



The secondary Head of Department and the achievement of exceptional student outcomes

Stephen Dinham

University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of the secondary Head of Department (HoD) in leading teams producing exceptional education outcomes in Years 7-10 in New South Wales (NSW, Australia) government schools.

Design/methodology/approach – Sites where exceptional educational outcomes were believed to be occurring were selected using a variety of data including performance in standardised tests, public examinations, various value added measures and nominations from various stakeholders. Sites were of two types: subject departments responsible for teaching certain subjects and teams responsible for cross-school programmes in Years 7-10. Sites were selected to be broadly representative. Some schools had more than one site, e.g. Mathematics and Student Welfare. A total of 50 sites across NSW from 38 secondary schools were studied.

Findings – With both subject departments and teams responsible for cross-school programmes, leadership was found to be a key factor in the achievement of exceptional educational outcomes. Analysis of data revealed certain qualities, attributes and practices of the HoD of these schools, which are explored, central to which is a focus on students and their learning.

Research limitations/implications – HoDs were those of secondary schools from one state educational system.

Practical implications – Despite the pressures of the secondary HoD role, the HoDs studied had been able to lead and facilitate teams that were thriving when others struggle to perform. Whilst innate, personal qualities are important, much of what these HoDs possessed and demonstrated had been learned from others.

Originality/value – Detailed case studies have provided an examination of HoD leadership effectiveness in a wide range of contexts, with much commonality revealed. Thus, the study can inform future professional learning for secondary HoDs and possibly other middle managers in education. It may also have value for HoD selection.

Keywords Teaching, Quality, Leadership, Secondary schools, Secondary education, Australia

Paper type Research paper

Background to the study

Pressure for educational change has increased greatly over the past few decades. These pressures and demands are often contradictory, with schools expected to take on a raft of social responsibilities while lifting student performance and meeting new accountabilities. Calls for continuous improvement, transformation

The ideas expressed in this paper are those of the author but they have been greatly influenced by the writings and ideas of the other investigators of the AESOP project: Geoff Barnes, Paul Brock, Bill Green, David Laird, John Pegg, Wayne Sawyer and Robert Stevens. The input of others involved with site visits and reports is also acknowledged.



and data-driven decision making have become constants for schools (Zmuda *et al.*, 2004).

Educational change needs to be considered in the wider socio-political context, where teacher status is tending to decline, social criticisms and expectations are rising and there are concerns with both attracting and retaining quality teachers and with leadership succession and sustainability (Dinham and Scott, 2000; Scott and Dinham, 2002).

Although much change is imposed from above and outside, there is also desire within schools for change and improvement to teaching and learning. Often, principals have responsibility for driving change and teachers have responsibility for implementing it. Middle managers such as secondary Heads of Department (HoD) – the term Head of Department (HoD) is used in this paper to avoid confusion, rather than Head Teacher or Faculty Head – occupy key linking positions between principals and classroom teachers.

The HoD has formal responsibilities and accountabilities and exerts influence horizontally and vertically within and beyond the department and school (Duke, 1987; Koehler, 1993; Dinham *et al.*, 2000; Busher and Harris, 2000; Gunter, 2001).

With the trend towards greater school autonomy in certain areas such as management (Beare *et al.*, 1989), yet greater centralisation, accountability and control through means such as outcomes based assessment, standardised testing and reporting of student and school performance, it can be argued that the workload of the secondary HoD has become more complex, intensive and challenging.

In addition, the HoD usually has a significant teaching load and in larger secondary schools, he or she can be responsible for ten or more staff and the teaching and learning of hundreds of students.

As a result of these and other responsibilities which as noted can be countervailing, the secondary HoD has been found to be a high pressure position, with those in the “middle” recording higher levels of mental stress and lower levels of occupational satisfaction (Dinham and Scott, 2002). An interview study involving 26 secondary HoDs at four government and non-government schools (Dinham *et al.*, 2000) found that:

- HoDs took on the role for a variety of reasons;
- only half HoDs reported the role was what they had expected it to be;
- HoDs were under-prepared for the interpersonal aspects of the role, which are heavily dependent upon relationships;
- HoD preparation was largely *ad hoc*, with formal preparation little utilised and poorly regarded;
- HoDs reported that lack of time to perform the various aspects of the role was the worst aspect of the position;
- much of the role of the HoD was reactive with little room for discretionary action;
- HoDs felt the quality of their own teaching was compromised by the role;
- HoDs had a wide range of professional learning needs with only half reporting that these were being met;
- the HoD position was poorly rewarded for the breadth and depth of the tasks involved; and

- the opportunity to have an influence and to lead other professionals was highly prized by HoDs, some of whom regarded the HoD as the “best position in the school”.

Despite the importance of the role, the secondary HoD has been under-researched, when compared with others such as principals and classroom teachers. The importance of principal leadership has long been accepted in school effectiveness research and the individual teacher has been found to be the greatest contributor to student achievement, apart from students themselves (Hattie, 2003). However it has been increasingly recognised that subject leadership is important in facilitating quality teaching and learning and school improvement (Busher and Harris, 2000). Those such as HoDs can have significant influence on the quality of teaching and learning within their departments and individual classrooms (Ayres *et al.*, 2000, 2004). The challenge for HoDs is to move beyond the managerial aspects of the role to engage more with teaching and learning, although to accomplish this, professional learning may be required in both the management and educational leadership areas (see Brown *et al.*, 2002).

