PARTNERS FOR BETTER PRACTICE:  
A TEACHER FOR HOMELESS CHILDREN

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Abstract

This paper describes the partnerships between a private accredited child development center for homeless children (the House of Tiny Treasures [HTT]), a large urban, independent school district, (Houston Independent School District [HISD]), and an urban university (the University of Houston-Downtown [UHD]) in placing a certified teacher into a school for children of the homeless. For the first time, HISD placed one of its certified early childhood teachers in this private facility so that children could experience a more seamless transition into district schools. Case study methodology is used to describe the progression of the certified teacher during her first year at the child center and examines her impact on the entity. Findings indicate that certain traits and outside support increase the likelihood of success.

KEYWORDS: Homeless, teaching at-risk children, partnerships

INTRODUCTION

In an older southeast neighborhood of Houston one comes upon the House of Tiny Treasures (HTT). The facility consists of three small buildings--two are painted shades of vivid purple and a third is painted bright yellow. All three structures sit on less than half an acre of land in a predominately low socio-economic sector of the metropolitan area. Upon entry to the property, one can see by the child-friendly décor that this is a childcare center for young children, ranging in age from infancy through six years old. What is not evident is the background of the children who attend this facility. All of the children belong to the homeless population of greater Houston. These children lack any type of enriched environment outside of this very unique, nationally-accredited institution.

The number of young homeless students attending HTT varies from 25-35 students at any given time. At the end of the school day, the majority of students are bused to shelters and other accommodations approved and provided by the shelters. The causes for the homeless situations of families affiliated with HTT are numerous; they include extreme poverty, mental illness, domestic violence, drug addiction, and substance abuse. Whatever the reason, the children of the homeless reap the shortfalls, as they are diagnosed with special needs/learning disabilities at double the rate of other children and are twice as likely to repeat a grade because of frequent absences from school [National Center for Family Homelessness, 2002].
Although HTT is under the direction of SEARCH (Service of the Emergency Aid Resource Center for the Homeless), an organization that is funded by grants and private donations, it is located within the boundaries of the Houston Independent School District. HISD is the largest public school system in Texas and the seventh-largest in the United States. Its website notes that the district is working hard to become Houstonians’ Pre-K–12 school system of choice, and that it is constantly improving and refining instruction and management to make it as effective, productive, and economical as possible. It is because of this commitment, perhaps, and/or because children at HTT often “feed” into the HISD system (as their parents gain employment) that the district chose to pilot the installation of a Texas certified teacher at HTT. A pilot project was developed with the collaboration of HISD, HTT, and the University of Houston Downtown – UHD.

A partnership between the House of Tiny Treasures and the University of Houston-Downtown (UHD) was established when concerned faculty, staff, students, and administrators at UHD’s College of Public Service addressed the lack of amenities and services at HTT. Action was taken to provide basic needs for the children (warm coats, school supplies, etc.), expert training, and pedagogical materials (including technology). What became increasingly clear as the faculty and staff worked with the childcare center was the need for a systematic, developmentally appropriate curriculum and a highly qualified staff. Research findings provided an incentive: children who need the best teachers are often those with less education [Peske and Haycock [2006]. The Center for Public Education [2009] supports this statement, stating that:

- It’s not news that poor and minority children are more likely to be taught by the least-qualified teachers. And it’s not a breakthrough to find correlations between teacher quality and student achievement....In brief, research shows that good teachers make the biggest difference in student learning and that non-white and poor students—who are more likely to arrive at school less prepared for learning than more affluent children—have the least access to the best teachers" reads statements from the Center for Public Education.

The UHD partnership with HTT was a natural outgrowth and advancement of UHD’s service mission. UHD has been designated a Hispanic-serving university serving a very diverse population, including many students who live in less affluent urban settings. UHD originally created the College of Public Service with a strong community orientation to advance education and the ethical practice of justice in response to its community needs. The College’s two departments (Urban Education and Criminal Justice) seek to fulfill this mission through exploratory and reflective learning, intervention, and prevention in a diverse community setting. The Department of Urban Education, as its name suggests, specifically seeks to prepare teachers to work in urban settings with diverse learners. The Criminal Justice Department hopes to prevent persons from reaching the point of incarceration (which often contributes to later homelessness) and to prevent certain patterns of homelessness that have been shown to lead to criminal behavior (for example, severe problems with drug abuse can cause loss of employment, followed by the loss of the home and incarceration when the person begins to look for illegal funds for the substance, but employment is difficult after incarceration, so a pattern of homelessness can ensue).

