Head Teachers and a Changing TAFE

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Abstract

Change in Technical and Further Education (TAFE) is being driven by government initiatives that must be operationalised at the College level. Head Teachers are the frontline managers who have to ensure that their sections are responsive to the changes while also meeting the educational requirements of their traditional student base. This research was designed to explore how Head Teachers are managing within this change-focused environment by examining the reflections of a number of Head Teachers in one Institute of TAFE in NSW. The results of a content analysis of interview data are presented with the intention of better understanding the experiences of people in these positions within TAFE.

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Introduction

Vocational Education and Training (VET) policy and practice is constantly changing in line with a new vocationalism that emphasises the contribution of all educational institutions to national economic imperatives. In this way it has become very closely aligned with microeconomic reforms aimed at addressing Australia's balance of payments problems by enhancing the productivity and internal competitiveness of Australian industry (Billett, Cooper, Hayes and Parker, 1997).

Chappell (1999, p 11) has argued, though, that while TAFE staff can relate to the new discourses of vocationalism they "continue to identify with an institution constructed by the discourses of industry skills development, liberal education and public service". Chappell (1999) also contends that the new discourses of economic rationalism, which construct a radically different organisation with different purposes, values and interests than those used to construct public sector institutions, have little meaning for teachers in their teaching lives. Randle and Brady (1997) and Elliott (1996) also recognised the tensions created for professionals whose philosophical basis is predicated on pedagogic values. They felt there was a tension between achieving dual economic and social goals and between defending pedagogic values while promoting the managerial bottom line. Head Teachers in TAFE have typically been promoted from within the ranks of teachers and originally entered an organisation that favoured social goals above economic considerations. New skills and knowledge, it is argued, are needed by teachers who now occupy management positions (Exworthy and Halford 1999; Khoo 2002).

The reforms to education necessitated by the moves to a new vocationalism, economic rationalism and corporate managerialism have resulted in educational change becoming almost a constant (Dinham and Scott, 1998, p 2). These rapid changes have meant that staff face more challenges than ever before (Harris, Simons, Hill, Smith, Pearce, Blakeley, Choy and Snewin, 2001, p 1). Some of the significant developments under vocational education and training's direction include changes to the National Training Framework, the rollout of training packages, increasingly flexible delivery and the use of new technology. A survey, though, of the sector's key stakeholders "suggests that only about half of the current VET workforce possess the skills to meet the challenges" (Harris et al 2001, p 2).

A study in the latter half of 2000 by the Australian Education Union found that "[f]unding cuts and constant change/restructure are two of the key changes that have had the most impact on the work of TAFE teachers" (Kronemann, 2001, p 1). Other changes highlighted by this study as impacting on the work of TAFE staff were reporting and accountability requirements, cuts to teaching staff,

changes in delivery modes, curriculum changes, reduced job security/greater casualisation, training packages, cuts to support staff, technological change, changing student clientele and workplace training and assessment. In fact, 86% of the 900 staff interviewed said their workload had increased or significantly increased and about the same number said that stress at work had increased or significantly increased.

Studies of school heads of department (Dinham, Brennan, Collier, Deece and Mulford, 2000; Connors, 1999; Brown and Rutherford, 1998), course leaders (Paterson, 1999), English school headteachers (Grace, 1995), subject leaders (Glover and Miller, 1999) and department and faculty heads (Earley and Fletcher-Campbell, 1989) found that, while these managers are a driving force in the successful implementation of change in their institutions, they are very much preoccupied with routine administration and have little time to deal with the demands on their position let alone reflect on the strategic importance of this position. Many managers also felt that their own teaching suffered because of extraneous pressures and demands thus undermining their 'core business'. According to Stace and Dunphy (2001) the leadership of change is one of the key requirements of today's managers. To be able to lead change successfully, though, requires the delegation of operational responsibilities and a commensurate shift from the bureaucratic role of an operational manager to the (often unfamiliar) role of change agent and change leader.

