

Leading and managing the competence-based curriculum: conscripts, volunteers and champions at work within the departmentalised environment of the secondary school

Christopher Downey, Jenny Byrne and Ana Souza

University of Southampton Education School

Corresponding author: Christopher Downey – cdowney@soton.ac.uk

Christopher Downey is a Lecturer in Education at the University of Southampton. Chris graduated in Chemistry from the University of London and trained as a secondary science teacher at the University of Southampton. He taught science at secondary schools in Hampshire and Poole. During this time he gained experience of school leadership as a Head of Department and as an Assistant Head teacher. His research interests include the allied fields of educational improvement and effectiveness.

Jenny Byrne is a Lecturer in Education at the University of Southampton. She graduated from Birmingham University. After completing her PGCE at Durham University she taught secondary science and became Head of Science at a school in Berkshire. She has also worked in primary schools in the UK as a science teacher and in the NHS as a health education officer. She completed her MSc and PhD at the University of Southampton. Her research interests include children's cognitive development, the affective domain of the self and its impact on learning, health education and biography.

Ana Souza is a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Southampton. Ana graduated in Language Teaching and Translation (Portuguese/English) in Brazil, where she taught EFL for 10 years. Having completed her MA in English Language Teaching at Thames Valley University, London, Ana has taught ESOL and Portuguese in the UK. She completed her doctoral study at the University of Southampton on issues of language and identity. Ana's research interests include bilingualism, code-switching, community language schools, language planning in migrant churches and Brazilian migration.

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Abstract

This article presents a subset of findings from a research project describing the experience of four case study schools which have implemented a competence-based curriculum for students in their first year of secondary education. Secondary schools are highly departmentalised environments with organisational structures based primarily around subject departments and this can present a considerable challenge to such a multidisciplinary curriculum initiative. School leaders and teachers involved in the implementation and development of a competence-based curriculum speak in terms of championing and legitimising the curriculum to their subject specialist colleagues. Teachers recruited to the competence-based approach were sometimes described as a mix of volunteers and conscripts and overcoming any initial scepticism toward the approach required the position and status of the curriculum initiative to be established within the departmentalised organisational structure of the secondary school, and required continuing advocacy for the competence-based approach.

Keywords: competence-based curriculum, multidisciplinary, competencies, middle leadership, Heads of Department

Introduction

This article is one of a suite of articles focusing on a case study of four secondary schools that engage their Year 7 (11-12 year old) students in learning within a competence-based curriculum (CBC) framework for a substantial component of their timetable. Summary details of the case-study schools, the different CBC frameworks and the case study research design are contained in the introductory article to this suite of papers.

During the initial phase of the study we interviewed senior leaders, normally a Head teacher and/or Deputy Head teacher together with the teacher charged with overall leadership of the CBC. We quickly determined that leaders play a key role in both the implementation and development of each of the CBCs and, in common with many types of school-wide curriculum innovation, the backing of senior leaders, in particular the Head teacher, is critical in giving status to the CBC within the busy curriculum of the typical secondary school. If senior leaders in the school provide the necessary status at the outset of curriculum innovation then it is the CBC leader who takes on the baton of maintaining the purpose and status of the CBC approach once the innovation is established and functioning. This article, therefore addresses both of these stages in the processes of implementation and ongoing development of the CBC within the case study schools, and does so through the following research question:

What are the issues and tensions faced by senior leaders and competence-based curriculum (CBC) leaders in developing a position and identity:

- *for the competence-based curriculum amidst the dominant structure of subject disciplines,*
- *and for CBC leaders among their fellow middle leaders?*

In common with the other articles in this set, this two part research question is framed in terms of four issues which emerged from analysis of the preliminary interviews with senior leaders and CBC leaders in each school.

In our analysis of competence-base curricula in the case study schools we have likened the multidisciplinary teams of teachers to subject departments in their own right. Our rationale for this is situated not just in the way the teams behaved (they held team meetings, collaborated on curriculum development and issues such as assessment and resourcing and conducted self-evaluation), but the way the teachers and particularly the CBC leaders spoke about their engagement with the CBC. We therefore begin this article with a consideration of research literature on the role department leaders as middle leaders and how this relates to the dominant organisational structures adopted in most in secondary schools along subject department lines.

