from the Directors

Fifteen years ago we had a simple idea: teachers are the key to children’s learning.

Teachers are key to the intellectual life of the classroom. If they are to inspire children's curiosities, they themselves must continue to learn and to grow. Real learning takes time. It requires close and sustained contact with new ideas. Teachers, often isolated in their classrooms, rarely have time to think; they are cut off from the rich cultural and scientific resources of the city beyond classroom walls. We needed a way to break down those walls.

Thus was born the Center for Education. We set out a simple mission: create opportunities for teachers' on-going learning and enlist the support of the larger community in supporting learning as an essential part of teachers' work.

And there is one more piece: stand back and watch in amazement at what kids can do when they have a knowledgeable, inspired and caring teacher.

The voices of teachers in this issue of Centerpiece eagerly tell how their teaching, even their understandings of the children, were transformed by their participation in one of the Center’s programs. These voices represent the literally thousands of teachers whose classrooms are places of lively learning because they dared to learn. They represent the many teachers who have told us they would not still be in teaching were it not for the Center.

We celebrate all these teachers who have learned from and enriched our work. We salute our colleagues whose creativity continually grows the programs and extends the vision. And we thank whole-heartedly the corporate, foundation and individual donors who over 15 years have made it possible for us to walk beside teachers and find inspiration in our city’s amazing kids. Thank you.

Linda McNeil Receives Alumni Achievement Award from the University of Wisconsin-Madison

Dr. Linda McNeil, codirector for the Center for Education and Professor of Education at Rice University, was honored with an Alumni Achievement Award from the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education at an awards reception May 10, 2003. Dr. McNeil, who received her Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction from the University of Wisconsin, was recognized as a national expert on school reform and as “an influential voice in the current national debate on accountability, standards, and assessment.” Dr. McNeil, who has written extensively on teaching and learning in urban schools, on school organization, and on policy and standardization, also gave the keynote presentation, Who Speaks for Children in a Standardized World?, which addressed the ways standardized systems of schooling harm children and their capacity to learn.
Our Stories, Our Common Thread

Pansy Wing Gee, Classroom Storytelling Project Mentor Teacher

Thinking back to how stories came to my classroom in 1988 is a blur at best. I was back in the public school classroom after having taught pre-school for two years. I was both in working-mother shock as well as culture shock. My first grade class of 28 diverse 6-7 year olds at Mark Twain Elementary was nothing like the 16 not-so-diverse 3 year olds at Bethany Methodist Weekday School, or anything remotely similar to the 30 second, third, or fourth graders I had taught at the inner city school of Bastian Elementary. In that first grade class (the boys and girls are now juniors in college), some were “gifted and talented”, some “prestigious” neighborhood kids, some couldn’t read, and some couldn’t speak English. But they were all wonderfully curious, active, talkative and eager to be heard. There was just no time and not enough of me to hear them all.

So, having Patsy Cooper, founder of the School Literacy & Culture Project, come into my room every other week to mentor me sounded great. She not only brought an empathetic ear and an extra pair of hands, but she also brought and has left with me ever since, the ever so simple, extremely powerful, idea of story dictation and dramatization. My class became not just another first grade class at Mark Twain; it became known to everyone as “Mrs. Gee’s Class” and to us as OUR class. For Sevag (from Lebanon), who was so frustrated with us for not understanding him; for Katie, who wanted everyone to hear her stories NOW; and for Tony, who needed a safer physical means to tell the news in his life, telling stories and dramatizing them became the common thread that wove everyone together. The private, don’t disturb time with the student and me was invaluable. My kids knew that when it was their turn for me to write

Asia Outreach Expands Teacher’s Horizons and Teaching

Gloria Dimke, teacher participant, Faculty Development Institute on East Asia

Thank goodness for the fellowship of teachers. A friend of mine, late in 2000, noticed a small article in the Houston Chronicle. It referred to a class for teachers being offered at Rice University. It was a Faculty Development Institute on East Asian Studies.

