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How and why we need to change INSET days...

INSET days just do not work – and we should stop pretending that they do. They are often grossly inefficient and appallingly wasteful of precious resources. But what can we do to make them better? In this *Best Practice Focus*, **Joel Wirth** considers how INSET needs to change if they are to be an effective part of whole-school CPD practice



The Emperor's not-so-new CPD: Why INSET must change

Let's be honest, on one matter, we're almost all naked. In terms of training, especially grand, top-down INSET days, we might have carefully constructed sketches of the beautiful outfit that we are wearing and reams of apparent evidence that our sartorial glories have dazzled the paparazzi. There may well be acolytes surrounding us testifying to the wonders of our wardrobe – even promising to wear something similar themselves.

But nothing will change the naked truth of it all. Staff training just doesn't work and we should stop pretending that it does.

Last year's fashion

Take the belle of the professional development ball – the INSET day. What should surprise us all is that the traditional INSET day has held on so long.

In 1988, when training days first appeared, change was most decidedly needed. As a child of the 80s, I saw at first-hand the state to which the profession had sunk. At my school, the students went on

strike in response to the countless days lost to industrial action on the part of teachers. Clubs didn't run. Trips hardly ever took place.

But it was worse than that. Students got abandoned. Friends of mine – talented young men and women – left adrift in "the system". No extra yard from their teachers. No intervention – only a sort of laissez-faire "they'll-get-back-what-they-put-in", pre-determinism. An apparently indifferent surrendering of professional agency.

Lord Baker's twin response was the national curriculum and, as the hoary-handed sons of the soil in the staffroom will tell you, to take five days "holiday" and re-purpose them so that they fell within the directable days of a teacher's contract. They became the final five in the 195.

Since then, of course, the changes have never really stopped. The intervening 34 years have seen an endless round of initiatives – structural, doctrinal, pedagogical, systemic, contractual – all of which have sought to wrestle with the abiding enigma of the nation's education system.

The national curriculum has been morphed and remorphed, but is now – if we're speaking frankly – pretty much gone, prey to the new mantras of institutional independence and curriculum intent.

But INSET days are still here. Still hanging around, trying desperately to be relevant and useful.

We can call them what we like. They were Baker Days at the start, way back in the day-glo haze of 1988, long before most of the current profession had entered a classroom in anger, but they soon became Teacher Training Days or INSET Days or Professional Learning Days – or whatever you know them as.

The constant shift in the nomenclature should tell us something. It only ever happens to things we're not sure about, or are embarrassed about, whose status is uncertain or whose purpose is unclear. Re-branding is the first sign of enduring shame or inevitable redundancy.

I'm proposing that it is time for a change. It is time we all act the part of the small child in the crowd, who – as the emperor passes,

clothed only as the midwife should see him – refuses to go along with the prevailing delusion of the crowd. It's time we called it out.

It's the teachers, stupid

Nothing is more important than teachers' on-going professional development.

Let me please be clear. If any of this reads like the standard rant of a cynical, staffroom mood-hoover, then I need to retrench.

School – college – nursery – university, when looked at in granular detail, are very little more than the sum of countless daily, hourly interactions between human beings who know "stuff" and other, mainly younger human beings, who we as a society think need to know this "stuff". Through those interactions, "stuff" is delivered, and we call this process "learning".

As an economy rooted deep in the mercantile tradition, the system within which we work has defaulted to a very transactional view of what education is. Ofsted's current focus on all things curriculum is an aspect of this.

Curriculum is the embodiment

of learning – it is what makes learning tangible. Learning is encoded in curriculum intent statements, schemes of work, lesson plans and learning objectives and then measured in marked books, assessments and, ultimately, in institutional data. It has a palpability about it that lends it gravity.

Curriculum is the Higgs Boson of education, deferring mass upon learning. In this way, learning can be *weighted* and, as such, it can be weighed.

It also means that it is open to misinterpretation or mis-weighting. During the maddest periods of America's descent into the quagmire of the Vietnam War, the progress of the conflict was measured in Body Count.

