Towards a typology of secondary school subject departments

Abstract

Subject departments are an increasingly important unit of analysis for research on schools and beginning teachers' experiences. In many ways, the department seems to be more important than the school, although both are interrelated through dynamic social relations. Understanding more about departmental cultures and the nature of the relationships within and beyond departments, particularly from the perspective of beginning teachers, is an important task for research. Initially by analysing a practice-based typology of eight departmental types through an exploratory factor analysis of questionnaires completed by beginning teachers (n=55) we refined the typology to four (hierarchical; open; self-promoting; divisive). Further exploration of this refined typology through in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of six beginning teachers allows us to illustrate the departmental types in relation to their experiences. These findings highlight some of the ways in which new regimes of accountability and corporatisation are reshaping the ways in which departmental cultures are constructed and enacted. The beginning teachers in this study describe their responses and adaptations to their placement departments in ways that highlight opportunities for ITE partnerships to better anticipate and prepare beginning teachers for the departmentalised nature of their experiences.

Keywords: School departments, culture, department leadership, department typology

School subject departments

Secondary schools continue to be organised mainly around subject departments, involving groupings of subject specialist teachers, physical space, varying degrees of informal and formal control over the interpretation and implementation of school policy, including across; pedagogy, assessment, recruitment of students, and accountability for student progress and attainment. As a unit of analysis, the school subject department was previously considered invisible to research (Ball & Lacey, 1984; Siskin, 1994), and while it is still believed to be 'under-examined' (Sutton & Knuth, 2020, p. 118), it has received increased scrutiny. A growing body of literature has argued that school subject departments are highly significant for: student outcomes (Ko et al., 2015; Strand, 2016); beginning teachers' experiences and learning (Childs et al., 2013; McNicholl et al., 2013; Puttick, 2018; Thorpe & Tran, 2015); the implementation of school policy (Berjaoui & Karami-Akkary, 2019;

Watson & de Geest, 2014); and school reform efforts (Johnson, 2019; Sutton & Knuth, 2020). Attention has been given to the leadership of school subject departments (Lillejord & Børte, 2020; Puttick, 2017; Williams, 2017; Bennett et al., 2007), arguing for the significance of this level of leadership in terms of its impact on the whole school (McLaughlin and Talbert, 1993; Friedman, 2011; Melville et al., 2014; Paranosic & Riveros, 2017). Across a range of international contexts there is evidence that academic and day-to-day decisions within secondary schools are concentrated at the departmental level (Berjaoui & Karami-Akkary, 2019; Paranosic & Riveros, 2017; Thorpe & Tran, 2015), and that notions of 'collegiality' are focused within departments rather than schools (Bennett et al. 2007).

School subject departments are increasingly conceived of as 'complex, being constituted through social interactions within the context of a formal educational institution with its associated hierarchies, power relations, micro-politics, expectations, and norms' (Puttick, 2017, p. 63): that is, departments are more than physical areas of a school, or a group of teachers. The complexity of departments is often emphasised (James & Goodhew, 2011), and the notion of their being 'constituted through social interactions' has implications for teachers' and students' experiences of departments, and for methodological approaches that might be used for researching school subject departments. Departments have also been shown to act and be experienced as 'silos' characterised by high levels of insulation between them (Casey et al., 2020), adding to the importance of better understanding departments in order to contribute to their - and schools' - flourishing.

Our interest in secondary school subject departments comes primarily from the perspective of beginning teachers' development, and the importance of departments in ITE (Initial Teacher Education) experiences (Childs et al., 2013; Douglas, 2012; Kardos et al., 2001; Puttick, 2018). The interest in a typology of departments originates from the first author's professional engagement with school subject departments, including 10 years teaching in two secondary schools, followed by 15 years in initial teacher education, working in partnership with up to 40 subject departments per year. As a beginning teacher in the 1990's, the subject department was instrumental to my (anonymised for review) daily activities, resources, socialising and support mechanisms – and therefore became both a key focal point, and source of professional loyalty. Moreover, it felt like my individual identity was linked with the subject department, engendering buy-in and a sense of pride by

association, albeit this was not seemingly the case for all teachers and departments. In my second teaching post, I sensed a greater degree of competition between subject departments. In some instances this competitiveness was perhaps jovial, but between others it felt genuinely disparaging: the variations between departments' values seemed significant. Upon entering ITE, my interaction with subject departments altered, and the focus of my perceptions shifted to the experiences and support offered to beginning teachers. Such insights informed placement decisions, seeking to achieve 'best-fits' between departments and the needs, experiences and targets of beginning teachers.

