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Please cite this publication as follows:

Gregory, P. (2017) Locating leadership of art in UK primary schools. *The Journal of Elementary Education*, 10 (2-3). pp. 181-189.

Link to official URL (if available):

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'Locating leadership of art in UK primary schools'

Dr Peter Gregory

peter.gregory@canterbury.ac.uk

Abstract

Using some of the evidence collected as part of a doctoral study of school-based leaders of art in the UK, this paper presents the most recent and emergent models of the leadership in art.

The data suggests likely attributes of those in leadership positions and the effects upon the activities in which those individuals engage. As a case study of over two hundred art leaders, the challenges are clearly presented. They are more deeply explored through interviews and discussions about attitudes to artworks and their use with learners in the classroom as well as by analysing the paper records kept by the leaders.

The paper concludes with a fresh analysis of the types of leaders of art encountered and the opportunities presented for those with an interest in developing the subject further – for government, teacher trainers and the leaders themselves.

The study raises important issues for those who might want to learn from the situation in the UK.

Introduction and study overview

My doctoral study (Gregory,2014) is situated within a feminist paradigm to consider the identity, experience, practice and understanding of art and design coordinators (also known as subject leaders) in primary schools across the South East of England.

A postal survey sent to the 550 primary schools involved in partnership work with a single university and yielded a return rate of 40.7% (n = 224) –almost all from women art leaders. The survey included elements of common practice by leaders of all curriculum subjects as identified by Fletcher and Bell (1999) to allow comparison. These were analysed using the Chi-Square Test to establish statistical differences in the recorded responses. The emergent themes were explored through individual interviews with 32 teachers, allowing deeper probing. A number of the interviewees took part in a further interview discussion which explored their understanding and attitudes towards artworks (n = 25) by looking at images based on the work of Downing and Watson (2004). Of these, 17 coordinators allowed close scrutiny of their paper files, folders and records for analysis. Additionally, 9 advisory personnel (including inspectors, advisors, teacher-training tutors and an author responsible for publishing a practical developmental guide for coordinators) were interviewed to provide a wider context for the study.

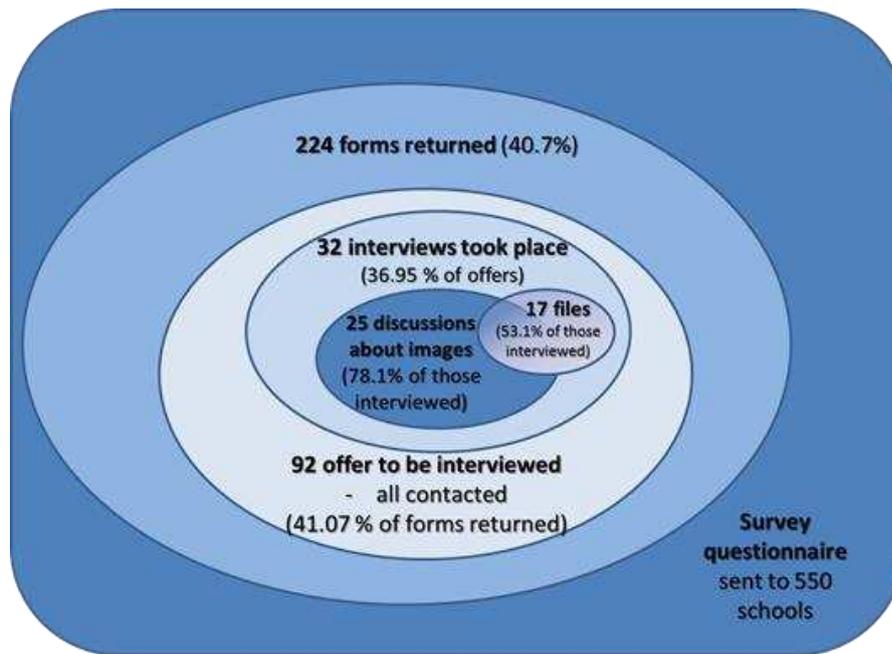


Figure 1 Venn diagram overview of the study with the art leaders

The qualitative and quantitative data collected from these opportunities revealed issues which clearly link to factors of power, gender and knowledge within patriarchal structures. These were considered in some detail in an attempt to faithfully present the individuals and the situations encountered in the study. There is a strong sense that the primary teachers leading art and design have not been adequately heard before and that earlier attempts to record their views have been subdued, edited or even deleted by those with the power to make such choices: this paper is another vehicle for their voices to be heard.

