

Teachers' Resource Centres: 'Concrete and Clay'?

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Introduction

The 1990s saw a number of projects in which the establishment of Teachers' Resource Centres (TRCs) was a central strategy and Marjon played a part as an institutional partner in many of these projects including:-

English Language Teaching Development Project: Namibia

CRADLE Project: Ecuador

ELTIP and PROMOTE Projects: Bangladesh

RESC Project: Sri Lanka

PEP Project: Swaziland

English Resource Base Project: Zambia

SPRED II Project: Kenya

Having come to Marjon from the Secondary English Language Project (Kenya) in which the establishment of TRCs was a major 'output' I have found myself involved in all of the above projects as a consultant and/or trainer, and would wish to make the following observations about TRCs and what has (and hasn't) been achieved through their establishment. To do this I shall consider why they became so fashionable and indeed why they seem to have fallen from favour in recent years, then go on to suggest ways of maximising their chances of success in any future establishment plans.

What is a TRC?

TRCs go under many names – Teachers' Centre, Teachers' Resource Centre, Teachers' Advisory Centre, English Support Centre.... the list goes on. And this in itself may have contributed to the problem. In some projects the question 'What do we want the TRC to do?' has never been clearly answered. To give access to teaching/ learning resources, to advise and support teachers, to act as base to small-scale local INSET activity, to become the focus for teacher-initiated curriculum development, to be material production centres, to be a meeting place for professional and social activity? TRCs can be all of these and more. But to be all of these (or even many of these) necessitates a breadth and depth of resources, services and 'specialist' personnel. I will later propose that TRCs are most likely to be successful if they focus on limited functions at the outset and develop 'organically' to attend to other functions as needed and as feasible given the resources, skills and personnel available.

Their apparent multifunctionality must have been greatly attractive to project designers – seemingly whole flocks of birds could be simultaneously killed with the TRC 'stone'.

Furthermore TRCs provided (often quite literally) concrete evidence of donor support that could live on after projects had been and gone and remind recipients of our generosity! As Woods (1996:49) notes, '... they are the ELT equivalent of roads, bridges and dams, there for all to see and admire.'

The impact of TRCs on educational improvement

Despite the various functions that they can fulfil, at least theoretically, the messages from research and evaluation into their impact sometimes makes depressing reading. Knamiller (1999) notes in an evaluation report covering a range of TRCs in developing world countries:

'..... regarding impact on schools, teachers centres alone did not appear to be an effective strategy for improving the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom. Neither did they make a noticeable difference to the availability and use of teaching and learning materials in one classroom.' (Knamiller, G. (ed) 1999:20)

Knamiller goes on to point out however that the very presence of such centres had a positive impact on teachers' morale and 'feeling of status' and that by providing *opportunities* for professional interchange were laying the foundation 'for the development of a professional culture.'

TRCs are frequently seen as a base for INSET courses, and Knamiller (ibid) also noted that these courses appeared to begin a process of change in teachers by raising awareness and providing ideas and materials that might be experimented with in the teachers' own classrooms. Furthermore, such courses at times had knock-on effects on teacher training curricula generally, resulting in the curricula becoming more tuned to the needs of practising teachers.

A final point from Knamiller – his report noted that where TRCs managed to involve the wider community in which they were situated there was raised awareness within the community regarding changes in education and heightened expectations of what education can provide. (1999:21)

So despite some positive effects, the central purpose of the TRC in terms of raising standards of teaching and learning and making materials and resources available to facilitate learning may not, it would seem, have been generally achieved.

My own involvement in TRC related projects leads me to believe that evaluations ranging across many TRCs in different contexts might tell us little in general. TRCs exist in a context, a country, a culture and for these reasons the functions they fulfil and the parameters of success will vary enormously.

Nonetheless, there may be some broad lessons to be learned from the international experience of setting up and running TRCs that *might*, if used as guidance rather than as recipe, lead to better planning and greater success in terms of impact and sustainability in the future.

