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Changing roles of Heads of Department: A Queensland case

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Abstract

There is little doubt that devolution of responsibility to schools and the growth of school-based management have impacted upon the role and workload of school leaders. Not only Principals have been affected by these changes as Welch (1996) argues that Principals of public secondary schools have passed responsibility down to Deputy-principals and to Heads of Department. As such, the Head of Department role, like other school administration positions, has undergone significant change. Of interest to this paper is the changing role of Heads of Department in secondary schools.

This study reports on the findings of semi-structured interviews with eight Heads of Department from four public secondary schools and Principals from each of these schools in South East Queensland. Four years after the first set of interviews, two heads of department were reinterviewed. Both sets of interviews focused upon the role, change, and the importance of leadership.

The research generated eight specific themes each of which was considered consistent with the nature of the role in a period of significant cultural change. These were the difference in perceptions regarding the Head of Department role, held by Principals and Heads of Department; Head of Department leadership in terms of a curriculum framed department or whole school leadership; how individuals perceived leadership, and how they learned of leadership; the impact of the changing culture upon the individual Head of Department; the growing influence of situational factors upon the role; the impact of managerialism; the changing nature of a secondary school department; and a growing and more complex workload, and the need for different skills. Furthermore, the findings pointed towards the need for effective change processes and a reconceptualized head of department role. The paper concludes with some implications for the ongoing professional development needs of Heads of Department.

Changing Roles of Heads of Department: A Queensland Case

Background

Over the last three decades, public education systems throughout the world have experienced constant organizational change. That change was and continues to be driven by the demands for increasing efficiency, effectiveness, and for greater accountability (Lawnton, 1992). Complementing the economic rationalist approach has been corporate managerialism, a process that places the organisational paradigms of private sector businesses on the public sector (Goodwin, 1996). An important characteristic of corporate managerialist change in public education has been an emphasis upon increased local management that is geared towards achieving centrally determined goals.

Educational systems in Australia (O'Donohue & Dimmock, 1998) and elsewhere (Whitty, Power & Halpin, 1998), then, have seen restructuring and decentralisation. Decentralisation or devolution of responsibility to schools and the growth of school-based management have impacted on leaders and the demands that leaders face. O'Donoghue and Dimmock (1998) point out that restructuring has added greatly to the role of school Principals, causing their workload to "broaden and deepen" (p. 167). Not only Principals have been affected. Welch (1996) argues that Principals of public secondary schools have passed responsibility down to Deputy-principals and to Heads of Department. As such, the Head of Department role, like other school administration positions, has undergone significant change. Of interest to this paper is the changing nature of the Head of Department role as perceived by Heads of Department and school Principals. The paper begins by considering some of the Queensland policy documents that frame the role in a historical sense from Subject Master, through the change period in the 1990s. It then examines some of the empirical research on the changing roles of Heads of Department. Following this is a discussion of the research design that guided the qualitative methodology research and the findings are presented.

Head of Department Role in Policy

In Queensland, Australia, Heads of Department in state secondary schools were originally called Subject Masters. As the title indicates, the position was one generic to and focussed specifically on particular curriculum areas. Subject Masters were expected to provide content mastery and pedagogic leadership for teachers; in essence they were role models for teachers within their departments. The role of Head of Department itself evolved from that of Subject Master. The Department of Education's *Handbook of Information and Administrative Procedures* (Department of Education, 1984) described the role of Subject Master as "being responsible for the management of staff, educational programs, and facilities, associated with a particular subject department" (1.04.1). The Head of Department position, while sharing much with that of Subject Master, is somewhat different. The *Position Description and Standard Work Profile* (Education Queensland, 2001) describes the role of Head of Department as: "Heads of Department focus on curriculum leadership, participating in the development of a vision for learning, promoting a supportive and responsible

learning culture and interacting with students, parents, teachers and the community” (Introductory Section, para. 1).

