

The Teacher Center, Inc. (New Haven, Connecticut): A Case Study

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"The Teacher Center is both a place and a concept; a place where skills are improved and innovations shared; and a concept of professional growth which values the integrity of each teacher's work."

THE Teacher Center, Inc., was founded in 1971 as an independent, non-profit, resource, support, and advisory center for New Haven area teachers interested in educational innovation. Modeled, in part, on the teacher center and advisory services in the British educational system, but growing out of the particular interests and concerns of local teachers, the Center has for four years offered a unique and continually expanding range of services.

The work of the Teacher Center has been based on a number of general assumptions about the learning process and an awareness of the specific types of needs for training and support which many teachers feel. One of the basic realizations underlying the Teacher Center approach is that teaching, in the words of Sarason *et al.* "is a lonely profession."¹ With all the demands placed upon their time and energy during the school day, teachers rarely have a chance

to talk with each other about the problems, the frustrations, or even the triumphs of their work. Through its drop-in center, its program of workshops, and the contact it provides with in-class advisors, the Teacher Center offers a multitude of opportunities for teachers to meet, share ideas with, and learn from, other educators sympathetic with their concerns.

But the Teacher Center offers more than sympathy. Teachers come to the Center with a great many specific requests: for curriculum materials for their classroom; for ideas on how to organize classroom space; for instruction in art and craft techniques; for books from the Center's educational library; for experience in artistic, dramatic, mathematical, scientific, and other kinds of activities which can lead to practical teaching strategies. The Teacher Center is seen as a place where one can come to unwind, relax, and talk informally, but also as a place to work, to learn, and to improve one's skills and self-confidence.

Fundamental to the Teacher Center's approach is a belief that the kind of learning teachers want to do can occur in an atmosphere which is inviting, hospitable, supportive, and nonevaluative. Contrary to

¹ S. B. Sarason *et al.* *Psychology in Community Settings*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1966.

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the courses teachers are required to take for their certification or the mandatory in-service education days planned by some school systems, all programs of the Teacher Center are voluntary. Teachers participate in them because they choose to do so.

Workshop programs and advisory services are initiated on the basis of the teachers' own suggestions. Unscheduled walk-in visits by teachers, student-teachers, parents, or other interested people are welcome and frequent, and someone from the Teacher Center staff is always available to answer questions, offer advice or suggestions, or simply listen. As a physical environment, the Teacher Center is unpretentious, comfortable, and visually stimulating; as a human environment, it attempts to be warm, accepting, and responsive.

Since its inception, the Board of the Teacher Center has felt a commitment to responding to teachers' needs as they emerge. At the time the Teacher Center was first organized, following two highly successful, day-long conferences in New Haven on "alternative" and "open" education, a major emphasis in the Center's program was on meeting the needs of the growing number of teachers who were interested in the "open classroom." Workshop sessions during the school year and intensive three-week summer programs focused on a multitude of theoretical and practical issues related to the "open" or "integrated day" style of teaching. But as more and more people became aware of the Teacher Center and sought it out as a place to find help and/or to offer their own services, the scope of the Center's programs broadened considerably.

Some of the movement in new directions which the Center was able to make was both predictable and intentional. The Board had from the outset, for example, planned to try to meet needs for training and support which had been expressed by paraprofessionals in the school system, but it was some time before resources could be assembled to plan the programs which now exist specifically for paraprofessionals. Some of the Center's movement in new directions was not so predictable, however, but came about as

the result of recognition of new sets of needs and the identification of new sets of resources which had not been previously foreseen.

While maintaining its firm commitment to a broad set of beliefs and values about the teaching/learning process, therefore, the Teacher Center has also maintained a commitment of being sensitive to changes and new developments in the specific needs expressed by teachers and flexible in its approach to meeting those needs. One of the Center's enduring goals, in short, has been to be aware of possible new goals. By involving, in one way or another, literally hundreds of New Haven area educators in its programs, by striving continually to make new matches between people with needs and people with resources, the Center has been able to offer a far greater range of services than was ever envisioned by its founders.

The Drop-In Program and Facilities

The informal drop-in program has grown considerably in terms of both facilities and usage. The Center's library contains books covering a variety of education-related areas including child development and educational psychology, philosophy, new curriculum methods, the informal classroom, and alternative schools. Special efforts have been made to obtain books not readily available at other local libraries. The books have been catalogued, are available for home loan or browsing at the Center, and have been widely used. In addition, the Center subscribes to a variety of educational magazines and journals and maintains a small collection of filmstrips and locally made videotapes illustrating outstanding examples of classroom practice. These resources have also been extensively utilized.

The craft area has been an important meeting place at the Teacher Center with Jan Murray, arts and crafts advisor. The arts and crafts area is always in use. During the week parents, teachers, and students drop in for advice, to continue working on projects, and to find new materials for the classroom.