As Goodson and Marsh (1996, p. 54) observed: “The subject department provides the most common organisational vehicle for school subject knowledge, certainly in secondary schools, but unlike ‘the curriculum’ it has not been widely researched or much noted in our studies of schools”. Yet life and learning in secondary schools are commonly organised according to subject matter and the school subject remains the preferred focus of teaching and learning and the preferred form of curriculum realisation (Siskin and Little, 1995).

Research by Stodolsky and Grossman (1995, 2000) and Grossman and Stodolsky (1995) emphasised the importance of a “comparative approach toward understanding subject-matter differences among secondary school teachers”. Likewise, due attention needs to be addressed to “school subjects as specific contexts within which secondary teachers teach” (Grossman and Stodolsky, 1995, p. 5).

Whereas school effectiveness research in the past was concerned more with the macro school level, increasingly, there has been focus on the sub-units within schools such as departments (Busher and Harris, 1999, 2000). Research evidence concerned with school improvement emphasises the importance of focusing on efforts to change practices at different levels within an organisation. The largest study of differential school effectiveness in the UK highlighted the importance of differences between departments in explaining differences in school performance (Sammons *et al.*, 1997). As Hannay and Ross (1999, p. 346) have concluded, “we need far more research on the micro-processes involved in secondary schools”.

Thus the research reported in this paper contributes to this particularly important area; it is extensive in scale, looking as it does at junior secondary education throughout the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (NSW DET), one of the largest educational systems in the world.

The study

ÆSOP (An Exceptional Schooling Outcomes Project) is an Australian Research Council funded study investigating processes leading to exceptional educational outcomes in Years 7-10 in NSW DET government (public) schools.

Exceptional educational achievement was defined using the rubric of the three, interrelated domains or principles outlined in *The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century* (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 1999), i.e. that schools should:

- “develop fully the talents of all students”;
- attain “high standards of knowledge, skills and understanding through a comprehensive and balanced curriculum”; and
- be “socially just”.

Research sites were of two types: departments responsible for teaching certain subjects in Years 7-10, and teams responsible for cross-school programmes in Years 7-10. A total of 50 sites were studied in 38 secondary schools across the state.

Methodology involved four researchers visiting each site (some schools had more than one site/area identified, e.g. Mathematics and Student Welfare, and thus teams were larger).

Visits were typically four days with lesson observations, interviews with the principal, HoD, other executive staff, teachers, students and community members, and other forms of data gathering such as observations and document analysis (see below).

Leadership, both positional (principals, HoD, other school executive) and from classroom teachers was found to be an important factor in the exceptional outcomes achieved by students, teachers and schools.

While the vast majority of the 50 sites were confirmed to be achieving exceptional educational outcomes as defined in the project, some were not. In the latter case, some aspects of leadership identified in the exceptional sites were lacking to a degree or absent[1].

ÆSOP: how the sites were selected

The project employed a case study approach whereby quantitative (e.g., public examination performance, “value adding” measures) and qualitative data (e.g., nomination from parent groups, principals, DET officers) were used to select a sample of sites where schools appeared to be achieving exceptional educational outcomes, either within department-based subject areas or with cross-school programmes, over at least a four year period.

Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data occurred with sites selected to provide a sample of socio-economic types, rural-urban distribution, size of school, and spread of subject areas and programmes. Use of the “Adelaide Goals” played an important role in the selection process, in that evidence of personal and social achievement was sought in addition to academic success. Eventually, 50 sites were selected for study at 38 secondary schools, with some schools being selected for potentially exceptional educational achievement in a combination of academic areas and/or cross-school programmes.

Formulation of methodology and selection of sites took much of 2001. Pilot studies at four sites took place in late 2001, with the bulk of site visits taking place in 2002 and 2003. Data analysis and writing occurred in 2003-2005.

How AESOP data were obtained and analysed

The overall aim of the project was to identify and analyse processes in NSW public schooling, Years 7-10, producing exceptional educational outcomes to assist national renewal in junior secondary education.

The following study questions were developed in respect of the above aim:

- What are the variables and processes leading to exceptional educational outcomes – in the possible areas of personal identity, academic success and social attainment – in the study site(s)?
- Is it possible to identify the relationship(s), if any, between “academic success”, “personal identity” and “social attainment” as achieved through subject departments and/or other formal groups and special programmes and initiatives?
- What organisational and institutional factors – NSW DET, District, school, leadership, community, department, other groups and individuals – contribute to and constrain this success?
- To what degree and through what means, if any, are the exceptional educational outcomes of the sites shared or shareable with others within and beyond the school?

Participation on the part of schools, teams, and individuals was voluntary. Site visit research teams consisted of a university academic who acted as leader, another academic with expertise in the area under investigation, a HoD from another school in the district with expertise in the area under investigation, and the Chief Education Officer (School Improvement) from the local district office. Additional academics and HoDs were included in multi-site visits.