Vietnam was not a war defined by traditionally measurable things like the gaining of territory or the surrender of battalions. Instead, a firefight or bombing raid or the torching of a Vietnamese village was deemed a success in terms of the numbers of bodies counted – of dead Vietnamese.

The more bodies – soldiers, yes, but also women, children, civilian non-combatants – the better. Known as MacNamara's Fallacy after the US secretary of defence for much of the war, it is easily summarised, as many of you will know, as: "If you can't count what's important, you make what you can count important."

The curriculum is crucial, of course. But we have to accept that it is largely contingent and open to significant change over time – subject to shifts in politics, technology and the economy.

English, history, RE, geography – we follow the faint outlines of the national curriculum or we decide for ourselves what we teach. Whether you start year 7 with an arrow in the eye or atop a ziggurat in Ur, it's still history.

Science and maths have shifted, perhaps more glacially, especially as technology or deepened knowledge and understanding have taken hold.

Someone who studied A level chemistry or physics back when Bros were enjoying a non-ironic burst of fame might marvel at how our understanding of the atom and the fundamental fabric of reality have changed since those days.

But the interactions – those countless daily interactions, the

medium by which the learning has been traded – well, they haven't really changed.

Yes, of course, societal shifts have seen radical changes in the relationships between teacher and student. Language has evolved. The economy has moved from industry to services, so expectations have moved, differently in different areas of the country. We have many a mile to travel to reach an equal society, but we are closer now in some areas while in others, especially in terms of economics, we are more unequal than our great-grandparents would ever have recognised. But the contact point for learning is still the same.

I vividly remember an INSET day amid the halcyon glories of the Building Schools for the Future era about classrooms. Of course, by that, I mean I remember this one moment from the many hours we spent on the issue (I rest my case, M'lud).

We were shown images of classrooms over time – from Plato's Gymnasium through Shakespeare's schoolroom and Victorian church schools to the modern day. The presenter asked us to consider that it was time for something different – that the model of one person with a big desk at the front facing this way while many smaller people, who often had to share a desk, faced the other – was in need of an overhaul.

That wasn't the conclusion I drew. What struck me was the durability of the alchemy. Whatever that was, that was what worked, and our task now was not



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to rethink it or rebrand it but to do the hard work of making it better.

Students do not learn from your curriculum, they learn your knowledge from you. Teachers are the stewards of those countless interactions: they either initiate them or they lead the response to those initiated by students (in the form of answers to questions, poor behaviour, etc).

Until we redesign our fundamental understanding of career-long teacher learning so that teachers are placed completely at the core of all that we do – not data, not the curriculum, but teachers – we will go nowhere.

Why don't INSET days work?

This exercise is best done with a colleague. Think back over the last three INSET days you've done (don't count any safeguarding training – that's different – we'll get to that). Pluck out five things you can remember that will ever make a material difference to a single child.

Just five. From 18 or so hours of teacher time. Just five.

That is 18 hours multiplied by the 80 teachers in your average-sized school. So, actually 1,440 teacher hours.

Three, if you can't do five.

While you're thinking, I will just work out how much that costs – 1,440 hours is 1,265 (a full teacher's annual hours) plus another 15%-ish – it's about a teacher and the leg of a second teacher. I think we could compromise that it is somewhere in the region of around

£60,000. Look at the efficiency of the outcome for the investment! Your few things on one hand (multiplied by all your colleagues), £60,000 on the other. If you've got your three or maybe even five things now, weigh them against that.

Often, this inefficiency is the very best thing about INSET days. It's what some staff quite like. It is why we put them at times in the year when we are just easing people back into things (stand up September 1 and January 4) or when they need a break (December 1 – nice).

However hard the senior leadership plan them, and I know how thoroughly they are planned, they are still grossly inefficient and appallingly wasteful of precious resources.

It gets worse. Now, check your three or five things against your colleagues'. They're bound to be different. Indulge me here.

One of those INSET days included a session on questioning for the whole of the teaching staff. It was led by a talented teacher, six years into their career, who had bravely stepped up to deliver. There was a PowerPoint, a hand-out, they had even circled the chairs because you're peers and all that – the teacher was pretty good.