Fate opened a great door for me that day. The class, taught by Dr. Richard Smith, Professor of History and Director of Asian & Transcultural Studies at Rice University, was fabulous. I looked forward to it each week. I learned a great deal and looked forward to the end of the session when I would receive the lessons written as part of our requirement for attending. Being paid to learn, too, was a rare treat. My school received monies for Asian studies materials and I convinced my teammates to write an integrated curriculum for the semester. This past year two more of my peers took the class, and we are currently collaborating and expanding the unit. My trip to China through the Institute was beyond my wildest dreams. It was an honor to have been chosen to be part of such a great group of people. I learned so much through my own experiences there. My classroom came alive last year when I pulled out the hundreds of photos and souveniers gathered on the trip. My enthusiasm carried over to my students who begged to learn more about this fascinating culture. Thanks to the Institute and Mr. Freeman of the Freeman Foundation which sponsors the Institute and the trip, my students had a whole new world opened to them through my experiences.

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Gloria Dimke, a teacher at Timberwood High School, participated in the Faculty Development Institute in 2000 and was selected for a three week all-expenses-paid trip to China in 2002.
If you care to reflect on your high school years for a moment, hopefully there are some good memories, like, when you played in the band...or sang in the choir or laughed with your friends...but if you are like me (and hopefully you are not), you will be hard pressed to remember many stimulating intellectual experiences. Most of my high school courses are a blur with a few widely spaced blips on the screen. My junior year history teacher, the one who is remembered because he strayed far from the text and narrated his way through most class periods dragging in juicy, gossipy tidbits about this or that king (all of which left no mark on my tabula rasa), is appreciated because at least he did not stick to the script. At least he said a lot of sensational things. But the only class I remember is the one where we had a big debate about evolution. He let us go on and on, and there was quite a bit of heat but on we went. That was forty years ago and I remember it well. I don’t remember one king; I cannot even verify which history he was teaching, but I remember that debate.

According to Dr. Nonie Harcombe, there is a reason for that. She would hasten to point out that my history teacher only really taught us anything the day he allowed the debate, because that was the day he actually allowed us to voice our ideas. And this notion, that students actually have ideas of their own, is the tenet that defines Dr. Harcombe’s Model Lab Program for secondary teachers. If she had her way in the world of education, there would be a lot more debating and a lot less lecturing. And for most teachers, that would require a paradigm shift, a 180-degree turn, an uncomfortable revolution.

Debbie Cobb, pH Lab Resident Teacher

Debbie Cobb, a teacher at Sam Houston High School, is a Resident Teacher in the pH Lab at Lee High School this year.

pH Lab Challenges Teacher’s Old Assumptions

Debbie Cobb, pH Lab Resident Teacher

Participation in the middle school Rice Model Science Lab (RMSL) was a life-altering event. While memories of stress, anxiety, and discomfort surface, I am smiling behind a straight-faced expression. From journal writing and developing lessons from various resources to master teacher observations and workshop development, RMSL is the boot camp of science teaching. Cultivation of the professional teacher and reflective practitioner is its course cry. Similar to the Marines WHO-AH or the sorority OOO-OOP, sighs and mumbled curses can sometimes be heard from the mouths of RMSL teachers.

As a result of RMSL, I have been able to hone my professional teaching career, use reflective practice in the classroom, develop and create lessons, and present at local and national conferences. I am excited and passionate about education, learning, and reaching our children. While RMSL was daunting at times, I am better for it. I am renewed, strong, collaborative, and ready to take on the teaching of children and teachers and the learning of science content and pedagogy.

Upon “graduation,” teachers become catalysts. While we are expected to change or impact science education, one child or teacher at a time, it is the Rice Model Science Lab that is the catalyst, the recoverable un-reactive substance that increases reaction energy. Thank you RMSL, for increasing my reaction energy, my passion for teaching and learning. I consider myself a product and not a catalyst.

Rediscovering a Passion for Teaching at the Model Science Lab

Omah Williams, Model Science Lab Resident Teacher

Omah Williams, now an East District Science Instructional Coordinator, was a Resident Teacher in the Model Science Lab at Lanier Middle School from 2000-2001.
School Science & Technology Integrates Technology into the Science Classrooms

By Wallace Dominey, Project Director, School Science & Technology

In recognition of the importance of technology to education, School Science & Technology has provided technology support to teachers since 1997. We have taken three major approaches. First, database web-site applications have been built and provided to teachers. Example applications include online creation and editing of lesson plans, online file sharing, and online assessment. Second, teachers have received technology training in various computer applications from Cold Fusion programming to PowerPoint. Third, student computer clubs have been formed so that elementary campuses will have technology-capable students able to assist teachers with technology.