UHD worked previously with non-certified staff at the House of Tiny Treasures, providing them with specialized pedagogy, student volunteers, and technology. The addition of a certified teacher was a significant step in advancing their goal to provide the best methods of instruction for pre-kindergarteners. Grant, Stronge, and Popp [2008] support research that shows a positive relationship between student achievement and pedagogical knowledge of the teacher. The success of the certified early childhood teacher and the development of her role (as the first certified teacher) throughout the first year, were seen as important for the progress of the House of Tiny Treasures in a number of ways.

The Houston Independent School District hired a Texas certified public school teacher (a recent graduate of UHD) to work at the center. The teacher was the first certified teacher to hold a position at HTT. During her first-year term, the teacher was charged with meeting the pedagogical and developmental needs of the unique population at HTT and promoting developmentally appropriate practice as advocated by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). To support the new teacher’s efforts in implementing these goals with her at-risk students, UHD professors conducted professional development sessions on curriculum planning and assessment. The teacher was coached in: promoting children’s aesthetic and physical development, utilizing inventories to measure
children’s social and cognitive play, making changes to the outdoor environment, and utilizing advances in technology.

Data was compiled to determine the depth and scope of the development and implementation—not only of the public school district teacher’s role in this private educational setting but also the theoretical base of her work as it applied to the first year of this new partnership. A research case study was developed, providing “a factual description of events that happened at some point in the past” [Naumes & Naumes, p. 4, 2006].

**METHODOLOGY**

Descriptive case studies in education provide a format for researchers to record and investigate the complexities of real situations and actions through various frames of reference (such as those of the stakeholders at HTT) Such a case allows analysis and lessons learned from the events of the past [Naumes & Naumes, 2006]. The authors of the case study utilized direct interviews, direct observation and documents to gather information. Their objectives were to describe: the integration of the public and private social environments with regard to the teacher’s role, the organizational characteristics that contributed to the social integration of the teacher, the issues that impacted the integration of the diverse environments, and how institutions (HTT and HISD) balanced the need for change/adaptation with the need for accomplishment of routine tasks (Tellis, 1997).

The descriptive case study provides a template for possible initiation of further district-supported teaching positions at HTT and/or district-supported facilities in other areas of the city that may wish to establish similar programs for their homeless children. It may also be useful for those who oversee HTT to seek financial and other types of external support. Finally, the descriptive case study offers a frame of reference for those who wish to replicate the study in similar facilities across the country.

Subjects participating in the research study were the certified teacher, the program manager (along with her administrative team), and the uncertified members of the teaching team. A UHD professor who conducted research and provided professional development at HTT also participated, bringing the total to nine. Each was interviewed extensively during the course of a year, and anecdotal records and digital recordings were used to collect data. Following is a case description based on interviews with the subjects of the study.

**A DESCRIPTIVE CASE STUDY**

**Program Manager**

The program manager, Mitzi Bartlett, played a key role in acquiring a certified teacher for HTT. The idea originated during a board meeting of the Houston Area Association for the Education of Young Children (HAAEYC). Ms. Bartlett attended a “network night” meeting at HTT along with HAAEYC board members. One board member noted the high quality of the center (which was accredited by HAAEYC) and suggested that HTT seek funding through a CIRCLE (Center for Improving the Readiness of Children for Learning and Education) grant to obtain a certified teacher. When it was clear that a position from HISD would be available, an elementary school principal recommended Irasema Barrera for the position because she knew her well and thought she would be perfect for this position. The principal had also participated in a “CIRCLE team” with four other principals in the “feeder area” for HTT. This literacy program provides mentors and curriculum for reading. She had asked Ms. Barrera if she would be interested in the program at HTT. No further interview for the position of the certified teacher was required with HISD.

The program manager was very interested in having a certified teacher who could work collaboratively and effectively with the uncertified teachers at the facility. Another important criterion was the teacher’s philosophy of early childhood education. The teacher was expected to align her philosophy with developmentally appropriate practices as proposed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). This association accredits young childhood centers on extremely strict standards that must be evaluated on a yearly basis [NAEYC, 2009].

The program manager did not want to set specific criteria for “a personality” to be hired. She emphasized “I went in with my eyes open because I couldn’t do it any other way. It would not have
worked." Ms. Bartlett noted, "I want my two teachers to feel equal because, to me, all three of those teachers will bring an extra piece that one or the other is lacking."

The Certified Teacher

The certified teacher selected to work in the public/private educational partnership project was Irasema Barrera. Ms. Barrera received a degree from UHD in sociology. She worked for a year as an educational aide, then sought her Texas teachers' certification through an alternative regional certification process at an Educational Regional Service Center. Ms. Barrera joined HTT as a second year teacher. (She taught one year in a Pre-Kindergarten classroom prior to her current position.) She was 24-years-old, of Hispanic heritage, spoke fluent Spanish, and was a native Houstonian. Ms. Barrera was originally hired for a one-year term. The local school district agreed to a second year of collaboration with HTT, and Ms. Barrera’s contract was extended because of her favorable performance and her acquired knowledge of HTT and its pedagogical environment.