High quality leadership must be seen as critical in today's vocational education and training sector given the major changes occurring in the sector. Some would argue (Mitchell, Young and Wood, 2001; Hopkins, Lambrecht, Moss and Finch, 1998) that, to respond to this rapidly changing environment, capable managers and quality leadership is even more important than at any time in the past. It is also imperative that a research agenda, which seeks to gain a knowledge of how managers are coping in this change-focused environment, involves an understanding of the work context of these managers.

Project aim

This project arose from earlier research on the management styles of women in TAFE (Rice, 2000), the world of work of TAFE Institute Managers (Rice, 2001) and from the work of Dinham et al (2000) on school Heads of Department. A lack of research into the role of middle and first line management in education prompted this research with the aim of discovering how these managers cope within their current change-focused environment.

The participants in the study are Head Teachers who are located in Colleges of TAFE within one Institute in NSW. These Head Teachers are responsible for the operation of a section that comprises one or more discipline areas. The role of the Head Teacher is both educational and administrative. Head Teachers in the Institute researched have two reporting lines – one to their Deputy College Director for all College matters and a functional line of control to their Director in the Business Development area of the Institute office for all matters related to both mainstream and commercial course delivery.

The research design was guided by the following questions:

- 1. Why do Head Teachers aspire to the position?
- 2. How well are Head Teachers prepared for the role?
- 3. What are the elements of Head Teacher workloads?
- 4. What do Head Teachers like most and least about their work?
- 5. How would Head Teachers prefer to allocate their time and effort?
- 6. How do Head Teachers develop their leadership style?
- 7. How do Head Teachers contribute to College and Institute decision-making?
- 8. What are the professional development needs of Head Teachers and how are these being addressed?
- 9. What changes, over the past few years, have impacted on Head Teachers?
- 10. What are the future aspirations of Head Teachers?

Method

In the Institute being studied there are seven colleges with approximately 90 Head Teachers. The Head Teachers in five of these colleges have been interviewed at this stage with participation in the study being voluntary.

The qualitative paradigm has been used for the study because it is concerned with understanding the behaviour of participants from their own frame of reference (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998, p 2). Using interviews, an attempt has been made to determine how different people make sense of or give meaning to their working lives as Head Teachers.

A semi-structured interview schedule was used comprising demographic items and thirteen open-ended questions. The aim of the questions was to take participants through their career from an initial attraction to the job to their thoughts about a future in TAFE. The questions on the interview schedule align with the research questions noted above.

All participants in the study were contacted by e-mail and mutually acceptable interview times were organised. Both face-to-face and telephone interviews were conducted with participants depending on their preference and their geographic location. Interviews took from 35 to 180 minutes with an average of 70 minutes. Notes, including direct quotations, were made during the course of the interviews. Typing of the notes occurred immediately following the interviews. These typed transcripts were returned to participants for verification and to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. The data obtained was then coded, with categories from this open coding reflecting the issues raised by the participants in the study.

Results and Discussion

Of the twenty-seven people interviewed at this stage, fourteen have been female and thirteen male. The average age of participants is 49 with a range of 36 to 57 years. The participants have an average total of 20 years teaching (whether in the school or TAFE system) and 9 years at their current college. They have had an average of 8 years in Head Teacher positions with 6 years in their current location.

Why did they become Head Teachers?

Interviews with the participants revealed a number of reasons for becoming a Head Teacher. The desire to have more input into the operation of a section along with having some control, power or influence were reasons voiced by more than half of the participants. While many also felt it was a natural career move, interestingly a larger number applied for the position because they did not want someone else in the job.

The major influences on seeking to be a Head Teacher came from other TAFE staff including senior managers and colleagues. Many had also acted in the position or believed they had the knowledge and skills to do the job because of previous work experience.

The majority of those interviewed felt they would remain as a Head Teacher until retirement with most of these stating that it was their preferred future in TAFE. Six of the participants specifically stated that they would not move into an Institute Manager position (which is their next level of direct promotion). Two participants said they would prefer the Head Teacher role if they could go back five to ten years and another two would rather go back to teaching.

