

# ***New Approaches to Collaborative Education***

*By Beverly J. Irby, Karon LeCompte, and Rafael Lara-Alecio*

**O**n a typical Tuesday afternoon, Roberto, a third grade student, goes to the cafeteria at the end of his regular school day. After a healthy snack, he heads for his tutoring session, where he is greeted by Patricia, an education major who comes to the sessions as part of her elementary methods classes.

Patricia and Roberto work on math, reading, and study skills for 30 minutes or so. She tells him that she is excited about coming to teach in Roberto's classroom in two weeks. He describes a "nifty" science activity that some university students did with his class last year.

Roberto also tells Patricia that his mother and he attend Saturday School, where she is learning English and computer skills. Patricia says she will be there next Saturday to help in the program.

Later in the afternoon, Patricia's teaching methods professor and Roberto's third grade teacher

stop in to offer encouragement.

What's going on here? What's going on, in the scenario above, is a new and exciting approach to collaborative learning. Roberto and Patricia are part of an on-site, real-world, learning laboratory where universities, schools, and parents are working together to improve the learning experience for elementary school students and teachers in training.<sup>1</sup>

This article describes two such community learning programs that use a professional development center approach to teacher education. In the first example, university pre-service teachers, like Patricia, become a part of a school community by participating in real classroom settings.

The second example brings education professors and their students into the community by involving parents. The program offers a laboratory classroom for university students, with semi-structured learning activities for the elementary

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**Beverly J. Irby** is coordinator of research for the Center for Research and Doctoral Studies in the Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling at Sam Houston State University. **Karon LeCompte** teaches and coordinates gifted education at Berkman Elementary School in Round Rock, Texas. **Rafael Lara-Alecio** directs the bilingual/ESL programs in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Texas A&M University in College Station.

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school children. Parents have an opportunity for personal improvement, while graduate students can gather data for academic and professional growth.<sup>2</sup>

Current evidence in the field of education notes the importance of collaboration between schools and universities in the preparation of new teachers.<sup>3</sup> This collaboration, along with an emphasis on community involvement, is at the heart of programs sponsored by professional development centers like the Sam Houston State University Center for Professional Development.

These programs are important because, despite the evidence supporting collaborative approaches to learning, traditional teaching methods, such as lecture and class discussion, continue to be the main means by which faculty teach. Dey reports that only 20 percent of faculty use experiential learning or field-based studies to teach.<sup>4</sup>

In the professional development center we describe here, education faculty spend much of their time helping students in combining theory and practice. In addition, they begin to serve the larger educational community as part of the elementary or secondary school's overall learning community,

This professional development approach gives new meaning to community learning—and serves as an example for other colleges and

school districts.

In the first example of community-based, collaborative learning, 24 Sam Houston State University preservice teachers forego the university lecture hall in favor of taking their methods classes in elementary social studies, science, and math on-site at Sammons Elementary School, a culturally and linguistically diverse campus in Houston, Texas.

**I**n this first example, preservice teachers worked for a full semester with mentor teachers from the elementary school, under the direction of education methods faculty from the university. The education professors also provided training for the mentors and facilitated discussion on curriculum, instructional strategies, and student learning.<sup>5</sup>

The university students spent between three and seven hours per week in each of their assigned classrooms. They began by observing mentor teachers and university professors as they demonstrated model lessons. University professors, in turn, viewed lessons delivered by mentor teachers and preservice teachers and provided feedback. Reflections and self-assessments were conducted on all teaching, with the help of video recordings.

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be technologically proficient. To help the preservice teachers integrate technology into teaching, the center provided various software tools and made computer technology and scanners available to generate reports and student-developed activities. The computer lab and the technology specialist on the elementary campus were also available to university students as they prepared lessons and activities.

The preservice teachers in this project increasingly saw themselves as a part of the learning community since their university class met on the elementary campus and since they worked daily in the classrooms. Their plans for teaching and assisting in the classroom were developed directly from the curriculum, as defined by their respective mentor teachers. Planning was a combined effort that linked university students, mentor teachers, and university professors.

Teams of two or three preservice teachers planned the curriculum for a six-day teaching episode in science, math, and social studies. The science and social studies curriculum was developed as an integrated unit, incorporating technology and alternative assessment methodology.

The success of the planning process used by the preservice teachers, their mentor teachers, and the professors reinforces the

argument for field-based experiences for future teachers. Within this framework, undergraduates experience the advantages and disadvantages of working with a team.

In the beginning, the preservice teachers expressed fear and anxiety of the unknown. But by the end of the teaching episodes, they were confident that they could teach effectively:

“I never realized what went into curriculum planning and teaching until now. It’s a tough job.”

“The most important thing we found in the planning and teaching process is that we learned to listen to each other and draw on each other’s strengths.”

“We are going to make a conscious effort during student teaching next semester to work as a part of the school community. The understanding of the children, the culture of the school, and the teachers makes a difference in the way we view the curriculum and day-to-day operations of the classroom.”

**B**ecause Sammons Elementary is an ethnically diverse campus, university students were encouraged to think seriously and critically about the development of a multicultural environment, which further enhanced their sense

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of community.<sup>6</sup>

The students began with a critical essay about their own culture and increased their awareness of diversity by reading about and discussing other cultures. They were urged to remain open-minded and to absorb what is similar and different in the cultures of the children they taught.

As a part of this development, the university students recorded and observed a lesson where they interacted with elementary students. They judged themselves on their respect, understanding, and response to the cultural diversity found among their students. They began developing, in essence, an ethic of caring.

**T**he ethic of caring was an important concept in this professional development center. Here, university faculty and preservice teachers provided an added force of instructors who care about quality education for students. The preservice teachers provided Sammons students with a greater degree of individualized instruction. Additionally, both the preservice teachers and the elementary students benefitted from demonstration teaching sessions conducted by the university faculty.