A fourth major component of technology integration has begun for School Science & Technology: online K-8 science teacher professional development. The goal is to provide science content and pedagogy online twenty four hours a day, seven days a week to supplement face-to-face professional development opportunities. For the hundreds of thousands of elementary teachers who teach science, face-to-face professional development in science may not be economically feasible given the amount of training required for each teacher. Online professional development, however, can be made as comprehensive as needed and has a fixed cost: the cost of development. Online training also has the advantage of being “just in time” to be accessed at any time information is needed. Of course, online training has the disadvantage that it is not hands-on unless teachers are willing to obtain their own materials and participate in online experiments.

The goal of Rice Science & Technology is to develop online K-8 science training that is both high quality and highly interactive and responsive to the needs of teachers. The simple act of accessing this training is in and of itself valuable for teachers who are not technologically savvy. The ability to access and use online resources is becoming increasingly necessary not only for teachers, but for everyone else. “Ready or not, here I come!” You may remember this phrase from a spirited game of hide-and-seek in your childhood. These words could also apply to the use of technology in education.

The eventual integration of technology into instruction seems inevitable. What is more surprising, perhaps, is how little impact technology has had on instruction up to this point. With respect to technology, our schools are in many ways museums to the way that we were taught as children. Chalk and blackboard are still the most utilized instructional aids. But are chalk and blackboard students really going to be ready for a job market that increasingly demands technological competence?

Education is falling farther and farther behind other human endeavors as educators lack access to technology. Commonplace workplace tools, the internet, office productivity software, communications and projections devices, etc., that the business world takes for granted, are seldom used in classrooms. When a teacher was told by a vendor that she was going to be taken to the 21st century in technology, her response was rightly “what happened to the 20th century?” Perhaps we have not ignored an entire century of technological advances when it comes to educational practice, but we certainly are decades behind in using technology effectively. Technology’s potential contributions to education should no longer be ignored. “Ready or not, here I come!” is not far off the mark. What is the contribution that technology can make to education? I offer that the primary contribution of technology to education will be the personalization of instruction. This may seem counter intuitive. All the Borg, Metropolis, and Matrix type world views show technology as dehumanizing. What could be less human than being taught by a computer? The answer is simple: being taught en masse along with thirty-five or more other students the same way.
School Writing Project Honors the Voices of the Teachers

By Gastonia (Terri) Goodman, Codirector, School Writing Project

The HISD Auditorium is crowded on this late September afternoon with almost 100 third-year mentor teachers scrambling to fit in the three hours of professional development training required by the district. I have dutifully attended each session over the last two years, so I can remain the primary contact person for Maribel Brauner, an ACP teacher and former student of mine. Like all of the previous sessions, the presenter is articulate and the materials are voluminous. I flip through the pages marking due dates with borrowed sticky notes so I don't miss any deadlines.

At break I look up from my notes to see Pershing Special Education teacher Catherine Wampler approach. She smiles and says, "When does School Writing Project start?" I return her smile pleased to see a familiar face and reply, "Soon. Very Soon." After Catherine returns to her seat, I look around the room and contrast the differing formats of the two professional development models. The HISD mentor training is set up like much of teacher professional training offered not only in the district, but statewide. It is large, anonymous, presenter-driven, and product-oriented. The teachers for the most part are quiet unless assigned a specific group task, and teacher experience and feedback is for the most part overlooked or discouraged. At this particular meeting an elementary teacher questions the lack of contact time she has with her assigned novice teacher and is silenced when the presenter asks her to take it up with her principal.

School Writing Project (SWP) is the antithesis of most professional development models. While "personalization" is being touted by district and corporate professional development companies, they are usually anything but personal. SWP, in contrast, is small with no more than ten to twelve teachers invited to join each workshop. It is teacher-driven, with workshop facilitators active as classroom teachers and the seminar sessions are set up based on participant needs in the classroom. Most importantly, a SWP workshop is credible and honors the experience and voice of teachers.

After my chance encounter with Catherine, I pull out a draft of an article I started in the spring. It is a snapshot of a SWP Teachers Workshop and reflects the vital professional exchange that happens when teachers learn from each other and are trusted to make decisions in their classrooms:

It is early April, 5 p.m. on Thursday, as our small but diverse group of School Writing Project teachers meet in the Ley Student Center on the Rice University campus. We gather around an oblong wooden table in the Second Floor Conference Room as the sunlight fades outside. For most of us, our day began before the sun came up, but you wouldn't know it to listen to our conversation.