Site teams were expected to undertake the following:

- (1) Interview the principal about the exceptional department/programme.
- (2) Interview the HoD/leader of the exceptional department/programme.
- (3) With classroom teacher approval, visit classes to observe students at work, and discuss pedagogy and related matters with those teachers.
- (4) Hold a department forum.
- (5) Conduct student fora in two year groups – Years 7 and 8, Years 9 and 10.
- (6) Conduct a parent forum.
- (7) Team leader to organise additional discussions with the principal and the HoD as needed.
- (8) Team to investigate any documents that are held and used by the department/programme, e.g. policy documents, newsletters, management plans, programmes etc,
- (9) Provide oral feedback to the department/programme staff and principal on final day.

Site teams used protocols to record data and observations and submitted a report in electronic format for data analysis.

ÆSOP Findings: how does the leadership of the HoD contribute to exceptional educational outcomes in junior secondary schooling?

From line-by-line analysis of the site reports on subject departments and programmes entered into NUD*IST (QSR, 2002), a clear picture emerged of the leaders and leadership in departments and programmes identified as producing exceptional educational outcomes in the various subject areas under study.

Data analysis using the grounded theory technique of open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), revealed more than 250 concepts relating to aspects of secondary HoDs and their leadership. The grounded theory techniques of axial and selective coding resulted in these concepts being grouped into eight categories – a core category and seven contributing categories.

Core category

The core strategy is:

- Focus on students and their learning.

Contributing categories

The contributing categories are:

- Personal qualities, relationships.
- Professional capacity, strategy.
- Promotion and advocacy, external relations.
- Department planning, organisation.
- Common purpose, collaboration, team building.
- Teacher learning, responsibility, trust.
- Vision, expectations and culture of success.

The HoD: influence on success

1. Personal qualities and relationships

Site reports revealed how the personal qualities of HoDs were an important aspect of their leadership. These highly effective leaders are people who are dedicated to the job. Their commitment, energy and enthusiasm for teaching motivate those around them and are infectious. They have a strong commitment and passion for their teaching subject(s). They are easy to get on with, consistent yet flexible, non-dogmatic, and prepared to admit to their mistakes, taking responsibility for Department-based decisions. They carefully consider options although they can be decisive when necessary.

These HoDs demonstrate empathy. They show care and consideration and make themselves available to help when needed. They are inclusive in their dealings with people.

A site report for a school identified for English noted:

The HoD is held in high regard by her colleagues. ... An experienced English teacher described her HoD's leadership as "politically aware" and the woman herself as a "fabulous people-person who is good at negotiating". Further praise came from a young English teacher on staff who enthusiastically stated, "I have one of the best bosses. She treats you as a person, with respect, and I can talk to her about everything. She keeps the whole staff happy".

These HoDs have effective interpersonal skills. They have a good way of dealing with students, even the recalcitrant. In this, they are able to distinguish between “the sin and the sinner”.

One of their most important attributes is that they serve as role models for others, setting a good example. They model humanity and professionalism, thus exercising both moral and professional leadership. They tend to have a strong influence on less experienced staff. Another site report for a school selected for English noted:

The role of the HoD is powerful – she exercises strong intellectual, mentoring and supervisory leadership. In the words of the principal, she “leads by example”. She sets a clear agenda while, at the same time, enabling teachers to exercise professional autonomy and to enjoy the confidence to adjust the programme according to the differing needs and contexts as they arise. . . . English teachers feel that their creativity is allowed to be expressed.

These HoDs have a positive attitude and are open to new ideas. They are receptive to the suggestions of others and are prepared to try new approaches. They are politically aware in their dealings with other faculties and groups and have a strong presence and reputation in the school. They are effective advocates for their area.

HoDs let their staff know they care for them and show appreciation for what staff do. They frequently give praise and provide feedback, both positive and negative.

Over time, they have earned respect from staff, students, parents and the community. In turn, they demonstrate respect for others. They tend to be recognised as exceptional by deputy principals and principals. They elicit loyalty. Staff don’t want to let their HoD or team down.

In a site report for a Science Department, three teachers made the following observations:

[The HoD] is very flexible. He is very willing to take on board other people’s ideas. He’s not one of these dogmatic people who just sort of says this is my idea . . . He’s more than willing to listen to other people’s ideas, and incorporate them and have a go, and if it doesn’t work fine, if it does good (Science Teacher 1).

[He] has encouraged everyone in the department to contribute in a big way (Science Teacher 2).

He’s a person that you can depend 100 per cent on. He is uncompromisingly fair. Annoyingly fair sometimes. A depth of character you don’t find, really, in a lot of people. And I think that the respect that we have for him is another very important thing too (Science Teacher 3).

Personal qualities such as interest and enthusiasm were mentioned in many of the site reports. A report for a school selected for English noted:

The staff get caught up in the infectious enthusiasm but it is low key, they just get on with it. They are not resisters or blockers, there is a mutual acceptance of what needs to be done. There is a high level of co-operation with the HoD, who supplies initial energy. She has a sound depth of knowledge and everybody’s game is lifted by her. Even weaker teachers get caught up in the culture.

