

Dreaming Big: The Ongoing Story of the Collaboration Between a University, a School District, an Author and an Illustrator

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Abstract: This article describes a school-wide literacy project situated within a Professional Development School partnership. The goal of this project was three-fold: to enhance elementary students' literacy learning, to provide teacher candidates with "on the job" teaching experience, and to incorporate community resources into the learning environment. This article provides an overview of this elementary school-university partnership, a description of the literacy project, responses from the PDS partners on this project's impact, and ideas for further expanding this project into the larger learning community.

KEYWORDS: Professional Development School, community partnerships, literacy education, elementary education, special education, teacher candidate, teacher preparation

NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:

1. A comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any partner and that furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and, by potential extension, the broader community;
2. A school-university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community;
4. A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants;
8. Work by college/university faculty and P-12 faculty in formal roles across institutional settings

"I think the purpose of the...[literacy] project was to inspire kids to reach for their dreams. It was a special experience for the kids to meet an actual author and illustrator and to also allow them to participate in a school-wide project...[The] project impacted my teaching career in a positive manner as well. It allowed me to prepare a lesson for my students and it gave me 'on the job' experience. It also taught me how to properly collaborate with my teachers" ~ Pre-service teacher's response.

As indicated in the pre-service teacher's response above, "on the job" learning is a critical component to preparing future educators. Historically, teaching P-12 learners has taken place in local classrooms whereas training pre-service teachers has taken place primarily on university campuses. With the Professional Development School (PDS) model, however, the local classroom becomes a communal learning space. As described by the National Association for Professional Development Schools (NAPDS),

PDSs, however, are more than simply places where teacher candidates complete their clinical experiences. Instead, they are schools whose faculty and staff as a collective whole are committed to working with college/university faculty to offer a meaningful introduction to the teaching profession. As such, PDSs create a school-wide culture that incorporates teacher candidates as full participants of the school community. (2008, p. 4) In this article, two educators will describe a PDS partnership focused on building community through a school-wide literacy project. This partnership included faculty and students within an elementary school, teacher candidates and their university supervisor, as well as two members from the larger community – a children's author and illustrator. In this project, the teacher candidates and classroom teachers co-taught reading and writing activities related to the author/illustrator's texts. Additionally, the author and illustrator visited the school, leading the elementary students in read-alouds, book discussions, and a school-wide art project.

This project not only embodies the PDS vision for developing a school community focused on improving student learning and supporting teacher professional development (NAPDS, 2008). This project also demonstrates how a local school can serve as a "third space" – a place in "university teacher education where academic, school-based, and community-based knowledge come together in less hierarchical and haphazard ways to support teacher learning" (Zeichner, Payne & Brayko, 2015, p. 124). That is, these classrooms served as a learning space for P-12 students, an "on the job" training space for teacher candidates, and a communitybuilding space among members from inside and outside the school. Finally, this project embodies one way in which educators can creatively target a key component to all students' academic success – their growth as readers and writers.

For decades, scholars, educational organizations, and classroom teachers have maintained that reading - as well as other literacy skills - form the foundation of children's learning. Reading has been called "...the Open Sesame for acquiring knowledge: learn to read, and you can read to learn just about anything" (Zakariya, 2015, p. 2). Similarly, the National Council for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) asserts, "One of the best predictors of whether a child will function competently in school and go on to contribute actively in our increasingly literate society is the level to which the child progresses in reading and writing" (1998, p. 1). Literacy education is crucial for students to succeed academically, to communicate socially, and to express themselves creatively. That is, "[t]he ability to read, write, and communicate connects people to one another and empowers them to achieve things they never thought possible. Communication and connection are the basis of who we are and how we live together and interact with the world" (International Literacy Association [ILA], 2018b).

