

## SECTION ONE : THE PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHERS' RESOURCE CENTRES

### TEACHERS AS PROFESSIONALS

The pace of change in today's world is still accelerating from day to day. This change is not only one of new technologies but also one of new relationships between youth and adults, populations and their governments, members of the sexes one vis a vis the other and, what concerns us in this handbook, between the pupils we educate and their teachers and between these teachers and those who hold the "power" in the educational system.

In many countries the "frontal-system" of classroom **teaching** is giving way to more co-operative ways of **learning** where the pupils have a contribution to make and the teacher is no longer expected to be the authoritarian source of all information. Changes in society to greater participation by the average citizen will lead to some moves, however small and gradual, in this discretion even in those countries where at present this may still sound unlikely.

Parallel with this greater "openness" in the classroom has come a recognition that classroom teachers are professionals who have much to contribute to the improvement of the country's educational system once it is recognised that, given the right kind of support,

their potential for development is almost limitless. Recognising teachers as professionals and supporting them in their work is the aim of the Teachers' Resource Centre as conceived in this handbook.

## A PLACE AND A CONCEPT

"The Teachers' Resource Centre 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. It can respond to the needs of teachers and enhance their professional growth in a positive and constructive way. The Centres emphasise 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." This view, as expressed by two writers on Centres in 1976\*, encapsulates very neatly the philosophy behind the work of a Teachers' Resource Centre in the broadest sense.

In those countries where, over the past decade or so, Centres have been opened, their immediate success, especially among primary teachers, has stemmed from the function of support to the teacher as a professional which has been the main plank in their philosophy. The Centres are really "of the teachers, (run) by the teachers, for the teachers" as is implicit in their very name of Teachers' Resource Centres, where the apostrophe at the end of the word teachers is all significant.

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\* C Levine and R Horwitz : The Teacher Center Inc. (Newhaven, Connecticut): A Case Study. (Educational Leadership USA Vol 33 No 6 March 1976 -Association for Supervisors and Curriculum Development.)

Fundamental to the Teachers' Resource Centre approach is a belief that the kind of learning teachers need and want to do can best occur in an atmosphere which is inviting, hospitable, supportive and non-evaluative.

## **BREAKING DOWN THE TEACHERS' ISOLATION AND OTHER BARRIERS**

Teaching can often be a lonely, isolated task. Teachers in a small school sited on some remote island or in some inaccessible rural location are obvious subjects for a sense of isolation because they are far removed from the decision making bodies in their country, are visited very infrequently by advisers, inspectors or tutors, have little or no access to resources and support services and are unlikely to enjoy significant contact with more than a handful of other teachers. Even when the teachers are in a large school in an urban conurbation they can still be isolated in a classroom with thirty or forty children, hungry for professional support through meeting and talking with colleagues in other schools who share similar problems and other educationists who can give advice, help and support in improving individual morale and skills in the classroom.

Centres try to make it one of their primary functions to assist in breaking down these barriers so that they are a meeting point for kindergarten teachers and their secondary colleagues, teachers and administrators as well as classroom practitioners with advisers, inspectors and college lecturers. The resultant interchanges of ideas, advice, opinions, etc. can lead to a cross-fertilisation of professional experience which can benefit the teacher in the classroom in particular and in the educational system as a whole.

## **SOME ELEMENTS BASIC TO A CENTRE AND ITS PHILOSOPHY**

Separate elements in the underlying philosophy and in the ways of working of the "Ideal Teachers' Resource Centre" may best be sum-

marised under a number of distinct headings though the elements are to some degree overlapping. While normally a Centre will combine several of these elements, it should not be considered mandatory for a Centre to incorporate them all.

### **1. Support for Teachers**

The primary task of any Teachers' Resource Centre whether it serves a small and concentrated teacher population or a large and diffuse one, is to give the teachers of the area the support which is relevant to **them** and to their daily work in the classroom. Since the type of support that teachers may require almost inevitably varies according to local and regional circumstances this will give each Centre its own distinctive flavour. In some areas, the support will be more in terms of resources, both hard and software, in others, the emphasis may be more on workshops and in-service education courses, while in yet other areas, more structured support may be required if the teachers are mainly untrained.

### **2. Neutrality**

The Centre should be a neutral meeting ground for all those concerned with the education of our children. None should come to assess the other, rather to assist in mutual help. Everyone, whether they be administrators, the head teachers or principals of a school, newly qualified or even unqualified teachers, should feel free to expose their weaknesses and strengths in a mutual search for improvements.

