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Staff development (INSET) policies to support the use of IT across the curriculum: the good news

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Abstract
In a context of many other changes in the education service, schools are being presented with the additional challenge of providing appropriate in-service education and training support to existing teachers to enable them to use IT in their own subject disciplines. It is a challenge that is being met with varying levels of success.

This paper reports on part of a research study carried out in 29 secondary schools in five local education authorities, spanning England and Wales. The research has been concerned with investigating the processes by which the IT-related INSET needs of staff have been identified; how provisioning strategies have been determined; and how the effectiveness of the INSET given has been evaluated.

Although there are significant problems to overcome which have been discussed by many others (e.g. see 1,2), the focus for this paper is the positive findings. It reports on aspects of practice which are regarded by the participants as being the most effective.

Introduction
Over the past five years, a significant number of changes have been introduced to the education system in England and Wales. Not least amongst these changes have been those engendered by the introduction of the national curriculum and by the policy for giving schools control over their own finances. As a result of these and other developments, local authorities and schools have been faced with meeting numerous requirements, many of which are enforceable by statute. One of the new requirements is to introduce information technology as a tool across the curriculum. Clearly this generates a staff development need and, in order to assist local authorities, central government have earmarked specific funding for addressing this need. This was originally made available under the LEATGS and ESG schemes but, more recently, these have been combined under the GEST scheme. In addition, LEAs and schools have used a proportion of the resources that they have obtained for pursuing TVEI objectives to either directly or indirectly support IT-related INSET.

This paper reports on a research study aimed at investigating the overall effectiveness of the systems established for meeting the IT-related INSET needs of teachers in the secondary sector. In particular, it focuses upon some of the strategies regarded as most effective by the central staff in LEAs and the staff in schools by whom they have been adopted. The research study covers 29 schools in five LEAs and the findings relate to the period 1988-1991. (Readers interested in obtaining fuller details of the design of the research are advised to refer to 23)

Findings
As might have been predicted, the dynamic nature of the educational environment has generated both problems and opportunities for those concerned with promoting the IT-related development of secondary school teachers. The manner in which local authorities have responded has been influenced, interalia, by both their history of involvement in this domain and by their general views about interventionism. There have been both positive and negative results but within this paper attention is focussed on the former since the intention has been to produce a document that can be used as guidance by those involved in practice. However, it should be noted that very few existing systems for delivering IT-related INSET have been formally evaluated. Moreover, since the ‘solutions’ adopted are, in many cases, context dependent they would require some form of adaptation before they could be adopted elsewhere.

Within such a brief paper, only a subset of the findings can be reported. These shall be presented in three categories: resourcing issues, skills of trainers and environmental factors. Within each of these categories consideration will be given both to initiatives that lie within the control of LEAs and to those that schools can take.

a) Resources
Pragmatics suggest that, in a context of significant change, and bounded expenditure, it is unlikely that local authorities will be able to commit a
substantial amount of their own resources to IT in
general, or to IT-related INSET in particular. Given
this assumption, the main opportunities for making
progress on resourcing issues would seem to be
either to attract funding from other sources or to
use existing resources more effectively. In practice,
authorities have tried each of these approaches.

With respect to the former, that is securing extra
resourcing, there was evidence of moves being made
by some LEAs to generate revenue by commercial
exploitation of their own skills and
materials. Two authorities had made an attempt at
marketin their curriculum materials and another
one sold INSET provision to teachers of other
authorities. (In all of these cases the main objective
of raising funds was to subsidise the authorities'
own INSET programmes.) At this latter authority,
there was also an endeavour to attract IT resources
through collaborating closely with industry and
commerce. It was estimated that this policy had
resulted in a million pounds worth of hardware and
software support, either in the form of loans or gifts,
being acquired over a three year period.

Although the above strategies have all had a measure
of success, they also have their limitations. To be
able to attract money from selling INSET provision
or curriculum materials, an authority has to have
‘products’ that are distinctive from those of other
LEAs and which are available at affordable prices.
Given that the overall size of the market is limited,
the likelihood of many LEAs attracting a significant
amount of money via this means is low. Regarding
loans or ‘gifts’ of computing resources, a number of
instances were uncovered where there was a clearly
stated, or even contractual, expectation about what
sponsors wanted in return. For instance, in one
case, where a school had received kit from a major
computer manufacturer at half price, they were
required to deliver a number of training cum
promotional events for local industry and commerce
in the ensuing twelve months.