Through an iterative process of authoring a chapter on school subject departments (Anonymised for review), a tentative departmental typology was produced by the first author, drawing upon these professional experiences, and informed by specific individuals, incidents and perceptions. The resulting departmental categories (Table 1) are not designed to be mutually exclusive, nor static.

Department	Potential Indicative Characteristics
Individual	Dominated by the Head of Department (HoD). Obsessed with perceptions of the power/importance/profile of HoD. Lots of self-promotion & noise – all intended to amplify the status of the HoD.
Socially-driven	Driven by a broader mission around the value/importance of education &/or transforming the life chances of pupils. Sceptical &/or dismissive of senior leadership & policy/OFSTED/league table agendas.
Subject-promoting	Exclusively pre-occupied with the primacy of own subject. Enthusiastically embrace a wealth of extra-curricular opportunities/activities to promote the subject. Highly possessive over curriculum time & homework timetables.
Competitive	Pre-occupied by constant benchmarking with other departments. Ultimately driven by targets & results. Dismissive of the achievements of other, inferior, departments.
Conformist	Prioritises absolute compliance with all internal school bureaucracy. Fastidious awareness & adherence to policies/processes/deadlines. Meticulous organisation & presentation of spaces, resources, etc.
Collegiate	Driven by a desire for collective ownership and the departmental team ethic. Smothered by the necessity to discuss & agree the minutiae of every decision.
Autonomous	Individuals operate within a department 'shell' – but seemingly with autonomy to act at will. An unintended consequence of relaxed leadership; a deliberately engineered 'enlightened' approach; &/or strong characters, senior/fractional staffing.
Laissez-faire	The absence of any direction, consistency of practice or identity. Often linked to staff cynicism, incompetence or wanting to leave.

Table 1. Initial typology of subject departments

This often 'invisible' departmental level seems vital to engage for efforts seeking to develop teacher education: one response to Ellis and Childs' (2019) provocation about how universities might take a 'transformative stance' and better 'feel the need for change' (p.285) is, we suggest, through greater attention to school subject departments as a key site of learning and transformation. We felt that taking the first author's practice-informed, mildly satirical classification could enhance knowledge around subject departments if deployed as a starting point for research into how different 'types' of department support beginning teachers. There are parallels with the Haydn scale (Haydn, 2007) in that both frameworks were designed iteratively, are built upon accumulated experiences within English schools, seek to capture the diversity of secondary school environments, and are practice-led constructs (Haydn, 2014). This research is important because, at one extreme, there is evidence of toxic cultures in some departments (Rossi et al., 2008; Sirna et al., 2008)

with obvious impacts on beginning teachers' development, and in less extreme cases beginning teachers must navigate tensions between having open discussions (for example, about subject knowledge), and performative requirements of assessed programmes (Puttick, 2018), encouraging the performance of competence which can be particularly challenging in certain departments such as those which have been described elsewhere as veteran-oriented (Melville and Wallace, 2007).

Existing departmental typologies

Previous analyses of school subject departments have developed categorisations based on: organisational typologies (Busher and Harris, 1999); distinctions between veteran-oriented, novice-oriented and integrated cultures (Kardos et al., 2001; Datnow and Park, 2018); collegiality, innovation support and commitment (McLaughlin and Talbert, 1993), and; contrasts between individualistic and collaborative approaches (Childs et al., 2013). An organisational typology is shown in Table 2, based on Busher and Harris' (1999) description:

Type	Description
Federate	Several subjects which may work closely together, as their subjects are seen as having similar approaches towards knowledge. For example, a humanities department including history, geography and religious education
Confederate	Several subjects grouped together with shared management and possibly space, but with little in common between the subjects. For example, a department including citizenship, business studies and music
Unitary	a single subject department with its own head of department and space, neither affiliated to nor managed by a larger faculty
Impacted	the same as 'unitary', but smaller. Busher and Harris (1999) include geography departments as an example of this group, having only two or three designated rooms, with two or three full time teachers
Diffuse	one subject area, with a designated Head of Department (HoD) but without an identifiable base. For example, Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) may be taught across the school by teachers for whom PSHE is not part of their job title/description and only constitutes a minor part of their timetable

Table 2. Department organisational typologies (Busher and Harris, 1999)

In this organisational typology the department type may affect teachers' experiences (Puttick, 2017), but not necessarily: there might be similar approaches towards, for example: collaboration; assessment; and subject knowledge in departments of very different organisational types. These different organisational types include variations between the ways in which subject identity functions (or not) in constituting the nature of the department. One aspect of this organisational level is related to Childs et al.'s (2013) sampling choices as their ethnographic work included only departments with shared team rooms.

