

LEARNING COMMUNITIES WORKING TOGETHER FOR THE SUCCESS OF ALL STUDENTS: A SHARED VISION

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Abstract

This article focuses on the true spirit of school partnerships and showcases specific elements of a Professional Development School (PDS) and a university. Benefits experienced as a result of the partnership are highlighted. It is extremely important to develop a partnership that allows each party to learn from each other with mutual respect. The ultimate result of the partnership is that everyone involved works together and shares the vision of successfully educating all students, including students with disabilities.

“The power to reinvent teaching and schooling is located in neither the university nor the school, but in the collaborative work of the two.”

Cochran-Smith (1991)

Dr. Cochran-Smith’s words encapsulate the spirit of true school partnerships. Universities must not be viewed as the experts with a correction plan for school improveMent. The partnership among a public school, a university, and a community should

be one that is nurtured with mutual respect. Each party, public school, university, and community should value the partnership as equal contributors to the overall goal of meeting the needs of all children, including children with disabilities. When schools, universities, and communities unite with a shared vision, teaching and learning will be more effective for all involved.

We will share one such partnership—the coming together of an elementary school, a university, and a local community resource center that was guided by the goals of the Holmes

Partnership network to create a Professional Development School (PDS). The partners in this particular PDS relationship are the University of Central Florida (UCF), Orlando Science Center (OSC), Enterprise Elementary School, and the Holmes Partnership.

The University of Central Florida is a major metropolitan research university whose main campus is located in Orlando with area campuses located in the central Florida region. The Orlando Science Center is a “hands-on” learning center with hundreds of interactive activities for all ages. This great community resource provides educators with opportunities for professional growth and promotes and encourages interactive, inquiry-based science learning. Enterprise Elementary School, located in Port St. John approximately 10 miles west of the Kennedy Space Center, is one of 20 original Inclusion Models in the State of Florida and is currently in its eighth year of operation. Through the Holmes Partnership PDS model, these three partners, University of Central Florida, Orlando Science Center, and Enterprise Elementary School, create a collaborative framework for sharing information.

In order to stay abreast with current pedagogy, instructional leaders need to take advantage of all available resources. A valuable resource that should be considered is the development of an intense relationship among public schools, colleges of education, and community resources. This type of partnership holds wonderful professional development opportunities for the classroom teacher and also provides an important opportunity for university faculty to stay knowledgeable with current practices in the public schools. It is extremely important to develop a partnership that allows for each party to learn from each other. We will share with you specific elements of our partnership, which will highlight the benefits experienced.

Elements of the Partnership

There are many elements to our partnership. University courses are offered on-site at the Enterprise Elementary school campus. Enterprise teachers are involved in the teaching of these on-site courses that enhance their professional development in the field. Each on-site course involves a 20-hour practicum wherein university students are strategically placed in the elementary classrooms, assisting teachers with individual or small group instruction, assessment, and/or classroom management. The first-hand knowledge practicum students gain by being involved in classroom interactions also helps students to move from theory (book learning) to practice (application to real-world settings). During the spring semester, a high concentration of both elementary and exceptional education university interns are placed at Enterprise. University interns and practicum students truly benefit from the exposure of numerous activities and school improvement programs at Enterprise. Seeing first hand teachers’ modeling collaboration and teamwork provides the university students with examples to emulate. Enterprise teachers have professional development opportunities available as well, such as implementing action research grants, and attending professional conferences and workshops.

University Courses Offered On-Site

During the university students’ junior year, three undergraduate education courses are taught on site at Enterprise Elementary—two courses for exceptional education majors and one course for elementary education majors. One of the two exceptional education courses is offered in the fall semester followed by the other course in the spring, along with the elementary education course. Each course is carefully designed to take advantage of all available learning experiences offered at Enterprise Elementary.