Ms. Barrera compared her observations of the House of Tiny Treasures to a public school environment. She noted philosophical differences and similarities related to: physical space, social interaction between teachers, interaction between teachers and families, and pedagogy.

Ms. Barrera observed that an expansive physical environment was viewed as an essential element of HTT’s pedagogy. Entire rooms were devoted to art, writing and home living activities, such as the kitchen center where children “prepare food,” set the table, and so forth. She noted that public schools limit these kinds of activity centers to a single room. She reported that the social aspects of teaching were both similar and different from the public school environment, in that she was able to collaborate with those already working at HTT: “We actually got along right from the first time I came. They’ve been really open minded about it...” These teachers all work in very “public but small” areas, so this may help with team teaching and collaborating.

In contrast to her role as a teacher in a public school setting, Ms. Barrera expressed surprise that she did not interact as much with the parents at HTT on a routine basis. She stated, “You need it, I think, at times--especially when you haven’t really met them, and you want to bring up concerns about the child because you’re the one who interacts with them]...we are the ones who interact with the children and know what they’re struggling with.” Because of her fluency in Spanish, however, when she did interact, it was on a positive basis.

Implementing multiple curriculum guidelines and requirements was a major challenge at HTT. Ms. Barrera was bound by Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills [TEKS], the state standards for public school teachers, and the standards already adopted and in place at HTT, namely United Way Bright Beginnings (a model program designed to improve the quality of child care for Houston children). Created in partnership with ExxonMobil and the United Way, the HTT curriculum contained theoretical differences between it and the Texas Education Agency standards and guidelines. Ms. Barrera explained:

“.......their philosophy is a little bit different than what I’m expected to do as a teacher for the district. I think they do a lot of student-centered things, but, for me as a teacher in the district, we’re expected to have certain blocks of instructional time, like 45 minutes of math or 30 minutes of science and 45 minutes of literacy--and all that. So the students are supposed to be focused on just literacy or just math or just science, but this other program it’s more like a student has free choice. Well, we’ve kind of tried to blend a little bit of both....

Ms. Barrera believed that her limited, yet fruitful experience in HISD as a teaching assistant, her one year appointment as part of an early childhood math, science and literacy teaching team for HISD, and her teacher preparation program adequately prepared her for this position. She stated, “I was in Region Four [an alternative certification program]. I would say it was a good program, but there’s nothing better than learning hands-on experience” (experience in the classroom with children).

Ms. Barrera also spoke to her readiness to teach in this challenging and unique environment. Her sociology degree was noted as a reason for why she was interested in working with the homeless population at HTT. Work in urban education shows that many young teachers who are from socioeconomic areas different from those in which they teach often leave before they learn diverse and motivating ways to work with urban children. Kincheloe, Hayes, Rose, and Anderson [2007] indicate that they “...are sometimes the most vulnerable to the social representations of urban poverty and poor urban students. Living lives so culturally distant from their students, these teachers and teacher-education students need to understand both the communities in which poor urban students live and the nature of
their lives (pp. xiii-xiv)*. Those who have a sociology degree would not only have more knowledge of social frameworks but also of the types of communities and the resources that could be of immediate use to children such as these at HTT. A number of sociology degrees offer training in case work, child development, community organization, resource managements, fund raising, health outreach, social assistance advocacy, and other community affairs areas that would be of major benefit to a population such as this one. This degree from UHD has the aims of: (1) service [helping those in need and addressing social problems], (2) social justice [concern with poverty, unemployment, and discrimination], (3) dignity and worth of person [treating others with respect and promoting self-determination], (4) the importance of human relationships [integrity], and (5) competence. Coupled with skills in pedagogy, this would seem to provide an excellent base for a teacher described by Roth [2007]: “Good teachers know their students, for to prepare an appropriate curriculum, they have to address their emotional, motivational, and cognitive needs” [p. 143].

In terms of her on-going pedagogical development, Ms. Barrera disclosed that she attended a weekly professional development seminar organized by the school district. Although Ms. Barrera was not teaching in a district school, she was able to benefit from professional development opportunities provided for district teachers. The HISD sessions, conducted by professionals, helped her learn new strategies, methodologies, and assessments.

