A CASE OF NEED: THE HOUSE OF TINY TREASURES

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Abstract

This descriptive case study investigates the partnership of an urban university, two departments within that university, and the House of Tiny Treasures (an early childhood development center for young children of the homeless). Creation of the project, the initiatives of each department of the college, challenges, and future plans are described.

KEY WORDS: Education, case study, urban education

INTRODUCTION

On a small street in a stereotypical urban neighborhood near the University of Houston – Downtown (UHD) is the brightly painted House of Tiny Treasures (HTT). HTT is an outreach program of the Service of Emergency Aid and Resource Center for the Homeless (SEARCH) organization. SEARCH was founded in 1989 as a faith-based nonprofit organization by the Council of Congregations - an ecumenical collaborative across Houston and Harris County that believed homeless individuals and families need more than a meal and a place to sleep. At first glance, one may think HTT is a typical childcare center for neighborhood children, but the clientele are quite unique. All of HTT’s children are members of the homeless population in downtown Houston. Each child reunites with a family member at the end of the day at a shelter for the homeless. This descriptive case focuses on the partnership between the center and an urban university. The two are working towards the joint goals of simultaneously facilitating initiatives for these children and their families while, at the same time, providing opportunities for faculty research and educating university students on urban needs.

The homeless population in Houston has increased. Community leaders recognize the homeless situation as a priority need in Houston’s inner city. The number of homeless people in Houston who live in areas that skirt the University of Houston-Downtown (UHD) and other areas downtown are at the forefront among the city’s list of needs. According to the National Center for the Family Homeless, families with children account for about 33% of the homeless population. Among children in the U.S., 1.35 million are homeless during a year’s time, and 42% of homeless children are under the age of six. Furthermore, homeless children are diagnosed with special needs/learning disabilities at double the rate of other children, and they are twice as likely to repeat a grade because of frequent absences from school [National Center for Family Homelessness, 2002].

UHD is located in the fourth largest city in the United States. The University has been identified as the most diverse institution of higher education west of the Mississippi River. Although the university has been designated as an Hispanic-serving institution, there is a significant African American population as well. The University’s location (near a bayou with expansive bridges) brings its students and faculty into constant contact with the homeless who live in the area--many times directly underneath the bridges that join the campus buildings. The location is also near the large county jail, and some of the recently-
incarcerated homeless also live in the area. In addition, UHD’s mission includes providing opportunities for non-traditional students. Among the non-traditional students are many who have lower incomes. They were often raised in families that faced significant challenges and had parents who may not have been well equipped to prepare their children for higher education. These UHD students are often faced with some of the same challenges as the homeless with issues such as finding and balancing work, trying to find the time and resources to properly care for and support a family, and completing an education.

UHD created its College of Public Service (CPS) in 2003 with a strong community orientation. CPS’s purpose is to advance education and the ethical practice of justice in response to community needs. CPS has two departments: Urban Education and Criminal Justice. Both departments focus on fulfilling the CPS mission through exploratory and reflective learning, intervention, and prevention in the diverse community setting. The foremost objective for the Department of Urban Education is the training of teachers who will be able to work effectively with diverse learners and in urban settings. The Criminal Justice Department focuses on preventative training. Graduates are trained to help prevent the individuals they serve from moving into situations that could lead to a first or further incarceration. CPS’s Criminal Justice efforts also focus on preventing homelessness, since incarceration is often the precursor to lack of a job and family ties which can often contribute to later homelessness. In addition, the Criminal Justice curriculum aims to help its students to understand and to focus upon preventing the patterns of homelessness that could lead to criminal behavior.

The House of Tiny Treasures was established by SEARCH in 1992. UHD staff and faculty have known about HTT for several years, and university employees have provided donations for the children at HTT on a regular basis within the last five years. Staff and faculty, particularly within the College of Public Service, have joined together to help these children to feel a part of (instead apart from) the community. The CPS business manager was first to make the CPS faculty and staff aware of HTT activities and its great needs. As a former UHD student herself, the CPS business manager had participated in a volunteer project assignment that focused upon the HTT children’s needs. Until the fall of 2006, UHD’s participation was at the volunteer and donation level only. These UHD efforts included: (1) securing warm coats and sweaters for winter wear, (2) providing opportunities to participate in normal holiday festivities through parties and gift bags, and (3) ensuring each child has a few personal toys and items to foster awareness of ownership and sharing.

