

The Teachers Centre: A Critical Analysis

DAVID BURRELL*

A British educator analyzes the progress and the problems experienced by Teachers Centres in Britain. Nine pertinent questions are raised and answered.

I AM not the warden of a teachers centre. I work in the University of Sussex School of Education where we have organised a range of facilities and services for teachers. However, these are neither the same as nor operating in the same context as the typical teachers centre. I write therefore as an outsider, but as, I hope, a sympathetic outsider who sees the development of the teachers centres as one of the most exciting movements in British education during the last decade. Since the first one opened in 1964 some 600-700 have been created. Not all these are fully developed; nevertheless, except in the more remote parts of the country, there can hardly be a group of teachers which does not have access to a centre of some kind. Until now the picture has been one of smooth progression. Now, however, in a time of both reorganisation in education and economic cutback, questions must be asked of the centres, as they must be asked of every other aspect of education in Britain.

The questions have become more pertinent in the present period of economic difficulty when the commitment to centres by

the Local Education Authorities (L.E.A.) will be fully tested. Have the centres been set up merely as a result of bandwagon pressure, or do they reflect a genuine commitment to innovation and in-service education? Perhaps even more important, how will the L.E.A.'s respond to the decision, made by the Department of Education and Science, that significant use be made in the field of in-service education of the spare persons and plant made available in colleges of education? These new resources are the result of a reduction in the number of initial training places and of the reorganisation of the public sphere of higher education. It would be a pity if this decision were used as a justification for not providing the resources needed to move the centres out of what has been well described as their "cottage industry era."¹ The evidence at the moment seems to be hopeful; most L.E.A.'s clearly regard centres as a valuable asset to be maintained even in a time of economic stress. It is well they should, for if we are to provide the range of in-service opportunities needed in Britain all the available facilities will have to be de-

¹ R. Gough. "Teachers' Centres as Providers in In-Service Education." *British Journal of In-Service Education* 1 (3); Summer 1975.

*David Burrell, School of Education, University of Sussex, England

veloped to their full capacity. Before centres can develop in this way, answers have to be found to some of the problems they face. It would be wrong to be caught up in a euphoria about them and to assume that problems and issues do not exist.

The Differences

Before I go on to look at some of these problems perhaps I should briefly describe the main characteristics of the teachers centres in Britain. It is difficult to do so because, by their very nature, centres and the way they have developed make generalisations almost impossible. Some, especially the early ones, are specialist centres concerned with a particular aspect of the curriculum (maths, science, the teaching of reading); most have more general functions. Some have full-time wardens, some part-time; some have adequate ancillary staff, some have to exist with very little help for the wardens; some are closely connected with L.E.A. advisory staff and their activities reflect this, others are very much less influenced by advisers. They are all different, each reflecting very much the local situation from which they have sprung. But despite the difficulties it is possible to make reasonable generalisations about two major areas: functions and philosophy.

The Functions

On the whole centres have four major functions. The first is to provide a base for curriculum development and in-service education activities. What exactly these consist of will vary from place to place, especially since they are intended to reflect the expressed needs of local teachers. Major activities include the dissemination, consideration, and adaptation of nationally produced materials, the production of curriculum materials with a local flavour, study groups (on language development and mixed ability teaching, for example) and courses run by the teachers themselves or L.E.A. advisers. An important addition to the programme of course in recent years has been induction

activities for teachers in their first and probationary year of teaching. The second function is to act as an information centre for schools and teachers within the geographical area served by the centre. Sometimes, they form part of a wider regional information service. Their third function is to provide a range of services and facilities to back up and complement the resources of the schools. These are needed more by the primary and smaller secondary schools than by the larger secondary, but all benefit from access to the centres' reprographic services, equipment services (loan, repair, and maintenance), library facilities, and collections of curricular materials. Finally, the centres can act as a valuable social centre and informal meeting place for teachers within the area, although there is some evidence that social contacts arise out of, and are incidental to, other activities.