Focusing on beginning teachers' perceptions of departments, Kardos et al. (2001) apply an idea of organisational structures quite differently and in relation to the professional cultures that characterise schools and which beginning teachers experience. Their purposive sample of 50 beginning teachers in Massachusetts were interviewed, explicitly asking: ''Are there certain norms and expectations?… How do you know or how did you learn what is expected of you?...' (p. 285). They suggest three categories of departmental cultures: veteran-orientated, novice-orientated and integrated cultures. In veteran-oriented cultures the norms are established by and for established teachers with little consideration of or attention to beginning teachers' needs. Similar descriptions come through Melville and Wallace's (2007) analysis of science departments and their integration (or not) of new – and particularly non-specialist – science teachers. In contrast, novice-oriented cultures were determined by the beginning teachers, giving greater freedom but less guidance from more experienced colleagues. The importance of distinctions between novice and veteran members of departments in terms of the way departments are perceived and experienced is also highlighted by Sutton and Knuth (2020). Presented as an ideal-type, *integrated cultures* combined aspects of openness and freedom with regular dialogue and support across teachers with different levels of experience.

Drawing a slightly different conclusion from their study of science, history and geography school subject departments in England, Childs et al. (2013) offer a distinction between individualistic and collaborative departmental cultures. The individualistic culture echoes Kardos et al.'s (2001) description of veteran-oriented departments which constrain beginning teachers' inclusion and learning. Drawing on Hargreaves' (1994) metaphor of the 'Balkanization of teaching', Kardos et al. (2001) argue that collaborative cultures were

(possibly paradoxically) ‘‘balkanised’ – effectively segregated from the rest of the school – a fact which has potentially negative implications for teacher learning and the promotion of collegiality at whole school level’ (p.49). Across these different learning cultures, the role and importance of heads of department is noted and this is developed in Sutton and Knuth’s (2020) analysis of the 'deep narratives' they found department leaders using to establish and sustain beliefs about teaching and learning. The importance of heads of departments’ role (also referred to as ‘subject leaders’ and ‘middle leaders’) is concerning when considered against Lillejord and Børte’s (2020) systematic review which found that studies ‘consistently reveal that middle leaders have trivial jobs that do not build on their competence’ (p.83). In response, they argue for changes in ‘intelligent accountability’ in order that teaching ‘can become a knowledge- and inquiry-based, intellectual activity’ (p.83). Childs et al.’s (2013) research highlights some of the variations between secondary school subject departments in England in terms of culture, size and organisational type. The wider context of school organisation and governance has undergone and is undergoing a period of change in England, with implications for subject departments and ITE partnerships (for example, see Ellis et al. 2022). Academisation – shifting school governance from Local Authorities to a quasi-autonomous, quasi-market, quasi-school-led models– means that the nature of Academies and Multi-Academy Trusts have implications for departmental cultures. Beginning teachers have the potential to offer a particularly interesting insight into departments because of the limited time they have spent in them: the norms have not yet become normalised for them. Developing our understanding of departmental cultures – and particularly the ways in which they are perceived by beginning teachers – is an important task for research in support of these ends.

Methodology

In order to test the proposed typology, we developed a mixed-methods design. In the first phase, an online questionnaire was emailed to all beginning teachers enrolled on a secondary initial teacher training programme at one university in the UK. This university was chosen as suitable location for this exploratory study given its status as a key centre for initial teacher training in the region and due to the authors’ connections to the institution. After two follow-up invitations there was a 47% response rate (n=55). The questionnaire

was issued in the second semester, at which point all beginning teachers had experience of two subject departments, thereby the dataset was effectively doubled. Beginning teachers were from a range of subjects (18 in total) and schools. Following the questionnaire, respondents were invited to provide their email address if they were interested in taking part in semi-structured interviews. Participants were selected on the basis of their responses to ensure that a spread of department characteristics were represented. All those invited agreed to take part (n=6), and interview schedules were developed to explore the nature of departments from the perspective of beginning teachers.

Questionnaire

To develop the questionnaire, the eight proposed types were converted into Likert scale items, as shown in Table 4 alongside the results. Items were preceded by the stem 'How true is this in your department?' with four response options given: Very true, somewhat true, not very true, not at all true. There were four items for each proposed type and exploratory factor analysis was then employed to test this typology, allowing items accessing the same construct (type) to be grouped together (Field, 2013).

