



Aged Wine for New Bottles: Teachers' Centers for the Twenty-First Century

Written by LORRAINE KEENEY and HEIDI WATTS

Dolores Kohl Education Foundation
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In June 2004, Dolores Kohl, founder of four teachers' centers in Chicago and abroad, invited twenty teachers' centers leaders to Chicago to reexamine the activities and contributions of centers and envision what role centers might play in the 21st century. This paper reflects the views shared by these educators during the Chicago 2004 Workparty

Preface

Ask any educator about the greatest problems facing schools today and you'll be sure to get a list that includes:

- *How do we attract and keep bright, energetic, dedicated teachers into the classroom?*
- *How can we teach to standards and still engage all children in learning?*
- *How do we keep teachers up-to-date and growing professionally?*
- *What do we do about children who are failing and dropping out?*
- *How can we get parents to work with us?*

Here is a response to these and similar questions, from 20 former teachers' centers leaders gathered in Chicago; together they have well over 400 years of educational experience, enough to at least to raise your curiosity about what they see teachers' centers offering the twenty-first century.

These leaders from around the world are veterans, from around the world, of a lively innovation that flourished from the '60s through the '90s, honored teachers as learners and provided continuing education for teachers in school district offices, former classrooms or warehouses. A teachers' center was, quite simply, a place where teachers gathered to learn more about teaching and children's learning, a center for professional growth, for experimenting with learning materials, trying out activities, discussing difficulties and exchanging remedies.

Teachers' centers saw teachers as learners, not just technicians, able to play a significant part in building their own professional development plan. In the same manner, their students were seen as individual learners with different styles and knowledge bases on which they would build, with the help of the teacher and by becoming engaged in a challenging curriculum.

A few of these original centers continue to offer sustenance and support to teachers today; other new teachers' centers have developed as variations on the original theme. Over time, strands of the work from the original centers have found their way into mainstream teacher education programs and other institutions.

Although teachers sometimes received inservice credit for work at the centers, participation was almost always voluntary. The staff was generally composed of teachers recently out of the classroom, who were therefore grounded in the experience of the participants. The focus was both individual and general. Teachers might pursue a single need or concern of their own such as developing a rubric, reading up on discipline approaches, or revising a social studies unit, or they might join a course, a workshop or a study group. Sharing was endemic—teachers talked about their work and came to understand it better; teachers shared their work and good ideas proliferated.

The leaders that share their insights here believe that the teachers' centers legacy can address many of the pressing problems facing education today. We invite you to read their suggestions, join with other like-minded individuals and consider creating a teachers' center for today.

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Ask any superintendent or principal about the greatest problems facing schools today and you'll be sure to get a list that includes:

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- *How can we teach to standards and still engage all children in learning?*
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Introduction to Teachers' Centers

For almost three decades, between the mid-sixties to the beginning of the nineties, continuing education for teachers was redefined and invigorated by the work of teachers' centers. A teachers' center was, quite simply, a place where teachers gathered to learn more about teaching and children's learning: a center for professional growth, for experimenting with learning materials, trying out activities, discussing difficulties, and exchanging remedies.

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Although teachers sometimes received in-service credit for work at the centers, participation was almost always voluntary. The staff was generally composed of teachers recently out of the classroom, a staff therefore grounded in the experience of the participants. The focus was both individual and general. Teachers might pursue a single need or concern of their own, such as developing a rubric, reading up on discipline approaches, or revising a social studies unit, or they might join a course, a workshop or a study group. Sharing was endemic—teachers talked about their work and came to understand it better; teachers shared their work and good ideas proliferated.

Ruth Shane, former director of the Kohl Teachers' Center in Beersheva, Israel, describes the heart of the teachers' center approach and concept.

We didn't present for teachers a body of given knowledge that they had to acquire to be better teachers. Our approach was totally the constructive one—teachers came with their questions, interests and concerns and built with us their solutions, their new knowledge,

their new tools to use for their teaching. While the rest of education was still in the pre-constructivism view, that knowledge is something passed from the expert to the learner, we saw the learner as the source of generating and expanding their own knowledge schemes to include better teaching operations.