The voluntary efforts led to the 2006 development of a more formal connection between UHD and HTT. A formal relationship seemed to be a natural step, as so many UHD departments and individuals have interests that focus on urban problems and solutions. As the CPS community sought to broaden participation with HTT, participating faculty and staff realized that, in order to make a significant difference in the lives of the children, the needs of the entire family needed attention. The faculty members, for example, had expertise that could support and assist the homeless children at HTT and their parents and siblings, as well as HTT faculty and staff. The collaboration between CPS and HTT is non-traditional and unique because of its interdisciplinary approach to addressing community needs, its urban emphasis, and its student-oriented approach to an integrated model of reflective learning, research, and service. It is possible that a modified version of Freire’s proposals [Gibson, n.d.] most closely mirrors the educational philosophy of underlying CPS programs. Freire argues that use of “see-judge-act” student-centered methods lead to critical consciousness or an awareness of the necessity to constantly unveil appearances that are designed to protect injustice for the powerless. These changes in attitude and behaviors serve as a foundation for action aimed at attaining equality and democracy [Gibson, n.d.]. The UHD students and faculty (as well as other community members) involved with this project have embraced equality and democracy as objectives for the UHD-HTT partnership efforts.

An overarching objective within CPS is to respond to community needs, an objective that that was reflected in the CPS-HTT formal partnership that began in the fall of 2006. The partnership sought to strengthen and formalize ties so that both HTT and the College might benefit from the university students’ contact with the diverse set of children at HTT. Further, it was expected that the vision for the future and growth of homeless children and their families could be extended. The presidents of UHD and SEARCH signed a Memorandum of Understanding in a ceremony on Oct. 6, 2006. The signing of the Memorandum was followed by meetings that focused on how the partnership could begin to make a real difference in the HTT children’s lives. The Dean and business manager of CPS and the director of HTT developed an “advisory board” to include the Vice President of Facilities and Programming and the new president at SEARCH, as well as community advocates, leaders, judges, medical center faculty, and UHD faculty from
a variety of programs. SEARCH’s new president had come from Habitats for Humanity and was devoted
to making a difference in the homeless community. The president of SEARCH, the Dean of CPS, and the
director of HTT were also guests on KPFT 20.1’s “Interchange” to discuss the research that was an
integral part of the partnership. As these programs expand, CPS will begin collaboration with other
colleges within UHD, the faculty of other universities, local school districts, social and criminal justice
agencies, and medical support services (such as Texas Children’s Hospital and Meyer Development
Center), to ensure adequate resources and expertise are available for research and program
development.

THE HOUSE OF TINY TREASURES

HTT’s parent organization, SEARCH, is an umbrella for a number of outreach programs to address
the problems confronting the homeless. The programs include a resource center, a mobile outreach, a
housing project, an educational program, on-the-job training programs, HTT, and others. As noted, HTT is
located in downtown Houston (near UHD) and provides stability and structure for homeless children who,
typically, have tumultuous lives. The programs promote optimum developmental growth for success in
school and provide an environment that helps children to realize their full potential in life. HTT was
established specifically for children whose parents are involved in opportunities to become independent
and self-reliant. Homeless parents who can focus on their own education and/or job training are more
likely to become self-sufficient, productive citizens. SEARCH opened HTT 1992 for the specific purpose
of helping the homeless to transition by providing a place for the children while their parents are moving
from unemployment and homelessness to working or completing further educational training.

Most children’s families are beset with poverty, violence, and other destabilizing conditions. Their
mothers may have received little (if any) prenatal care. Many mothers may have been involved with drug
abuse during pregnancy and/or have had some type of mental illness. The children, consequently, often
suffer from various developmental delays and/or some form of emotional or behavioral problem(s). Many
of the parents have backgrounds similar to their children and may lack the skills or emotional strength to
cope with the parenting challenges. The effectiveness of the support provided by HTT is key to the long-
term success of the adult participants. Parents with young children can have difficulty breaking the
homeless cycle because they have no safe place to leave their children while they are working or
completing job training. Yet, in this case, HTT parents can pay on a sliding income scale for their
child(ren) to have access to services in a licensed, nationally-accredited early childhood center.

HTT serves approximately 32 children from ages six months to six years. Most are African American
or Hispanic ethnicity. HTT has a staff of three administrators, seven teachers, and one cook. Two
therapists work with the children on a contract basis. HTT provides the children with: transportation to and
from their homeless shelter; food (except dinner); screening for psychological needs, speech, hearing,
vision, and language; play therapy and art therapy; counseling; parent education and support; case
management; and developmental assessments. This center was accredited in November 2005 by the
National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), a recognized sign of high quality in
early childhood education and developmentally appropriate programs.