In 1994, the change in title to Head of Department occurred and, with it, the shift in emphasis for the role. While the Head of Department was still required to provide curriculum and pedagogic leadership; leadership in a much broader sense, and management skills were to be given greater emphasis. Such skills were to be employed not only in the Head of Department’s particular curriculum area, but also at a whole school level.

While the Head of Department role was clearly stated in the Education Queensland position description, it is likely that the perceptions of what the role entailed and how it was manifest in practice, in the minds of both practitioners and those who work with those practitioners, were both complex and subjectively interpreted. Heads of Department who began their careers as Subject Masters might have perceived the nature, the dynamics, and demands of the role very differently from those who perhaps were just beginning in the role. The aim of this study, then, was to explore the perceptions of those involved in the role, and the potential tensions and contradictions that systemic change in general, and the growing impact of school-based management in particular, may have brought to the Head of Department position. The next part of the paper reviews some of pertinent empirical research.

Head of Department Role in the Literature and Empirical Research

The Head of Department role is one in which there is relatively little research in Australia (White, 2001), in Canada (Hannay & Ross, 1999) or in the United States, (Bliss, Fahrney, & Steffy, 1996). Moreover much of the available literature lacks empirical foundations and is in the form of handbooks that indicate how a Head of Department should operate (Department of Education, Queensland, 1984; Harris, 1999), rather than how understanding of leadership is gained and leadership style applied. Not only is there a shortage of literature on the role but the role has been characterised as “ill-defined and highly variable” (Hannay & Ross, 1999, p. 346) and “largely undefined, open to interpretation, and multifaceted in nature” (Weller, 2001, p. 1).

An early yet thorough study of Heads of Department at work was undertaken by Earley and Fletcher-Campbell (1989) in the United Kingdom. They used case studies in secondary schools and employed semi-structured interviews with staff in order to gain both understanding of the role and the qualities that characterized effective Heads of Department. A major finding of Earley and Fletcher-Campbell (1989) was the shortage of time with which Heads of Department were to fulfill their role. The authors also described the need for Heads of Department to both perceive and embrace the management aspect of the role. According to them, the role possessed several features including leadership, the personality of Heads of Department, accessibility, communication, and administration. Effective leadership was regarded by Heads of Department and administrators as central to their role. School administrators described Heads of Department as those with a good knowledge of curriculum, who were skilled classroom teachers, and possessed the organizational and administrative skills to ensure departments operated efficiently.

They judged the effectiveness of Heads of Department in terms of their ability to draw out the most from their teachers.

A study by Glover, Gleeson, Gough, & Johnson (1998), also in the United Kingdom, was undertaken a decade later and to some degree extended Earley and Fletcher-Campbell's work. Their work was undertaken with five of the staff of each of seven secondary schools. Glover et al. (1998) described the leadership of Heads of Department largely in terms of team leadership. The Heads of Department in their study described their leadership as "first among equals" (p. 285). The authors found that effective teaching and learning was closely linked to the ability of middle managers to "motivate, inspire and support teams of staff" (Glover et al., 1998, p. 285). This ability demanded understanding of leadership. Evidence, however, suggested that Head of Department understanding of leadership was pragmatic rather than theoretical with Heads of Department acting intuitively in their relationships with their staff.

Glover et al. (1998) found also that Heads of Department were aware of the impact of change on their role in three main ways. Firstly, the role had changed from one characterized by administration to one where leadership and management were of greater importance. Secondly, the role had become characterized by tasks that had been delegated downwards from senior management. Significantly these tasks were whole school rather than those generic to particular curriculum-framed departments. Thirdly Heads of Department described growing responsibility for the monitoring and evaluation of their curriculum-framed departments, and a role interpreting change passed down from school administration, to teachers. The role had changed from one characterized by instructional leadership to one characterized more by managerialism.