Some creative approaches were being adopted to
managing within the existing resource constraints.
For example, at one LEA a policy decision had been
made to equip the authority’s IT centre only with
monitors. Teachers attending courses were
expected to bring computers with them, it being
argued that kit should not lie idle in LEA centres
when no courses were in progress. (Monitors were
held centrally in order to reduce the bulk of
equipment that teachers would have to bring with
them.) In three authorities, IT advisory staff pooled
their resources with those of other subject specialists
in order to finance IT-related INSET provision that
neither could have financed independently.

b) Developing the skills of trainers

It is almost a truism to state that in order to be
capable of delivering IT-related INSET to specialists
in other subjects, providers need to have both IT
skills and a good understanding of the domain in
which it is to be applied. Nevertheless, in practice,
it was atypical to discover an authority where a
major strand of strategy was concerned with building
a base of such potential trainers. A significant
exception was where an IT adviser, who also
happened to be an ex-English specialist, was staging
a course for school IT co-ordinators. The objective
of this INSET was to provide the trainees with the
capacity to empathise with their English colleagues.

Other instances of developing trainers were more
marginal in nature. In one authority, the ESG-funded
IT advisory teacher had an informal arrangement
for working with advisory teachers for mathematics
and science in order to enhance their awareness of
IT applications and their own IT skills. However, the
latter were constrained to work specifically in the
primary sector. In a second LEA the problem of
combining IT skills with other subject expertise had
been solved by establishing temporary two person
training teams. For the duration of an input to a
school, the IT advisory teacher would collaborate
with a school-based subject specialist in order to
give school-based INSET to colleagues of the same
discipline.

In all of the authorities there was some form of ad
hoc arrangement whereby IT advisers would attempt
to enhance the IT skills and knowledge of their
adviser colleagues. However, it was usual to find
that both parties had other work commitments
which led to the time available for such initiatives
being very restricted.

c) Environment

It could be argued that the rate of change within the
education service over the last five years has been so
rapid as to make the adoption of a considered
approach to any development problematic. However,
authorities and schools were pursuing a
number of policies which could, directly or
indirectly, benefit the development of IT-related
INSET. These will now be presented.

Firstly, consider those policies specifically relating
to the IT context. A number of schools had made
attempts to improve staff access to computer
hardware and software. Their strategies included
making kit available in staff rooms and allowing staff
to take kit home at weekends and holidays. At some
schools, computers would even be confiscated from
departments failing to use them in order that they
could be redeployed in those where more interest had been shown. In one authority, the LEA had funded the purchase of a machine specifically for staff use for each of its secondary schools. This had been accompanied by a self-teaching package which had been developed within the authority.

An ‘environmental’ factor of concern to many LEA staff was the possible effect of the introduction of LMS upon hardware and software requisitioning policies. It was felt that the opportunity for shared training experiences would quickly be lost if schools opted to buy a diverse range of IT equipment. In order to counter this trend, LEAs had adopted a number of measures ranging between coercion and inducement. In one authority, it was clearly signalled that all LEA-based training provision would be based upon a particular machine; in another, the authority gave schools a financial incentive to buy a particular system.

Apart from these IT-specific strategies, it was discovered that schools and authorities had instituted policies aimed at fostering INSET developments more generally. For example, at one LEA, all pupils throughout the authority finished early in the afternoon on the same day each week in order that staff could hold meetings and attend in-house INSET provision. Although most of what took place within this time was defined by the schools as fitting in the former rather than the latter category, in many cases it appeared that the distinction was arbitrary. Meetings held to discuss the implications of statutory requirements for curriculum development could just as easily be defined as self-help INSET sessions. In another authority, all schools in a district were required to share a common closure day each year to enable district-organised INSET to take place. When operating at its most effective level, this led to the skills and expertise developed by teachers in one school being successfully shared with colleagues in neighbouring institutions. However, given the competitive ethos underpinning the introduction of LMS, there must be some doubt as to how long such a practice can be sustained.

Surprisingly few schools made use of the recipients of out-of-school INSET to share the expertise that they had acquired in any systematic way with their colleagues. Where strategies had been developed, there was a perception that it was both effective and enjoyed by both ‘deliverer’ and recipient but, in the majority of cases, little attention appeared to have been given to finding a way of setting aside the time for this process to occur.

Conclusion
The scale of the task of providing appropriate IT-related INSET to all teachers is daunting. Many have argued that it is not practicable within the resources available, and the author has some sympathy with this view. However, creative and imaginative approaches to solving the problem of providing sufficient support have a contribution to make. This paper has outlined a number of the approaches adopted by LEAs and schools. Although each on its own may have only a limited effect, the cumulative impact of implementing a combination of these measures could be significant. If one of the objectives enshrined in government’s original LEATGS proposals is to be successfully addressed, namely ‘that there would be more effective management of the staff development of the teaching force’, it is essential that attention be given to the development of a more sophisticated approach to the determination of local INSET policy.

References
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