The facilities include an office, two small houses, a parking lot, and playground spaces for each area. Two
adjacent and brightly colored houses have been transformed into learning centers—one for
infants/toddlers and one for preschoolers of homeless families. Classrooms are located in each “home.”
The layouts employ the Reggio Emilia philosophy that emphasizes the role of the environment in learning
for young children [Cyert Center for Early Education, 2004]. Both “homes” have indoor and outdoor
learning space. The infants/toddlers’ area has a large attached covered porch for art, water/sand tables,
and manipulatives. Their outdoor area is smaller than that of the preschoolers and rectangular in shape
with a small house and several pieces of permanent equipment. The fences are beautifully painted with
a bright mural. The preschoolers’ classroom is larger and is a model of a developmentally-appropriate
practice, as noted by the NAEYC accreditation team. The indoor space has learning centers, a loft, a
dramatic play area, science stations, technology stations, an art room, and an area for private therapy to
take place. In addition, there is a small front porch for a water table and a covered back porch just large
enough for a beanbag chair and some books. Their outdoor space includes: a two-sided easel with a
large selection of paints; a gardening box that houses ladybugs and new flowers; a sensory box with
shredded rubber mulch; vehicles for playing; a house with supplies for many multicultural restaurants or
homes; a riding track with cars; a science kit for exploring; and a sensory table with a cover, pretend play figures, and kits for changing themes (in addition to a permanent playground structure and a swing).

INITIATIVES

The HTT-UHD partnership combines early childhood and higher education expertise to address many issues of children who are at risk. The partnership goals include conducting descriptive and evaluative research as a base for meaningful program development, as well as networking with and empowering the community by providing a variety of initiatives. There are also intervention plans that focus on the HTT clients, their parents, and their school-age siblings. In addition, there are projects in the planning stages that will provide contextual opportunities and experiences for preservice teachers who are enrolled in the Urban Education program. For university students, their observations, and participating in and/or analyzing experiences with young homeless children contributes to the development of their expertise as future professionals. For example, students beginning their studies in education will participate in a number of various activities: simple and directed observation, teaching activities, technology, and data collection at HTT. Because of CPS' participation, the HTT facilities have recently become wireless to communicate more easily with professors on issues that the HTT faculty and staff may have—as well as to transfer data and gain technology support. The partnership’s use of technology is discussed in detail in a later section.

UHD, SEARCH, and HTT collaborated to design a study that would provide evaluation and assessment for Phase One of the partnership. The study focuses on three sets of issues: (1) analysis and assessment of SEARCH intake and data for computer and adult literacy, (2) the evaluation of the HTT’s curriculum and environment, and (3) a needs assessment of basic parenting and adult literacy curriculum for the HTT parents. Video tapes, anecdotal records, interviews, and digital photography all serve as data collection instruments for this case study.

The first experiences for UHD and HTT focused on initiating a relationship through a fine arts program. Each week, in their Summer Program, CPS professors and a high school volunteer worked with one group of HTT children to provide comprehensive experiences through developmentally appropriate fine arts activities. The CPS purchased art materials to encourage children’s active engagement. A UHD Urban Education Professor, along with Criminal Justice graduate student volunteers, and a high school volunteer provided creative art time for two groups of children, ages 18 months to 3 years and ages 3 to 6 years. Once this initiative was analyzed as successful, it was decided that a continual working relationship would be beneficial to all of the organizations.

During the onset of the formal partnership, the collaboration between UHD and SEARCH, specifically CPS and HTT, made significant progress. Through writing grants, professional development sessions, program development, and installation of the technology, the teachers of the preschool and infant/toddler classes at HTT and the Department of Urban Education faculty have begun to develop a process and model of reciprocal learning. In the initial phase of the partnership, the focus has been on establishing and analyzing “the fit” between these two major groups. The dynamics of this relationship are multidimensional and include an ultimate goal to impact the educational experiences of not only the homeless children but also their families. The first stage includes initiatives for developing the partnership and a long-term model for the relationship. The model includes initial and regular experiences that facilitate developing a comfortable relationship among the members of both organizations who are involved in onsite work. These experiences included weekly visits to HTT by UHD faculty. During the visits, faculty members initially observed the interactions of HTT teachers as they interacted with the children, eventually became active participants in the interactions, and later evolved to become active models for the teachers. Once a working relationship was established, HTT and the Urban Education faculty partnered to pursue several other initiatives. Honing the skills of the teachers was based on the premise that educational levels and experiences of professionals in early childhood education is a key to predicting the quality of services that young children will receive [Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford & Howes, 2002; Norris, 2001; Ruopp et al., 1979; Supovitz, Mayer & Kahle, 2000].