A small number of empirical studies on the role of Heads of Department have been carried out in Australia. Three key studies with implications for this paper are reviewed here. White's (2000) Victorian study involved the interview of 46 participants including Principals, Deputy-principals, curriculum area co-ordinators, and teachers to gain a greater understanding of the Head of Department role. A key conclusion was that Head of Department leadership was situational and that Heads of Department demonstrated a range of different leadership skills appropriate to particular demands and different circumstances. White (2000) described the work of Head of Department as instructional leader, curriculum strategist, learning area architect, and administrative leader. The role of an instructional leader refers to Heads of Department who optimise teaching and learning in their curriculum area of responsibility. As curriculum strategists, Heads of Department, provide direction for teachers in their curriculum area which requires them to adopt and implement a vision for their curriculum area and work to achieve a vision that reflects the whole school. Learning area architects refers to Heads of Department who develop a culture that is both collaborative and focused upon the improvement of teaching and learning. Finally, Heads of Department act as administrative leaders ensuring that the learning area continues to operate.

A second study by Crowther and McLendon (1998) focused on the Heads of Department in five public secondary schools in South East Queensland. The authors described five aspects of leadership described as "best practice" which were evident in the operation of the Heads of Department. They were transformational, strategic, educative, organizational wide, and pedagogic. Crowther and McLendon (1998)

pointed out that while these represented best practice, they would not all be present in a single instance of educational leadership as the complexity of differing contexts and the limitations of human ability would preclude that. The situational nature of Head of Department leadership was alluded to by the authors.

The third study considered here was by Dinham, Brennan, Collier, Deece and Mulford (2000). Their study which was undertaken with Heads of Department in secondary schools in New South Wales sought to explore how well Heads of Department were prepared for their role, what made up their workload, how they developed their leadership and management style, and what they felt were their professional development needs. Heads of Department “overwhelmingly” (Dinham et al., 2000, p. 28) described their leadership in terms of team leadership. They discussed, for example, the ability to work with a team to gain consensus, and the ability to work with a range of individuals and groups.

Common to these three Australian studies is the perception of the Head of Department role as one framed by curriculum. The Head of Department role emerges as complex, one influenced by situational factors, and one in which a number of forms of leadership are evident. Instructional leadership appears of particular importance. It is a role in which interpersonal skills, especially communication skills, are emphasised. The next part of the paper considers the research design.

Research Design

The aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of the Head of Department role from the viewpoint of Heads of Department and Principals in Queensland secondary schools. For this reason, a qualitative research design was used.

Data Collection

Two sources of data were employed in this study. These were multiple documents and interviews with both Heads of Department and school Principals. Two different forms of documents were used for related but different purposes. Documents from Education Queensland were analyzed to gain understanding of the role and how it evolved. For instance, documents which described the role of the Subject Master before 1994 and Head of Department after 1994, contributed towards the historical perspective employed in the research. Documents generated by individual schools contributed to understanding school contexts.

Twelve participants selected from four schools within Queensland were involved in this study. In each of the four schools, the Principal and two Heads of Department were interviewed in July and August of 1999. In October of 2003, two of the Heads of Department were interviewed a second time. The second set of interviews sought to gain an understanding of how Heads of Department perceived the evolution of the role between 1994 and 2003. While the aim of the research was to interview all participants a second time, this was not possible because many of the original participants had either transferred or retired.

The participants within each site were selected through semi-formal discussions, first with Principals and then with Heads of Department. One of the researchers sought Principals who had led their schools over the period of change from Subject Master to Head of Department, were willing to have their Heads of Department participate, and were prepared to discuss their perceptions of the Head of Department role.

These interviews with principals led to similar interviews with Heads of Department. Again Heads of Department who had been Subject Masters and were willing to discuss the nature of the role were sought. Semi-formal discussions were held with all of the participants. At these discussions, an agenda similar to that with the Principals was followed.

Semi-structured interviews were an appropriate method with which to access this knowledge and were chosen as a means to achieve the objectives of the study. Interviews were done school by school, ensuring the characteristics of each case was maintained. Interviews ranged from 1 hour to 1.5 hours in duration. The second stage of interviewing took place four years after the first phase of interviews. As alluded to earlier, only two Heads of Department were interviewed a second time. Heads of Department who were approached were those who had participated in the earlier phase of the research and were still working in the same school.