Making the TRCs work

Find out what the TRC should be (and do) in a specific context

It may be that TRC project designers have been too influenced by the British model of 'Teachers' Centres'. The heyday of the British Teachers' Centre coincided with a period wherein decisions about curriculum were largely made at school level. It seems to me no coincidence that since the introduction of the National Curriculum and the resultant centralising of decision-making, Teachers' Centres in Britain have faced difficult times and many have closed down.

In most overseas developing world contexts curricula are similarly mandated and centralised. Teachers in many contexts seem rarely to have been consulted with regard to curriculum content. In many cases, too, there is little room for flexibility in terms of interpreting curricula and the kind of decision-making required in terms of the processes (and resources) through which content may be taught and learned.

TRCs in such contexts that seek to address the function of curriculum development may be setting off on the wrong foot. Indeed Weindling et al (1993) concluded that even within the British model there was very little systematic curriculum development through Teachers' Centres.

In developing country contexts the 'curriculum' may not be an appropriate starting point or necessarily at the centre of the TRC concept. That is not to say that through TRCs curriculum issues cannot be addressed, but the big issue of curriculum might best be addressed when other issues have first been attended to. In a 'Maslowian' sense, TRCs might best begin by addressing some of the more basic day-to-day survival and security needs of teachers (and learners) to provide the foundation on which other issues might be addressed as the TRC grows.

It is my belief that TRC projects have not consulted extensively with the prospective users of the TRC in establishing what *they* want it to be and do. Inevitably, host governments too will have a view and there are bound to be compromises over decisions but it is the requirements of the teachers that should be paramount. I would add here that such information-gathering towards an

analysis of needs is likely to require sophisticated techniques and therefore be time-consuming. Frequently teachers might propose that, for example, their own development of IT and computer literacy skills is an important requirement, but when asked to explain how and in what ways development of their IT skills might impact upon their classroom teaching and learning they have difficulty in giving a rationale.

To sum up then, to maximise opportunities for success there needs to be an in-depth survey of potential users to ensure that the TRC addresses the prime functions that the users themselves identify as needed.

Develop and budget for limited and realistic functions to meet users' requirements

I noted earlier that TRCs can fulfil a wide range of functions but at the outset they should attend to those functions that:

- a) meet the needs of prospective users
- b) can most readily be achieved.

Priority (a) seems to me to be self-evident. Priority (b) maximises the opportunities for immediate success (in albeit limited areas of activity). This gives staff motivation and creates a positive image for the initial users.

In many developing country contexts it is likely that the provision of teaching/ learning resources and materials will be an important (often *the* most important) function. Again however the selection of which materials and resources will be required should involve extensive consultation with users. Often a first requirement will be copies of 'set' coursebooks and teachers' guides which still, in some countries, may be centrally prescribed but beyond the financial means of schools or parents to supply. In such contexts, failing to meet that immediate need whilst stocking the centre with more 'state of the art' (often UK produced) coursebooks serves little purpose.

Similarly in many contexts learners' access to extensive reading material is limited or non-existent. The provision of book boxes of extensive readers for loan to schools is frequently seen as an important contribution. In all TRC projects in which I have been involved book boxes have been particularly welcome and used by teachers and, more importantly learners. Too often, though, the funding required for sufficient numbers of readers has been wholly inadequate. In one such project the budget would have provided for only 31 boxes (each box containing 30 readers) to be loaned out to some 58 'member' schools. Given that the boxes were intended to give access to extensive readers for children at all grades of secondary education, such meagre provision is unlikely to make any discernible impact either on improving reading skills or on developing reading habits amongst the learners.

This leads to my next point.

Ensure that project funding is sufficient to allow for the TRC functions be fulfilled

As previously noted if functions and objectives are established but adequate finance is not made available TRCs are placed in a no-win situation. Evaluation of success, both formal (by outside agencies or recipient governments) and informal (by teachers and the wider community) are likely to be negative.

I referred previously to underfunding for materials and resources, but there are many other examples. Where TRCs are identified as bases for small-scale INSET it may be that there is no budget for expenditure for refreshments or expenses and honoraria for local trainer/ facilitators. Hence, INSET activity is likely only to be successful in projects where INSET provision is a funded component of project activity, but as soon as the project comes to an end there is a danger that INSET will wither and, too often, die out altogether.

