

University-School Partnerships: A true story of how they work and who they help

BY LOLETA D. SARTIN AND VICKI LUTHER



University researchers are calling for partnerships as a way to improve PK-12 schools and their own teacher education and school policy research (Via, 2008). Amongst the approximate 107,235 persons graduating with a degree in education, many are in need of additional support and best practice acquisition (NCES, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2000). Henderson, Mapp, Johnson and Davies (2007), in their book *Beyond the Bake Sale*, postulate that partnerships and student achievement are closely linked.

In the push for systemic reform in education across the nation, calls for the formation of partnerships among university and school professionals are prominent. Partnership building has become a vehicle for massive restructuring of curriculum at all pre-college levels, as well as professional development of teachers. (Richmond, 1996, p. 214).

As cited in Dyson (1999), university-school partnerships and collaboration have been the most frequently recommended approaches to educational reform (Clark, 1988; Kersh & Masztal, 1998). Universities and schools provide each other with resources and benefits in research and practice (Stump, Lovitt, & Perry, 1993) and need each other to reach their common and respective goals (DeBevoise, 1986; Goodlad, 1988; Lasley, Matczynski, & Williams, 1992).

Levine (2002) claimed benefits of pooling resources such as participants' knowledge and skills are at the heart of university-school partnerships. The

collaboration offers a "potentially powerful tool for transforming our environment" (Dickens, 2000, p. 37). The time and effort to try to work across two or more organizations is worthwhile compared with trying to achieve the same goals internally (Teitel, 2003). Furhman (2008) posits universities are publicly responsible for what happens in schools; they must have a deep sustained partnership with schools in which the university shares accountability for student outcomes. Darling-Hammond (2008) further states, partnerships are possible and necessary to make the American education system work for children, families and the economy into the 21st century.

Universities and schools are addressing the issues of teacher quality, student learning and the gap between research and practice. Both entities must collaborate and work together to create learning communities grounded in current evidence-based research and practitioner knowledge (Vernon-Dotson, Lengyel & Lane, 2008).

According to Warren and Peel (2005), "teachers receive a greater sense of unity, greater sense of empowerment, a higher sense of responsibility for their school's destiny and an increased level of pride" (p. 351) as a result of successful partnerships between universities and schools. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) recognizes that university-school partnerships have the impending power to support continuous learning and improvement for both the school and the university (Levine & Trachtman, 2005; NCATE, n.d.). University-school partnerships between universities and PK-12 schools have the potential to increase teacher quality and student learning while reducing the gap between theory and practice (Vernon-Dotson, Lengyel & Lane, 2008).

Loleta Sartin:

When I interviewed for the position at Macon State College, one of my initial questions was, "Am I able to partner with the local schools?" My motivation was due to my desire to work with elementary students. More importantly, I knew I could not teach literacy courses absent of students, which provides the opportunity for candidates to apply the skills they are taught in class. The partnership started with two teachers at the respective schools and has grown into a third and fourth grade initiative at both sites.

Our Story

A partnership was initiated between the School of Education at Macon State College and two elementary schools, Barden Elementary in Bibb County and Miller Elementary in Houston County, to develop the course "Literacy Assessment and Instruction." The course is a four-hour credit course that is delivered one day a week on the college campus and another day in the respective schools.

Everyone has worked diligently with the schools to create a partnership that involves the administration, teachers, instructional coaches, students, families, teacher candidates and professors. Though the process has taken a lot of planning and organizing to ensure the effectiveness of the partnership, the benefits have been worth the time and effort.

Vicki Luther:

Teaching "Literacy Assessment and Instruction" in the schools is a wonderful opportunity for all. We have the opportunity to stay abreast of trends in P-12 schools and to bridge theory and application for the candidates.

Essential Elements

1. Preplanning

Communicating, collaborating and planning are essential ingredients in an effective partnership. The professors meet with the teachers, instructional coaches and principals at both sites to discuss the partnership prior to the course being offered each spring semester. There are no concepts too minute to discuss: all parties' receptiveness to the ongoing partnership, the time and dates of the course, the Georgia Performance Standards that will be taught, and the grouping of the students (it is important to ensure the candidates' and the students' personalities complement each other).

