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Publisher: Routledge

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British Journal of In-Service Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjie18>

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Published online: 12 Sep 2006.

To cite this article: David Wray (1989): Negotiating Needs in School-Focussed Inset, British Journal of In-Service Education, 15:3, 145-149

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0305763890150302>

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Negotiating Needs in School-Focussed Inset

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Beginning in the late 1970s as a reaction against the observable ineffectiveness of much traditional in-service provision, school-focussed INSET has made a great deal of progress in both its theoretical underpinning and its practical implementation. It has acquired a rigorous rationale (Henderson, 1979), been the subject of major research investigation (Baker, 1979), and amassed a wide variety of case-study reports (Wray, 1984a). Such evidence as exists seems to suggest its effectiveness (Wray, 1984b, Baker, 1979). More recently it has received firm official backing, being the model upon which government initiatives in the INSET field have been based. Through the allocation in the recent Teachers' Pay and Conditions of Employment legislation of five days per year when teachers should work but not teach pupils (the so-called Baker days), schools now have the time to plan and run their own in-service programmes. This has coincided with changes in INSET funding arrangements so that, under GRIST, schools are now financially responsible, either individually or in clusters, for their own in-service development. School-focussed INSET is very much becoming the dominant pattern, and for many teachers, their involvement in in-service work is greater than it has ever been.

Despite this welcome increased profile for INSET, however, some problems have already begun to emerge. These stem basically from the simplistic philosophy upon which developments have been based, namely: give schools the responsibility and the wherewithal to organise their own in-service, and this will lead inevitably to effective development. This is naive in that it assumes firstly that schools *can* specify clearly for themselves what they need in terms of INSET, and secondly that they know how they can get what they think they need. Lots of schools will be able to do these two things, but for many others they will be problematic.

The second of these problems will be readily recognised by most schools who have tried to find visiting speakers for their in-service activities. There do not appear to be enough appropriate and effective speakers to go around, and reports have begun

to appear in the educational press (Bailey, 1988) satirising the activities school staffs have sometimes been asked to engage in during their 'Baker' days. In addition, if the school tries to do without input from an outside expert, they run the risk which has always been recognised (Henderson, 1979) as endemic to school-focussed INSET, that of parochialism. School staffs sitting down to share their mutual ignorance about a particular topic might be characterised as school-focussed incest, rather than INSET! There is, of course, no simple solution to this problem, chiefly because it is inextricably linked with the first problem mentioned above. If schools cannot define precisely their in-service needs, then they stand little chance of getting the appropriate input to satisfy them. The problem of needs-definition is paramount to the whole issue.

Yet surprisingly little attention is given to the difficulties involved for schools in formulating their in-service needs. Under the GRIST arrangements a common pattern seems to be for groups of head-teachers to gather together to agree priorities for in-service for their schools. They may or may not have consulted their staffs beforehand. Even if they have, this system works under the assumption that teachers (and heads) find it quite simple to articulate their needs. This assumption seems also to have been made by researchers. The only major research project to investigate school-focussed INSET so far (the SITE project, Baker, 1979) used as its mechanism for determining needs a straightforward questionnaire. In other words, teachers were simply asked, 'What in-service do you need?' It is small wonder that, given such unsophisticated methods of determining needs, the responses made are usually unsophisticated too. From personal experience, when requests come from schools for in-service help, they are usually phrased in terms like, 'Can we have a session on the teaching of reading', or 'We would like some input on the development of oral skills', or even, as recently received, 'We would like a session on the development of language in the primary school'. With such broadly expressed requests it is very much a matter of chance if the resulting in-service session happens

to be precisely what is needed, although it is possible, of course, that such imprecisely expressed needs do not entail sufficiently developed sets of criteria for judging the effectiveness of particular sessions and courses. Participants may be more inclined to judge sessions on their enjoyment rather than on their fitting precise needs.

The above remarks are not meant to be patronising to teachers. Almost anybody would find it difficult to respond precisely if asked what their needs were. The task implies a degree of self-criticism which does not come easily. It also has within it a certain circularity which can be self-defeating. Areas in which we feel ourselves in need of some help are not likely to be areas about which we know enough to analyse precisely what help we need. If we could analyse these areas in sufficient depth, we would probably not really need the help. Evidence supporting this argument can be seen when we look at attendance patterns at the old-style in-service course laid on in teachers' centres etc., with voluntary attendance. It was certainly more likely to find teachers at these courses who were interested in their topics and therefore knew sufficient about the area to make the course attractive, rather than teachers who knew nothing at all about these topics and went to the course to find out.

There are strategies open to schools for more systematic determination of their development needs (Abbott, Steadman and Birchenough, 1988), yet even those rely upon staff members identifying their own weaknesses. Areas in which teachers and schools feel themselves to be weak need not necessarily be the areas in which they actually are weak. Again the enterprise is threatened by possible parochialism.