Not only should funding be realistic to meet the functional needs of the TRC but it also needs to allow for sustainability. Many TRCs thrive during project life-times, but too often fail to sustain

much beyond it. Hence in establishing the functions and funding of the TRC consideration should be given to income generating activity. This might lead to the provision of resources, equipment and services that, though not central, to the TRCs, primary functions, could serve to provide a 'rolling' fund to support continuation of the primary functions beyond the project lifetime.

Some TRC projects in which I have been involved have made attempts to incorporate income generation allowing for payment for services such as photocopying and laminating, copying of audio and video cassettes, equipment hire (eg video camera, tape-recorders etc), word-processing etc. Some have allowed for fees to be charged for IT lessons and training room hire. But on the other hand, some have been expressly forbidden from any kind of income generation or have not been provided with the resources/ equipment to enable income to be generated.

Whilst there are dangers in allowing TRCs to generate income I believe that it is essential if they are to sustain activity beyond the lifetime of the project through which they were established. Clearly there need to be stringent procedures to ensure transparency and accountability. Furthermore, in contexts wherein schools or individual teachers are already paying a membership fee, additional charges should be minimised. But there are frequently opportunities to generate revenue from services to the wider community at competitive prices – some TRCs have shown initiative in these areas, producing desktop published laminated menus for local restaurants, providing video services at events such as weddings and local celebrations, etc. But any kind of income generation requires resources, equipment and the development of particular skills of the TRC personnel and approval at the outset of host governments. However, there will understandably be little motivation for income generation unless all funds raised are kept within the TRC's own operating budget.

Woods (1996:50) notes:

'it is notoriously more difficult to secure funding for an ongoing, open-ended project than it is for something which has a clearly defined completion date, so undertakings must be obtained from the beneficiaries of the project that funds will be available for maintenance beyond the completion date.'

Whilst such assurances should be sought, the history of TRCs teaches us that there is no certainty that they will be given or kept. New projects will arrive, making new demands on recipient governments to make their own contributions from frequently meagre funds in the spirit of collaborative development and, quite understandably, priorities will therefore change. In such circumstances it is understandable that previously made promises might not materialise.

I would therefore urge donors to recognise this reality and build into subsequent projects (from the same donors, or from other donors' initiatives in the education field) small-scale funding to support TRCs established in previous projects and indeed to enhance activity in those TRCs that are already being used by teachers. It is an irony that frequently it is the most used TRCs that are put under the most financial pressure when project funds stop. It is these 'successful' centres that will require funding for expansion of materials, maintenance and refurbishment etc, without which they will at best stagnate and at worst wither and die. Enhancement or maintenance budgets of a modest nature in subsequent projects would make a major contribution to sustainability.

But sustainability is about more than funding, as we shall now see.

Plan for sustainability

Whilst it was previously noted that funding is a key factor in sustainability, there are many other aspects to consider. Here I will suggest just four which I consider to be crucial. They are *career pathways, staffing, training, and location and environment*.

- *Career pathways:* In order to attract the best personnel to the TRC it is essential to ensure that posts within TRCs are incorporated into national frameworks. This allows for such posts to become part of an education professional's progression through a career structure, and avoids TRC posts being seen as a professional cul-de-sac from which the only way out is to go backwards to where one entered. Often TRC co-ordinators or managers come from the ranks of experienced teachers who, had they stayed in the mainstream, would have moved onwards and upwards to become departmental heads, head teachers, college lecturers etc. Posts therefore must be placed appropriately within existing structures of pay and seniority in order to attract the right personnel both at the outset and to allow for personnel to move onwards and upwards as time goes by whilst still allowing for the recruitment of new high quality personnel to replace them.

In some TRC projects, posts have been formulated within the project but not embedded into national structures. In such situations personnel may have found that their terms and conditions change when the project winds up or, even if they are maintained, find they have reached a ceiling which does not allow for their continuing efforts and experience to be further rewarded.

