

Enacting a Mission for Change: A University Partnership for Young Adolescents

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Abstract

As practicing teachers, school personnel, and teacher educators engaged in a school-university partnership, we have worked to co-create a mutually beneficial relationship centered around the learning needs of young adolescents. In this article, we will describe our diverse perspectives on and perceptions of how the partnership enhances the learning experiences of the young adolescents with whom we learn and work. We come to this work with two interrelated goals of preparing a cadre of effective middle grades teachers while improving the educational experiences for 10-14-year-old students at Westport Middle School (WMS)--whether it is through classroom instruction, teacher education, or providing supports within the school.

Formalized partnerships between universities and public schools are more common than ever before as clinically-based teacher preparation becomes required at the state and national level. The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) expects institutions to “co-construct mutually beneficial P-12 school and community arrangements, including technology-based collaborations, for clinical preparation...” (CAEP, 2013, Standard 2.1). While this topic of study is still relatively new and research has begun to document the benefits of school-university partnerships, it is important to consider the benefits to the stakeholders--particularly the student population. As practicing teachers, school personnel, and teacher educators engaged in a school-university partnership, we have worked to co-create a mutually beneficial relationship centered around the learning needs of young adolescents. In this article we will describe our diverse perspectives on and perceptions of how the partnership enhances the learning experiences of the young adolescents with whom we learn and work. We come to this work with two interrelated goals of preparing a cadre of effective middle grades teachers while improving the educational experiences for 10-14-year-old students at Westport Middle School (WMS--whether it is through classroom instruction, teacher education, or providing supports within the school.

Our Partnership

The University of Louisville (UL) is a metropolitan, research-intensive university that has engaged in partnerships with a variety of entities for many years. It was not until our former president, Dr. James Ramsey, established the Signature Partnership Initiative (SPI) that these partnerships became a formalized way to enact the University’s mission of “...not only providing a quality education for the region’s citizens, but to act as a societal agent of change—one focused on community enrichment and improvement” (UL, 2012). Enactment of our mission means that partnerships are established explicitly for the greater good of the West Louisville community. Aligned with this mission, the UL College of Education and Human Development (CEHD) worked to create a school university-partnership where teacher candidates, classroom teachers, university faculty, administrators, and students worked together to co-construct a place of learning through practice, benefiting *everyone*, especially the middle grades students of the school. In an effort to prepare teacher candidates consistent with Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) Teacher Preparation standards (2012), the tenets of *This We Believe (TWB)* (NMSA/AMLE, 2010), as well as enact the University’s Mission, the UL CEHD

engaged in the development of a clinical model with WMS, a UL SPI affiliate school.

WMS enrolls approximately 1300 sixth through eighth grade students representing 40 to 50 different elementary schools in our large mid-western city. The WMS student population is economically, ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse with 77% of the students eligible for free or reduced lunch. The state department of education has designated WMS a “Persistently Low Achieving” school for five consecutive years because of students’ consistent low performance on state standardized tests. For this reason, WMS is also labeled a “priority” school within the state and district and receives additional supports beyond the partnership with UL. Negotiating a partnership with WMS as a “priority school” was a deliberate decision guided by the UL mission and SPI goals to improve the educational experiences of young adolescents living in the West Louisville community. It also provides a very realistic view of teaching and learning in an urban context for our teacher candidates. The partnership between UL and WMS was formalized in 2013 and continues to be an integral part of the preparation of middle grades teacher candidates at UL.

Our Roles

As we negotiated the roles within our relationship, we were careful to consider the perspectives, talents, needs, and contributions each stakeholder had to offer. There are five clear roles in our partnership that compliment and support each other, making the work we do symbiotic: 1) Teacher-In-Residence, 2) Classroom Teachers, 3) Teacher Candidates, 4) University Faculty, and 5) Middle Grades Students. By design, each role contributes to the educational experience of every person involved in our collaboration, ultimately benefiting the young adolescents with whom we work and learn.