Researchers also asked Ms. Barrera to describe a typical day at HTT to note how she followed developmentally appropriate practice [NAEYC, 2006] and how her schedule might differ from public schools. There was considerable range of arrival times because children sometimes have difficulty getting ready at their shelters. They also all eat breakfast at HTT and brush their teeth there. The rest of the morning is normally spent in small groups (first in literacy or letter knowledge, then calendar, days of the week, months, weather, etc.), and they then talk about the unit under instruction. Children go to centers (all are considered literacy centers because all centers have writing materials, prints, and books), and small groups of about two or three students are pulled out for literacy activities. While children work with activity tubs of their choice, the teacher sits down with a small group of students (or just one that needs one-on-one help). There is group story time, followed by recess and many out-of-door activities (such as planting broccoli and pumpkins, art projects, etc.). Children are fed lunch and put down for a long nap (because they are often not able to sleep well in their shelter). When awakened, they have a snack, and the day ends with group time (student-authored stories and students dramatize them and just talk).

The teaching environment in which Ms. Barrera worked was very transparent. Her teaching and interactions were constantly under observation by various visitors to the center, including those who contributed monetarily to HTT, city officials, and so forth. Other observers included the business manager, the uncertified teachers, city officials, parents, professors, and college students and volunteers from local universities. Ms. Barrera became accustomed to the situation and viewed it as a positive factor. She believed that the visitors learned to appreciate what the school offered in terms of teachers, materials and resources. She also felt that it was good for the children to see successful people in the real world. “They can say they can be like them maybe,” she continued, “especially if they come from the same background that they do--maybe ethnically or racially or culturally.”

The certified teacher emphasized that her main goal for the academic year at HTT was to have her preschoolers ready for kindergarten. She disclosed that assessments showed her homeless children were behind in letter knowledge. Goldstein and Wekerle [2008] note that certain times in the early school years provide a crucial point for homeless children with regard to future school success because they were in the phase of developing reading skills that are key to later school success. Her mentor from the CIRCLE program, a nationally recognized literacy program which provided the grant for this process, also maintained that this must be the number one goal. In addition, she strove to make children’s learning experiences engaging so that they would be excited about coming to school.

Preparing the children for kindergarten when their attendance was poor was a major concern for Ms. Barrera. “Several students are ready; we have students who are already reading. But it’s those students that aren’t there yet that concern me and the other teachers, as well….And still, when the kids are not there at the beginning of the day, it is difficult.” When asked what aspects of the curriculum were most valuable and should be retained in the coming year, she replied that working in small groups and maintaining a cozy, home environment was essential. A warm environment and small groups has been associated with effective instructional strategies [Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, & Rodriquez, 2004].
In addition to using the CIRCLE curriculum (Center for Improving the Readiness of Children for Learning and Education), a three-year literacy-focused program, the teacher brought a new focus on developmentally appropriate curriculum and whole child approach pedagogy. A developmentally appropriate curriculum adapts to the growing child and is based upon instruction that is centered on each individual at his or her particular place in development and takes into account the child’s culture and social world. The whole child focus is particularly poignant with reference to these children at HTT because it tells educators that they cannot teach academics alone—they must consider the physical, emotional, and social development as well for children to be successful. The centers reflected more diverse content but still focused heavily on language and its many forms. The materials and manipulatives employed by the teacher were similar to what had been there before, but their use and frequency of use improved, and many more content areas were included.

The District

The Houston Independent School District created a unique situation by hiring and placing a certified teacher in a non-public school setting. The certified teacher explained that the district had been very supportive by making concessions to district rules, such as not withdrawing students for excessive absences. Citing the issue of special paperwork as an example, she related: “I know some of it still hasn’t been turned in, like paperwork that goes in student files...like vaccinations. They took a long time to be turned in. The district doesn’t allow students to be enrolled without their vaccination. They made an exception...” The teacher also noted that a required survey for parents for a district initiative was “waived” because the program manager felt that parents had to disclose too much personal information.

The district was very supportive in promoting the certified teacher’s professional development. Each Wednesday from 12:00-3:30, the teacher was granted released time to attend educational training sessions organized by the public school district.

From the perspective of supporting administrators, the collaboration with HISD during the first year presented some challenges. “Because it was a pilot program, there were a lot of things that weren’t ironed out before. Specifically, we had some issues regarding immunizations of the children and the fact that some of the parents didn’t have an I.D. or a social security number/card...just basic things that would be great if people had those, but in the homeless population...there aren’t documents.” Referring to the situation as a “homeless vacuum,” one administrator stated that the priority of food and shelter left little time for resolving issues related to: obtaining immunizations, lack of permanent addresses and phones, and parents who were in “lockdown” situations (such as rehab centers). Processing paperwork to enroll the children presented another challenge. Supporting administrators concluded that the paperwork should have been processed the summer prior to the beginning of the program.