Assumptions

There is certainly nothing incidental about the philosophy of the centres. Indeed in some ways this philosophy is the most characteristic and significant aspect of them. Several basic assumptions are worth noting. First there is the notion that basic and effective innovation and reappraisal of work in the classroom will come about mainly through the efforts and activities of practising teachers, assisted by whoever can contribute in some way.

The second assumption is that there exists among teachers a vast reservoir of untapped expertise and experience. If they are given the opportunity, good teachers are capable of drawing on these and using them as a starting point for professional renewal and growth. The good practitioner is seen to have great potential as the trainer of other teachers. Third, it is assumed that centres can be effective instruments for reconsideration or development of current practice in the schools. The fourth assumption is that centres can provide a neutral arena in which teachers can work relatively free of constraints and pressures and the hierarchical assumptions often present in other training

institutions. Many would argue that the rejection of the latter is the initial decisive factor in the development of true professionalism among teachers. It is certainly associated with the idea of teacher control of in-service planning, for the fifth assumption is that centres should be organised and controlled as far as possible by the teachers themselves through the centres' programme and other decision-making committees. The function of the warden is mainly to act as stimulator and facilitator. In this way it is possible to ensure that the centres retain both flexibility and close contacts with the schools, thus making it possible for programmes to reflect quickly the immediate problems faced by the teachers. These are the assumptions that I wish not so much to question, although I will use that format in the remainder of this article, but to analyse and comment on.

The Questions

1. *What are the nature and characteristics of activities in the centres?* A glance at existing programmes stimulates the comment that, despite the rhetoric, a major activity is the traditional course, and that it tends, in the centre context, to be short in duration and very practically based, that is, it is apt to be principally concerned with the

day-to-day and immediate problems that face teachers in the classroom.

This is not true of all centres. Some have become well known for their work in developing the curriculum and for their encouragement of innovation in schools. But the fact that it is true of others, and that some activities came clearly in the "tips-for-teachers" category raises a number of issues, which I wish to explore.

2. *What is the spin-off for an individual, or a school, from participation in a course taking place outside the immediate environment of the school?* In-service education in Britain until now has been dominated by the course concept and the assumption that ideas and materials encountered by individuals in a setting external to the school can be successfully implemented in the school.

Courses, even school-focused courses, are necessarily conducted at a high level of generalisation. It is extremely difficult for an individual teacher (or even a group of teachers within a school) to relate the insights gained to his or her particular institution, especially since many within it may not share the enthusiasm or have been stimulated in the same way.

Those of us who organise activities outside the school, and this certainly includes wardens of teachers centres, have not faced



The Shilton Play School, Oxfordshire, England

Robert R. and Sarah H. Leeper

up fully to the problems of implementation. Attendance at a course, however successful it may have been in terms of participation, engagement, and even attempts to adopt the ideas afterwards, is not the same as actually effecting change in or reappraisal of the situation in the classroom. The dissatisfaction felt with current models of in-service education is reflected in the movement toward school-based models, with the emphasis on institutional rather than individual needs and problems.²

3. *How far are, or indeed can, the experience and expertise which teachers bring to in-service education activities be used to the advantage of other participants?* There is an obvious tendency for activities run by teachers for teachers, particularly if they are rather short in duration, to be merely a recounting of successes or the subjective pooling of experience. These can provide a valuable starting point for significant activities, but it is extremely difficult to move many teachers beyond this starting point. It requires skilled leadership, time for reflecting and analysis, and, above all, acceptance on the part of all concerned that the pay-off is not immediate and in some cases not even identifiable.

The problem is related to the broader issue of the place of educational theory in in-service education. Theory not related to practice, which is the usual case in initial training, is rightly held by teachers to be arid and irrelevant. It is becoming increasingly accepted that it is better to introduce teachers to disciplines such as psychology, philosophy, and sociology when they have had some continuous experience in the classroom.³ It is further argued that acquaintance with such disciplines will give teachers the tools necessary for a proper analysis of their classroom practice and a broader context for the reappraisal of that practice.