Obviously, remaining as a Head Teacher is not a problem in itself but it is a concern that so few expressed any desire to move into promotions positions within TAFE. It is also a concern that a number of those interviewed identified a lack of career or succession planning in TAFE that would ensure there were teachers, who had been appropriately developed, to move into Head Teacher positions in the future. This is particularly important given the increasing casualisation of the workforce and the consequent loss of full-time teaching staff. "Where", as Dinham et al (2000, p 34) questioned "will the next generation of such leaders come from?"

What do Head Teachers do?

The major elements of the workload of Head Teachers comprised dealing with student and staff issues; paperwork and administration; planning in terms of programming, timetabling etc.; teaching; and communicating via the telephone, email and in meetings. There were a number of comments about the variety and scope of Head Teachers' activities with many bemoaning the difficulty of obtaining some sense of completion of the tasks they engage in. The finding that Head Teachers' activities are often fragmented and that continual exchanges of information result in an inability to concentrate on the core business of the position is replicated in other research on educational leaders (Dinham et al 2000; Dinham and Scott, 1998; Pettit and Hind, 1992; Eagley and Fletcher-Campbell, 1989). The consensus of these researchers appears to be that it is extremely difficult for managers in education to become agents of change if they are focused on this containment or reactive role which is marked by a "variety of tasks and fragmentation of time through attendance at meetings, sporadic conversations with people, ... response to official correspondence and ad hoc data gathering" (Pettit and Hind, 1992, p 125).

Working with staff and students was, by far, the most enjoyable aspect of the Head Teacher role. Other satisfying elements included working with industry, influencing sectional operations, introducing new ideas and innovations, and planning and organising the work of the section. While the majority of the participants enjoyed the educational aspects of the job, eighteen wanted changes to their teaching load and preparation time for classes. They believed the only way they could do justice to their administrative and educational roles was to reduce the number of hours they spent in teaching. One said:

It's becoming a job where you can't do what you want to do – interact with the students. It's becoming a pain to teach. It's not the lack of enjoyment of teaching – there's just too many other things to do.

More than half of the Head Teachers found the increased reliance on performance targets such as ASCH (annual student contact hours) and dollar budgets to be one of the worst aspects of their work. This requirement has resulted from the introduction of competition into the vocational education market and the commensurate increase in contestability of funding.

Tension between the roles of educator and manager (Chappell, 1999; Randle and Brady, 1997; Elliott, 1996) was certainly evident in the Head Teachers interviewed. The majority of the Head Teachers expressed their love of teaching but were concerned that they also needed to be part of the new, competitive vocational education and training sector. Most seem to have adopted a position of strategic compliance to their new role by "maintaining a commitment to educational and other professional values in support of student care and collegiality" (Gleeson and Shain, 1999b, 1999b, p 488) rather than adopting a managerial discourse of professionalism. The tension between these discourses, though, manifests itself in worries about a lack of resources to provide programs and the need to run commercial courses to gain a share of contestable funds. One Head Teacher reflected:

There are priorities you have to deal with – the educational role and the administration, budget role. They are in conflict. You either lose educational quality or you are told off for spending too much.

The main concern of the Head Teachers, though, appears to be a lack of time to actually become involved in anything other than the day-to-day operational aspects of their role. Most of those interviewed felt that they were not doing justice to either of their roles – whether educational or managerial. The Head Teachers felt they were spending far too much time on administrative matters with one observing:

I just feel like I'm pushing paper around in circles and anyone can do that.

Casualisation of the workforce resulting in many sections suffering a loss of full time teaching positions was another difficulty faced by participants in the study. The lack of appropriate clerical support compounded the problem, with the Head Teachers finding it difficult to delegate lower level tasks when there were no staff to delegate to. In fact, three of the Head Teachers believed that they could not do a lot of things differently unless they had more support to do so.