This was also inherently built into the nature of the expected continuing relationship between the teachers and their classroom students. The kind of curriculum pieces in a teachers' center were of the same view of learning, activity centers with choices of tasks, games of different levels, creative experiences for different senses. Teaching with these tools invited the constructivist-learning mode where children were also not "receiving" knowledge but engaged in consciously building knowledge. ¹

At the Chicago conference, Sharon Feiman-Nemser² of the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education at Brandeis University presented some of her insights and led a conversation on the ways teachers' centers could support new and seasoned teachers in today's educational environment. Her voice can be heard throughout this piece. Comments and reactions of other session participants are also included here, and are laced with inserts from other meeting sessions.

Centers Can Support Students and Teachers in Relation to Standards-Based Education

Teachers' centers today can provide support for both student and teacher learning within standards-based education. Teachers' centers can help teachers determine how to teach in ways that work for them and their children and, at the same time, address standards and prescribed teaching approaches required by the district, state and professional associations. Participants were clear about the role teachers' centers could play in helping teachers balance philosophy, the needs of their students, and district mandates.

Dolores Kohl, founder of several centers in Chicago as well as four teachers' centers in Israel, emphasized the importance of centers in helping teachers develop their own philosophy over time, and supporting them in maintaining their beliefs as they respond to district mandates:

Our center has long-standing relationships with particular urban schools where we work with the standards around different integrated-learning topics. We address math, social studies, and early literacy standards. Teachers receive ongoing, advisory support through mentors and multiple classroom visits. Teachers also visit and use concrete learning materials. We base what we do with them both on standards and their teaching philosophy.³

When David Hawkins, director of the Mountain View Center in Colorado and professor at the University of Colorado, wrote about the importance of taking into consideration the child, the curriculum and the teacher,⁴ we could not foresee the tremendous emphasis on standards and curriculum mandates

¹ Ruth Shane. Transcript 2004 Chicago Workparty

² Sharon Feiman-Nemser. Transcript 2004 Chicago Workparty

³ Dolores Kohl. Transcript 2004 Chicago Workparty

⁴ Hawkins, David. (1973). "I, Thou, It: The Triangular Relationship" Charles Silberman, ed. *The Open Education Reader*. New York: Random House

which have unbalanced the equilateral triangle so that nearly everything pivots around prescribed materials and teaching methods with little input or flexibility left to the teacher or the child. Teachers' centers could help pull the triangle back into a better balance among the three elements: child, content and teacher. Sharon Feiman-Nemser notes that the move back to consideration of teachers' philosophy and of a child's developmental level and readiness is easier when there is flexibility in the way ideas are taught, even though the standards or ends are mandated. Such flexibility will be easier to attain if the center and the administration in the school district find common ground:

The integration of teaching philosophy and pedagogy while meeting standards and testing requirements can work if there is some flexibility in the means teachers can use to reach the ends, but this is a huge challenge. Today, the curriculum has narrowed to focus only on what is being tested, which is basically literacy and math. And the way it is to be taught is also usually very prescribed. There just isn't the time in the day to do social studies, science and art in an interdisciplinary unit. Even if teachers really want to do it, they often can't. In my work with teachers, I'm hearing, "I don't have time to do that." There are prescribed two-hour literacy blocks in which teachers have to replicate literacy models that mandate how to teach. They often don't have a choice.-

When the ends are mandated, but not the means, teachers' centers and advisors have an easier time helping teachers to find more compelling ways to meet those ends. When the means are prescribed, you are really hamstrung unless a principal supports deviating from the script.

In addition, the notion of partnering with whole schools is powerful over a long-term. If you can get the buy-in from both teachers and administration, you're creating a genuine support. You really do need the buy-in at the top. If you do it with a whole school over time, you can mitigate the control of some of the mandates; then teachers can have a voice.⁵

Centers Can Help Teachers Develop and Master New Curricula

Teachers' centers can work with teachers on curriculum. Centers can provide opportunities for teachers to work with published materials—time and space for what David Hawkins called "messing about" as a learner.

Centers, with work spaces, materials, and with experienced teacher mentors on the staff, are ideal places for teachers to explore new curricula, to link curricula materials to standards, to create appropriate modifications for their own classrooms, and to deepen their understanding of children's thinking and pedagogy. Finally, a teachers' center can help teachers be critical evaluators of curricula.