Pershing Middle School teacher Catherine Wampler is discussing the success she experienced in modifying last week's Read-Aloud activity we studied and practiced with each other at our last workshop meeting. The activity involved generating critical observations around a common reading passage (Ernest Hemingway's short story, "The Hills are Like White Elephants) with a partner. The teachers alternated the role of speaker as they observed what was significant about the selection with a partner taking notes. After five minutes the roles were reversed so that each teacher provided critical insight into the assigned passage.

As timekeeper and observer, I noticed Catherine seemed initially apprehensive with the activity based on some long silences as she searched to fill up the allotted time. She was good natured in her joking when her partner James, a college writing teacher, focused on rhetorical strategies and rather sophisticated uses of symbolism. Afterwards, as part of every SWP Workshop, we made time to collaboratively examine the way that the strategy would need to be modified to fit our specific student populations.

As practicing teachers, we have all experienced the frustration of an activity delivered in a professional development workshop or studied in an educational text that looked seamless on the page only to...
An Oasis of Creativity and Writing in the Summer Creative Writing Workshops for Young People

Last June nearly 400 young writers, ranging from entering kindergarten through entering twelfth grade, participated in Summer Creative Writing Workshops. Cosponsored by the School Literacy and Culture Project and Writers in the Schools, the workshops typically are jointly taught by a teacher and a writer who lead their students in wide-ranging writing activities. Below two teachers of a kindergarten workshop share their experiences.

By Sharon Dworaczyk and Julie Fitzgerald, Mentor Teachers, Classroom Storytelling Project

For the child preparing to enter kindergarten, the Summer Creative Writing Workshops offer a stress-free learning environment focusing on the written word for both the experienced writer and the more reluctant one. Art and drama are incorporated into the children’s daily routines to extend their understanding of the written word and create a fun and inviting atmosphere. The children’s days are full of reading, journal writing, independent writing, story dictation and the dramatization of their own personal stories, as well as those stories written by adults. They enter a world where they are empowered to be writers and creative thinkers. All of the activities presented to the children throughout the three-week

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Teacher Brings Classroom Storytelling Project to Peru

By DeeDee Kibodeaux, Mentor Teacher, Classroom Storytelling Project

The wonderful thing about being a mentor for the Classroom Storytelling Project is the diversity of the resident teachers that we meet and work with. I have the pleasure of working with teachers from Spain, Columbia, Mexico, and many other Latin American countries. One actually took me to her country. Ann Elizabeth Wadsworth was a resident teacher I mentored during the 2002-2003 school year for the Houston Independent School District. She was enlightened with all the literacy activities and the children’s stories. When Elizabeth wanted to return to her country, Peru, she proposed to a very prestigious private school, Saint George School, to implement story dictation and dramatization in their program. The school offered her a job. Since I was her mentor, I was asked to do a workshop with the teachers at Saint George. As I prepared for the trip I asked myself what are the needs of these teachers? I wondered what were their philosophies? I wish I had taken a picture the first day of the workshop; the teachers were in the back corner table and were just listening to my presentation. But, as the day unfolded, I read The Carrot Seed by Ruth Krauss to demonstrate adult-authored dramatization. When I asked for volunteers to dramatize the story, the teachers were a bit reluctant. But, like in a classroom, they glittered and shined like stars. The next two days were full of stimulating conversations about different literacy activities that I presented to them. During breaks, teachers would walk up to the tables and look at the books and displays of children’s work. Their concerns were the same as the teachers here in the United States. I then realized that I was not just interested in children here in the U.S. but throughout the world. I ended the three-day workshop with reading (actually singing) What a Wonderful World by David Weiss. No matter what color of skin we have, what language we speak, or what country we live in, one thing I am convinced of: children are treasured and they all have a story to tell.