2. *Professional capacity, strategy*

These leaders of successful departments are experienced and effective teachers. They possess depth and breadth of knowledge, have a sound understanding of curricula and keep informed of current developments. The site report for a school identified for English noted:

The HoD has successfully taken the lead in understanding the new [syllabus] concepts, familiarising the staff with them and initiating policies in implementation. All teachers acknowledged her as someone whose subject knowledge was extensive and pre-eminent and to whom they could turn immediately and unhesitatingly for guidance or explanation. Far from being intimidated by curriculum change, the HoD had embraced it, thus making the transition period much less threatening for her staff.

The Principal of a school where the Mathematics Department had been identified commented:

A primary cause [for the success of the department] would be the absolutely outstanding professional characteristics of the HoD. I think she has professional characteristics, personal characteristics in so far as they impinge on her professional functioning and commitment . . . her commitment is such that there is nothing she does in a superficial manner, she is a most thoughtful person, she is a person to whom I turn at all times if I want a thoughtful or reasoned response to a policy or procedure. Nothing is ever said lightly. Everything is given a great deal of thought. Commitment to professionalism, commitment to excellence, commitment to students, not in any touchy feely sort of way, but a belief in the importance of their learning and a belief in the importance of Mathematics . . . It's really her professionalism.

These HoDs seek out best practice from outside their department and school. In turn, they are able to model this in teaching, planning, programming and behaviour management. They are open to new ideas and approaches and are able to integrate these into their practice. They are good listeners and respect the experience and views of other department members. Their approach is to build upon what is there. It is clear from many site reports that these people took over departments that were operating effectively, but were able to use their professional and personal capacities to take this to a higher level. A key aspect to accomplishing this was to release potential through collaboration and team building (see later).

These HoDs are prepared to share resources and encourage others to do the same. They regularly report back to staff. They are prepared to share the credit for good ideas and encourage rather than control the “high fliers” in the Faculty. They provide guidance rather than restriction.

They are hard working, well organised and thorough. They pay attention to detail. They tend to work harder than anyone else in the faculty and step in to fill the gap when needed. A key aim is to remove or overcome obstacles to change and higher levels of achievement.

Some HoDs set an example by allocating themselves to lower ability classes. They are also strategic about the allocation of more capable teachers to where they can best be used and allocate less experienced and/or less able teachers to facilitate their professional growth.

A site report for an English Department noted:

The HoD herself says that she is a “spoon-feeder” of her staff: “I give them the folders, the material and I think it’s important to model for the staff. I won’t ask them to do what I wouldn’t do myself”. Her leadership style is to “work hard and people don’t want to let you down. I try to maintain credibility – I’m the one who has no home room and I take the bottom Year 10. I can’t switch off. I mark everything and get it back the next day ... instant feedback. More of the others are doing it now as well ... I encourage the staff to write their own comments. Negativity doesn’t exist. ... I think leadership is about removing obstacles.”

3. Promotion, advocacy and external relations

These HoDs are effective advocates for their department and respected members of their school community. They tend to be active in school politics and are able to secure resources and support for their area. They facilitate networking across the school and with the wider community and profession. They take on other commitments outside their immediate responsibility and have the capacity to mediate between department and school policies, practices and priorities.

A site report for a school identified for personal development, health and physical education (PDHPE) noted:

... the HoD PDHPE is able to articulate the needs of the department at the executive level, and make strong representations on the department’s behalf. Staff indicated that she consistently presented her case well, and was clear on the outcomes she wanted to achieve. ... the HoD’s communication skills were manifest in her management of resources. This was brought into sharp focus through her ability to attract outside funding to the department (specifically, through the Parents and Citizens Association). The President of the P and C enthused that the HoD not only made substantive cases for the allocation of funds to the PDHPE department, but was particularly vigilant in reporting back the outcomes of the funding allocation.

These HoDs raise the profile of and promote their subject areas with students, parents, the rest of the school and feeder primary schools. A site report for an English Department noted:

The HoD provides the staff with written weekly “English up-dates”. Moreover, every weekly edition of the [School] Newsletter has an English column. No other department does this regularly and most have no entries. The entries are written by the HoD and are always about what is going on in classrooms, especially in terms of assessment, writing competitions, excursions, HSC study series, opportunities.

A site report for another school selected for English also highlighted the importance of promoting the subject area:

The HoD, who took up the position in 1992 ... [described] English as “the poor cousins of Maths” in the school. She talked about having to “sell” English to the parents as being equally as important as Maths and Science. She maintained that Asian and Middle Eastern parents often felt that whereas they could help their children with the latter subjects, this was not the case with English. Indeed, she felt that English had to be presented in a manner that would lead students to value English highly, focusing on a “step by step” method of explicit teaching, which, to some extent, is not unlike that associated with Maths.

Their commitments do not prevent HoDs from engaging in professional activities outside their faculty and school. They participate in and contribute to professional

development and in-service across the school and with professional associations and other bodies outside the school.

The site report for a school where Science had been identified as being exceptional in Years 7-10 noted:

... the current HoD was keen to establish broader links with the 13 [primary] feeder schools. Part of this had been initiated with the invitation of Year 6 students to be involved in the [school] Science Fair this year. In addition, he had set up a number of Science workshops in two or three of the feeder schools to develop the links further. The focus of the workshops was to provide Science activities relevant to primary students. While there is clearly a benefit for [the school] in establishing these links with the younger students, the programme also raises the profile of Science with the next generation of incoming students. This is particularly important given the status of Science in many primary schools and the lack of Science that is often taught.