One of the original aims of the Teacher

Center's founders was to keep teachers acquainted with the wide variety of classroom materials, both home-made and commercially-produced, which can be used to stimulate learning and to move teaching away from over-reliance on chalkboards and textbooks.

In 1975, as part of a special program funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, a number of new demonstration areas were set up in the Teacher Center to illustrate methods of using color, lighting, and space to maximize the visual appeal and learning potential of ordinary classrooms.

One of the new projects of the Center is its recycling program, aimed at collecting discarded "junk" (including colorful bits of plastic, cylindrical storage containers, cardboard, fabric, foam rubber) from local factories, shops, and homes, and turning it into usable classroom material. Mary Sarsheen, the recycling advisor, helps collect and display materials and advises teachers on ways to use them with children. In times of tight budgets and reduced availability of school supplies, the Teacher Center's recycling program has become extremely popular.

Workshop Program Expands

The workshop program of the Teacher Center has expanded greatly, in terms of both variety of topics and frequency of sessions. Many of the workshops focus on very specific issues and skills: for example, using cooking in the classroom to build mathematical concepts; nature in the city; record-keeping in the open classroom; and African crafts. Others have a more general appeal, for example, the six-week series of applying principles of environmental design to organizing classroom space.

The workshops emphasize an active approach to learning, and special attention is paid to maintaining an informal atmosphere, encouraging interaction among participants, and building self-confidence as well as knowledge. The Center now has a number of "regular" workshop leaders who can be called upon to give workshops at frequent intervals, but the coordinator is

constantly scouting for new talent and encouraging the development of an ever-expanding range of workshop topics.

Participants in Teacher Center workshops represent a broad spectrum of teaching styles and come from a wide variety of school situations. In addition to teachers from public and private schools, student teachers, and college students in teacher education, school administrators, paraprofessionals, and parents have attended workshop sessions.

A major part of the Teacher Center's program has been the annual three-week summer workshop on the "integrated day." This intensive workshop provides a rich, interdisciplinary learning situation focusing on manipulative mathematics, environmental studies, science, social studies, language arts, creative writing, movement and dramatics, and crafts. Participants are encouraged to share their experiences and ideas with each other and to create materials and undertake projects to meet the needs of their own particular teaching situations. One unique aspect of the Teacher Center's summer program is that it does not end in the summer. Advisory assistance from Teacher Center staff members is available to participants in their own classrooms during the school year, and follow-up workshops are organized at the Center itself.

Beginning with the 1975 program, participants in the summer program had the option of getting university credit for the experience, through an arrangement with the Graduate School of Education at Fairfield University.

The Advisory Program

The Teacher Center's Advisory program has four basic components: (a) support to teachers, through classroom visits and workshop sessions, in their own schools; (b) advisory assistance to teachers at the Center itself; (c) in-service training provided to school systems; and (d) assistance to other community agencies and programs.

In-school Advisory Assistance. The basic idea behind the school advisory program is

that teachers experimenting with new ways of teaching need and can benefit greatly from noncoercive, nonthreatening advice and support in their classrooms. The Teacher Center has assembled a large number of advisors with varying areas of specialization.

Advisory Assistance at the Teacher Center. As part of its informal, drop-in program, the Center has always welcomed requests for information or help from teachers and other people who stop in during the day. Much of this assistance has been provided by the coordinator in terms of interdisciplinary approaches to curriculum, school organization, and management problems, in-service training programs, and community resources, and her assistant particularly in the areas of parent involvement, beginning teachers, and middle school development. In the past two years the Center has begun scheduling regular advisory days when other staff members have been available to offer assistance in their special fields.

Assistance to Other Community Programs. The Teacher Center is frequently asked to provide workshops and/or advisory assistance to other programs in the community which are not formally attached to school systems. Several New Haven groups have sought advice on how to run after-school or summer programs for inner-city children.

One of the Teacher Center's longer-term advisory projects has been its service to the Yale University Department of Psychiatry's State Training Center for Head Start staffs. Through this program, the Teacher Center has for two years provided both workshop and on-site advisory assistance to numerous Head Start centers in Connecticut and Rhode Island.

The Teacher Center frequently receives visits from school administrators who are seeking ideas for staff development which they can incorporate in their own work. Many of these administrators are interested in creating resource centers or in building classroom advisory services into their various programs, and they come to the Center



Studying pond life during a summer workshop

with questions about the sorts of needs teachers have and the sorts of activities that have been most successful in meeting those needs.

One of the "delightful burdens" of the Teacher Center is the hosting of a wide range of visitors who come for advice on how to start teacher centers in their own communities. While responding to these visitors takes time and effort, its benefits are that it enables the Teacher Center staff to learn about developments elsewhere and to contribute to the stimulation of teacher center growth as part of a national movement.