Many young students thrived on the attention and encouragement that the university students

offer, as evidenced by the following comments from elementary students:

“I like having you in my classroom because you help me learn better.”

“Your activities are so much fun, I really like the Emu eggs and the experiment we did.”

“You always smile when you see me.”

The second program we would like to describe grew out of field-based experiences in bilingual classrooms. Several of the university students enrolled in the field-based methods courses were working toward a dual endorsement in bilingual and elementary education. They were able to offer many of the Sammons Elementary children support within their own culture and language.

These preservice teachers were assigned to bilingual classrooms for the semester where they helped teach students to express the individuality of their own culture and language. From this experience, it became clear that there was a need to reach the broader community.

This recognition led to the creation of a program aimed at involving potentially English proficient parents in the education of their children while helping them learn English. This program, called Sat-

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urday School at Sammons and operated jointly by Sam Houston State University and Texas A&M University-College Station,<sup>7</sup> provided university students laboratory settings for working with potentially English proficient learners and, more importantly, contributed to the community learning structure on campus.

Preservice teachers, along with university professors, planned and prepared sequential lessons for the program. Saturday enrichment activities were provided for the parents and their children of all ages at no cost to families. Each Saturday, an average of 35 parents attended the program, which was federally funded partially by a bilingual education Title VII grant and fully supported by the elementary school campus administration team.

**B**esides the parents, this community of learners included professors, elementary age students, as well as undergraduate students, masters students, and doctoral students.

The program ran ten consecutive weekends for three hours every Saturday morning. The principal and assistant principals rotated the opening of the building each Saturday.

One-half of the parents attended an ESL class for an hour and a half, then moved to a hands-on com-

puter class for the remaining time. The other half of the parents began with the computer class and then switched to ESL. The elementary students had semi-structured learning activities during the morning Saturday session.

The parents who attended Saturday School at Sammons were highly motivated. They expected that the skills they were learning would improve their socio-economic status and their personal lives. One example of the level of motivation was a father who attended class each Saturday at 9:00 a.m. after working all night until 6:00 a.m.

Besides the basic English skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening—and learning how to better assist their children—the parents also learned how to write a resumé in Spanish and English and how to fill out a job application in English. These skills were incorporated in the ESL class and then applied during the computer session. Among the finished products were a professionally typed resumé and accompanying letters.

In answer to open-ended interview questions used as a part of the evaluation of this program, the parents who attended indicated that the program was significant in their lives and in the future of their families:

“Today I clean buildings, but as long as I try to learn English,

my next job will be better.”

“My husband and I want to start our own business. We are here to learn computer skills and improve our English. We want a better future for our children.”

“When my children see me doing my homework, they want to help. We learn as a family.”

These parents were part of a learning community that emphasized individual improvement and life-long learning. They learned strategies for communicating with their children about school life. The benefits from this communication are ample. Parental encouragement, we know from research, significantly contributes to stronger student achievement, better attitudes, and higher aspirations. A child with involved and supportive parents is likely to be successful in school and the future.<sup>8</sup>

Field-based experiences in professional development centers, given the right components, can work in any community. The university professors and students and the elementary school teachers and administrators involved in the Sam Houston and Texas A&M program believe that teachers for the new century must engage in authentic teaching. This can happen best if schools and university-based educa-

tors demonstrate collaboration and open communication.

A key factor to effective collaboration: All participants must see themselves as significant partners in a learning community focused on providing the best education possible for all students. Universities and schools need to be seen as one, not as separate entities, in the educational process.

The projects described above all shared common themes: collaboration, expectations, commitment, and community.

Participants in the programs brought a set of values or wants relevant to their respective microcultures. Each person wanted something different out of the community of learners. The success of the programs depended on the degree to which each participant was willing to compromise and reconcile values towards the attainment of the whole program.<sup>9</sup>

Commitment was also an activating force. University professors and school district personnel were committed to the education of good teachers and the education of children and their families. All parts together made a unified community that supported the learner.

In this type of learning environment, as a Mayan Quiché proverb states, “No one stays behind; all walk together.”<sup>10</sup> ■

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Kinsley, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Relationships were initially formed between the university and school faculty and administration through the writing and implementation of a federal Title VII Transitional Bilingual

Education Grant (iQueremos Triunfar!, Aldine Independent School District, Texas A&M. University, and Sam Houston State University, 1993) Another grant, funded through the Texas Education Agency, subsequently empowered the established partners through the development of the Sam

- Houston State University Center for Professional Development [SHCPD].
- <sup>3</sup> Goodlad, 1991; Cochran-Smith, 1991; Holmes Group, 1990; McDermott, Gormely, Rothenberg, and Hammer, 1995; Meade, 1991; Renaissance Group, 1995.
- <sup>4</sup> Dey, 1995. Craycraft, 1995. Dey reported the results of a survey by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California Los Angeles. Dey, 1995; Astin, Koen, and Dey, 1993.
- <sup>5</sup> Robbins and Patterson, 1994..
- <sup>6</sup> Lara-Alecio and Rendon, 1995.
- <sup>7</sup> The joint program was sponsored by the departments of Curriculum and Instruction, Educational Leadership and Counseling, and Language, Literacy, and Special Populations, Sam Houston State University, and the departments of Curriculum and Instruction, Office of Bilingual/English as a Second Language Education, Texas A& M University-College Station, and funded in part by a bilingual education Title VII grant.
- <sup>8</sup> Epstein, 1992
- <sup>9</sup> LeCompte, 1995.
- <sup>10</sup> Recinos, 1994.
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