The Uncertified Teachers

Prior to the 2007-2008 school year, the teaching staff at HTT consisted of two uncertified teachers. Although the two teachers were not state certified, they both held two-year degrees. The uncertified teachers had no formal input in the hiring process, and they did not assist in designing a mission statement or goals for the certified teacher. During initial interviews, the uncertified teachers expressed uncertainty about their roles and who would “lead the way” in managing the classroom. They assumed that the certified teacher would be the one to lead because of her advanced degree.

The teachers identified challenges the certified teacher would encounter at HTT that might be difficult for someone used to the strict schedules of public schools. One major challenge resulting from irregular attendance would be maintaining a daily, reliable schedule. Daily schedules would need to be altered, such as extending nap time for students who get little rest in shelters.

Both Margaret Carmona and Clemencia Gonzalez (the uncertified teachers) were very positive in their assessment of Ms. Barrera. Clemencia said, “I've learned from her, and she's learned from me. It's give and take. We can talk, and that's a good thing. I'm able to tell her what I think.” Ms. Carmona shared that,

Everyday I'm learning something from her. She'll take an ordinary experience on the playground, and she'll turn it into a science lesson, or something happens in the classroom, and boom, it's a math lesson. She's just spontaneous with her lessons, it'll just pop out. An everyday occurrence happens and .... it's a learning experience.... She's an awesome person—it just makes it all that much better and ....it is a calmer feeling in
the classroom.” She finished by reporting that Ms. Barrera looked for opportunities to work with the children, such as using different themes, making the learning centers more inviting to maintain the children’s interest, and suggesting positive changes. She stated, “As a teacher in the classroom, it’s been very positive for me working with my co-teachers….There are obstacles, but those obstacles come from office… it’s not the classroom….The obstacles come from, well, we have to mesh HISD and NAEYC [National Association for the Education of Young Children], but in the classroom we are fine. We are two different entities, and they are trying to make us mesh….That’s like the politics in the office…but in the classroom, I think it’s great!

Ms. Barrera’s two colleagues also described her as “awesome” and “adaptive” because she adapted to the way things were done at HTT. They viewed her as a “good friend” and “interior designer,” referring to her creative way of putting the teacher’s lounge in order. Finally, Ms. Barrera was described as “patient” because of her flexibility and availability in assisting adults and children with problems.

**Supporting Administrators**

Two support administrators, a social worker and staff/teacher, currently serve the House of Tiny Treasures. Even though they had few opportunities to observe Ms. Barrera in the classroom, they developed impressions about her work at HTT. The administrator/teacher disclosed that in her capacity as an administrator, she was not involved in writing the job description or the evaluation performance of the certified teacher. She further stated that she was unaware of the certified teacher’s background, and how the climate changed during the academic year. Her general impression was, however, that the climate was “better” since the teacher joined the staff at HTT.

The social worker expressed the importance of selecting a teacher who had experience working with homeless children and families. She noted:

> I was looking for a teacher who had experience with children who live in poverty or had some specific emotional needs. Most of our children, I think, are special needs…because most of them have experienced trauma or seen a lot of tragic events that have affected their global functioning--whether speech or just emotional functioning….[It needed to be] someone who would be able to embrace that and understand that…and also add that into her daily classroom in a nonjudgmental way, which requires a lot of patience…and just see the whole situation, instead of just saying this child is bad. There is a reason why this is going on. It has been ingrained since they were young…so just to have that type of insight instead of just seeing black and white or be so focused on that, for example, the child needs to learn these three colors…but definitely a degreed person.

When commenting on the contributions the teacher made since joining HTT community, she stated:

> I think she is very sweet with the children ….She is patient…which is nice. She is really creative artistically which I think is good for the children to see. She is bilingual, so, I think, for our Spanish speaking children or those from Spanish-speaking families, it’s a comfort to them when they know that even though they speak English, if they get too upset or nervous or something, that their first language is able to be utilized. She has creative ideas for the learning environment….All that other stuff are things at an administrative level, and that would be really out of her hands

In summarizing the experience with having an HISD certified teacher at the facility, one supporting administrator concluded:

> I think the teachers get along with [the new certified teacher] really well. I think it’s a positive--and always interesting to have a different perspective in a classroom. When people come here to visit, they are impressed that we have an HISD classroom and an HISD teacher. You automatically correlate that with ‘positive’-- which is good.

**UHD Faculty**

Dr. Kathryn Jenkins, the UHD Professor of Early Childhood on site, has seen some environmental differences at HTT since the arrival of the certified teacher.

> There seems to be more focused observation and more one-on-one interaction with children. I also have noticed some activities that involved all the teachers…it seems to be sometimes confusing as to whose lead to follow. There is more flow from theme to
theme, however, and there seems to be more variety in the content. However, there also seems to be a conflict of theories/approaches. I saw more open-ended play and choice centers before; whereas now, I see many more structured lessons and small group work that largely focuses on literacy...I see more teacher-driven, objective-based lessons. I also think there is more structured planning. I think that there are more assessment-based activities than before and that they do some planning together with all of their varied training and backgrounds to combine for appropriate structure. It has the structure of a kindergarten class rather than preschool--more so than before.