The research study concluded with a series of recommendations for further developing the role, particularly for those based in schools; the art leaders themselves and the professionals involved in ITE/CPD work demonstrating how the understanding and application of the model of empowered leadership proposed by Thurber and Zimmerman (2002) might facilitate improvement.

UK context

In UK primary schools, it is now common to have identified teachers who take responsibility for the teaching of a specific subject or subjects across the school (Bell and Ritchie, 1999). Their role is not exclusively to teach the subject but rather to lead or coordinate the teaching by their generalist class teacher colleagues (Bennett, Newton, Wise, Woods and Economou, 2003). An earlier literature review of the specific role of art coordinators (Gregory, 2006) established that their work and activities had not been researched previously. The generalised view regarding their role seems to be that a good art coordinator ought to ensure that the subject is 'well taught' across the school (Downing and Watson, 2004; Ofsted, 2005 and 2006).

Listening to art leaders in schools

During the main interviews several key themes emerged: the leader's identity, the allocation of the role, aspects of agency, the role itself and the budget at their disposal.

Identity: The leaders spoke openly and freely about themselves, their interests and inspirations. Those who were interested in art – whether making or viewing in galleries – often referred to their families. They acknowledged the challenges they faced and how they met them.

Allocation of Role: It became apparent very quickly that the interview process yielded a clearer view of their work. Two leaders were in fact specialist teachers – only teaching art across the school but this had been unclear from their written responses.

They ranged from the very newly appointed (a matter of weeks earlier) to those who had held the position for many years. There did not seem to be a great deal of difference in the way they understood the role, although they usually remembered being told what to do – either directly by the headteacher; through the contents of the file(s) they inherited from the last leader or by analysing and reflecting on the work of the leader of another subject in the school. Some held leadership roles for other subjects. Two were headteachers who were pleased to have the role as they had intense personal interest in the subject and they felt it allowed them some kudos amongst the staff, although both expressed regret at not being able to invest more time to develop the role (or indeed the subject in school).

Agency: Most were happy with their role although several talked about the limitations defined by the headteacher or other members of staff. This often seemed to be linked with a feeling that they were expected to make the school look bright and colourful – whilst often frustrating the process of creating the artworks. Some had discovered that they had been nominated as art leader quite incidentally – during a staff meeting when it was mentioned or on a list displayed in the staff room. In general, there was a sense of resignation about this rather than a feeling of anger or resentment.

Role: In discussing their role in more detail, there was often an implication that they could do little more than they were already doing. Hardly any had the opportunity to visit other classes to see colleagues teaching and only a few got to see the plans of their lessons. Most said they knew what was happening by looking around the school at the work which was displayed. Most were frustrated that they could not access courses for themselves or be allocated time in staff meetings to work with their peers. They all seemed busy with aspects of identifying, ordering or controlling materials and equipment.

Budget: Finances were difficult and few had the budgets they felt were needed. Several ran an art club (some charging membership fees to increase the funds available - others sold the artworks or artefacts produced).

Discourses which emerged from the whole study

Having gathered the data in the ways described above several discourses emerged even before detailed analysis was undertaken and the fuller picture revealed.

Power and agency: The role gender seemed to play in the leadership of art with hardly men being represented. Then, there was the issue of the art leaders' age and the influence that this could have on their ability to apply their experiences to the role. The questions that intrigued me were linked to

the school contexts in which they worked and the ways these might be reflected in the personal factors of the leaders (or vice versa): was there any kind of link?