Theoretical framework and related literature

The context of potential tension – departmentalisation in secondary schools

Metcalf and Russell (1997) have suggested that teaching in secondary school is similar to working on a production line, on which students move between specialist classrooms as if moving between stations on a conveyor belt. The timetable takes on the mantle of the conveyor belt, shuffling students around the subject specific workstations on a regular basis throughout the day. Thus the subject department acts as the dominant organisational structure in the day-to-day life of teachers and students, and many secondary schools in England have their key organisational structures established along the dividing lines between different subject departments, or between groups of subjects known as faculties (Glover et al. 1999). These strong subject-based divisions may present challenges for teachers who also need to work within other organisational structures in the school, such as systems for the pastoral care of students. Pastoral teams tend to draw teachers from a range of subject disciplines and so cut across the departmental structures. The nature of pastoral work undertaken by teachers is such that it tends not to cause substantial organisational conflicts with the responsibilities of subject teaching, nevertheless, the relationship between the pastoral and subject structures in a school is not always harmonious (Imants et al. 2001). In many secondary schools it is the subject departments or faculty groups of subjects which hold sway and form the main organisational structures around which most other organisation is built. Subject leaders or heads of department (HoDs) therefore have considerable authority at the middle leadership level in many schools (Busher and Harris 1999). Some commentators (e.g. Dimmock and Goh 2011) call for new organisational structures to facilitate a multidisciplinary approach to teaching competence-based curricula and we have discussed the extent to which the case study schools in our study have adapted their structures to accommodate the CBC in the other

articles in this issue, but here we are principally concerned with the points of tension as school leaders seek to position the CBC and help it achieve status within the more traditional divisions of subject departments.

Dimmock and Lee (2000, 354), writing from an international perspective, have described subject departments as “strong, robust, rigid and bureaucratic organisational structures”. This robustness and rigidity of subject departments provides a stable platform and a key point of reference for teachers working within their subject discipline. It also allows them to develop a strong identity for themselves as teachers of a specific subject and members of a subject teacher team. Visscher and Witziers (2004, 787) have commented on how, in the Netherlands, subject departments are viewed as “the most important entity for promoting professional communities”. Siskin (1994; 1997) concluded that departments in US high schools are the critical sites for teacher professional practice and that any kind of change to be brought about in high schools would ultimately have to deal with subject departments. Similarly, subject HoDs benefit by leading within such a robust organisational structure and have status associated with their role as leaders in a key unit of the school. Dinham et al. (2000) found that despite being critical of the pressures that their role placed on them personally, and on the quality of their own teaching (see also Dinham and Scott 2002), they prized the opportunity to lead other professionals and to have influence within the school. Some considered their role to be “the best position in the school” (Dinham et al. 2000: 64). Harris (2000; 2001), in an analysis of effective departments (in terms of the academic progress that students make – Sammons et al. 1997), has documented the impact such departments can have across the school when they act as a test bed and catalyst for improvement initiatives. A key characteristic of such high impact departments, Harris (2001) found, was strong communication and collegiality both within the department and in relationships with teachers in leadership positions in the school.

By contrast, Dimmock and Lee (2000) conclude, that it is the very strength and rigidity of subject departments which may serve to inhibit curriculum change. They intimate that a more flexible structure is necessary to facilitate change, with Heads of Department viewed more as leaders of teacher teams. Imants et al. (2001, 295) refer to the notion of ‘*departmentalisation*’ in secondary schools and assert that this culture can erect barriers between teachers in multidisciplinary contexts and even result in alienating effects on students. Hargreaves has developed this perspective further (Hargreaves et al. 1992; Hargreaves 1994), referring to the subject departments in secondary schools as ‘low permeability’ structures which are highly insular, mitigating against membership of multiple groups and the transfer of professional learning between teachers in different groups (Hargreaves and Macmillan 1992, 2). Such structures have high permanence with a tightly defined membership and are delineated by the creation of clear space between departmental teams so that movement of teachers between teams over short time frames is unlikely. Hargreaves and Macmillan argue that, while static departmental structures serve to develop strong and lasting personal identities for teachers, with a sense of attachment to the departmental team, they also perpetuate divisions which make it challenging for teachers to work in genuinely collegial ways due to the political complexities arising from entrenched power differentials that exist between high and low

status subjects. To counter these tendencies they propose the development of a ‘*moving mosaic*’ structure (Hargreaves and Macmillan 1992, 35&37) in which membership and leadership of teacher teams is fluid, with both teachers and leaders taking on temporary roles in a variety of teams, and HoDs rotating in their role. Furthermore, Glover et al. (1999) found that senior leaders in schools with traditional departmental structures were more likely to express dissatisfaction that subject HoDs did not collaborate sufficiently in whole-school improvement across all subject areas. Hannay et al. (2001) conducted a 6 year longitudinal study of secondary schools in Ontario which adopted a more fluid approach to internal organisational structures with middle leadership positions being developed on a temporary basis and roles constructed collegially from discussion based on the current school development plan. Hannay et al. assert that organisational restructuring within the school is a necessary antecedent to changes in school leadership culture, with a requirement to define what middle leadership roles are before any change leads to cultural changes. Witziers et al. (1999) sound a cautionary note however, by arguing that an increase in opportunities for teachers to work in multidisciplinary teams does not necessarily foster increased collaboration between teachers. Thus, the call for ‘high permeability’ organisational structures from Hargreaves and Macmillan (1992) may not automatically flow from simply adopting a multidisciplinary approach to teaching. The role of the departmental leader, as a leader ‘in the middle’, may be pivotal in assenting to and securing outcomes from multidisciplinary, high permeability initiatives so we turn our attention now to literature related to the role of middle leaders in secondary schools.