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A gentle buzz of conversation fills the room, punctuated every now and again by a burst of laughter. Teachers talk in small groups, asking and answering the questions that matter in their lives: “I’ve never dramatized children’s stories before – did it really work for you?” “How do I find time to teach this way?” “Is there a way to adapt this idea to work with older children?” Such was the setting last July when over ninety teachers of two year olds through second grade gathered in the Kyle Morrow room on campus to further their knowledge of early literacy. Participants in the eighth annual “Reading, Writing, and Cultural Connections Summer Institute,” these teachers came from a variety of public school districts, private schools, Head Start centers, and day cares. Some brought with them years of experience, while others came with the enthusiasm of one trying something new. Together they participated in discussions on topics ranging from print awareness to cultural awareness. They analyzed their current teaching practices and challenged themselves professionally by presenting to the group. Somehow, through these shared experiences, this diverse group came to experience firsthand what it means to develop a sense of community – to see, as Marjorie Skolnick writes, that relationships really do enhance literacy learning. Participants took home a binder of resource materials, enough book lists and “bargain” locations to satisfy the most avid shopper, and suggestions for literally hundreds of classroom activities. More importantly, however, they carried with them a renewed awareness of their power as teachers to change lives by listening, challenging, and caring for the children in their classrooms. True teaching will never come from a set of activities or any teacher’s guide; it comes instead from the myriad of informed choices that we as teachers make each day. It comes from truly believing that children can be knowledge creators. One participant summarized her learnings in this way: “We need to be reflective teachers, taking what we know and doing what’s best for students. Also, being able to know and give an explanation for what we’re doing in the classroom. Is it good for children? Is it meaningful?”

Vivian Paley and the Classroom Storytelling Project Present at the National Association for the Education of Young Children Annual Conference

Over 500 early childhood educators came to hear a presentation on using children’s own stories to promote both literacy and social learning at the National Association for the Education of Young Children's Annual Conference in Chicago, November 5, 2003. The three-hour session featured Vivian Paley, author and MacArthur Fellow; Patsy Cooper, New York University; Gillian McNamee, Erikson Institute; and Bernie Mathes, Connie Floyd and Karen Capo from the Center for Education's School Literacy and Culture Project. The audience gave a standing ovation to Vivian Paley and the rest of the panel at the end of their session.
their story, my attention and my understanding were
guaranteed. Having the control to choose actors and
how they’d perform guaranteed to each student author
that the class would understand both the story and the
storyteller’s feelings.

I grew to love students better because I knew them
better. Even more important was that my students grew
to love each other. They were Mrs. Gee’s class and I was
theirs.

Now one might think that this would be enough to stick
with the Storytelling Project in and of itself: a way to
have everyone come together as a classroom and to help
students with emergent literacy. What a gem! But there
was yet another hidden jewel in this storytelling
treasure chest. The Storytelling Project has provided me
with a teacher community. As a “resident” teacher, and
now as a “mentor” teacher, I am part of a network of
wonderful teachers-colleagues-friends with which to
share inspiring conversations about our children, about
our philosophies, and about our stories. The monthly
Mentor Seminars, and the summer and winter early
literacy workshops, under the wise direction of Bernie
Mathes, Judy Rolke, Karen Capo, and Connie Floyd,
play essential roles in bringing together a group of
diverse people who learn from each other. The stories of
children hold us together and encourage us to push
ourselves further into a deeper understanding of those
little ones we call “ours.”

School Science & Technology Integrates Technology Into the Science Classroom, continued from page 4

topic, at the same rate, in the same manner regardless of whether the topic, rate or method of instruction fits the
student intellectually, linguistically, or developmentally.” Although good teachers struggle against this one-size-
fits-all instructional model, our educational system does not truly support individualized instruction. Ideally,
there should be one student-one instructor in many situations and only technology can provide that level of
individualized instruction within the spending limits imposed by our society.

The task of serving the individualized needs of any number of students simultaneously is precisely what
computers can do effortlessly. Computers can be programmed to evaluate a student’s need in a particular subject
area, then present material to the student in such a way that the student will learn, which will lead to additional
personalized evaluation, more presentations, and more learning. And unlike a current classroom setting, the
student does not have the luxury of sleeping through, failing to understand, or tuning out the instruction. This is a
key difference. Once the student stops responding and learning, the computer stops teaching, and if desired, alerts
a teacher that there is a problem. In this way, the connection between teaching and learning is assured.