4. Department planning and organisation

These HoDs have a major influence upon department planning and organisation. They oversee the development and centralisation of teaching resources and take a leading role in programming.

They facilitate with staff the development and implementation of clear policies and procedures and effective communication.

Department meetings are held regularly and tend to be focussed on dealing with one or more key issues rather than administration. Decision making is collaborative with an implicit understanding that there will be universal and uniform application of group decisions.

Detailed and effective evaluation, documentation and reporting are important aspects of department organisation overseen by the HoD.

Effective student discipline and welfare strategies are developed and instigated and there is thorough follow up on student matters. HoDs foster a consistent approach to behaviour management, with students and staff knowing precisely what is involved and what are the consequences.

A site report for a Science Department noted:

Discipline within the department is good ... This is due, to a considerable degree, to the effectiveness of the HoD as a disciplinarian. A number of staff members commented on the reluctance of students to be sent to him for discipline infringements and on his thoroughness in following up students who are referred to him. The HoD commented that, while he likes to take one of the more capable classes in Year 7, he prefers to take the lower ability classes, where discipline problems are more likely to occur, in Years 8 to 10. He commented, not entirely in jest, that "it saves time by cutting out the middle man".

Another site report for a Special Education Unit noted the importance of consistency and standards:

"We don't give in. And nothing's watered down. It's too bad. If they've blown it, they've blown it", explained one Unit teacher. The middle school coordinator observed, in relation to the HoD, that "he doesn't waver and he doesn't allow any disability to be an excuse for different kinds of behaviour".

A site report for a PDHPE Department made similar comments:

"[The HoD] is certainly very well organised. I would say that she takes her job and her subject area very seriously ... I think she believes in what she is doing ... and that's by her demeanour, by what she does, what she says" [another HoD]. ... the students indicated they were clear about expectations concerning assignment submission, behaviour, and assessment procedures. ... comments from PDHPE teachers indicated the HoD articulates ideas and expectations clearly with them. She draws all staff members into the decision making process, thus facilitating an exchange of ideas between staff members and between the HoD and staff.

These HoDs monitor the use and quality of teaching resources and department developed resources. The standardised and agreed systems put in place assist in future leadership succession. Teachers are encouraged to have input and to take responsibility.

5. Common purpose, collaboration, team building

As noted, in many cases the seeds for success were present when these HoDs were appointed but they were able to bring the elements together to take their department to another level of performance. One way this was achieved was through developing a common purpose and commitment amongst department members, fostering collaboration and building a productive team.

A site report for an English Department noted:

English has a high profile ... It is a "magnet" among the kids. ... [The] HoD is the centre orchestrating it all. [The HoD] is central to the success of the department. Good leadership from the HoD is important. ... The Principal argues that the HoD is the primary factor in the department's success. English had a poor history before [The HoD] arrived and was a very split staff. She had been on the staff and was occasionally relieving HoD. She gained the position on merit and "set about re-building the department. The staff have rallied around her and see themselves as a team. ... For the Deputy Principal, as with the Principal, leadership is an issue: "[the HoD] is able to embrace a whole lot of individual personalities and styles with no cliques".

These HoDs are adept at drawing out the ideas and opinions of their faculty members. In this way, common agreed goals are developed which are binding on the Faculty.

A site report for a school selected for Science commented:

[The HoD's] leadership style is very democratic, a style which is well suited to this particular context. Given the age and experience of the department members, and the fact that they have their own well-tested ideas about educational theory, an autocratic leadership style would not be appropriate. He is sensitive to the views of the department members and is very successful in welding them into a cooperative and effective team. "I'm easy to get on with and I'm prepared to listen to people ... and take on board their ideas" [HoD Science]. Newer members of the department are drawn into a collegial team, which exhibits friendliness and professionalism.

Department members have a feeling of ownership of their area and feel confident and secure. In this way, high morale and a feeling of common purpose is facilitated. Despite what might be mandated, there is a feeling of control.

A site report for Mathematics noted:

The Mathematics HoD has led the department for the past six years. He is very supportive of his staff and is very much one of the Mathematics team. He uses a collaborative approach to decision making, and uses the experience and expertise of his staff to the students' advantage.

He has integrated newer members into the department giving them more and more responsibility as they gain experience.

The HoD of the above department commented:

I don't prescribe anything to my staff, unless I have to ... We are, Mathematics wise, more collaborative, I draw on all of their experience ... It's not me saying I'm the HoD and this is how its going to be done, it's "How are we going to solve this problem?"

The site report for a school identified for its Intensive English Centre noted:

The HoD has forged a strong and stable team in the IEC. The Principal said: "They work really well together as a team, they seem to get on well together. Overall it's a pretty impressive team, through the HoD's leadership and the quality of the people we have over there we get some very good team work. They work together and support each other, they support the kids and they are very dedicated to their job."