The most powerful element of the partnership is teaching university courses on-site at the elementary campus. At the heart of our partnership is the sharing of information from one party to the other; teaching university courses on-site affords us this opportunity. What

the university faculty learns from the partnership is incorporated into the university course competencies for the pre-service teachers to use in the future. Conversely, what classroom teachers learn can be immediately implemented in their classrooms. Enterprise teachers share practical strategies as well as successes and frustrations of teaching in an inclusive setting with the undergraduate students. In turn, the university students are given the opportunity to share current research-based strategies and methods that can be utilized in inclusive classrooms.

In one of the exceptional education courses, EEX 3241: Methods for Academic Skills for Exceptional Students, university students are assigned mentor teachers at Enterprise and are required to complete practicum hours each week. This course is designed to prepare exceptional education majors to teach exceptional students at the elementary level. Through such activities as class discussion, cooperative learning activities, and mastery of course competencies, university students learn how to use student data in order to develop and incorporate effective teaching methods and/or strategies. Some topics covered in this course are effective questioning techniques, direct instruction, lesson plan development, and selection and modification of classroom materials.

For course assignments, the university students develop many classroom materials for their assigned elementary classrooms, including interactive bulletin boards, file folder games, and other teacher-made projects. Because the course is offered on site at Enterprise, university students can immediately utilize their created materials in their practicum settings. One university student noted, "I liked actually working with children and applying the book knowledge to the real classroom." Another university student expressed, "I feel that this gave us a down-to-earth experience of what goes on in an inclusive setting." An additional benefit of the practicum requirements is reflected in another university student's comment, "Classes at Enterprise Elementary provided us with a smoother transition to student teaching." Another important issue covered in this course is inclusion. University students get to see first hand teachers collaboratively working together to teach all students. Upon reflecting on her experience at a full inclusion school, one student shared, "How refreshing it was to learn about inclusive classrooms . . . it proved that the concept is not just a theory—it works!"

Due to the strategically planned time of the course (1:30-4:30 p.m.), the Enterprise faculty members contribute to teaching the course by guest lecturing at the end of their school day. In preparing for these classroom-teacher-lectures, teachers are practicing being a reflective practitioner. The reflective process is highly valued as an instructional improvement strategy and teaching others about their own teaching is an excellent means to practice reflection. One teacher reflected that her experience of working with the university students, ". . . gives me the chance to share my knowledge to make stronger teachers, the opportunity to improve my teaching, and the chance to promote a quality education for future students as these teachers prepare to have their own classrooms."

The following semester, we enhance our participation with the university students in the EEX 3221: Exceptional Education Assessment course. This course focuses on formal and informal assessment techniques for referral and placement, program planning and evaluation, and monitoring the progress of exceptional students.

Students learn how to use student data to determine the best assessment strategies for making decisions in the classroom setting. The university students are again assigned a mentor teacher to work with on a weekly basis, this time focusing on classroom assessment procedures. Teachers welcome university students into their classrooms to observe their testing and assessment techniques.

The university students also have an opportunity to develop a child case study on a particular child in the classroom. One university student expressed, "It was such a good experience to test kids and work with real subjects." Teachers also contribute to the lectures of the assessment course on such topics as multiple intelligences, informal classroom assessment,

and working with at-risk children in an inclusive setting. The sharing of assessment issues helps increase awareness of non-discriminatory assessment procedures for individuals with disabilities—a desired outcome across the educational community.

The elementary education majors are enrolled in EEX 4003: Teaching Exceptional Students, a mainstreaming course that focuses on accommodations and modifications for children with disabilities in the inclusive setting. In this course, elementary education majors develop and practice effective teaching and management strategies to use when working with students with mild disabilities, exceptional needs, and at-risk in mainstream and inclusive settings. What better environment to teach such a course than an inclusive school? University students have the opportunity to practice various accommodation projects within their practicum hours as part of their course requirements. The elementary majors gain first-hand- knowledge of teaching individuals with disabilities. One elementary major expressed, “I do not feel intimidated by exceptional students.” Another student shared, “This was one of the best experiences of my academic career—I have never worked with such amazing children before!” “All of our students are different and this class helped us prepare for those differences,” noted another university student. The university students are also required to inter- view Enterprise teachers on their perceptions of inclusion. The valuable information gained from all of these experiences can help them later in their teaching career and can ultimately result in producing general education teachers who are more sensitive to the needs of individuals with disabilities. “I learned how to teach all students with effective strategies,” noted another university student. Another student shared, “I look at education differently and if I become a teacher in an inclusion school, I will feel more comfortable and willing to work with a team teacher.”

