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CHAPTER 9

LEADERS OF SUBJECT COMMUNITIES

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Within English schools there is commonly a role undertaken by a subject specialist known as 'subject leader' or 'middle manager'. These individuals are responsible for an aspect of the academic curriculum and include department heads, faculty heads, curriculum team leaders and cross-curriculum subject co-ordinators. They oversee and lead the teaching and learning, the use of resources and the development of the staff who work within the area. They usually have a tier of management above them and the staff working within the area are considered to be below them in the structure whilst they are working in that role.

A department in an English secondary school is a formal unit of accountability, which is usually organized around a specific subject. However, as Siskin (1994) has argued, and the title of this chapter suggests, a subject can also provide an additional source of identity for teachers over and above that of teacher. This indicates that it might also be helpful to examine the dynamics of departmental leadership from the point of view of the subject unit as a community of practice, and to consider the implications this might have for the role of the subject leader.

Research into leadership within effective schools has shown that it extends beyond the senior management team (Harris, 1999) in what is now becoming referred to as dispersed or distributed leadership. Because of this, it has been increasingly recognized that those at the middle level of leadership or management have a powerful influence over classroom practices (Harris, Busher and Wise, 2001) and are expected to:

> "… 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)

Clearly in most secondary schools the middle manager cannot do this alone so they need to 'secure' high quality teaching through working with others particularly other teachers. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) nicely summarize this with an expectation that the subject leader will:

> "Establish clear expectations and constructive working relationships among staff, including team working and mutual support; devolving responsibilities and delegating tasks, appropriately evaluating practice and developing an acceptance of accountability." (DfES, 2001)

They do not state whom the team should feel accountable to and this is an important point that we will return to later.

Throughout this chapter the term middle manager will be used to denote individuals acting as academic middle managers, subject leaders and subject managers. It draws on data collected as part of a much wider research project on "The Role of Academic Middle Managers in Secondary Schools' (Wise, 1999). Some parts of the research were reported in an article specifically on the monitoring role (Wise, 2001) and it is these aspects that will be discussed in some detail here.

Originally the data were analysed assuming a predominately rational bureaucratic model of practice. They will be re-examined here using Wenger's (2000) concept of a 'community of practice' and the potential usefulness of this model will be discussed.

Role Set, Role Conflict and the Subject Department

Central to the original analysis of the data was the concept of role set and the associated concept of role conflict. However, this also provides a potential link to the reconceptualisation of the department as a Community of Practice, so it needs to be outlined briefly here.

An individual's role set is made up of the people whom the role incumbent considers have a legitimate right to influence their decisions and actions whilst acting within that role. This means that an individual may have several different role sets operating concurrently as most people enact more than one role at a time eg teacher, middle manager, parent and partner. The influence may be direct or indirect but it is important that it is viewed as legitimate by the role incumbent otherwise it might be ignored or not acted upon (Howard, 1988, p.87). Legitimacy might arise from positional authority, subject knowledge, ethical stance or many other sources.

An individual head of department in England might consider some or all of the following to be members of their role set: their subject area colleagues, their senior managers, teachers in other subject areas, pastoral team members, parents, governors, Local Education Authority Advisors and Inspectors, Examination Boards, subject associations, local community members and so on. Within this range, however, some will be seen as key members, whose influence is considerable, whilst others are peripheral and of little relevance except, perhaps, in relation to specific tasks or issues.

Wise (1999) found that middle managers considered their subject area team to be the most influential in all areas of decision making. This was also reflected by their team members who believed themselves to be the most influential group in the middle managers' role set. One middle manager commented:

"It is really, really important to listen to your team's ideas so they have a sense of purpose and being part of it … a shared responsibility." (Wise, 2001, p.337)

Wise (1999) also found that middle managers in schools have to contend with conflicting views of their role from their senior managers and their team members. This situation causes role conflict (Handy, 1993, p.65; Hargreaves, 1975, p.54) where the different roles the individual is being asked to fulfil are not compatible. With respect to monitoring for example, the team members are viewed by the middle managers as having the greater legitimate influence over their decisions but the team members are resistant to the idea of monitoring of performance. On the other hand, the senior managers expect monitoring to be taking place and have greater positional authority within the hierarchical structure. In the research (Wise, 1999) the middle managers used the lack of time, expertise and experience as a way of avoiding the conflict and did not, in general, engage in direct monitoring of their team members' performance.