⁵ Sharon Feiman-Nemser. Transcript 2004 Chicago Workparty

There is great value in being a learner and “messaging about” with curricula materials in order to understand how one learns as an adult and how that relates to children’s learning. Teachers, in the ’60s, confronted with new curriculum ideas that ventured far beyond textbooks, needed to engage in the activities themselves in order to become more comfortable with the “hands-on active learning” approach and with new content. Active engagement enabled them to understand and respond better to children as creators and learners. When these materials were explored with other teachers the personal experience, as well as the exchange of ideas which grew inevitably out of the interactions between the participants, the materials, and the concepts being explored, were of profound significance in encouraging teachers to remain learners, and, as we know, the best professionals in any field are always learning.

Some centers were actually started with a focus on a particular topic, such as mathematics or science, or the arts, explicitly recognizing the disparity between existing teacher expertise and the level of content knowledge and confidence that teachers needed in order to address newly developed curriculum materials.

As the knowledge explosion continues, teachers need support and experiences even more than before to help them with new content. The conference participants pointed out that it is often easier to discuss methodology and pedagogy with both experienced and beginning teachers than to talk about content because people are generally uneasy exposing their lack of knowledge in a subject area. Centers were uniquely positioned to bring teachers at all levels of experience and sophistication together in a non-threatening atmosphere.

Conversations focused on content have been the missing element in discussions between mentors and their partners. I think the mentors were intimidated about going deeper into a content area that they know at kind of a shallow level themselves. Everyone is interested but nervous because of what it implies about what it is you need to know. We are making an assertion that you need to know the content more deeply; that you need to have more subject-area knowledge, and not everyone is ready to deal with that. It is almost easier to have a discussion about methodology.⁶

Helping teachers to draw a classroom map, experiment with pendulums, or to light a bulb from a battery helps the teacher make connections, conceptualize, and understand the principles and content of the curriculum in ways that reading about an assignment cannot. Some developers have built this kind of learning into their curriculum, but not often enough and seldom well enough. Teachers’ center staff can be non-threatening facilitators of teacher learning and models of exploratory learning.

There have been some interesting new curricula, created with staff development attached. For example, there is a course, DMI, in which you sit around and talk for hours at a time about a single math

⁶ Anon. Transcript 2004
Chicago Workparty

problem and then look at clips about how children conceptualize, understand and solve the problem and how adults understand it. The course is very much a center-like activity. It is very collegial and there is nothing rote. It is about figuring it out; it is really hard stuff. The issue now for teachers is that it has become a mandated curriculum; there are math coaches who don't evaluate teachers but provide important support. However, the principal does evaluate teachers, based on how well they are following this prescribed model. Teachers who are not secure teaching math in this way need intensive support or they will tend to rely on scripts because teaching in this way is not what they know how to do.⁷

Elementary teachers are faced with teaching what they have never learned—statistics, probability, and algebra—pre-algebra in Kindergarten! I think it might be the right thing for students, but it is tremendously hard on teachers.⁸

Sharon Feiman-Nemser notes that some curriculum developers are now aiming their efforts at educating teachers about both content and pedagogy. Exploration of materials to develop deeper understanding of content, learning styles and teaching approaches all fit within the purview and philosophy of teachers' centers. Helping teachers and other educational leaders, parents and textbook committees evaluate the quality and depth of materials could be a valuable role of centers.

Good curricular materials can be a valuable resource, helping teachers increase and deepen their knowledge of subjects and how to teach them. Some curriculum developers are starting to think of the teachers as their audience, even more than their students. In the past, there was a clear division between teacher educators and curriculum developers. The former thought about teachers and their learning; the latter thought about children and their learning.

Now more educators are realizing what teachers' center leaders also understood: that curriculum development and teacher development are two sides of the same coin. If you just give people materials and games, they may not appreciate all that can be learned from working with those materials. Teachers' centers might play a role in promoting the thoughtful and productive use of good materials, including helping teachers see more fully what concepts and content can be learned from interacting with those materials or games.