The role of middle leaders in seeking to position their area responsibility within the organisational structure of secondary schools

Bennet et al. (2003) perceive middle leadership encompassing a range of roles including subject leaders, heads of department, pastoral leaders and special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs) and we would position CBC leaders within the middle leadership group, or at least in those aspiring to such a position. They refer to the work of Dimmock and Lee (2000), concluding that the more strongly an organisation is focused around the structure of subjects, the fewer opportunities there will be for middle leaders to engage in cross-curricular work. Bennet et al. (2007, 457) refer to the ‘strong sense of territorialism’ that can occur when subject departments are located in a hierarchical school structure, with less evidence of collegiality across the Heads of Department than within departmental teams. Even HoDs of core subjects like English can feel the need to “sell” the importance of their department to fellow HoDs and to other stakeholders such as parents (Dinham 2007). This tendency to end up vying for position among curriculum leaders has also been observed to be a feature of Further Education colleges as well as schools (Alexiadou 2001; Lumby 2001) and suggests that HoDs of subject departments may not be inclined to encourage their valuable team members to engage in multidisciplinary teams such as those employed in some of the schools in our study, making the role of the CBC leader even more challenging. Wise and Bennet (2003), in a survey of middle leaders and the roles they undertake in schools, found that middle leaders fulfilling a range of cross-curricular co-ordinator roles tended to

have leadership responsibility for large and disparate teams of teachers and conclude that their work may sometimes be “on the margins of other teachers’ commitment” and “peripheral rather than central to the work of subject teaching” (p12).

Simkins (2005) describes a set of what he sees as emerging leadership roles in education, which are related to distributed leadership perspectives (Gronn 2000; Harris 2003). Simkins concludes that these emerging roles have settled into three distinct types:

- enhanced line roles, focused around leading others in a way that ensures their effective performance through the process of performance management within an often over simplified hierarchical conception of organisational structures;
- project roles, focused on the use of resources to achieve tightly defined and often short term outcomes which make it challenging to forge the necessary relationships to complete the shared task;
- networking roles, which involve working in partnership with groups of people or individuals, normally across organizations, in order to tackle common problems or pursuing shared purposes.

(Simkins 2005, 16-19)

Middle leaders acting in networking roles are often required to work with people who have their primary accountability to someone else, and this requires an element of what Simkins refers to as ‘*boundary crossing*’

Boundary crossing is never easy: differences in cultural assumptions and practices as well as concerns about the future distribution of power and influence require extremely sensitive handling and are likely to affect significantly conceptions of appropriate forms of leadership in future years. Frequently influence – whether it arises from expertise, personal qualities or some other source – is more important than formal power, and co-operation and collaboration are more important than hierarchical control.

(Simkins 2005, 19)

The role of middle leaders in legitimising their own position and status within the leadership structure of secondary schools

Busher and Harris (1999) support the view of Siskin (1994) that the nature and discourse of academic subject knowledge forms the defining feature of departmental culture in the secondary school. They are of the opinion that elements of a subject department’s epistemology, which include curriculum content and also values and unique methodologies, have a strong role in shaping teachers’ identities and their individual approaches to teaching and learning. Thus CBC leaders and advocates holding other leadership positions are likely to appeal to the types of epistemological discourse employed by subject disciplines in order to establish a position and identity for the CBC as another department in its own right. A key outcome of this study lies in identifying the specific elements of the subject discourse that the

CBC leaders appeal to in order to provide legitimacy for the CBC and thus establish its place within the strong vertical discourse of subject disciplines.

Elsewhere Busher (2005a) discusses the dialogic processes by which school community and purpose is developed and maintains that it is differential access to power, rather than an appeal to a rational approach or coherent argument, which forms the key factor responsible for shaping the outcomes of these dialogues. This constructivist approach to understanding how individuals develop their identity within a role is developed from the work of Giddens (1984; 1991). Alvesson and Willmott (2002) describe this discursive process of constructing shared understanding as 'identity work' which then leads to a process of 'identity regulation'. CBC leaders need to establish a position for themselves both within their multidisciplinary teacher teams, and more especially among their middle leader peers in order to be able to stake their claim on access to curriculum time, staffing and resources. If Busher (2005a) is correct in his assertion that organisational structures in schools are no more than "the historical outcomes of negotiative processes...that are sustained and eroded by changing socio-political contexts" (pp. 138-139) then the stakes for CBC leaders in negotiating their position within the school hierarchy are very high indeed. CBC leaders will need to devote a considerable proportion of their energy and time to establishing a personal identity for themselves and the CBC within the school in order to tip the balance of power in their favour. In each of our case study schools adopting a multidisciplinary team approach to the competence-based curriculum there was a need to justify its place within the departmentalised environment of the secondary school, both within the CBC teacher team itself and more especially in the minds of colleagues, whether cynical or sympathetic toward the CBC approach.