- *Staffing:* Potential staff profiles will be largely determined by the primary functions to be fulfilled – whether and how far the TRC will act as a resource loan centre, a materials production centre, a base for INSET, an advisory centre, etc. Often the TRC will address all these functions and more besides. Hence, it will be important at the outset to decide on whether and how far any individual might be expected to have sufficient expertise and skills to meet such wide-ranging demands or whether a team-based approach to staffing is needed. Clearly, this decision will have a major implication for the allocation of funds for staff salaries.

In my experience, good, experienced teachers *are* frequently able to fulfil such functions. Good teachers use a range of resources (and are themselves resourceful), create their own materials, attend (and maybe sometimes facilitate) INSET, advise less experienced colleagues or act as mentors for pre-service teacher trainees on teaching practice and are thus frequently the best candidates for the job.

This may seem self-evident but some projects have failed to ensure that the right staff have the right professional profile.

Selection procedures must therefore be rigorous and terms and conditions attractive. Even then, there may be dangers. In one TRC project in which I was involved local school head teachers were asked to nominate an 'advisor' to work in the TRC. Not surprisingly, many put forward a teacher who was seen to be least successful in the classroom as their proposed candidate as a means of ridding their school of a weak staff member. Results and league tables often exert as much pressure in developing world contexts as they do in Britain.

Of all the factors that most contribute to the successful establishment of TRCs, ensuring that the right staff work within them is, from my experience, the key. TRCs can and do succeed and even sustain, often against all odds, if the right people are in place.

- *Training:* Even with the best staff in place it is essential to realise that the operations of the TRC and thereby the skills and abilities to work effectively within it, go beyond those of the classroom. Training is therefore essential to enable staff to fulfil whatever functions have been designated. Such training might include:-
 - 'Library' skills – classifying and categorising, selecting, maintaining materials
 - Resource equipment skills – operation and maintenance
 - INSET facilitator skills and trainer training (with all that involves)

- Advising and counselling skills – one to one counselling, etc
- Marketing and publicity – identifying opportunities, advertising and promotion etc
- Networking – making contact and winning support from the educational and business community
- Materials development skills – helping teachers to develop their own materials and resources
- ICT skills - to assist in record keeping, materials production, networking etc
- A whole host of business and management skills connected with people management and motivation, planning, decision-making, delegating, financial management, record-keeping and monitoring etc.

Too few TRC projects have fully appreciated the training needs of staff selected to work in or manage the TRC. Sometimes there has been a naïve assumption that just being a good teacher is enough. Being a good and well-respected teacher may be a pre-requisite, but training is essential if the TRC personnel are to meet the demands made by the TRCs proposed functions.

Furthermore, in some projects training has been very much an afterthought – in one project training of TRC managers came weeks before the withdrawal of the project. Until that point staff had been left to find their own way. Almost inevitably this resulted in the TRCs getting off to a slow and stumbling start. My belief is that users, sometimes making difficult and time-consuming journeys to the TRC, are unlikely to come back if they find that the centre has little to offer in the first critical contact. As Manser and Allam (1996:34) noted in their account of setting up a Teachers' Centre in Cairo, '...people by their nature have no faith in any organisation that is not already in full operational swing.'

- *Location and environment:* Different projects have reached different decisions regarding where best to locate the TRC, and local contexts will be crucial in coming to the right choice. Some have opted for using vacant space in a local school, others have placed TRCs in regional or district educational offices, still others in higher education institutions such as Teacher Training Colleges whilst a lucky few had funding to construct purpose built centres. Each option has its advantages and disadvantages.

Schools offer an immediate user base and enable the TRC to have close contact with classrooms and thereby remain 'grounded'. However, experience has shown that ownership problems can arise. Furthermore, if based in schools some TRCs have been forced into opening only within the schools' operating timetable thereby making it difficult for teachers from other schools to visit outside of school time (eg evenings, weekends) when they themselves have no teaching commitments.

Regional district offices are frequently located in major towns and therefore likely to have good transport links to the surrounding community. TRCs situated within them will also be close to the hub in terms of curriculum and policy decisions, and ease of liaison with educational officers (eg inspectors, advisers etc) might facilitate mutual raised awareness of how the region and TRC might assist each other in raising standards of teaching and learning. In some contexts however, the regional office might be seen by teachers as the place wherein power is exerted and thereby have a somewhat negative 'vibe'. Good TRCs should belong essentially to the teachers themselves rather than be seen as an arm of the authorities. Ownership and opening times have also been a problem in some contexts where such offices housed the TRC.