The methods we use should model what teachers can do in their classroom. If teachers learn that way, and are excited about it, they may be more likely to teach their students that way. That's one of the fundamental ideas of teachers' centers.⁹

⁷ Anon. Transcript 2004 Chicago Workparty

⁸ Anon. Transcript 2004 Chicago Workparty

⁹ Sharon Feiman-Nemser. Transcript 2004 Chicago Workparty

Centers Can Provide Appropriate Support to Meet the Needs of Beginning and Veteran Teachers

Teachers' centers can provide developmentally appropriate support to meet the needs of both beginners and veterans in the profession. Supporting new and transitioning teachers is crucial as is supporting the growth of experienced teachers in the roles of advisors, mentors or site-based teacher educators.

Differences in teacher experience and development can be addressed by offering a variety of professional development activities. Teachers' centers have a history of providing time, space, acceptance and opportunities for learning suited to the learner. Some past formats that might be adapted to current circumstances, or adopted wholesale, include the following:

- **LEARNING CENTERS:** Individual teachers drop by and engage in experimentation with materials set up for exploration of the properties of electricity, or the mechanics of voting, or approaches to teaching probability. They study posters of work from another classroom for ideas, or browse through a library of professional books.
- **WORKSHOPS:** Easily accessible, free or inexpensive workshops encourage teachers to learn skills or concepts that could be integrated into the classroom. Opportunities are always present to talk with center staff or other teachers struggling with the same issues.
- **STUDY GROUPS:** Gatherings of a small group of teachers, usually over a period of time, examine children's responses to a particular topic or assignment, or discuss a theme such as children and violence, bullying, war or terrorism. Such groups frequently use journal writing or teacher logs as a basis for observation and discussion.
- **ACTION RESEARCH:** Teachers define a problem in their own school or classroom, develop a research question, collect and analyze data with the help of teachers' center staff. Research and reflection on self-directed questions improve the teachers' ability to observe and understand the forces at play in their own work and lead to the improvement of understanding and teaching practice. Most of these action research projects are collaborative, encouraging teachers to learn from each other, and, most importantly, to think about their work with the eyes and tools of a researcher.

The key to developmentally appropriate professional development is diversity and choice. When there is a range of activities, teachers can choose what works for them; they are most likely to know what they most need, and most likely to be motivated to pursue it. Another key is sensitive, informed guidance, which can be provided by teachers of teachers, mentors, center staff and/or designated supervisors or coordinators.

Teacher study groups, workshops, hands-on learning, action research, journal writing, in-depth study of a single child's work ... all could take place in teachers' centers of the 21st century. In the diversity of activities lies

the possibility of addressing the different needs of beginning and veteran teachers. The beginning teacher can learn a new concept by working with it for the first time in the company of more experienced teachers, or can solve her management problems by talking about them with other beginners and center staff. The veteran teacher, who has already experienced a variety of curriculum materials and student learning styles, can deepen the extent of her understanding by joining a study group or working on an action research project. Skills of observation and reflection can be guided by shared journal writing at any stage.

Another role we envision centers playing in the 21st century, as they did earlier, is to support new teachers specifically or those who are transferring to work with a new age group or subject area. When should such support occur? Support for new or transitioning teachers should not consist, as, for the most part, is the case at present with scattered mandatory in-service days for everyone from the physical education coach to the calculus teacher. In-service training is often like a non-specific antibiotic administered to all teachers whether they need it or not.

Support must be need-specific, that is, it must be seen as relevant by the teacher, and should be ongoing. Support over time is an important feature of the teachers' center. A teachers' center is a place to which you can return, again and again, as you solve old problems and discover new ones. It is a place where you can count on non-judgmental assistance—a safe place to admit mistakes and needs. A place to get ideas from peers, strategies from workshops and staff, materials for teaching. It is a place, which remains in place.

Supporting the growth of all teachers, whether beginners or veterans, is important, but each stage may require a different approach. One such approach is to recognize the skills of the veteran teacher and the needs of the beginning teacher by pairing them as mentor and mentee, or by simply mixing them deliberately in issue-focused discussions and activities.

Because of the high attrition rate of teachers in their first three years, and because of the large number of teachers who are retiring, and mandates to reduce class size, there is a perceived teacher shortage. Thirty states have mandated new teacher induction programs; the most popular is mentoring. They are, unfortunately, unfunded mandates.

