
‘So that I can more or less get them to do things they really don’t want to’. Capturing the ‘Situated Complexities’ of the Secondary School Head of Department.

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Introduction

The growth of qualitative research traditions in education which attempt to document and analyse teachers’ experiences in ethnographic, narrative and discursive forms reflects a shift, as Andy Hargreaves (1994) puts it, from ‘scientific certainty’ to ‘situated certainty’ where greater attention is paid to the various ways in which teachers conceptualise, experience and organise their social worlds. In contrast, and rather ironically, many of the normative and bureaucratically driven taxonomies of educational leadership and management which have emerged as ‘lubricants’ for the ‘self managing school’ phenomenon continue to define the practice of leadership in terms of ‘scientific certainty’. These are often expressed as generic management competencies or abstract characteristics of school effectiveness.

Recent empirical studies of secondary schools have identified the subject department as an important and variable influence on both student effects (Nash & Harker, 1998; Sammons, Thomas & Mortimore, 1997; Harris, Jamieson & Rush, 1995; Gray, Hopkins, Reynolds, Wilcox, Farrell & Jesson, 1999) and teaching contexts (McLaughlin, Talbert & Bascia, 1990; Little & McLaughlin, 1993; Siskin, 1994; Siskin & Little, 1995). Although working in quite different research traditions, and with disparate foci, what these studies have in common is the observation that departments, and their practices and effects, may vary as much or more within schools as they do across them. This implies that, just as headteachers

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or principals are important for establishing a 'whole school culture', Heads of Department may fulfil a similarly important role in these smaller functional groups. Moreover, just as individual school cultures vary according to their history, traditions, student mix and staffing, departmental cultures are, we might assume, highly idiosyncratic in terms of curriculum subject and workgroup relationships. We remain, nevertheless, comparatively ignorant about the processes through which subject department cultures are created and maintained in particular localised settings. Little research attention has been devoted to the work of the Head of Department (Turner, 2000; Dinham, Brennan Collier, Deece & Mugford, 2000) despite the reality that these individuals routinely have formal responsibilities for developing, implementing and evaluating much of what takes place within the confines of the department. To complicate matters further, Heads of Department are also subject teachers and members of the departmental workgroup. Thus, like primary school principals, they both 'lead the team and belong to the group' (Yeomans, 1987).

In this paper, I identify the major features of secondary school subject departments as complex, socially constructed workgroups. I then examine how interview data might productively be used to depict and explore more realistically what I call these 'situated complexities', the idiosyncratic patterns of constraint and opportunity within which individuals conduct their work. Finally, some implications and possibilities of this form of analysis for the professional development of those with curriculum leadership responsibilities are considered.

The line of argument I wish to follow is simply this. What takes place day-in, day-out in subject departments has elements both of the predictable and the uncertain. Predictability is to be found in the tapestry of curriculum organisation, delivery and assessment which produces regular, seasonal patterns of work that are broadly recognisable from department to department, school to school, and system to system. The uncertain elements lie in the natural variation that occurs between particular groups of teachers, their students and locally developed programmes of work. The danger is that, in our haste to find more 'effective' magic bullets to 'improve' schooling 'outcomes', we may end up pursuing these more predictable, homogenous, generic and seemingly replicable aspects of practice and ignore the uncertain, the difficult to identify, the less easily understood, the idiosyncratic. Yet to my mind, if we want to better understand the 'situated complexities' of subject departments, and how they function and grow, it is precisely to the local and most parochial features of workgroup practice that we need to turn. On this view, the interest lies not so much in whether or not particular departments may have, for example, 'strong but flexible leadership' (Sammons, Thomas & Mortimore, 1997, p. 93) or 'a collegiate management style' (Harris, Jamieson & Rush, 1995, p. 297) – although these may serve well as triangulation points with which to locate our detailed map-making. Rather, our concern is how and why certain leadership and management 'choices' are identified and made. I suspect that we may profit more by taking into account the history, politics and culture of the department, the experiences, positions and aspirations of the various members of the workgroup, and the nature of the demands it faces from school, community and the education system.

Secondary School Subject Departmentsⁱ

The school subject has long been and still remains of primary importance to an understanding of how secondary teachers conceptualise and carry out their work. The subject *tradition* acts as a central, conceptual framework at several levels inside and outside the school: social, professional and personal. This framework encompasses issues of epistemology, affiliation and career progression. In terms of the practical organisation of teachers' work in the secondary school on a day-to-day basis, however, the subject *department* is pre-eminentⁱⁱ:

Although stereotypes of the 'subject-oriented' secondary teacher have been overdrawn in important respects, secondary teachers do consistently frame their work in terms of subject and department. Subject departments form the primary organizational unit of the high school, defining in crucial ways who teachers are, what they do, where and with whom they work, and how that work is perceived by others. (Siskin & Little, 1995, p. 1)

As we shall see though, neither subject traditions nor the processes undertaken in particular departments are fixed, uncontested or homogeneous.