2. Assessment

Candidates are provided an in-depth overview of the literacy assessments used in each district. They are taught how to administer, interpret and design lessons based on the assessment results. Barden Elementary uses the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) and Miller utilizes the Houston County Literacy Inventory (HCLI).

3. Engaging Families

The voices of the students' parents (or caregivers) are essential to the process. A Family Engagement Night entitled "Meet and Greet" is held at the beginning of the practicum experience. During the event the

teacher candidates are able to discuss with the parents their child's reading behaviors, interests, strengths and weaknesses. The parents also identify areas they want the candidates to work on during the practicum experience. The night is filled with food, literacy games and great conversations that help assist the candidates in planning personalized instruction for the students they are assigned.

4. Weekly Experience

Candidates create various ways to engage students in the literacy process. They are required to ensure the students have the opportunity to read, be read to, write and engage in an activity that reinforces the concept being taught. An onlooker can see the excitement on the students' faces as their Macon State College teacher walks through the door. The professors and teachers observe the lessons and provide feedback and encouragement to both the students and candidates as they work together.

5. Ongoing Communication

The professors, teachers and candidates constantly confer during the practicum to discuss students' and candidates' progress. The candidates are also required to write weekly reflections that overview their teaching strengths and areas of concern. In addition, they consistently develop a plan of how they will utilize the students' strengths to design the weekly lessons.

6. Student-Led Conferences

To culminate the practicum experience a "Celebration of Learning Gala" is held at the school sites. The candidates and students create a tri-fold board with the students' work on display boards. During the Gala the students present their work to their family, teachers, Macon State College faculty, city officials and school district administrators. At the Gala the students participate in a program, dinner is served and the students provide a detailed overview of the concepts they have learned in a gallery walk setting.



The Benefits

The benefits of a collaborative partnership between a post-secondary institution and an elementary school are far-reaching, and many individuals are able to develop and grow through these learning opportunities. Because of this, the collaboration process truly becomes a 'win-win' situation for those who receive instruction, give instruction, and supervise the instruction. Four subgroups who receive the most help and support from these partnerships have been identified; these include the elementary students, the teacher candidates, the practicing elementary teachers, and the college professors.



• **THE ELEMENTARY STUDENTS:** Throughout the practicum experience, the third and fourth grade students are exposed to new strategies for learning and remembering familiar information. This is especially helpful to students who may be struggling with elements of the reading process. Educators know the importance of learning to read and read well, yet we still see an overwhelming number of low-functioning readers in our classrooms and in our society. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) has named the inability to read as a life-threatening disease due to the fact that poor readers generally have a lower quality of life than those who are fluent readers (2006). As Boyer (1995) points out, "...learning to read is without question the top priority in elementary education" (p. 69). The practicum allows children to reinforce the skills they are learning in the classroom, and this additional practice can be extremely beneficial.

During the nine-week practicum experience, students are placed in small groups. These groups are formed based on reading scores and ability levels. The classroom teachers play a pivotal role in placing students together, and careful consideration is placed

on ensuring optimal learning experiences. Because each candidate works with the same two or three students each week, the students receive consistent small group instruction. Students get to know the teacher candidates in a more personal way and bonds are formed.

Each week, the students are engaged in lessons on specific English language arts standards. These are standards that have already been introduced and taught in class but that the teachers feel need additional review. (The classroom teachers determine which standards should be addressed during the practicum sessions prior to the beginning of the collaboration). Students receive additional support in understanding these standards, but do so in a variety of ways. The teacher candidates utilize students' interests to teach the content and also make the instruction hands-on. They also give students the opportunity to play educational games, research information on the computer, conduct scavenger hunts in the library, read for pleasure, and engage in cooperative interactions with peers. This allows students the ability to become engaged in the learning, and this engagement increases the motivation for learning.

• **THE TEACHER CANDIDATES:** This collaboration between the elementary school and the college is extremely beneficial to our preservice teachers. The practicum experience allows the teacher candidates opportunities to apply the theories learned in class to the "real world" of the classroom and to practice their craft in a non-threatening environment. Because they are constantly supervised by both the college professors and the classroom teachers, the teacher candidates never have to feel alone. They are free to ask questions, seek advice, and discuss any difficulties they may be experiencing, and the professors and teachers are able to supply immediate feedback concerning the lessons and instructional techniques.

