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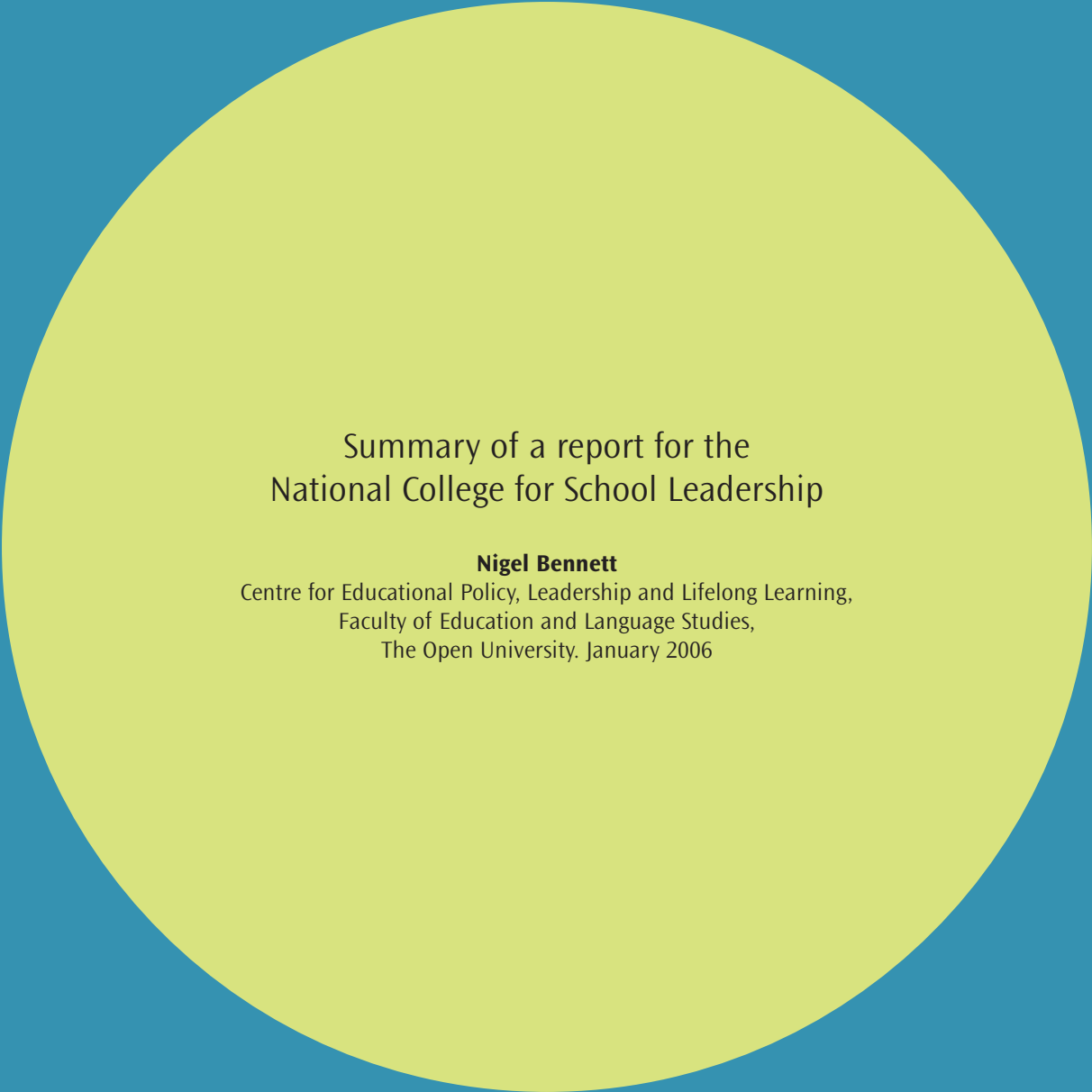
HEADS OF YEAR
HEADS OF FACULTY
SUBJECT LEADERS
CURRICULUM
CO-ORDINATORS

Making a Difference

A study of effective middle leadership in
schools facing challenging circumstances



Literature Review



Summary of a report for the
National College for School Leadership

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Introduction

This paper summarises our report (Bennett, 2005) on the role of subject leaders in secondary schools facing challenging circumstances. This brief summary outlines some key issues in the role of the subject leader and the pressures they face, and concludes with some suggested guidelines for action for these postholders.

