

UIN Teacher Renewal Program: Overview, Impacts and Outcomes

Program Overview

In this renewal program, the focus was on deepening the teacher's integrity, peacefulness, and capacity for wonder, mystery, and community. Teachers learned to lead more reflective and connected lives and to sustain life-giving attitudes toward other people. Making use of poetry, wisdom, literature, arts, media and reflection, retreat content was organized around seasonal themes- helping teachers see that the teaching vocation offers opportunities for entering deeply into the cycle of renewal.

Reflection work was done in large-groups, small-groups and solitary settings. Teachers re-discovered their own gifts and "inner teacher" and grew in ways that nurtured their spirit and capacity to listen constructively to themselves and others. The overnight structure allowed opportunity for informal dialogue and interaction, and gave participants time to rest and focus.

Participants in the "Teacher Renewal Program" committed themselves to faithful attendance at four weekend retreats over a one-year period, one in each season

Facilitator: Bliss Browne, President, Imagine Chicago

Location: Chicago Botanic Garden with hotel accommodations nearby

Format: Friday 4 PM-Sunday 1 PM every season

No. of participants: 24 teachers

Cost:

Cost per participant \$1500. \$400 paid by participant, \$400 by their school. Each received a \$700 scholarship for the balance of tuition, room, board and retreat expenses.

A Sample Annual Cycle of Retreats

Winter

Renewing the Heart of Education: The Gift of Silence and Shared Lives

Spring

Paradox and Possibility

Summer

Community and Abundance

Fall

We Teach Who We Are: Identity and Renewal

Teacher Renewal Program Evaluation and Reflections (2000)

There were two public reports of impact: a 2000 issue of the Chicago Annenberg Challenge journal which had a feature article on the program and a WBEZ radio special on the “heart of education” on Feb 14, 2001 which focused on the program and its impact. Evaluations and observed changes in behavior throughout the year suggest three levels of impact on teachers and teaching:

Refreshed the intellectual, emotional and spiritual lives of teachers

- Participants rediscovered the heart of teaching. In the February retreat, the teachers created a tree on they displayed hearts they created symbolizing the heart of teaching. WBEZ attended the retreat and captured their thoughts into a 10 minute news broadcast for Valentine’s day. Clear themes included the importance of being present to students and developing and sustaining methods to cultivate the teacher’s own inner strength, balance and resiliency
- The program has bolstered courage and confidence in their skills and capacities as educators . Teachers are now bolder to trust themselves and what they know constitutes effective teaching in the face of system mandates that might otherwise undermine it
- The program has helped them rediscover innate creative capacities. As a result, they are building more creative activities into their classrooms.
- The program has developed habits of reflection—participants report now taking time outside of retreats to practice paying attention via journaling and reflection time
- Teachers have gotten clearer on priorities
- The program has renewed their passion for teaching in spite of high demands and frustrations; several teachers have reported that this has been the most important professional development opportunity in their entire professional career, that it has kept them in teaching at a point they would otherwise have left
- It has established a meaningful intergenerational connection between seasoned and inexperienced teachers

Impact on better understanding the role of teacher and the institution of public education

- There have been many thoughtful conversations about the structures of public education in Chicago—what works, what is needed for teachers to be more productive, to be sustained in their vocations. Much of this conversation has been brought back from the retreats into faculty meetings within individual schools. Individual teachers have grown much bolder in sharing with their principals and colleagues what they think is essential to educational excellence and reform of the current system
- the program seeded the ground for education reform—serving as a catalyst to change classroom practice, and encourage leadership for education reform. Several program participants have shifted from teaching into principal positions so they can impact the system change

Impact on classroom practice and student relationships

- Teachers report being more patient with their students, more forgiving of themselves, and less susceptible to cynicism and anger toward school administrators and colleagues
- The program has enabled new, more humane connections to students. For example, one teacher who created a teacher survival kit at the retreat ended up giving it to one of her students whose family was breaking apart. The next week, when the teacher was out sick, the student created a survival kit for the teacher. Since then, their relationship has been much stronger. Another teacher captured the shift within and without in these moving words: “I used to bring conditioned love for myself and my students into the classroom, now I try to bring unconditioned love.”

"I have learned to find meaning and true purpose in my professional choices and actions. I've gained greater perspective in my role as a teacher. This has taught me to see my students in a different light. I experienced the joy of teaching once more"

A participant in the Teacher Renewal Program

This program completed two two-year class cycles.

The audio feature on the program done on the WBEZ program Eight Forty Eight on Valentine's Day, 2001 can be heard here. Click on Feb. 14, 2001 on the calendar and listen to the first segment Teachings of the Heart

http://www.wbez.org/audio_library/848_raf01.asp