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Auerbach, Franz Egon

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teacher's centres — new growth point?

F E AUERBACH

Fifteen years ago, there were few Teachers' Centres in Britain. From the creation of the Schools Council in 1964, "the scene was set for an educational explosion . . . within eight years, more than 600 teachers' centres invaded the English educational map."

The quotation is from the 1973 book "Teachers' Centres", edited by Robert Thornbury, himself the warden of the Sherbrooke Teachers' Centre in London.

Cynics might say this explosion is just a vogue, yet it seems unlikely that the increased participation of classroom teachers in hundreds of different centres is just a passing phenomenon.

Basically, teachers' centres are most often local in scope — places where teachers can come from fairly nearby to make teaching aids, to attend and organise courses and lectures, meet friends, work together in workshops, browse in a professional library.

Though that is the typical pattern, there are centres devoted to a single subject, like those specialising in Schools Council or Nuffield projects in mathematics, science or modern languages. Some are mainly concerned with curriculum development, some "serve as few as 22 teachers, others as many as 8 000" — occasionally spread over a large country area.

In South Africa, apart from the Bantu Education Department's three in-service training centres and the TED's College of Education for Further Training — all mainly for running longer courses — there are at present five teachers' centres. Natal has two, in Durban and Pietermaritzburg; the Cape has one in Mowbray, Cape Town, and a more recently opened one in Port Elizabeth. In the Transvaal, the TTA's Teachers' Centre is the only one so far; it is also the only one in the country run by a teachers' association.

It seems certain that other centres will be started in various parts of South Africa within the next few years; in the meantime, a description of how ours functions may give readers a clearer idea of this relative newcomer on the educational scene.

The TTA's Teachers' Centre is based on the newly-built Saheti Primary School in Senderwood, but because there are no other centres in our area our centre remains fairly mobile. Many functions we organise take place elsewhere: this is determined partly by the nature of the function and partly by the expected teacher audience.

One of the cardinal reasons for the success of the Teachers' Centre phenomenon everywhere is its ability to respond to expressed local needs, a point we try to bear in mind constantly. Yet other factors determine our programme as well; for this reason I shall try to indicate in what follows how some activities arose. This will give readers a better idea than a mere list would do.

The need for a link between primary and high schools is often expressed by teachers, especially since the new Std 5-7 junior secondary phase has been introduced. Several such link groups have existed from time to time, some set up on local initiative, some prodded by keen circuit inspectors. For a while, the TTA had an English study group running well in Johannesburg North-west, where primary and high school colleagues met regularly. That was in 1971. Two years ago I sent a circular to TTA branches, suggesting the setting up of such groups in various areas, but there was little response. As a next try, a keen Centre supporter in Johannesburg East was persuaded to set up a trial group for teachers of English, Afrikaans and Mathematics; its second meeting took place at the start of the third term. Another group may be started in Johannesburg South soon.

In Johannesburg East a group of junior primary teachers from four schools met, identified five problems they wished to probe in greater detail, and approached the Centre to organise this for the whole comprehensive unit. This has been done, with the organiser finding some speakers from outside to help guide the discussion at some of the meetings. Now a similar group has been set up in the Benoni-Kempton Park area.

Things happen in other ways, too. Last year we were asked by the British Council if we could use two British lecturers on English second-language teaching, who were being brought out this July to work with African teachers in the Ciskei and in KwaZulu. Many discussions and months later, and stimulated by the English Academy's August 1975 Pretoria Conference on English teaching in Afrikaans-medium schools, our Centre ran a four-afternoon course this July at the Goudstadse Onderwyskollege, with an enrolment of 46 colleagues drawn from the inspectorate, Goudstad, and a number of Afrikaans-medium high and primary schools. We taped the excellent talks by Miss Garvie from Birmingham and Mr Jones from Wolverhampton, and hope to publish them. There are also two requests for setting up study groups in this field.

In 1975 Johannesburg nursery school teachers disbanded their organisation; many of them joined the TTA. Several functions have been organised in 1976 to cater for this new group of TTA members; all have been enthusiastically supported, and a planning committee of nursery school teachers has been set up to plan further activities.

On 13 May a colleague phoned the TTA. On a visit to her sister in California, she had met the lady in charge of the Palo Alto Montessori Education Centre, and invited her to visit South Africa. The lady would be arriving (at her own expense) on 22 June for a three-week visit to South Africa; could we help organise her programme? Well, it was pretty short notice for organising a tour, but one does not turn down such an offer. We met Miss Lena Wikramaratne at 11 p.m. on 22 June at the airport, and she visited various primary and nursery schools, early learning centres and a school for cerebal palsied children — one that uses, and kindly lent us, much Montessori equipment which Miss Wikramaratne used during the workshops she ran in Johannesburg and Pretoria. She also gave two public lectures here, and visited teachers in Durban and in Cape Town, whence she flew to South America on 14 July.