The key point that the report makes is that we can identify important underlying issues and problems that face all secondary school subject leaders, but that they are more acute and difficult to address in schools facing challenging circumstances. In particular, the key issues that subject leaders in such schools have to deal with are concerned with the multiple difficulties faced by these schools, the negotiation of the subject leader's broker role in the light of the strong moral leadership role advocated for the headteacher, and the problems faced by staff who may be uncertain about the quality and effectiveness of their practice.

What are the key aspects of subject leadership highlighted in the literature?

Bennett et al (2003) identified two key tensions in the role of the subject leader, and three basic issues through which these tensions were reflected.

The two tensions were

- whole-school expectations of subject leaders' role versus their loyalty to their department
- a growing line management culture within schools versus a professional rhetoric of collegiality

These two tensions were worked out specifically in relation to three important areas:

- collegiality
- accountability
- authority and expertise

In addition we explore the literature on:

- leadership as negotiation
- shared leadership
- power
- trust
- community of practice

Collegiality

Collegiality was interpreted in a variety of ways. Some were related to action and practice, and others were related to structure.

Collegiality as action and practice was concerned with questions of how much discussion within subject departments was focused on the what and how of teaching, and there was evidence that the term was often used as a synonym for individual autonomy. Collegiality as structure was seen as a way of defending the individuality of the department against the demands of the school's senior leaders and the perceived line management structure through which these demands were expressed. This tension generated important issues of accountability for the subject leader.


Subsequent writing by Ribbins (2003) has provided a longitudinal case study which demonstrates how a strongly directive and interventionist head of a design department drove through changes in teaching practice which included highly directive curriculum changes and demands for teaching conformity. These ultimately produced both good examination performances by the students and a culture of openness among departmental staff about classroom practice, a willingness to be monitored in the classroom and high departmental morale.

Accountability


The review found that most subject leaders saw themselves as primarily accountable to their departmental colleagues and for defending their subject against curriculum demands, whereas senior staff saw them as accountable to the school and the governors for the department's performance. One consequence of this was that senior staff expected subject leaders to monitor the work of the teachers in their department and observe their classroom practice. This presented problems for many subject leaders who felt that it cast doubts on the professionalism of their colleagues as teachers of their specialist subjects, and undermined the climate of trust on which their departmental collegiality rested. Only where subject leaders had responsibility for the work of non-specialists were monitoring and observation seen as appropriate.

Writers such as Glover et al (1999) and Wise (2001) see the role of the subject leader as 'buffer and bridge' or 'broker', standing between the school and the department. Like all middle managers – and here we deliberately choose 'manager' rather than 'leader' – subject leaders have to interpret policies made outside the department and filter demands so that they become manageable and acceptable to their colleagues (see also Bennett, 1995).

'Defence' can also involve 'advocacy'. Subject teachers may want to feel that their needs and opinions have an influence on whole-school decisions. Glover et al (1999) and James and Aubrey-Hopkins (2003) emphasise how important it is for the status and reputation of the subject leader that they obtain sufficient resources for the department to do its work. James and Aubrey-Hopkins also see this as a crucial aspect by which individual subject leaders sustain their self-respect, and legitimise their authority in their own eyes so that they feel they have the right to exercise the role.



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Authority and expertise

The literature suggests that a subject leader's capacity to do the job rests on their subject knowledge and teaching competence, and the ability to model good practice. The basis on which individual teachers acknowledged their subject leaders' role and allowed them to exercise it was not their formal position. Rather, the basis of their authority derived from their interpersonal skills, subject knowledge and expertise as teachers. Interestingly, they did not necessarily have to be the best teacher of the subject, but they had to be able to model what their colleagues saw as good classroom practice.