The CPS faculty developed and carried out professional development sessions for HTT’s teachers based on the needs assessment of HTT’s director and the opinion of the early childhood faculty. The theoretical basis for the initial professional development sessions was of great importance. One of the most critical indicators of a strong and quality education for early learners and, eventually, for positive
outcomes for children is the professional development that their teachers receive [AFT, 2002; Kagan & Neuman, 1996; Learning to Care, 1998; North Carolina Partnership, 1998; Whitebook, Howes & Phillips, 1989]. The theory behind this on-site professional development was that it was seen to be less intimidating for the HTT teachers because it took place in their environment. UHD faculty believed that the HTT teachers would be more open to changes in their environment and more likely to make changes in their beliefs if faculty development took place at their school with their own HTT students as examples—all conducted by university faculty who had experienced their situation first-hand. Additionally, the professional development sessions were individualized to the specific interests and needs of the teachers and the children they were serving.

The UHD faculty utilized technology in two ways in order to customize the professional development activities. The faculty first collected data using video and digital photography of the students in their outdoor learning environment. Then, during the professional development sessions, the faculty used the video to show vignettes to teachers for analysis and illustration. The teachers were asked to analyze what they saw occurring and what categorizations they could make regarding levels of social and cognitive play and oral language development. The video allowed the UHD faculty to illustrate the power of using technology for assessment purposes. The HTT faculty viewed the vignettes several times and discussed the ways in which the vignettes could be used for analysis. The digital photo images of the children playing and interacting were used in the same manner. Anecdotal records and developmental checklists (collected during each visit) were referred to during the sessions to support conclusions drawn by the HTT teachers. This professional development model led to several beneficial outcomes, including the beginning of learning transfer. The teachers were involved in analysis of their own students using technology and authentic assessment. They experienced modeling of data collection using a variety of methods. The CPS faculty observed the HTT teachers making effective and gradual changes to the learning environment and changing their practices. These outcomes resulted in the learning of new skills and knowledge and, in some cases, changes in teacher beliefs. Weekly discussions, informal interviews, and observations of the classroom teachers revealed that this model for building a working relationship for change is natural and effective.

Over the last twenty years, there has been a significant change and positive progress in types of early childhood programs. For example, there have been increased numbers and improvements made for programs such as Title 1, Head Start, and others that service children with special needs. The HTT-UHD partnership activities serve all types of children with many special needs—physically, psychosocially, and cognitively—that would qualify for these kinds of services and the professionals who teach and serve them. The partnership has expanded the benefits of the nature of these types of programs to these homeless children. As yet, the field of early childhood has not had much emphasis on the needs of homeless children. Additionally, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA) has increased the importance of the specific environments. NCLBA focuses mostly on the indoor classroom. In contrast, the HTT-UHD partnership’s initial programs have a focus on the development of professional training, funding, and faculty assistance for working in the outdoor environment. To date the outdoor environment has been a very underutilized and under-assessed aspect of the early childhood classroom. The collaborative between UHD and HTT has taken into consideration the patterns and trends in early childhood research and knowledge accumulated over the past few decades. In addition, the collaborative has combined the modern requirements and NCLBA’s areas of focus into the model the collaborative is using at HTT. UHD’s Early Childhood Professors, for example, received a grant to furnish HTT’s outdoor environment with optimum equipment for children’s exploration and creativity. The equipment is designed to provide stronger support for cognitive and social play as well as oral language development. The professors were able to find matching funds to enable the transition and development of the outdoor classroom.