Yet the basic argument behind school-focussed INSET is still surely correct. There is far more likelihood of in-service having an effect if it is seen by recipients as meeting their needs, and if it is targetted on whole-school needs rather than the diverse needs of individuals. This then gives us the problem of how to ensure that INSET does adequately meet the needs of teachers and schools: needs which they themselves may find difficulty in expressing. One possible way forward in this will be discussed later in this article, after first being illustrated by a case-study of school-focussed in-service in action.

School-focussed INSET: a case-study

The school involved was a large junior school,

which had recently moved into new open-plan premises. A new head had been appointed and a further appointment had been made of a senior teacher with special responsibility for developing a school language policy. The remainder of the staff were a mixture of established and younger teachers. The school was designed around three large 'areas', served by a central hall, and a central library. Part of the general staff development in the school, peripherally important to the work described below, was to accommodate ways of working to the demands of open-plan architecture.

Because of the newness of the head and senior teacher the staff were conscious of the likelihood of change, although they had few clear ideas of the direction this would take. At an initial staff meeting to discuss the development of a new policy for language, they were asked to state their priorities for development. It emerged very clearly that, although they had mixed feelings about the idea of change, they did see the need to 'do something about' the central library. This was not really surprising as the library was at the time stocked with rather delapidated and old books (the oldest was dated 1914, but showed evidence of quite recent use!), and was, to put it kindly, lacking in organisation, both of which facts had led to its being treated badly by the children. Some of the newer staff also asked if the school could buy some newer reading schemes, the schemes currently in use being *Ladybird* and *Pirates*.

As a result of this initial meeting it was put to the staff that they should help formulate the new language policy through a series of discussion groups. The idea was greeted with a certain amount of relief as the staff seemed to feel they would be able to have some influence upon what and how they were subsequently asked to teach. Three groups were formed, each with the task of looking at a particular area of the language curriculum. The groups were to be concerned with: Reading, Writing, and Poetry/Drama. The staff volunteered to join a group and, with some persuasion, the groups began with more or less equal membership. Each group was given a three-fold brief. They had, over a two term period, to produce:

- a) a policy document for discussion by the whole staff,
- b) guidelines for the purchase of new resources for their area,
- c) a plan for a programme of mainly staff-led in-service sessions to familiarise everyone with the new policy.

The teacher with responsibility for language development was a member of each group, although not the leader. The groups aimed to meet fortnightly during lunch-times or after school, and many of their meetings were also attended by the head-teacher, and some by advisers.

The rest of this case-study will focus on the working of the group concerned with Reading, but first some very brief details of the results of the other groups will be given.

The Writing group produced the following documents:

- a policy for the teaching of handwriting and the presentation of written work,
- a policy for the teaching of spelling and punctuation,
- guidelines for widening the range of children's writing, the types of audiences they might write for, and the introduction of a more reflective approach to writing.

This group tried to introduce revision and drafting into their own classrooms and subsequently became powerful advocates to the rest of the staff of this process approach to writing.

The Poetry/Drama produced the following resources/documents:

- a thematic anthology of poetry for the staffroom,
- a collection of poems with accompanying suggestions for how they might be introduced and developed in the classroom,
- a collection of ideas for drama.

They also ran a series of workshops involving the staff in poetry presentations, and organised several demonstration drama lessons led by outside 'experts' and by themselves.

The Reading Group

A more detailed account of the results of this group's work will be given as an illustration of an alternative procedure for self-determination of IN-SET needs.

This group began with two clear needs already identified, as explained earlier, by the school staff. These were:

- a) the need to reform and reorganise the central library,
- b) the need to rethink the school reading scheme.

The satisfaction of these needs generated further

needs, as will be described.

a) The reform of the library was a reasonably easy task. A sum of money was allocated to this and two members of the group were given the responsibility for purchasing new fiction and information books. Other members of the group went through the existing stock discarding very old or very tatty books and rescuing and repairing others. Help was sought from the local Schools' Library Service who offered a cataloguing service, and the information books old and new were catalogued according to the Simplified Dewey system within a fortnight. Some new furniture was acquired and the room brightened up by the use of posters and the acquisition of some new book display units.