Most encouraging has been the keenness with which colleagues have been sharing insights gained overseas while studying under the Witwatersrand Council of Education's major scholarships. Tom Clarke has pioneered the use of individualised SMP mathematics material, run two weekend courses (at Northwards and in Lenasia), and is heading a work party preparing a S.A. version of the SMP cards. Graham Walker has run an eight-week course on new insights into English teaching, a course so well supported that it was repeated in the third term.

Certainly science teachers deserve special mention in this article. A study group led by Peter Spargo — who is now with the University of Cape Town — has been meeting every month for six years; since last September, colleagues from African, Coloured and Indian high schools have become regular members of the group. After a teachers' centre seminar on the Practical Course early last year, Brian Roth of Western High School has led a team of colleagues who have produced pupils' worksheets for Practical Course General Science. These are being tried out in 15 schools and, after revision, will be published for use in 1977. In addition, they are being enthusiastically recommended by members of the inspectorate, at whose request we have produced an Afrikaans translation which has been bought by ca. 55 Afrikaans-medium high schools throughout the Province.

Our junior primary study group has produced two booklets on language teaching, and has one on junior mathematics in the pipeline. These have been published for the TTA by Maskew Miller. The group's memorandum on Junior Primary evalua-

tion, drafted after considering comments from 40 per cent of Transvaal English-medium primary schools, has drawn favourable comment from the Department, and, like other Teachers' Centre efforts, was published in the TTA magazine.

Keen members of the group have also shared their knowledge on Learning Readiness with Coloured and African colleagues in two excellently attended four-afternoon courses earlier this year — further courses, already requested, are being planned.

Part of our success is almost certainly due to our ability to respond to requests promptly. A phone call last year helped to ensure that Pretoria Boy's High School's excellent Geography exhibition was seen in Johannesburg by over 1 500 teachers and pupils — transported from Pretoria by the TED, opened in the JCE new library by TED Assistant Director, Mr J A Laburn, subsequently transported to the Indian teacher training college in Fordsburg and the African one at Jabulani in Soweto — and mounted three times by keen geography teachers!

The Centre provides organisational support for the newly established Transvaal Association of Teachers of English (TATE) which has run a number of afternoon and evening functions ,as well as a week-end course on assessment in conjunction with the Association for the Study of Evaluation in Education.

Like other Teachers' Centres, we have had our fair share of demonstrations of educational aids: reading laboratories, structural maths apparatus, language masters and mini-laboratories, film loops, controlled readers . . . We even know of cases where such demonstrations — wherever possible involving teachers who have used the aids in the classroom — have led to substantial sales of equipment!

With the valued help of JCE staff and some other colleagues we have begun to produce slide-tape programmes, video-tapes and tape recordings of visiting lecturers' talks, as yet on a small scale. Our slide-tape programme on small group work in the classroom has been shown in a dozen Transvaal towns: we have been to Klerksdorp, Phalaborwa, Nelspruit, and places nearer home.

Teachers come to the Centre from as far afield as Carletonville, Pretoria, Nigel and Vanderbijlpark — and "teachers" means colleagues from nursery, primary and high schools and from colleges and universities.

During the past three terms we have had over 4 000 attendances from over 350 educational institutions, not counting those who visited the geography exhibitions, or the schools that ordered science worksheets by post.

The Natal Centres have concentrated to some extent on the use of audio-visual aids and the production of "software" for them. The Cape Teachers' Centre — which has also acted as a model for the recently started Port Elizabeth one — has been very successful in setting up subject committees for most subjects, each of which organises activities of particular interest to teachers mainly concerned with that subject. It has also become a regular meeting place for teachers' associations, principals and the like. Like our Centre, it has begun to produce lesson material.

Ideally, Teachers' Centres should serve a teacher population of about 800 to secure maximum involvement of most of the teachers in the area. This clearly cannot be the pattern for the TTA Centre for some time to come, for we must serve as many teachers as possible while there are, as yet, no other centres in the Transvaal.

When we become localised it will be more possible than it is now to develop the important social side of the TTA Centre, the feeling of belonging together. Probably this will have to await the mooted erection of a TTA Building — another exciting prospect on our horizon!

Teachers' Centres, I am certain, have come to stay — and, in our country ,they are just beginning. It has been stimulating to note the response of the profession and the keen interest of so many people concerned with education — including the Press — in the TTA's pioneering venture.