They had been asked to present by the assistant head who leads on teaching and learning (why is it never the head?) because the assistant head wanted you all to hear "someone else's voice".

They even gave it a prime INSET slot at 9:30am. The assistant head knew it was an important session because they had read the feedback from 60 lessons last year and "questioning" had been written down somewhere on the very complicated lesson observation sheet as a "thing" in 38 of those lessons. Quite a "thing". This session was the answer to the problem of 38 teachers having a "thing" about questioning.

Let's start with the other 22 of the 60 for whom questioning wasn't a thing (or at least, not a written-down-on-the-form thing). What's in this for them? They might get something from the experience but broadly they are not too bad.

But immediately, a third of the room thinks "this isn't for me". Of the remaining 66%, some have forgotten that questioning was a

“ And therein lies the core madness of INSET days. A programme that costs £100,000 of teacher time per annum, per average school and nobody thinks it's for them ”

thing they had because the observation was last term. They also hear the teacher start by talking about open and closed questions, which they don't think is a thing that's ever been mentioned to them – they too drift off, comforted that there are evidently some other teachers less talented than themselves who really need this stuff – it goes on.

So, that colleague of yours with the different list of remembered INSET content – it can't be a surprise that you have got different things. At no stage are you likely to have thought "this is for me".

It might be for Ofsted. It might be for the senior leadership. It might be for almost all of the other teachers who are clearly no good at this stuff because we're having to do a session on it – but it's not for me and it's not for the children I teach.

And therein lies the core madness of INSET days. A programme that costs £100,000 of teacher time per annum, per average school and nobody thinks it's for them. So, no-one remembers five things. Or three.

Okay. I accept the charge of being a touch too provocative – I'm sure there are colleagues who do remember stuff, who might have changed *something* about something they do – but I'm not prepared to accept that this is good enough.

Those changes that colleagues have made – a tweak here, a mini-whiteboard there, a think-pair-share to the left, a slice of thinking time to the right – did they make these changes with any sense that they thought (or knew) that these "somethings" would be the answer to whatever *thing* had been written down on whichever lesson observation form was used when someone last came in to see them teach? And if as I suspect not, where are they getting the real help from?

Looking but not seeing

As a profession, we paint in primary colours. In the example above, questioning is just one such colour. It is a thing we see when we go into classrooms, which is either done well (rarely) or, more commonly, sub-optimally.

But we all know the shades and nuances of questioning. Often, it becomes the byword for teacher exposition – the bit we do at the

start of lessons before giving them their bigger bit to do for the remainder. All of that – from the moment we finish the register up to "Right. Get cracking" – that's all comfortably housed under the roof of questioning.

Questioning during exposition is the thing that stops us being lecturers. It's the thing that Gradgrind never did in *Hard Times* – and no-one wants to be like him.

It's the social glue that seeks to make teaching a collegiate process, something that "we're all in together". If we do too much talking, that's usually phrased as "insufficient questioning" or "no checks on learning/progress" in one form or another. Whenever we do deign to engage the young folk, we get in to "too many closed questions" or "insufficient thinking time given to allow open questions to 'land'" or "not enough opportunities to support students to develop their answers" or "insufficient attention paid to whether they answer in full sentences, using a 'stage voice'" – that list goes on.

Teachers tend to know their subject onions. They are the experts in the room, the sage on their stage. So, if anything goes wrong in the first 10 minutes, it is unlikely to be a subject knowledge issue. If it is not something to do with the performative elements of the role (speaking too quietly, poor eye-contact, not managing learning or off-task behaviours – another long list) then it has to be the fault of questioning.

Looked at another way, if you have ever left the first 10 minutes of a lesson thinking that the teacher is not cut out for the profession, it will be because of those foundational blocks of classroom management and subject knowledge.

Such experiences are, mercifully, increasingly rare. For the overwhelming majority who you think just need a tweak here or a ratchet screwdriver there, you'll

likely settle on "questioning".