The study

The aim of this paper is to ascertain how CBC leaders in the case study schools, as described in the introductory article, are responding to the challenges of leading multidisciplinary teams in the strongly departmentalised structure of the secondary school. Though part of a wider study, this paper reports only on data collected in relation to these management and leadership issues. Other issues are explored in the accompanying papers in this issue. The data reported in this paper were collected from individual and group semi-structured interviews with CBC leaders, Head teachers and other senior leaders, and also from group interviews with CBC teachers as their perception of the role played by the CBC leader and the challenges they face is a key part of our developing understanding.

Simkins (2005), conducting a review to answer the question "What works?" in educational leadership, has stated that middle leaders find themselves subject to more complex pressures and conflicts in fulfilling their role than is traditionally viewed in arguments about middle managers. He argues for the importance of exploring the interaction between structure and agency in specific contexts and how this interaction is mediated by the values of the individuals in these complex roles. To this end we have sought to develop an approach to

analysing the interview data collected along the lines of four issues drawn from analysis of preliminary interviews with school and CBC leaders that explores some of the complex interactions between school organisational structure, school senior leaders and CBC Leaders as agents of curriculum innovation and how the values of individuals influence such interactions.

Findings

The findings presented here are drawn from all four case study schools, although points of comparison and contrast between schools will be made, and it is important to note that the narrower context of the CBC in School 4 meant that the challenges experienced by the CBC leader were often of a different nature or intensity to those faced in the other three case study schools. Where points are exemplified with direct quotations from the participants the role and school of the respondent are indicated.

Research question: What are the issues and tensions faced by senior leaders and CBC leaders in developing a position and identity for the competence-based curriculum amidst the dominant structure of subject disciplines?

- ***Issue 1: Making space for the competence-based curriculum - a source of tension***

The amount of time allocated in the timetable to teaching within a particular subject discipline may be viewed as an indicator of its perceived importance in the curriculum. Any reduction in time allocation for teaching a subject is therefore a potential source of tension, as Heads of Department feel their ability to cover National Curriculum expectations are compromised, or opportunities to engender interest in the subject in order to boost take up at later stages of learning are affected. The initial implementation of the competence-based curriculum required space to be made on the timetable of Year 7 students and this resulted in a reduction of teaching time for other subjects. CBC teachers and Leaders recognised the cost to subjects in terms of loss of lesson time. As one teacher, who, when not teaching on the CBC was a member of a core curriculum subject team expressed:

...everyone wants their curriculum time really, don't they, that's the thing. (CBC teacher, School 1)

At School 1 the Deputy Head teacher described how the loss of lesson time had been distributed across a wide range of subjects including one lesson from each of maths, English, science, drama and history. While this might be viewed as shared sacrifice of lesson time, some subjects lose proportionately more KS3 teaching time than others in giving up a single lesson. The Deputy Head teacher went on to reveal that technology and geography had each lost two lessons to the Year 7 curriculum, but the extra hour of Yr7 time lost by geography then led to tensions between geography and history, as these subjects were seen as competing for recruitment of students opting to continue their study of subjects beyond Key Stage 3 (KS3).

One CBC Leader articulated the loss to subject departments in terms of curriculum content rather than lesson time, with the expectation that this loss of content needed to be paid back through gains made in the competence-based curriculum:

They also see that they're going to lose their content. They don't see it as a supporting content. I don't think it actually detracts at all. I think it actually supports and reinforces your content, it's not a lessening of anything. (CBC Leader, School 3)

In three of our four schools it was the humanities subjects which had given up proportionately more lesson time for the implementation of the new Yr7 curriculum. In School 4 the nature of implementation was through common themes explored separately *within* rather than *across* subject clusters, which meant that humanities still retained its complement of lessons, as did other subject areas. As a consequence, tensions with subject departments were not raised at all in this school during the interviews. The scaling down of humanities teaching time featured strongly in responses given to us in two of the four schools (Schools 2 and 3). One Head teacher expressed this to us in the following way:

... it quickly became apparent to many people that certain subject preserves were under threat and in particular in this instance for us in humanities and in the art subjects (Head teacher, School 2)

It appeared in some of the case study schools that the CBC provided a means of retaining and developing talented humanities teachers particularly in Schools 2 and 3 where the number of teachers employed to teach the humanities group of subjects had been reduced in the period leading up to the implementation of the CBC.

