

HOW SUCCESSFUL ARE THE BRITISH TEACHERS' CENTRES?

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Teachers' Centres apparently have brought new verve to change processes in British schools. What does this seem to imply for school systems in America?

ONE OF the most significant movements in education in recent years in Britain has been the development of Teachers' Centres. While some of these Centres have been in existence for some years, the majority have come into being since 1967, when the Schools Council Working Paper 10 stated that Teachers' Centres were good and that every Local Education Authority should have one. The rush to get on the bandwagon was in full flight. New Centres sprang up throughout the country and at the present time there are over 650 such Teachers' Centres financed by Local Education Authorities in Britain.

Before the development of Teachers' Centres in Britain, teachers leaving their college of education and entering the profession as certificated teachers could frequently lead

a professional life of almost complete isolation within the classroom. One of the greatest contributions made by Teachers' Centres has been to break down the barriers and remove some of this isolation. The Teachers' Centre is a common meeting ground for primary and secondary teachers; for teachers with many years of experience and the newly qualified; for college of education lecturers and the practicing teachers; for classroom teachers and administrators. In the Teachers' Centre they can all meet as equals with a contribution to offer. This cross-fertilization of educational ideas may lead to better teaching and therefore ultimately benefit the pupils.

To judge by this phenomenal rate of growth, the Centres are meeting at least some of the needs of teachers. While these facilities vary considerably from area to area, nevertheless large elements in the motivation for starting new Teachers' Centres have been a growing consciousness of the rapid changes that have been taking place within

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the schools and an increasing realization that the old method of allowing new ideas to percolate slowly through the education system is no longer adequate. Vast and far-reaching changes are taking place in education and Teachers' Centres are attempting to respond to these changes. Teachers' Centres offer the opportunity for in-service education for local teachers; for curriculum development by locally-based groups; for dissemination and evaluation of national projects; offer support to teachers in the local area; and have created a new atmosphere of discussion and consultation.

Establishing and Operating Centres

While the Local Education Authority and its Education Officer are usually closely involved in the early stages of planning Teachers' Centres, once a Centre is set up it is the teachers who have the dominant role in its operation. Teachers have a majority on any steering committee thus making teachers feel the Centre is for them and reflects their views. Administration of a Centre is the task of a warden or leader and a small management or advisory committee to help him decide on the nature of the local in-service program, and the directions for development of the Centre. Usually one representative of the Local Education Authority which provides the money for operation of the Centre

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is on the committee, while the remaining members are practicing teachers. Teachers are made to feel that they are involved in all aspects of the operation of the Centre.

There is no rigid format for the establishment and operation of Teachers' Centres and there is, therefore, a great deal of variation depending on needs as construed by local teachers, their advisory committee, and the local warden. The rapid expansion of members of Teachers' Centres may well depend on the fact that the idea behind them is control by local teachers. Some few Centres still limit their curriculum investigations to a particular field such as mathematics or science, but most now attempt a more wholesale review of the adequacy of an entire curriculum by grade or age. Many Centres feature formal in-service training courses, others stress informal workshops, still others provide facilities for self-study.

A number of Teachers' Centres feature exhibits of new materials, and lecturers who may be parents, supervisors, professors of education, or others directly related to the education process; while others stress teacher autonomy through self-directed accomplishments of teachers to try to preserve the feeling that the teachers are doing the work for themselves, for their own benefit, and that the whole is not just somehow imposed by the ministry or by academicians from universities who are far from the scene of the action.

Facilities: What Is Essential?

While a few Teachers' Centres are situated in schools or colleges of education, the majority are now in separate buildings by themselves. It has been argued that they should not be in colleges of education or universities as this might result in their being too easily dominated by such institutions. This does not mean that many of the activities of a Centre cannot take place outside of the Centre building or be conducted by professors or other suitable personnel.

There are three basic essentials in providing accommodations: comfortable surroundings for discussion; a workshop with room enough to leave work or store it easily;

and facilities to provide a good cup of tea! Besides these basics, some Teachers' Centres also have some or all of the following: a science laboratory, audiovisual aids rooms, kitchens, various conference rooms, and offices for the warden and his staff.

Certain items of equipment must clearly be provided such as work tables, shelving and storage racks, display work, books, typewriters, projectors, a tape recorder, and other items beyond this basic minimum that the Centre can afford.

Most Centres include libraries of up-to-date and relevant books, various types of machines for reproducing papers, maps, tests, materials for preparing learning aids for use in the classroom, as well as audiovisual equipment. All of these are available for use by local teachers.

Program Based on Needs

The programs of the Teachers' Centres vary according to the needs of the local teachers who will only attend those activities which they feel will be of value and interest to them. To attract teachers and make them aware of the Centre, most Centres try to provide what teachers in the area want. The first programs in any Centre usually deal with fairly simple, specific curriculum topics. Study and working groups are limited as to aim and time so that tangible results can be produced in a short period of time. With more experience, longer and more complicated projects can be initiated.

In most Centres the larger part of the program comes after school hours and on weekends, but there is an increasing trend toward holding some courses during school hours with teachers being released to attend. Courses vary in length from one evening to those which require four or five weeks of one evening a week. Day courses of up to three days are becoming more common.

Communication Is Stressed

Centres use a variety of means of communication such as newsletters to schools, displays, traveling exhibitions, and face-to-

face contact between the warden and teachers. Principals are encouraged to become active in their commitments to Teachers' Centres as a means of attracting teachers to do likewise, and also because they are the ones who can give teachers release time to work at various projects. Some Teachers' Centres also publish a regular magazine which goes to all teachers.

Growth in development work is heavily dependent upon rapid spread of ideas. Centres need to have available information on what is happening in other Centres as well as knowledge and research relevant to their immediate tasks. Teachers' Centres are therefore urged to record the sorts of things they do. They are not to think that what they might be doing is too simple or fumbling, but to write down whatever types of things they are doing and to become a kind of clearing-house for local information.

Implications for Change

While the Teachers' Centre idea in Britain seems to be very worthwhile, it still would appear that the idea might not be best transplanted in toto to North America. Yet, there are certain aspects of the movement that might well be borrowed for use. The generalizations taken from policy statements of Teachers' Centres hold true anywhere, and these might well prove to be the most useful aspect of the Teachers' Centre movement for adoption elsewhere. Such ideas as the following might well be worth remembering:

1. Fundamental changes in education will come only through those charged with the basic educational responsibility, that is, teachers.
2. Teachers are unlikely to change their ways simply because outside experts tell them to change.
3. Teachers will take reform seriously only when they are responsible for defining their own educational problems, delineating their own needs, and receiving help on their own terms. □

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