Semi-structured Interviews

Following the statistical testing of the typology, six participants were recruited from those who agreed to be contacted, and follow-up online interviews conducted (by first and second authors). Participants from a range of subjects were chosen, to try to capture a diversity of placement experience (see Table 3). Questions and prompts were developed based on participants' questionnaire responses and the types to which their departments corresponded, within an organic structure within which participants were welcomed to pursue narrative lines by relating anecdotes they felt to be significant in describing departmental life.

The beginning teachers are referred to by pseudonym in accordance with university ethical approval, which also covered consent, anonymity and confidentiality within the research. The issue of asymmetrical power relations was also acknowledged, and it was made explicit to all potential participants that their involvement, or views, would have no impact on course judgements, and that the data was solely for research purposes.

Pseudonym	Subject
Ruby	Music
Ekaterina	Modern Foreign Languages
Helen	Modern Foreign Languages
Dave	English
Adam	Computing
Jess	Art

Table 3. Participant details

Findings and Discussion

The following sections offer an integrated presentation of our findings and the discussion of these findings, beginning with an overview of the way in which the data offers support for the typology developed. That is, we suggest there is strong support for hierarchical, open and dismissive, and weaker support for self-promoting. Following this summary we then explore the departmental types in relation to the beginning teachers' perceptions.

Support for the typology

All questionnaire responses were included in the exploratory factor analysis (n=109). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin statistic was .801 indicating a 'meritorious' sample for factor analysis (Kaiser, 1974), and individual item values were also all above adequate. A correlation matrix was produced and all items were found to have two or more correlations above 0.3 (see Field, 2013) and none above 0.9. All were thus included in the principal axis factor analysis with varimax rotation, chosen to ensure the extracted factors remained unrelated. A visual inspection of the scree plot indicated that four factors should be extracted, and in total these explained 54.05% of the variance. A conceptual inspection of the items loading onto each factor suggested that these were of value to the analysis, as shown in Table

4. Reliability testing was subsequently carried out on the four factors, the results of which are also shown in Table 4.

The four factors extracted through the factor analysis allowed us to identify four departmental types, which have been labelled according to the atmosphere in the department; hierarchical, open, self-promoting, and dismissive. Three of these four types have values of Cronbach's α above .6, which is broadly within acceptable limits (Field, 2013), with the 'open' factor having particularly good reliability (Cronbach's α = .891). The fourth factor, 'self-promoting', has a value of .496, which is low, and the small number of items in this subscale (4), plays a role here (see Cortina, 1993). This type warrants further investigation to establish its validity in describing subject departments, although it makes conceptual sense.

Factor label	Item	Loadings	Cronbach's α	If item deleted
Hierarchical	Department staff were quite dismissive of other departments	0.697	.672	.588
	There was an absence of professional dialogue	0.659		.588
	There wasn't any support for school policies/initiatives	0.616		.609
	People were able to independently do their own thing	0.611		.593
	Departmental life was centred on the head of department	0.583		.795
	The department were governed by league tables (Reversed)	-0.506		.641
	Department staff were focused on the profile of the head of department	0.439		.657
	The head of department was dominant	0.335		.632
	There was no effective communication	0.565		.620
Open	The department was extremely well organised	0.378	.891	.880
	The head of department didn't really provide strong input	-0.400		.874
	The department was characterised by a united, team effort to introducing new initiatives	0.543		.879
	We didn't really have structured team meetings	-0.382		.881
	There was no clear department loyalty or culture	-0.460		.887
	The department ran a lot of extra-curricular activities focused on the subject	0.515		.884
	The department staff were focused on transforming the life chances of pupils	0.790		.886
	The head of department didn't really seem to care very much	-0.614		.892
	Great pride was taken in the presentation of departmental spaces	0.595		.892
	Department staff had a clear sense of the value of education	0.577		.888
	Department meetings were focused on targets, forecasts and outcomes	0.566		.886

	The head of department made sure we all followed school policies/processes to the letter	0.462			.880
	Team meetings could take a long time because of the level of discussion	0.447			.880
	Everyone in the department was treated as an equal	0.495			.879
Dismissive	Department staff believed their subject was the most important		0.372	.625	.612
	The head of department exhibited absolute power		0.736		.463
	The department was dismissive of the Ofsted agenda		0.564		.576
	There was an emphasis on reaching collaborative team decisions		-0.463		.578
	The head of department was obsessed with how well the department was doing compared to other subjects		0.422		.606
Self-promoting	There was a clear sense that this was the best department			0.300	.496	.491
	The head of department was very strict on the department meeting all deadlines			0.539		.374
	The department protected their curriculum time aggressively			0.523		.416
	The department staff got particularly annoyed if they had to lose any lesson time			0.461		.416

Table 4. Tested departmental typology

Departmental types

Data analysis of online interviews allowed us to begin to extend our understanding of the ways in which the department types may be experienced by beginning teachers. The following discussion is framed around the four emergent departmental types, accepting the examples do not necessarily exhibit all the item characteristics.

