The Teacher Curriculum Work Center, Chicago: A Case Study

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Devoted and imaginative teachers combined ideas and talents to establish a functional center in Chicago. This facility is now serving teachers who seek professional growth and development.

In presenting a description of an alive and viable teachers center, it seems appropriate first to take the reader on a tour of the space, in much the same way as visitors are introduced to the Teacher Curriculum Work Center. The second part of this article will briefly highlight the origins and unique characteristics that underlie the center's operation. In this way a sense of the particular dynamics of this center might be gained within the limits of these pages.

The Teacher Curriculum Work Center, which was founded in 1972 by five Chicago teachers, is located in three small rooms in the Hyde Park YMCA on the south side of Chicago. The core of the center is in two small adjacent rooms, with an "annex" workshop and storage space off along a short hallway. Entering the door, on which are signs announcing coming workshops and special events, one finds two display boards. One features activities and material ideas on seasonally appropriate topics. The other holds a display of materials focused around a particular theme that is derived from a workshop, minicourse, or staff project. The current display features language arts manipulatives and ways these can be integrated into the "continuous progress program" used by local public school teachers. Creative implementation of this required program has been the subject of much discussion in staff development sessions, workshops, and general talk prior to the display.

One of the functions of the displays is to enable teachers to have continual access to information and ideas that have developed without being limited to the time of the particular meeting or workshop. In this way, ideas are spread in an on-going manner, rather than being limited to workshop participants or an otherwise contained group. Under this wall display is a rack of current periodical and new library acquisitions and the center's extensive files of catalogues of commercially available materials.

To the right, on several shelves, is the library from which center members may borrow. Included in this collection are curriculum resource books in math, language arts, sciences, social studies, and the arts. The focus is away from published curriculums, although a few such as in Interaction language arts materials are featured. The emphasis is on providing sources and ideas from which teachers can draw in implementing their own curriculums and creating their own activities and programs.

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Passing by a small reception desk and a larger work table, the visitor finds a wall of shelves on which is a representative display of the center's collection of handmade materials. This includes a variety of materials for skills such as phonic, addition, and place value that can be made at the center. These materials have come, in kind or as ideas, from teachers who have used the center. The way teachers utilize them depends upon the needs of the individual teacher. Sometimes the material answers the problem at hand and is used as a model; often the particular material is used as a point of departure for an idea or format and the teacher makes modifications or refines the idea in creating his or her own apparatus.

Turning to the right, on this tour, we move into the second room which houses the bulk of the raw materials for making things. On a small wall there are labeled boxes of wooden cubes, blank playing cards, spinners, tape, counters, stickers, and other materials. A large work table stands in the center of the room. Around the walls are shelves on which are stored boxes of additional handmade materials, tag board, and more books. On top of these shelves is counter space which holds paper cutters, thermofax, and laminating machines. With striking order and efficiency, all the materials and tools that visitors need are available in this small space.

The third room, called the annex, is the area where wood and tri-wall carpentry work is done. Two large workbenches stand against the walls on which hang tools and shelves with nails, paints, and such supplies. The ample space allows large furniture projects to be made, as well as stored in various stages of completion. The separation of this room from the quieter areas of the center confines otherwise distracting sounds of drills and hammering to this space. Another room, also near the main center is available from the “Y” on a shared-time basis. It is used as the large space for workshops and meetings as well as storing the curriculum files of instructions and suggestions for making and using materials. A look into this space ends the tour of the center's facilities.

The first-time visitor, unfamiliar with the center, is usually surprised by how small the facility actually is, and then struck by the feeling of community and support that is generated. It has been characterized as a model of an open classroom for teachers where as much self-directed activity can take place as desired. Another characterization of the facility is found in a study of the center by Sharon Feiman:

The environment serves as a “magnet,” drawing visitors into a variety of activities. This function is a product of the open display of materials and options with clear instruction to facilitate inquiry; the proximity and high visibility of others, and the interactive nature of the space. The center provides visitors with stimulation, concrete ideas, space, materials, and tools to follow through on their ideas, and the staff provides technical assistance if needed.

While the space reflects the primary commitment of the Center, the creation of curriculum materials which will support teachers in developing more responsive and flexible classrooms, the programs and usage of the center underscores this commitment as well. The main usage of the center is as a “drop-in” facility. While teachers are urged to become members, the use of the center is free to any visitor. Open hours at the center are during the afternoons, one evening a week, and all day Saturday. Visitors, primarily from preschool and elementary classrooms in public and private schools, come voluntarily, select their own activities, and work at their own pace, with staff assisting as guides and resource people.

The main “instruction” consists of unprogrammed encounters between staff and teachers, teachers and teachers, teachers and materials. This informal method of teaching is a subtle blending of self-motivated learning on the part of teachers, setting of expectations by staff through “style” and environment, and peer and staff reinforcement.

2 Ibid., p. 18.
The usage pattern, of teacher-initiated activity, is supported by the program structure of the center. On Saturday afternoons, free workshops are offered on topics ranging from diagnostic skills to Dienes math materials. An extension of the single topic workshop program is in the development of mini-courses. These are given as a series which focuses on a particular topic over a longer period of time. By having an extended experience, teachers have an opportunity, in a group situation, to explore educational issues or curricula in greater depth. The workshops are supplementary to the work of the center. They serve to enrich the curriculum options available to teachers, but do not define nor limit the possibilities of in-service professional development.

Besides the variety of activities that take place in the center, there are other services that extend out to the educational community. Throughout the year the staff provide in-service workshops in public schools and answer requests for advisory support in individual classrooms.

How Did the Center Begin?

In 1972, five teachers who shared a history of common friendships and collaborations on a variety of educational change projects decided to start a teachers center as a means for supporting change in schools. The starting point for this change process was to be through the introduction of individualized self-corrective manipulative materials into the classrooms. However, teachers needed a source for these materials, and it was felt that a center would serve this purpose. They also believed that, in the process of first creating individual pieces of materials, the teachers would want to begin exploring and developing more responsive curricula for their own classrooms. Thus, besides being a response to an educational need (the availability of inexpensive manipulative materials), the center was also seen as a model for a more responsive and supportive environment in which self-learning is encouraged and promoted. Teachers with access to this kind of experience would be better able to effect changes in their own teaching styles and classrooms.

In the spring of 1972 the group discussed ideas for a center and wrote a proposal. The Weibolt Foundation, in Chicago, provided the first year's funding, space was found in the YMCA, and the center was opened in October 1972. In the following year two additional staff members were added and major grants supporting the center were made by the Lilly Foundation of Indiana and the New World Foundation of New York.

Two characteristics of the Center should be highlighted since they are central to the role of teachers in the center. The first of these is that participation in the center's activities is voluntary, coming from the individual teacher's initiative and interest. The extensive use of the center by teachers undermines the all too common attitude that teachers are unwilling to undertake their own professional growth and development.

In conjunction with this voluntary participation is the second characteristic which might explain the response that teachers have toward it and that is the valuing of teachers as resources. Perhaps because of its origins and ongoing staff as clearly linked to teaching, individuals are perceived as colleagues and resources. Teachers regularly share their insights and skills through workshops and mini-courses, as well as during the informal encounters among teachers during the drop-in times. In addition, summer scholarships to workshops and institutes outside the center are regularly offered to teachers who then give workshops upon their return.

Teachers, as well as board members, staff, and users share their energies and serve in a variety of roles. A final quotation from the Feiman study is appropriate in ending:

The Center seems to be a place where people experience a congruence of individual needs and group goals. The collective lifestyle is unified by a commitment to sharing and a sense of common purpose.3

3 Ibid.