- ***Issue 2: Selecting the competence-based curriculum teaching team - conscripts and volunteers***

In Schools 1, 2 and 3 it was senior leaders, and in particular the Head teacher who took on the task of recruiting and allocating the initial staff team for the CBC. The two schools in which we had access to interview the Head teacher (Schools 1 & 2) were also the schools which had implemented the CBC the longest. Both of these Head teachers took the opportunity to reflect on how the initial approach to staffing the curriculum had been undertaken and how this approach had developed over time. We were struck by the fact that both Head teachers independently referred to the initial team of teachers as a mix of conscripts and volunteers:

Well, I think you've got to have some people who are going to champion it, you know, they're the volunteers, the ones who are excited by it, the ones who want to do it.... the conscripts were people that I did talk to individually, and did, really show them how it could be beneficial to them as well, so they weren't total doubters. They just needed that extra encouragement. (Head teacher, School 1)

In the initial interviews both Head teachers stressed the importance of having a good balance of volunteers in the mix in order to provide the necessary momentum to overcome the inertia

stemming from having the more sceptical conscripts to the CBC team. In a follow-up interview with the Head teacher at School 2 the discussion around conscription of teachers to the team had become more pragmatic in tone indicating, perhaps, that it wasn't viewed as an effective recruitment strategy for the longer term staffing of the teaching team. Where teachers had agreed to engage with the new initiative the provision of what one school leader referred to as an "exit route" was seen as important, so that teachers did not feel compelled to remain in the CBC team simply because the Head teacher felt that they should. This Head teacher went on to say:

We learned from hindsight that you cannot conscript people into this team, in a sense, any more than probably you could conscript people into any sort of initiative if they were only there because they felt it was their own survival at stake rather than the needs of the project or the initiative and ultimately the learners. (Head teacher, School 2)

For teachers who become settled on the team the tension of working as a subject specialist in their departmental team as well as being a member of a multidisciplinary team was an ongoing challenge. CBC Leaders were cognisant of this tension and had a realistic attitude about the primacy of the subject department in the secondary school and, by comparison, the subsidiary position of the CBC:

It's difficult to organise because everybody who teaches [named CBC] is a specialist in another subject and the other subjects are the priority subjects and [named CBC] is a secondary subject...if you have your department meeting it will be your first department and then we fit the [named CBC] department meeting in as and when, it tends to be a lot more informal. (CBC Leader, School 2)

Explicit reference to the CBC as a department, as made above, was relatively rare, but occurred most in Schools 1 & 2 which were those with the longest running competence-based curricula suggesting that time to establish the curriculum allowed members of the CBC team at least to explicitly refer to themselves as a department even though, as expressed in the quote above, there is a sense in which the CBC is seen as subsidiary to the set of subject departments.

- ***Issue 3: Championing the competence-based curriculum - settling the sceptics within and beyond the team***

The need to champion the competence-based curriculum within the teaching team and beyond to colleagues in subject departments was perceived as a crucial enterprise in establishing and developing the CBC and giving it status in the life of the school. In School 4, where the CBC was confined within rather than cutting across the subject discourse, the tension was more between managing the competencies alongside the need to maintain a high volume of subject content in each lesson:

I think the biggest struggle we've had is that the competencies were just handed to us and there was nothing to kind of hang them on ... match your competencies to your content so you've got something to hang it on so the students can see it in use (CBC Leader, School 4)

In School 4, with a narrower focus for the CBC purely on the humanities subjects of geography, history and religious education, there was a much stronger focus on subject discipline content, and as a result, we found that the competency discourse played a relatively minor role when compared to the CBC in the other three case study schools. The teachers in School 4 generally felt they preferred the strong content thread throughout their lessons. In an interview one teacher in School 4 parodied settings in which skills development was the dominant focus with a disparaging comment; “Here’s a morning; go and run around and cause chaos”.

By contrast, in the other three case study schools frequent references were made to the need for advocacy for the curriculum in order to win over sceptics, especially those outside the curriculum teaching team. The need to nurture advocates or ‘champions’ for the curriculum, who would extol the benefits for teachers as well as for students, featured in a number of interviews and this was seen as a key task for the CBC Leader:

We are trying to raise our profile in the school with the more conservative elements of the school. I would say this is proper teaching because you actually teach them how to learn... since I've been down here I'm a much better teacher in history than I was previously. (CBC Leader, School 3)

It was also noted that other teachers in the CBC team can act as in this advocacy role especially helping to assuage the concerns and doubts of colleagues in their subject departments:

...unless people are in the [CBC] team they really understand what it is... they might think its project work. I mean I think it's different if you've got members of the department in the team. So English, for example, have, I think science have one, but there must be other subjects that don't have any in the team. (CBC teacher, School 1).