The secondary school workplace comprises what McLaughlin and Talbert (1990, p. 9) call 'multiple, embedded contexts'. These are: subject area or department; school structure and culture; school sector and policy system; community social class culture and educational value system: societal, professional, community. Consequently, the work of the subject department and teachers within it is influenced to varying degrees by student, workgroup, school, community, peer and system norms and expectations (Ball, 1981; Louis, 1990; Metz, 1990; 1993; McLaughlin, 1993; Talbert, 1995). Thus, as Siskin and Little point out,

[w]hen we look to departments, we need to look closely at both the broad influences and the local actions that shape the contexts for teachers and for students, and we need to theorize carefully the relationships between them. (Siskin & Little, 1995, p. 17)

It is inevitable, then, that secondary school departments as contexts for teaching and learning will exhibit not only certain common, traditional sub-cultural processes but also changing, idiosyncratic features of subject and workgroup practice. Departmental curriculum practices (content, pedagogy, evaluation) vary: within and across schools and subject boundaries (Siskin, 1991; 1994); over time and in terms of student attainment levels (Ball & Lacey, 1995; Sammons, Thomas & Mortimore, 1997; Harris, Jamieson & Rush, 1995). It is a truism, but nonetheless an important point of departure, that not all subjects and departments are the same.

Within the school and the national or state system, subjects are hierarchically organised according to their relative, fluid and contestable sources of power and it is, therefore, in teachers' interests to work as a group to enhance the status of their own subject:

Thus in secondary schools the material and self-interest of subject teachers is interlinked with the status of the subject, judged in terms of its examination status. Academic subjects provide the teacher with a career structure characterized by better

promotion prospects and pay than less academic subjects. The conflict over the status of examinable knowledge, as perceived and fought at individual and collective level, is essentially a battle over material resources and career prospects. (Goodson & Marsh, 1996, p. 134)

As with Hargreaves' recent metaphor of secondary schools as typically 'balkanized' cultures (1994, pp. 212-240), Ball (1987, p. 221) has shown how secondary school departments routinely vie with each other within the school for status and resources in a form of 'baronial politics', how the status of the subject waxes and wanes within the school, and with it both the career prospects and the amount of 'high status' academic teaching available to subject teachers. Connell (1985, p. 163), too, has noted the 'division', 'conflict' and 'serious antagonism' that often exist between subject departments in secondary schools, 'especially where the division of subject-matters also involves differences of method and equipment, and educational ideology'. Equally, Ball and Lacey (1995) and Talbert (1995) have demonstrated that subject departments experience *internal* ideological and philosophical struggles between teachers or groups of teachers over appropriate curriculum content and pedagogy. Departments may, as a practical consequence, be strong or weak within the school and even traditionally dominant departments such as mathematics, science and English may struggle to maintain their relative status if the department's work is perceived by others as too non-academic, or there are internal disagreements over academic content and subject pedagogy, or there are too many non-specialist teachersⁱⁱⁱ, or the relationship between the Head of Department and principal or other school senior managers is poor (on this relationship, see also McCartney & Shrag, 1990; Sammons, et al, 1997; Ball, 1987).

Siskin has recently taken the analysis further and developed a typology of secondary school departments as 'social worlds' (Siskin, 1994, pp. 89-112) based on a study of 'the big four' (Math, Science, English and Social Studies) departments in three large American high schools. The notion of the department as social world is important to an understanding of teachers' work for,

[i]t is as community, as a social group creating the atmosphere in which they work, that departments matter most to the teachers within them. While the department is also an administrative unit which makes critical decisions about teaching assignments ... and the subject which they teach ... for teachers the department is most often and most simply the people they work most closely, the social group in which they are members'. (Siskin, 1994, p. 96)

The department as social world varies considerably, though, in the extent to which it is (i) factionalised or *inclusive* of its members, and (ii) demanding of loyalty and collective *commitment* from them. Thus Siskin identifies departments as one of four ideal types - either bonded (high commitment, high inclusion), bundled (low commitment, high inclusion), fragmented (low commitment, low inclusion) or split (high commitment, low inclusion) (pp. 99-101). Although in her study (of larger departments in larger schools it should be noted), departments of all four types were found, most frequently departments were bundled, i.e.

[T]eachers are clearly members of a coherent and bounded department, sharing concerns and acting together to co-ordinate and support each other's efforts. Norms

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of inclusion are high – all members are welcome at meetings, lunch tables, and all are included when departmental decisions are made – but individual concerns rather than collective goals drive decisions ... These are departments where sharing occurs, but in a more limited form, and at less cost to individual teachers' autonomy than in the bonded department. (Siskin, 1994, p. 100)

Equally, like Ball above, Siskin identified a range of political activity both between and within departments. Such activity is claimed to be essential if departments are to exert influence at school level over 'proximal frames'^{iv} such as staff appointment and student selection, resource distribution, assessment, timetable space, physical environment and student grouping arrangements. But, within the department, too, crucial decisions are made which impact directly on the working conditions of their members:

While the social and professional rewards of membership – support, sympathy, suggestions and humor – are valued resources for teachers, the department, as a formally sanctioned administrative unit, has the authority to command and dispense far more tangible rewards and sanctions. It is in this sense that teachers ... talk about 'the department', and 'the way the department makes decisions' – as the official unit where a surprising number of rules are set, decisions made, and resources acquired and distributed. Which courses will be offered, and which required, who will teach them, at what time, in which room, and with what materials – these are micro-political decisions which are immediately and concretely consequential to teachers, and they are decisions in which departments play critical roles ... In the routine decisions of department politics teachers can win and lose desired courses or students, the materials to make their job easier, or even the jobs themselves.

