

The Influence of the Head of Department on the Quality of Teaching and Learning

Paul Hammond,
Tring School, Tring, Herts

Aim

To investigate the strategies used by effective secondary Heads of Department (HoDs) positively to influence classroom practice.

Dimensions of this Case Study

Interview and survey data were gathered from 500 students, 12 teachers and 4 HoDs in 4 secondary school Science departments.

Summary of Findings for this Case Study

- Students valued teachers with a confident grasp of the subject matter, well-developed skills of explanation and an ability to identify the source of their misunderstanding. Distinctive actions and attitudes displayed by the HoD lead to this good practice being identified and adopted consistently across the department.
- HoDs had a vision that encompassed the essence of Science as a discipline; the manner in which it should be taught; a wider philosophy of education; the nature of leadership; a view on departmental management and a commitment to living out these values.
- HoDs established the department meeting as a channel for professional development with emphasis on the sharing of good practice in teaching and learning.
- Schemes of work were used to organise teaching effectively and document examples of good practice.
- HoDs encouraged the use of teachers' departmental workrooms as an informal forum for the interchange of professional opinions and information.
- HoDs streamlined administrative tasks and encouraged forward planning through measures such as the provision of departmental bulletins and interim discussions with key personnel between the regular departmental meetings.
- Quality assurance measures tended to be informal, with success dependent on the level of trust and respect built up between the HoD and colleagues. The introduction of more formal mechanisms for monitoring seems likely to provide a further stimulus towards the raising of standards in the classroom.
- Innovations were introduced selectively to ensure a coherent programme of development.
- HoDs understood the current capacity of their department for change and development and were willing to pursue a suitable management strategy in order to generate and sustain forward momentum.

Capacity for Change

Effective practitioners realised when their vision for the department was not fully shared by their colleagues so that the capacity for change was quite low. This required a management strategy that was tight with little room for deviation:

“When I started, the scheme of work was the only mechanism for making sure that the people did what I wanted them to do. It was the engine that was going to change what was being taught and the tests were the mechanism for ensuring that people had taught that – instead of just carrying on what they had been doing for the past ten years. It was crucial that the SoW [scheme of work] were focused and directed. If you take the framework away, what you get is eight people doing completely different things.”

However, when the same HoD had achieved a greater unanimity of purpose with his team a few years later, he realised that the department had a greater capacity for change and development and hence a different management style was more appropriate:

“I’m able to say this is a good idea, try this in the knowledge that it’s probably going to get tried, whereas in the past, I would be conscious that if I didn’t write it into the scheme of work it probably wouldn’t happen.”

Conclusion

HoDs exert a positive influence on classroom practice where they:

- ease the tensions that arise firstly within the HoD’s roles and secondly between his/her own roles and those of other school personnel;
- generate opportunities for good classroom practice to be identified in classroom observation, shared in department meetings and recorded in schemes of work;
- appreciate the current capacity of their department for change and development and adopt a suitable management style;
- develop a trust and respect from colleagues, thus providing the social dynamic necessary for the introduction and maintenance of quality assurance measures.

About the Project

This study involved working with the Science departments of four secondary schools – two in Hertfordshire and two in Bedfordshire. Each of the four HoDs nominated three colleagues within the department who had built reputations as effective classroom practitioners. These were the subject of focused attention, with each choosing two classes to be interviewed and surveyed for their opinions on what makes an effective science teacher.

Tensions in the Role

The study showed that the range of expectations and demands on HoDs gave rise to a perceived conflict of roles. Firstly within the HoDs roles and secondly between his/her own roles and those of other school personnel. The conflict exhibited itself in a number of key tensions, which the HoDs in the study had clear strategies for dealing with.

Class Teacher or Subject Leader?

The HoDs sought to influence the quality of teaching of others and found it a challenge to devote enough time and energy in preparation for his/her own. The HoD was not thought to have the moral authority to monitor standards if his/her own were lacking in rigour.

The effective HoDs spent much of their time establishing systems that organised teaching more effectively – including their own. Discussion at department meetings included, for example, ways of teaching photosynthesis; the outcome of monitoring the marking of exercise books and homework ideas for the schemes of work. All of these measures directly supported the quality of teaching in the department including that of the HoD.

Urgent Tasks or Important Tasks?

Short-term urgent tasks made it harder for HoDs to work on 'important' long-term planning tasks. To counter this, HoDs took explicit steps to deal with urgent tasks that were often administrative in nature. They jealously guarded the agenda of department meetings, shielding them from unnecessary administrative items which could be dealt with by the publication of a departmental bulletin.

Maintenance or Development?

The time and energy expended by the HoD on maintenance tasks did not make the optimal use of their abilities. At the same time as keeping the wheels rolling, the HoD also had to be the source of propulsion to ensure progression with implementing the development plan.

HoDs in the study explicitly developed maintenance structures and procedures such as:

- publishing a fortnightly departmental bulletin;
- calling interim meetings of key personnel between the regular departmental meetings;
- committing procedures for reoccurring events in the school year to paper so that implementation becomes reassuringly predictable;
- a regular scrutiny of the school calendar in order to anticipate upcoming events;
- using a range of proformas designed to allow information to be easily recorded and accessed;
- the establishment of well-managed paper and computer filing systems.

All of these measures were unspectacular but effective in the streamlining of day-to-day tasks. It was a feature of all departments that yesterday's development quickly became today's maintenance with the latest innovations building coherently upon those that had gone before.

Whole-School View or Department View?

