



Newsletter Features

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- Important Dates

Important Dates

- **October 18: Field Advisory 4:00-4:50 room 2417 4:50-5:30 (mentors)**
- **November 1: New Student Orientation**
- **Nov. 7—Dec. 2: Advance Student Registration**
- **November 15: Field Advisory 4:00-4:50 room 2417 4:50-5:30 (mentors)**
- **November 25: Deadline for newsletter submissions**

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Special Teachers and Exceptional Pupils = Urban Promise

Mentoring with Artifacts

Two themes have emerged during the beginning stages of the 2005-06 STEP=UP school year: 1)clarifying the role of the mentor and 2)using artifacts from the classroom to ground interactions. The link between the two is evident. Discussing artifacts can become a powerful tool to initiate interaction of ideas between the UIC student and mentor. And an understanding of the role of mentor as the escort through the travels of the classroom kindles the professional exchanges regarding the artifacts.

We aim that the artifacts will provide a vehicle for you to figure out the teaching abilities and questions/issues your UIC partners might have as they move into becoming a special education teacher. We are reminded in research about the importance

of varied kinds of support. In a survey of over 200 beginning special educators, Whitaker (2000)found that mentors were most effective in helping retain teachers “if the mentor provided emotional support and met the ‘personal adjustment’ needs of the beginning teacher.” In STEP=UP settings, those ‘personal adjustment’ needs vary a lot. Some UIC students are already teaching in general education or even special education settings. They may have been teaching for up to five years while other students are at the beginning, mid-point, or end of a traditional program that culminates in student teaching. The hard part of mentoring, especially in STEP=UP, is figuring out what *abilities* as well as *needs* your UIC partner might have.

We are also struck by how Whitaker’s findings fit with recent discus-

sions among UIC students in which they talk about their STEP=UP mentors as a ‘liaison’ and ‘connector’ to real teaching experiences. They tell us that they are not looking for “the expert teacher who gives advice to others,” but rather are searching for a guide, someone who will not only expose them to new ideas, but also listen to their feedback and their questions. They do not want “the answer” they tell us, but instead want a good discussion about the uncertainties of teaching and how other teachers (including their peers) reason through situations.

Dave Rench put this idea in motion when he approached his UIC students with the following quandary: “I have been taking students into an inclusion class for the past four years. The majority of the students are familiar with my students and autism in general, but I still would like to educate all the students about our differences and how we all have strengths and weaknesses. So I just posed the dilemma: What are some of your ideas on a way for doing this?” (cont.)

And, he tells us, he learned some good possibilities from the discussion.

Dave's method of drawing his UIC students into discussion of a genuine conundrum is the beginning step of a true collaboration between mentor and UIC student. In our thinking, that is a kind of "teamwork approach toward problem-solving." It is a valuable asset for all teachers, and particularly for special education teachers who will work collaboratively with other professionals. As mentors, the opportunity presents itself with each UIC student contact to model true partnership in teaching.

"A beneficial mentoring relationship for beginning special educators has been correlated with retention of these teachers in the field of special education. This, in turn, positively affects the learning of the students who do not have to adjust annually to new, inexperienced teachers. Additionally, the emotional support given by an effective mentor to a new special educator will most likely lead to a successful teaching experience for that beginning special educator, giving that new special educator the confidence and skills to continue teaching in this field."

Amos, B.A. (2005). Defining the mentoring relationship of beginning special education teachers. *Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin*, 71 (4). 14-19.

Whitaker, S.D. (2000). Mentoring beginning special education teachers and the relationship to attrition. *Exceptional Children*, 66 (4). 546-566

Mentoring the Teacher

In STEP=UP we are coming to define the mentor's role and work quite differently from the traditional view of "mentor as expert." Instead, we use words such as collaborator, facilitator, sounding board, discussion leader. We model professional collaborative conversations, focused on students' learning and our teaching. We take on the challenge of engaging our UIC partners (students), especially those already teaching, to see our discussions as opportunities to develop problem-solving skills, experience alternate ways of reasoning, and expand ways to understand individual learning.

It is important to remember that the UIC students (in their future teaching) will likely work with students at all different ages and varied disability populations—not just with the level of students they currently discuss with you. How can we show them useful strategies for gathering information about a wide range of student abilities and grade levels?

Finally, it is OK for a mentor to say "I don't know." In fact, it could make clear that teaching is fraught with uncertainties that we reason through in order to take careful and calculated actions.

Using Resources to Discover Literacy Artifacts Outside the Classroom

We all know the importance of blending in-school and out-of-school activities, as well as finding major themes or "big ideas" to use as hooks to help K-12 students connect reading and writing. Walker and Allen (1997) draw on good practice and research to suggest some major strategies, and those notions are also fundamental to the UIC Program. For example, they suggest that "children have opportunities to increase their understanding of the forms and functions of literacy by participating in thematic reading and writing activities in dramatic play contexts. This type of thematic play provides opportunities for children to use multiple forms of literacy in a variety of ways. Teachers are sometimes encouraged to guide the development and implementation of these types of thematic centers by initiating and developing themes, by selecting literacy materials, and by modeling literacy behaviors during play."

Walker and Allen describe their collaboration with preschool children in a play center that mimics a travel center. "We wanted the children to have a say in the topic for the center. We were also interested in including more reading and writing opportunities for the children." From the theory of multiple intelligences and notion that students learn through varied modifications, such a travel center (or any kind of dramatic reenactment) could provide chances for students with talents in art, graphics, keen spatial awareness for using maps, and so on to contribute their abilities to a group project and product.

For mentors, what might this mean? What literacy artifact(s) could you bring from this type of literacy project? Aside from the final products what activities along the way could you document and assess that you might share with your UIC partners? For example, how might you show UIC folks how you taught your students to collaborate? What might your own students consider to be a "good" literacy artifact that they would like to show off?

Walker, C.A., & Allen, D. (1997). *Should we travel by plane, car, train or bus? Teacher/child collaboration in developing a thematic literacy center.* *Reading Teacher*, 50, 524-527.