Important to the collaborative is that UHD’s early childhood education faculty have access to the homeless preschool children for research, analysis, theory development, and practice of skills. Houston’s community leaders are concerned about the state of children at risk in the city because recent statistics indicate that the number of children affected by poverty and need is continuing to increase. The community’s responses to this situation (i.e., in terms of effective policies, laws, and programs) needs improvement [Sanborn, Kimball, & Leventhal, 2006]. The Houston community and its leaders believe that the needs of its young children are best served through coordinated partnerships and relationship development among organizations, institutions of higher learning, and programs. The UHD-HTT partnership allows faculty to observe theories-in-practice in urban settings with children who have a
A variety of learning styles, abilities, and special needs. In addition to the observation of these children and the collection of data, faculty members model ideal teaching methods and authentic assessment practices in real settings for classroom teachers. These changes to the environment, the modeling of developmentally appropriate standards and practices, and the shift in teachers’ beliefs will continue to affect the children HTT serves. The initial data from the study has shown positive changes occurring in the levels of social and cognitive play as well as advancement in the oral language levels of HTT’s preschool students following the interventions and changes to their environment. The opportunities to observe, share, and model experiences that have resulted from the UHD-HTT partnership have contributed to the development, growth, and empowerment of members of both organizations.

Some of the partnership activities are well underway, while others are still in the planning stage. The partnership will seek eventually to serve all of those named in Figure 1, as shown below.

### FIGURE 1

**COLLEGE OF PUBLIC SERVICE SEARCH AND ITS TINY TREASURES PROGRAMS PROJECTS (A MATRIX OF RESEARCH AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group/Theme/</th>
<th>HTT Children</th>
<th>HTT Teachers / Professional Development</th>
<th>Siblings of HTT Children</th>
<th>Teens Served by SEARCH</th>
<th>Families Served by SEARCH</th>
<th>Adults Served by SEARCH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language and Literacy</td>
<td>Family Literacy Nights: UHD/UE</td>
<td>Family Literacy Nights: UHD/UE</td>
<td>Family Literacy Nights: UHD/UE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Psychosocial Development and Growth</td>
<td>Social &amp; Cognitive Play: UHD, UE, &amp; HCDE Grant Research/Programs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Life Skills</td>
<td>Social &amp; Cognitive Play: UHD, UE &amp; HCDE Grant and Oral Language Development: UHD, UE, &amp; HCDE AND UHD, UE organizing the outdoor environment: sensory table, life cycle of ladybugs/ butterflies, dramatic play out of doors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>HTT, UHD, UE and City of Houston Partnership to Celebrate the Week of the Young Child: SEARCH/UHD/UE/ Various Houston Reps and Community Partners</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Professional Development: Capturing the Developmental Levels of Play Using Digital Photography and Video: UHD/UE</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional Development: Teacher’s Beliefs Regarding Music and Movement of Toddlers Enhanced by Technology: UHD/UE</td>
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TECHNOLOGY AND THE HOUSE OF TINY TREASURES

One of the more innovative partnership aspects has been the use of technology. The original technology plan called for multiple uses by HTT faculty and staff as well as for joint data collection based on accountability in teaching and learning, integration of data, reflection over the quality of data, longitudinal tracking of the data, and flexibility in assessment methods for homeless early childhood students. However, as in many new initiatives, the approaches were modified during implementation and in response to observations made while monitoring the new practices. The action research methods employed at HTT during the first few months determined that, in order to collect digital data for instruction, research, and professional development, it was necessary to take inventory of all technology aspects. In line with Covey [1989], it was hoped to "begin with the end in mind". However, in existing research involving such low-economic children, the "end" was ill-defined in terms of technology. It was necessary and essential to form an outline of needs that was based on the association that guides developmentally appropriate practice for educating all young children in the U.S.--the NAEYC.

Robust Access (Multimedia and Internet)

This effort was to include plans for multimedia and Internet based upon researched suggestions. For example, the National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC, 2006] promotes seven important tips for professionals in evaluating computer programs used in the UHD-HTT technology initiative:

1. Apply developmentally appropriate practice, curriculum, and assessment.
2. Improve children’s thinking ability and develop good relationships with peers.
3. Technology is integrated into daily learning activities.
4. All work for equity in access to technology for all children and their families.
5. Technology must not teach to stereotypes or use violence to solve problems.
6. Work together with parents to promote appropriate uses of technology.