Normative Role of the Middle Manager

The exact tasks undertaken by a middle manager vary from school to school, subject to subject, individual to individual but it is possible to draw up a normative list of tasks that are usually undertaken by the majority of middle managers in secondary schools.

In Wise (1999) a classification for these tasks was derived from the work of other writers (eg Lambert, 1972; Bailey, 1973; Morris and Dennison, 1982; Brydson, 1983; Hughes,1985; Bennett, 1995). The model is based on there "being a continuum between people and things as one dimension and a continuum between institutional and individual aspects as the other dimension" (Wise, 1999, p63) which gives four quadrants as shown in Figure 1:

FIGURE 1 TO GO SOMEWHERE HERE

These quadrants were called Administrative, Academic, Educational and Managerial for ease of reference and also in part because of the type of tasks that would fall within them. The Academic tasks would be those associated with the organisational paperwork directly supporting the learning of the pupils such as schemes of work and homework policies, whilst the Administrative tasks would involve the paperwork and administration associated with the whole school role such as managing finance and the stock of resources. The Educational quadrant would contain tasks like teaching, liasing with parents and other more people related aspects of the role whilst the Managerial quadrant would be those aspects of the role directly associated with the staff within the middle manager's area. Tasks likely to fall within this area are monitoring the progress of students on teaching practice and newly qualified teachers (NQTs) in their induction year, promoting and planning the professional development of staff within the area, deployment of staff to take advantage of strengths, leading and motivating the subject team, co-ordinating the work of the department and monitoring progress through the curriculum.

Each of these quadrants requires a different range of skills on the part of the middle manager. Those in the upper two quadrants require organisational ability, commitment of plans and policies to paper, financial aptitude and other predominately non-person centred skills.

The tasks within the Educational quadrant require the person-centred skills usually expected of a teacher, relating to students and their parents. This is an area where a middle manager might be expected to be exemplary if they are to gain the respect of their subject area colleagues. Descriptions of the subject leader's duties as 'leading from the front', 'leading by example' and being the 'leading professional' all expect the middle manager to be able to demonstrate ability in the 'art' of teaching usually across a range of abilities and ages of students. Their classroom management and

use of resources might be expected to provide a model for others to follow. Except where they have a classroom assistant attached to the class, they are working alone with the students, their inter-personal relationships are with individuals who are there to learn. The role is one which they are trained to adopt, are assessed competent in before they are given qualified teacher status and makes up the majority of their working week.

In contrast, their 'Management' role requires inter-personal skills with colleagues who for most of the working week would be considered to be their equals. Some individuals may have been teaching longer, may be senior in the hierarchy or may be more qualified. The middle managers are expected to negotiate access to lessons to monitor what is being taught and how, manage the individuals' professional development in line with perceived weaknesses or with departmental needs and lead curriculum development through persuading colleagues of the benefits.

These are a very different set of inter-personal skills and they are ones in which the new middle manager may have received very little training or guidance. In practice many approach colleagues as they would like to be approached and others simply avoid this area of their responsibility (Wise, 1999). This has been seen as a major problem for a number of years (Ribbins, 1985; Stokes, 1981) and was certainly frowned upon by the Chief Inspector of Schools (1997, p.14).   It may be that an alternative viewpoint that is less hierarchical than the one assumed in the normative model just outlined could help address this issue.

Monitoring and the subject leader

The resistance to change of subject areas and departments has long been a problem to those wanting to implement change in secondary schools (Leask and Terrell, 1997)

Monitoring could be viewed as having an hierarchical accountability function where practice is 'checked' by those further up the structure. It is a process where the middle manager, in a bureaucratic structure, checks on the work of the rest of the subject area team to ensure they are carrying out their role as agreed or, often, as instructed. This might involve checking that books are being marked according to an agreed policy, homework is being set, teaching is being carried out according to the norms of the department and the syllabus is being followed. Some of these tasks the middle managers found easier than others (Wise, 1999).

Within each of the three case study schools involved in the study by Wise (1999) there were comments in the staff handbooks or generic job descriptions which made clear the expectation that the middle managers were responsible for monitoring the teaching within their area of responsibility.