But this is a very simple way of looking at a complex phenomenon. Just what do we mean by knowledge, competence and good practice? Subject knowledge and classroom competence do not necessarily go together.

Ogawa (2003) suggests that competence rests on a combination of 'knowledgeability' – the knowledge or certainty that particular actions will produce particular results – and 'capability' – the ability to identify and choose between a number of alternative courses of action so as to act in the way that seems most appropriate to the situation. When knowledgeability and capability continue to deliver what is expected, teachers continue to work in a condition of certainty; when they do not, uncertainty about what counts as effective practice creeps in. This may be why teachers working outside their specialist areas and heads of department who are not getting good exam results (Sammons et al, 1997) welcome guidance and direction.

If departmental members and subject leaders value collegiality, how do they square off the 'leading professional' with the sense of equality implicit in the collegial framework?

One way of resolving this is to see leadership as an activity or function that takes place within the department rather than something done by a particular individual. Seen as a function, leadership 'flows through' the relationships within the department (Ogawa and Bossert, 1996). When we talk about leadership as a function rather than as one person's role, we are allowing for the possibility that it moves between people or gets stretched over a range of individuals (Spillane et al, 2001). Such an approach to leadership affects profoundly the basis on which we judge a subject leader's competence, and gets further attention in the discussion of teacher leadership below.

We should note, however, that even if leadership within a department becomes a function rather than a role, the literature reveals strong pressures that foster fragmentation in the culture of the school. Teachers' sense of accountability to their subject is one, which is reinforced by the tendency of secondary school timetables to segment the students' experience into a kind of production line (Metcalfe and Russell, 1997). The need to sustain legitimacy as a subject leader by defending the territory tends to create departmental subcultures, especially if the departments can claim to be successful (for example, by getting consistently good exam results). Jones et al (2004) also point out, reinforcing the production line analogy, that departments often have physical areas within the school that create visible as well as intellectual boundaries and reduce the extent to which staff communicate informally across subject areas.



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Leadership as negotiation

Morley and Hosking (2003) view leadership as a process of negotiation between particular individuals in particular settings. Rather than promoting best practice, this negotiation should be about creating a shared view of what the organisation is like, why that is the case and what is planned for the future. Both of these views – dialogue and debate and negotiation – see the result as being agreed understandings of a situation and action to deal with it. Negotiation is a way of moving those involved from a situation of uncertainty to one of certainty about the what and how of teaching and learning in the school. It is a constant process, which is why these writers also emphasise the leader's role in this task.

We should note two points about this view of leadership as a negotiative process. First, it introduces two important elements into the discussion: power and trust. Second, negotiation involves two or more individuals or groups who may have different interests and values, and thus may lead to conflict instead of a shared view. This can weaken relationships and create cultural fragmentation and uncertainty rather than integration. Avoiding this result, and keeping a balance between uncertainty and certainty about what is being done and how, are key leadership activities.

Shared leadership

In terms of shared leadership, the literature on leadership in schools facing challenging circumstances has focused on the role of the headteacher. It emphasises the importance of the head having a strong moral basis for their leadership, and refusing to accept actions that contradict it.


They can be ruthless in enforcing their moral stance. However, they seek to persuade their staff to accept their vision and goals, and to promote dialogue, debate and collaboration in achieving them. Leadership is a widely distributed function and this removes the distinction between leaders and followers (Harris, 2002).

Teacher leadership


Teacher leadership is seen as a means of promoting negotiation between teachers, generating higher levels of participation and collaboration within schools and reducing the potentially divisive effect of subject departments noted above. It is seen as a vehicle for innovation and for generating a continuing review of practice, with leadership as a process of support and assistance as much as direction-setting.