One of the things that strikes me is how limited prevailing ideas of induction and mentoring are. In a lot of places, this is considered a form of short-term support to get teachers over the hurdle of their first year of teaching. People are not thinking in developmental terms about new-teacher learning. We all know that beginning teachers are not finished products. Even the best novices from the most terrific pre-service programs are still constructing their teaching practice. There are some things you can't know until you start teaching. You can't know your second graders until you meet them. You can't know what you're supposed to teach until you get a

job and find out what you are expected to teach. In so many ways we ignore the fact that beginning teachers are learners. We give them the same job that we give veteran teachers. We often give them the toughest classes because they have the least seniority. Our policies fly in the face of what we know about where they are in learning to teach. So, I would love to see the continuation of the teachers' center legacy that regards all teachers as learners.

In the center I was part of, we didn't make such a big distinction between novice and veteran teachers because many teachers were exploring new approaches to teaching. We took teachers seriously as learners. We also tried to advocate for giving new teachers more appropriate assignments and providing access to the expertise of veteran teachers. We also took the development of mentor teachers seriously. Again, mentoring of new teachers is a widespread structure but it often does not rest on well-developed ideas about what new teachers need to learn and how they can be helped to learn that. These ideas and ways of working were prominent in advisories and teachers' centers. And induction and mentoring programs could learn from that history.

Mentoring (or what teachers' centers called "advising") could be combined with teacher support groups, which many centers had. In Chicago, for example, Marvin Hoffman and his colleagues have created a network that brings together first-, second-, and third-year teachers in the Chicago Public Schools. The network is connected to the Urban Teacher Education Program at the University of Chicago. The network is responsive to issues faced by beginning teachers. It also has a strong literacy agenda and operates very much in the spirit of the teachers' center movement.

At Brandeis, a strong cadre of mentor teachers meet monthly in a study group and in a summer institute. Besides working on their practice as mentors, the teachers have begun to talk about their own teaching, to share materials and strategies with each other, to take on leadership roles in their respective schools. By focusing on how to help novices learn to teach, you quickly open up questions about what good teaching entails, what teachers need to know and be able to do, how we can all refine and strengthen our practice. So what begins as an effort to support the development of new teachers quickly becomes a joint effort to strengthen the quality of teaching and learning. I think teachers' centers knew that working with cooperating teachers or mentor teachers meant working on these two levels.

In an extended practicum like a year-long internship, host teachers can come to see themselves as school-based teacher educators, helping novices get inside the practical and intellectual demands of teaching. If you have someone in your classroom from September to June and you are working collaboratively with the

teacher education program to create a curriculum for learning to teach, you are likely to see your role in a more expanded way. Teachers' Centers could support the development of mentor teachers who think about teacher development in new ways. There is a lot in the heritage of teachers' centers that could be brought to bear in developing new roles for veteran teachers as teacher educators. This can be a very professionalizing experience. At Michigan State, mentor teachers working closely with teacher candidates in a year-long internship also participated in school-based and cross-school study groups where we analyzed videotapes of interns teaching, reflected on how we plan for teaching and how we could teach the art of instructional planning to interns, and generated examples of what teaching standards look like in practice. Often mentor teachers would say, "This is the best professional development I've had. My own teaching has been affected. I feel like I have a new kind of authority. I know what I know about teaching in a way that I didn't before." Good teachers know how to pull off seamless lessons with students, but they may not know how to take such lessons apart for purposes of helping novices understand what such teaching involves. As mentor teachers learn to analyze and talk about teaching, they expand their sense of professionalism, which is very empowering. That is another arena where the teachers' center legacy is visible.¹⁰

Centers Can Encourage and Facilitate the Recording of Practice:

A fourth way teachers' center practice could assume a leadership role in the 21st century is by creating powerful records of school and classroom practice. Teachers' centers have documented children's work, helped teachers create portfolio documentation for student evaluation, and guided teachers in keeping journals, which record their thoughts and observations, often on the spot. The next step is to develop clear, consistent and engaging records of actual practice: of what happens within the "dailiness" of schools. If we can capture in print, film or tape the act of children learning, we will be much better able to understand how learning occurs, how children think, and to respond appropriately.

