

What's a Teachers Center For?

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"'Teachers,' 'teaching,' or simply 'learning' center, this kind of staff development program must gain its credibility and working constituency by expressing plain purposes that can generate teachers' intellectual energy and personal commitment."

THERE is a notion of teachers centers which is essentially an image of a *place*—small, welcoming, hand-built—where teachers come voluntarily to make things for classrooms, to exchange ideas, and to learn in a format of one-shot or short-series workshops rather than semester-long courses based on lectures and texts. Because this place is non-institutional neutral ground, teachers can let down their hair, drop competitiveness and defensiveness, and thus find starting points for self-improvement and professional growth.

There is another notion of *teaching* centers which emphasizes the *concept* or *process* of a local school district, college of education, and perhaps state department of education collaborating to meld preservice and in-service education in a new field-based institution than can make preservice more nitty-gritty practical, in-service more challengingly intellectual, professional credentialing more realistic, educational research more relevant, and professional performance more accountable.

Both notions are of course ideals. The

adherents of each tend to believe that the other notion is impractical—not the way teachers are or the way the school system works. *Teachers* centers are put down by some educational administrators as being pleasant but ineffectual because of their small scale, insistence upon teacher voluntarism in participation, and localism of leadership and purpose. On the other hand, some *teaching* centers have been ignored by working teachers who distrust them as just another blueprint for the same bureaucratic motions—which facilitate management by administrators and professors but do not enhance learning by teachers and students in classrooms. Luckily or unluckily, on the way to being realized, ideals are subtly blurred; and the actualities of both notions—teachers center and teaching center—show a good deal of comingling of streams of thought and useful compromise. Looking at centers across the country, one finds so many different combinations of programming, teacher participation, decision making, sponsorship, and financing, that no widely applicable “models” for building a new center can be delineated. If one seeks a model, it seems more useful to dwell on the *purposes* for which centers have been started, and the premises they project in teaching-learning interactions with teachers.

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Teachers Must Be More Than Technicians

During a 1974-75 study of some 40 centers across the United States, the writer and colleagues began by visiting centers identified with the informal education movement and drawing, to varying extents, upon the British open education and teachers center experiences. From this core cluster of centers the study moved to exploration of a wider group of centers which shared with the original group a priority for teaching teachers in a responsive rather than a training mode. An outcome of this study, describing 22 centers, is the book *Exploring Teachers' Centers* by Devaney and Thorn.¹

A premise which stands as a constant amidst a bewildering variety of teachers center settings and formats can be stated as follows:

Teachers must be more than technicians, must continue to be learners. Long-lasting improvements in education will come through in-service programs that identify individual starting points for learning in each teacher; build on teachers' motivation to take more, not less, responsibility for curriculum and instruction decisions in the school and the classroom; and welcome teachers to participate in the design of professional development programs.²

The common *purpose* which stands out as a bond linking widely dissimilar teachers centers is the aim to help teachers enliven, individualize, personalize, enrich, elaborate, reorganize, or reconceptualize the *curriculum* within their own classrooms. Study of scores of teachers center program offerings and calendars demonstrates center leaders' belief that help to teachers in the area of curriculum is the most teacher-responsive service they can offer. These centers teach teachers how to use manipulative, real-world, exploratory, frequently individualized curriculum materials and how to gradually reorganize classroom space and time to

¹ Kathleen Devaney and Lorraine Thorn. *Exploring Teachers' Centers*. San Francisco: Far West Laboratory for Educational Research, 1975.

² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

accommodate greater student activity and interaction. They engage teachers in adapting packaged curriculum materials, making their own materials, or building classroom apparatus, and often they involve teachers in some new study—often math or science—

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or craft so as to reacquaint them with the experience of being active, problem-solving learners themselves.

Such programs take place in settings which range from schoolrooms to whole school buildings, from storefronts to university classrooms, from warehouses or factories to suites of offices from which teachers center staff—“advisors”—go out to work with teachers in their classrooms. Sponsorship of teachers centers takes equally varied forms:

1. Independence—groups of teachers, former curriculum developers, and/or teachers of teachers, are associated in nonprofit corporations and operate with foundation grants, school district contracts, and participant fees.

2. Wholesale incorporation within a school district in-service department (local or county)—teachers center staff are employees of the school district and receive line-item funding supplemented with foundation grants, state and federal categorical moneys such as ESEA Title I, III, and VII, Follow Through, EPDA, NSF, desegregation, and mainstreaming moneys.

3. Service centers within universities in which space, one or more staff positions, and some operating costs are contributed by the university, and other support comes from sources such as those listed in 2 above. Some (not all) of university-based teachers

centers operate as partnerships between the university and one or more school districts (for instance, those at Minnesota, Syracuse, Connecticut, SUNY College at Cortland).

Focusing on the other idealized notion—that of a *teaching center*—one finds purposes relating to training: objectives held by colleges of education for field-based experiences for student teachers; objectives of state education departments for recertification of experienced teachers, perhaps according to competency schedules; objectives of local district officials for training staff in particular instructional systems, curriculum programs, or competencies.

It seems important to keep in mind such differences in originating purposes now that there is so much talk about a vague concept of centers as a way of reforming in-service education, and thus of producing change in schooling. Twenty years of national experimentation with school reform have produced no certifiable national panaceas, so the most recent variable that educational reformers have seized on to manipulate is in-service. The alternative style of in-service usually called neither teachers nor teaching center but simply *teacher center* appears to be a new kind of “staff development,” which might introduce change more successfully than external curriculum materials development has been able to do.