It was left to the departments to define quality within their subject area although in one school there were guidelines as to what might be expected of all teachers in the classroom. In practice very few team members were required to show any records or plans to their middle managers and virtually none had experienced any direct observation of their teaching. Indeed, one teacher commented that they had entered a profession and expected to be trusted to work unsupervised. One middle manager commented that "[Monitoring] definitely would be a priority if it wasn't seen as a threat" (Wise, 2001, p.338). Within the current career structure in England, for example, with classroom observation such an important part of the performance management process, this attitude is unlikely to change unless the purposes and outcomes of monitoring are discussed and agreed.

It is perhaps significant that in many of the departments involved in the research (Wise, 1999) there was no system in place for the middle manager to be observed.

Community of Practice

A 'community of practice' is a social learning system. According to Wenger (2000, p. 226) competence is both historically and socially defined and is in interplay with our personal experience. When this interplay is in tension, learning takes place (Wenger, 2000, p.227) and thus our personal development is entwined with the social structures we belong to.

There are three modes of 'belonging' to social learning systems which Wenger (2000, p.227) posits can be used to define a community. All three co-exist but in varying proportions. The first mode is that of 'engagement' which is where working together, producing artefacts, or helping a colleague, shapes our experience of who we are, what we can do and how the world responds to us. The second mode is that of 'imagination'. This is an awareness of a wider community which it is possible to only imagine but within which we might wish to orientate ourselves such as a nation or the community of Science teachers. We cannot know every individual so it requires an act of imagination to place ourselves within it. The third mode of belonging Wenger calls 'alignment' which is the process of aligning our practice with those outside our immediate engagement. This is not a one-way process but one of mutual co-ordination.

Wenger (2000, p. 229) relates our need to participate in communities of practice as "essential to our learning" and "at the very core of what makes us human beings". This is because they are the building blocks of social learning and are the means by which we define competence "through an experience of direct participation." They do this first by having a collective sense of what the community is about, secondly by interaction, establishing norms and thirdly by having a "shared repertoire" of language, artefacts, history and practices.

In a sense then, a community of practice is about establishing norms that the members conform to, the learning converges, but taken to the limits this would lead to stagnation and would not be about social learning. However this scenario assumes a fixed boundary with no input from outside the community which in practice does not happen. At the boundaries, the community is challenged and its learning enhanced, it diverges into new experiences, competencies and practices (Wenger, 2000, p. 233).

By reflecting on the strength of feeling of most middle managers in the research (Wise, 1999) that their colleagues within their own subject area team were their biggest influence it can be seen that there is evidence of a community of practice within most departments or subject areas. This has important implications for schools whose senior managers would normally consider the hierarchical, positional authority of the senior management team to be the strongest influence (Wise, 1999).

The fact that the senior managers were the next most influential group is possibly a sign that the belonging through imagination is weaker and as such might leave the subject area isolated from the wider community. This is evident in schools when some departments are referred to by others as 'mavericks' or as one middle manager described the departments in her school, as 'satellite stations' (Wise, 1999).

However it might also be considered as an internal alignment relationship. The process of alignment is very important in secondary schools with the external accountability of examinations but there is also the concept of internal alignment with agreed policies and other colleagues or subject areas within the school. The department or subject area effectively has a boundary with the whole school community which will have its own rules of engagement and judgements of competence. However alignment is not a matter of just accepting the opinions of others, it is more a process of negotiation to come to somewhere near common agreement. This practice can be observed at many heads of department or middle

management meetings where ideas are often loudly and energetically discussed! There are often 'trade-offs' at the whole school level that allow subject areas to gain some benefit in return for 'falling into line' on another issue.

Within the bureaucratic hierarchical model of management the middle manager is expected to use their positional authority to effect change but behind the closed doors of the classroom they can only rely on occasional monitoring visits to check if their instructions are being carried out. How might this be different if the department or subject area is analysed as a Community of Practice? From Wenger's (2000) point of view, the community of practice is unlikely to have a single leader who would suffer all the role conflict. Whilst he accepts the need for a "community co-ordinator" who takes care of the day to day work he also puts forward the idea that the community needs several other forms of leadership which may be enacted by one or two members or widely distributed.

