

overheard at the extra-curricula café

Baffled by Inset

Cappuccino: Whilst waiting for you to turn up, I read in the paper that parents are baffled by 'Inset' days.

Latté: I'm not surprised. First they were Baker days, then Staff Training days. I wonder how many parents know what 'Inset' is?

Cappuccino: They probably think it's something to do with pest control.

Latté: Quite possibly.

Cappuccino: That's probably what most headteachers think it's for, although the pests they are thinking of are members of staff.

Latté: Actually, most members of staff are baffled by Inset days too.

Cappuccino: I remember when they were first invented, they were rather resented by old timers.

Latté: You mean staff who knew everything?

Cappuccino: Yes, I remember speaking at a twilight Inset in one such secondary school.

Latté: What was that about? The provision of old people's homes for retired teachers?

Cappuccino: No, twilight meaning 'after the school day'.

Latté: Not for Mr Chips then?

Cappuccino: I finished my session and asked if there were any questions. There was a long silence, so to break the tension I said "Well, if there are no questions, perhaps we can all go home."

Latté: And?

Cappuccino: There was a stony silence, broken by a wag at the back who said, "We can't. It's directed time."

Latté: What happened next?

Cappuccino: The headteacher took over and I melted gratefully into the background.

Latté: Do you remember how staff meetings were filled with frantic calculations about directed time?

Cappuccino: The phrase 'twelve-sixty-five' is full of meaning to teachers of a certain age.

Latté: Yes. The notion that hours written on a time sheet equates with effectiveness is somewhat flawed.

Cappuccino: I knew a school where staff were required to clock in and out, to ensure they did the hours.

Latté: That's ridiculous. What about people who took work home and worked all evening and at weekends?

Cappuccino: That's what the staff argued. They demanded that the headteacher kept the school open until ten p.m. each evening, so they could carry on working.

Latté: And did he?

Cappuccino: The headteacher realised that he would have to pay for extra heating and the site manager's overtime to keep the school open.

Latté: What happened then?

Cappuccino: They set up some kind of ambiguous system of record keeping which was impossible to verify, since much of the work was done at home.

Latté: So the head turned up in the evenings at teachers' homes with a clipboard to check that they were marking pupils' work and weren't watching 'Waterloo Road' on television?

Cappuccino: No. The system took early retirement along with the head.

Latté: What do you think about Inset days?

Cappuccino: The same as I think about coffee shops.

Latté: What?

Cappuccino: Some are excellent, like this one. Others you would not want to be seen dead in.

Latté: I've seen many dead teachers at Inset days.

Cappuccino: Now you need to explain yourself!

Latté: Teachers deliberately not engaging. I remember one art teacher who painted eyes on his eyelids so that he could sleep whilst giving the impression of being wide awake.

Cappuccino: I suppose you can't blame them, after desperately trying to engage with pupils every day?

Latté: Is that a pun?

Cappuccino: Not intended, but I think that some parents thought that Baker days were for preparing some teachers for alternative careers in the catering industry!

Latté: Well, the Inset culture has created a whole industry for course leaders and gurus of various kinds.

Cappuccino: What's the best Inset you've been on?

Latté: Ah, that's easy. Many years ago we all turned up expecting a dull and depressing day.

Cappuccino: It's strange how so many talented teachers sound so boring when addressing their own colleagues.

Latté: Indeed. Well, after some introductory stuff which frankly I cannot remember, we all put our coats on and walked around the school catchment area.

Cappuccino: What on earth for?

Latté: Many of the staff lived miles away, drove in their Volvos to school each morning in their bubble of isolation and had no idea what the environment was like for children to grow up in.

Cappuccino: Was it useful?

Latté: Oh, yes. Staff could empathise with the pupils' struggles and lack of aspiration. Pupils were treated much more sympathetically after that.

Cappuccino: I wonder what parents thought of that Inset?

Latté: Just like today: baffled. Some things don't change. ■