Many who speak of using computer technology argue that computers should be used primarily to teach ‘higher
order’ thinking skills. I am at a loss to understand why. To me, the opposite approach makes more sense. Use
computers for tasks that computers do best. Thus, computers would be used for the ‘rote’ type teaching first, such
as memorizing multiplication tables. Computers only teach what students do not know instead of presenting the
same material to all students, even those that have mastered the material. And computers can make learning and
memorizing fun for students and give instant feedback and reward through the use of visually appealing graphics
and game-type formats. This is not to say that computers cannot teach thinking skills. They can. For example,
examine educational computer programs for preschoolers: what does a talking car do when faced with a cow in the
road? Answer: honk the horn!

You may ask, “where does the use of computers for instruction leave the teacher?” If other industries are any
guide, teaching will change, but teachers will not be replaced by computers. Increased technology has not meant
increased unemployment. Technology itself creates jobs and the increased efficiencies provided by technology
may displace some teachers temporarily, but technology produces more jobs than it eliminates. Also, humans are
social animals and human contact during instruction is likely to continue.

In addition to supporting individualized instruction, another key advantage of using technology for instruction
will be the reduction of effective class size. Imagine two-thirds of a class actively using technology to learn.
Teachers would then be free to devote more time to constructivist, inquiry-based, authentic teaching that large class
sizes restrict. And teacher grading (a time consuming task for teachers) would be reduced to a minimum and
unnecessary for technology-based learning components. There are other possible models of technology-based
instruction in addition to assistance in a traditional classroom. For example, distance learning using technology
could reduce class time or large groups of students using technology to learn could be managed by smaller
numbers of adults with teachers working with smaller groups of students at any one time. The technology is
available today. The question is how long will educators wait to put these capabilities into practice?
Another case in point would be my biology teacher, who was very interesting to listen to. But the only class I truly remember was the one where he and I argued over whose Punnett square was correct, his or mine. He let me defend the way I had worked a genetics problem and he took me seriously. We went back and forth. We were both science devotees and we both loved to work genetics problems. That day he functioned as though we both had brains and ideas and valid ideas at that. It turned out that I had worked the problem correctly, which meant that he had worked the problem incorrectly. But he was okay with it. The fact that I could defend my ideas and that I felt comfortable enough to speak up, said volumes about him as a teacher. At least on that day he would have received a nod of approval from Dr. Harcombe.

Maybe you would care to take a stroll down memory lane. Think back honestly and try to remember the learning. Did your teachers ever bring you to that point? Did you ever have an opportunity to put forward an idea that was uniquely yours? Were you ever called upon to defend your ideas with supporting evidence when confronted with alternative ideas?

Every year Dr. Harcombe gives four high school teachers an opportunity to make the leap. Under her constant supportive and purposeful eye, these educators have a chance of a lifetime to become for others on a daily basis, what rarely happened for them. So, it is not an easy transition. For most, Dr. Harcombe is the first role model they have encountered, which makes for a great deal of un-learning while learning. But her patient, consistent nudging and tuning, gradually melts away years of mis-education and begins the process of a new approach and a new understanding.

Imagine this: it is time to teach the relationship between light and sight. So, do we tell the kids that light travels in straight lines from a source to an object that then reflects the light to the eye that tells the brain that something is being seen? Heavens no. God forbid. What do we do? We ASK the kids to tell us what the relationship between light and sight is! And, shock of shocks, they tell us what THEY THINK the relationship is. And then we have three or more ideas being put forward. The class is divided. Some students agree with Luis. Some students agree with Christian and the rest of the students agree with Silvia. What to do? Well, we argue about it for a while until every one is clear as to why they hold a certain view and then we let light speak for itself. We encourage the students to set up demonstrations in which their view is clearly shown to be the view that agrees with what actually happens in an experimental situation. And does that settle it? No! Views that have been argued for are not lightly released. It may take several class periods or several weeks or months or, gasp, years?

Research shows that even for highly educated people, erroneous ideas are common because no teacher ever took the time to allow those ideas to be confronted and tested and tested until they are released and replaced with more scientific ideas, in this case, science being the medium. But the idea is true for any discipline. And is this time consuming? It is indeed and it explains why only four teachers per year are accepted into the program because hours of one-on-one discussion are required for teachers to be able to confront their ideas about teaching, ideas that have been in place for a long time, ideas that have been reinforced by nods of approval from many sources, ideas that are not easily released and replaced.

