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Tidying the Cupboard?

The role of subject leaders in
primary schools

How can subject leaders in a primary school share their talents and expertise to make a positive impact on teaching and learning in the school?

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This enquiry investigates the role of subject leaders in primary schools following a series of school visits and interviews undertaken between September 2003 and April 2004.

Introduction

Teachers with responsibility for subjects have traditionally been termed co-ordinators in primary schools. The term implies a tidying function, bringing together different elements, putting things in order. The publication of the National Standards for Subject Leaders raised the profile of the role and defined it more clearly:

“Subject leaders provide professional leadership and management for a subject to secure high quality teaching, effective use of resources and improved standards of learning and achievement for all pupils.”
(DfES 2001)

The leadership and management of subjects is included within the Ofsted Inspection Framework and it has consistently been criticised by Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Schools. In particular, the monitoring, evaluation and development of teaching has been identified as a weakness. Because of these perceived weaknesses, the development of subject leaders together with other middle leaders is very much part of the current school improvement strategy:

- The National College for School Leadership runs a Leading from the Middle programme based on the belief that “successful leadership for sustainable improvement requires leaders at many levels within the school”.
- The DfES Primary Leadership Programme focuses on imparting the “skills of observation, feedback and analysis within the teaching and learning of English and mathematics” (DfES, 2003).
- The National Agreement signed in January 2003 aims to tackle teacher workload. “Teachers with leadership and management responsibilities will be entitled to a reasonable allocation of time within school sessions to support the discharge of their responsibilities.” Headteachers are now obliged to recognise the workload of the role of subject leader and support teachers so that they are able to carry out the job.

School visits

In the course of my research, I visited six primary schools varying in size from 180 to 700 on roll.

I talked to the headteachers in these schools about the role of subject leaders in their school, and I interviewed between two and four subject leaders in each of the schools I visited, asking them what they did, and how they perceived their role as subject leader.

A summary of the findings and six questions for school leadership teams

My research raises six fundamental concerns about the role of subject leader:

- Headteachers are concerned about the need for joining up the leadership and management in the school. The devolution of decision-making, while having obvious advantages, also increases the complexity of the structures that need to be in place in the school. If the headteacher delegates a task, what mechanism is in place to check that the task is done to the required standard?

If your subject leaders lead the subject, who leads the subject leader?

- Headteachers and subject leaders in my research are concerned about the subject knowledge demands that the subject leader role makes on teachers who, first and foremost, should be excellent classroom practitioners. Primary school teachers are almost always generalists rather than specialists, teaching all subjects in one part of the school. As subject leaders, we ask them to be specialists across the whole age range, even though many of them may have only taught in one key stage.

Do your subject leaders have the subject knowledge they need across the whole age range in your school to be able to do the job successfully?

- Headteachers and subject leaders are unhappy about subject leaders making critical judgements about fellow teachers. Headteachers recognise that training and support is needed to do that difficult job, but it is not always available. Teachers are reluctant to be critical of peers for whom they have respect.

Do you expect your subject leaders to confront unsatisfactory performance?

- The DfES has a school improvement agenda foremost in its mind when thinking of subject leaders. However, subject leaders in the schools I visited preferred to see the role as an opportunity for their own professional development rather than as a direct means of raising standards in their subject.

Who takes responsibility for standards in your school?

- Headteachers are very aware of the need to give quality time to subject leaders so that they can carry out their work, and subject leaders see time as a major issue. The National Agreement places an obligation on headteachers and governors to provide that time but provision in the schools I visited varies widely and is dependent on individual school budgets.

Is the job description for your subject leaders 'do-able' in the time you give them?

- Where have all the subject leaders gone? They're tidying the cupboard! It is not a surprise that every subject leader I talked to emphasised their role as a resource manager. That is not necessarily because they don't understand the need to do other things but, rather, it comes from a belief that if teachers have the right resources they will do a better job. It is also the part of the role that is achievable and less threatening. However, teachers make expensive bottle washers.

Is it necessary for a teacher to do all the things you ask your subject leader to do?

Some ways out of the cupboard

None of the schools I visited claim to have all the answers to establishing effective subject leaders so that they have a positive impact on standards of teaching and learning in the school. However, each of the schools offers ideas that could be used by other schools to develop the effectiveness of the role of subject leader.

Teamwork

The role of single subject leaders in a school is a daunting role. An alternative that some schools are finding works well is a team of teachers working together on one subject, across a group of subjects or on themes across the whole curriculum.

The advantages of this type of teamwork are:

- greater collaborative learning between teachers
- stronger links between key stages across the school
- a wider consultative base
- a shared workload
- a system less likely to stall if individual teachers move on
- greater opportunities for teachers to gain expertise for a range of subjects more in keeping with a generalist class teacher

Teaching teachers

If headteachers are serious about distributed leadership, then they need to give time and energy to supporting and developing leadership roles in the school.

Schools in my research have done some of the following:

- made the development of subject leaders a theme in the school improvement plan
- made explicit the roles and responsibilities of the subject leader in an up-to-date job description
- revised the management structure in the school to include subject leaders or subject teams and made formal agreements about channels of communication and responsibility
- clarified the relationship between middle leaders and senior leaders in the school so that leadership is joined-up
- provided training and support in the particular skills that are needed by subject leaders, for example: action planning, data analysis, communication, facilitation, coaching, classroom observation and feedback, resource management

Teachers leading teaching and learning

As part of the National Agreement, headteachers are now obliged to review the workload of subject leaders and give them time or support to help them get the job done.

Schools in my research are trying a number of ideas:

- Headteachers plan a cycle of tasks to be completed each term using after-school staff meeting time to do the work. For example, staff work, often in teams, to write subject action plans, analyse work samples or review schemes of work. Staff meeting time is no longer used for housekeeping items; these are relegated to 10-minute lunchtime briefings, quick consultation notices on the notice board or weekly timetables on the staffroom whiteboard to keep everyone in touch.
- Making imaginative use of non class-based teachers to release subject leaders to do specific coaching tasks that have to be done during school time such as demonstrating an element of teaching or teaching alongside another teacher.
- Headteachers or senior teachers who previously had a large amount of time out of the classroom are themselves doing more teaching in turn for distributing leadership tasks.
- Using administrative staff or teaching assistants to audit, order and organise resources, working for the subject leaders in turn. The approach is more cost-effective than paying for teacher time. Teachers are the most expensive resource in a school; they are not best used counting the bulbs and batteries.

Conclusion

The role of subject leader is an extremely demanding one. Some subject leaders in primary schools may not have the expertise, influence, time or even the inclination to do more than open the post and tidy the shelves. If subject leaders are going to lead, it is the responsibility of headteachers to stop them spending their time tidying the cupboard and help them to work with other teachers in the school, sharing their talents and expertise so that they can begin to make a positive impact on teaching and learning in the school.

Research associate reports available in autumn 2004

In Search of the X-Factor: A group enquiry into the secret of maintaining continuous school success, Marie Graham, Headteacher, Roseberry Infant School, Stockton-on-Tees

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Growing Your Own Leaders: The impact of professional development on school improvement, Penny Castagnoli, Headteacher, Beaconsfield High School and Nigel Cook, Headteacher, The Disraeli School

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