There are times when representing the department and fighting one's corner won support for the HoD from his subject colleagues. On occasions this was a necessary action for the effective HoD, for example when an unworkable scheme is being foisted on the department. However, it was felt that the effective practitioner also needs to be able to see proposals (even those that might disadvantage the department in the short-term) from a whole-school perspective, despite criticism back home.

One example of good practice involved Senior Management and departments working to a common agenda on training objectives. The senior team lead whole-school INSET sessions into preferred learning styles and the department incorporated the ideas into measures designed to meet one of their own development objectives – namely the broadening of homework learning styles.

Monitoring or Surveillance?

Two main difficulties arise here. Role confusion leads HoDs into thinking it is someone else's responsibility to monitor the quality of teaching and learning. However, this may have concealed a deeper role conflict. HoDs found the tasks of observing colleagues teach and inspecting mark-books threatening to departmental relationships.

In the four departments studied, there was little formal monitoring along the lines of systematic classroom observation or efforts to check on adherence to departmental policy on the setting of homework. Rather, the HoD monitored the quality of teaching and learning through regular informal observation opportunities. A combination of both formal and informal approaches would appear to be ideal. For example, one department had plans to introduce the monitoring of marking through a sampling of books from across a year group. The anonymous reporting of outcomes at a departmental meeting promised to be a subtle method of nudging teachers towards the expected norm. The culture of trust built up by the HoD in question suggested that the introduction of a more formal monitoring regime would be quite acceptable to his colleagues.

The importance of vision

Vision is a term often mentioned in connection with effective leadership. The study revealed that those with a clear view of the direction they wanted the department to go had firm ideas on how the vision is best implemented in the context of their department. Interviews of HoDs and their colleagues revealed very clear views on...

The nature of Science as a discipline...

"I have a commitment to the idea that Scientists have a responsibility to let kids know that Science isn't the truth – that Science is speculative – knowledge is therefore always provisional. I think that enables kids to see it as a creative activity."

The manner in which it should be taught...

"In as active a way as possible, with students doing as much as possible, practical work wherever there can be. In the ideal world as much as can be going on outside of the lesson."

A wider philosophy on education...

"There are values that are inside me – every opportunity I can see I manipulate things so that we get there – students as individual learners and the importance of thinking as opposed to traditional learning of facts and information."

Views on leadership...

"When you stop thinking and challenging what you are doing and why you are doing it – then there's a danger of dying professionally."

The way that the department should be run...

"I think the way he brings the staff together at department meetings – he's not a dictatorial leader – he's very much a person who listens to what the staff have to say but at the same time listens with more of an overall picture of the School – where the School's going."

And a personal commitment towards living out these values...

"He's very enthusiastic – he also leads by example – he's got lots of ideas that he can actually bring across at department meetings – the way he does that – he can get other people involved as well, feeling ownership of it."

Effective HoDs and the Sharing of Good Practice

The students' views on effective teaching agreed with the findings of other researchers in this field and could be categorised under three broad headings:

- appropriate understandings and beliefs about social and interpersonal interaction with young people;
- a firm grasp of subject knowledge;
- understandings of how children learn and application of appropriate teaching methods.

More specific examples of good practice in these three areas were identified through an analysis of interview data obtained from students and teachers. Distinctive actions and attitudes displayed by the HoD lead to this good practice being identified and adopted consistently across the department. Three common strategies are outlined in the following comments of HoDs:

Developing comprehensive schemes of work

"They form the basis of the lesson we deliver: a list of the learning outcomes; topic broken down into a sensible order; suggestion of resources; experiments; risk assessment and homework."

"The schemes of work – all the materials we produce for these – are the bottom line. The standard below which things should not drop. I am quite happy for people to explore other ways of delivering things as long as they don't fall below this standard."

Making effective use of department meeting time

"I do think that is a HoD's job – think out ways that the department meeting should not get clogged up with administration or discussion of specific points that don't apply to everyone."

"That probably is my most important role in the meeting – to keep focus on the issues and in advance of the meeting it is to be selective – to filter and decide what are the key things we need to deal with at this time."

Shaping the culture of the teachers' workroom

"The great strength of it is that people are constantly in a dialogue about the work they are doing – they are taking the tips and advice and basic strategies that make for successful teaching."

This particular channel for the sharing of good practice was a surprise finding of the study. Conventional teacher wisdom tells you that departmental kettles are a threat to staff unity but in the study schools the workroom acted as a forum where good practice became common practice.

It is not logically inevitable that the workroom will have a positive effect. Our evidence suggests that the leadership role of the HoD was very important here – if he/she acts as a positive role model in this respect, the tone which department members are likely to follow is set. The workroom can influence the attitudes of teachers towards students as much as it can inform them about the best resources to use for different activities.

"In the room we do talk about pupils and we hear how people react to certain situations or certain pupils and there is a sense of caring here – you're not always down on them – that obviously affects you and your relationship with the pupils. This feeling is established in the department and you are part of that."

Further Reading

Earley, P., & Fletcher-Campbell, F., *The Time to Manage?*, NFER-Nelson Windsor(1989).

Harris, A., Jamieson, I. & Russ, J., 'A study of effective departments in secondary schools', *School Organisation*, 15 (3) pp. 283-299 (1995).

Hopkins, D., Harris, A. & Jackson, D., 'Understanding the school's capacity for development; growth states and strategies,' *School Leadership and Management*, 17, 3, pp. 401-411, (1997).

OFSTED, *Subject Management in Secondary Schools – Aspects of Good Practice*, HMSO, London (1997).

Contact

Paul Hammond, Tring School, Mortimer Hill, Tring, Herts, HP23 5JD.
Tel: 01442 827966; fax: 01442 890409; e-mail: chorthy@rmpc.co.uk
Web-site: <http://www.hod.org.uk>