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

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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 This was originally made available under the LEATGS and ESG schemes but, more recently, these have been combined under the GEST scheme.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 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.

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...
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 marketing 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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