By 'dispersing' the responsibility for 'policing' the performance of the subject area team the extent of the conflict for any one member could be reduced. In the early days of the community it might be necessary for this to be formalized but gradually this would become a natural action for certain members over particular issues. One member of the community might be responsible for a particular development and would monitor its progress through implementation. Another member of the community might be responsible for leading enactment of whole school policies within the area and would monitor their functioning. In this way, the designated leader of the area, that is the person labelled by the structure, might be only responsible for monitoring a small part of the work of the subject or area. On other occasions they would be a colleague being observed or monitored.

The leader for each aspect would be likely to be the one judged by the community to have the greatest competence in that area and would therefore have the authority of expertise, which professionals have greater respect for than positional authority. The

community members would be the ones judging the competence and therefore would charge the leader of that aspect with pursuing the decision of the community, they would be the leading professional on that aspect rather than the professional leader (Wise, 1999).

How does this model of a department working as a community take account of the expectations of external agencies that might have legitimate authority as well as membership of overlapping communities with possibly conflicting norms.

Boundaries

It is at the boundaries of their subject area that the legitimacy of the role senders diminishes for the middle managers (Wise, 1999). They view the influence of those outside the immediate team to be less valid. However, they do regularly have to interact across the boundaries in their role as a middle manager and in other roles. They are usually part of another team (or possible community) when they meet with other heads of department or subject leaders, yet another team when they are acting as a pastoral tutor, and another again outside the parameters of their school when they meet with other subject specialists at training sessions or examination meetings. In all these circumstances the middle manager's understanding of their role is questioned and their competence challenged.

If the subject area is thought of as a community of practice then these boundary engagements are important and the challenge they pose must be addressed. It might be necessary for the designated leader to set up meetings or opportunities for engagement that allowed the community members, or a subset of them, to discuss the challenge and consider how it might 'fit in' with existing community norms, how the norms might need to adjust to accommodate the challenge or indeed how they might challenge the expectation. If, for example, a whole school change was found to be at odds with the norms within the department which were heavily influenced by the

norms of a larger community, such as a subject association, and the process of negotiation did not lead to an acceptable situation for the community then the change would risk being ignored. Minimal compliance or even undermining might follow this, placing the community at odds with the wider community within the organization but strengthening their sense of identity with each other.

FIGURE 2 TO GO SOMEWHERE HERE

Of course a sort of boundary might appear within the subject area where one or more subject specialists is not prepared to accept all the norms of the remainder of the community. They might be marginalized as individuals, or where their practice was at variance it would be open to greater scrutiny. The situation would be much the same for a new member who was going through the process of being socialized into the ways and norms of the community and considered to have legitimate peripheral participation. In both cases the individuals concerned would offer learning opportunities to the community because there might be questioning of accepted practices or introduction of new ideas for consideration. What might have initially been a clash of ideals might lead to new norms for the community.

Research has suggested (McGregor, this volume) that there is often more commonality between the same subject departments across a range of schools than there is between different subject departments within the one school. This is evidence of the strong community that can exist within subject specialists. This may derive from their original study of the subject (Siskin, 1994) and affect the way they think and view the world which will have an impact on their approach to the teaching of their subject.

An example of this would be science teaching, which is frequently done in mixed ability classes in an integrated way. Here there might be a number of subject specialists teaching a subject they are less familiar with for a large amount of the

time. For this reason, the normal classroom autonomy of the teacher is often forsaken in return for assistance with teaching the non-specialist area. The acceptance of a variety of leaders is a natural consequence of the integrated nature of the subject. There has to be, however, a fundamental understanding of what the core task is, arrived at through a process of negotiation. The teachers cannot change their approach with each change in subject so there has to be a sense in which they work together to achieve the outcomes they have agreed upon.

Monitoring in a Community of Practice

How might viewing the department as a community of practice help with carrying this important task?

> "People must know each other well enough to know how to interact
> productively and who to call for help or advice. They must trust each other,
> not just personally, but also in their ability to contribute to the enterprise of the
> community, so they feel comfortable addressing real problems together and
> speaking truthfully." (Wenger, 2000, p.230)

The expectation that the department or subject area might work together is not new (Tyldesley, 1984). Donnelly (1990, p. 11) noted that "the main task of the head of department in the 1990's is to lead staff towards the realisation of a common vision…". Whose common vision is a question that might be raised, and how common, because even within a community of practice the result of the negotiations is unlikely to be completely consensual agreement. The DfES (2001) similarly assume consensual agreement at some level. They see the middle manager's role as ensuring all the members of the team behave according to expected and agreed standards, so that a student receives more or less the same experience of a subject regardless of whom they are taught by. How these standards are communicated will vary according to the expectations of the organisation, the team and the middle

manager themselves but usually they are, after a process of discussion, written down as departmental, subject area or similar policy document. It is then, in a bureaucratic structure, the middle manager's responsibility to ensure that they are carried out. The members are held accountable to the policy and their practice is compared to it. How effective this monitoring can be is questionable when only a small proportion of the teaching year can be observed.