The NAEYC tips made it clear that an inventory of technological equipment was necessary to see “what was missing” in order to provide students, teachers, and administrators with what is called “robust access” to technology. North Central Regional Education Library [2007] defines “robust access” as access that allows students “ready access to rich resources, broad expertise, strong support systems, and (to contact with) others with whom they can collaborate (and) will clearly… [provide] a competitive advantage as they face the challenges of life and work in the 21st century.” At the time the partnership was formed, HTT’s facilities had limited (or no) access. The first challenge for the technology initiative was to find cost-effective technological equipment. Once equipped, meaningful and purposeful professional development was needed for those working at HTT so that they could use the equipment for (a) accessing useful teaching and technology-facilitated learning strategies, (b) understanding data collection and archival methods, and (c) acquiring pedagogical skills using computers and related peripherals in their classrooms.
When discussing how computer use should be evaluated in public schools, it is important to note that the Texas Education Agency [2007] has recently implemented the Long Range Plan for Technology, 2006-2020. The Plan is a guide to proper educational implementation in four key areas of modern instruction: (1) teaching and learning, (2) educator preparation and development, (3) administration and support services, and (4) infrastructure for technology. The state agency provides a rubric in each of these areas, known as the tool for planning and assessing school technology and readiness or The Texas Campus STaR Chart (School Technology and Reading Chart). Each year teachers must rate the technology used in their particular buildings in each of the four areas mentioned, and this rating is to be done online by each teacher. The state uses the survey results to rate technology implementation and use for each campus until a targeted use is met in all four key areas. One of the most pervasive issues for a program attempting to implement technology is to come to consensus on what computers should be and what they should do for a program. Within the STaR Chart and Long Range Technology Plan, 2006-2020, a computer is regarded as: (a) a multimedia center connected to the world or (b) a multimedia center where students can create media (such as word documents, presentation documents, spreadsheets, etc.). Through the computer, students are connected to the world by the Internet so that they can collaborate with peers and experts as well as conduct content-area research on the Web. As the UHD-HTT partnership initiated the technology aspect of the program, it was vital to consider these concepts.

Initial funds to procure technology were less than $10,000.00. The technology participants decided to purchase two laptops, a wireless n connection, two projectors, two digital cameras, and a camcorder, along with necessary cables, consumables, and media storage. Providing robust access with laptops in the environment allowed students, teachers, professors, and researchers’ access to multimedia and the Internet at all points on the HTT property. The technology permitted UHD students, professors, or anyone else teaching and learning pedagogical applications to handle the field work at HTT in “road warrior” fashion (meaning an individual remote network user; typically a traveling worker “on the road” accessing the network via a laptop).

The technology was then expanded to afford access to anyone among the participants who had a personal laptop with the proper multimedia software. Participants had to use an encrypted password to access the Internet while at HTT. The researcher realized that much Early Childhood data could be collected by UHD students trained in skills such as interview note-taking, digital photography, and digital video taping. The researcher’s robust access to the collected data was also augmented by enabling email documents to be sent to data retrieval staff, video tapes to be archived to optical memory on the spot (and duplicated as needed), pictures to be downloaded to HTT computers for immediate use or sent as a compressed file through email attachments, as well as other applications. Even university course management and document sharing programs (such as Web CT Vista used at UHD) could be accessed from the research site thanks to the wireless n connection. The n connection is the latest in a series of wireless connections technologies and boasts up to twelve times faster and four times farther than the wireless g connection.

The researchers were satisfied with the technology system’s ability to generate and archive data. The collected data could be routed or saved by researchers before they left the HTT property. Investigators could then begin the task of categorizing data as soon as they could get to their desk-top or personal laptop. Data collection, teaching, and learning in early childhood education can be enhanced by this traveling “robust access” method.

The Current Users of the Technology at HTT

It is extremely important to note how many potential users of the technology there are in the HTT application of Robust Access. The potential users included:

1. HTT Students
2. Parents of HTT Students
3. HTT Teachers
4. HTT Administrators
5. UHD Early Childhood Professors
6. UHD Researchers
7. UHD Research Data Collectors
8. Involved Community Members
9. UHD Student Field Workers
10. HTT Information Technology Support Workers

If access is truly robust, the full exploitation of technology's promise is likely. If it is not, that promise may be an empty one [North Central Regional Education Library, 2007].

Peripherals

The peripherals being used at HTT are connectable devices that have an auxiliary function outside the laptop configuration. These include printers, projectors, speakers, digital cameras, and computer presenters (hand-held computer controllers) that can be attached to laptop computers or wireless networks. Peripherals are considered to be any input, output, and secondary storage devices of a computer system, and are typically options separate from the laptop itself. The peripherals can be digital transcription systems or any device that can be used in or out of the field after data has been collected and needs to be edited, archived, or shared. The possibilities are endless in scientific research. However, introducing, learning about, and applying the new peripherals in the modern classroom require myriad types of training. The modern “road warrior” can utilize such items when they are easily transportable. Peripherals that used to be expensive and bulky have become smaller, better, and cheaper, although they may not be inexpensive enough for some budgets.