One of the CBC teachers interviewed in School 3 had just been recruited to the curriculum team at the time the study began and admitted to being more of a conscript than a volunteer. The teacher had initially been sceptical of the benefits of the CBC approach, but described being won round by the CBC Leader and other members of the CBC team acting as advocates for the initiative. Nevertheless concerns remained for this teacher regarding the need to adjust to the new discourse of the CBC and the move away from the familiar discourse of the subject:

I think it's going to be challenging because at the moment, I teach my subject it's my subject skills and it's some something that I really love to teach. (CBC teacher, School 3)

At a subsequent interview this teacher was still rationalising involvement in the CBC in terms of the benefit to subject specialist teaching, suggesting that the vertical discourse of the subject is still dominant in the view of self as a teacher. Adjusting to the new discourse of the CBC requires support from the Curriculum Leader, and further required advocacy for the competence-based approach.

...it's made me do some things slightly different, and it's a challenge, and sometimes I don't like challenge ...I think it's going to be very [pause] quite good for me because it will just extend my skills, the skills I learn down here I can transfer to Year 8 and 9 so for the department so it's actually beneficial ... at the back of my mind I was thinking 'well, maybe one day try it out, erm, I think it forced my hand a little bit.
(CBC teacher, School 3)

Occasionally even well-established teachers within the CBC team can be reluctant to make the necessary break from the strong discourse of the subject discipline in order to embrace the agreed approach within the horizontal discourse of the CBC. This can be a considerable source of tension within the team. According to the Head teacher in School 1 these teachers had to be eased out of the CBC teacher team.

Such support from the Head teacher is viewed as critical to giving the CBC a distinct profile in the life of the school. In Schools 1 and 2 the current Head teacher had provided the initial driving force for implementation of the competence-based curriculum, and their names were mentioned frequently by both teachers and the Curriculum Leaders during interviews. It was clear that purposeful communication of the initial vision by the Head teacher to the wider staff body did much for raising the status of the initiative during the critical stage of implementation. Nevertheless, sometimes the Head teacher's singular authority was required, particularly during the crucial implementation phase, to ensure that initial criticism was not allowed to develop into a cynical culture which might undermine the competence-based approach as this long but insightful quotation reveals:

The bit that I think is really significant, particularly back in the early days, was the perception of other staff in the school of [named CBC], and there was a very, very small group of staff who would refer to it as "Oh well, that's simple minds" and other stupid throw-away comments. ... that quickly got eroded when I think first of all those people were chased down. I didn't let comments, and neither did anybody else within the school, let comments go like that unchallenged ... if leadership is completely and utterly committed to it, people are pretty brave or pretty stupid, as the case may be, if they openly try to undermine, you know, what I consider to be fundamental. (Head teacher, School 2)

In a similar role the Head teacher from School 1 was required to settle the anxieties of the CBC team as they stepped out of the familiar confines of the subject discourse and into the unfamiliar territory of the horizontal discourse of the competence-based approach. For the teachers, their expectation of what constitutes effective teaching is framed by a view of

themselves as teachers of their subject and perhaps only the Head teacher can effectively cut across that expectation.

It's not about content, it's about process, but they [the teachers] couldn't work to that as they were so schooled in the National Curriculum. I told them to scrap the National Curriculum; to put it in the bin. They believed me and they ditched the National Curriculum. (Head teacher, School 1)

Research question: What are the issues and tensions faced by senior leaders and competence-based curriculum (CBC) leaders in developing a position and identity for CBC leaders among their fellow middle leaders?

- ***Issue 4: Legitimising the position of the CBC leader – searching for value and purpose in the CBC***

As discussed above CBC leaders regularly found themselves working to foster legitimacy for the CBC among their colleagues, especially Heads of Department. This was often linked to the CBC leaders seeking to position themselves within the leadership hierarchy of the school. This turned out to be no small task as some of the CBC leaders obviously didn't see themselves on the same level of authority as the Heads of Department in their schools, and even their colleagues teaching on the CBC tended to refer to them more in terms as a principal member of the team rather than as a leader in the same mantle as a Head of Department.

Teacher: *We don't have a hierarchy down here, do we, really? He [CBC leader] does lead us and we do defer to him.*

Interviewer: *Is that relationship different when you talk about being the Head of a Department?*

Teacher: *I don't think necessarily from our point of view, but I have the suspicion that other people looking in at our department might think that the way that he is might not be the same as the Head of Maths or the Head of English or whoever.*

(CBC teacher, School 3)

CBC leaders were clear that a key part of their role was to raise the profile of the curriculum through regular communication and collaboration with their subject leader colleagues. The examples of the ongoing dialogue with subject leaders offered by CBC leaders tended to be focused on subject content, in the search for appropriate contexts in which to set the development of competencies. Even this offer to draw more of a particular subject discipline into the teaching of the CBC needed to be handled sensitively, particularly with subject leaders that were still quite raw about losing curriculum time to the CBC.