(Siskin, 1994, pp. 114-115)

And, on the basis of this analysis of internal 'power and politics' she attributes differing forms of leadership to each of the ideal department types. Thus bonded departments are characterised by collaborative decision-making and consensual leadership; split departments by struggles over leadership and autocratic or dictatorial decision-making; fragmented departments by an absence of leadership and unclear decision-making and bundled departments by leadership or authority of expertise and administrative type decision-making by the head of department (Siskin, 1994, p. 134). Significantly, for department members, credibility in leadership and management are in no small part a corollary of subject expertise (Little, 1995), consequently heads of department rather than whole school managers are legitimated in this role. As Siskin's and other empirical studies have consistently shown (Ball, 1981; 1987; Earley & Fletcher-Campbell, 1989; Torrington & Weightman, 1989; Siskin, 1994), there is a tensile, symbiotic relationship between leadership and membership of the department. On the one hand, 'the power relationships between the head of a subject department and its members can vary from autocratic to non-directive and democratic' (Goodson & Marsh, 1996, p. 56); on the other hand:

Accumulation is a key administrative role for each subject department and in terms of seeking budget, equipment, staff time and high calibre students; these resources are pursued relentlessly by departmental heads. But there is also the allocation of resources internally to subject department members and heads which often demand support and cooperation in return for allocating resources to staff. (p. 57)

The 'style and preferences' of the Head of department, not least their self-perception as either administrator or teacher (Johnson, 1990; Talbert & Bascia, 1990; Sammons et al, 1997; Earley and Fletcher-Campbell, 1989), have been found to be significant in explaining variations of practice within schools:

The fact that the position of department head is part teacher and part administrator contributes to its unique significance and creates what can be a productive tension in the school organization. The extent to which the individuals who hold these positions emphasize either the teaching or administrative components of the role affects their subsequent working relationships with teachers. Those who saw themselves primarily as teachers tended to work more as peers with colleagues and to regard the department as a democratic organization that could be a base for building influence in the larger organization. Those who saw themselves primarily as administrators were more inclined to oversee teachers' work closely and to expect staff to implement their superiors' decisions. (Johnson, 1990, p. 177)

Prior to the most recent wave of reforms (characterised by a shift to local administration of central policy, the greater separation of management and teaching functions, the introduction of mandated curricula and more pervasive forms of bureaucratic and market accountability), studies of departmental level leadership or management were equivocal in their findings in this regard (Hamlin, 1987; Earley & Fletcher-Campbell, 1989; Torrington & Weightman, 1989). The styles and self-perceptions of heads of department varied considerably. Heads of department were frequently reluctant to 'oversee' colleagues' work and often found it difficult to accomplish more than basic administration requirements. Many were reluctant to delegate tasks and increase colleagues' already heavy loads, preferring to absorb the additional work themselves, often at high personal and domestic cost. In contrast, in one case study of curriculum innovation within a physical education department, the decision-making process was shown to be shaped tangibly by issues of 'power, conflict and resistance' through 'the strategies utilized by the departmental head in an attempt to dominate the realities of the department, and the forms of resistance initiated by the staff' (Sparkes, 1990, p. 153).

Recently, there is some evidence of intensified pressure from senior management at school level for more directly interventionist forms of staff, financial and curriculum 'management' at departmental level, linked to the spectre of external accountability. In their focus group interviews with 24 English heads of department in 1996, for example, Brown and Rutherford found that senior management at school level expected that more discipline and finance issues would be dealt with by the head of department, that departmental management was increasingly driven by external accountability issues and that greater proportions of time were spent in producing records and reports of questionable purpose for diverse audiences. More generally:

The heads of department reported a great reduction in their autonomy and some now regard themselves as the 'buffer' between the aspirations of their colleagues and the demands of the National Curriculum. Decisions, it was claimed, are increasing [sic] being made with inspection in mind, and not necessarily what the head of department considers appropriate. (Brown & Rutherford, 1996, p.4)

Such pressure toward managerial intervention is bolstered by 'school effectiveness' studies which identify considerable differences in national examination results between subject departments either in the same school, or in similar socio-economic circumstances (eg Sammons et al, 1997; Harris et al, 1995). The pressures have reportedly been accommodated in a variety of ways within departments, for example, through the wider distribution of management responsibilities among staff and the use of structured development planning processes in scheduled meeting time slots (Constable, 1995). However, while such approaches to the social organisation of departmental work are consistent with recently developed templates for the administration of the 'self-managing school', they also ignore many of the complexities of teachers' traditional occupational practice and, in part at least, depend on a naive faith in the efficacy of 'collegiality' as a vehicle for the development of 'successful schools' and teachers.

Much of the faith in 'collegiality' is founded on Judith Little's classic American study of teachers' workplace norms, based on interviews and observation of 105 teachers and 14 administrators in three secondary and three elementary urban schools (Little, 1982). Little found that 'continuous professional development' was most likely to be found among groups of teachers who (a) 'engage in frequent, continuous and increasingly concrete and precise talk about teaching practice'; (b) 'are frequently observed and provided with useful (if potentially frightening) critiques of their teaching'; (c) 'plan, design, research, evaluate and prepare teaching materials together'; and (d) 'teach each other the practice of teaching' (p. 331). Thus the ideal form of 'professional development' is strongly associated with the individual teacher's willingness to work closely with and confide in her colleagues. At an abstract or normative level, the findings are uncontroversial and likely to attract universal endorsement. However, in the specific, school-based, historical, political contexts of management, curriculum and teaching reform, normative models of professional collaboration tend to develop worrying surface cracks which may indicate underlying structural faults. By 1990, Little herself had become far more circumspect about the likelihood of collegiality to break down teacher isolation or encourage collaborative development (Little, 1990). Furthermore, she has recently reported that collegiality and leadership practices may change markedly in schools where cross-subject restructuring is taking place and accountability to external groups becomes more prominent:

Leaders' actions and relationships are thus subject to greater administrative and collegial scrutiny and less open to idiosyncratic interpretation than are the roles and relationships forged by department heads under more ordinary circumstances. Put in colloquial terms, no one cuts much slack to designated leaders in restructuring schools. And the leaders, in turn, adopt modes of leadership that more closely approximate the bureaucratic norm than the collegial one. Under these circumstances, teacher leaders press harder on the conventional norms of privacy (autonomy) than most departmental chairs feel obligated to press an than most teachers willingly accept. (Little, 1995, p. 55)

It has also been argued that collegiality *per se* is neither good nor bad, that in practice collegiality takes many forms, and that some of these are artificial or 'contrived' to suit narrow management control purposes (Hargreaves, 1994). Teachers value, and often find more productive, their privacy and solitude; indeed,

the 'culture of isolation' (Griffin, 1995) in teaching is persistent. Thus, it is suggested, a sensitive and judicious balance between autonomy and collegiality may be a more realistic and effective demand on the use of teachers' time (Clement & Staessens, 1993).

In addition to their internal patterns of sociability, collegiality, autonomy and leadership, it is possible further to differentiate subject departments and teachers within and across schools according to the formal qualifications of their members (Talbert, 1995) their student 'mix' (Metz, 1990), the extent to which teachers within the department practise common pedagogies (Ball, 1991; Gutierrez, 1998), the orientation of their members more to a 'technical culture' or a 'service ethic' (Talbert & McLaughlin, 1994), and how they respond to governmental policy directives (Ball & Bowe, 1992). Moreover, there are differences within and between subject departments in the extent to which, and with which groups of students, they are concerned to transmit a canonical body of examinable knowledge via, for example, the use of textbooks and more didactic forms of teaching (Ball and Lacey, 1995; McLaughlin, 1993; Siskin, 1994; Ball, 1981; Goodson & Mangan, 1998; Metz, 1993). Finally, in a recent 'school effectiveness' study based on the external examination results of thirty departments in six schools over five years (Sammons, et al, 1997), the presence of leadership from senior management, consensus and a shared vision at whole school level were, unsurprisingly, positively correlated with more effective departments, as were the leadership of the Head of Department, staff commitment and hard work, teamwork and 'shared goals, an academic emphasis and high expectations of students' (p. 94). Equally, the researchers concluded that departments found it easier to 'achieve and maintain effectiveness' in 'more effective' schools. Thus the presence or absence of schoolwide discipline problems and high levels of staff absence also had an impact on departmental 'effectiveness', while within departments, 'personality conflicts, an 'obstructive' or weak second-in command [sic], lack of shared goals and values and some 'uncommitted' teachers were seen to inhibit team work and the implementation of agreed policies' (p. 96). In such cases, reported strategies for improving 'poor' departmental performance included 'a change in postholder, or removal of certain 'problem' staff ... moving 'difficult' staff around ...[and] intensive work by a [senior management team] member with a HoD perceived as needing extra 'support' (p. 96).

This is not to suggest that each and every one of these subject department variables merits detailed attention in all studies of secondary schools, but merely to reinforce Siskin and Little's observation above that we need to attend to the manner in which 'broad influences and local actions' interact in particular ways in individual school and department sites if we are to attempt to understand more fully the complexities and nuances of workgroup and subject teaching practice among secondary school teachers.

The enduring organisational and interpersonal aspects of departments which have been rehearsed above are well summarised by Goodson and Marsh (1996) who draw the distinction between their '*administrative* and *social relations* functions' (p. 56). The former includes communication, timetabling, budgeting, 'physical

territory', material resources, professional identity and networking with the wider 'epistemic community' (Siskin, 1994; Ball & Lacey, 1995; Earley & Fletcher-Campbell, 1989). The latter is concerned more with the personal and interpersonal relationships among subject department members which qualitatively affect professional relationships, openness and levels of mutual trust, for 'friendships and interests will develop in an atmosphere where teachers spend time together, share materials, and generally co-exist in a common 'comfort zone' ' (Goodson & Marsh, 1996, p. 57).

In order to more fully understand the ways in which these groups of teachers in secondary schools attempt to create and maintain their 'situated certainties' we need to attend more closely to (a) the ways in which they address specific issues of curriculum development and workgroup relations; and (b) their explanations of their reasons for doing so in the ways they do. Such an agenda would include the need to focus on the personalised ways in which Heads of Department conceptualise their work and set about addressing the unique mix of curriculum, administrative, surveillance and interpersonal issues they face as 'leaders' and 'managers' in a particular school and departmental setting. In so doing, we pursue a commendable determination to give 'voice' to the priorities and concerns of practitioners as they define and address them (after all, how else can we 'get inside their heads' (Brown & MacIntyre, 1993) in order to discover what these people are attempting to do and why?). But, we also create difficulties for ourselves in terms of faithfully and fully documenting the reasoning behind these practitioners' actions. By examining the 'situated complexities' of the Head of Department's role, and in seeking to record the ways in which *this* Head of Department addresses issues to do with *this* subject, in *this* school, with *these* students and *these* colleagues in *this* educational system at *this* time we self-evidently focus on the local, the idiosyncratic features of practice and seek plausible explanations of this practice. Action is, thus, highly context specific. Our methods of recording, reporting and analysing action must therefore necessarily maintain the link between action and the context in which it takes place (Gronn, 1982). The focus of analysis thus becomes the working through of issues, priorities and choices in the immediate setting, and not simply an assessment of their resolution in terms of supposed 'effectiveness' or 'generalisability' to other school settings.