Teaching courses on-site allows for professional growth of university students, classroom teachers and university faculty. By allowing the university students to implement course assignments and projects in their classrooms, the classroom teachers are being introduced to current content and instructional strategies taught at the university. Since assignments are discussed with the classroom teachers prior to implementation, the university students gain insight from experienced teachers in the field who can help enhance their assignment or project. In sharing her thoughts, one teacher expressed, “I am directly affecting children of the future by the foundation that I am offering these university students.” University students are able to take information from the course lectures and teachers in the field and combine it to create learning for the elementary children. A prime example of university students sharing current strategies is described by one of the Enterprise teachers. The teacher had been working with a fifth grader who had been struggling with multiplication. After many attempts, she was not making any headway with the student. One of the university students asked to help. The university student incorporated a game and was successful! The teacher noted that the fifth grader still does not have all of his multiplication facts memorized, but he knows how to find the answers.

Teaching courses on-site also allows the university courses to move from theory to practice. The university faculty benefits by maintaining a connection with current classroom practices which can be incorporated into course content and assignments. Everything from children laughing in the halls, to alarms sounding for fire drills, to school bells ringing to indicate the end of the day helps set the tone for the content being learned in the courses. The authentic setting provides the optimal learning environment for pre-service teacher training. It is a win/win situation for all parties involved in the learning process.

Practicum Experiences

Each university course taught on-site at Enterprise has required practicum hours in the classroom setting. One of the exceptional education teachers assists the university faculty in

selecting practicum sites at the school for the university students, which is important since she understands the needs of the school and the special needs population.

Teachers are able to plan specific activities and responsibilities for the practicum students ahead of time since the practicum experience is scheduled at the same time each week. The university practicum students can provide teachers additional assistance in developing and implementing informal assessment procedures and offer one-to-one assistance to children who need additional instruction. Everyone involved in the partnership collaborates, shares, and learns from each other. One Enterprise teacher conveys this message nicely when she stated, "My students are blessed when we have a practicum student as they receive extra attention and more individualized instruction. The practicum students have the opportunity to have hands-on experiences with the students and get a feel for daily instructional procedures and classroom routines. I, in turn, learn new techniques and methods from the practicum students as we collaboratively plan the implementation of their required projects for their university courses." One student summed up her experiences by saying, "We had wonderful opportunities to directly apply our knowledge and put it into practical use. We had the chance to work directly with students and that is when true learning and teaching can take place."

Internship

The partnership also allows for a high concentration of student interns to be placed at Enterprise Elementary, ranging from 10 to 14 in one semester. Both elementary education and exceptional education majors are given the opportunity to choose Enterprise Elementary for their senior internship, which lends itself for an ideal collaborative experience. University students hoping to intern at Enterprise complete a separate application form which includes completing additional information concerning perceptions on inclusion and reasons for wanting to intern at Enterprise. A committee consisting of university faculty members and Enterprise faculty and staff review the applications and make the final decisions.

For internship at Enterprise, teaching situations are arranged so both the elementary education and exceptional education student interns have experiences with co-teaching, developing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for children identified as having a disability, working with science fair projects and competitions, working with the guidance counselor on the referral process, meeting with child study teams, and many other worthwhile experiences.