The loss of control over their time has emerged as a major theme in this research on Head Teachers. This finding is similar to that of many others who have studied education systems other than TAFE including Dinham et al (2000), Connors (1999), Owens (1998), Brown and Rutherford (1998) and Eagley and Fletcher-Campbell (1989). It is vital, though, "if an education service is to go about its prime business of developing, delivering and enhancing learning programs, that staff don't become buried in useless information and calls on their time" (Scott, 1999, p 95). According to Scott (1999, p 100) if more responsibility is given to people 'at the coalface' for particular functions "then parallel attention will have to be given to restructuring their work in order to allow them adequate time to carry out this additional work".

Blase (1982, cited in Adams, Heath-Camp and Camp, 1999, p 140) found that "teacher stress increases when teachers believe they lose control of their time". A number of the Head Teachers, throughout their interviews, mentioned stress and the need to find ways of relaxing. The increased workload and constant change facing the Head Teachers should be addressed to ensure that they are supported in implementing change and in dealing with the constant stream of administration and paperwork that appears to be consuming the majority of their work days.

The fact that many of the Head Teachers are beset by short and unrealistic deadlines has led them to believe that others have little understanding of their job. This perceived lack of understanding ranges from senior management through to clerical staff in the administration areas of TAFE. The following quote is illustrative:

One of the worst things about being a Head Teacher is people – the expectations that are placed on you with very short notice. It seems to be a consistent theme.

According to Elliott (1996, p 92) this perception could lead Head Teachers to be dilatory in their observation of paper systems and to withdraw their cooperation. In fact, a number of those interviewed said that they would rather be late with their paperwork (which they perceive as often unnecessary) than disadvantage their classes or their teachers by withdrawing time from their core responsibility (education).

What is Head Teacher involvement in decision-making and change?

The major changes impacting on the Head Teachers are perceived to be the move to a more competitive vocational education and training sector with the subsequent imposition of performance targets; requirements for changes to curriculum content and modes of delivery; reorganisation of the institute structure; decreases in government funding; casualisation of the workforce; and an increase in administrative workload.

It is disturbing to note that, during this period of continual change, nine of the Head Teachers felt they had little or no involvement in college decision-making and change and twenty two Head Teachers perceived their involvement at the institute level to be little or none at all. One actually said:

I doubt most people at the Institute realise I'm alive.

Those Head Teachers who felt they had some impact at a college level cited senior and other staff meetings as their main medium of influence.

Half of the Head Teachers did not want to alter their involvement in either college or institute decision-making citing a lack of time or commitment for doing so. The other half would like to alter their involvement especially in the decision-making of the Business Development area with one saying:

Decisions are made by people not doing any teaching.

In organisations operating under conditions of ambiguity and uncertainty, such as educational institutions, the quality of decisions is improved by "drawing on the knowledge and experience of key people" (Owens 1998, p 283). The success of TAFE will increase if management is able to secure a sense of ownership and commitment from Head Teachers. This will only occur if they are involved in the decisions that affect them and if there is a genuine system of consultation and negotiation. Involving the Head Teachers in more of the higher level decision-making, especially that relating to change, should not only motivate the Head Teachers but should improve the change process through utilisation of their innovative ideas. This involvement needs to be tempered with the knowledge that half of the Head Teachers did not, in fact, want more involvement in these processes.

What leadership style is exhibited by the Head Teachers?

The Head Teachers interviewed discussed their leadership style in terms of 'people' management. They discussed being consultative, team players, open, supportive, empowering, facilitative, caring, warm, friendly, inclusive, sharing, fair, democratic, emotional and humanistic. Eight Head Teachers mentioned that they could be autocratic when necessary while two others said they could operate as laissez faire managers occasionally.

The majority of the Head Teachers were influenced in their leadership style by the people around them including TAFE staff, family members and other people they came into contact with during their lives. These role models had both positive and negative impacts on the leadership style development of the Head Teachers. Interestingly nine of the Head Teachers discussed the importance of the environment, their own personality and their life experiences in developing their leadership style. Ten Head Teachers had been influenced by their previous industry experience and seven felt that their education and reading experiences had impacted on their leadership style.