In a community of practice this would be seen as a more shared responsibility. Monitoring would be carried out by perhaps every member of the community to help members better reach the ideals negotiated. Where there was disagreement about whether practice seen was in line with agreed norms there would be the opportunity for discussion and development rather than a punitive measure as might be envisaged in the bureaucratic structure. The monitoring is seen as a developmental learning experience, a chance to share practice rather than be checked on. In this way, the impact might last beyond the immediate observation and indeed observation might be sought when new ideas were being tried.

There is a sense in which all monitoring could be said to be about accountability but it is significant who they are accountable to, what they are accountable for and what the outcome will be. If it is to their community for agreed norms and values for development purposes then possibly the process would become less threatening. A good example of this being attempted was in a department in one of the case study schools (Wise, 1999) where the head of department was a young, inexperienced teacher who had a large number of senior staff in his department. They had a system which was more about mutual learning. To avoid conflict he had instituted an arrangement whereby every member of the department observed the teaching of every other member of the department during the course of the year. This lead to very stimulating discussions at the departmental meetings when ideas and observations were fed back into the group. This sort of arrangement, a change in purpose for monitoring, could reduce the conflict for the middle manager.

The Way Forward

The expectation that middle managers will monitor the teaching of their subject area team on a regular basis has long been established. It has not been accepted by the middle managers as a legitimate expectation for all that time but there is evidence that even though it is now accepted it is still not being done (Wise, 1999). Of course 'performance management' in England has made them observe their team members at least once a year but there is a vast difference between this snapshot and the sort of monitoring of performance that is required to ensure consistent quality and uniformity of experience. This latter type of monitoring could be viewed as part of the engagement process of a community of practice where they develop shared language, repertoires and so on.

When the pressures on the middle manager not to monitor are considered it is not surprising that they avoid the issue. The group within their role set they consider to have the most legitimate power, their team members, is perceived as not expecting to be monitored and indeed some are actually hostile to the notion (Wise, 1999). This does however, cause great role conflict as they know they are expected to monitor by their senior managers who have positional authority within the school structure.

Many training courses currently on offer to middle managers do no more than raise their awareness of what they should be doing. Others, undertaken over a longer period of time develop the knowledge and understanding of what is required but few impact on the behaviour of the middle manager in their school environment (Harris, Busher and Wise, 2001).

How can the concept of communities of practice help? Firstly, middle managers would need to be made aware of the concept of communities of practice and then given the opportunity to develop their knowledge and understanding. This is

necessary so that problems such as the stagnation of the community through isolation from learning at its boundaries are actively avoided.

If the development of a community was seen as being beneficial there would need to be time for the dialogue to be undertaken that develops shared understandings and resources. Within the current climate in English schools this could not be expected to happen in the margins of participants' time. There are some doubts as to whether a community of practice can be formalized in this way, part of a planned process but without the time they can never happen at all. There could perhaps, in the first instance, be a policy developed to establish guidelines for monitoring to take place and a division of labour across the community, perhaps each person monitoring a different aspect of the agreed working practices of the community.

Another reason for not participating in monitoring is lack of time (Wise and Bush, 1999). By relieving the middle manager of the sole responsibility for monitoring some of the problem might be removed. However, the development of shared understanding, trust and sense of commitment will take time to develop and nurture. The concept of the subject area or departmental team as a community of practice may remove some of the unwelcome bureaucratic imposition of traditional monitoring practices but it does not reduce the level of responsibility for the nominated leader or community co-ordinator. Instead of doing the tasks themselves they are responsible for leading the community of professionals into a realm of common understanding, respect and practice. They would need to lead the negotiation process in the first instance particularly at the boundaries. This could require a whole new range of skills for many.

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