

MIDDLE MANAGEMENT IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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The development of posts of responsibility in Irish primary schools since the 1970s and procedures for appointment which were last revised in 1997 are described. To investigate the operation of the system, principal teachers in the Cork area were asked to respond to a postal questionnaire. Large majorities of respondents viewed the recently revised procedures as an improvement and agreed that having participated in inservice education relating to educational administration should be a factor in the selection of teachers for posts. However, over three-quarters also felt that seniority should be a factor. In fact, in a majority of schools which had a post to offer in the first round of allocations, the most senior candidate was appointed. Concerns that arise from the operation of the revised procedures are presented.

Recent developments relating to posts of responsibility in Irish schools start from a position in which primary schools were much less complicated work places, and had fewer pupils, than is the case today. Each school had a principal teacher, and larger schools had one or more vice-principals. Apart from these, there were no promoted positions in the primary sector.

The first posts of responsibility were introduced in the 1970s, as a consequence of the Ryan Tribunal on Teachers' Salaries (1968). The Tribunal examined the pay, working conditions, and promotional prospects of teachers, both at first and second level. Prior to this, primary teachers, and indeed teachers in technical schools, had been paid less than their counterparts in secondary schools, and this was a bone of contention. Primary school teachers had been campaigning for a common basic scale, a move which was contested by second-level teachers on the grounds that secondary teachers needed a degree as a basic qualification, while this condition did not apply to teachers in primary and technical schools. The Tribunal recommended a common basic pay scale for all teachers; it also proposed promotion in the form of posts of responsibility, with appropriate remuneration. It further recommended that these posts should be available in equal numbers to lay and religious teachers in religious-run schools. This was a very important recommendation, given that many schools were administered by religious.

The recommendations of the Ryan report, together with subsequent negotiations, led to the introduction of the Grade A and Grade B posts of responsibility in 1973. This proved to be a development that would favour second-level schools to a greater extent than first-level schools, as the number of posts being allocated to the school would be calculated on a points system, points being calculated on the number of pupils enrolled, with older pupils being worth more points.

All schools would have a principal teacher, but the Points Rating of the school would determine the level of a principal's allowance. To qualify for the appointment of a vice-principal, a school would require a Points Rating of 150 points or over, and the level of allowance would also be determined by the points rating. The number of Grade A and Grade B posts (if any) that a school would be entitled to would also be determined by its points rating.

The first posts of responsibility were allocated in the 1970s, but this made no difference to a sizable number of primary schools, as they were too small to qualify for any post.

In an agreement negotiated between the Department of Education, the INTO (Irish National Teachers' Organisation), and the CPSMA (Catholic Primary School Managers' Association), it was recommended that a post of responsibility should be awarded to the applicant longest serving on the staff, all things being equal. The longest serving teacher was defined as the applicant with the longest unbroken contract of permanent employment with the Board of Management. Other managerial bodies such as the Church of Ireland Board of Education, Educate Together, the Methodist Church in Ireland, and COPE Foundation subsequently ratified this agreement, and it became the standard practice for the allocation of posts.

In the years that followed, several concerns relating to posts of responsibility emerged. These were chiefly to do with the nature of the duties to be allocated to the post; the time for performance of these duties; the points system for determining the number of posts; and the seniority issue.

It was up to the individual school principal to decide on the duties that should be allocated to a post holder, and there was no recognized procedure for doing this. Frequently, duties were designed to suit the holder, rather than to match the needs of the school, and varied from 'routine' and even 'trivial' to those with considerable responsibility (Herron, 1985, p. 127). The top ten categories of duties as identified by Herron in order of frequency of occurrence were: audio-visual aids, library, register roll books, yard and break supervision, sports and games, school choir, savings schemes, tours and outings, litter collection and school grounds, and first aid. Other post duties identified ranged from 'watering

plants' and 'responsibility for towels' to ones with weighty responsibility such as 'instrumental music throughout the school, fundraising and art and craft throughout the school' (Herron, 1985, pp. 128-129). Some schools (25% of those surveyed) delegated no extra duties at all to the post holders.