This internship arrangement has valuable outcomes for the elementary and exceptional education majors. The elementary education majors receive first-hand experiences of implementing instructional strategies to accommodate children who are academically at-risk or who have disabilities. They also have the opportunity to enhance their understanding of various disabilities and characteristics they may not have otherwise had if they were not interning in an inclusive school environment. The exceptional education majors have numerous opportunities to work collaboratively with general education teachers to enhance their communication and collaboration skills. The exceptional education majors also have the opportunity to enhance basic subject matter knowledge and competencies they possibly would not have been able to do had they not been interning in an inclusive school environment. These experiences will help prepare the student interns for the "real world" experiences they will encounter in their first years in the field. A current elementary education intern expressed, "The staff at Enterprise have welcomed me with open arms and I am able to experience and use the techniques I have read about in my textbooks." Another comment was shared by a current exceptional education intern, "The internship setting at Enterprise is absolutely fabulous—the atmosphere creates a setting that is very conducive to growing as a learner, a teacher, and a person. I love it!"

Having a large number of student interns within one semester at one school is also beneficial to teachers and children. Once the student interns become more responsible for instructional time, teachers have increased opportunities to meet with each other, plan, create learning experiences for the interns, and be more involved in professional development opportunities. Having student teacher interns and practicum students in the classroom increases the opportunity for more individual and small group instruction that can ultimately impact children learning in a positive way. One teacher validated this by her comment, "Having an intern allowed me the time to sit and interact with a new student during the school day that I might not have had the time otherwise." She further commented, "The children in my room know that these college interns are not only learning, but are teaching all of us, as I have a lot to learn as well."

The principal offers another opportunity to the university interns toward the end of their internship. The principal observes the interns in the classroom setting. When the principal observes the interns, the interns are given feedback from a principal's perspective, which mirrors real life in that principals evaluate teachers' job performances and effectiveness every year. Upon the interns' request, the principal will conduct "mock interviews." The mock interviews are designed to prepare the interns for possible questions and situations they may encounter during an actual interview. The principal offers practical suggestions and provides a "safe environment" for the interns to practice their interviewing skills. The principal plays an important part in molding and training teachers for the future. Overall, university coordinators, classroom supervising teachers, and the principal collaboratively work together to provide a safe environment that is conducive for the intern to grow professionally. As one teacher expressed, "Interns get the opportunity to try out new ideas without fear of embarrassment or ridicule."

Exposure to Activities and School Improvement Programs

Additional benefits of the partnership include the university students being exposed to a variety of school-based activities, innovative school improvement programs, and an inclusive environment. The university students have a wide variety of school-wide activities from which to gain knowledge: student-operated video production lab activities, foreign language instruction, science fairs, book fairs, field trips, and family literary night activities.

Enterprise Elementary has several Nationally Board Certified teachers with additional teachers working toward certification every year. Nationally Board Certified teachers and teachers who are currently in the process of being certified nationally, share much by way of modeling collaborative professional growth. University students observe first hand, how teachers who have finished the process, support those who are working toward certification.

University students also have the opportunity to observe the implementation of Dr. William Glasser's Quality School Training Program at Enterprise. The Quality Schools initiative was designed to provide schools with a systematic approach to understanding and implementing quality education for all children. University students observe various techniques and strategies used by Enterprise teachers implementing Glasser's program.

University students also gain insight into the framework of inclusive education. Since Enterprise Elementary is a full inclusion school, all of the exceptional education children are served in the regular classroom. University students observe exceptional education teachers providing support within the regular classroom setting by using such instructional methods as co-teaching, small group instruction, direct instruction, and consultation. They get to see teamwork being enhanced at Enterprise with teachers being involved in vertical teaming and grade level teaming and witness the benefits of such collaborative practices. Vertical teams at Enterprise are used to enhance communication and collaboration across the grade levels and students are encouraged to work cooperatively in teams, helping each other. University students are shown how procedures such as vertical teaming and grade level teaming com-

plement each other and can provide pertinent information to teachers that can help them better meet the needs of their students. One university student felt her experience of being involved at an inclusive school was extremely rewarding, "Working with the teachers at Enterprise encouraged and challenged me to keep an openness concerning inclusion. The team work portrayed to meet the needs of all students made me realize that an inclusion school is important in the field of education." All of the school-wide activities, school improvement programs, and inclusive school structure provide a dynamic, community-connected atmosphere.