How can we create cases of powerful teaching that others can learn from? The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has had a project designed to support talented teachers in creating multimedia cases of their practice. The action research or teacher research movement rests on the belief, shared by teachers' centers, that teachers are creators of the knowledge of teaching. The next step is to make that knowledge public, and not only the private possession of individual teachers. The original teachers' centers encouraged teachers to talk about their teaching, to share materials and ideas, but they did not emphasize the need to ground such conversations in evidence, documents, and records of practice. That would be a valuable extension.

¹⁰ Sharon Feiman-Nemser. Transcript
2004 Chicago Workparty

Imagine if we had a library of discs or videotapes of the kind of teaching advocated by teachers' centers—images of what is possible in all kinds of schools. That would be a powerful resource for studying and improving teaching. Such records could persuade teachers that other approaches are possible. It is hard to create something you haven't seen yourself. ¹¹

Centers Can Use New Technologies for Networking and Curricula Support

Technological advances have changed the possible roles centers might play. One of the major changes in society since the late 1900s, when teachers' centers flourished, is the prominence of the Internet. This is fertile ground for the exploration of ways to redesign the concept of the teachers' center to meet the needs of the 21st century. There was considerable discussion about the possibilities for computer and Internet use among teachers' centers leaders, which crystallized as questions rather than specific suggestions. For example:

- If we were to build a teachers' center on the Internet, does that mean that a place is not essential?
- Is face-to-face interaction necessary? Is it more important in the beginning? After people have come to know one another, can the Internet replace face-to-face interactions?
- Does a mentor or advisor have to see the classroom to determine the real problems a teacher faces? Can advising be done over the Net? What are the advantages and disadvantages?
- The network might have the potential to tie together a group of beginning teachers with mentors. Messages could be sent and responded to almost immediately. Would it be an effective tool for mentors?
- If a combination of face-to-face and online interaction is effective, what, when and how should the communication occur? Would it work better for one constituency than another? Could there be chat groups for, say, first grade teachers, or science teachers, managed by the center staff?
- Wouldn't the network be ideally suited to some situations, particularly where geographical distances are a problem, as, for example, for rural teachers or international exchanges?
- The network seems like a perfect way to catalog and share lesson plans and curriculum packages. But can it really serve to help deepen practice? How could that be done? How could it be evaluated?

Centers Could Exist for All Who Work with Children

The teachers' centers of the future could be centers, not for teachers alone, but for all those concerned with the well being of children.

Can we imagine a holistic approach to the well-being of children, one which brings together the pediatricians, the nutritionists, the juvenile courts, the children's' museums, the teachers, the schools and churches—the whole

¹¹ Sharon Feiman-Nemser. Transcript
2004 Chicago Workparty

community—to focus on the immeasurable significance of childhood, on the unique strengths and particular pattern of needs each child possesses, to work together toward creating safe, healthy, child-centered environments and supportive cultures for all the world’s children? Children’s centers could do what we know how to do: work with individual parents, teachers and child care providers; work with groups both homogeneous and heterogeneous; circulate and lend out resources; carry new ideas from home to school to children’s center; create networks of helping professionals; offer courses, workshops, seminars, degree programs, and individual counseling; sponsor support groups and advisors; and encourage observation, reflection, and shared stories.

As a clip from the bigger picture of what we envision we include this excerpt from a paper by Bracha Weingrod, former director of the Kohl Teachers’ Center in Jerusalem, describing an interaction with a parent.

...A group of youngish mothers was attending the center in the context of a fairly new home-directed Head Start program. They were to spend one morning a week for three weeks creating materials for this program. These were immigrants from villages in Morocco, who had settled in farming areas around Jerusalem. Most of them arrived as teenagers or young women, and they were anxious to improve their children’s success in school. One of the women decided to create a large clock...which she did beautifully, cutting, pasting the numbers, carefully making moveable dials and edging it all in black, sturdy tape. I complimented her on the bright and clear clock, at which point she took me aside and asked me, ever so quietly, “And now, please, would you teach me to tell time?” ...This may indeed be a dramatic example...but are we really sure that there are not many parents out there who would be happy to find out more about gravity, the solar system, percentages or how to read a map? I honestly feel that a concerted effort to entice parents into the teachers’ centers of tomorrow would reap rich rewards. Do you know how many parents are afraid of THE TEACHER? Intimidated by THE TEACHER? Worried sick about her child’s relation to THE TEACHER? True, we know of the others as well who blast a hot furnace of venom at the teacher...but they too can be mellowed. Perhaps the time has come to relent the exclusivity of the teacher in the child’s life of learning, and to share the labor and love with the parent.¹²