Questioning covers almost everything that is done in classrooms as part of active pedagogy. In the colour-by-primary-numbers of the profession's current take on professional learning, it is red. And all the staff (only some of whom have a "red" mark on their feedback form) troop into a space where someone who's quite good at red demonstrates their quite goodness in the hope that others will somehow absorb a zen-like state of "quite goodness at questioning" through simple exposure to it. This is INSET by osmosis and it doesn't work.

Time to break the cycle of failure

Let's look at a fairly representative training day

We take the task of professional development really seriously and, as we have seen, we invest time, money and our professional reputations in making such occasions work.

INSET time is prime real estate – a mere 30 hours of direct interface between the leadership of the school – who have all those objectives and priorities from the development plans to get going with – and its staff. Only 30 hours to do so much and to be so persuasive as to the clarity of our purpose and the right-mindedness of our vision for the direction of future travel.

But look at your last INSET day on teaching and learning. If yours were anything like the majority, you will have had an all-together-in-the-hall-listening-to-the-head bit (an hour at most – they do like to talk), then a-something-on-teaching-and-learning-involving-groups/cascading/stations/feedback/meeting staff from other departments/thick markers and sugar paper-fest (maybe 90 minutes).

Then, if you are allowing the learning to settle, there'll have

been the what-does-this-mean-for-you/your department/faculty-bit-back-in-one-of-your-classrooms – another hour.

You might have been asked to produce an action plan – a slightly runty offspring of the grander senior leadership team action plans which sleep undisturbed in filing cabinets on the Corridor of Doom.

By now it's lunch (do you feed them?) and, like the kids, the staff are all done with learning about whatever it is you were doing. So, the afternoon is often given over to "department time", a period dappled with other meetings (ECT mentors to the left, pastoral leads to the right, dyslexia champions to C107).

Senior leadership let go of the reigns and retreat to their offices (or circulate to prove that they are still "of the people"), congratulating themselves that they have covered what was on their agenda.

INSET by osmosis.

Most of the feedback from teachers will have been positive – and there will most assuredly be someone who has "really got something out of the day" – but only because their expectations are so low.

If you're brave enough to ask teachers: "How will what you have experienced today materially impact students' experiences in your classroom?" – my guess is that they will find some mollifying platitude to keep you at arm's length.

My second guess would be that a well-aimed learning walk a month later would disabuse all concerned of the notion that it's made any difference whatsoever.

Permit me a brief counter argument. While they're often the most bum-numbing experiences, INSET days are probably the best vehicle we have for the delivery of important information: the Safeguarding, the Prevent update, the Identifying Harmful Sexual Behaviours training. But if the aim of INSET is to foster real professional development though personalised learning, we have to stop doing those big days and try something different.

So, where does the evidence point?

Since 1988, there have been approximately four million INSET



days run. That's 24.5 million hours of professional learning, not including staff and department meetings or sharing-best practice twilights. The internet is awash with companies, speakers, authors, specialists, all of whom offer you exactly the snake oil for the particular condition you are experiencing.

All of which makes it all the more staggering that such little academic enquiry has taken place into what actually works in terms of on-going teacher learning.

Many of us will have justifiably applauded the general move towards an evidence-based approach to professional development (especially that espoused by bodies such as the Education Endowment Foundation and Chartered College of Teaching), which has been important because there are arguably aspects of what is done in the name of teaching that are optimal.

Take mathematics, for example. As a nation, we have learned to cower in awe at the strides made by the systems of China, Korea, Japan and Singapore in perfecting whole elements of the teaching of calculus, algebra and arithmetic.

In Japan, there are nationally agreed ways of teaching certain

elements of mathematics that no teacher would contemplate challenging as a matter of course.

In Britain, in each of the four separate systems in operation, teachers are largely at leisure to develop approaches of their own. In Japan, the evidence from countless hours of lesson study, shared learning, evaluation and academic rigour is amalgamated and it is decided that *x* is the optimal way of delivering *y* and that all teachers should approach *y* via *x* until such a time as the evidence points to a more impactful method.

In Britain, there is no central authority. Our system is more atomised. While it might struggle to match the systems above in terms of progress and achievement in mathematics, our experimentation and flexibility bring other strengths. But clear evidence on what works is not one of them.