Subject leaders were not always forthcoming in their response to the CBC leaders' attempts at collaboration. Where responses were given it seems the key principal was to avoid the

chance of unnecessarily duplicating or even undermining the work of subject departments. This seems to suggest a clear hierarchy of authority, with the needs of subject departments having priority over those of the CBC.

CBC leader: *We had some consultation with the Heads of Department and said, "Look, we're going to do these various topics and areas. If there's anything you want us particularly not to do because it's a key point of your student work then we won't do that. Likewise if there is something or an area that you think might be useful if we could do something on then we're happy to have a look at it and see if it will fit in because for us the topic's immaterial".*

Interviewer: *What sort of responses did they give you to those questions?*

CBC leader: *To be honest with you half the time we got no response.*

(CBC leader, School 3)

The Curriculum Leader in School 1 was a long standing member of staff and who had held a subject leadership position in the school in the past and who was currently responsible for KS3 learning as well as being the CBC leader. Perhaps unsurprisingly this CBC leader described meetings with Heads of Department that seemed to be on a more equitable basis than the two less experienced CBC leaders in Schools 2 and 3. Nevertheless the focus of the discussions with Heads of Department still seemed to be driven by the content-based subject discourse.

Relationships with subject departments are particularly strong where a colleague with some degree of responsibility for subject leadership also happens to be part of the CBC team, as is the case in School 1. In these circumstances the professional dialogue is more likely to align with the horizontal discourse of the competence-based approach:

The Head of Key Stage 3 science is in [the CBC], and when you look at what we cover, although it's not content based, it never is, you still want to make sure there's a balance. ...I mean, I still think it could be better, but I think the better links with departments has helped and also how we assess, assessment for learning has got a lot better over the past couple of years. (Curriculum Leader, School 1)

The establishment of formal assessment procedures was a key feature of CBC development in all four schools. This was an issue to which considerable meeting and planning time had been devoted in Schools 1, 2 and 3. CBC leaders realised that being seen to be developing rigorous procedures for assessment could further enhance credibility and lend legitimacy to the CBC.

I think the main fear from those other departments, or their main problem, is that they don't see if there's any academic rigour involved... We know it's here and when they start using it and when they come down they see that there is academic rigour there. ...The fact that we'll be able to pass on to them clearly defined levels of

progress and evidence to back that progress up, that will get the last few doubters around. (CBC leader, School 3)

Discussion and conclusions

The highly departmentalised nature of secondary schools presents a challenging environment in which to establish a multidisciplinary approach to the learning such as the CBC. The strong discourse of many subjects in the secondary curriculum leads to well established recognition and realisation rules for what constitutes valued learning and teaching and this gives authority to HoDs which lead these subjects. The more diffuse horizontal discourse of the CBC can lead to a struggle to compete for recognition and resources unless key advocates raise the status of the CBC.

Glover et al. (1999, 334) found that senior management's understanding of departmental leaders' work to be pivotal to its effectiveness. This appears to be the case in Schools 1, 2 and 3, where a multidisciplinary approach was adopted, the Head teacher's role is crucial in the implementation stage, in terms of setting the vision, positioning the CBC within the wider context of the secondary curriculum and selecting the initial group of staff to take responsibility for learning and teaching, most especially in selecting the CBC leader.

Scarcity of resources can also be an issue for the CBC, especially the need for time and high quality staff. For the CBC, however, the advocacy required relates more to defending the rationale for its very existence perhaps due to the 'power disparity' present (Bennet 2006, 9) in the relationship between the CBC leader and other HoDs. In two of the case study schools it was found that the Head teacher had a crucial role to play in providing advocacy for the curriculum and engaged in the recruitment of the initial team of staff, described in each case as a mixture of conscripts and volunteers. Careful consideration on the part of senior leaders is required, in collaboration with subject leaders, to explicitly position the CBC within the departmentalised structure of the secondary school and this could help considerably to elicit acceptance for the initiative. In some of the case study schools it was clear that the Head teacher also acts as a champion for the CBC leader, especially in clarifying their position, role and status within the middle leadership level to teachers within the CBC team and to subject HoDs and other middle leaders which also accords with Bennet's view (2006).

