

Retaining heads of mathematics in a performative culture: a case study

Bryony Black

The University of Sheffield

This study explores the experiences and perspectives of heads of mathematics departments (HoMs) in secondary schools in northern England. The HoM has a broad range of responsibilities, key being ensuring that the pupils in their school score highly in external examinations. The current crisis in the recruitment and retention of mathematics leaders in schools is not a new one, but the body of research into the issues affecting those in this key role remains small. Taking as a theoretical background Foucault's work on power, governmentality and discourse the study considers the way in which school leaders' interpretations of a performative culture affects the work of HoMs. Employing a case study approach and using data collection techniques including focus groups, one-to-one interviews, audio diaries and observations, the aim of the study is to identify the conditions under which retention of those in the role of HoM is likely.

Keywords: secondary; departmental leadership; performativity; governmentality; power; retention

Introduction

Recruitment and retention of teachers of mathematics in England is in crisis (Lynch, Worth, Bamford & Wespieser, 2016), and in February the House of Commons Education Committee (HCEC) stated that, "The Government and National College for Teaching and Leadership should develop a long-term plan to improve both the supply of new and retention of existing teachers over the next 10 years" (HCEC, 2017, p.25). Mathematics is specifically mentioned as a shortage subject in the report, and this is an issue that I come across regularly in my current role as Director of ITE at The University of Sheffield. I visit many schools in which the HoM has left but no replacement has been found, for example, or where a reluctant member of the teaching team has agreed to take over the role for an interim period.

Having been a HoM in a state secondary school in England, I am aware of many of the challenges faced by those currently in the role. The ever-increasing emphasis on examination performance and pupil progress (DfE, 2017), particularly in English and mathematics, means that the role is high-pressure and high-stakes, and those in the role are crucial to ensuring the success of a school.

The aim of my research is to offer school leaders and policy-makers some ideas about enabling factors that make retaining HoMs easier within the performative culture in which schools in England currently operate.

Research questions

My broader research project aims to answer the following questions:

1. What is the role of the HoM and how has it changed?
2. What are the experiences and perspectives of HoMs?
3. Why do HoMs remain in the role or choose to leave?
4. Are these experiences and decisions connected to the amount of teaching experience the HoMs had prior to taking on the role?

In this paper I concentrate on the second of these questions.

Theoretical background

Taking as a starting point Foucault's work on power, discourse and neoliberal governmentality (Foucault, 1976, 1978), I focus on two interconnected areas that have a marked impact on the work of HoMs: performativity and its consequences (Ball, 2003, 2013; Keddie, 2013) and school leadership theory and practice (Gillies, 2013; Niesche, 2011).

Lyotard defines performativity as "the optimization of the global relationship between input and output" (1979, p.11), where in educational terms, the input is the teaching and the output is the examination results, and Keddie (2013) argues that "measuring and monitoring student, teacher and school performances in relation to externally imposed targets, comparisons and incentives comprise the 'fabric' of most schools" (p.764). Within such a culture, the possible implications for the teaching profession are broad and not necessarily positive, ranging from a complete change in people's understanding of what constitutes education to loss of teacher autonomy resulting in anxiety, damage to relationships and a narrowing of pedagogical approaches.

The consequences for HoMs of working within a performative culture are hugely influenced by its interpretation by school leaders. Many head teachers are likely to adopt a 'distributed' approach to leadership, having undertaken the National Professional Qualification for Headteachers (NPQH) (NCTL, 2016). Distribution of leadership can have a number of interpretations, although Niesche (2011) and Gillies (2013) argue that in fact the concept is merely a tactic of government: the required outcomes of high grades in GCSE examinations have already been established and those within schools are merely given the opportunity to find their own ways to meet the externally imposed targets. Therefore school leaders' interpretation of their own role will have a significant impact on their attitude towards distributing leadership amongst their team.