Clarity About Purposes

Clarity about purposes for the new or reformed staff development program can lead initiators of a center to those experienced centers that will inform them most meaningfully and provide the most readily translatable examples of program and process. For instance, American teachers centers which grew out of the recent spate of curriculum materials development—principally Elementary Science Study, Madison Project Mathematics, and Education Development Center Follow Through—naturally looked for instruction to teachers centers in England, which also had begun as places to involve teachers in learning and adapting

new curriculum materials—notably Nuffield Maths. The purpose to involve teachers in making curriculum materials for their own classrooms has shaped American teachers centers physical settings (conducive to experience exchanges and a participatory rather than a consuming stance on the part of the teacher), staff roles (emphasis on peer teaching and expertise derived from classrooms and curriculum development projects), programming and scheduling patterns (hands-on workshops, minicourses), and style of teaching (interactive, advisory, experience-based). A purpose to train teachers in a particular curriculum or system, or for specific skills competencies, results in different characteristics of setting, staff, program, teaching style.

Clarity about a center's basic purposes also will prove instructional in settling matters of governance: who manages a center, what program it offers for whom, how resources are spent, and whether teachers participate on their own or their employer's time. If a school district's administrators, in collaboration with a state education department and/or a college of education, choose to operate a center as a principal and official means of in-service, the organizations which represent teachers and other staff in their dealings with school management must be involved in organizing the center. The *manner* in which decisions will be made, and the constituencies who are to be involved in decisions, must be agreed on before substantive matters of programs, place, staff, needs assessment, scheduling, style of teaching, etc., can be addressed.

Clarity about purposes, and insistence that those purposes be derived from *local* needs, can mean that a new center will be a blend of both idealized notions: both teachers *and* teaching center. This seems possible when one observes the intense interest with which staff developers now examine the experience of the small, independent, teacher-involving centers. Begun primarily with purposes for individualistic curriculum development—certainly with no intention to design a blueprint for in-service education—teachers centers appear to be practicing some

principles of staff development that in-service theorists underline as imperative.

In-Service Programs Are Needed

In his introduction to the ASCD booklet, *Professional Supervision for Professional Teachers*, Thomas Sergiovanni calls for supervisors and trainers to target on improving the teacher's capability and opportunity to tailor classroom curriculum to students. "In the final analysis it is what the teacher decides to do day-by-day with students in the classroom that really matters and this daily encounter needs to be the focus of change."³

In the first essay in NEA's booklet, *Rethinking In-Service Education*, Roy Edelfelt and Gordon Lawrence cite "a number of clear and strong patterns of effectiveness" that emerged from recent research on in-service for the Florida State Department of Education.⁴ Among these are:

School-based programs in which *teachers participate as helpers to each other and planners of in-service activities* tend to have greater success . . . than do programs . . . conducted by college or other outside personnel without the assistance of teachers.

In-service education programs that have *differentiated training experiences for different teachers* (that is, "individualized") are more likely to accomplish their objectives than are programs that have common activities for all participants.

In-service education programs that *place the teacher in an active role (constructing and generating materials, ideas, and behavior)* are more likely to accomplish their objectives than are programs that place the teacher in a receptive role. . . .

In-service education programs in which *teachers share and provide mutual assistance* to each other are more likely to accomplish their objectives than are programs in which each teacher does separate work.

Teachers are more likely to benefit from in-service programs in which they can *choose*

goals and activities for themselves, as contrasted with programs in which the goals and activities are preplanned. (Emphasis added.)

The experience of those centers which incorporate some part of the teachers center ideal suggests that offering more than rhetorical opportunity for the teacher to become hands-on-involved in his or her own *curriculum* development is one efficient and practical way to accomplish the needs assessment, goal-setting, and programming functions that are essential for a *staff* development program. This involvement may not be appropriate for all school districts nor for all teachers within any one school district. The diversity of needs in American schools and diversity of capability among American teachers argues that a teachers center should not have to take on the entire in-service function of a school district—to serve all training needs of all teachers—in order to prove its value for those teachers who want to rethink, rearrange, and adapt their present curriculum. The proof of a teachers center is not implementation of any one innovation or change strategy, nor any given measure of teacher's (or pupil's) achievement in any given skill, technique, or subject matter. Rather, the value of a teachers center is that by offering teachers the opportunity to work on the curriculum of their own classrooms the center elicits from teachers over time—one, two, three years—serious professional inquiry and creativity. These "performances" of curriculum investigation and adaptation or invention stand as practical, individualized, intellectually powerful, and visible criteria of professional teaching competence.

Any staff development program, whatever its name or its scope, in these lean times must justify itself in terms that the major influence upon children's schooling is teachers and the major neglect in schooling is teachers' professional growth and morale. "Teachers," "teaching," or simply "learning" center, this kind of program must gain its credibility and working constituency by expressing plain purposes that can generate teachers' intellectual energy and personal commitment. □

³ Thomas J. Sergiovanni, editor. *Professional Supervision for Professional Teachers*. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1975. p. 6.

⁴ Roy A. Edelfelt and Margo Johnson, *Rethinking In-Service Education*. Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1975. pp. 18-19.

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