Hierarchical

Both Ruby and Ekaterina described experiences of (different) departments that share similar characteristics as hierarchical departments, in particular the focus on the Head of Department (HoD) and their standing and power. Power games surrounding knowledge and information permeated, affecting control over and access to, among other things, teaching resources. The ways in which this is worked out in the context of English multi-academy trust schools that demand a high degree of compliance illustrates some of the challenges for beginning teachers in these environments.

For Ruby, there were (music) subject-specific aspects of HoD control that she felt inhibited her creativity and potentially hindered the development of independence in planning and teaching. She described restrictions around composition and performance which she felt were heavily theory based, alongside a disproportionate focus upon piano skills. At GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education; one of the main qualifications that students may gain at the end of Secondary Education in England) the HoD controlled pupil work on composition and performance via one-to-one input, seeking to positively influence pupil outcomes. Ruby hinted that she felt this emphasis was at the expense of encouraging pupils to pursue their interests: 'at GCSE it was about having lessons to enhance their performance, I don't think there was an emphasis on making pupils do music after school, at college or sixth form' (Ruby, interview). The subject-specific nature of these tensions are highlighted in the way that Ruby perceived the HoD's dominance being reinforced by their teaching the majority of GCSE and A level classes, and their running of extra-curricular music clubs. With 'subject expertise as the basis of authority' (Bennett et al., 2007, p.466), challenges (or perceived challenges) to this from beginning teachers is likely to be problematic. The status of individuals is particularly important when – as in Ruby's case – the relations between department and wider academy trust were mediated directly through

the same individual. Her perception was of a departmental culture largely set by the HoD, which was particularly interesting because the HoD worked part-time within the department, and the rest of their time in a Trust-wide role. The HoD's Trust-wide role also resulted in some strong adherence to Trust initiatives and a particular focus on pupil outcomes, built around a strict adherence to schemes of work, described as 'very rigid and there was no allowance for any deviation from them…there was a scheme I wasn't fond of and wanted to teach in my own way. However, I was told I could not do this on numerous occasions' (Ruby, interview).

Similarly, Ekaterina described how the relationships between the HoD and senior leaders in the school drove the compliance with school policy:

> ...we would have to complete this report for such a date, otherwise we will get negative feedback from someone, and [HoD] can't have that because they have been good friends for ages (Ekaterina, Interview)

In Ekaterina's case, the constraint on a wholly 'hierarchical' approach that is imposed by the department/academy trust relationships, and the rationale for compliance being the HoD's social standing, was further complicated by 'the head office'. Described in impersonal terms, there was not a named person associated with this administrative body who promoted consistent 'academy standards', to which 'compliance wasn't optional...acting independently is not part of the academy's policy' (Ekaterina, interview). This impersonal bureaucracy was associated with grades:

> I was to get the marking done on time and submitted to the head office...There would not really be any subsequent discussion...I was told to give a certain level of feedback for the head office...it was all a ticking box exercise...I didn't feel the student was the main focus of the academy. It was all about the results (Ekaterina, interview).

The rationale for the consistency imposed by the head office provoked understanding from Ekaterina who, while describing the lack of independence she perceived, articulated the corporate rationale that is framed in terms of social justice:

> You can understand where they are coming from...the school is in a deprived area and the reason why they are under these academies and this trust umbrella is

> because they were under achieving schools in the first place. The trust policy is to bring all the schools to the same level and achieve good GCSE results, and this is their main goal (Ekaterina, interview)

The repetition of the refrain being 'under' illustrates the protective and hierarchical metaphors through which the school, department and teachers are imagined and positioned. The justification of policies by appeals to social justice aims constructs an environment in which questioning and discussion is restricted: who could want students not to get better GCSE grades? Who could suggest the school should continue to 'under achieve'?