As the library became a much more pleasant place it became noticeable that it began to be used more heavily, both by teachers with whole classes and by individual children. As this happened several teachers commented that they were concerned that their children did not really understand how to use the library. This concern transformed itself into a request for some help on the teaching of library skills. The teachers had identified an in-service need for themselves but, most importantly, this need had only been articulated as a result of an initial reform. It is an example of what will be referred to later as a 'negotiated need'.

b) Having the brief to 'rethink the reading scheme' inevitably forced the group back to basics. They had to examine what the rationale was for having a reading scheme in the first place. After some discussion it became clear that nobody in the group believed that the school should have *one* core reading scheme. Rather, they wanted to have as wide a choice of reading material as possible, with an easily intelligible system for choosing books appropriate to the needs of particular children. As a result of this decision, several tasks then set themselves. The group had to organise for a parallel reading scheme system (Moon, 1980) which involved:

- looking carefully at current resources and potential new acquisitions,
- arranging these into difficulty levels,
- determining criteria for when children should change level,
- formulating guidelines for other staff on how to use the system and the books.

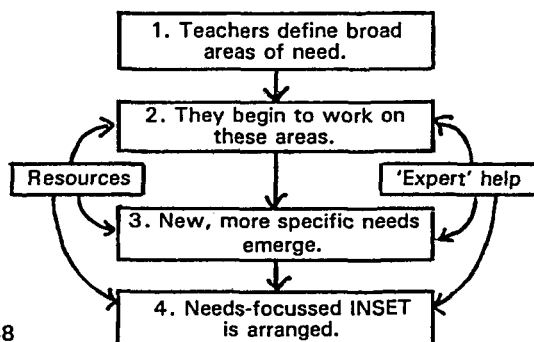
In carrying out these tasks the group became very aware of the quality of the books they were including and began to exclude series they were

doubtful about. They also began to wonder about the efficacy of a structured approach to teaching reading and requested some in-service input on the teaching of reading with and without schemes. Again in-service needs had emerged through a process of negotiation.

Other examples of this process also occurred. One teacher in the group expressed the desire that they should 'sort out' the resources available in the school for the teaching of phonics. What she wanted was to be able to locate material to teach a specific phonic rule without having to wade through pages of books of exercises. Two members of the group volunteered to work on this by assembling a phonic resource bank. They commandeered a two drawer filing cabinet from the head's office and labelled each file with a particular phonic blend. Thus there were files labelled 'ai/ay', 'silent w', 'magic e' and so on. They then went through all the books of phonic exercises in the school, with the help of two volunteer parents, and cut out pages and exercises and filed them in the appropriate places. When this was finished it meant that any teacher who wished to do work on a specific phonic rule had only to look in the right place in the filing cabinet to find a selection of appropriate teaching materials. The effect of this was startling. Once they understood how the new system worked, several members of staff spontaneously commented that there was no longer any point at all in them giving whole classes the same phonic exercise. They could individualise their teaching at a stroke. As a result of this, they asked if they could spend a staff meeting discussing ways in which they could rapidly assess which phonic work individual children needed. Again an in-service need had arisen as a result of other work.

The needs-negotiation process

What emerges from this case is a process by which members of a school staff were able to define some very precise in-service needs for themselves. This process can be modelled as follows:



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It is clear from the case-study, and the model, that the process is not really self-sustaining. It is unlikely that any progress would have been made without the input of resources and/or expert help, even if this were limited, as in the case-study, to that provided by the school curriculum co-ordinator. The attractiveness of the model, however, is that this 'expert' help does not need to be of the kind that can provide solutions to identified problems. It is a different conception to that of the external consultant. The expert in this model need only have the knowledge to be able to work on very broad issues, and to recognise when and how to narrow these down. As has been shown, this narrowing can occur spontaneously as part of an attempt to work upon broader initial need formulations. Having negotiated precise needs, answering these can involve external, recognised 'experts'.

What are the implications of this model for the INSET process?

The major implication would appear to be that, rather than INSET providers starting from a position of assuming almost complete ignorance on the part of their clients, they need to take the time to determine:

- (i) where these clients are in their thinking about a particular topic,
- (ii) what the clients see as their needs,
- (iii) what the clients see as appropriate next steps,
- (iv) how the implications of these next steps can be recognised and articulated by the clients,
- (v) how these articulations can be formulated as precise INSET needs,
- (vi) how changes in resource availability might influence the needs-determining process.

As this process is essentially one of negotiation, it inevitably has major time implications. In terms of effectiveness though, it is likely that the most crucial part of the process occurs fairly early on as teachers work on their broad definitions of needs and more precise definitions emerge. If INSET providers can assist at this point, it may be that the time they spend later on in delivering actual INSET courses will be much more effective due to its much closer targetting. Time spent in negotiation of needs may save a great deal of later delivery time.

Conclusion

School-focussed INSET has always been ostensibly based upon a problem-solving model of innovation (Havelock, 1971). A weakness in this

model is that it assumes that problems can actually be articulated by institution members. What has been lacking in much school-focussed INSET work has been a mechanism whereby awareness of problems and needs could be raised. The major point of this paper has been that negotiation is a crucial element in such a mechanism, and that this element requires a great deal more attention from INSET providers if they are to be really effective in their provision.

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