Because of lack of clear Department of Education guidelines, there was no uniformity in the amount of time expected for the performance of the post duties. For some teachers it meant a regular or daily commitment; for others a commitment at a special time of year only; and for some no extra time at all. Financial remuneration, however, was a flat rate allowance for each grade of post.

The points system, which was weighted in favour of older pupils, clearly militated against the creation of posts of responsibility in primary schools as compared to second-level schools, and also meant that infant schools were at a serious disadvantage. Over the years, some little improvement was made. However, a considerable difference remained in the number of posts at primary level as compared to second-level schools.

While in theory, each member of staff was eligible to apply for an advertised post, the general practice was that only the longest serving teacher would apply. Junior teachers were reluctant to challenge the status quo. Very quickly, the post of responsibility came to be considered a long-service reward, a factor that militated against school mobility for teachers. When a teacher other than a principal joined a school, s/he automatically entered at the bottom of the staff in terms of seniority, regardless of years of teaching experience. Apart from the post of principal teacher, all promoted posts were filled from among the teaching staff of a school.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MIDDLE MANAGEMENT

In recent decades, various studies have examined posts of responsibility, and have recommended a more appropriate use of this potential middle-management structure. The Primary Education Review Body was launched by the Department of Education in February 1988. Its terms of reference were to review the primary sector of education, and to report to government. The areas to be encompassed by the Review Body were to include the structures of primary education; demographic trends and their implications; the quality of primary education; and school organization. The curriculum was not to be within its remit, since another body had been set up to review it. The report of the Review Body (1990) looked at the procedures for the allocation of posts of responsibility, and noted 'although suitability for the post is a condition of appointment, in practice the longest serving applicant in the school is almost

invariably appointed' (p. 47). It went on to note that 'in the main the system of promotion on seniority works reasonably well and is generally accepted.' It 'does help to foster a long-term commitment by staff to a particular school and locality.' However, it goes on to point out that 'rigid adherence to the seniority rule is not always in the best interest of the school' (p. 47). It recommended that the primary concern of Boards of Management should be the suitability of the candidate for the post, and that the duties assigned to the post should be reviewed.

In 1991, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development issued its report on policies for education in Ireland in the publication *Reviews of National Policies for Education: Ireland*. It was openly critical of many of the circumstances surrounding the allocation of posts of responsibility. First, it noted the lack of an appropriate middle management structure. 'In a situation where schools should be equipped to cope with new demands, it is regrettable that an effective middle management capability scarcely exists. It may be added that, in the long run, maintaining an undifferentiated structure of school staff detracts from the attractiveness of teaching as a career' (p. 108). On the seniority issue it said that 'it will be necessary to appoint teachers to posts of responsibility in the light of their competence and skills rather than on the ground of seniority alone' (p. 109). While noting the lack of professional training for management, it pointed out that 'It will be necessary to develop among teachers in general an interest in middle management, and to offer appropriate courses during initial training as well as in-service training' (p. 108).

In 1992, the government published its Green Paper *Education for a Changing World*. This discussion document asserted the importance of the existence of a clear career structure for teachers, so that 'on the basis of merit and achievement, they may have reasonable expectations of promotion' (p. 167). This was seen as benefiting the teachers themselves, as well as improving the management of schools. The paper also proposed that appointments be made 'through competition, on the basis of the best-qualified and most competent teacher. Seniority will be just one of the factors considered in the selection process' (p. 168).

Not surprisingly, this proposal was met by a strong reaction from teachers. The INTO (1993), following nationwide seminars and debates among its members, issued its response in which the traditional viewpoint is quite visible in relation to accession to post of responsibility, as well as to the duties to be allocated, and the time for execution of the duties. Other things being equal, the applicant having the longest, continuous unbroken permanent service in a school should be offered a post of responsibility as it becomes available. Substitute

cover should be available in order to allow a teacher undertake duties associated with a post of responsibility as the need arises (pp. 94-95).