6. *Teacher learning, responsibility, trust*

These HoDs model and place a high value on professional learning. They help staff identify their professional strengths and weaknesses and assist and encourage them to address these. They facilitate department-based professional development as well as supporting and encouraging staff to engage in school-wide and out of school professional learning.

There is a culture of professional sharing whereby staff assist each other to share best practice and with staff providing workshops and feedback from their professional learning.

There tends to be professional talk in the staffroom with the HoD providing current journals, papers and examples for staff. There is a sharing of latest developments, approaches and ideas.

A site report for a school identified for Mathematics noted how the HoD had subtly and persistently directed the professional learning of staff:

The HoD is particularly keen to introduce technology to assist students with their learning. He has been responsible for the setting up of the Mathematics computer laboratory and the purchase of additional sets of graphics calculators. He has also supported the introduction of this hardware by ensuring that teachers are trained in the use of this equipment. As well, one of the Mathematics teachers has been allocated one of the compulsory technology classes in Year 7. [The HoD commented]: "Graphics calculators ... we are using a lot more now we have three sets of graphics calculators ... We go to as many inservice courses on them as we can. One by one I have convinced them that they are a good thing. On faculty meeting afternoons occasionally we sit down and do, say, something on the statistics module or I drag them into the computer room and we'll have a look at this new geometry thing I found or new graphing thing I've found."

Less experienced teachers are paid close attention and given support to help them adjust. There is subtle pressure through role modelling for new teachers to rise to the level of the rest of the department.

The site report for a Science Department noted:

The HoD commented that he has devoted a lot of time to the professional development of new teachers, providing them with teaching ideas and advice on classroom management, etc. He also has a philosophy of "protecting" beginning teachers. He and the other more experienced

staff members take a greater share of “difficult” classes to enable inexperienced teachers to gain confidence. This preparedness to put themselves out to assist the development and integration of new members of the team is a clear example of the group collegial ethos in action. “New Science staff are inducted into their ways ... The HoD is very supportive of struggling teachers. He covers for and looks after new teachers” [Principal]. “We provide highly structured specific programmes to support new teachers” [HoD].

These HoDs recognise the expertise of others and allow them to exercise leadership. They encourage staff to extend themselves without resorting to overt pressure or control. They demonstrate trust which has implicit expectation that other staff can and will perform professionally.

A site report for an Intensive English Centre noted:

The Principal said: “The HoD IEC is very much respected by the school staff and the IEC staff. She’s a very efficient organiser, a very caring person and she applies very good leadership to her staff, and gets a great deal of work out of them”. A Deputy Principal said: “But even speaking to the staff they will say the HoD IEC allows them to have their own initiatives and be independent. She trusts her staff because they are all doing an excellent job, and she tends to show the way and provide guidance. The staff appreciate this because they do not feel like they are being suffocated. And I think that is a formula that works. They all extend themselves, being given some freedom. The HoD IEC leads by example”.

A site report for a school identified for English noted:

The HoD was seen by all staff as democratic and empowering. According to one teacher: “She doesn’t act like a HoD. She delegates – we all have jobs and she oversees them. She’s good with new programmes because she makes sure she understands it first, then takes us through it and then divides up the jobs”. According to a young teacher: “[the HoD] is one of the best bosses. She treats you as a person, with respect and you can talk to her about anything. She keeps everybody on the whole staff happy”. Thus, very significantly, the HoD is the originator, organiser and facilitator of professional development in the department. ... The HoD is highly esteemed by staff as a leader and as a facilitator of teacher development. One of the younger members of staff maintained that he felt he had “grown as a teacher since coming here”.

Through such measures HoDs help to generate a culture where teachers share responsibility and contribute for their mutual benefit and the benefit of their students.

7. Vision, expectations, culture of success

These leaders of successful departments possess a clear vision for what they want to achieve. They also have a clear view of the importance and relevance of their subject areas for students’ lives.

They seek and accept input from others to formulate this vision and set high standards and expectations.

The HoDs possess clear personal goals and set high standards for themselves. They model professionalism. They believe in working hard and expect the same of students and fellow staff.

A site report for an English Department noted the observations of one teacher:

[The HoD] works on your strengths but doesn’t let you get away with your weaknesses. She encourages you, suggests new approaches, directs you to resources and to others who might help ... she encourages collaborative and workshop marking. [She] loves and fosters creative

writing across all levels. Entry in competitions is encouraged. It starts with in-class work and local competitions through to the *Herald* “Young Writers” [awards].

Another teacher from the same English Department commented:

The big issue for success here is the HoD – everyone rises to the team level. She creates a very positive, powerful culture. A weak teacher would not work here – there is an expectation that you pull your weight. [She] leads by consensus. She is part of the group and works hardest by far, we don’t want to let her down. She gets kudos as a HoD with us by representing the department and winning. She argues aggressively for our interests and that’s how you get support. Helping becomes infectious, there is a “clan-like” mentality here.

Casual or replacement teachers are well supported and are expected to teach rather than baby sit. Casual teachers who do not meet expectations are not normally used again and permanent teachers who do not fit the culture may end up transferring. When new appointments are made, the HoD makes an effort to ensure a good fit with the needs and ethos of the Faculty.