Teacher-in-residence. A unique role in our partnership is the role of Teacher-In-Residence (TIR) who is a veteran classroom teacher given significant release time to act as a liaison between the UL and WMS as well as provide additional support to teachers and students in the building. The TIR’s responsibilities to the partnership include: identifying placement sites within the school for teacher candidates; assisting teacher candidates

in acquiring field and service experiences; facilitating the communication between university faculty, teacher candidates, and classroom teachers; co-teaching university coursework when needed; supporting the various components of the partnership and university faculty; and ensuring that teachers and students at WMS are aware of all of the benefits of the partnership. She also helps maintain professional communication where questions or concerns from university faculty or classroom teachers and administrators can be addressed in a timely and professional manner. The TIR’s responsibility to the classroom teachers and students include: teaching small group reading intervention classes; conducting one-one-one student assessment conferences; creating and supporting advisory programs; supporting new teachers; assisting in Professional Learning Communities; and providing a number of the day-to-day supports teachers need.

WMS classroom teacher. The classroom teacher’s (CT) role at WMS is first and foremost focused on the young adolescents in their classrooms. While their primary job is to teach young adolescents, by virtue of choosing to teach at WMS, they become integral to our partnership work as they provide opportunities for teacher candidates to observe in their classrooms, assist them with various school activities, participate in team meetings and Professional Learning Communities, and see appropriate and meaningful interactions with young adolescents. In our partnership, the CT is also considered a teacher educator as they model appropriate practices for our teacher candidates, participate in university course work as guest speakers, and invite teacher candidates to engage in a variety of professional activities beyond course work (e.g., field trips, live scoring assessment events, learning checks, and grade-wide activities). CTs are always given the choice to host UL teacher candidates in their classrooms or participate in other partnership-related activities as they deem appropriate. We stress open and honest communication among stakeholders so teachers can step back if they need a break or engage if they want to.

UL teacher candidates. As we created our partnership with WMS, we focused heavily on the role our teacher candidates (TC) would play in the relationship. Their role is to engage in the community of WMS as a participant and member of the school culture.

They complete numerous field hours with assigned teachers, regularly participate in school activities and service opportunities, and engage in professional relationships with the school staff, administration, and teachers. TCs also develop relationships with students by assisting in after school activities, small group instruction, one-on-one goal-setting conferences, and a variety of other opportunities. All of the stakeholders strive to prepare the TCs for middle grades classrooms by also explicitly pointing to the characteristics of *TWB* seen in action.

UL faculty. The two faculty members from the UL are both full-time, tenured faculty with official responsibilities at the UL and WMS. The role of university faculty (UF) includes teaching courses on-site as well as offering support to the CTs, staff, and students. They do this in a variety of ways throughout the school year and summer by participating in many of the school functions. With their TCs, they attend assemblies, assist with learning checks, observe fire and tornado drills, eat lunch with students, and participate in team meetings. Their role is to ensure the TCs have opportunities to observe and debrief real-time activities of middle school teachers and young adolescent students while also abiding by the university goals and expectations of program requirements. UF are also responsible for teaching required university coursework, working closely with the TIR and school administration, communicating with university-based program faculty, and maintaining various university-based program faculty responsibilities (e.g., faculty meetings, committee work, office hours, mentoring and advising doctoral students, and program revision).

WMS student. The role of the student at WMS is critical to the work we all do. They represent the spectrum of diversity and offer all of us opportunities to consider multiple perspectives. We all seek to learn from them and work to make decisions about our partnership based on their needs as diverse young adolescents. Students are allowed and encouraged to visit the on-site university classroom for a variety of reasons (e.g., promoting a service project, conducting a classroom poll, sharing projects, or just to say hello). They are also encouraged to interact with TCs and UF in the classrooms, hallways, and before and after school activities.

Key Components of the Partnership

The partnership between WMS and UL is year-round and includes numerous activities. While all of the work is important, three intentionally designed components anchor the foundation on which we build a space for learning with and from each other. Sixth Grade Orientation and Summer Flight are bookends to the school year, with our Site-based Classroom a consistent connection throughout the year. These foundational components are critical to our goal of providing rigorous, meaningful, and developmentally responsive educational experiences for the students of WMS. They also encompass many of the 16 characteristics of *TWB* (2010) as they address *Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment, Leadership and Organization, and Culture and Community* (NMSA/AMLE, 2010). Additionally, these components represent the time continuum of a school year.

Sixth Grade Orientation. The sixth-grade orientation was created to help incoming students and their parents transition from the elementary school to the middle school and takes place over the course of three days, prior to the beginning of the school year. Our TIR, CTs, administrators, and guidance counselors meet to discuss and plan the various activities that will take place. UL TCs and seventh and eighth grade students of WMS are recruited to assist with all the activities. The overarching goal of the orientation is to provide an opportunity for incoming sixth graders to meet their classmates, teachers, administrators, and counselors before the school year begins, easing the difficult transition into a new learning space. The activities during the orientation are focused on building relationships with future classmates and CTs, becoming familiar with the layout of the school, practicing routines of a regular school day (e.g., class transition, library use, eating in the cafeteria, lock and locker use, etc.), and developing a sense of confidence about beginning middle school. Parents are also invited to attend the first day of orientation and have the opportunity to meet teachers, administrators, staff, and counselors.