Wise and Bennet (2003, 23) found that leaders operating in cross-curricular roles report having lower levels of influence in decisions about curriculum and resources and "are likely to have to prove legitimacy before they are able to influence decisions in another area of the curriculum". While Glover et al. found that many subject leaders "...did not consider that their role extended beyond that of advocacy of their subject" (1999, 336). CBC leaders in each of the case study schools recognised that part of their role was raising the status the CBC to their HoD colleagues through seeking collaboration to contextualise the development of competencies. CBC teachers also have a key advocacy role to play, especially championing the CBC back in their subject departments, and also with new members joining the team who may be sceptical of the approach, especially if they considered themselves to be

more a conscript than a volunteer. Bennet (2006) refers to the importance of advocacy in the role of middle managers in secondary schools. The focus there is on the defence of the subject discipline with the HoD needing to ensure sufficient material resources are available for department and, in doing so, legitimising their authority to members of the departmental team. While advocates in the form of 'champions' for the CBC will clearly be required at the time of implementation, throughout the life of the CBC regular time needs to be given over to developing a planned approach to continuing advocacy for the curriculum. The sustaining role of the Head teacher appears to be crucial to ensuring that this effort is effective.

The strong subject content focus in secondary schools presents a considerable challenge to establishing the authority of the CBC leader as the CBC lacks the strong discourse of the specialist body of knowledge and subject-specific lexicon which all serve to provide points of recognition and identity for the subject disciplines. This lack of points of reference for subject teachers and HoDs makes it hard to establish the multidisciplinary approach to the CBC as a department in its own right and, by implication, to offer recognition of the authority of the CBC leader. This creates a challenge for the CBC leader in establishing an identity for themselves, both in terms of their relationship with other HoDs, and also with the teachers in their team who are often also subject teachers relating to other departments. The HoD has traditionally been seen as having outstanding specialist knowledge in their subject discipline (TTA 1996; TTA 1998) and it is clear from the responses of CBC leaders in this study that the cognate version of specialist knowledge in the CBC is harder to define. Busher (2005b) also reports that a key concern for middle leaders is concerned with developing a sense of self and agency in their colleagues which presumably assumes they are able to establish that identity for themselves. Bennet et al. (2003) point out that the authority of subject leaders within their department tends to be vested in their competence as teachers and also in their knowledge as the superior subject specialist, rather than simply by virtue of their title or position. They point to the research of Witziers et al. (1999) in the Netherlands which concluded that the key discussions and decision-making in subject departments tends to be focused far more on the content of teaching than on effective teaching strategies or teacher development which were issues which came, arguably, more clearly to the fore in the work of CBC leaders in the case study schools.

The expectation that those in HoD roles are expert practitioners (Turner and Bolam 1998) is perhaps more challenging to establish for CBC leaders than for their subject leader colleagues. Turner and Bolam (1998) develop a six-part categorisation of knowledge proposed by Eraut (1994) which could help to define the knowledge that CBC leaders bring and develop in their role if this wider knowledge set was given status, in particular the *knowledge of educational practice*, *conceptual knowledge* (which Turner and Bolam view as operationalising professional learning) and *process knowledge* (p. 383), while Houlton (2002) refers to

pedagogical knowledge, subject knowledge and leadership knowledge. These alternative types of practice knowledge would need themselves to be given position and status similar to that accorded to subject knowledge in order to benefit recognition of the CBC and the CBC leader, so there is a danger that this may create a vicious rather than a virtuous circle in fostering the identity of the CBC leader.

We did observe that, in order to counter the crisis of identity for the CBC leaders, CBC teacher teams have turned to other elements of teaching and learning which provide clear points of contact with the established subject disciplines, by developing detailed, formal and rigorous approaches to assessment. Whitty et al. (1994) discuss the potential for formal assessment to also help provide students with the necessary recognition to be able to establish the legitimacy of cross-curricular learning within the subject dominated framework. Busher and Harris (1999) also note that status of a department is often based, at least in part, on the academic and technical performance of the students it teaches. In the case study schools it seems that assessment processes help to provide recognition and realisation rules for both teachers and students working within the CBC, and, at the same time, to boost the status of the curriculum in the eyes of sceptical colleagues outside the team. It is crucial, however, to develop principles for this assessment data to be used formatively as students progress beyond the year/years in which the CBC features and that efforts are invested to ensure that the assessment has currency with teachers outside the CBC team.

Ideally, the CBC leader needs to be given opportunities for continuing professional development to enhance her/his capacity to play a high profile role in development of the competence-based approach throughout the main curriculum and thus be viewed as the specialist in this area well beyond the bounds of the CBC teacher team. Harris et al (2001) conducted interviews with middle leaders as a follow up to a survey of the extent of subject leader training in England and Wales. They found that focused CPD helped middle leaders to become more confident in their knowledge of their role and also in becoming better advocates of their department among their colleagues in leadership positions. It may not be easy to locate provision of effective professional development for CBC leaders as much of what is on offer external to the school will be focused along the traditional pastoral and subject based middle leadership roles. It is perhaps the networking role described by Simkins (2005), with its challenge of crossing organisational boundaries, which fits the CBC leader best and perhaps their identity lies in developing their own social capital as networkers within the school in terms of the development of high quality learning and teaching that transcends boundaries between subjects and the low permeability that Hargreaves and Macmillan (1992) refer to.

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