However, we should note that because teacher leadership does not rest on a hierarchical structure of roles and responsibilities, it assumes very high levels of trust between staff, shared values and structures that create space for such negotiation to take place and provide any necessary support. Without these, despite the claims of writers such as Lingard et al (2003) that teacher leadership raises staff morale, the negotiative process at the heart of teacher leadership practice can easily result in conflict and fragmentation, and there is some evidence of this (Blase and Blase, 1997; Smylie, 1997). Changing staff can also affect the degree to which teacher leadership is accepted (Burke and Mitchell, 2004). Creating structures of support and flexibility is the responsibility of senior staff, but subject leaders can do much to create flexibility within their own departmental areas.

We should also remember that the roots of teacher leadership lie in the USA, where school principals are seen as middle managers within much more strongly directive local systems, and where, as non-teaching administrators, they were moved between schools much more frequently than teaching staff. Teacher leadership is presented in North America as a means of creating a more participative, professionally based decision-making process within schools where traditionally there has been little teacher participation in school decision-making at all, and thereby creating the kind of longer term certainty that frequent changes of school principals can undermine. Thus for example, in Patterson and Patterson's (2004) study, teacher leaders are seen as taking responsibility for substantial areas of whole-school policy-making and practice, performing a mixture of tasks traditionally exercised by subject leaders and senior staff in English schools, and providing forms of professional support that would be promoted within departments by good middle leaders.



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Conflicts of interest

This summary has identified many opportunities for conflict, and conflict involves the use of power (Hoyle, 1986; Ball, 1987). However, the teacher leadership literature tends to present leadership as distributed among the teachers so that they are perceived as equals who assume leadership roles on the basis of their particular expertise in a situation and in an environment of cultural integration. But just as negotiation implies different values and interests, so we must remember that some participants are more influential than others: there is always what Hales (1993) refers to as ‘power disparity’. This is relatively small between subject leaders and others, but very great between the head and their colleagues. Heads can mandate action if they wish, and can remove staff, and appoint teachers who share their values.

Teacher leadership writers accept this implicitly by identifying two crucial roles for headteachers. The first – moral leadership – has already been referred to. Secondly, as line managers with a whole-school perspective, heads can identify areas of practice that they believe would benefit from greater staff collaboration. Bringing this about on anything more than a superficial level would require the kind of negotiation that we referred to earlier, and again, there is no intrinsic reason why this work cannot involve, if not be undertaken through, subject leaders.

Much of the literature on educational leadership discusses power in terms of power to persuade colleagues rather than power over colleagues. However, any kind of power disparity that is structurally created, such as that between headteacher and staff, is ultimately ‘power over’.

For this reason, the role of subject leaders as defenders of the interests of their subject colleagues, referred to above, is crucial in reducing the degree to which power over their area of responsibility is exercised by more senior staff.

Trust

Trust between the different parties or individuals involved is an essential requirement in conflict resolution. We need to be certain that people will do what they undertake to do. One objection that subject leaders expressed about monitoring and evaluating their colleagues' work was that it undermined the basic principle of professionalism: trust in a person to do their work properly and without supervision. This was behind the claim of collegiality by many subject leaders.



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The literature is clear that there is a relationship between the exercise of power and the development of trust. It is difficult to see how headteachers can 'require' trust (Harris, 2002) of their staff; it is more likely that the response to opportunities to engage in collaborative activities within the constraints of a very strong moral framework, as in her examples of effective headship in schools in special measures, will be compliance rather than trust, unless staff can be brought in who share the values of that moral framework.

Communities of practice

Writers on organisations are increasingly referring to communities of practice, and we should examine briefly the difference between these and collegial units. Communities of practice are seen as groups of individuals which are to a large extent self-generated on the basis of shared values and a shared understanding of what their work involves and how it should be done.

Because of this shared understanding, they become important sources of individual members' personal and professional identities. Leadership within a community of practice is a function not a role, and plays the important part of supporting and encouraging colleagues. One possible distinction between a collegium and a community of practice may be that although both may have a set of shared values, a collegium is a group of individuals who work primarily as autonomous individuals, whereas a community or practice is a group of individuals who work more collectively. From this perspective, members of a community of practice are more likely to discuss work and establish agreed bases for practice, and find that these discussions reinforce both their commitment to their shared values and the degree to which their professional practice is consistent across the group.

