

Teachers Centers in the U.S.: An Idea Whose Time Has Come?

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"Clearly I have a commitment to the idea of the teachers center, and it was in this spirit that this issue of Educational Leadership was written and organized. . . . However, I am disturbed by a number of problems that should be considered by anyone who sees the teachers center as a possible alternative to conventional approaches to the education of America's teachers."

I HAVE recently returned from a Kettering Foundation sponsored study of British Teachers Centers. We visited centers, talked to "wardens" (center heads or directors), teachers, school heads, and advisors. Even more important, we had considerable time (on planes, trains, taxis, and elsewhere) to discuss all of this among ourselves and relate what we had seen to our own experience. Given the distinguished group I was traveling with (John Goodlad, Vito Perrone, Ewald Nyquist, Lon Crim, Wilson Riles, B. Frank Brown, and Sam Sava) this may have been the most valuable part of our trip. In any case, this experience, added on to my considerable prior experience in Britain and my work at the University of Connecticut's Center for Open Education during the past five years, encouraged ASCD to seek my help in putting this special issue together.

I agreed to do so because I believe deeply that teacher education in the United States is at a crossroads, and that alternative ways of reaching classroom teachers are needed now more than ever. Clearly I have a commitment to the idea of the teachers center, and it was in this spirit that this issue of *Educational Leadership* was written and organized.

On the other hand, I am not naïve enough to think that such centers as we now know them in both Britain and the United States are panaceas for all of the problems that beset those of us working in teacher education in the U.S. Therefore, in addition to a number of case studies of successful American centers, we have included four articles that are in fact more analytical and critical in nature. My own piece, for example, explores at some length the differing educational traditions in Britain and the U.S. that may make it far more difficult for the teachers center to grow and prosper in the U.S. as it has in Britain. Kathy Devaney discusses the problem of definition, while David Burrell raises a number of questions about the way things have gone and are going in Britain. In addition, Tom Lickona explores the limited research that currently exists on the effectiveness of American centers.

Personally, I am disturbed by a number of problems that I have confronted in my

work that are not in any sense *resolved* in the material that follows—problems that are perhaps ignored by starry-eyed innovators anxious to be a part of what may become the next American fad, problems that should be considered by anyone who sees the teachers center as a possible alternative to conventional approaches to the education of America's teachers. Let me share a few of these concerns with you.

1. Teachers centers apparently mean many things to many people. To some of us a teachers center is a relatively small, intimate place where teachers go on their own to deal with the problems that concern them. To others, the teachers center is an administrative creation designed (subtly or directly) to carry out the curricular wishes of those in command. While Kathy Devaney deals with this question at length in her article, I simply wish to caution the reader at this point in time to read the "fine print" before jumping aboard the teachers center bandwagon. This fresh and potentially innovative idea can be used to deliver old wine in new bottles (which, incidentally, is not necessarily a bad thing). We ought to be aware, however, of what we are doing and why we are doing it.

2. Some of the very best centers I have observed are operating on financial shoestrings. They are under-funded, understaffed, and under-equipped. They have, nevertheless, maintained their integrity, and are often enormously exciting and stimulating places. Clearly they need to be put on

a reliable, dependable funding base—yet, if this happens, will these dynamic centers inevitably become a part of the establishment, dispensing the conventional wisdom of the institution?

3. Where, in fact, should the funding for such centers come from? Private foundations have their own agendas to push, and their funds are almost always given for limited periods of time. My experience with federal funding is mostly negative, and it is exceedingly difficult to get "no strings attached" support from universities. How much support should local districts provide? Should individual teachers be prepared to pay some of the cost?

4. What should be the relationship between teachers centers and college or university? Should centers operate as independent alternatives to conventional modes of teacher education, or should their work be viewed as an active and important appendage of the programs offered by any lively and responsive school or college of education?

5. Should a teachers center, however funded and organized, have an educational point of view which it advocates? Or should it be largely eclectic in nature, helping teachers to pursue whatever goals they wish?

6. Should teachers centers concentrate on the practical, day-to-day needs of teachers (most do) or should they also be concerned with larger questions dealing with educational theory, research, and philosophy? To put it another way, can teachers grow *without* consideration of these broader questions?

7. Should teachers centers be so exclusively teacher centered that principals and

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other administrators and/or specialists are excluded from their programs? Can schools change very much if this becomes the accepted mode of operation for most centers?

8. Similarly, what of the role of parents in teachers centers? Should center programs and activities be aimed at parents, too, if we expect some genuine change to take place in the lives of children?

9. What should be the role of teachers unions and other professional organizations as the teachers center evolves in the U.S.? In Britain, such organizations have played a largely reactionary role. Will this be true here, too? If so, how can we counteract such an attitude?

10. In most cases, secondary school teachers have stayed away in droves from the activities of teachers centers. This may be true for all sorts of reasons but the basic question remains: Is there a place for the secondary school teacher in the American teachers center? What can we do to provide some of the same stimulation that has appealed to so many elementary school teachers? Surely we cannot ignore the secondary teacher in the developing American teachers center.

11. In the best of Britain's centers we found that perhaps 20 percent of the eligible teachers were participating, while 80 percent were not. What can be done to reverse these figures? Can we be satisfied with such a ratio? How can centers attract the reluctant teacher?

12. Can teachers centers avoid the randomness that seems to dominate so much of their offerings and instead provide a more coherent, sustained, and continuous help for American teachers?

13. If (as educators such as John Goodlad, Vito Perrone, and others believe) the individual *school* is the best change unit, how can the teachers center work more effectively with *schools* as such, rather than randomly scattering its shots with individual teachers who, in the final analysis, may become discouraged (sometimes crushed) in a hostile school environment?

14. Finally, how can teachers centers

become places that produce, more than anything else, a *climate* for change—a constant flow of new ideas and approaches—rather than a product?

Wordsworth could have had the teacher in mind when he wrote of the poet as: “. . . a man endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature and a more comprehensive soul . . . a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is within him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions in the goings-on of the Universe. . . .”

If genuine change is to come about in the education of our children, we must expect a great deal of our teachers. I see no way out of this. Perhaps the teachers center, if it is developed and nurtured thoughtfully and avoids the dangers of faddism and fashion, may contribute toward this goal.

In conclusion, let me recommend some reading that goes far beyond what we have been able to put together for this special issue. My suggestions are by no means exhaustive, but they do include what seems to me to be “must” reading for those involved in the development or management of teachers centers in America.

Burt Lasky at Agathon Press (150 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10011) has published two fine books dealing with teachers centers. The first is edited by Marilyn Hapgood and is titled *Supporting the Learning Teacher*. The second, edited by Robert Thornbury, is simply called, *Teachers Centers*. In addition, Kathy Devaney's very thorough analysis, *Exploring Teachers Centers* (Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, 1855 Folsom Street, San Francisco, California 94103) is an invaluable aid. Finally, let me recommend the Kettering Foundation /I/D/E/A/ report of our study of British Centers entitled, *Implications of the Teachers Center*. This is available from /I/D/E/A/, P.O. Box 628, Dayton, Ohio 45419.

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