The interviews followed the model described by Minichiello (1995). The use of topics rather than fixed questions was seen as allowing greater flexibility in the interview process. The interviews were structured around three headings: the Head of Department role, leadership and the Head of Department, and the effect of change. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Transcriptions were sent to participants so that they might have the opportunity to either add or delete where they considered appropriate. With the transcriptions were stamped envelopes so that amended copies could be returned to the researcher.

Data Analysis

Documents were analyzed using the model of Altheide (1996) who describes the primary emphasis of such analysis as being to “capture definitions, meanings, processes and types” (p. 26). Altheide’s model is one of content analysis, defined by Merriam (1998) as “systematic procedures for describing the content of communications” (p. 122). The model employed to analyse the transcripts came from Miles and Huberman’s (1994) work and emerged from their definition of data analysis described pragmatically as containing three interrelated processes: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The three processes of analysis, they point out, are not discrete. Rather while separate, the three processes of analysis interacted with each other throughout the analysis.

Data reduction, is described by Miles and Huberman (1994) as the “process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming the data that appears in written up field notes or transcriptions” (p. 10). The second process, data displays, is “an organized, compressed assembly of knowledge that permits conclusion drawing and action” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 11). Within this study extended text and, to a lesser extent linked charts, were used to holistically display data. Following Miles

and Huberman (1994), the third process is concerned with conclusion drawing and verification. In this process, the researcher is engaged directly in the interpretation of the data. Strategies that were employed in this study were noting patterns and themes, seeking plausibility, clustering by conceptual groupings, making contrasts and comparisons, and partitioning variables.

Findings and Discussion

The role of Head of Department was described through the voices of the participants from the four sites. They described the role while they were immersed in the turmoil of systemic, and as a consequence, situational, cultural change. While each of the four contexts was unique, what emerged from the four sites were eight key themes which illuminated the participants' perceptions of the role and how the role had changed since 1995. Each of these is now discussed.

Principals and Heads of Department: Different Perceptions

The difference in the perceptions of the role held by the two groups was stark. While Heads of Department saw the balance between curriculum and a whole school role as shifting and the workload growing, Principals described a quite different role, one more consistent with change in the culture of the organization.

That most of the Heads of Department described a role characterized by instructional leadership of and commitment to a particular subject area was not surprising. As Guskey (1986) points out, acceptance of such a fundamental change in the role would have required that Heads of Department break down assumptions about themselves and their role. For most Heads of Department, particularly those who had been Subject Masters, this prospect would have seemed daunting.

Principals described a different role, one where Heads of Department would continue to lead a group of teachers, but not necessarily defined by a subject area. Reflecting the downward flow of both function and responsibility associated with school-based management (Lingard, Knight, & Porter, 1995; O'Donoghue & Dimmock, 1998; Welch, 1996), Principals argued that responsibility for instructional leadership be delegated to teachers who possessed the experience and skill to undertake this role. For the Principals, the dominance of curriculum would be replaced by an emphasis upon developmental change and leadership, particularly at a whole school level. While most Heads of Department described a shift in the balance of the role within what they assumed was a relatively stable organizational culture (consistent with findings in studies by Glover et al., (1998) and Welch (1996), principals described a role that was characterized by almost complete cultural change. The role they described was managerialist (Lingard et al., 1995), one characterized by change based development at a whole school level.

Leadership of a Curriculum-framed Department or Whole School Leadership

Of particular significance in the nature of the Head of Department role was the growth in systemic influence upon leadership. Policy documents indicated that Heads of Department were once responsible primarily for leadership of curriculum and pedagogy within their subject departments. By 2001, Education Queensland's (1997)

Standards Framework for Leaders had become a policy reference for the Head of Department role. In a systemic sense the role had become one largely described in terms of its leadership.

