Association of Teachers and Lecturers
Press Release

Press office: 7 Northumberland Street, London, WC2N 5RD
Direct line: 020 7782 1589 | Switchboard: 020 7930 6441
Out-of-hours: 07918 617466 | Email: media@atl.org.uk

3 September 2015 – embargoed to 00.01 hours on 4 September 2015

Speech by Kim Knappett, president of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) at the president’s reception in London on 3 September 2015

Please check against delivery

The Three T’s – Time, Talk, Trust

‘May you live in interesting times’ – often referred to as the Chinese curse - was a quote that was frequently used when I was at the beginning of my teaching career many moons ago. At the time I saw it more as a blessing as I am one of those people who likes a challenge and who gets bored easily, but now, nearly 30 years, five prime ministers and 13 secretaries of state later, even I – the person who loves to be busy - has had enough. I've had enough change to last the rest of my career – even if I can't retire until I am 67!

One of the first things that changed as I entered the profession was the introduction of Baker Days – or INSET days – or even INSECT days, as some Key Stage 1 children call them. What was wrong with them, I hear you ask? Isn't good quality CPD what education professionals are constantly asking for? Well let me tell you – they were the start of the 'one-size-fits-all' training and the start of teachers doing 'busy' work.

It was bad enough that those five Baker Days were taken from our holidays. But to make it worse, we were made to sit through whole school training sessions which had little, if any, relevance to our day-to-day teaching, and we still had to give up more of our holiday to tidy up from last year, and more time to prepare the resources and classroom for the new students before they arrived. If you drive past any school at the end of July or the start of September the evidence is clear to see – committed support staff, teachers and heads doing the things they know will have an impact on their students’ learning.

Some schools, however, have increased the range of CPD they offer – my own school is a case in point. Some of our INSET days are converted to twilights and we offer a smorgasbord of opportunities throughout the year for staff to choose from. And do you know what – I have had more positive conversations with colleagues about teaching and learning following those sessions this year than I have had from numerous whole school sessions in the past.

One of the themes for my presidential year is TIME – we need to reclaim our time. We need to stop doing things that have little or no effect on the pupils we teach and start to prioritise our own time – doing tasks that have a tangible impact on students.

Over 40,000 of us spent hours filling in a workload survey for the current Secretary of State last Autumn – but that was busywork too as, to date, the Government has not done anything that actually responds to our feedback.
We told the politicians that teachers were spending too many hours entering data that nobody needs or reads, that we spend too much time writing detailed lesson plans – not to improve our teaching or students’ learning, but in case someone should drop in and observe us.

Another thing that changed as I joined the profession was the introduction of GCSE’s and the National Curriculum. It was refreshing to be in on the ground of something new. In fact it was so new that in my first year as a London First Appointment, as NQTs were called in those days, I was asked to run a session for my colleagues as I had been ‘trained’ in these new ideas. What I remember about that time, apart from the fact that I spent the small budget I was given on wine to bribe people to come along, was that we TALKED, we shared our ideas and our concerns, and we figured out how it would work best for our students.

The second theme for my year is giving teachers space to TALK. In too many education institutions staff have become isolated by busy work and by the fear that Ofsted, performance measures, and league tables, both between and within schools, have created.

In the past, when you had a challenging pupil in your class you chatted informally over a cup of tea with colleagues and shared ideas about how to get the best from that pupil. When you noticed from informally sharing results that another class has done better than yours, you asked how their teacher had taught that section of the curriculum.

Now, once more, teachers and students are facing yet another set of changes to GCSE’s and A-levels. We haven’t had time to really get to grips with the best way of delivering the previous changes and yet again teachers across the country are, even this week, trying to prepare lessons based on new systems that no one really seems to understand. Too many of the conversations teachers are now having are about when the next bright idea and set of changes is coming, rather than about finding creative ways to support students through the changes.

Teachers and teaching assistants are some of the most creative people I have ever met – they want to find solutions and they want the best for the pupils in their care. Many of the solutions to the problems in education could be found if those with the professional know-how, who teach our children and young people on a day-to-day basis, were given the time and space to TALK and were listened to. Winston Churchill said: “Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.” My challenge to education professionals is to have the courage to TALK, and my challenge to the politicians is to have the courage to LISTEN – you just might learn something.