A look through any series of academic journals will substantiate this. Therein, you'll usually find a variety of individual articles, each fully foot-noted, complete with citations, each of which pay testament to the author's grasp of the complexities of their chosen thing, each suggesting that this "thing" does indeed have an

“ When was the last time you saw someone else teach? Or, asked another way, when was the last time you experienced being a student in a classroom? ”

impact. What you will tend not to find is any sense that this impact is the optimised maximal impact.

We are uncomfortable with dictates from on high that seek to decree that *this* is how we ought to do it. Ours is a system of individual teacher units (in that way, we reflect our broader society as completely as, say, the Singaporean system reflects theirs), each empowered to decide for themselves what suits. Where many of the systems listed above are set menus, ours is more of a buffet, where teachers can eat as much as they like of what they fancy. Evidence plays very little part in it.

It is, as such, unsurprising that we persist with the current model

of on-going teacher development. Our training tends to offer tools, strategies, approaches, experiences, which we then allow professionals to filter, amend and employ as they see professionally fit. We offer them a smorgasbord and even let them pick off the gherkins.

All of which makes it imperative that we radically change what we are doing. If you will permit me an oversimplification: the unit of delivery in the overseas education systems discussed above is pedagogical (this thing is done this way) and the teacher is deployed to deliver that pedagogy. In the UK, that unit of delivery is the teacher (it is my professional view that these things are best done this way).

In our system, evidence – while always worthwhile – will fail to bring about significant change because its focus is pedagogical and that is simply not how we do things.

The radical change we require is either to adopt a system where teachers' autonomy is restricted, allowing pedagogy and evidence to come to the fore – to be clear, not a step I am advocating – or to accept the more atomised system we have, place the individual teacher at the very heart of it, ➤



and build personalised training provision around that teacher for the entire duration of their professional career.

Those are fine, non-controversial words. No Trust CEO or assistant headteacher deployed to deliver on-going professional learning will believe that they are doing anything other than “placing individual teachers at the heart” of their own career learning.

But if we have got anywhere in this article, it is – I hope – to a point where I suggest that they are wrong. Such assertions are disproved by countless, forgettable, impotent, impact-less training events that fail to move anything in the classroom – though we all had a nice lunch.

Holding our hands up

You’re a teacher. You’ve been teaching five, 10, even 20 years. Think about what’s worked for you in that time. Try and identify the lightbulb moments or crossroads experiences you have had where you’ve realised that something you do could probably be done better. You might be fortunate enough to be able to put your finger on any number of occasions of blinding self-realisation. You might have had a really successful coaching experience.

More likely, you’ll be among the majority who feel that they’re better now than they were before but have only a vague sense of how that’s happened – something to do with *experience*, absorbing stuff

over a career of fly-bys or near misses with other professionals, a dash of trial and error, a teaspoon each of happenstance and blind luck.

Let’s pause there. That is a sobering realisation. You’re better – but you don’t know *how*.

And, hang on – are you better? Or are you just better at the routines you do? That year 7 scheme of work is as familiar to you as an old cardigan, you can deliver it straight from the PowerPoint; it’s just *Othello* again with year 12, you do this every year. Is your improvement real or simply performative? Are you more efficient or are you just more efficient? And how would you even know?

It’s time to be kids again

Now let’s face the staggering reality of on-going professional learning for teachers in most schools in this country. When was the last time you saw someone else teach? Or, asked another way, when was the last time you experienced being a student in a classroom?

Herein, I would contend, lies the issue. In what other profession does this happen? Not in the legal system (where barristers vie with each other on a regular basis in the courts system); not in the medical profession (do you imagine for a moment that a surgeon is allowed to carry out a procedure without seeing it done countless times before?); not in dentistry; not in social work, brick-laying, film-

making, professional sport, arc-welding, accountancy, plumbing – need I go on?

You can’t learn these trades by being shown a video and then getting on with it, but teacher training is often little more than that.