In the rest of the paper I consider one qualitative approach which has been adopted in a multi-site case study of secondary school heads of department at work. In particular, I focus on the approach used to present and discuss primary, interview data which encourages a richer, more provisional discussion of the 'workings' of the Head of Department's activity rather than a synthesised and abstract quantification of the various task components. The distinction is, to my mind, fundamental if we intend to use research to enhance the work of 'leaders' and 'managers' in education. Put crudely, abstract and synthetic analyses of management work tell us little about how we might improve secondary schools and schooling; fine grained analyses of teachers' own concerns and of the ways in which they seek to resolve these may just provide more useful and useable insights into the dynamics of subject departments in secondary schools.

Painting a Picture^v of the HoD at Work

There are a number of questions we need to consider when attempting to paint a plausible, representative portrayal of the Head of Department at work. These questions are fundamentally about power and the authority of voice, and in this context, about who may legitimately describe and evaluate what HoDs do.

1. How can we capture the thinking that underpins individual action?
2. To what extent do we attempt to portray idiosyncracies of local context?
3. How do we decide which elements to include in the picture?
4. Is our portrayal representative?

1. How can we capture the thinking that underpins individual action?

Drawing on Gilbert Ryle's (1971) distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' analyses of human activity, Gronn (1982) criticises the tradition of what he calls neo-Tayloristic, time-and-motion studies of (in his case) school principals at work. In the eight such studies he reviewed, the focus of analysis was on the quantification of what individuals do and when (thin), rather than on attempting to document and understand why these individuals made the decisions and choices they did (thick). As Gronn argues, 'the transition from thinness to thickness, or from a list of bodily movements to an interpretation of what they are for, is accomplished by reference to what the person had in mind' (Ibid., p. 27). To achieve this, individual events must be seen in context, as part of a saga or episode of connected administrative activities, the purpose or thread of which is revealed only when one understands where it leads. For Gronn, talk is central both to administrators' work and its analysis, thus in order to build the thick description 'observations are necessary, but for sufficiency, observations must be interspersed with dialogue and some critical analysis of that dialogue' (p. 29).

2. To what extent should we attempt to portray idiosyncracies of local context?

Similarly, Richard Bates (1990, p. 50) has been utterly scornful of the distorting effects of positivist approaches to the analysis of educational phenomena (comprising as they do complex forms of individual action and social relationships) in which 'the compilation of data [is] produced simply by the aggregation of individual cases'. A particular target for Bates' disapproval is educational research in the area of role theory:

Role theory is premised on the assumption that differences in organisation and position relate to differences in role perception and performance. Virtually all methodological studies of role, however, employ techniques of data aggregation which obscure the effects of differences in organisation and subsequent differences in the perception and performance of particular roles. The individualised, decontextualised data is typically then aggregated and factorised. The fascinating exercise of speculation about the meaning of the factors is then engaged in, totally free of the contextual clues which would allow more or less appropriate explanations to be provided. (pp. 50-51)

For Bates, actions, and differences in action between people and settings, may only be properly understood when 'contextual clues' are taken into account. In contrast, the tendency to disaggregate events from the contexts (cultural, political, socio-economic) in which they take place implies that it is possible to reduce the practice of administration to generic, abstracted forms of 'performance' which may be enacted in any educational setting in the narrow pursuit of a science of educational management and the 'cult of efficiency'. The difficulty with the resultant pristine (and often anodyne) models of administrative practice, is that they rarely accord closely with practitioners' own views of reality, nor, indeed, do they provide practicable guides to action.

3. How do we decide which elements to include in the picture?

In thin, mono-dimensional portrayals of administrative activity, which focus exclusively on the visible features of practice, decisions about the composition and content of the picture are invariably made not by practitioners themselves but by their detached observers - researchers, bureaucrats, politicians, inspectors - on behalf of teachers. Choices about what to include, and what to exclude, and about what is 'good' or 'bad' are generally made in the interests of generalisability and transferability - for example, the search for a generic taxonomy of managerial competencies applicable to the evaluation of HoDs' work in all establishments within a school system, or a synthesised set of 'managerial effectiveness' factors which researchers can use to compare school with school and department with department across the country.

In seeking to understand the 'broader principles' which inform teaching and, in our case, administrative action, Smyth argues powerfully for a reflective discourse informed by teachers' own practical concerns and theories about their work with a view to developing critically informed and 'concrete action for change' (Smyth, 1993, pp. 114-115). Historically, however, the control of teaching, and decisions about what is significant in teachers' practice, has resided far from the classroom:

The problem, then, is primarily a political one of who has the legitimate right to define what counts as knowledge about teaching. While teachers may have been reluctant in the past to be seen to be publicly exercising that claim, others outside of the classrooms have been far less reticent. (p. 115)

Smyth cites Herbert Kohl (1983, p. 30) who claims that unless teachers take on this theory-making responsibility themselves, the 'vacuum' will be filled by 'academic researchers and other groups'. On this argument, we need to ensure that our portrayals of practice honestly represent teachers' own concerns and theories about their day-to-day practice. In the same vein, as researchers, we perhaps ought to be humble enough to recognise 'the power of the direct quotation to capture succinctly and vividly what could only be expressed dully and less economically in the researcher's own words' (Rudduck, 1993, p. 180). Thus, in constructing our portrayals of HoDs' practice, it is important both that the elements we select for analysis, and the words we use to describe them, provide a representative, empathetic and holistic picture of what is going on and why.