Ignorance / insufficient understanding: I also perceived an issue of ignorance, sometimes about the leader role or the extent of their responsibility but frequently about artists, techniques or the materials used in making some art works. The more conceptual art included among the images discussed also raised questions of the degrees of understanding held as well as the way these teachers acted as censors in selecting work to show pupils. With some individuals, this was also linked to degrees of uncertainty and nervousness about the expectations of their personal knowledge bank.

Low status and isolation: There were instances indicating the low value of art in schools and a frequent feeling of a lack of agency and the powerlessness experienced by many leaders seemed beyond their ability to tackle or change. Above all, there was an acute sense of compliance: seeking to serve unknown 'others' including the expectations of an inspector who might call (one day). This was compounded by the way in which the majority of leaders existed in isolation within their school, unaware of opportunities in their locality to link with others and possibly find ways of becoming change agents themselves.

Drawing conclusions

Using all the data, it was possible to reflect on the role and the effective development of the leaders. They could be classified into one of three groups:

- Leader/facilitators (who encouraged and developed colleagues in art)
- Maintenance figures (who simply kept the curriculum going)
- Special Experts (who absorbed all responsibility for the teaching of art – usually deskilling their colleagues in the process)

This then allowed an understanding of how each type of art leader was developed and a simple table to be constructed. This incorporated the critical factors of experience which would determine which type of leader these teachers might become over time. There were several identified within the study: previous experiences, qualification in art, their training pathway and whether they felt they had the full endorsement of the headteacher through a positive appointment process.

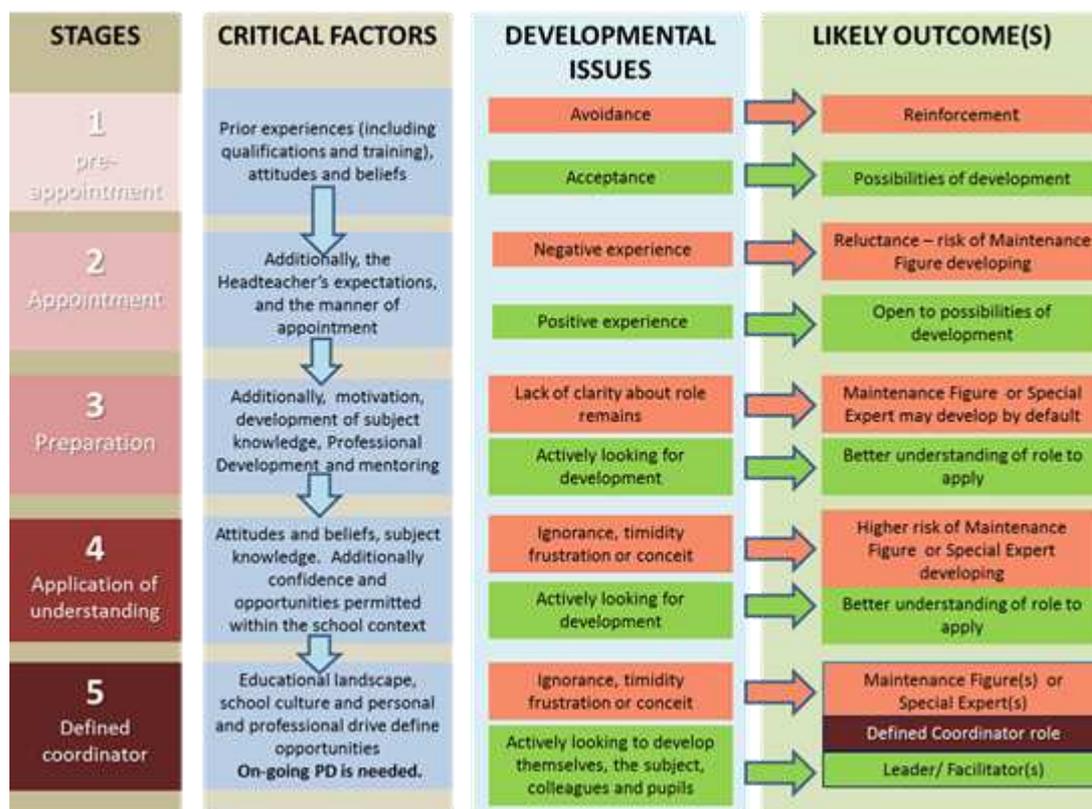


Table 1 The developmental stages of becoming an art leader (Gregory, 2014:220)

From these I identified five developmental stages which I set out (Table 1) in order to demonstrate how an art leader might progress responding to situations or factors within each stage.