In reference to the daily operation of the center, Dr. Jenkins observed that:

There is more structure and routine, but it is not necessarily structured with just one type of preschooler in mind. There is a definite effort of teamwork. A fourth person seems to have leveled the differences a bit from before. With the different theoretical and training backgrounds, there were many times that it was apparent that there was some confusion or disagreement of how to teach a certain area or in addressing a child’s need. Now, there appears to be more cooperative planning and a true give-and-take. The curriculum’s overall scope includes more attention to developing the whole child through experiences that address aesthetic, physical, language and social domains. The centers and their activities are more encompassing of varied strategies and levels of learners. Thompson [2002] found that developmentally-appropriate practice can buffer some of the stresses associated with socio-economically deprived children.

When asked if this UHD faculty member noticed any academic/instructional differences, her answer was:

I do not see as much evolved DAP [developmentally appropriate practice]-based scheduling and teaching. There seems to be much more structured and dedicated time given to certain areas, especially in the area of language. When discussing art projects and integrating process-oriented art, this concept seemed novel, such as something that was a brand new thought, to perhaps use one area to support another--especially to integrate with math or science. It was clear that they were excited at the thought of allowing more time for other content areas. Before, it was somewhat loose, more of an emergent curriculum most of the time, with focus, when needed, to fulfill training on certain skills or concepts. I have seen more focused instruction, more cooperative groups/small groups being teacher led. I think Irasema’s background and HISD’s philosophy is solely the reason for this. It is a positive--in that it allows for more flow, more guided practice, more interaction, and more assessment. It is also a challenge, as it is very different from previous structure. It is interesting to note that when I am present, the uncertified teachers seem to be the most likely to become engaged in the process fully, and the certified teacher generally focuses on a small group of kids.

Overall, the researcher/faculty member observed significant physical and emotional environmental changes in the preschool classroom since the arrival of the certified teacher. The set up of the classroom included more consistent themes, the scheduling was more structured in their small group time, and lessons seemed to be better organized. This was viewed as a positive development. Although the other teachers had the credentials and the skills to educate the at-risk children, the support and philosophical foundation of the certified teacher enriched the planning and interactions.

**FINDINGS**

Several insights have emerged from this study based upon the interviews and observations by researchers on site over time and those at the House of Tiny Treasures during the specific time of this study. These include: (1) more pre-meetings at the HTT prior to the school year to particularly address accreditation and outside evaluation issues, (2) increasing required training in special needs for all staff, (3) continued district professional development, and (4) more empowerment of all the staff. Findings also include recommendations based upon teacher attributes. For example, a teacher for this unique situation should not only be current in pedagogy but also in the political issues regarding these types of children and their situations. Prior experience with poverty situations (in this case, through a degree in sociology)
was significantly valuable, as was the ability to be a team player in a close-knit situation. Specific personality traits were also found to be attributes that would help the success of a person placed in a similar situation. Traits such as kindness, a good work ethic, flexibility, and comfort in having others constantly observing were seen as keys to success. Reflection on the part of the teacher and the entire program was also seen to be imperative.

The HTT program manager specifically suggested that there should be more pre-meetings between the certified teacher and the teaching team. Accreditation standards are “a great neutralizer” in that, “if they say you have to do it to be accredited, then everybody has to ‘play by the rules.’” Knowing these rules and standards could be one key to the overall success of this certified teacher’s role. The program manager added, “If, asema had to learn the rules we have to play by for state and national by accreditation. If she got it, and she does great with it, but it was totally different because, in the public school, it’s more about, ‘Are they going to pass [the state tests]?”

The program manager also suggested that there should be a mandate that all of her teachers have six hours of special needs training (in addition to state professional development requirements of 150 hours every five years). Although these special hours are mandated for her as an administrator, they are not for teachers. However, it is “just good practice,” she notes.

Continued district support in professional development would also seem to be extremely important to carry forth. Although this particular certified teacher has considerable training in sociology, other areas that relate to this unique population and age were less strong. The weekly training provided by the district remains a supportive benefit to the teacher and the children.