### **3. Relevance**

The services and support which the Centre offers should always seek to be relevant to the practical needs of the classroom practitioners and their pupils. Activities should take place

because discussions with teachers have established their relevance and not only because someone "above" feels it would "be good for teachers" or the system.

#### **4. Flexibility**

The programme of courses, workshops and other types of resources, which the Centre offers to teachers should always be flexible enough to deal with an "immediate cry for help" and reflect the changing needs of teachers and the educational system. The Centre and its staff must be sensitive to the needs of the teachers it serves and be conscious, at all times, of the danger that bureaucracy can easily oust flexibility in any organisation.

#### **5. Education not Training**

If one recognises teachers as professionals, and even as yet unqualified teachers as potential professionals, then one cannot relate to them as mere employees to be **trained** what to do and how to do it, and expect them almost blindly to carry out instruction received as part of this training. Professionals are **educated**, that is they are given the tools for the job and then trusted to apply them with understanding. Even in the very process of in-service education they, with their experience in the classroom, will have a contribution to make.

#### **6. Teachers as Providers as well as Consumers**

It clearly follows that if teachers are recognised as professionals they will not only seek in-service education and support for their own work in the classroom but they will be able to act as leaders of workshops, working parties and courses. At one moment one might utilise their personal strength to share with other colleagues, while at other times they would benefit

from the greater expertise of these same colleagues on a different topic. There will no doubt still be many occasions when the service of an outside "expert" will be called upon (college tutor, adviser, inspector, lecturer, etc.) but equally there will be occasions when inner-resources are utilised. This will be particularly applicable when activities are organised for unqualified teachers.

## **7. From Solution-Centred to Problem-Centred**

In the rapidly changing technologies and relationships of the present era, it is almost impossible to find solutions which can be imparted to classroom practitioners as universally applicable. So the Centre should move from a solution-centred approach, where the "experts" arrive with their pre-packaged solution to transmit to their listeners, to the problem-centred approach with its emphasis on diagnosing and studying problems, sharing expertise, calling on outside resources and thus finding appropriate solutions to the real situation.

## **8. Professional Atmosphere**

The elements in the Centre philosophy suggested above call for the greatest emphasis possible, in the light of economic restraints, on creating a professional atmosphere in the Teachers' Resource Centre. The intention here is both as regards the building, rooms and furnishing as well as the relationships set up by the staff of the Centre with the teacher population they serve. It calls on the one hand for a non-institutional building and on the other for an "open" director who probably, not too long ago, was a successful teacher. The important feature of the director, whether he is in charge of a large or small Centre, is that he commands the professional respect of his staff and the wide range of teachers and visitors who use the Centre.

## 9. From Small Beginnings ...

Relevance is measured not only in terms content but also in form. A Centre which is lavishly housed and equipped against a background of schools struggling to meet daily needs, is unlikely to have much relevance for the classroom teacher. Whereas, a Centre which makes a modest beginning and seeks to offer realistic support for teachers, is likely to attract a growing clientele. It can then expand its material and human resources as demand dictates. In this way, it is much more likely to retain credibility in the eyes of teachers and the community as a rational and realistic institution.

The following two elements in the philosophy of a Teachers' Resource Centre will clearly not be relevant to every situation in every country and should therefore be thought of more as desirable than essential.

## 10. Locality

For the classroom practitioners to be able to participate in the activities of the Teachers' Resource Centre and turn to it for support, it should ideally be sited within easy reach either of the schools or homes of the teachers it serves. This also enables it to be in closer touch with the changing needs of the teacher population, the schools and the local education authority. Where, for geographical reasons, this is not possible, a main Centre with "satellites" might prove to be a possible alternative for making the Centre's facilities available to teachers. New technologies combining the use of the telephone and the television screen could, in the not too distant future, become yet another method of contact between teachers remote from the Centre and its support service.

## 11. Democracy

Reference has been made to the importance of the apostrophe after the word 'teachers' in the name Teachers' Resource Centre. Where this point is accepted, the evidence is likely to be seen in a majority of the teachers sitting on the Management or Advisory Committee which determines the overall policy of the Centre. Local colleges, advisers, inspectors and education department representatives would clearly also be represented, but would not constitute majorities. Such representation would be found also on the various sub-committees of the Centre enabling teachers not only to accept that democracy is at work, but to see that it is at work and that the Centre is truly a Teachers' Resource Centre, a place where colleagues in the very widest sense of the word, support them in their work.