The utilization of the peripherals is one of the most impressive aspects of CPS’s involvement with HTT. The CPS faculty can teach about the peripheral applications in their university classroom. Student-faculty teams can then implement the peripherals as field-work projects at the research site. University classes such as Educational Technology in the Curriculum [ETC 3301] now have a field-based component that incorporates using these skills in the field. The results benefit needy recipients—both homeless children and families. Simultaneously, the educators reap the benefits of using the new technology and experience constant improvement in their teaching and learning activities. With laptops and projectors in the field, all work is shared with entire classrooms at a time. Locating key information on the Internet can be taught with one laptop. Pictures and videos can be immediately displayed for all to see and, thus, promote increased conceptual understanding. Voice and video recorders can be used to record examples of performance and then be archived to centers and used to demonstrate what specific behaviors look like. In the near future, is likely that students will bring personal laptops to classes at UHD along with their personal peripherals so that they can improve their expertise in pedagogical applications of technologies. Additionally, digital cameras will be used by faculty, UHD students, and HTT employees to create and implement lessons for music, movement, language, and literacy. This new age of technology in education will force students, professors, and HTT personnel to consider many new applications and choose professional development that includes the application of both laptops and peripherals as a key component.

The HTT Wireless Site

The picture of the technology system in Figure 2 may help the reader to develop a better understanding of the concepts discussed in the technology section of this project (e.g., “road warrior”, “robust access”, and “peripherals”). The figure is intended to help the reader to understand how a powerful wireless network with multimedia incorporated is situated at this site. The figure is a top-down view of HTT’s approximately 6,250 square feet of property and its three buildings.
The wireless hub is located in the office building with the actual equipment located in the kitchen on a high shelf. The wireless hub has the speed of a boasted 108 megabytes per second and a reach of up to 300 feet from the hub in any direction. Thus, the Internet can be accessed in either of the other two buildings, the playgrounds, the parking lot, and somewhat beyond. With an electric connection or fully charged battery on a laptop, one can create documents and share them anywhere on the property. Inside the classrooms, teachers can connect laptops to projectors and show visuals, teach classes, and access the Internet, among other activities that use a wide range of peripheral equipment.

What UHD and HTT have begun with these multimedia centers “connected to the world” is more than the partnership could have imagined when the project began. Services are now incorporated in English and Spanish. Planning is ongoing for future university fieldwork at HTT and other educational entities. Ongoing action research is being collected, archived, and used to promote best practices in early childhood education for urban children. The technology aspects of the partnership are seen as a unique endeavor. Currently, the CPS faculty is developing graduate courses that focus on application of technology in the classroom for certified teachers. This initiative can help define how veteran teachers can apply their pedagogical expertise to technological innovations that will make teaching and learning better for all concerned and opens wider the windows on dilemmas facing urban children. Parts of these courses will include application to the CPS-HTT project.

**CHALLENGES**

The foremost challenge for the HTT-CPS project and for future data collection is the transient nature of the families and children whom HTT serves. Turnover in HTT students and faculty (as well as teachers and staff) makes the collection of longitudinal data difficult. One way to mitigate the problem is to focus on a collection of case studies about individuals, including a wide range of data on their circumstances and/or relationships rather than to focus on one aspect of concern over longer periods of time. The majority of the families remain in the area for a year or a little more. This time frame permits collection of data for case studies. Thus, the research team can build a huge database that will provide a basis of investigation of multiple issues using cross-sectional approaches. In addition, there are a small number of HTT children who have siblings at HTT. The sibling sets may provide opportunity for longitudinal observations of the family units.

An additional challenge faced by the CPS faculty, students, and staff and inherent in the UHD-SEARCH partnership is one of cultural differences. It is one thing to discuss homelessness, while it is...
another to truly understand it. All UHD participants working with the HTT must continuously reassess physical, verbal, and social interactions with the HTT families in order to ensure that they do not interject improper biases. SEARCH offers a “day of homelessness” experience to help volunteers and program partners understand the rigors of being homeless. The “day of homelessness” experience is invaluable in helping meet this challenge. In addition, although HTT staff members are not highly educated formally, they have valuable everyday experiences with the homeless population. Consequently, UHD participants draw on HTT staff's highly valued insights.