The change in emphasis on leadership mirrored the change in the role. Leadership had grown in importance to the role and simultaneously had become more complex. For Heads of Department whose leadership had been largely tied to curriculum and pedagogy, the change in culture seemed to have generated demands for leadership and leadership skills with which they were not familiar. To an extent, this appeared to echo the experience of Principals themselves (Limerick, Burke, & Smeale, 1995).

While the emphasis upon instructional leadership had been reduced, responsibility for curriculum appeared to remain an important part of the role. Yet that responsibility was also characterised by diversity. For some curriculum areas, the traditional role was not to change. In others, the range of curriculum areas for which a Head of Department was responsible was to increase. Significantly this implied they were to be responsible for curriculum areas outside of their skill base. In still others, curriculum responsibility was to be complemented by an expanded whole school aspect of the role, particularly a whole school leadership role.

Perceptions of Leadership: Learning of Leadership

That leadership was becoming such an all-embracing part of the Head of Department role brought into question Head of Department perceptions of leadership and how understanding of leadership was achieved. Consistent with the work of Turner (2000) and Deece (2003), all Heads of Department described learning about leadership on the job. But not all described learning of leadership while in schools. A number described learning about leadership in other employment or through cultural experiences such a church youth group or sporting activities. Reflecting the findings of Dinham et al. (2000), Heads of Department acknowledged the influence of both role models and mentors. How Heads of Department developed their understanding of leadership emerged as pragmatic, opportunistic, situational, and unpredictable.

However, the growth in systemic emphasis upon leadership meant that Head of Department “ad hoc” (Turner, 2000, p. 300) learning of leadership was no longer to be seen as adequate. Deece (2003), whose work with Heads of Department was undertaken in New South Wales, also expressed disquiet over the “random process” (p. 48) with which Heads of Department learned of leadership and developed the necessary skills. The systemic focus upon the leadership aspects of the role adds emphasis to the need for professional development that grounds Heads of Department in leadership theory and assists in the development of leadership skills.

Changing Culture and the Individual Head of Department

Cultural change is seen as being closely linked to individual identity (Ellemers, 2003). Change in the culture implies acceptance of a significant shift in the norms and values that underpin an organization’s culture. For the individual, this is a difficult process (Coghlan, 1993; Handy, 1997) and an “intensely personal” (Duck, 1993, p. 109) one characterized also by complexity and context. Heads of

Department initially appeared caught up in change, demonstrating role ambiguity, role conflict, and a commitment to the existing culture. The anxiety and concern that Guskey (1986) argues that role conflict causes, was evident in responses. Role conflict was to be expected. Hannay and Ross (1999), describing the situation in the Canada, argued that role conflict among Heads of Department was “inherent” (p. 346) when educational reform involved whole school or even cross department change.

For individual Heads of Department, the change in culture created a personal struggle, one which reflected the work of Schmidt (2000) in her work with secondary school department heads in Canada. Caught within the process, they described change that was ambiguous, pragmatic and dynamic. There appeared to be little understanding that the changes their role was undergoing were a consequence of cultural change in the organization in which they worked. At the second interview, Heads of Department described an almost complete change in the role. It was a role in which instructional leadership had been replaced by management. Such a fundamental change in role draws into question the effect of such change upon the identity of Heads of Department. Heads of Department, whose identity had been traditionally framed by an expert knowledge of a particular curriculum and a commitment to provide effective teaching and learning, were now fulfilling a primarily management role.

Of note was that the two Heads of Department who were reinterviewed did not indicate role ambiguity, role conflict, or identity threat. This reflected the work of Hannay, Smeltzer, & Ross (2001), whose longitudinal study in Canadian secondary schools indicated that Heads of Department experienced initial difficulty with change, followed after a period of time by commitment to new, specifically whole school tasks. Heads of Department in this research described a role in which their curriculum responsibilities had expanded and become more complex, one in which the workload had increased considerably. Instructional leadership had become of less importance and the role demanded enhanced management skills.