Research indicates that the elementary years are critical for students' growth as readers and writers (Zakariya, 2015). By the time students reach the fourth grade, they begin to engage with disciplinary content in more complex ways, including reading rigorous texts across content

areas and writing in a variety of genres (Gere, Aull, Dickinson, Orzulak, & Thomas, 2007; O'Brien, 2008). Classroom teachers, then, must ensure that their students possess the necessary skills and knowledge to perform these tasks. Equally important is ensuring that all teachers – across grade levels and content areas – are provided with pedagogical training and support in literacy instruction (Gere, et al., 2007; ILA, 2018a; O'Brien, 2008; Zakariya, 2015). This article describes a school-wide literacy project situated within a PDS partnership. The goal of this project was three-fold: to enhance elementary students' literacy learning, to provide teacher candidates with “on the job” teaching experience, and to engage the PDS partners and its guests in community-building activities. This article will provide a brief overview of this elementary school-university partnership, a description of the literacy project, responses from the PDS partners on this project's impact, and ideas for further expanding this project into the larger learning community.

Background

In the fall of 2015, the special education teacher preparation program at a four-year university in the southeastern United States began piloting a Professional Development School (PDS) model with a local elementary school. The Title 1-funded school, which is located in an urban school district, has approximately 450 students in grades Kindergarten through fifth grade. Currently in the third year of its partnership, special education teacher candidates from the university complete 60 hours of practicum experience each semester at the elementary school. Each candidate is assigned to a classroom teacher and participates in a variety of instructional activities including assisting with daily classroom routines, working with individual students or small groups of students to reinforce learning, and developing and implementing lessons. An important aspect of the PDS is having the university supervisor on-site at the elementary school during the time the teacher candidates are there. This allows the university supervisor to answer questions that the teachers may have, resolve any issues that may arise, assist candidates with instructional planning, and provide feedback to the candidates about their teaching.

Dreaming Big: Launching a Literacy Project

A unique opportunity arose during the fall 2017 semester to expand the partnership between the university and the elementary school to include two community partners, author Chic Cariaga and illustrator Thelma Kat Ferry. These two individuals have published several children's books including *A Grandiose Gathering* and *No One Likes to Hear Me Sing*. The expanded partnership resulted in the launching of a literacy project. The project was designed to stimulate an interest in reading and writing for the elementary students, while also having them participate in an art-related experience. To help accomplish these objectives, the project included a three-day visit to the school by the author and illustrator. The school visit was a vital part of the literacy project and critical to the project's success. It demonstrated the strong commitment of the community partners to the project and, in particular, to the K-5 students.

The literacy project also contained a service learning component for the teacher candidates. This service component afforded the university and its teacher candidates the opportunity to give back to the elementary school, students, and teachers who had provided the

candidates with important learning opportunities and hands-on experiences that were essential to helping prepare them to be successful teachers. Prior to the author and illustrator's visit, the teacher candidates co-taught lessons with the classroom teachers. To introduce the K-5 students to the author and illustrator, the candidates read the book *A Grandiose Gathering* to the students. After reading the book, the candidates led the students in a literacy activity related to the story while the classroom teachers supported the candidates' instruction. The activities focused on students using alliteration in their writing. In the lower grades, the students created alliterative sentences using their names, such as "My name is Colton, and I like candy" and "Sara sings songs". One of the classes in the upper grades invented new flavors of potato chips to incorporate alliteration into their writing. For example, "Marvelous Marshmallow Mango" and "Scrumptious Sweet Spicy Sausage" were two potato chip flavors they invented. Having the teacher candidates read the book and having the students involved in writing helped promote literacy learning and also paved the way for the author and illustrator's arrival at the school.

During two days of their visit, either the author or the illustrator went into each of the K-5 classrooms and read two of the books they had written or illustrated. As Chic and Thelma Kat read each book, they asked the children questions about the story and encouraged them to use their imaginations to make predictions about the story. Thelma Kat also shared her original illustrations for the books and inspired the students to discover their own creativity. For the third day, all of the students in the school joined the illustrator and author in the art room to participate in a special art project for their school. The students each painted their own "circle of creativity" on canvasses that were then hung in the school's hallway on display for everyone to see and enjoy. By the end of their time at the school, Chic and Thelma Kat had laid a solid foundation for continuing the literacy journey at this school. The students buzzed with excitement over the possibility that they, too, could become a published author or illustrator.