Does it make a difference then, this work that Dr. Harcombe is doing day after day? It seems that it does. Since the Middle School Science Lab opened in 1990, some 56,000 young people have been taught by her graduates and the test results indicate that these students are better problem solvers and thinkers than the average. Teachers who go through her program tend to stay in education, a much-sought-after outcome.

There is a saying that you cannot teach an old dog new tricks. I have been teaching for twenty-five years and I am for the first time seeing that students have ideas about everything. Students have ideas, you can call them preconceived notions if you like, but I have spent the last twenty-five years ignoring them for the most part. I even think it would be accurate to say that I somehow intuited that when I teach science, I am teaching to a clean sheet of paper. Every nugget of wisdom I impart is drops into an empty bucket and is gratefully snapped up and incorporated into a worldview. Believing that students enter my classroom with a system of ideas already in place is a brand new thing for me. I am a very old dog but I am learning things that should have been put in place twenty-five years ago. It is a wonderful thing for me. Under Dr. Harcombe’s direction I am becoming an unabashed learner of science and teaching.
School Writing Project Honors the Voices of Teachers, continued from page 5

experience the failure of the same strategy in our classroom. What might work with my junior Advanced Placement high school students will not work with ESL teacher Pat Ojaboro’s or Catherine’s special education students. Both Catherine and Pat are quick to point out the obstacles for their students in this inductive approach to critical reading, but instead of dismissing the Read-Aloud, they make clear and workable suggestions to modify it by incorporating frame questions and modeling for the students. The brainstorming and problem solving that follows our practice of an instructional strategy makes it more meaningful for a wide-range of students. The same process is used in every SWP workshop, whether we are examining reading or writing strategies.

A week later, at our SWP workshop, prior to examining moving students from journal writing to creating completed literary pieces in the classroom, Catherine is reporting back to the group the success she encountered with her special education students when they tried the Read-Aloud technique. "I couldn't believe it. Some of my most reluctant readers wanted to continue," she says. I compliment Catherine’s willingness after only three weeks with the group to incorporate a new technique into her ongoing classroom practice. She dismisses my praise in the workshop by saying, "When you teach Special Education, you are willing to try anything that works."

But despite her protest, I know that she is being too modest. All of us as teachers have dismissed an instructional approach as impractical because we lacked the conversation and practice with colleagues necessary to gather the courage to try it out with our students. Teachers, like our students, do not like to fail in the classroom. In fact, one of the most important goals in SWP is to create a trusted community of professionals so that we can grow together over time in developing practices that help our students improve as readers and writers. It is the kind of trust that school reformer Deborah Meier writes about in *In Schools We Trust*….the kind of trust needed to provide important critical feedback, to share secrets about your teaching dilemmas, or to accept responsibility for your colleague's work.

SWP stands in stark contrast to the professional teacher development that is offered in large group settings without follow-up or shared experience. It invites teachers to come to know each other and to respect the different challenges we experience in the classroom as we carve out time to share our classroom stories. As a high school teacher, my challenges are to prepare my students for the rigorous Advanced Placement tests and for application to first-tier colleges; my next door neighbor and SWP Workshop colleague, ESL teacher Pat Ojaboro, struggles to help her students "build enough confidence just to get them to take the risk of putting words on paper."

Together we are working towards the common goal of making our classrooms meaningful and purposeful places where our students share in the joy of reading and writing.

As I leave my HISD mentor training session after three hours, I think of my friend and SWP colleague Tom Brady at Waltrip High School. Curious to know why he joined our SWP Workshop last year after 30 years as a professional educator he replied, "In most professional development workshops there is just not the personal investment. You don't know that person (facilitator) and you will never see them again. In a SWP Workshop the professional relationship between participants is emphasized, and this is motivating for teachers."

I agree, Tom.

Teachers Learn to Reflect and Create a Sense of Community, continued from page 7

But does a burst of summer enthusiasm really impact a classroom? For Mary Beth Nolan, a prekindergarten teacher in the Woodlands, the answer is yes.

“I am really enjoying the storytelling and drama in my class. The children are responding tremendously. All fourteen of my children have dictated stories and I have learned that we must act them out within the next two hours or the writer will drive me nuts! They are already writing parts for their friends in the story and even the most reluctant student is blossoming. News of the Day has been great. One mother told me that her son told her that ‘c’ is a trickster because when it gets with ‘h’ it says /ch/. This had to come from News because we take the lessons as they come. We were circling c’s and discussing the sounds and we happened to come across a ‘ch’."