This brings me to my final theme – TRUST. When I started in the profession, teachers were trusted to do what they knew was best for the enquiring minds in their care. They were free to try new and different ways to get across a concept that they had observed students struggling with, to go off at a tangent, to slow down or speed up depending on the class in front of them. Now we have rigid schemes of work, assessment schedules that mean there is no time for learning to take place before we test pupils again, and marking policies that demand comments in three, or sometimes more, different colours of ink.
How does it help a child who is not able to read or understand English to have a comment written in their book? It is far better to have the conversation face-to-face and check the child understands. But today if something is not written down and recorded there is no evidence it was done, and schools believe Ofsted needs to see the evidence. A teacher’s word is no longer regarded as sufficient. So we spend hours on busy work just so those who are checking up on us can see that it was done.

And what about the improvements the pupils do in response to the comments? I have heard from colleagues who have been challenged during book monitoring on the grounds they had not given students the opportunity to respond to feedback because the improvements were not done in the correct colour, or were not headed ‘improvements’, or simply because the student was not present to do the work. Now everything has to be checked and double-checked and everything has to be perfect – or ‘outstanding’ in OFSTED language.

I am sure that many of you, like me, were not surprised to read last week of the crisis in teacher recruitment. We have seen over recent years a reduction in the number of people entering the profession, and now we are beginning to haemorrhage at all points on the career path. We have seen an increase in the number of new teachers who leave in the first five years. The number who see teaching as a lifelong career is diminishing rapidly and, of those who stay, hardly any want to take on the challenge of senior leadership or headship. But who can blame them when teachers are only regarded to be as good as the results of their last cohort of pupils or the grade of their last observation. And we have been told that, not only do we have a 1% pay freeze for the life of this parliament, but that not all teachers will get even that. If politicians, and society in general, do not begin to value teachers more highly then we cannot expect to attract more people into the profession or persuade them to stay.

Education is a profession and those working within it need to be treated as professionals. Both the general public and politicians seem to think that because they went to school they know exactly how all children should be taught. I have been numerous times to both my GP and the hospital but would never presume to tell my surgeon how to operate. I might be able to help them diagnose what is wrong with me by explaining my symptoms, just as parents and other professionals can often give us helpful information about the students that we teach. But we need to be trusted to use that information and the information we gain from working with their children to work out what is best for them and their education.

I’m not saying that teachers should be allowed to ‘just get on with it’ – of course we should be accountable for children’s learning, and for the public money that is spent. That’s why ATL, the union I’m proud to be president of, has developed a vision for inspection that holds us to account, and is supportive and knowledgeable too.

We’ve called for an inspection system that is locally based and peer-led. One that looks at key issues within a school and chooses its inspectors based on the issues to be inspected. One which acknowledges that there are more differences in the quality of education within schools than that between schools, so doesn’t give an overall grade but instead encourages schools to learn from the good practice within each establishment. And one which is overseen by a national body to ensure the quality and consistency of inspections.
This trust also applies to funding. Quality education cannot be achieved on the cheap. In many schools the cash available for resources is now significantly less than it was in the past. For many years funding has stood still while the cost of the essential resources has steadily increased. There is even a greater financial crisis in education for over 16s because the Government has cut the funding in both sixth form colleges and the FE sector and this is having a significant impact in the both the range of courses and the quality of learning available to many of our young people. The Government needs to give us the relevant level of funding and trust us to use it well.

When I started my PGCE year we were asked to think of a maxim for our career – mine was ‘Remember every child is an individual’. Despite all of the changes and challenges that have happened, and all of the barriers that have been put in place to make my job harder, I still believe it is true – every child has a right to learn and develop as an individual within a community. Teaching those children is one of the most rewarding careers, and I’m pleased to have been able to change the lives of many individuals.

My message to the Government, and to those who make the decisions that affect the education framework in which children and young people learn, is this. Every teacher, every lecturer, every head and every teaching assistant is also an individual – a professional who wants the best for every learner. So I urge those who make the decisions to give us the TIME to do the work that matters and most benefits our pupils. Give us the space to TALK, to share concepts, to solve problems, to develop new ideas. And, most of all, TRUST us – the education professionals - to know what is best and let us get on with the job; we can, and do, make a difference.

ENDS

Note to editors:
• The Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) is an independent, registered trade union and professional association, representing approximately 170,000 teachers, headteachers, lecturers and support staff in maintained and independent nurseries, schools, sixth form, further and higher education colleges and universities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

• ATL exists to help members, as their careers develop, through first rate research, advice, information and legal advice, and to work with government and employers to defend its members’ pay, conditions and career development.

• ATL is affiliated to the Trades Union Congress (TUC), Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and Education International (EI). ATL is not affiliated to any political party and seeks to work constructively with all the main political parties.