Continued monetary support is also of concern. Many donations and grants have provided for needs and equipment. However, the HTT facility remains under-funded in many areas. Part of the challenge will be to publicize the needs of this valuable center so that it becomes (and remains) state-of-the art in all areas.

There are many projects in progress, and a number of individuals from CPS are involved. Including many more CPS participants has been somewhat problematic—as was discovered in writing this case study. Originally, a large group from both Urban Education and Criminal Justice met to discuss research and other areas of joint involvement. A much smaller Advisory Board was appointed from the larger group. It is the Advisory Board members who have carried out the vast majority of the projects, research, and joint meetings with HTT. However, the entire college took on this project with HTT. The Advisory Board has recognized that efforts to keep all interested parties in communication and involved in the research need to be accelerated. One advantage to investigating and writing case studies (such as this one) about a partnership as described here is identifying possible areas for improvements.

A final challenge is avoiding disruption in HTT children’s fragile development processes. In past volunteer projects with other universities, their students have arrived at unscheduled times with no specific goals other than being there, forming bonds with children, and then leaving as soon as they had completed their required volunteer hours. The CPS-HTT partnership includes multiple efforts to collect what the researchers regard as invaluable data and to have students and faculty participate in valuable experiences. The partnership participants acknowledge that there are even more kinds of experiences for a broader array of UHD community members (such as service learning and application projects). However, protecting the lives and development of the HTT children and their support workers must be the forefront objective.

CONCLUSIONS

The CPS-HTT partnership participants recognize that the situation could employ some other types of research. However, the participants have decided to continue using the descriptive case study methodology as the partnership moves forward. Nath [2005] noted that, with the use of case studies, “…researchers realize that valuable information can be gained through rich anecdotal study—particularly when experimentation or other quantitative methods are not possible” [p. 396], “The emphasis,” she notes, “is to obtain as complete a picture as possible for study…” [p. 398]. This case study methodology has already produced a number of ideas for further research and areas of focus for problem solving.

The ultimate goal of this partnership is to address the myriad of elements within the life situations of these children and their families that contribute to their at-risk status. UHD's CPS will continue to serve as a hub for pooling expertise and resources for HTT and its multi-dimensional support system. This project is seen as extremely valuable and duplicable by many urban universities throughout the U.S.—as well as other areas of the world where there are populations of homeless families. This continuing case, describing an urban university partnership, will hopefully serve as a model for those who commit to social projects such as this one. The Kellogg Commission, consisting of presidents and chancellors or 25 major public universities, called for reforms to prepare America’s universities for effective and engaged service to society in the 21st century. This call applied not only to students but to faculty as well. A project such as this partnership offers an answer to the commission’s view of engagement as “well beyond extension, conventional outreach, and even most conceptions of public service…. By engagement the Commission envisioned partnerships, two-way streets defined by mutual respect among the partners for what each brings to the table… (in which) the engaged institution must put its resources – knowledge and expertise – to work on problems that face the communities it serves” [Byrne, 2006].

The HTT-CPS partnership has been ongoing for almost one year. This case study provides and important opportunity for reflection on the partnership’s benefits and strengths as well as consideration of
what remains to be addressed. The case study suggests a need to continue this valuable relationship—but on a higher level and by incorporation of even more dimensions. HTT educators have experienced professional development and modeling of strategies and techniques and, as a result, have expressed a desire for increasing their knowledge base. Continuous efforts in the areas of pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment are planned. The technology now installed at HTT will permit advanced instruction and ongoing data collection. However, the technology must be continuously monitored and updated.

University students have made informal visits to the preschool. However, more structured field experiences are currently being developed for the summer courses in Early Childhood and should extend into a regular and documented part of many courses in CPS. In addition, service opportunities for students are being offered through a NAEYC/UHD/SEARCH-sponsored event at HTT. However and in the future, service opportunities at HTT will be made available in many areas of CPS. As noted earlier, research [Early, et al., 2006] indicates that the education level of early care educators is an important predictor of the quality of service that young children receive. Therefore, one aspect of the partnership that should be explored and developed is establishing a standard of educational levels appropriate for HTT teachers. For example, a bachelor’s degree as a minimum requirement may be appropriate going forward. On-site support for the formal education of the current staff must be a part of the ongoing investigation. Once these collaborative experiences are established, a truly comprehensive model of reciprocal learning, benefits, and growth will be achieved.

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