As (indicated in Table 1) art leaders move from one stage towards the next one, there are key developmental issues to be considered in relation to the critical factors I identified in my study. These are presented in the red or green sections: red is the *least* desirable route and the process progression set out in the 'likely outcomes'. The defined leader role is that which develops as a result of the interplay between the different factors and issues listed. Neither maintenance nor special expert models are ultimately seen as desirable, each for different reasons.

Maintenance figures: do not affect change, they are a stunted form of the 'subject leader' and similar in many respects to the lesser 'coordinator' role as defined by Bell and Ritchie (1999). The main concern of a maintenance figure is compliance and the mechanism of shared ignorance across the school staff can then become the crucial factor in determining the shape and form of art coordination adopted – particularly when safeguarded by the absence of developmentally challenging subject specific CPD. In this way neither ignorance nor timidity simply can affect change. Those who suffer frustrations in their role, compounded by knowing sufficient to appear to do a good job are more likely to develop the kind of professional conceit already alluded to.

Special Experts: become the essential art epicentre of the school community. Class teachers may feel relieved of the pressure of teaching art and may abandon any attempt at doing so. The work produced by pupils may be of a high standard and the displays across the school environment could be seen as a cause for celebration. However, this type of art leader cannot be seen as desirable as they limit the

growth of generalist teachers by limiting their repertoire of subjects, and restricting the depth of their subject knowledge and pedagogical understanding.

It should be noted that these developmental stages are just that; as developmental stages they are not static. If significant changes occur such as the arrival of a new headteacher or additional responsibilities given to the art coordinator, then the developmental process will operate. It can never be assumed that the defined leader is fixed for ever, but those determined to find ways of leading and / or facilitating others around them are more likely to retain their subject-based professional integrity and find new pathways through changes in the educational landscape. Among the crucial factors to minimise the evolution of weaker models is the importance of on-going professional development. The lack of such opportunities has already been noted but the likely impact both for and on the art leader could be catastrophic and result in substantially weaker leadership, increasing the likelihood of developing either maintenance figures or special experts.

How do these lines of thinking sit in Thurber and Zimmerman's (2002) model? All I described in the five stages of development above sit predominately in their Domains A and B. My research study did not identify robust art leader models which had ventured into Domains C or D. This does not mean that they do not exist but only that they had not yet been identified. (This could be an indication of their rarity).

Final conclusions

The developmental lines outlined above are important in considering the emancipatory and empowering opportunities for the (predominately) female art leaders for several reasons. Firstly, as Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) acknowledge, emancipation cannot be achieved without recognition of the limitations forms of oppression and the desirability of changing the situation. It would appear that most of the leaders in this study were largely unaware of the predicament they operated within and therefore (understandably) unlikely to seek change. However the concept of a male researcher's role in 'empowering' them is unsettling for me personally. Just as there were many issues to recognise and work on in defining the study itself, there remain similar ones to apply in developing the outcomes into new opportunities. The explanations require as much sensitivity to ensure the predicaments are revealed and opportunities are built through collaborative activities. Irwin (1995:133) emphasised the importance of 'dialogue among individuals...[which] requires faith in people and in their power to create and recreate... founded upon love, humility, faith, in the midst of a relationship of mutual trust...'.

The opportunities for empowerment of art leaders must therefore be built with and by them in careful and meticulous processes over time.

Neither successful leadership nor emancipation will be achieved by another route.

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