The framing of this problematic echoes the ways in which Stahl (2020) analyses 'social justice' in relation to corporate practices, ethical tensions and neoliberal paradoxes. The overt corporatisation and accountability regimes – made particularly apparent in relation to the status given in these discussions to GCSE grades – seems to reflect a continuation of these trends, for example as described by Bennett et al. (2007). One striking example of the tensions between accountability, centralisation and individual power dynamics illustrates the ways in which the hierarchical culture undermines the whole-school and trust-wide aims: Ekaterina described the ways in which she was prevented from accessing the standardised lesson plans and resources which were shared on a Google drive, to which she was not granted access, and 'if [the HoD] would provide me with some existing lessons from the trust, she would take the slides out of it. So instead of a full lesson I would receive 2 or 3 slides which were not connected to each other...it wasn't a help, it was trying to confuse me and it wasn't a pleasant experience' (Ekaterina, interview). This lack of access, or restrictions imposed by timing contributed to the culture that worked to position the HoD as dominant: access to knowledge is power and so 'you never had a completely clear, transparent conversation'. For example, Ekaterina described being 'told that things needed to be done at the last minute...I wasn't told something and they said I should know this already myself'. In response to this culture she adopted defensive coping strategies:

> Towards the end I became expert at this and tried to communicate only in writing with my mentor, using more of a closing sales technique to try and protect myself and reinforce myself by saying 'if you need something done please let me know before the task', making my position a little bit safer. (Ekaterina, interview)

The ‘hidden curriculum’ of the departmental culture here results in an explicit kind of learning for the beginning teacher: corporate tactics to survive these hierarchical power dynamics and knowledge politics being enacted in the institution of the trust with its pressures of performativity, social justice rationale, and standardising policies. They illustrate some of the ethical questions and paradoxes likely to emerge through certain forms of neoliberal education (Stahl, 2020). These ethical dilemmas were felt by Ruby in the reified atmosphere of the department office. Department staff tended not to leave the office very often, with their actions described by Ruby as a clique who used this base as a venue for less professional conversations about other teachers, departments and schools. Ruby described feeling compelled to join this clique, and, partly as a consequence, became involved in some negative conversations about others, which she hinted a sense of discomfort with: echoing the kinds of ‘toxic’ departmental environments described by Sirna et al. (2008).

These examples highlight some tensions faced by beginning teachers, as temporary guests within host departments, which potentially creates adherence to established practices via allegiance, acquiescence and/or professional expectations to ‘fit in’.

Open

Helen’s Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) department was described as being very organised, particularly in terms of the structure of centrally-held shared resources and the running of meetings. A recently-appointed head of faculty had introduced shared planning and resources so that any absences could be covered easily within the department. Dave experienced a similar arrangement, described by him as ‘shareable resources’: clearly sequenced and openly accessible materials which he praised for helping him to understand the syllabus. This openness to outside or new members of the department shares strong similarities with collaborative and novice-orientated departments (Childs et al., 2013; Kardos et al. 2001).

The organisation and culture of open departments was also manifested in collaborative working practices, praised for being ‘mostly about the children’ (Helen, interview). For example, in Helen’s department, meetings often finished early (due to the efficiency of the

informal agenda) to allow teachers time to start working on whatever had been agreed. Dave also highlighted the 'fluidity' of the informal agenda through which everyone's opinion - including those of beginning teachers – would be sought.

Department staff were described as open to extra-curricular activities, particularly when they would benefit students. In strong contrast to the grade-focused characteristic of hierarchical departments, Helen and Dave both describe a child-focused approach, with staff prioritising what they believe best for the children, including informal arrangements designed to keep students in the classroom, such as seating plan changes. There also seemed to be perceptions of low-friction, compliant relationships with whole-school policies being followed in these departments.

The ways in which Helen and Dave described the physical spaces of their open departments contrasted with the territorial descriptions of hierarchical departmental spaces. For example, Ruby described experiences in a hierarchical type with teachers spending most time in department spaces 'separated from the school'. In open departments, spaces were both welcoming and a source of pride, with time and resource attached to maintaining attractive displays which sought to stimulate interest, or to celebrate achievements. Helen noted that 'there was a fairly heavy emphasis on [classroom wall displays] so time was given to it. If you asked for something and said it would make your classroom better for the students you could have it, no real questions were asked'. Dave described a classroom 'bursting with resources and books', classrooms in Helen's school were mostly decorated with staff-generated and commercial resources, and in Dave's department student work was highly visible alongside teacher-generated displays.

The multi-sensory nature of the descriptions of departmental cultures also extended beyond visual and affective dimensions: both also mentioned the importance of food, including Helen's department 'lockdown bake-off'. In both placements, the positive experiences were built upon strong organisation, a shared departmental ethos and a culture of respect (towards both people and learning). The resulting supportive relationships with beginning teachers were described as providing a supportive backdrop against which they might flourish and successfully navigate the diversity and complexity of ITE placements.