² For a full discussion of the problems involved in school-based work see: M. Eraut. *In-Service Education for Innovation*. National Council for Educational Technology, 1972.

³ For an exposition of this idea see Chapter 6 of H. Judge's *School Is Not Yet Dead*. New York: Longman, Inc., 1974.

Those who argue thus tend to underplay the problems inherent in the contention; particularly the difficulty of training teachers on a part-time basis in observation and analytic skills, and the paucity of educationalists with the ability to use theory to illuminate good practice. But there is clearly a great deal in the argument.

If it has weight, it has important implications for the nature of activities at all levels, including teachers' centres. Many teachers in Britain during the next few years will not find it easy or even desirable to obtain secondment for a full-time course. If they do not meet the theory of education in their teacher centre activities, where will they meet it?

4. *How far are teachers able to delineate their own needs? In particular, how far are they able to distinguish between immediate "pain" needs and more long-term needs?* Most teachers are rightly seeking help with the problems that face them now in the classroom. They have to be given help with these, and centre activities should reflect this. But often the immediate and identified problems are only symptomatic¹ of much more basic and long-term ones. These major problems can only be dealt with, if at all, through intensive study and work at the school as well as the centre. They also require a great deal of commitment, time, skilled leadership, and consultancy support.

The implications of this are that:

a. Teachers are, rather than merely should be, interested in this kind of activity and are prepared to visit the centre in order to engage in it. The evidence of attendance, particularly among secondary teachers, would appear to deny this, or at the very least to raise doubts, although it must be pointed out that attendance rates are variable across the country.

b. Teachers actually want to change either themselves or the institutions they work in. While this may be true in many cases, it would seem to be more realistic to start from the notion that many others see innovation as a source of anxiety, inadequacy, and insecurity.

c. Teachers are enabled by their con-

ditions of service to participate in lengthy and demanding activities. This patently is not true. The full implications of voluntary participation in in-service education in Britain have not been faced even by the drafters of the James Report and the subsequent White Paper.

d. The facilities and people of the Local Education Authorities and other agencies will be mobilized to help. In fact, L.E.A. advisers are fully stretched, and they are seldom used as leaders of groups of teachers within a school or a centre looking at a specific problem over a period. The opportunities for both them and individuals from other agencies such as colleges of education and universities to engage in cooperative field-work with teachers are limited and many do not have the skills.

e. Many wardens of centres have the time and skills to engage in the type of development work envisaged. But it remains one of the peculiarities of British education that we assume that someone who has been a skilled practitioner in the classroom or in some other role can transfer without training or with only a modicum of training into a quite different field.

We assume this with heads of schools, with lecturers in colleges and departments of education, and with teacher centre wardens. It is interesting that members of the newly-formed association of wardens at both regional and national level are setting up in-service programmes for themselves to improve their own skills.

5. *Is it possible to produce a programme of activities which at the same time is designed to meet the immediate needs of teachers, as expressed by themselves, and is also developmental over a period?* A balance between long-term progression and short-term flexibility is acceptable as a principle, but there is some danger that it becomes an unachievable ideal. The programmes of many centres are produced in a rather ad hoc fashion, year by year, or even term by term. It is difficult to see how such a programme can contribute systematically to the growth of individual teachers in a professional sense

over a period. There is a great need in Britain for the whole field of in-service education to become regarded as a continuum by both organisers and participants, and that means both coherence within programmes of institutions and close inter-relationships between

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programmes of separate institutions. There is little evidence as yet that this need has been fully appreciated (see question 9).