Still another recommendation relates to the work climate. One interesting issue that came to light in this study is that of a “power structure.” Although this certified teaching role was provided through the local school district, it was obvious that this role could have created unequal status in the personnel at HTT in a very atypical way. The program manager stated, “We need to bring the standards up to where our early childhood professionals [uncertified teachers] realize that they are professionals, too.” Although no defensive mechanisms among staff occurred, at times, she believed that her uncertified teachers “had a predisposition that because she [the certified teacher] was … an HISD teacher, that somehow she was superior.” This was manifested in the following comment by the program manager:

“...just more ‘give in’ by the uncertified staff. Instead of, during planning time, saying, ‘Well, accreditation says this,’ they just go with it [what Ms. Barrera suggests]…[She] is one of the sweetest human beings in the world. And if [the uncertified teachers] can’t be sure enough of themselves to hold their own, and hold a professional conversation, what are they going to do if I don’t get [her] back next year?”

The suggestion is for all of the teachers to be more assertive, relating that the certified teacher “knows she is a professional, and my teachers don’t…I want all my two [uncertified teachers] to feel equal. Because to me, all three of those teachers bring an extra piece that one or the other is lacking.”

A number of recommendations center specifically on the attributes of the certified teacher. For example, a key for success is having someone who is “current”—not only in teaching but also about the politics of early childhood. Having a teacher who is up-to-date in many areas is extremely important to the success of these particular children. Regarding understanding current policy/politics, the program manager mentions, “What appalls me is when I talk to early childhood professionals or public school professionals...[and] they don’t know what the trends are; they don’t know what’s in the news or what the political climate is—what is going on. You must stay up on your field or you’re not a professional.” This school is involved in many local, state, and national policies and fund raising initiatives, so having someone familiar with these issues could make an incredible difference when important visitors observe or when writing grants or other statements.

Strength in teaching was noted as a far-reaching positive attribute not only for the children but for the other uncertified teachers. One of the uncertified teachers notes: “Everyday I’m learning something from her. She’ll take an ordinary experience on the playground, and she’ll turn it into a science lesson, or something happens in the classroom and...it’s a math lesson. She’s just instantaneous with her lessons.” Later in the interview she adds how the certified teacher works to change the environment tries to make the centers inviting and welcoming to keep the children interested. When asked about the quality of instruction now, she notes, “I think so much more, they’re getting more than past years because we have– much more instruction, better quality instruction.” Other areas of pedagogy come to light through the interview of an uncertified teacher: “I like the thing she does with them when they come in the
morning…they sign in, and that’s to help them learn how to write their name…which is amazing! …with their centers, it is like they are checking in.” One of the administrators wrote, “She’s constantly going to meetings, constantly exposed to different ideas. She’s always bringing ideas. It’s like ‘all around freshness.’”

The issue of training in sociology as well as in teaching emerged as a definite strength for this role. For example, behavior management was given as a main challenge by the certified teacher. She stated, “…(the children) need a lot of help in socializing with each other. I think that was a challenge…[and] …Patience, be patient with [the homeless children]--it was hard,” but the certified teacher believed that sociology training was of major help, noting, “I think that was one of the reasons I wasn’t so hesitant to work with the [homeless] population….I think because I had already been exposed to it [in my degree training].”

Teamwork is also obviously an important part of this role and should be an expected recommendation for anyone who works at a facility such as this one. One uncertified teacher confirmed that teamwork was a part of this past year, noting that the relationship was one of ease. When asked if they shared, the answer was “Yes! You can tell her, this, this, this, and she can tell me back…we can work it out,” notes one uncertified teacher. Another of the uncertified teachers confirmed how well this worked in the case of this particular teacher:

We got paired up with an awesome teacher who is easy to work with…[She] didn’t come in demanding that this has to be changed, and ‘It’s going to be my way because I’m the teacher.’ It was perfect. When we met for the first time for the CIRCLE training, I was happy with her. I saw some of the other teachers who were already, ‘Well I’m the real teacher and this is the way it’s going to be, and I’ll tell you what I need you to do,’ and she was nothing like that. She’s just a dream, and I tell her that all the time.

Personality and work ethic does seem to impact the success of this role, and it is obvious that the manager hopes that anyone coming into this position would be of a similar personality as this teacher. “We’re talking about a human being who came in and said, ‘How does your day work? What do you do? How do you do it? Where do you need me?’” relates the program manager and continues with, “She is not overbearing, she’s very 50/50 ‘give and take’ all the time. This is a teacher that cleans the bathrooms, scrubs the floors…[and] when they are doing planning, she [the certified teacher] says, ‘What do you think?’ She’s always inviting conversation.”

Another personality trait would have to be the ease that one would feel in having others constantly observing one’s teaching and one’s interactions with children. In a situation such as this, it could not be wise to employ a teacher who was not comfortable being constantly watched or was not open to suggestion. The nature of the children in this facility is also different, so personality would also play a part with them, as indicated by one of the uncertified teachers: “…I see how the children react with her, and some of the children, if they’re not having a good day…she seems to turn that positive attitude towards them, and they seem to get a little bit better…. She’s a glowing person….When she comes around, you automatically smile at…just her glowing attitude. Even if she’s having a bad day or something, she’s still smiling.”