Summer Flight. Through our partnership, we have established an enrichment camp for all students entering grades sixth through eighth at WMS. CTs spend three full days collaborating with each other, UF, and UL TCs to prepare engaging lessons revolving

around intriguing ways to teach the core content, while fostering community through social lessons. Teachers are encouraged to think outside of the box when planning, using materials and spaces that normally cannot be used during a regular school day with a full class. Students spend five full days at camp, benefiting them academically, socially, and emotionally. Not only does the camp keep them challenged academically, it also introduces concepts in unique ways, addressing the kinesthetic and tactile learners that may not understand it well otherwise.

School-based university classroom. As UL and WMS negotiated the partnership roles and responsibilities, it became important to create a physical space where the two partners could come together to meet, discuss, plan, and collaborate. WMS designated a full-size classroom to UL UF and TCs for coursework, meetings, and a variety of other university functions. The location of the UL classroom is symbolic to both WMS and UL. The intentional placement of the room next to the main office and library represents the commitment of WMS to the partnership, and UL's commitment to be involved in the everyday life of the middle school. Being in the busiest place within the school affords all stakeholders access to the space and provides TCs the opportunity to hear, see, and experience the sights and sounds of an urban middle school during the school day (e.g., class changes, beginning and ending school routines, locker conversations, typical hallway banter). WMS also uses the space for their own staff meetings, pull-out classes, or other special events. Establishing a site-based, dedicated classroom within WMS was integral in the success of classroom-embedded coursework and on-site faculty support that occurs throughout the school year.

Classroom-embedded coursework. The majority of university coursework taught at WMS incorporates a classroom-embedded structure (Howell, Carpenter, & Jones, 2013; Howell, Sheffield, Shelton, & Vujaklija, 2017), where TCs spend part of their university class session embedded in classrooms throughout the school. This structure was created to provide an immediate and tangible bridge between the theory of the UL classroom and the practice of the WMS classrooms. TCs are placed in classrooms by the TIR throughout the school

building to observe, assist, and interact during a university class session where they are then able to return to the UL classroom to debrief and discuss how what they are learning in their university coursework is connected to and represented in the WMS classrooms.

On-site faculty support. The UL classroom does more than house university coursework and provide space for collaborative meetings and activities. It symbolizes the ongoing and embedded faculty support the partnership offers to the TIR, CTs, administrators, and students of WMS. UL faculty are in the designated classroom on a regular, predictable schedule. The TIR, CTs, staff, and administrators view this aspect of the partnerships as a quick and easy resource to ask questions about a process, talk through ideas, or seek support on different topics. In addition to the day-to-day support, the partnership also provides CTs with financial and academic support for National Board Certification, specialized professional development, advanced degree completion, and other new learning opportunities offered by the university.

A Partnership with and for WMS Students

The partnership between WMS and UL has grown and changed over time. One consistent aspect of our work together is the common focus on the young adolescents with whom we all interact and learn. By virtue of the design of our partnership, we recognize the numerous benefits for all stakeholders. When we zoom in to consider how the partnership improves the learning experiences of students at WMS, we perceive three overall benefits consistently present: relationships; student social and academic confidence; and a network of support.

In Table 1, we provide a crosswalk of how we perceive the key partnership roles, key components, and benefits to students connecting to elements of *TWB*. We further elaborate these ideas to illuminate the perceived benefits to the students of WMS.