The next major educational initiative was the National Education Convention in October 1993, when all the major partners in education held dialogue on the crucial issues affecting the development of education in Ireland. The Secretariat issued the main findings and recommendation of the Convention in its *Report of the National Education Convention* (1994). The report devoted consideration to the question of middle management and posts of responsibility. It noted that, in the past, schools 'were rather less complex institutions, and the management and the management needs were less demanding than is the case at the present time' (p.47). In its view, procedures in this area were unsatisfactory, and 'Boards of Management have limited discretion both in the selection of candidates and in assigning duties to post holders' (p. 48).

The lack of a clearly defined procedure for the selection of post holders, the need to define responsibilities commensurate with the posts in question, and the facility to allow some flexibility so as to match these with the particular needs of the school, were among the defects associated with the system. A general finding was that post holders were unwilling to accept any responsibility for the management of staff in the schools. This did little to relieve the burden on principals (p. 49).

The Convention report noted general agreement that the system was unsatisfactory, and recommended that it should be redesigned to reflect the contemporary management needs of schools. It recommended a complete review of the issue, including the allocation of posts on merit rather than seniority; the abolition of the points system; a review of the responsibilities to be attached to posts; regular review of these duties; that duties were to be professional in nature, and not of a nature that could be filled by technical and administrative staff; appropriate remuneration; reduction in teaching hours to execute duties; and a proper system of training for those who wished to become involved. It also proposed that principals had a major part to play in identifying and encouraging good potential candidates, and that 'once a system has been put in place, the difficulties mentioned at the Convention of matching a candidate's track record to the specification of the position should not be so difficult' (p. 54).

The White Paper on Education, *Charting our Education Future* (1995), was the culmination of a lengthy and broadly based consultation process. Building on the preceding years of debate, it 'outlines policy direction and targets for future development including significant organisational development' (p. ix). It also heralded a major programme of legislation, which culminated with the publication of the Education Bill. The paper quoted liberally from the Report of

the National Educational Convention on the question of middle management, and clearly endorsed its recommendations. It recommended that 'Significant restructuring and redefinition of the duties and responsibility of vice-principals and post-holders will be required in order to align these more closely to the management and instructional needs of schools' (p. 154).

It declared that discussions on a major reorganization of the middle management system would be initiated with the concerned interest groups, with a view to matching the responsibilities of the posts with the needs of the school; providing opportunities for teachers to assume responsibility within the school; and the establishment of selection procedures which would ensure that the most suitable people are appointed, regardless of seniority.

Negotiations on a range of claims relating to service, promotion and retirement of teachers were initiated in 1994 at the Conciliation Council for Teachers. Following intense and heated debate, including a one-day strike in 1995, these claims were finally processed as part of the Programme for Competitiveness and Work (PCW), and details were outlined to primary teachers in a publication issued by the INTO (1996). Teachers claimed increased monetary allowances, as well as improved conditions of employment, promotion and retirement, while the Department of Education looked for increased productivity in return. As part of the PCW, the official side offered pay increases in line with the national rate, as well as many other improved conditions of service, in return for which, in line with national trends, teachers were asked to make certain concessions. A major feature of this development was the attention accorded to management and middle management, which proposed major changes for posts of responsibility, in line with the recommendations of the previous decades. A greatly increased quota of posts would be made available to all schools, and the points system, which militated against creation of posts at primary level, would be abolished.