The role of the Head Teacher today is about much more than being a 'good' teacher. More attention has to be paid to budgeting control and forecasting, performance indicators and effective working relationships. Effective leaders in TAFE, as in any business enterprise, are now required to be collaborative

individuals (Limerick and Cunnington, 1993), reflective practitioners (Grace, 1995) and transformational leaders (Parry, 1996; Callan, 2001) who critically think about the culture of their organisation and the ways this culture may need to change. The transformational leader in education is envisaged as one who communicates excitement, originality and freshness to the organisation (Rice, 2000) and one who manages and leads change (Callan, 2001).

The expectation that Head Teachers be consultative, transformative, reflective leaders and decision-makers who are able to manage change is difficult to achieve if they are not involved in the higher level decisions that are taken within their college and their institute. The problem is compounded with the intensification of the workload of Head Teachers, which leads to a lack of time to consult with anyone outside their immediate workgroup and a lack of time to critically reflect on their own practices.

What are the development needs of the Head Teacher?

More than two thirds of those interviewed reported that they felt prepared or fairly prepared for the role of Head Teacher, with the remainder feeling either unprepared or not as prepared as they could be. While many had attended internal or external staff developments to help them in their role, they admitted that the staff developments usually occurred after they began performing the job of Head Teacher. The majority of participants cited self-initiated or on-the-job preparation (including mentors) for their role as Head Teacher. As a result of this preparation most of the participants felt their first appointment to a position of Head Teacher met their expectations.

The requirement for development of management skills and computer skills (to deal with the computerised systems in TAFE) emerged as two of the main needs of the Head Teachers interviewed. A number of participants also reflected on their need for technical and educational development in updating skills in their discipline area or in dealing with changes occurring in the educational environment in general. All of the Head Teachers in this study were promoted from teaching positions with only a minority having any prior management experience or qualifications. This gap in their experience must be developed with basic management competencies, especially in the area of change management, thus allowing them to better cope in a market focused vocational education and training sector (Anderson, 1996; Exworthy and Halford, 1999; Gleeson and Shain, 1999a, 1999b; Simons and Harris, 1998). While a number of the Head Teachers praised the current focus on Head Teacher development within their Institute (which focuses on change management), a majority still felt their needs were not being met or were only partly being met.

Future preparation programs should target key leader attributes such as those identified by Finch, Gregson and Faulkner (1991) and Callan (2001) then apply these attributes in realistic settings. There is also need to develop realistic case study experiences to use in courses, workshops and seminars. To manage change, Hopkins et al (1998) recommend on-the-job experiences including an exposure to positive role models while Elliott (1996) stresses the importance of formalising reflective practice.

What future do the Head Teachers see for themselves?

Many of the people who participated in this study expressed the view that there was nowhere to go in the educational role for Head Teachers. Once they are promoted beyond their current position, Head Teachers move away from any teaching role and move onto administrative conditions. With the large majority of Head Teachers clearly obtaining their satisfaction from their role as teachers (albeit suffering stress and guilt when they cannot prepare for classes as well as they would like) it becomes problematic for them to move to a purely administrative role.

Many Head Teachers would like to see their role addressed to take into consideration the many changes that have impacted since the move to a new national training agenda. They would like to see support in the form of clerical assistance, which would remove many of their mundane duties and free their time to concentrate on the strategic, change-focused aspects of their positions. At present the only way the Head Teachers can visualise achieving their managerial goals is a reduction of their teaching role – a role most would rather retain.

Conclusion

The position of Head Teacher is undergoing a radical transformation. Much of the traditional role of the Head Teacher in terms of delivering educational quality is being pushed aside to allow time to undertake administrative duties. This study has found that Head Teachers are very much preoccupied with routine administration and crisis management leaving them little time for strategic or reflective thinking. The constraints of time have reduced the influence of Head Teachers over their major concern, which is the quality of teaching and learning in their discipline area. The challenge for Head Teachers is to ensure change occurs but that educational quality is maintained. They also have to reconcile their traditional social philosophy with the managerialism of vocational education and its new ideals and values.

There is a need to rethink the role and duties of the Head Teacher to reduce their administrative workload and allow them to have an input into decision-making, leadership and change at both the College and Institute level.

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