6. *How far is it realistic to talk of a programme based on teachers' expressed needs in the light of the L.E.A. position in relation to centres?* The programme in most teachers centres is decided by the programme committee, on which teachers form a majority. Nevertheless, there is evidence from some centres that an important influence in deciding the activities are the wishes of the advisory staff. Some would argue, as Eric Midwinter has done so eloquently and convincingly,⁴ that a major function of centres should be as “an authority's agency,” especially during periods of major reappraisal of the education service the L.E.A. is providing. He qualifies his argument in a number of ways, not the least being that the ultimate aim should be the professional development of the authority's teaching force within the framework of a higher degree of cooperation with that teaching force. Even with this qualification, not all wardens would agree with the notion, and many would doubt whether their activities are seriously circumscribed or influenced. But the very presentation of the idea does raise questions of how far centres can really be regarded as free agents, or indeed should be, when the L.E.A.'s

⁴ E. Midwinter. “Teachers Centres: The Facilitators.” *British Journal of In-Service Education* 1 (3); Summer 1975.

provide and therefore control facilities, finances, etc. It is a question likely to be greatly in people's minds during the next few months as the future of in-service education in Britain is discussed.

7. *Should centres serve teachers alone?* Many centres are seen by their wardens as a focus for various agencies that wish to cooperate with teachers. These agencies include social workers, doctors, youth workers, adult educationalists; in some instances inter-professional groups have been set up to study particular problems together. But as the name implies, teachers centres have on the whole been set up to serve the teachers in a particular area, and there appears to be a feeling among some teachers that they remain so.⁵ There is certainly a feeling that a widening of the clientele would make them less attractive to a number of teachers, who would fear that activities would not reflect their specific professional needs to the same extent. There is also a feeling among wardens that the centres at present face enough problems with the commitments they already have.⁶

Nevertheless, it seems to me that the time is approaching when the centres should be seen as an arena for the exchange of ideas and expertise between parents and all engaged in or interested in education and related problems. We may need to move slowly, but that should certainly be the direction.

8. *How should teacher centre activities be evaluated?* I don't know the answer to this question. It is one which applies to all in-service education activities in Britain. However, centres and all other agencies need to develop some clear procedures for the evaluation of their activities. We have to

⁵ H. Bradley, P. Flood, and T. Padfield. "What Do We Want for Teachers Centres?" *British Journal of In-Service Education* 1 (3): Summer 1975.

⁶ This feeling was expressed in a recent letter to the Times Educational Supplement (28.11.75) by the Warden of Manchester Teachers Centre: "It may well be that centres can eventually offer something of value to managers, governors, and parents, but most of them at present have their hands more than full coping with the declared needs of the teachers—let alone the enormous needs implicit in modern staff development."

move beyond simplistic ideas of head-counting, reports, and follow-up surveys.

9. *What should be the relationship of teachers centres to other training institutions?* The notion of the professional centre set out in the James Report and the subsequent White Paper raises the whole question of teachers centres and other institutions in their regional context. It is easy to theorize about the need to set up networks of institutions and activities, and see the whole field of services to teachers as a coordinated whole, but the practical problems are great. In Britain there exists the particular problem of getting institutions across the binary line and with a background of hierarchical assumptions to work together, but the effort has to be made.

The University-based Area Training Organisations⁷ have failed to provide an acceptable base for such regional coordination. New Regional Organisations are currently being discussed, but it is worrying that at present the discussion has tended to be about structure rather than purpose. Not enough attention is being given to the pressing need to provide for flexibility and equality of status between all agencies in the field of in-service education. One of the more important lessons learned from the emergence of teachers centres must not be overlooked.

These then are some of the problems that face those of us interested in maintaining and developing teachers centres in Britain. I am confident that they will be overcome and that centres will play an important part in in-service education here. I feel it is an open question whether the idea is transferable to the American situation. It would be a truism to state that if it is it will have to be heavily adapted. But the central notion is surely transferable, that is, the concept of the classroom teachers as experts and professionals in their own right, able and willing to take on the responsibility for much if not all of their own reeducation and development. □

⁷ Called Institutes of Education in some instances and Schools of Education in others.

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