The unions invited their membership to vote on the revised proposals, and in 1996, primary teachers nationally endorsed the PCW. Negotiations between the Department of Education, the INTO, and CPSMA followed regarding interpretation of the proposal and, following agreement in May 1997, the Department of Education (1997) issued a circular to schools in which it outlined the agreed procedures which were to be followed in the allocation of the first 2,000 newly allocated Grade B posts which were to be created right away, with remuneration to be backdated to January 1997. The circular was almost immediately followed by an information circular *Eolas*, issued by the INTO in May 1997, which further clarified the salient details for its members. The major changes as proposed by the PCW were all incorporated. Promoted positions in

primary schools were renamed Principal, Deputy Principal (formerly Vice-Principal), Assistant Principal (formerly Grade A Post of Responsibility), and Special Duties Teacher (formerly Grade B Post of Responsibility). An extra 390 Assistant Principal Posts and an extra 2,580 Special Duties positions were to be created in primary schools. Allowances were to be increased by 28 percent. The points system would be abolished. In future, all posts would be calculated on the basis of the number of teachers in a school. Duties were to be assigned following consultation among the staff, and would be matched to the needs of the school, and would be subject to regular review. Appointment would be by competition. Seniority would not be the sole criterion for selection, though merit of experience would be recognized. Arrangements relating to this would be agreed among the various representative bodies. The representative bodies debated the interpretation of the seniority issue, and the agreed interpretation was that seniority would no longer be the only deciding factor, but would be one of three criteria: capability and willingness to undertake the duties attaching to the post; length of service in the school; and interest in a particular area within the list of duties.

The recommendations specified that, following consultation with staff, the Board of Management was to approve a schedule of duties, which should be posted in a prominent position in the school. The range of duties would be inclusive in nature so as to facilitate applications from a broad range of the teaching staff. In effect, this means that posts which call for specialized training in areas such as music, visual arts, or science may not be created. Applicants will be interviewed by a panel of three, consisting of the Principal, Chairman of the Board of Management, and an independent assessor, appointed by the Board and drawn from a list of names compiled specifically for this purpose by the school's Patron and the INTO. There was a degree of urgency to complete the selection procedures before the summer holidays of 1997, as the Department had indicated that the appointed teachers would not otherwise be eligible for the backdated pay.

As this overview demonstrates, the campaign to create an effective middle management structure in primary schools has achieved some measure of success. The allocation of posts on the points system, which clearly militated against primary schools, has finally been abolished. An increased quota of posts has been allocated, which should serve to improve the management of schools, and enhance the career prospects of teachers. Schedules of duties are to be negotiated in consultation with the entire staff of the school, which is in keeping with modern thinking on collegiality and teamwork. Duties are to match the needs of the school, and will be subject to periodic review. Rate of pay has been

increased by 28%, and has since risen again, in line with general pay increases. Existing post-holders are offered the opportunity of buying into the new procedures, thus earning the increased rate of pay, or of maintaining their original conditions and not receiving the pay increase.

A SURVEY OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

As part of a research methods module for the MEd degree with Bretton Hall College of the University of Leeds, I conducted a survey by means of a postal questionnaire of the principals of 100 schools in the Cork area in Autumn 1997, in an attempt to analyse local trends in the allocation of the first round of posts of responsibility. The survey had a 72% response rate.

More than 4 out of 5 (84.7%) principals viewed the revised procedures as an improvement; 11.1% were unsure; while 4.2% stated they were not an improvement. Almost 9 out of 10 (88.8%) said that the new procedures would lighten their work load. Over three-quarters (77.8%) believed that seniority should be one of the factors in appointment to posts of responsibility, while 22.2% considered that it should not. Four out of five (80.6%) principals thought that previous inservice training in educational administration should be a factor in the selection of candidates; 9.7% were unsure; and 9.7% thought it should not.

Forty of the responding schools had a post of responsibility to offer in the first round of allocations. In 35 of these cases, the most senior unpromoted teacher applied, and in 30 cases was awarded the post. In only five cases did the post go to a junior teacher. In 27 of the 40 schools which had a post on offer, only one candidate applied. In 22 cases, this was the senior candidate. Five schools had two applicants and nine schools had three applicants.

The chief concern expressed by principals was the issue of time for performance on the duties attached to a post. No official guidelines are given, other than specifying that the 'level of duties should be commensurate with the level of remuneration'. Judging by the range of duties described by principals, there is huge variation in terms of time input. The question of whether these hours should be available during school hours or outside school hours was also an issue of concern.