The Project's Impact

From observing students eagerly participating in classroom read-alouds, to watching teacher candidates excitedly lead reading/writing lessons, to seeing the finished murals hanging in the school's hallways – it was clear that this project made a lasting impression. In order to fully understand the project's impact, participants were asked to provide brief reflections describing their experiences. The illustrator, Thelma Kat, explained her vision for the project as: Children have remarkable creative capacities and with our program we can encourage self-expression and ignite each child's imagination. With this project children discover in art that there are no mistakes, only discoveries. Children with difficulties in academic subjects might excel at drawing, painting, music, and/or writing and with this selfdiscovery develops the child's self-esteem. With our program, there are no rules in art, only creativity: "Creativity is contagious, pass it on!" ~ Albert Einstein. (Personal communication, January 19, 2018)

As Thelma Kat noted, this project focused on allowing students to be creative. By bringing community resources into the classroom, students were able to read and paint alongside the author and illustrator, hear both guests explain their creative processes, and see how creative expression is used in the "real world."

Similarly, Chic commented on the importance of fostering children's imaginations and engaging them in creative activities, particularly those students who may struggle with more traditionally structured classroom environments or curriculum. Chic explained:

When I was in school my mind wandered. Today, I probably would be diagnosed as having some alphabet soup sort of "disorder" ADD, ADHD, ADWTH, ADOMG, etc. and then given a whole host of meds to quell my `wandering so that I could "focus" on the sameness of the curriculum. I'm afraid that we are stifling imaginations and creativity and replacing it with order. Day dreamers live on the edge of thinking, "outside the box," rarified territory for most people. They are the risk takers and way-seers of society. Mozart, Poe, Franklin, ee cummings, Thoreau, Picasso, Disney, Edison, Steve Jobs, the list goes on and on. I wish that I had started this journey while I was young, but hey, I'm an immature 60 year old... so that helps. (Personal communication, January 19, 2018) Interestingly, the teacher candidates shared the illustrator's and author's views. As part of their course requirements, candidates completed a brief reflection describing their experiences with the literacy project. Overall, the candidates agreed that the co-taught alliteration lessons were "a break" from the traditional curriculum. They described having to "think outside the box," "be creative," and "try something new" as they helped develop the reading and writing activities. As one teacher candidate explained, "It was so rewarding to see how positive the students acted towards the activity! I know my classroom [teacher] was excited to see her students really thinking and being creative. I think it was rewarding and refreshing to her as well!" Another commented, "I learned that when a teacher provides engaging work for his/her students, they are so motivated and genuinely enjoy learning. I could tell that our students really enjoyed our lesson, and it made me very happy." The teacher candidates seemed to like teaching these unique literacy activities, and they learned an "on the job" lesson – the importance of creatively engaging students in hands-on instruction.

The teacher candidates also responded positively to the guest visits provided by the author and illustrator. One said that the project "...brought all the children together for a few days and allowed them to work for a common goal together." Sharing the same story and collaborating on a school-wide art project were effective ways for students to build a positive school culture and community. Another candidate described the visits as a "one-of-a-kind experience that not many other children will get." Another believed that this project allowed students "...a once in a lifetime experience to meet, talk to and interact with the author and illustrator of a book written for their level of understanding. It also served to give those of us to aspire to be a teacher a taste of what's to come and what influence we truly have the potential to have." Finally, one teacher candidate commented, "it also inspired them to chase their dreams. Meeting the author and illustrator showed them that they too can be successful if they just work hard."

School personnel agreed with the teacher candidates that the author and illustrator's visit had many positive benefits for the elementary students. One classroom teacher commented on how the literacy project was "magical." She explained:

It gave students who struggle in reading and writing the opportunity to shine through creativity and imagination. They learned the creative processes and sometimes obstacles 'real authors' experience. I think for one of the first times, I

saw my students begin to view themselves as authors. (Personal communication, April 18, 2018)

Another classroom teacher stated that the author and illustrator

...inspired my students beyond my wildest dreams! During any free time they had in my classroom or in art class, some of my students started asking if they could write a story. Then, to my surprise, they asked if they could read their book to the class. This motivated other students in my class to do the same. (Personal communication, April 18, 2018)

This teacher observed that her students wanted to write more and more. As a result, she made a special bulletin board titled "Meet the Authors" to display the students' completed stories.