These HoDs provide clear direction to teachers and students. They are consistent and transparent in their application of consequences. They are seen by others as fair. Teachers tend to be able to handle their own discipline and sending a student to the HoD is seen as unusual and serious by all concerned.

A site report for a Special Education Unit noted:

An important aspect of [the HoD’s] leadership was his overall concern and vision for the students and the Unit. A parent, in expressing a belief that [the HoD] was probably the biggest single factor in the Unit’s success, noted that he had a clear vision and a belief in the individuality of students. This vision, she observed, tended to rub off on his staff: he was constantly “inspiring staff to live his vision”. A Teachers’ Aide noted that: “Everyone knows where they’re going and what they’re doing because it’s all organised. Everyone gets a say, especially in timetabling, he discusses that with the teachers what classes they’re going to take for the next year and what they’d like. As a teacher, the HoD was described by parents as being ‘a very, very firm ... gentleman ... all the kids respect him.’”

These HoDs provide constant subtle pressure for change and improvement in student outcomes and with staff are constantly seeking ways to extend students. They attempt to foster creativity in teachers and students and support innovation. They believe that all students can experience success and they and other teachers seek out ways for this to occur. On the other hand, high expectations means that slackness is not accepted from students or teachers.

Over time, role modelling and high expectations lead to the development of a culture of success that is recognised by students, other teachers in the school and parents. Students expect to work hard and to do well and have a view that the subject areas within the faculty’s control are important and relevant.

The Principal of a school in a very isolated part of the state where the Science Department has been studied noted:

The [Science] Department pushes and encourages high fliers and supports individual kids. Students have often attended the National Science Youth Forum ... The HoD has a strong commitment to involvement in Science competitions. Students generally do well in external tests ... Science staff are good at knowing kids and their needs.

8. Core category: focus on students and their learning

As was found to be the case with Principals (Dinham, 2005), HoDs have as their prime consideration students and their learning. Rather than academic achievement alone, HoDs and their staff recognise the need to attend to the personal and social needs of students as these underpin academic success.

They have a genuine concern for students as people. They are aware of the varied backgrounds of their students and have a commitment to their intellectual and social development.

They and their staff also know their students academically through assessment and tracking, a process that begins in many cases in feeder primary schools. So that students can get the best possible start, there is a focus in many of these departments on the Years 6-7 primary to secondary transition.

Within the department, there is a strong emphasis on monitoring and feedback. There is also recognition of the importance of assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning. Assessment tends to be regular and thorough and informs planning and approaches within the department.

The HoD and the department encourage independence in student learning and find ways to give responsibility and leadership to students. There is an emphasis and expectation that students take a degree of responsibility for their learning.

These HoDs find ways to reduce administrative demands on teachers, including taking on much of this themselves, so that teachers can concentrate their efforts on teaching and learning.

They also maintain close contact with all classes and are prepared to negotiate with students. What results from this focus on students and their learning could be termed a teacher-directed, student-centred culture.

A site report for a school where Special Education was investigated noted:

An important aspect of the HoD's leadership was the development of a student-centred culture incorporating high expectations of students, a culture in which roles, responsibilities and procedures for staff and students was mutually understood even if not documented. . . . while it was clear that the HoD was an exceptional leader, the features of effective leadership can be found in other individuals.

Comparisons with principal leadership

The following comparisons with the model developed for Principal leadership (Dinham, 2005) are offered:

- The focus on students and their learning is common to both Principals and HoDs and forms the central or core category for both positions.
- The bias towards innovation and action identified for principals tended to be subsumed in other categories with the HoD, in which this attribute was evident but less pronounced.
- Student support, common purpose and collaboration identified for principals was broadly equivalent to common purpose, collaboration, team building with hods, the differences being that HoD were less involved with student support and more involved with team building than were principals.

- Vision, expectations and culture of success is common to both HoDs and principals.
- Personal qualities and relationships is common to both HoDs and principals.
- Teacher learning, responsibility, trust is common to both HoDs and principals.
- Department planning and organisation was a major attribute of heads of department as was professional capacity and strategy, the latter being more subject-based than the capacity and strategy exercised by principals which tended to be more generic and school-wide in scope and focus.
- Promotion and advocacy, external relations is more within-school focussed for hods than is external awareness and engagement for principals, who have a more clearly defined and significant role beyond the school.

Discussion and conclusion

Although there was considerable variation across the sample of sites in terms of geographic location, socio-economic background, staff experience, subject areas, and programmes, there was strong commonality amongst the HoD involved with the study.

Male or female, young or old, and regardless of specialisation, HoDs were found to possess and exhibit similar personal qualities, attributes and actions. They could be accurately described as “authentic” leaders (Duignan and Bhindi, 1997).

The HoDs have their own personalities and foibles, yet the impression they project is one of professionalism underpinned by humanity. While their actions are an expression of who they are as people, there was evidence that these leaders of successful departments and teams have grown into the role, often under the influence of others and were thus both born and made as leaders. The implication here is that while not everyone is cut out to a leader, those with potential can develop and be mentored into the role. A key aspect of the HoDs was how they were actively encouraging the leadership capacity of others, thus facilitating distributed leadership and leadership sustainability in their departments.

