Creating Cross-Curriculum Impact

By Geoff Barton

"Stand by for action," pronounces the doomy voice-over at the start of Stingray. That could be our mission statement for the coming months. One of the many waves of change that has been developing, apparently unnoticed by many of us, is the recommendation of the School Teachers Review Body (STRB) that management allowances should be replaced by Teaching and Learning Responsibilities. To my mind, this represents one of the most significant opportunities for change in a generation of school leadership.

In the past, if you were a good teacher who also harboured even a modicum of ambition, you had few options. If you were genuinely wedded to your specialist subject you either remained as classroom teacher, frustrated whilst you saw people less good than yourself promoted up the pay spines, or you looked for a post as an LEA adviser or education lecturer – both of which (in those days) seemed to offer the opportunity of hanging onto subject expertise rather than swapping it for paperwork and hassle.

The alternative seemed to be promotion beyond the classroom, taking on a management role and administration – things that seemed counter to the reason we went into teaching.

Since then we've had the upper pay spine, and the Advanced Skills Teacher and Fast Track programmes. On its way is the Excellent Teacher scheme. All are designed to reward good teachers for being, well, good teachers.

So the logic of the new teaching and learning responsibility points seems clear. If good teachers can be rewarded for remaining in the classroom and doing what they do best, why do schools need so many management points sloshing around?

All of which does get you thinking about something which is both disarmingly simple and potentially radical: if we were building our schools afresh, what kind of staffing structure would we want? How would we organise our team of adults so that their roles genuinely impacted upon students' learning?

I suppose this is an opportunity to dust-off all those management clichés about thinking beyond the box, doing some blue-sky thinking, and maybe (if there's time) having a paradigm shift. As someone who rather too proudly boasts of once failing NPQH, I squirm at such jargon and prefer the rather simpler notion of starting from scratch.

So here's a couple of questions to get us thinking:

Traditionally schools have relied on teachers' non-contact periods to run something called - quaintly - a pastoral system (the word is rich in echoes of a shepherd tending wayward lambs). In many schools this is a strength and, in the recent report on <u>Managing</u>

Challenging Behaviour, Ofsted re-affirm the positive influence of good tutoring. But a traditional pastoral system does rely on non-contact periods. If there's a major incident in your school tomorrow which needs investigating, you're at the mercy of the timetable: if members of your pastoral team are free, they'll be available to investigate. If not, you'll either end up covering their classes (unsatisfactory and unfair to students taught by them) or give the job to someone else (which kind of defeats the purpose of having a pastoral team). You might plan to give them more non-contact time in the future, but if each free period costs around £2000, this is an expensive solution.

So, question 1:   Might you not instead want to explore developing pastoral staff who are not teachers, or – at the very least - building into each year team someone who doesn't teach, someone who is free to investigate issues, take statements, phone parents, do the administration. If so, how will you fund it?

Question 2:   What about your subject leaders? What's their role exactly? Isn't the compartmentalisation of learning – strengthened in the late eighties by the national curriculum – part of our problem? Students will dutifully trot from doing graphs in Physics to do graphs in Maths and then graphs in Geography, only to proclaim in each lesson that "they can't do graphs". Compartmentalisation of subjects has made it tougher for students to make connections in their developing skills and knowledge. So is there an opportunity here to dismantle some subject boundaries?

If you have a really effective Head of Maths, then doesn't that mean that performance in Maths is likely to be successful, but that doesn't really help you with improving the quality of other subjects.

Should we instead be moving towards something considered by David Hargreaves which rejects the idea of middle management subject leaders and instead has a project-management team? Their role is to solve problems. One year a project manager – as a member of the leadership team – might work to improve learning and teaching in, say, Science lessons. The following year she might be responsible for developing whole-school literacy or developing whole-school questioning, or explanation, or other generic teaching skills.

After all, isn't there an argument to say that good leadership is good leadership irrespective of subject specialism? Why shouldn't a good Head of English be a good Head of Science, if the role is about building a team's teaching skills, leading performance management, monitoring student progress? In fact, isn't there an argument that a leader of a subject may be more effective if she is detached from the notion of "subjects" and therefore able to ask objective, probing questions?

One thing's clear in all of this: there's an opportunity to rethink the way schools have traditionally organised themselves around the needs of teachers and instead, genuinely, to put in place structures that reflect the needs of learners.

We should, of course, tread with care. Theory and experience suggest that tinkering with structures and coming up with models that look good on paper can be a waste of energy. Your organisation can end up getting distracted, shifting its focus away from the needs of students, and getting all broody and introspective. Neat paper models rarely match the messiness of real life.