Relations with Institutions of Higher Learning

For the past two years, the Teacher Center has served as a field site for the Goddard College Experimental Program for Further Education (GEPFE). This program enables mature, working adults to earn credit toward an undergraduate degree through independent study and weekend courses. The Teacher Center involvement in this program came about through recognition of the need felt by paraprofessionals in public schools and day care to upgrade their credentials in order to advance in their careers.

The Teacher Center has become an important back-up to teacher education and other college programs in the New Haven area. Undergraduate and graduate students frequently take advantage of the Teacher Center library and curriculum materials, as well as its advisory services. Early childhood education students at South Central Community College are asked to attend Teacher Center workshops as part of their course work. Entire classes from Southern Connecticut State College have made field trips to the Teacher Center to learn about its resources and approach. Two SCSC faculty members have been frequent contributors to Teacher Center workshop programs and have utilized the Teacher Center both for its curriculum resources and the opportunities it provides for students to relate to more experienced teachers and to bridge the gap between academic work and field experience.



Using puppets to study language at the Teacher Center

Organization and Staffing

The Teacher Center is incorporated as a nonprofit organization governed by a volunteer Board of Directors and administered by a full-time paid coordinator.

One of the important characteristics which distinguishes the Teacher Center from other institutions involved in teacher education is that it is a grassroots organization, founded and run by teachers themselves. It is thus uniquely sensitive to the needs of teachers and uniquely committed to responding to those needs. As an independent organization, unaffiliated with any school system or governmental agency, it is free of the restrictions frequently imposed on groups endeavoring to innovate and promote change.

The Board of Directors is presently comprised of six nonparent teachers, three parent-teachers, and four parents with a long-standing interest in educational issues. Through their involvement with schools and other community programs, the Board members keep in close touch with a wide range of developments in the educational scene. The Board meets monthly to establish policy and carry out basic decision making.

While most of the Board members have been with the Teacher Center since its found-

ing, new members have been added from time to time in keeping with the Teacher Center policy of encouraging active participation in governance from the people served by the organization.

The coordinator, Corinne Levin, who has been with the Teacher Center since it first received funding in 1972, came to the Center with a long history of involvement in New Haven education and considerable experience in community organization, teaching, and teacher education. Her knowledge of the area and its people has made it possible for the Center continually to draw on a wealth of human resources available in the community. Her responsibilities cover all aspects of planning, organization, and management of the Teacher Center program.

With the upsurge of interest in and usage of the Teacher Center over the past two years, it has become necessary to hire an assistant coordinator to handle some administrative matters and share in the day-to-day staffing of the Center space. Fred Acquavita, a New Haven teacher and one of the founders of the Teacher Center, joined the Center staff in January 1974 and has been responsible for helping to deal personally with the large number of people who drop in to the Center each week.

By fostering a feeling of "shared ownership" which encourages teachers with skills worth sharing with other teachers to see the Center as *their* place and not just that of a permanent elite staff, the Center has attracted the services of an ever-expanding number of people.

Funding

The Teacher Center, Inc., is presently funded by the Edward Hazen Foundation of New Haven, the New World Foundation of New York, and the New Haven Foundation. Funding for special projects has come from the following sources: The National Endowment for the Arts awarded the Teacher Center a grant in November 1974 to support the continuation and expansion of the Center's program in environmental design and education, and the Connecticut Commission

on the Arts awarded the Teacher Center a grant to support the art and craft workshops and advisory services. Additional funding has come through contracts with area school systems and agencies for special workshops and advisory services.

Goddard College, the Yale State Training Center, and the Head Start Family Resource Center (Infant-Toddler-Parent Program) have all contracted for use of the Teacher Center facilities and resources in their various educational programs. Funds have also been received through sale of the Teacher Center publications, workshop fees, and contributions for coffee.

The Teacher Center has operated on a budget which is modest by usual standards. It offers a fiscal, administrative, and educational model that may be practical to other communities interested in developing a similar resource—a model where teachers take initiative and are responsible for their own learning.

The Teacher Center is the catalyst for communication of needs and the translation of these needs into practical and imaginative skills. In effect, the Teacher Center is both a place and a concept; a place where skills are improved and innovations shared; and a concept of professional growth which values the integrity of each teacher's work and values the horizontal spread of change in contrast to traditional ideas of supervision as the primary mode of raising standards of practice.

The Teacher Center is a unique vehicle for in-service training. It can respond to the needs of teachers and enhance their professional growth in a positive and constructive way.

"Good teachers want to become better teachers and they welcome help in the process. The greatest task facing us in the coming year will be to keep up with, and even a step ahead of, the demand for assistance of all kinds."² This certainly reflects our experience in New Haven. □

² Molly Brearley, Nora Goddard, Bill Browse, and Tony Kallet. *Educating Teachers*. New York: Citation Press, 1972.

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