DISCUSSION

The survey findings demonstrate that there are many reservations concerning the revised procedures, and indicate that there is still quite a way to go if a vibrant and effective middle-management structure in schools is to be established. The first concern - and it is one that has existed since posts of responsibility were first

created - is the issue of time for execution of the duties attached to a post. Furthermore, other than stating that the level of duties should be commensurate with the level of remuneration, no other guidance is given. In the survey, principals viewed this as a major area of concern. The schedules of duties revealed in the survey vary enormously in terms of time input necessary, and yet the pay is a flat rate allowance. The INTO (1993) and the National Education Convention (1994) report suggested a reduction in teaching hours to execute the duties, with the INTO adding that substitute cover should be employed. However, whether this is a viable or effective way of tackling the issue is doubtful, given the difficulties schools already face in trying to acquire substitute cover. It is also a most uneconomic way to solve the problem. Increasing the rate of pay to the post-holder, while stipulating that the duties would be done outside of school hours, would seem more practical. Adoption of this approach would require the Department of Education and Science and/or the INTO to provide guidelines on the approximate weekly or monthly input of out-of-school time that post holders would be expected to devote to their duties.

A second reservation concerns the seniority issue. Since the inception of posts of responsibility, critics have been arguing that seniority should be abolished as a criterion, and that posts should be opened up to younger teachers, in a move to enhance career prospects and ensure that effective teachers are rewarded and remain in the system. However, in the agreement reached by the representative bodies, the only criterion that can be firmly quantified is the seniority one. It could be argued that the others are ambiguous and difficult to quantify. Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that in the vast majority of appeals, the issue of seniority was the bone of contention, and in the subsequent re-interviews, the senior candidate was appointed. The survey findings also point to the persistence of the appointment of the senior candidate. However, it hardly seems right to sacrifice the dynamics of leadership and management to the questionable principle of longevity of service. Such a situation would not be tolerated in the business sector. The demands of professionalism would seem to call for further refinements in this area.

Another reservation about the operation of posts of responsibility is the requirement that the schedule of duties should be inclusive in nature to facilitate applications from the teaching staff. In theory this is a good idea; but in practice, it means that job descriptions may not be drawn up for curricular leadership in more specialized areas such as music, visual arts, and science. This could be identified as the loss of a major opportunity to provide for real and much needed curricular improvement in these areas.

A further concern is the lack of real opportunities for management and leadership in the revised schedule of job descriptions. The survey findings indicate that these tend to be in the main task-oriented rather than management-focused. Over 60% of principals considered that teachers do not view a post of responsibility as an opportunity to take on middle-management responsibilities. However, in research subsequently conducted among post-holders themselves, it would appear that post-holders and assistant teachers challenge this view.

The final and most significant area of concern is the lack of professional development established or proposed to help in the creation of an effective middle-management structure. The OECD (1991) pointed to the need to offer appropriate courses during initial training as well as inservice training. The White Paper (1995) proposed professional development as a priority for principals and vice-principals and affirmed its commitment to professional development in general; yet this middle-management structure was introduced without any extra professional development whatsoever. Again, an opportunity seems to have been lost, for the creation of an effective in-school management team. Many of the concerns outlined above could be minimized with appropriate professional development.

The other side of the professional development coin is the total lack of consideration in the selection criteria for applicants to posts of responsibility of any professional development which an applicant may have undertaken, which would equip him/her to fulfill the post more effectively. While criteria such as 'seniority', 'interest in an area', and 'capability and willingness to execute the duties' may not be faulted, the fact that academic or professional qualifications held by candidates is not a relevant criterion would seem to be a major flaw in the system. In the survey, four out of five principals considered that previous inservice training in educational administration should be factor in appointments to positions of responsibility. In subsequent research, post-holders and assistant teachers would appear to concur with this.

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