Findings from the literature

Much of the research available relating to the role of the HoD or HoM bemoans a dearth of research into the role (e.g. Harris, Jamieson & Russ, 1995; Busher, Hammersley-Fletcher & Turner, 2007). However, it is clear that the role has changed significantly over time, from a focus on maintaining an ordered department in terms of resources, timetabling and curriculum (Ernest, 1989) to monitoring the performance of the team and dealing effectively with under-performance (NCTL, 2013). There has been increased political interest in the role as performative measures have escalated and so striking a balance between implementing top-down strategies at policy and school level and devising approaches to teaching and learning

that they feel will benefit their department is one of the biggest challenges for a HoM (Weller, 2001; Busher et al., 2007).

In figure 1 I present an adapted version of Turner and Bolam's (1998) framework that gives an idea of the huge range of influences that will affect the experiences of the HoM:

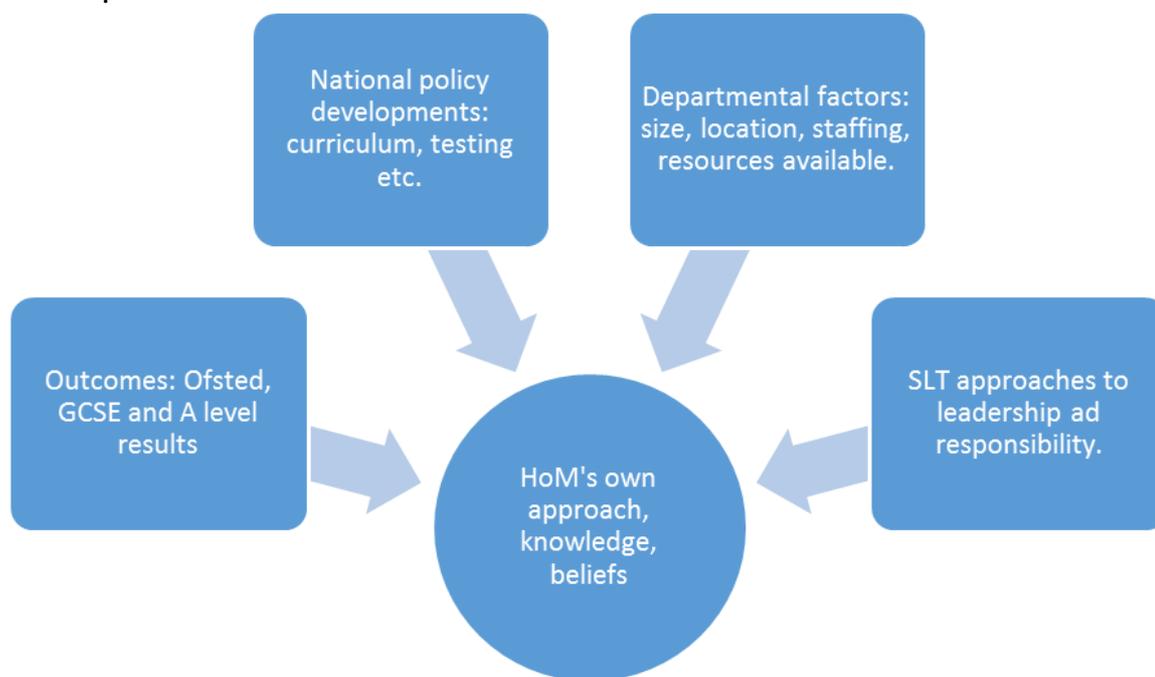


Figure 1: Influences on the experiences of HoMs. Adapted from Turner and Bolam (1998)

A consideration of these potential influences helped guide my data collection.

Methodology and methods

My research is a participatory study (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995) that takes a case study approach (Yin, 2014), with the case being 'the HoM'. I began by using a survey of all teachers of mathematics in 90 schools in the north of England. The survey served a dual purpose: firstly, to give a broad picture of the issues facing the mathematics teaching workforce in the area and secondly, to identify potential participants in the rest of the research.

Following this initial survey three groups were identified for further investigation: one was made up of HoMs who took on the role within the first five years of their teaching career; one of HoMs who took on the role when they had been teaching for more than five years, and a final group made up of teachers who had been HoMs but had chosen to leave the role. These groups took part in a range of data collection activities, including focus groups, one-to-one interviews and the recording of audio diaries, over a nine month period.