The teacher is ultimately the one who makes a huge difference in the reading instruction in a classroom (Reutzel & Cooter, 2009). If teachers are competent in their teaching of reading, the students will have a greater chance of being competent readers. There is a direct correlation between what teachers know about teaching reading and the reading achievements of their students (Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005). This practicum experience allows the teacher candidates to hone their skills so that they will become stronger teachers. It also increases their knowledge of the state standards, gives them a better understanding of appropriate lesson planning, increases their

classroom management techniques, and helps them to become higher-level thinkers.

• **THE CLASSROOM TEACHERS:** The partnership between the two educational institutions also has great benefits for the classroom teachers. While observing the lessons being taught, the teachers are learning new strategies and are given the opportunity to stay abreast of current research. Since the majority of these teachers have been practicing teachers for many years, this collaboration gives them the chance to see what is happening currently in college settings, and allows them to get a fresh perspective. Many of the teachers talk about the ideas they have gotten from the preservice teachers. This increases their level of knowledge and their motivation for teaching, which can also help their students' achievement improve.

Vicki Luther and Loleta Sartin:

We greatly enjoy the time we get to spend in the schools, as it affords us the opportunity to observe and work with elementary-aged students. We also get to work with our candidates in a closer and more meaningful way when we see them 'in action' with students. We are constantly delighted and amazed at the growth we

Because of this collaboration, the classroom teachers are also able to become mentors to the teacher candidates, and this can allow the veteran educators to feel that their work is substantiated. Teachers want to feel that their opinion matters and that they are valued, and being able to offer advice and support to those not yet in the field can be beneficial to their overall feelings of worth. The teachers at Barden Elementary and Miller Elementary have a great deal to offer our teacher candidates. As Strickland, Snow,

Gwendolyn Pearson-Kilgore,
Miller Elementary Principal:

Our goal at Miller Elementary School was to enrich the lives of our students in every way possible. Because of the collaboration with Macon State, our students were able to experience differentiated instruction in reading to a greater dimension. The Macon State students provided extensive individualized instruction, and the Miller Elementary students in turn truly experienced instruction that was specifically geared to their educational needs. The collaboration is truly a win-win situation...our students get extra assistance academically, and the Macon State students get practical teaching experience in an authentic educational setting.

Griffin, Burns, and McNamara (2002) state, "nothing ...can replace the power of a great classroom teacher" (p. 4), and when novice and preservice teachers have the ability to work with and encourage one another, great things can occur.

• **THE COLLEGE PROFESSORS:** The college professors benefit greatly from this collaborative partnership. The opportunity affords the professors to see first-hand what is currently happening in the public schools, empowering them to be more knowledgeable and effective in the college classrooms. In addition, the college professors are more immersed in the Georgia Performance Standards.

Summary

Research shows there are many benefits in university-school collaborations. Yet for Macon State College, Barden Elementary and Miller Elementary the proof truly lies in first-hand experience. The partnership has increased the teacher candidates' enthusiasm for the teaching profession and has given them more awareness of how to engage all learners. The partnership has also increased students' excitement and motivation about literacy, allowed teachers the opportunity to immerse themselves in current trends, and allowed the college professors to remain engaged in elementary schools. This partnership has been, and continues to be, a rich resource for all involved.

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Get Boys to Grab a Book!



Do you know that . . .

- ♦ biological and social issues influence boys' abilities and preferences in reading?
- ♦ more boys are referred to special reading services and special education than girls?
- ♦ generally, boys will not read books about girls, but girls will read books about boys?
- ♦ boys don't comprehend narrative fiction as well as girls do?
- ♦ few boys enter school calling themselves non-readers, but by high school over half do?

SO WHAT'S A TEACHER TO DO?

Check out these resources—soon you'll have a room full of boys grabbing books!

Blackburn, M. V. (2003). "Boys and literacies: What difference does gender make?" *Reading Research Quarterly*, 38(2), 276-287.

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