Thus an effective community of practice is likely to rest upon a deeper level of trust between its members – what Bottery (2003) calls 'practice' trust – than a collegium, in which members trust one another on the basis of their role: in this case, as a co-teacher of a subject.

Conclusion

The role of the subject leader in schools facing challenging circumstances

This discussion has shown that subject leaders working in schools facing challenging circumstances must sustain a level of certainty about pedagogy in the professional thinking of their colleagues whilst promoting sufficient uncertainty to create a drive towards professional discussion and the negotiation of new forms of shared practice, as a basis for ongoing improvements in the quality of their students' learning.

At the same time, they must sustain or promote an overall school culture of integration rather than differentiation or fragmentation. This is little different from the subject leader's role in any other school. However, the issues around negotiation, power and trust are more acute in schools facing challenging circumstances.

In our view, the central task of the effective subject leader is to create a culture of trust within their departmental teams that will make it possible to discuss issues of practice rather than sustaining these as individual matters. This will be a slow process requiring that a level of uncertainty exists about what counts as good practice so that individuals are prepared to discuss what they do in order to find possible ways forward. However, too much uncertainty is likely to lead to a return to the old ways and resistance to change. We suggest that the following guidelines for action for subject leaders should help towards this end of creating trust and willingness to think collectively about practice.

- Work to provide an environment of stability and security within which their colleagues can work, acting as a buffer, bridge and broker to mediate between departmental needs and expectations and the wider demands of the school's senior leadership. Being seen to defend the interests of the subject will provide them with credibility and status among their subject colleagues. However, ensuring that colleagues are aware of wider school expectations will make it possible to align subject teaching policies with those of the school as a whole.
- Work to promote a shared approach to pedagogical or curriculum leadership within the subject, so that leadership is seen as support rather than guidance and direction, and where individual expertise, rather than office, is valued and respected as a basis for such leadership.

This is not to deny subject leaders' accountability for the overall quality of the work of the subject teachers; it is to acknowledge the range of skills and expertise that is available for colleagues to draw on as needed.

- Work to promote a view of professional dialogue and support as an opportunity to learn and improve practice, by taking advantage of the informal comments on such topics as successful or unsuccessful teaching work that routinely occur in staffroom conversations.
- Exploit situations of uncertainty to encourage individuals to support – that is to say, provide leadership to – one another, and to promote collaborative or team-based responses.
- Create situations of uncertainty in order to maximise opportunities for learning, ensuring that they are not so threatening that they cause colleagues to retreat into the familiar.

Much of the work necessary to carry out these tasks involves the kind of continuous negotiation outlined by Morley and Hosking (2003), encouraging colleagues to think about their teaching and their relations with each other. The subject leader also faces what is potentially an even more difficult task of maintaining this negotiative stance in relation to the wider school setting, in their role as buffer, bridge and broker, in order to ensure the overall culture of integration referred to above without appearing to undermine the position of their subject colleagues. This is a complex activity as it has to be undertaken in a situation of considerable power disparity in which the subject leader is the weaker party, and because of the moral ruthlessness described by Harris as a characteristic of the heads who were successful in overcoming challenging circumstances.

These suggested guidelines for action are not in any way original interpretations of the subject leaders' role, and nor are they panaceas. Indeed, at first sight they suggest that the tasks facing subject leaders in schools facing challenging circumstances are only different in degree from those facing subject leaders in any other kind of school. What is different, though, is the extent to which they have to promote simultaneously the conditions of security and uncertainty that can encourage their colleagues to acknowledge a need for support and advice without feeling inadequate or incompetent, and generate a climate of trust and rapport between the teachers of the subject that will promote the move from an individually focused collegium that may promote flexible and innovative practice to a community of learners that will do so.

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