4. Is our portrayal representative?

Our written accounts of the complex human action of others and the thinking which informs it are unlikely ever to be complete, or completely accurate. Indeed, rather than seeking to create a single authoritative or 'declarative' version of events, some accounts (as stories) purposefully encourage and allow 'readers the freedom to interpret and evaluate the text from their unique vantage points' (Barone, 1995, p. 67). Arguably, the most we can hope for is a picture of a HoD at work is that it is a representative, plausible and relevant rendering of the concerns and experiences of the person concerned^{vi}. Although, in striving for this we might usefully acknowledge that even in those studies which purposefully set out to give an authentic conception of teachers' thinking and voice, 'much of the search for terms by means of which to conceptualize teachers' knowledge is a series of compromises in which the researcher proposes terms that do some justice to teachers' knowledge while still being acceptable in the academic context with its requirement of context-free rational discourse' (Elbaz, 1990, p. 18).

Our discussion thus far has suggested that educational researchers as a group, for a number of reasons, may not have the best of track records in producing accounts of practice which meet these criteria. Yet it is possible, at least, to open up the way in which we have constructed our accounts to closer scrutiny than is customary in qualitative work and to enable the reader to challenge the 'validity' of our interpretation of the data (and this, after all, as Kvale [1995] demonstrates, has been the major criticism of the use of qualitative approaches in the social sciences).

For example, in making a distinction between observation and interpretation, Habermas (1990) asks the reader to consider the three conditions which are necessary for us to understand what someone is trying to tell us about their social world. First, he suggests, 'interpreters relinquish the superiority that observers have by virtue of their privileged position, in that they themselves, are drawn, at least potentially, into negotiations about the meaning and validity of utterances' (p. 26). Second, the interpreter cannot simply assume that he or she shares the same 'background assumptions and practices' as the person speaking. In this sense, interpretations are 'context dependent'. Third, the most we can hope to achieve is not the 'truth' but an interpretation that is 'correct', one that fits or suits what we are trying to understand (p. 26). And, in order to achieve this, argues Habermas, the interpreter must shift from a position of observer, to participant in the construction of 'a common *understanding* or a shared view' (p. 25). Thus the process of constructing an interpretative account based on a common understanding, is one in which the interpreter, or researcher, actively engages with the person providing the information to ensure that meanings of words and practices become explicit and shared through dialogue. Like Gronn, above, Habermas urges us to explicate the tacit meaning on which visible action is based.

The possibility of arriving at representative, plausible and relevant interpretations or understandings of HoDs' work is, I would suggest, enhanced if both the account of the event or action, the thinking which underpins it, and the interpreter's own thinking are presented for scrutiny together. Just such an (extravagant and unusual) approach to the presentation and analysis of qualitative

data has been adopted recently by Roy Nash (eg Nash & Major, 1995; Nash, 1997) in a series of detailed ethnographic analyses of young people's experience of secondary schooling. Briefly, Nash uses lengthy extracts of carefully selected interview data to which he adds an analytical commentary as he sets out to 'offer explanations of social events, phenomena, and processes ... through a close investigation of the everyday lives of individuals ... [with a focus] on the processes by which students come to form their conceptions of what they can learn from school' (Nash, 1997, pp. 3-4). In each extract he allows the discourse to develop, occasionally over several pages, as the young person explains his or her ideas, emotions, experiences of schooling and life. His commentary provides a sociological interpretation of what the young person is saying but the crucial point is that this commentary is itself open to interpretation and critique on the basis of the raw data presented. Because the data and the commentary are given equal prominence, and the students' voices are allowed to be heard, as Nash puts it, the reader is placed in the unusual position (at least for qualitative educational research) of being able to develop alternative meanings of the text, and also to see how Nash has arrived at the analysis he presents. This is important because although, as Jean Rudduck (1993 p. 19) rightly argues, 'some statements carry a remarkably rich density of meaning in a few words', this does not abrogate researchers from their obligation to demonstrate how they have arrived at an interpretation of those words, their meaning, and the context in which they were uttered.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, Nash's approach to data presentation and analysis has been strongly attacked (by one fellow sociologist of education) for presenting the reader with 'a mass of words, transcriptions full of jumbled sentences, insights, fantasies, jokes, uncertainties, ironies, stretched out on the page ... You expect the authors to digest it, put it all in order, make some sense of it, give it meaning. Nash and Major refuse, largely' (Jones, 1996, p. 209)^{vii}.

But, this criticism completely misses the delightfully simple, heuristic virtues of a mode of presentation which sets out 'to privilege the students as authors rather than to imprison their voices within the confines of an academic discourse sounding an overriding authority of its own' (Nash, 1997, p. 5). The mode of presentation thus encourages the reader to engage with the text, puts the reader in a position to be able to develop his or her own reading and understanding of the student's words, and, most unusually, allows the reader to come to an informed position on Nash, the author's, own commentary.

Although novel in the domain of qualitative educational research, the rationale behind the approach was applied with notable success and for broadly similar purposes in the 19th century by the French post-Impressionist painter Georges Seurat, through his experimentation and refinement of the technique of 'pointillism'. Seurat eschewed contour, there are no definitive lines and immediately recognisable objects in his painting, only an assemblage of carefully arranged coloured dots the purpose of which is to encourage the viewer to actively strive to make sense of what he or she is seeing:

In Seurat's canvasses, what happens is that nature loses its readily decipherable aspect. It is not possible to observe in a single glance what the artist wants us to see.

[Thus] the elusive elements of reality can be grasped only intellectually. (Redon, Seurat & the symbolists, 1970, p. 6).