After that intensive scrutiny of the early years, you’re off – left to glide on serenely, making it up as you go along, hoping to survive the annual/bi-annual visitation from clipboard-carrying senior leaders with their over-complicated, lesson observation form.

To be clear, I know you’ve seen your colleagues. You’ll have walked in and been un/impressed or indifferent to whatever’s going on. You’ll have absorbed some of what your colleagues know and do

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But I don’t mean that. I mean the deeply nourishing experience of being in another colleague’s room for an extended period of time – 20 minutes is optimal – experiencing the delights of their knowledge as a student.

You’re not simply (or even mainly) watching them, you’re being a part of the learning. You are asking yourself critical questions: What’s working here? Why do they/ don’t I do that? Why is that disengaged student over there not engaging? Why haven’t they moved over there to say that because the students over there can’t see the board? Why are they telling them the answers now – hell, I think I do that?!

And you’re being a student, experiencing the often-thin gruel they get on a day-to-day basis, spotting the busy work, the well-intentioned card sort that falls miles wide, taking out a mini-whiteboard when none’s really necessary, and realising that many lessons – from the perspective of a student – are aimless arcs of activity with an at best passing regard for a unifying sense of incremental learning.

Here’s the solution

Enough now with the arch scepticism, it’s time to get positive. There is an answer to all this. There is a way of delivering outstanding professional learning while – and get this – actually reducing the number of days of learning students lose. That’s right, *reducing* lost learning.

Interested? Then let’s get to it.

Before we start, we must all accept two foundational statements. If you are in broad agreement with me so far, then we have to be bold and accept as gospel two things:

- A classroom is a reflection of the teacher leading it.
- It’s never the kids’ fault.

These are the tenets upon which the new professional learning has to stand. Without an unquestioning acknowledgement of these inviolable truths, the system will be pulled inevitably into a culture of excuses and whinging “what about?-tery”.

These fundamentals make explicit and enshrine what is implicit in our system – a belief in

the teacher and the power of the teacher over pedagogy. If the teacher is the unit of delivery, central to success in the classroom, then we need to state that very publicly. Everything else follows.

The Teacher Learning Day

Dear reader, I introduce you to, the Teacher Learning Day. A day of bespoke, self-directed, in-house professional learning that is the right of every teacher in your organisation.

This will require courage. It’s not something you can easily do by halves. It involves taking the bold step away from a one-size-fits-all, all in the hall together INSET day to a bespoke programme of professional learning – or two half-days – that the teacher themselves directs.

Teachers are limited only by the restrictions of cover (see below). They can choose a day when they would normally have five classes and no-one will blanch at the idea of all that “disruption to learning” because the benefits will far outweigh any interruption to the normal flow of things. Teachers can be trusted to minimise the impact on their own exam classes.

Parents will love it. If one of your INSET days is being handed to your teachers, then you will only be having four days where school is closed to students. Who knows, in time, maybe only three. Or two. There’s rarely a panacea – but this might be it.

Not the watched but the watcher

“Get into classrooms” has been the *crie du coeur* of the profession for years but, even where it’s done, it’s often done partially. Usually it means senior leaders getting into classrooms. If not, it means an open-door policy (door rarely opened) or a gimmicky week of “come and see my lessons – I’m trying something new today” (door rarely opened).

Elsewhere, there will be a “quick pop in”, or a learning walk, or – naturally – formal observation.

The Teacher Learning Day is something subtly but radically different. A change in delivery, methodology and focus. It works simply. Visiting teachers sit at desks with students, not off to one side. There is no form to fill in. They experience the lesson as a student. They don’t ask those Ofsted

questions (“Tell me, Iram, is it always like this?”) nor do they plan to circulate.

They participate in the learning, they even answer/ask questions of their colleagues and contribute to class discussions. They attempt tasks that are set. At all stages, they are active and curious about learning. They are asking themselves questions. How am I feeling now? What am I not understanding? Do I understand where the lesson is going and what territory we’ve covered? What is being asked of me in terms of previous or external knowledge? What assumptions are being made at this point? Have we missed an opportunity there? Is this a safe space to be wrong? What happens if I am wrong?