Some of the school personnel viewed the literacy project as a way to expose the elementary students to new career options. The elementary school's principal felt like "students were able to gain valuable insight into being an author/illustrator. Hearing from someone first-hand regarding their career choice is always beneficial to students. This excited many of our students and created a desire to write" (Personal communication, April 26, 2018). The art teacher also saw this as a "wonderful opportunity" for students to "meet and work with a real artist" and that the experience could "lead to career choices later in life" for the students (personal communication, April 26, 2018).

Another teacher was especially excited to see the impact of the visit by the author and illustrator extend beyond the classroom. A parent told the teacher that after he had tucked his son into bed the previous night, the parent saw a light shining under the bottom of the child's bedroom door. The teacher said that the parent "opened the door and asked his son why his light was on and why he was out of bed. His son told him that he thought of another chapter to write for the book he has been working on and wanted to write it down before he forgot!" The teacher then exclaimed, "If that doesn't make your heart overflow with joy then I don't know what would" (personal communication, April 18, 2018).

Not only did school personnel observe the positive effects of the literacy project on the elementary students, they also saw benefits for the teacher candidates. As one teacher stated:

They experienced the quality of the lessons that were taught by the authors. They observed the creativity come alive in our students. Through their classroom activity, the candidates helped to foster that creativity by asking probing questions. (Personal communication, April 18, 2018) Another teacher remarked:

It was also good for the candidate to see that it's ok to learn with your student. The candidate was able to talk to the children about their work and experience the triumphs and frustrations as each child discovered new things." (Personal communication, April 26, 2018)

Another benefit that the classroom teachers and the principal noted was in the area of instructional planning. The elementary school's principal noted:

Any time spent in a school with teachers and students is beneficial for potential teachers. During this particular visit, the teacher candidates were able to see how the information provided to students was incorporated in daily activities and follow-up lessons within the classroom." (Personal communication, April 26, 2018) A classroom teacher agreed:

Candidates also got a glimpse into the logistics of planning and pulling off such a program. It is extraordinary to participate in such an experience but organizing the event is a task. They observed classroom teachers prepping and planning.” (Personal communication, April 18, 2018)

Bringing outside community members into the school served as a powerful way to inspire the elementary students, classroom teachers, and the teacher candidates. First, these guests demonstrated how literacy instruction can extend beyond traditional classroom activities and curriculum. As Thelma Kat explained, “[c]hildren [can] discover to say things with color and shapes and to see that communication is more than just words” (Personal communication, January 19, 2018). These guests also demonstrated to the students that being an effective communicator – in written words and artistic expression – extends beyond the classroom. As Chic stated, this project is all about “[s]tirring imaginations and planting seeds of creativity so that the next Mozart or Poe or Picasso or Jobs can find his/her voice” (Personal communication, January 19, 2018). In short, this literacy project truly embodied the expression, *Dream Big*.

Our Dream Continues: Looking to the Future

During the implementation of the literacy project, the Dean of Education at the university posed the following question to all of those involved with the project, “How can we get children to love writing?” This seemed like a monumental task, but author Chic Cariaga challenged those involved to “Dream Big.” Because of this challenge, the newly expanded collaboration between the university, school district, and its community partners – author Chic Cariaga and illustrator Thelma Kat Ferry – has continued to evolve and grow. Upcoming plans for the immediate future include a return visit to the elementary school by Chic and Thelma Kat to continue the literacy work that was started there. Chic will be co-writing a book with third grade students for publication. To integrate writing across the curriculum, the story will be on a topic selected by the teachers that is related to the social studies standards for the third grade. This will be the realization of a dream coming true for these third graders – they will become published writers.

The dream does not end there. For students at all grade levels who have demonstrated an interest in drawing, the students will work with Thelma Kat in small groups and participate in an art lesson designed to enhance their artistic expression. Thelma Kat will also meet one-on-one with students who are planning on pursuing their interests in art during middle school or high school. Providing specific feedback to the students on their artwork will be instrumental in helping these students to embrace their own artistic abilities and talents. This could even give students the self-confidence necessary to explore the possibility of a future as an illustrator.