Professional Development Opportunities

An added benefit of the partnership is the opportunity for collaboration in classroom-based research. The university provides grant monies for classroom teachers at professional development schools to be used for integrated classroom projects. Teachers are encouraged to develop action research proposals that are designed to evaluate instructional effectiveness. These projects provide an excellent way to stay current with what is effective in terms of student learning. The university site coordinator collaborates with the teachers and reviews proposals, providing them with support before submission to the university. After grants are awarded and implemented, teachers are required to present their results at a symposium designed for all of the PDS partners in the UCF/OSC Holmes Partnership. The sharing among schools allows for professional development that could ultimately increase teachers' instructional effectiveness.

In addition, the university sponsors in-service training and professional development opportunities to teachers on various topics. One of the in-service trainings offered focused on conducting action research by the classroom teacher. The training was held at the Orlando Science Center and teachers benefited not only from the training on action research, but also from learning more about the opportunities available at the center. Another professional development opportunity was secured by a grant from the university that provided conference registration and stipends for teachers who participated. The conference addressed specific teaching methods and strategies to use with students who have cognitive and/or developmental disabilities.

The university and Enterprise Elementary also explore innovative projects together. One jointly planned innovative pilot project was offered by a grant to develop electronic portfolios for the teachers to showcase their students' best work. Children's work samples and reflections were available on-line.

Developing informal relationships between university faculty and classroom teachers is another valued asset of the partnership—levels of trust are established. Because the university faculty members teach college courses on-site and are involved in collaborative projects, it provides an additional university presence and an opportunity to establish informal relationships. Many classroom problem-solving activities are discussed in informal, yet important meetings, which fosters a relaxed dialogue between both parties. Teachers have expressed how much they appreciate the freedom of asking for help without the risk of looking incompetent. University faculty members also experience the liberty of asking for teacher input in improving their course competencies. All of the professional development opportunities offered enhanced the cohesiveness of and collegiality of the partnership.

Conclusions-Final Thoughts

One of the six goals adopted by the Holmes Partnership in 1990 was the concept of simultaneous renewal of public K-12 schools and teacher training programs (Holmes Group, 1990). We feel this goal has helped us guide the philosophy of our partnership. We feel it is

important to have renewal simultaneously in order to create the best learning environments for all children. We must not work separately to attempt to accomplish this task. The partnership should be viewed as a joint effort with both the public school and university personnel working together to reach optimal results for student learning. In essence, it should be viewed as a “learning community” where children, teachers, and university faculty have the opportunity to learn from each other. From the principal’s perspective, the elementary students receive the benefit of “more hands” and more direct instruction from the teaching and tutoring that is going on as a result of the partnership. It also provides the staff with the opportunity for professional growth through their experiences as adjuncts and guest lecturers. It gives the principal great pleasure to see the Enterprise teachers grow and blossom both professionally and personally from these experiences.

Looking back on our years of nurturing this partnership, we have gained much knowledge and have experienced the true value of reflection. “It is important to start out slowly and allow time to adjust and get to know the needs of each party” (Ezell & Klein, 2001, p. 57). It is important to realize that every idea does not have to be implemented all at once. One lesson that we have learned is the need to continue to nurture the partnership because “as each entity in the partnership grows, new opportunities become available for the partnership that can enhance the productivity of the relationship” (p. 57). The partnership works because of the collaboration between Enterprise and the university and the commitment on both sides to provide the best education for all students, young and old. Overall, when everyone involved in the learning community has a common goal to create optimal learning environments for children, everyone benefits from the shared vision. Looking out from the Enterprise principal’s corner office windows to the open quad, one can observe the gathering and interaction of diverse groups from elementary children and their teachers and parents, university students and faculty, to community volunteers—a true depiction of a nurtured partnership.

References

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