And, for every question, the imperative follow-up: this classroom is a reflection of this teacher, so what is the teacher’s part in me feeling this way? How are their teacher behaviours affecting my learning behaviours?

Visiting teachers are treated like they’re on an external course. They aren’t contactable for the duration of their participation. They wear a different-coloured lanyard to show that they are involved in professional learning. They stay 20 minutes in each classroom and leave behind a positive postcard for the teacher. They identify things they enjoyed. There is no developmental feedback, no areas for improvement or EBIs. The teacher is thanked and praised and nothing else.

A teacher can visit three classrooms in an hour. Fifteen lessons in the equivalent time of the average INSET day. Optimally, they’d visit 10 to 12 in that time and spend the rest of the time reflecting on what they have seen. Everyone gets visited, no matter their standing, not just the usual go-tos, the Hermione Graingers of teaching and learning who get seen all the time by others wanting to understand “how it’s done”.

Paying for it

Scrap an INSET day from the calendar and give it to everyone of your teachers. Calculate the number of days that is for your school and increase your cover supervision team to meet the anticipated demands – 100 teachers equates to 100 days, 200 half-days or 20 weeks of lesson

“A day of bespoke, self-directed, in-house professional learning that is the right of every teacher in your organisation”

supervision, approximately 50% of a cover supervisor. That’s £18,000 per annum including on-costs. Take it from your training budget, reduce to near zero the external courses people go on (be positively Scrooge-esque with this) – for the best INSET guaranteed that your staff will ever have, it feels like a bargain. The benefits will be manifold. Take a moment to imagine the impact such a simple change might engender.

Impact

In the institution I run, there are no targets as part of the appraisal process. Instead, we ask teachers to reflect throughout the year on one question: How am I continuing to improve as a teacher?

If you ask yourself now, how would you answer that question? How do you imagine other staff would respond? Usually, you’ll get stuff about how they’ve recently revised schemes of work or that they’re working on questioning or something about a course that they’ve been on.

We don’t have a profession where staff are effective at honest self-reflection, especially with regard their own behaviours. But this is something different and I’ve seen it work. We take this approach to professional learning and we evaluate teachers’ experiences – both of visiting and being visited – and feedback shows that they see it as the best INSET they’ve done.

I need to make clear again, in case it wasn’t evident above, this is not an open-door policy. This is not

lesson observation or a learning walk. This is deeper, rooted in professionals experiencing lessons as students and reflecting profoundly on the implications for their own practice.

And what flourishes in the wake of such experiences? Real change. Real personal change. Genuine reflection on personal practice wrought through experiencing education through the eyes of its intended recipients, leading to changes in teachers’ behaviours.

And after? Informed and impactful conversations in meetings and staffrooms grounded in actual experiences. A deepened understanding of students in your organisation: a raised appreciation of the demands placed upon them and the challenges they face on a daily basis. This learning doesn’t float ethereally (as is so often the case for even the most highly-regarded research). This is learning that touches the ground in every classroom in your school and changes everyone who participates.

At the start of this article, I described schools and colleges as nothing more than the daily accumulation of countless interactions between students and teachers. Much of your response to everything that has followed will depend on the extent to which you are prepared to go along with that way of looking at what we do.

Even curriculum and assessment, crucial channels of interaction between the knows and the know-nots, are toothless while ever we fail to focus on the contact point of delivery.

Everything else, the uniform, the badge, the motto, the building, the daily grind of the “other”, the blah, the blah and the blah – all just white noise. In this interpretation of education, what I have described above – a bespoke and absolute focus on the transaction point of learning – is the living manifestation of school improvement.

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INFORMATION & REFERENCES

- ▶ SecEd: Creating an effective CPD culture across your school, *Best Practice Focus 13*, November 2020: <https://bit.ly/2QmCp0E>
- ▶ SecEd: For our archive of CPD best practice articles, visit <https://bit.ly/3C73472>
- ▶ SecEd Podcast: The SecEd Podcast: Overcoming barriers to effective CPD, May 2020: <https://bit.ly/3v2Qz5E>