By using careful selection and placement of tone and colour to create shape, shadow and movement, Seurat was able to demand that the viewers themselves bring the canvas to life and vest it with a meaning. Similarly, in our case, the careful use of HoD interview data avoids presenting readers with a single definitive interpretation of events and their meaning but allows them to construct their own interpretation, to in effect: 'look closely at both the broad influences and the local actions that shape the contexts for teachers and students [and] to theorize carefully the relationships between them' (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1990). So how would this approach look in practice?

Below, I provide (1) a brief quotation from an interview undertaken with William, a newly appointed HoD in a large mathematics department (11 staff), (2) a longer extract from which the quotation was lifted and which allows William's thinking to develop, and (3) my interpretation of William's thinking to emphasise the hermeneutic potential of this 'pointillist' approach to data presentation and interpretation.

(1) A lot of my time off I need to spend on building relationships with the teachers in my department so that I can more or less get them to do things they really don't want to. [William, newly appointed HoD Maths]

(2) I've got a big department that's going through a lot of changes in terms of the educational requirements. Over the last few years we've had a new curriculum and new assessment thing and I guess what I see my main role is to make sure that those things happen. ... I spend a lot of time building relationships with the people in the department. The nuts and bolts of the testing or the filing of resources, all those nuts and bolts sorts of things I can't physically do by myself, not [and] look after ten teachers. So I have got to have their help. I quite like a flat structure so I need to delegate jobs because we've got so many courses on. ... A lot of my time off I need to spend on building relationships with the teachers in my department so that I can more or less get them to do things they really don't want to. And it's nice. They can feel it's positive, they have ownership of what's going on. ... In this curriculum change the form is partially theirs because they were involved in doing it. It's not something that's being imposed upon them. That takes a lot of time. You spend a lot of time talking to people, you always have to listen too. Mathematics is a subject which kids tend to either love or hate. Unfortunately, there's an awful lot of hating. A lot of the time I spend time listening to the teachers about kids who are not doing the right thing. They're either passed on to me from the teacher or the dean as in the case this morning. And of course that takes up all your interval and things like that. But I see my role as being the slightly bigger stick than the teacher before we get to the end bigger stick of the top three sort of thing. So there's certainly that. But I think for me to be most effective I've got to take a lot of information that comes into the school about curriculum change, read it. I think well this is a load of rubbish but we're going to have to do it so how can I turn this to the people who work with me to make it as positive as they possibly can so it'll get done. I have to turn things around. ... Try to really take the positives out and accentuate them and downplay the

negatives. Because we are aware of them, and I have to find a lot of [information]. How do we do this? ... I'm working both on getting information for them ... and I'm the one that tries to go and find and answer to questions and look in the documentation. But I guess my main role is, I need to do that for the whole team together, because otherwise we just won't get the job done as individuals. And if I can do that, all the little nuts and bolts will fall into place because people will want to do it and their motivation's higher. And they feel if their being a teacher in the classroom is better and they don't have as many discipline problems and they don't have as many keeping up to date problems because they're involved in the process. And if I don't do that, I don't have those relationships with those people, all the other things will fall down. You can't make them happen if the teachers don't want to do it. [William, newly appointed HoD Maths]

Taken at face value, the brief first quotation implies something of a Machiavellian and fairly instrumental approach to the management of colleagues on the part of William (and this, in fact, is precisely the response provoked among groups of teachers to whom it has been shown): the way to get things done effectively is to 'build relationships' with the members of the workgroup in order 'to get them to do things' they probably would not do of their own volition. In as much as I'm reworking the actual words used by William, this is an accurate reading of what appears on the page. And this, in many regards, is precisely what we read month by month in published research reports of teachers' practice in secondary schools: a theme is identified and elaborated by the researcher and suitably meaningful gobbets of interview or observational data are incorporated to exemplify the theme. With increasing frequency, we are told that the data and analysis have been fed back to the research participants for comment but, at the end of the day, what is presented is still largely, to use Nash's (1997) words 'an academic discourse with an overriding authority of its own'.

However, as the second extract reveals, once we begin to attend to the meaning given to the actions, using the available contextual clues, with the intention to more completely present an account that demonstrates understanding of the 'situated complexities' of the context in which the HoD works, and on his or her terms, our understanding of why, in that mathematics department, at that time, in the context of those external imperatives and among those workgroup colleagues, William was choosing to act in the way he did.

(3) In an earlier discussion, as we were negotiating a specific focus for this part of the study, William told me that he was in only his second term at the school and that he had been appointed to the HoD position at the end of a year-long selection process over an older and more experienced acting HoD who was extremely well regarded by her colleagues. William had come from another school, was less experienced than a majority of the other teachers in his new department, all of whom were very well-qualified teachers of mathematics and, on William's assessment, a number of them he saw as better classroom practitioners than he was. The mathematics workgroup, like many others in the school had a core of settled, long-serving and high achieving staff. Prior to the arrival of a new principal just after William's appointment, the school had operated along quite traditional

hierarchical lines with an expectation of deference to the formal authority of the HoD at departmental level. In addition, a new national mathematics curriculum prescription had been published in 1992, with which the workgroup was still coming to terms, and a form of competence based assessment was being trialed nationally in a number of subjects, including mathematics. Thus the context in which William had taken up his post was fraught with potential difficulties and uncertainties at both workgroup, subject, school and system levels. Significantly, as we read through the longer extract, we see that his working context reflects most or all of the manifold subject, occupational and social issues raised in the review of the literature earlier in this paper and it is through this complex web of relationships, responsibilities, accountabilities and epistemic concerns, that William has to negotiate a workable path.