In considering the known pressures and contradictions of the role of the secondary HoD, the HoDs leading the successful departments and teams studied in the *ÆSOP* project have been able to deal with these and even use them to their advantage. Rather than just surviving, these leaders and the teams they led were thriving, often in difficult circumstances. In many cases, schools and departments had been in decline until Principals and HoD had been appointed.

A challenge for educational employers and systems is to utilise people such as the HoDs encountered in the *ÆSOP* study to assist in the development of future leaders, other departments and schools. One negative finding from the study was that these HoDs tend to be neither recognised nor utilised to any great degree outside their school and are in some respects, “hidden treasures” (Dinham, 2002).

Note

1. This paper concentrates on HoD leadership only. Findings on principal leadership were previously reported (Dinham, 2005). Later publications will examine Deputy Principal, other school Executive and distributed (teacher) leadership.

References

- Ayres, P., Dinham, S. and Sawyer, W. (2000), *Successful Senior Secondary Teaching*, Quality Teaching Series, No. 1, Australian College of Education, Deakin.
- Ayres, P., Dinham, S. and Sawyer, W. (2004), "Effective teaching in the context of a grade 12 high stakes external examination in New South Wales, Australia", *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 30 No. 1, pp. 141-65.
- Beare, H., Caldwell, B. and Millikan, R. (1989), *Creating an Excellent School*, Routledge, London.
- Brown, M., Boyle, B. and Boyle, T. (2002), "Professional development and management training needs for heads of department in UK secondary schools", *Journal of Educational Administration*, Vol. 40 No. 1, pp. 31-43.
- Busher, H. and Harris, A. (1999), "Leadership of school subject areas: tensions and dimensions of managing in the middle", *School Leadership and Management*, Vol. 19, pp. 305-17.
- Busher, H. and Harris, A. (2000), *Subject Leadership and School Improvement*, Paul Chapman, London.
- Dinham, S. (2002), "NSW Quality Teaching Awards – research, rigour and transparency", *Unicorn*, Vol. 28 No. 1, pp. 5-9.
- Dinham, S. (2005), "Principal leadership for outstanding educational outcomes", *Journal of Educational Administration*, Vol. 43 No. 4, pp. 338-56.
- Dinham, S. and Scott, C. (2000), "Moving into the third, outer domain of teacher satisfaction", *Journal of Educational Administration*, Vol. 38 No. 4, pp. 379-96.
- Dinham, S. and Scott, C. (2002), "Pressure points: School executive and educational change", *Journal of Educational Enquiry*, Vol. 3 No. 2, pp. 35-52.
- Dinham, S., Brennan, K., Collier, J., Deece, A. and Mulford, D. (2000), *The Secondary Head of Department: Key Link in the Quality Teaching and Learning*, Chain Quality Teaching Series, No. 2, Australian College of Education, Deakin.
- Duignan, P. and Bhindi, N. (1997), "Authenticity in leadership: an emerging perspective", *Journal of Educational Administration*, Vol. 35 No. 3, pp. 195-209.
- Duke, D. (1987), *School Leadership and Instructional Improvement*, Random House, New York, NY.
- Goodson, I. and Marsh, C. (1996), *Studying School Subjects*, Falmer Press, London.
- Grossman, P. and Stodolsky, S. (1995), "Content as context: the role of school subjects in secondary school teaching", *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 24, pp. 5-23.
- Gunter, H. (2001), *Leaders and Leadership in Education*, Paul Chapman, London.
- Hannay, L.M. and Ross, J.A. (1999), "Department heads as middle managers?", *Questioning the black box, School Leadership and Management*, Vol. 19, pp. 345-58.
- Hattie, J. (2003), "Teachers make a difference: What is the research difference?", available at: www.acer.edu.au/workshops/documents/Teachers_Make_a_Difference_Hattie.pdf
- Koehler, M. (1993), *Department Head's Survival Guide*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.
- Ministerial Council on Education, Employment (1999), *The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century*, MCEETYA, Canberra.
- QSR (2002), *QSR NUD *IST (6)*, QSR International, Melbourne.
- Sammons, P., Thomas, S. and Mortimore, P. (1997), *Forging links: Effective Schools and Effective Departments*, Paul Chapman, London.

-
- Scott, C. and Dinham, S. (2002), "The beatings will continue until quality improves: Carrots and sticks in the search for educational improvement", *Teacher Development*, Vol. 6 No. 1, pp. 15-31.
- Siskin, L.S. and Little, J.W. (Eds) (1995), *The Subjects in Question: The Department Organization of the High School*, Teachers College Press, New York, NY.
- Stodolsky, S.S. and Grossman, P.A. (1995), "The impact of subject matter on curricular activity: an analysis of five academic subjects", *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 32, pp. 227-49.
- Stodolsky, S.S. and Grossman, P.A. (2000), "Changing students, changing teachers", *Teachers College Record*, Vol. 102 No. 1, pp. 125-72.
- Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1990), *Basics of Qualitative Research – Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*, Sage, Newbury Park, CA.
- Zmuda, A., Kuklis, R. and Kline, E. (2004), *Transforming Schools Creating a Culture of Continuous Improvement*, ASCD, Alexandria, VA.