Flexibility is yet another personality trait that this role definitely requires. When asked by the interviewer if there was an overall word to describe this teacher, one of the uncertified teachers responded:

Credit for adjusting….She’s flexible, and she adjusted to us, I think…more so to us, and she’s very flexible, and she had to do a lot of adjusting. Just like I know from past experience, I used to be in a public school, and I know she had a lot of adjusting to do…and I think she did that….The schedule for these children is very different. Meals are an important part of the day because children may not have enough at the shelter….because children may not sleep well at the shelter….sometimes it real hard for them to wake up, and then they must work academics and development around these areas. It takes flexibility to try to make a difference for these children.

A final recommendation is that of continuous reflection and evaluation on the process of the program and of finding someone for the role who can maintain reflectivity. The program manager relates, “I keep a daily journal. I do reflective thinking. That’s how I know there needs to be more.” She emphasizes the importance of this role contributing to the program by saying, “I would not trade reflective thinking for the curriculum that she has brought. I tried for five years….Irasema brought this beautiful
thing. I’ve tried since I’ve been here, for five years, to get my staff to understand that when you observe a child and you find out that there’s something they need help with, that you incorporate it in the curriculum. I could never get them to get it, and Irasema walks in and has it down pat. They got it now. They saw it, and she models it [reflectivity] constantly.”

IMPLICATIONS

The placement of a district-employed certified teacher at this preschool for children of the homeless should continue to have a significant effect on future programming at the House of Tiny Treasures. Evidence shows that if a child has an effective teacher for even one year, the residual effect can last several years [Grant, Stronge, & Popp, 2008]. “Students who are assigned to several ineffective teachers in a row have significantly lower achievement and gains in achievement than those who are assigned to several highly effective teachers in sequence [Sanders & Rivers, 1996]. Teacher effects appear to be additive and cumulative…” adds noted educational researcher Linda-Darling Hammond [2000]. Research tells us that a certified teacher can make a significant difference in the experience of the children. This seemed to prove true at HTT (and for the current staff). The certified teacher’s knowledge and experience in meeting the state-mandated pedagogical and content standards and applications of early childhood education were reflected in enhancements of the already exceptional NAEYC-accredited HTT program. Her leadership and professional skills provided firm support for all participants of the unique educational community at HTT.

The partnership between HISD and HTT seemed to be a win/win situation for both of these entities. HTT received a qualified teacher to help with the programs supported by HISD and to ready their children for its feeder pattern schools, while HTT was provided with a teacher who could partner with and lead its uncertified teachers towards greater knowledge and skills in teaching. This position also provided HTT with more legitimacy in terms of having a certified teacher in residence. The program manager noted that all brought “pieces to the table” in making a better program for children.

The sharing between stakeholders at HTT is providing unique information for all—and for those outside the partnerships as well. This information can provide a framework for educating young homeless and/or at-risk children. The integration of guiding principles for educators and administrators may lead to a deeper understanding and support for research on the needs and experiences of homeless populations:

- children cannot learn if their basic safety needs have not been met,
- children cannot continue to expand on their knowledge with their families after school if they are fearful of their safety and have no place to study, and
- a teacher cannot easily influence a child to read or apply other concepts and skills if his/her books or materials are stolen at a homeless shelter or on the streets.

Issues associated with being homeless have historically been overlooked. The implications of this study are significant in that educators are becoming increasingly aware of the substantial impact they can have on this at-risk population. These children are considered “at risk” from behavioral and academic challenges encountered from the unstable living conditions [Anderson, Brickle, Jones-Hall, & Natale, 2006]. These same researchers also quote statistics that show homeless children are likely to attend multiple schools each year and that daily attendance is problematic, having school supplies is rare, and a large percentage are at least one grade behind in reading. Early interventions, such as those being developed and supported by private entities, school districts, universities, and others may truly change some of the dire statistics for education of these homeless children listed earlier.

The case study can be an effective tool for promoting knowledge about the education of homeless children. When a detailed case study captures the many details and emotions involved in a project such as this one, it is easy to see the value of not only the specific role under study but the entire school concept. This descriptive case study provides insight into the nuances of the integration of the public and private social environments, the organizational characteristics that contributed to the social interactions, the pedagogical issues that impact the integration of the diverse environments, and how the institutions (HTT and HISD) balance the need for change/adaptation with the need for accomplishment of routine tasks. Since this insight includes all major actors, it captured considerable data that may help others understand many of the unique aspects of this facility as a whole, the at-risk children whom they may one day serve, and what it takes to be a successful educator in a similar situation. For urban teacher education students, this is invaluable in their preparation process.
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