To reach more students, there are also plans in place to extend the literacy project to additional elementary schools within the school district and eventually to other surrounding school districts. During the 2018-2019 school year, the literacy project will be taken into four more elementary schools. This will include having students engage in creative writing activities with the author and participate in a school-wide art project with the illustrator. At each school, a group of K-5 students will be selected to co-write a book with the author for publication. This will help continue the partnership’s collaborative efforts to encourage children to read, write, and illustrate their work.

Dreaming even bigger, the partnership aspires to enhance literacy for every student in the school district. Plans are being made for a district-wide creative writing and art contest that will be co-sponsored by the university, school district, author, and illustrator during the fall of 2018. For this contest, each student in the school district will have the opportunity to submit a piece of his or her own creative writing or artwork with the chance to become a published author or illustrator. Finalists will be selected at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Pairs consisting of a student author and a student illustrator will be formed from the finalists, with the goal of each pair creating their own children's book. These pairs will attend a Literacy Day at the university to receive guidance and feedback from author Chic Cariaga and illustrator Thelma Kat Ferry on their children's books. Teacher candidates from the university will also be there to assist with Literacy Day and the candidates will continue to work with the pairs during the fall semester. In December of 2018, a gala will be held to celebrate all of the student writers and illustrators. The top author and illustrator at the elementary, middle, and high school level will also be announced. Those students will then have their illustrated books published.

Not only does this partnership between the school, university, author and illustrator offer opportunities for students to gain individualized mentoring and instruction, this partnership may result in long-term benefits for the students and their families. Research indicates that connecting school and community experiences can result in increased parent involvement in school activities, improved communication between parents and teachers, and gains in student achievement (McAlister, 2013). By expanding this literacy project from a three-day event to an ongoing exploration of reading, writing, and creative expression, partners may discover new ways to further connect students' worlds inside and outside the classroom. For example, parents might serve as judges for creative writing contests or might attend an art gallery viewing of students' masterpieces. Perhaps these elementary students could share their finished books with other students throughout the district. Perhaps new creative writing clubs could be formed.

Where will this literacy journey eventually lead? No one in the partnership really knows. However, each participant—the university, the school district, the author, and the illustrator—firmly believes that it has been this unique alliance that has thus far allowed their dreams to become a reality. They also see the importance and future benefits of this ongoing collaboration that has united a PDS and its community partners. Research supports such partnerships between schools and community partners for improving relationships with families and increasing students' academic achievement (ILA, 2018b; McAlister, 2013; Zakariya, 2015). Research also supports such school-university-community partnerships for creating a “third space” for training future teachers (Zeichner, Payne & Brayko, 2015, p. 124). Thus, the unique partnership developed between this particular elementary school, university, author, and illustrator provides one example of how the PDS model can be expanded. For now, all of those involved in the partnership will continue dreaming big...following this dream wherever it takes them.

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Students would go to school for the same total 180 days a year, but they would have more, shorter vacations. In crowded schools, vacations would be staggered to ease the demand for space. Enact a dialogue between a parent and a teacher on the issue offering valid arguments noted down from the text above. c) Work in groups of 3 or 4 (buzz groups) and assign one of the views on the issue of a year-round schooling to each group. Quite clearly the student was not a member of the university if membership is defined as having a shared responsibility for the program, regulations, welfare of the institution. In these respects the student was without status or recognition. The attitude of the university was paternalistic and authoritarian; this was accepted by all concerned." A School Story. It happened at my private school thirty odd years ago, and I still can't explain it. I came to that school in September and among the boys who arrived on the same day was one whom I took to. I will call him McLeod. The school was a large one: there must have been from 120 to 130 boys there as a rule, and so a considerable staff of masters was required. One term a new master made his appearance. His name was Sampson. He was a tall, well-built, pale, black-bearded man. I think we liked him. He had travelled a good deal, and had stories which amused us on our school walks, so that it's time for 21st Century Skills which include collaboration along with critical thinking, communication and creativity. In the future, our students will be looking for work in this global workplace and collaboration skill will enhance their prospects for employment and job advancement....] Skyteach. Form two circles with student desks, one inside the other. The conversation begins as students on the inside circle of the Fishbowl respond to a teacher-provided prompt. The first group of students asks questions, expresses opinions and shares information, while the second group of students, on the outside of the circle, listens carefully to the ideas presented and observes the process. Then the roles reverse.