Table 1:

Connections of Key Components

***TIR**-Teacher-In-Residence; **CT**-Classroom Teacher; **TC**-Teacher Candidates; **UF**-University Faculty; **S**-Student

This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents (NMSA/AMLE, 2010)	Key Partnership Roles*	Key Partnership Components	Benefits to WMS Students
Educators value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them.	TIR, CT, TC, UF	Orientation, Summer Flight School-based University Classroom	Relationships, Social and Academic Confidence, Network of Support
Student and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning.	TIR, CT, TC, S	Orientation, Summer Flight School-based University Classroom	Social and Academic Confidence
Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant	TIR, CT, TC, UF	Summer Flight	Social and Academic Confidence
Educators use multiple learning and teacher approaches.	TIR, CT, TC, UF	Orientation, Summer Flight School-based University Classroom	Social and Academic Confidence
Varied and ongoing assessments advance learning as well as measure it.	CT	School-based University Classroom	Social and Academic Confidence
A shared vision is developed by all stakeholders and guides every decision.	TIR, CT, TC, UF, S	Orientation, Summer Flight School-based University Classroom	Relationships, Social and Academic Confidence, Network of Support
Leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about this age group, educational research, and practices.	TIR, CT, UF	Orientation, Summer Flight School-based University Classroom	Social and Academic Confidence, Network of Support
Leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration.	TIR, CT, UF	Orientation, Summer Flight School-based University Classroom	Relationships, Network of Support
Ongoing professional development reflects best educational practices.	TIR, UF	Orientation, Summer Flight School-based University Classroom	Relationships, Network of Support
Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships.	TIR, CT, TC, UF, S	Orientation, Summer Flight School-based University Classroom	Relationships, Social and Academic Confidence, Network of Support
The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all.	TIR, CT, TC, UF, S	Orientation, Summer Flight School-based University Classroom	Relationships, Social and Academic Confidence, Network of Support

Every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate.	TIR, CT, TC, UF	Orientation, Summer Flight School-based University Classroom	Relationships, Social and Academic Confidence, Network of Support
Comprehensive guidance and support services meet the needs of young adolescents.	TIR, CT, TC, UF	Orientation	Network of Support
Health and wellness are supported in curricula, school-wide programs, and related policies.	TIR, CT	Orientation, Summer Flight	Social and Academic Support
The school actively involves families in the education of their children.	TIR, CT	Orientation, Summer Flight	Relationships, Network of Support
The school includes community and business partners.	TIR, CT, TC, UF	Orientation, Summer Flight, School-based University Classroom	Relationships, Network of Support

Relationships

Relationships between all stakeholders are the central aspect of the partnership that helps maintain an approach to educating teachers and continually benefitting the students of WMS. Our foundational components are designed with relationships as a critical underpinning of the work. Within our Sixth-grade Orientation and Summer Flight camp, the stakeholders collaborate to create activities that will help students build relationships with each other, their teachers, and their administrators. These relationships create a strong foundation for incoming students to build a successful transition to middle school and help strengthen relationships of students already attending WMS.

Further, because these activities involve the TIR, UF, TCs, CTs and related arts teachers from across the building, it allows students to connect with additional adults with whom they may not otherwise interact. Overall, having a number of relationships with a number of adults provides multiple levels of supports for students throughout the school year. Both events also provide opportunities for CTs, TCs, UF, and the TIR to build relationships with each other, resulting in a stronger community of professionals around shared goals and expectations for WMS students.

The school-embedded coursework throughout the academic year allows all stakeholders, especially TCs, to experience the ebb and flow of a school culture over time. All of the site-based

experiences for TCs lead to a familiarity allowing them to take on a more meaningful role in the diverse school community. They are able to gain a more holistic view of the school and WMS students while offering extra support to CTs and WMS students. In the end, the relationships with WMS students, CTs, and the TIR become a significant aspect of the confidence our TCs draw on as they begin teaching full time.

Social and Academic Confidence

The relationships and experiences WMS students have through our partnership leads to what we perceive as an increased social and academic confidence. Sixth-grade Orientation begins the school year for incoming sixth-graders and is designed to provide them with three days of activities that help with the transition to middle school. As we watch students practice things like opening a combination lock or navigating the school lunch line for the first time in a safe space, we watch them go from terrified to relaxed as they begin to develop a confidence in themselves. We work to help them practice new social skills and engage with students from all across the school district, with TCs who will be in their classrooms during the school year, and with CTs from throughout the building prior to the first day of school. We are able to see this social confidence support them throughout the school year as they continue to develop relationships forged during the orientation.

From our experience and observation, both the academic and social benefits Summer Flight

provides to WMS students who attend positively impacts their overall emotional stability. During camp, time to socialize and grow as a community is deliberately put into each day. Students have the chance to get to know more people, both students and teachers, as well as more content, leading to excitement and anticipation. This seems to build their confidence going into the next school year because they have a stronger grasp on topics they will be learning, as well as relationships with new classmates and teachers. All of this leads to what we perceive as more academically and socially confident students.