Placing the TRC in a higher educational institution such as a University or Teacher Training College facilitates dialogue between pre-service training and INSET, and as was previously noted can result in positive changes in teacher training curricula, as well as providing an immediate user base of trainee teachers who might then continue to make use of TRCs when they become qualified practising teachers. Furthermore, where such institutions provide on-site accommodation for trainees there are less likely to be inflexible opening time restrictions. However, ownership can again be a problem, and the TRC must guard against becoming wholly subsumed into the institutional ethos.

A few lucky projects have been funded to construct their own purpose-built centres. Clearly this allows for TRCs to be designed specifically to facilitate the fulfilment of functions that the prospective users have identified as most needed. Such an advantage however will count for little if the location of the TRC is inappropriate. TRCs should be centrally located wherever possible and must have sufficient transport links to enable users from their entire catchment area to make easy use of the centre. Indeed, Weir (1995) noted in his evaluation of Sri Lankan Regional English Support Centres (RESCs) that location was a key aspect in determining the likelihood and frequency of visits by teachers – the more difficult they are to get to, the less likely and less often teachers would come.

Wherever the TRC is located it should ensure a clean, comfortable and attractive environment for users and staff. This need not involve expensive or luxurious furnishings but does necessitate the provision of sufficient and appropriate fittings and furniture to comfortably house all the resources within, including human!

One final point regarding location. Many TRC projects with limited funds at their disposal, have not been able to establish sufficient numbers of TRCs to achieve national coverage. Frequently they have been simply too thin on the ground. In such contexts especially, planners should devote funds to ensure that TRCs can develop and maintain an outreach facility so that where teachers can't get to the TRC, the TRC (in the form of personnel and limited amounts of resources or materials) can get to the teachers. It is after all frequently learners in more remote areas who will be in most need of the TRC.

Monitor and evaluate for 'organic' growth

I noted above that some projects have expected too much too soon from TRCs and I proposed that in many contexts it might be better to start operations with a focus on addressing limited, achievable functions as identified by potential users. From this base, TRCs might then build on success and grow to focus on other functions.

In order to ensure that areas of growth are appropriate to the needs of the users and educational community, the TRC must be constantly in the business of surveying (eg amongst teachers, head teachers, the wider community) outside the TRC as well as monitoring within.

Such a process of ongoing monitoring and evaluation must be easily absorbed into the everyday running of the centre and should allow for diagnosis of which services, resources and materials are most used, (thereby perhaps indicating a need for expansion) and which least (thereby demanding analysis to discover whether a rethink, or perhaps a discontinuation of particular functions might be required, which in turn would allow resources to be deployed to support functions that are identified as successful and in need of growth).

The best TRCs in which I have been involved have used such surveying and monitoring in order to ascertain, *inter alia*:

- appropriate opening hours
- development of new services
- additional materials/ resources requirements
- potential new markets
- new user 'targeting' strategies

This type of monitoring allows for growth to be planned and managed and driven by the needs and wants of both the present and potential new users of the TRC.

Conclusion

It is my belief that TRCs have a major contribution to make, especially in developing world contexts where provision of resources and materials are inadequate and where funds to facilitate the continuing professional development of teachers are meagre.

It has been a pleasure for me to have been involved in the establishment of so many TRCs worldwide and I have seen first hand many examples of good practice and successful operation. However too few of these TRCs, despite the valiant efforts of those who worked within them, can be said to have thrived much beyond a project's lifetime. Some (for example, a number of RESCs in Sri Lanka and TRCs in parts of Zambia) have survived and continue to offer vital and much appreciated resources and services to hard-pressed teachers

I have argued though that the problem lies not in the TRC concept but in a failure to plan and fund appropriately at the outset. It is my belief that, were this to be done, TRCs could make major contribution to the raising of education standards worldwide.

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