Self-promoting

Adam undertook a placement within a self-promoting department type, where he described a strong sense of it being the 'best department', alongside a fierce protectiveness of curriculum time. 'Best' was interpreted in several ways by the department, including pupil popularity in terms of securing two, or even three, GCSE groups as an optional choice. Another way in which 'best' was manifested related to supporting students to achieve the highest possible outcomes according to their own ability, alongside a supportive approach to understanding the individual students not meeting their targets. This dual focus on student numbers and outcomes reflects Childs et al.'s (2013) description of the ways in which 'pressure to attract more students to the subject and to improve achievement at geography GCSE meant that other opportunities for collaboration beyond geography were not taken up' (p.44). Adam characterised his department's philosophy of maximising student numbers and outcomes as: 'Happy students get good grades' rather than 'pushed students get good grades'. Helen too used the word 'best', talking about how staff would joke that they were the best department, with student numbers playing an important role in this self-perception: all students studied two languages from Year 7, which is unusually high for UK secondary schools in England. Dave's department considered themselves as 'dutiful', in the way they prided themselves on setting work, whilst students' grades played an important role in school politics, describing them as 'ammunition' to potentially 'shut down any criticism'.

Despite feeling that they were the 'best', Adam's department also believed their subject was perceived by others as dispensable: when students required interventions, musical instrument lessons, or to play sports, they felt disproportionately singled out. Helen too reported 'some eye-rolling' when time was lost to events such as sports day. Likewise, in relation to timetabling, Adam's department felt the need to justify an hour a week at Key Stage 3, whereas other subjects were (unquestioningly) allocated five times that amount. This resulted in a defensive stance towards lesson time, and a fierce allegiance to the importance and status of their own subject, to counter a potential perceived lack of respect from elsewhere. This mentality also fed into significant efforts being put into raising the department profile, seeking to maximise pupil engagement and enjoyment. Examples included entering all Year 9 pupils into an international digital enterprise award, and

engaging GCSE groups in European Space Agency competitions. Such initiatives were promoted to showcase the department, and make 'a big noise in a good way' (Adam, interview). As a placement experience, the creative approaches to teaching and learning, alongside a strong emphasis upon fostering pupil engagement and interest, were described by Adam as creating a positive environment.

In another example, described by Jess, notions of being the 'best' department centred upon the intrinsic value of the subject, and by seeking to be the friendliest department, with staff being keen to talk with, and listen to, pupils. She described a culture that was 'particularly focused on the emotional wellbeing of her students'. This welcoming and friendly approach, allied to a focus upon well-being, was appreciated by Jess, who referenced her own anxiety and gratitude for the warmth and support she received. Her mentor offered 'I could talk to her whenever I wanted, whatever the time' and this laid firm foundations for what she described as a strong placement experience. The understanding shown, and alignment of personal values, contributed positively to her perceptions of a successful placement:

> I enjoyed the ... placement more and also learnt more. It fitted me more. I didn't feel like I was changing myself to suit my mentor's vision or checklist. I felt like I was working with someone on the same page as me. (Jess, interview)

Pupils were begrudgingly released from lessons for extra Maths, but sometimes the HoD would contact the Head of Year to try and 'over-rule' such requests from 'core' departments. Jess readily agreed with this approach which stemmed from a passion for the subject and the desire for pupils to benefit from as much lesson time as possible.

In these cases, placement experiences within departments where beginning teachers feel comfortable, based upon an alignment of values, and/or perceptions of personal support, were well-received. Something not shown through these reported perceptions are the ways in which contrasts with a more 'uncomfortable' experiences might actually be beneficial, or of the negative impacts of only experiencing a 'fitting in' and 'alignment' with pre-existing beliefs and values.

Dismissive

The final departmental type, dismissive, was illustrated by Jess's descriptions of disparaging comparisons with other departments, a powerful HoD, a lack of collaboration or teamwork within the department, and contempt for the OFSTED agenda.

The HoD sought to articulate a sense of superiority over other departments by focussing upon successes achieved with students whom other departments regarded as 'challenging'. As such, the department actively sought to 'prove other departments wrong', by achieving stronger outcomes with pupils, by encouraging them to complete work, express their own views and to have faith in themselves. Therefore, whilst both self-promoting and dismissive departments might both be characterised by engaging in neoliberal competition between departments, judged against easily measured metrics of student numbers and grades, in dismissive types there is perhaps a stronger emphasis on self-elevation via casting aspersions on other departments.