Both of these components, bridged by the on-site university coursework, also provide an increased social and academic confidence in our TCs. If they have assisted in Summer Flight and Sixth-grade Orientation, they enter the building and classrooms with confidence in their ability to interact with young adolescents, engage in small and whole group instruction, assist teachers in a variety of tasks, and take initiative in the classroom. This confidence becomes a strong support to the students and teachers of WMS and contributes to the TCs' overall presence in the classroom.

Network of Support

The partnership between UL and WMS was designed to both yield middle grades teachers who understand young adolescents and are prepared to teach them, as well as improve the educational opportunities for the students of WMS. The components we designed took into consideration the types of supports both the TCs and students of WMS would need. From our perspective, this intentional design has created a network of support for *all* stakeholders that ultimately benefits the WMS students. Figure 1 illustrates how stakeholders support each other as we keep the WMS student at the center of our work.

First, the TIR and UF are supported by one another as well as the CTs as they seek to place TCs in learning situations, negotiate the struggle of schedules, engage in critical conversations, and seek clarification on how they can be more supportive to the students and school. The TIR also supports both the CTs and TCs as they navigate the daily life of the classroom. If a new technology or assessment practice is introduced in the district, the TIR provides additional support to get everyone up-to-speed.

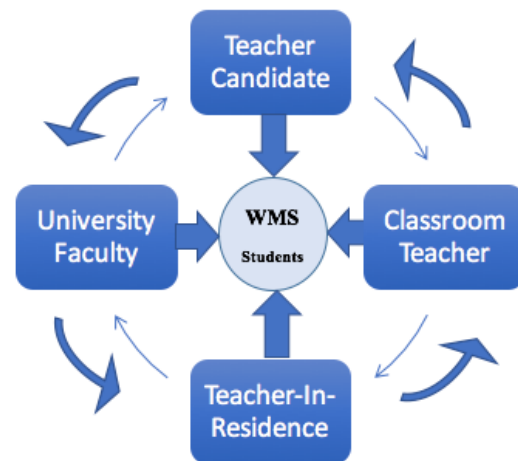


Figure 1: Network of Support

All of this support leads to TCs, and CTs who feel more confident, capable, and prepared, leading to meaningful learning experiences for young adolescents.

Second, the CTs and TCs support each other in the classroom as they plan, teach, assess, manage, and build relationships with students. The CTs are comfortable working with TCs as many are former TCs from UL, and are able to provide meaningful roles within their classrooms. TCs are able to provide extra support to the students and assist the teacher as needed. This recursive system of support becomes an integral part of the TCs' education as they are able to see firsthand the strategies that work in the classroom and the variety of situations that may occur. Because they are on-site, they get to immediately discuss their observations and receive feedback from their CT, allowing immediate reflection on the practice with their UF and other TCs. Students benefit by having additional and more experienced support in the classroom.

Finally, all the stakeholders become a tight circle of support around the students of WMS. University coursework focuses on helping TCs better understand the unique needs of young adolescents and how best to meet those needs. The TIR supports each of the other stakeholders in an effort to keep teachers up to date and supported, and TCs engaged in learning experiences, all with the goal of helping WMS students learn and grow in a safe space. UF support the TIR, TCs, and CTs by being a predictable resource and by offering opportunities for growth in a variety of ways.

TCs support the CTs and students by engaging in a meaningful role with the school community. This network of support creates the fibers that help our partnership grow and change over time.

Conclusion

Bringing together a large, research-intensive university and a large urban middle school does not happen overnight or with ease. In celebration of our partnership, we have focused on what we perceive to be the benefits to the young adolescents of WMS and the positive attributes of our partnership. We do acknowledge the very real challenges of bringing two very different and very separate entities together. We are currently collecting data on CTs' perceptions of the partnership and their perceived benefits to the school community. We plan to also conduct further research focused on the perceptions of the partnership from WMS student and parent perspectives in hopes of illuminating practices that further support young adolescents and their families as they make the transition from elementary school to middle school.

The work of our partnership is not always easy, exciting, or productive but remains critically important to our students. Creating a relationship that benefits all stakeholders requires constant compromise, negotiation, navigation, and patience. It also requires regular reminders of why we are engaged in this work. For us, we circle back to our two overarching and guiding goals of having a cadre of middle grades teachers who understand and are prepared to teach young adolescents and providing meaningful, rigorous, and developmentally responsive learning experiences for the young adolescents of WMS.

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