So we see the results in this classroom -- young children discovering their writers’ voices through stories and investigating the world of print through daily news shared with friends -- an empowered teacher clearly sharing her love of learning -- it appears to have been a successful summer! “I felt so valued and respected as a teacher by the presenters. There was a comfortable, relaxed, friendly atmosphere here, but it did not take away from the importance of why we were there. In fact, it made me more involved and interested.”

10 • Center Piece
Teachers from the Model Science Lab and School Science & Technology Present at the 2003 annual meeting of the Science Teachers Association of Texas

More than 25 teachers from the Center for Education’s Model Science Lab and School Science and Technology presented at the 47th annual meeting of the Science Teachers Association of Texas (CAST) in Houston this October, the largest state science teachers conference meeting in the U.S. More than 5,000 elementary, secondary and college educators, and administrators attended. The Center for Education was a sponsor. The Center’s information booth at CAST invited attendees to learn about all of the Center’s teacher professional development programs. Center for Education Codirector Linda McNeil and Model Science Lab Director Elnora Harcombe also gave a well-attended presentation at the conference, “Learning in Urban Schools.”

Model Science Lab Director Dr. Elnora Harcombe talks to a CAST attendee after her presentation with Center for Education Codirector Dr. Linda McNeil, “Learning In Urban Schools.”

Carlsen, Hyacinth Enyinnia, Wyvette Hughes, Bea Long, Nicole Magee, Sandy McMenemy, Amy Rose, Lisa Webber and Cheryl Willis gave presentations on a variety of science topics at the conference. Wallace Dominey, Project Director for School Science & Technology, also presented along with the following teachers from his project: Martha Borrowman, Paula Burke, Alejandra Degraff, Sharon Kennedy, Deborah Lembcke, Patty Manco, Alex Martinez, Charles Meredith, Tammy Oldani, Fran Rogstad, Jessica Scheller, Linda Scott, Carol Singletary, C.J. Thompson, Chris Thorn, and Cathey Whitener.

Debbie Cobb, a Resident Teacher in the pH Lab at Lee High School, talks to CAST attendees at the Center for Education’s information booth.

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period are literacy- focused while encouraging the children to learn through play. Here are a few sample questions and responses sparked by reading quality literature: “What would you do if you had a magic wand like the father in Abiyoyo, written by Peter Seger, and what would your magic word be?” “In-ga-la-ma-lou-sa! It makes a leaf fly in the air. It lands at my house and turns into a bunny.” (Mark). “Magic POOF It would turn my bed into a dolphin. The dolphin would take me out in the ocean where the sharks are. The dolphin gets to jump and I get to ride on him. Then the dolphin would take me back home. Then it would turn back into my bed. (Jackie).

After reading George Shrinks by William Joyce, the children were asked to imagine what would happen if they were to shrink. “If I were to shrink, there would be a big catcher and a big pitcher. He would throw a low ball and I would hit it.” (Thaddeus). “If I were to shrink when I do the dishes, I would get on the sponge and ski down the plate.” (Michael).

At this level, two teachers are paired together with approximately 14 children. What we have found most beneficial about the dynamics of team teaching is that each teacher brings her unique experience and understanding to the team. This provides a rich opportunity for professional development where diverse experiences and resources are shared. Through our joint interests in reading great books and writing, our classroom quickly forms a community of writers working together as a team, full of pride and respect for their work. These young children never cease to teach and amaze us with their creative capabilities and enthusiasm.
• Upcoming Events •

January 17, 2004  The Role of Books in Shaping Young Children’s Thinking  
School Literacy & Culture Project  
5th Annual Miniconference  
Duncan Hall, Rice University

February 1, 2004  African-American Read-In Chain,  
Cultural Conversations and  
International Reading Association,  
Project Row Houses

March, 2004  Hazel Creekmore Memorial Symposium  
Grand Hall, Rice University  
(date to be announced)

To learn more about the Center’s teacher development programs, its publications and its research activities, see our website at http://www.rice.edu/education

To learn how to participate in one of the Center’s teacher development programs, contact the Center for Education at (713) 348-5145.

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