Change in the Culture of a Secondary School Department

The culture of secondary schooling in Queensland had been characterized by semi-autonomous departments identified by particular curricula. While complex and often different, they shared structure and function. The change in culture seemed to imply maintenance of the concept of a secondary school department but not necessarily in its traditional form. The new culture was creating departments characterized by the potential for diversity, shaped largely by context, through school-based management. Departments were to have a much greater whole school component than the curriculum-framed departments they were to replace. The curriculum-framed department had been the point where teaching and learning was planned, organized and delivered. As such, the department had important professional and socialisation functions for teachers (Johnson, 1990; Siskin, 1994). The concept retained the potential for curriculum-framed departments but not as a uniform model. The model Principals described reflected the managerialism which had affected them. In a broad sense, it was indicative of the downward delegation of function, responsibility and workload that had characterized school-based management (Lingard et al., 1995; O’Donoghue & Dimmock, 1998; Welch, 1996).

The change in the culture of departments was exercising significant influence over the roles of Heads of Department and teachers. Principals possessed the ability to exercise considerable influence over the nature of departments, and, in turn, the Head of Department role. How this was determined seemed to reflect situational factors. As a result of the change in the culture of the secondary school department, Heads of Department were facing a workload that was larger, more diverse, and governed by situational factors other than curriculum. Instructional leadership, which had been the core of their role, had been displaced by the need for generic management skills. For teachers, the notion of departments not framed by curriculum implied that the professional and social functions of the curriculum-framed department were to be achieved in an alternative fashion. Instructional leadership was to become a function of skilled teachers, the workload for them increasing accordingly.

Situational Factors

The role of Head of Department was to become dependent upon how schools responded to systemic change. In a systemic sense, schools were given the ability to influence the nature of the role of their Heads of Department. This was consistent with the point made by Lingard et al. (1995) when they described school-based management as schools being given the power to exercise greater control over how centrally prescribed goals were to be met. This, Lingard et al. pointed out, allowed schools to take into account their particular situation.

In a policy sense, the process for deciding what the role would entail was both complex and seemed to bridge both the new and old cultures. Heads of Department for some specific subject areas would be retained. Yet, as has been discussed, the balance between curriculum responsibility and a whole school role was to change. Of much significance, schools would have the ability to determine the nature of that balance in their particular school. Principals in this study almost unanimously argued that the balance should shift strongly away from an instructional leadership role to a whole school role.

The influence of situational factors implies the increased significance of Turner's (2000) concept of organizational socialization and indicates, as Deece (2003) argues, the importance of both preservice and in service professional development that takes place within the context of schools themselves.

The Growth and Impact of Managerialism

The two new Heads of Department who were interviewed a second time described a role that emphasized managerial skills. There was recognition that the new role demanded new and more refined management skills. That recognition also reflected the experience of Principals before them (Cranston, Ehrich, & Billot, 2003).

The changing culture was, within broad parameters, shifting the focus of the role away from one characterized by instructional leadership towards more of a management role. This aspect of the role is perhaps illustrated by Paulsen (2005) who draws from Hearn (2005) to describe the Queensland public service professional in the emerging culture as "a team manager, monitor of performance indicators" (p. 24). However, while managerial skills were emphasized, the nature of the shift appeared to

be qualitative, complex and influenced strongly by situational factors. The change in this balance contributes to the need for the role to be reappraised at a systemic level. Such an adjustment in systemic perceptions is seen as underpinning the comprehension of a quite different role by its practitioners.

A Growing and More Complex Workload and the Need for Different Skills

Changes in the role of Heads of Department were taking place within, and thus reflecting, the change in culture that was affecting public education in Queensland. Welch (1996), argues that changes in the culture had filtered down to Heads of Department and were altering the role progressively. Changes in the role were, as a matter of course, affecting the size of the workload and its complexity, a process which was progressively influencing the nature of the skills the role demanded. This appeared consistent with research on changes in the role in the United Kingdom (Earley & Fletcher-Campbell, 1998; Glover et al., 1998) and in New South Wales (Deece, 2003).