And to share the labor and love not only with the parent or parents, but the guidance counselor, and the social worker, and the pediatrician. Imagine a session in which all the people who work with a “Jimmy” or “Maria” address themselves to his or her particular dispositions, skills, characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses. And then, with the shared insights from each perspective, they could create together appropriate strategies to help this “Jimmy” and that “Maria” become stronger, healthier, happier young persons.

¹² Bracha Weingrod.
Transcript 2004 Chicago
Workparty

Conclusion

Although schools and classrooms are very different in some ways from what they were thirty years ago, there is much that is the same. Teachers are still, for different reasons, feeling a lack of control over the content and schedule of learning in their classroom. Parents, teachers and administrators are worried about test scores and drop-out rates. New teachers and seasoned ones need to learn new content and pedagogy in the face of new curricula, new standards and technology. School administrators and boards are worried about a teacher shortage and retraining teachers to replace those who leave. Time in the workplace and in our personal lives seems even more limited; every second counts and there is little time for conversation over a cup of coffee.

Center leaders note some ways that teachers' center work has become common practice today and suggested ways that the original purposes and premises of centers could be retained to deal with issues in today's schools. Among practices that participants felt had roots in early centers were action research, portfolio and other alternative assessment practices, publication of colorful and attractive games and kits for classroom use, teacher recognition programs, and advisory or mentoring work.

Although in 1980 we did not use the words "reflective practice," the roots of what has become a dominant theory shaping teacher education today was a standard operating procedure in the teachers' center. Teachers would not only take responsibility for what happened in their classroom, but in addition, they would take responsibility for their own growth as professionals. Teacher growth then as now was accomplished through reflection on what takes place in the classroom, on feedback from students, and on what can be learned from other teachers. Today it is called reflective practice. Then, it was called teachers' center practice.¹³

There are teachers in classrooms today who are very much like those who started, worked in and participated in teachers' centers decades ago. The teachers we are speaking of are thoughtful and observant. They have been trained as professionals, have learned about developmental stages and developmental differences, have learned to integrate subjects, and to motivate students with different personalities, learning styles, needs and interests. These teachers hunger for possibilities in designing their own professional development programs, in developing their own curricula, and in exchanging "what works" ideas with other teachers so that they may create learning environments which meet the needs of their own particular groups of children, in their own particular places, and times.

The teachers we are thinking of know that teaching is not a series of tricks and strategies; it is an art, a craft, and above all a relationship between the teacher, the student, the content.

There are teachers today who hunger for respect, autonomy, and an opportunity to use their training, creative skills and professional knowledge for the benefit of children, in any reasonable and professional manner that

¹² Betsy Dolgin Katz.
Transcript 2004 Chicago
Workparty

seems to work for the wellbeing of all children. These teachers know that:
--every child is different, and there can be no, “one-size-fits-all curriculum”;
--what works today for one student may not work tomorrow, and that what works today for all students may not work for any tomorrow; and
--test-driven curricula do a disservice to many children and may impede rather than advance true learning.

There are today, as decades ago, teachers, administrators and parents willing and in a position to make a difference for children and for teachers by creating new inservice programs and professional development centers. They may choose to design programs that draw on the best of the old teachers’ center practices and shape them to new circumstances. Or it may be that they may design centers of another kind, that provide assistance to parents as well as teachers, or to anyone who is concerned about the growth and healthy development of children.

Perhaps this new generation of teachers, parents and administrators can build on the ideas, experience and lessons of the past. They may someday be able to say, along with those who attended the Chicago teachers’ center conference, that time spent working in centers was the most creative and rewarding of their careers.

Appendices

A list of participants in the Chicago Workparty and those additional people who have contributed to this monograph.

List of Chicago Workparty Participants

Hosted by the Dolores Kohl Education Foundation

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