The sheer complexity of this task comes through in William's own tentative reasoning where he feels obliged to see that the curriculum and assessment changes are implemented throughout a large department. He also sees a number of practical workload expectations made upon him as HoD by his colleagues, from the 'nuts 'n' bolts' of resource management and organisation, to student discipline, to liaison with external agencies of the state. This, he suggests, is too much for him alone if he is also to do the necessary talking and listening, build interpersonal relationships and the self-esteem of others and secure the confidence of his colleagues with the efficient management of student discipline. Certainly, William does say that part of his role is to get people to do things they may not want to, but, he also aims to 'take the positives out and accentuate them, and downplay the negatives'. It is clear from what he says that he and his colleagues have identified some shortcoming in the new curriculum and assessment frameworks and that in order to make sure these are fully worked through, as HoD he has to minimise any unwarranted resistance the innovations might engender among colleagues. Nevertheless, what strikes me about the longer extract, and William's reasoning behind his various connected actions is that he is attempting to build a collective commitment to and experience of successfully responding to imposed educational change. In order to do this, he cannot afford, like the stereotypical, overloaded subject HoD, to be left himself with responsibility for all the basic departmental, resource and course administration. Rather, his colleagues have to be prepared to take on a share of the administration and to contribute to curriculum and assessment development. In the second extract, for me, what William is talking about is not so much getting people to do what they do not want to do, but about demonstrating and persuading them of the value of adopting a flatter structure of shared administrative workloads in order to provide the essential space for the more important professional, collegial discussion of pedagogically demanding curriculum and assessment change.

Implications for Professional Development

If it teaches us anything at all, this approach to the analysis of 'management' work aptly demonstrates the contingent nature of the 'situated complexities' encountered day in, day out by William. In order to appreciate and fully understand the manner in which he attempts to conduct his work, we need to be attuned to the individual circumstances which shape and inform the strategies he uses as a Head of

Department in a given school setting. In this regard, thin, abstracted or synthetic descriptions of what he does are patently useless. Their superficial nature and spurious prospect of generalisability to other, supposedly similar settings, may in fact distract and discourage us from investigating the particular, the local and the idiosyncratic. Yet it is precisely these local 'contextual clues' which help explain why William has acted in the way he has.

In their pursuit of a reductive, generic applicability, many contemporary taxonomies and frameworks used for the evaluation and promotion of managerial effectiveness quite ironically exclude from their structure the very uncertainties of localised, quotidian practice which are necessary to persuade the reader that curriculum leadership is an intellectual and moral activity, that requires practitioners to understand and appreciate the idiosyncracies of their immediate workgroup and subject domains, and not a set of off-the-shelf responses to totally predictable and rational events.

By painting pictures of secondary school HoD practice with 'empathetic regard, full and critical attention, and a discerning gaze' (Lightfoot, 1983) that more completely portray the unique aspects of local social and epistemological worlds, and in language that teachers themselves use and understand, we may encourage those in leadership positions at subject department level to avoid the search for technocratic, magic bullets and instead to reflect on and attempt to make meaning of their immediate surroundings. Finally, in structuring our presentation of data so that academic analysis may be seen as simply one of a number of possible readings of these 'situated complexities' (and which may be more or less insightful or knowledgeable than those of practitioners on the ground) we encourage teachers in leadership positions to develop their own, informed theories of practice and to move towards what Smyth (1993) calls 'concrete action for change'.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ This section of the paper comprises an extensive review of the relevant literature. I have deliberately chosen not reduce its scope or to use subheadings to break up the text (as one of the reviewers has suggested) precisely because I am attempting to convey the flavour of secondary school subject departments as rich, multi-dimensional social fields, and of the difficulties of investigating them in ways which acknowledge their 'situated complexities'. Briefly, we need to approach the field attuned to the many possible and idiosyncratic ways in which individuals and groups of staff might interact, not limited in our thinking by preconceptions about what we might seek and find in terms of conventional scholarly frameworks for recording practice drawn from particular schools of thought such as the 'effectiveness' and 'improvement' traditions.

ⁱⁱ Ball and Lacey, 1995, p. 99 make a distinction between 'epistemic' and 'epistemological communities'. The former are subject tradition oriented, the latter refers to the organisation of departments generally and within particular schools. Departments demand "strategic loyalty" from their members, thus "differentiation of the epistemic community is quite typically suppressed in favor of organizational and status gains".

ⁱⁱⁱ Talbert, 1995, p. 82 et seq. shows how differences in level of specialist qualification lead to the internal stratification of the teachers within a department

^{iv} "decisions made at the institutional level which operate directly on the teaching process", Ball, 1981, p. 305.

^v The use of a picture metaphor is deliberate and not without precedent. In her widely acclaimed study of school cultures, Sara Lightfoot (1983) draws an analogy between the experience of having her portrait painted and her attempt to write portraits of the schools she studied in a way which would capture "many of the descriptive, aesthetic, and experiential dimensions" of social life in a relationship with her subjects "that had the qualities of empathetic regard, full and critical attention, and a discerning gaze" (p. 6).

^{vi} See Kvale (1995) for a useful discussion on the social construction of validity.

^{vii} I remember reading once that the length and consequent structures of popular Jazz music tunes in the early twentieth century were largely shaped by the two to three minute recording limit of the commercially dominant 78rpm record. It may be that the reporting of qualitative data, where, conventionally, the odd sentence or two of raw data is used to illustrate various points in the theoretical argument being developed, has been similarly shaped by the hegemonic occupational constraints of the 5,000 word peer reviewed journal article of the social sciences.