The close relationship between a Head of Department and a subject area that had encompassed the role and characterized the culture of public secondary education for many years was no longer present. Responsibility for an increased number of curriculum areas along with a heavier and more complex workload made instructional leadership no longer tenable. The skills traditionally associated with this aspect of the role were of little value. The effect upon the skills the role required was pronounced.

Management skills had become of greater importance. This meant that the importance of existing management skills was enhanced. For example, while interpersonal skills had long been recognized as important for Heads of Department (Earley & Fletcher-Campbell, 1989; Glover et al., 1998), responsibility for an increased and more diverse staff emphasized the importance of such skills. Significantly, Principals also identified the growth in importance of management and particularly of interpersonal skills (Cranston et al. 2003; Dimmock & Hattie, 1994) as being made more relevant to the role by change. Change meant that the role demanded a range of new skills, particularly management skills. While Heads of Department expressed the need for management skills, the displacement of instructional leadership coupled with systemic leadership demands also indicated the need for fresh leadership skills.

Leadership and management skills pertinent to instructional leadership were founded in teacher training. Yet there appeared to be little systemic recognition that a different role required different skills. Rather Heads of Department were adapting, learning, and developing skills. Awareness of that need was indicated by Head of Department recognition of the need for professional development and the point made by one Head of Department who described learning the new management skills by trial and error. It draws attention to the point that professional development was needed to both enhance and develop the skills, particularly the leadership and management skills, a reconceptualized role required.

Conclusion and Implications

The findings of this study provided a picture of Heads of Department within the dynamic of cultural change. For them, the changes they were experiencing were profound. The role was in the process of becoming broader, involving a greater and more complex workload. The homogeneous role of the Subject Master and Head of Department was being replaced by a one far more dynamic, situational and diverse. Instructional leadership, the core of the role in the previous culture, was being complemented and in cases being displaced by situational factors with an emphasis upon whole school issues. The implication for Heads of Department was that the perception of the role in uniform systemic terms was no longer possible. This shift in emphasis was of great significance. Within the old culture, it was likely that a Head of Department for a particular subject could slot into the same position in a school a thousand kilometres away with some sense of predictability. Situational factors indicated that the role was no longer generic and needed to be understood far more in terms of particular schools. For Heads of Department, and in particular aspirant Heads of Department, there existed a need to reconceptualize the role in terms of both systemic and situational factors, rather than the curriculum-framed department.

As the role changed, the skills it required were also evolving. This meant to some extent that the skills that had been the core of the role, particularly instructional leadership, were diminishing in importance. Leadership and management skills had long been associated with the role, but for the most part within the cultural parameters of the curriculum-framed department. Findings indicated that those skills were becoming of much greater importance in the role but in a different arena - that of the whole school. Through school-based management, situational factors also appeared likely to exercise significant influence over the skills individual Heads of Department required. Heads of Department demonstrated awareness of this change in emphasis and the consequent need for their skills to be updated and enhanced.

Teacher training, with emphasis upon both curriculum and pedagogy, had provided underpinning for a role in which instructional leadership was pivotal. However, as the role changed, expanded and became more contextual and diverse as greater emphasis was placed on leadership and management skills, particularly at a whole school level, teacher training became less relevant. A finding of this research was that the development of leadership and management skills appeared to be contextual and informal, to depend on the initiative of individuals. In a period of changing and increasing demands on Heads of Department, the adequacy of such learning must be questioned. Eraut (1994) described this process of learning as “unplanned, subconscious, and haphazard” (p. 84), and Turner (2000) as “ad hoc” (p. 300). Reflecting the Australian situation, Deece (2003) expressed unease at the “random process” (p. 48) of leadership training for Heads of Department.

An important finding from this work was the recognition by Heads of Department of the need for the development and enhancement of skills that the changing role required. The growth in the situational nature of the role and research (Turner, 2000; Deece, 2003) indicated the growing importance of Heads of Department learning their role on the job. The implication is that aspects of preservice and inservice training could take place within the context of particular schools. Such training, as Deece points out, has the potential to generate both professional and organizational socialization and to be seen by Heads of Department as consistent with their needs.

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