But it undoubtedly sets you thinking about features of school life we've taken for granted as traditional ways of doing things – such as having pastoral teams (many European countries don't, and their young people appear to survive school) and organising learning around subject areas. It also forces you to think about whole-school impact and how to make things happen consistently across subject areas.

Take whole-school literacy. Few of us could deny George Sampson's 1922 dictum that "every teacher in English is a teacher of English". But what's the reality in our schools? How effectively do we – across subjects – actively develop students skills in literacy? After all, it shouldn't be complicated. There are some simple things that every teacher in every subject could be doing that would make the learning of students powerfully more effective. Here are five of them:

1: Ask fewer questions, make them more open, and give students thinking time before you demand an answer

2: For writing, model the kind of writing you want by demonstrating how you might write the opening sentence or paragraph. Students rarely see the process of writing. Writing is dished up to them in handouts, worksheets and textbooks, but they need to see the process of thinking, writing, making decisions, changing words. So show them. Say: "Let's think about how I might start writing the essay. Tell me what you think of this as an opening sentence …."

3: For reading, make students' lives easier by presenting information in form that is inviting to read, using headings, subheadings and bullet-points to make information more accessible. Provide a glossary of key words.

4: For spelling, make explicit strategies you use to help you to spell difficult words. Don't dish out lists of spelling rules. Instead, demystify the way we all have our own ways of spelling accurately. Say: "I don't know how you remember how to spell parliament but I remember that it has "I am" in the middle. I say to myself "I am in parl-I-AM-ent". How do you remember it?"

5: Provide models of what you're looking for with attached criteria, so that instead of playing the traditional game of "guess the teacher's mind time", students know what they are expected to produce, how it will be assessed and what a good example looks like.

Now all of this is simple, homespun stuff. My point isn't to debate what's good literacy. Rather, it's how do you make it happen across all classrooms? How do you get

consistency? Because if some of our teachers are using the five strategies above and others aren't, then we've got an equal opportunities issue, with some students at an advantage and others left out.

In the past, particularly in the early days of the KS3 Strategy, our response was to put on whole-school training. We naively assumed that holding a literacy training day and telling all staff what they needed to know about reading, writing and spelling would serve its purpose. The result, of course, was a fizzling-out of good intentions based on a poor model of teaching. Getting every teacher in the school together and assuming that they all needed the same kind of input is just daft. It goes against everything we know about the need for differentiated teaching. So we shouldn't be too surprised if the result is inconsistent and sporadic literacy work across classrooms.

For me, a more useful approach is to map out what you think every teacher needs to know about literacy – a kind of core knowledge. At our school, we've identified nine essential bits of literacy know-how that we think everyone needs. We're doing the same thing for numeracy, behaviour management and, most recently, tutoring – that is, the essential skills we think someone needs to be a good tutor.

Then, instead of holding whole-staff sessions that end up satisfying no one, we plan a range of short workshop-based training sessions throughout the year. You want to develop the way you teach writing? There's a 1-hour session you can opt into in the next

training day. Your focus is on tutoring skills? Choose the workshop that best suits your needs.

It's a pick 'n mix approach to training which puts the teacher in the driving seat, managing her own development, based on identifying current strengths and weaknesses. And to make it work fully it just needs one further element – performance management which needs to focus on these essential skills of teaching. The ongoing discussion about performance might ask questions like these: "So how are you developing your literacy knowledge? What training have you undertaken in the past year? What evidence do you have of its impact in your classroom?"

Ironically, for me, whole-school impact isn't simply about appointing coordinators of (say) literacy. It isn't about lengthy and tangled curriculum audits. It isn't about earnest whole-staff training sessions. Rather, it's about simplifying what we expect as the essential ingredients in good classroom practice and creating the opportunities for our staff to develop their skills and knowledge, underpinned by a performance management process that places these skills at the core.

So as we wade deeper into the murky waters of restructuring our management points and questioning some of the ways we've traditionally done things, it's perhaps worth thinking beyond subject boundaries and focusing on the essential skills that all good teachers need, irrespective of their specialism. It's important to remember that energy spent producing great paper-based structures will rarely be as productive as time spent deploying the right

people in the right job, even if that makes for a messy structure. And it's vital to cling on to the main purpose of the whole process: a school-wide impact which is consistent across <u>every</u> classroom in the school. "Stand by for action" indeed.

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