Jess also encountered a divergence in teaching styles and expectations between the HoD and her mentor; the former adopting a structured approach, compared to the latter who encouraged creativity, fluidity and flexibility. This added complexity to successful placement navigation and resulted in wariness from Jess when dealing with the HoD. This was intensified by their dominance within the department, coupled with their strained relationship towards other departmental members. For example, when assessing pupil work, the HoD would overrule colleagues, which intensified an unhealthy perception amongst departmental staff the HoD was more ruthless in moderating their classes. This was handled with a resigned acceptance 'as they didn't want to deal with the hassle', but nonetheless within earshot of Jess they engaged in comments such as 'she has decided without us again', or 'ignored our advice again'. On Fridays, when the Head of Department was not in school, Jess reported that the remaining departmental staff held a 'mini celebration...which speaks for itself'. Unlike the hierarchical department type, where a strong HoD uses their influence to provide direction, in a dismissive departmental culture there is far less consistency and consensus.

Non-collaborative decision making over the length and content of a scheme of work imposed by the HoD also resulted in difficulties with lesson planning for Jess, exacerbated

by a perceived lack of supportive exemplars from her mentor. She described the ways in which being caught amidst such a conflict 'limited' her teaching, although she also felt that this unhealthy working relationship indirectly taught her to appreciate the importance of good communication.

There was also a sense within the department that OFSTED was viewed as a 'tick-box exercise', without an appreciation of the nuanced context of individual schools, or departments. Any such contempt was intensified by the declared impending retirement of her mentor, who revealed to Jess that she had no intention in changing her approach or planning for OFSTED and 'if they don't like it that's their problem'.

This department type contributes to previous research that focuses mainly on more positive examples, such as in Childs et al.'s (2013, p.52) terms, 'the collaborative nature of most of the departments that we observed suggests a rich and lively dialogue already exists…' Dealing with differences seems to be a particularly challenging and important area for beginning teachers and ITE partnerships to address because of the apparently overt barriers it creates to a 'careful examination' (Burn and Mutton, 2015) of practice. There are also implications for school leadership: in what ways might more collaborative cultures be encouraged? To what extent does the leverage provided by exam results and student recruitment mask other significant aspects of teachers' work?

Conclusions and limitations

There is an obvious sense in which the opportunities that beginning teachers perceived to exist in these quite different departmental cultures are exactly that: *perceptions* that are related to these individuals' own previous experiences and personalities, and which are generated through social interactions with other teachers in the department. The highly situated, social and individual nature of these perceptions has important implications for teacher education. This research offers further support for previous accounts arguing for greater attention to be given to the departmental level for teacher education and educational research. Our typology builds on previous accounts of departments through the ways in which we have tested an initial proposal of types and then combined the refinement of this with in-depth discussions about departmental cultures with beginning teachers. The

stark differences between departmental cultures reported here supports the contention of previous research that the departmental level plays a vital role in shaping beginning teachers' experiences and learning, acknowledging differences between large 'core subject' departments and small elective subjects. Departments are a key and still underexplored site for transforming teacher education (Ellis and McNicholl, 2015) within which beginning teachers formatively construct their cultural values and epistemologies.

Our data highlighted some of the ways in which new regimes of accountability and corporatisation are reshaping the ways in which departmental cultures are constructed and enacted. In particular, the ways in which exam grades function to direct and justify the priorities and work of departments are hard to overstate. The power of performative measures of success (such as student numbers and grades and how teachers (particularly beginning teachers) might navigate these discourses involves engaging with ethical dilemmas. The corporatisation of some of this decision making, positioning teachers in relation (below) to seemingly anonymous bureaucracies, further complicates the ways in which beginning teachers might best be inducted into the profession. Creating space for dialogue – including disagreement – about what are inherently contestable issues seems to be a particular aspect of this challenge that would benefit from further attention.

Across ITE partnerships, the complexities of navigating difference might operate at different levels. It is interesting that one of the founding principles of the Oxford's ITE model (the Oxford Internship Scheme) is an appreciation of difference and the expectation of some disagreement (Benton, 1990). In the context of strongly-felt standardisation logics in some of the schools and trusts these beginning teachers experience, expecting and building-in scope for disagreement feels revolutionary. At the individual level there are opportunities to better prepare beginning teachers to learn from (what they might perceive to be) 'difficult' departmental cultures. We are offering this departmental typology as a tool for practice to provide a means of better understanding departments, supporting beginning teachers, mentors and HoDs to critically reflect on the kinds of cultures they are working in, constructing and reproducing: there is nothing fixed or inevitable about them.

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