Having made use of NVivo as a data management tool I am currently in the process of analysing the broad range of data collected. In this paper I simply present

some of the comments of my participants, although this approach will be refined as the analysis develops.

Tentative findings

Whilst Ball (2003) talks of the “terrors of performativity” (p.225), it is clear that, to my participants, working within a performative culture is an accepted part of the role of HoM:

Erm, A level results were really good and so were our GCSE maths ones, so really happy there. Erm, one or two kids missed by one mark, so, their C, so they're going for re-marks. Not quite as many A*s as I'd like, but hey ho – I think that's across the board. Er, so really pleased there – it means management won't be on our backs – so it just means we can put our energies into trying to work out what the new GCSE is going to look like for the new Y11.

Mags, experienced HoM, audio diary

However, for some, this can go too far:

And I think one of the big issues is that whatever school you're at, you have all of the senior leaders feel like they have a buy-in to your department. Doesn't really matter whether their role is to do with maths or not, they all have their opinions on what you should and shouldn't do. And they'll tell you about it every single week. Quite often you'll see more than one of them a day who will tell you their opinions on your work and on people in your department's work. And it's quite a strange job, you feel a bit like you're in a goldfish bowl sometimes.

Ricky, HoM in a private school, formerly in the state sector, 1-1 interview

One participant accepts, or doesn't question, quite an extreme response to a performative culture by her leadership team:

Erm, but yeah – that's all at the moment going into my Developing Excellence Plan and SEF, which has been the bane of my life for the last week. Erm, it's quite difficult for me because this is the one that I wrote last year, erm, was told it wasn't good enough and was given it back, kind-of like bad homework, twice actually, erm, without too much guidance, erm, so it's quite, erm, bittersweet this one for me, cos that was what started my real struggle through the Autumn term this time last year, so I'm trying really hard on it not to have it sent back this year...

Elizabeth, early career, HoM, audio diary

Despite this culture, or possibly because of it, an important aspect of my participants' work was the development of strong teamworking relationships within their departments:

And when mock results come in I don't even really go through the data on purpose – I leave it a while and if there's individual issues I'll go and have a word with someone but I'm just trying to make everyone relaxed...”

William, early career HoM, FG1

However, for some this was not always easy:

It was so hard to be that buffer between everything that SLT is raining down on you, things that you know aren't beneficial to the children at all, protecting your staff, encouraging your staff and also listening to your staff you know, who are hanging on by their fingernails.

Sally, former HoM, 1-1 interview

One key experience not covered in the literature, and particular to the less experienced HoMs, is the damage to their own teaching that has occurred due to focusing on other areas of their work:

So I felt like my teaching – I had a proper meltdown erm, when I said, like, my classes are at a disadvantage for having me as a teacher, because I'm so busy doing other things, I can't commit to them.

Elizabeth, 1-1 interview

I'd really like some, everyone would like some knock-out Y11 results, but I'd like, but just from my class – I've always had alright results from my Y11s, because I end up taking on loads of things, and then it just, but I don't know how to, I don't know how to not take on loads of things

Edward, early career HoM, 1-1 interview

Conclusion

This paper aimed to identify the experiences and perspectives of HoMs in secondary schools in northern England. The literature suggested that a loss of autonomy due to a strong focus on meeting externally imposed targets was likely to lead to anxiety amongst the teaching profession, and that teachers' beliefs about the meaning of education would be affected. HoMs were likely to experience a range of external (e.g. national policy developments) and internal (e.g. whole-school initiatives) influences on their experiences, and in particular the approach of the leadership team in their school was a key factor. It is clear from the selected comments from my participants that these findings are true to varying degrees: all of the participants were focused on ensuring strong departmental results in external examinations as their main priority, but the early career HoMs experienced much higher anxiety levels than those with more experience, often finding that they struggled to balance developing their own teaching alongside supporting a large department. All participants mentioned the influence of their school's senior leadership team, and this is a key area into which further analysis will be undertaken.

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