

Journey of a Blue Ribbon Partnership

William Greene with Kathy Nagaji, Wendy Larrow, Wendy Lum,
Nancy Morikawa, Gloria Shoda, Ray Sugai and Joseph Zilliox

In 1995, while working as a graduate assistant at the University of Hawai'i, I taught a course in educational psychology to a cohort of students placed at Pearl Ridge Elementary School in central O'ahu. I was excited by the prospect of teaching learning theory and concepts that I could relate to contexts where daily examples from students' experiences would be part of our conversations about working with children. Since then, I have continued to build on my experiences at Pearl Ridge with two cohorts of students. The school staff and faculty at the University of Hawai'i provided proof of the power and potential of the school partnership model for training new teachers and for facilitating the renewal of veteran teachers and university instructors. This article looks at some of the characteristics of this partnership through the perceptions of those working within the culture of the public school system in Hawai'i.

The voices that form the text of this article include two Pearl Ridge administrators – Ray Sugai, the principal, and Kathy Nagaji, the school curriculum coordinator. The teachers are represented by kindergarten teacher, Nancy Morikawa; third-grade teacher, Gloria Shoda; fifth-grade teacher, Wendy Lum; and sixth-grade teacher, Wendy Larrow. Joe Zilliox and William Greene are the two university faculty who have been most closely involved with working with the teachers and students at Pearl Ridge.

Two four-semester cycles of cohort students were trained wholly or in part on the Pearl Ridge campus. (A one-semester pilot group preceded both cohorts.) The first cycle accommodated 18 students, all placed at Pearl Ridge. The second cycle involved 27 students who alternated placements between Pearl Ridge and Holomua Elementary School. Examples given in participants' comments relate to either one of the cohort cycles, and some statements summarize more general impressions spanning more than four years of partnership involvement.

The Early Phase: Setting Up a New School-University Partnership

About five years ago, Ann Port, co-director of the Hawai'i School University Partnership, contacted Joe Zilliox to ask if he would be willing to assist Pearl Ridge Elementary School staff in submitting a grant to the Apple Corporation. The grant meetings that followed gave Zilliox, Sugai, Nagaji, Morikawa and others a chance to get to know each other and express a shared commitment to education and children. Joe Zilliox suggested to the group that a math methods course he planned to teach to a group of student teachers at Waiiau

Elementary School might meet at Pearl Ridge instead, and that a few of the Waiiau students be placed there. Sugai began to have conversations with the rest of his staff about the school becoming involved in a university partnership. After reaching a consensus, the school decided to start modestly by hosting 12 students from the Waiiau Cohort as a pilot group. In this way, Pearl Ridge teachers were introduced to the new teacher preparation program being developed in the College of Education. When the time came to begin several new cohorts in the Spring of 1995, the school decided to give it a try with a two-year commitment and starting a cohort of their own. Two full cohort cycles (eight semesters) later, the Pearl Ridge is again planning to take on a new, third cohort next fall.

The responses from a survey of Pearl Ridge mentors and UH faculty have identified some common perceptions of how their successful partnership developed. These data cluster around five identifiable themes: the process of establishing ownership, the role of the pilot cohort, trust and communication, simultaneous renewal, and the culture of the school.

Establishing Ownership

Teachers describe Ray Sugai as the visionary, a strong and trusted leader who enthusiastically communicated his belief in the value of the partnership. Initially, however, Sugai realized that a partnership commitment would impact the entire school, "from scheduling to parking spaces." According to Sugai, the decision to open up the school to the university could not be "ram-rodged" by a couple of people, but would need buy-in time for teachers. Meetings were held with school and university personnel to discuss the program, agree on roles and responsibilities, and acknowledge that getting involved would be a learning experience for everyone — teachers, administrators, and university faculty alike. Sugai wanted to have as much information as possible available to his staff and to be up front about the demands that this new arrangement would have on the teachers. Larrow reported that all voices were valued, and everyone was encouraged to make an impact on shaping the program. "This is how we govern ourselves, by consensus," Sugai explained. "We had to decide as a school if we should make this commitment and whether or not we would be able to follow through." In the end, the whole school agreed to enter into the new partnership arrangement, and teachers were allowed to decide individually whether or not they would mentor a student teacher.

The Role of the Pilot

The pilot cohort allowed the partnership, in Joe Zilliox' words, to "start small, just to get our feet wet." From the beginning, the presence of 12 cohort students on campus made a positive impression on children and staff members. Teachers and administrators saw the adult to child ratio cut from about 1:30 to 2:30. While this was a significant improvement, the ratio was cut even more, in certain classes, when UH students grouped together to do special projects.

Of course, the pilot cohort was not free of challenges. Some students needed more support than others. They represented a wide range in ability and maturity. "But because our philosophy is 'every child is special, every child can learn,'" said Nagaji, "we transferred it to the cohort as well." When some teachers expressed doubt at their ability to provide the level of expertise needed to mentor a student, school administrators and UH faculty were able to reassure them and explain that what students needed most was the opportunity to work alongside successful teachers. "What won us over," Nagaji recalled, "was the impact the cohort had on the children." These experiences during the pilot semester helped reinforce the school's belief in the value of the partnership.

Trust and Communication

When asked about the attributes of a strong partnership, nearly all the teachers, faculty, and school administrators mentioned the importance of trusting relationships and good communication. Kathy Nagaji added a new role to her job as the school curriculum coordinator, by taking responsibility as the liaison between the university and the school. Everyone agreed that she played a vital role in disseminating information, dealing sensitively and quickly with issues or questions, and nurturing a climate of mutual trust. Sugai commented, "I know we wouldn't have been as successful if we didn't have Kathy in that position." Her frequent meetings, both scheduled and informal, with university personnel, teachers, and cohort students provided a common point of reference for everyone involved. Nagaji felt it was critical to the success of the program for her to stay in touch with the "heartbeat of the school," and she tried to be accessible to the teachers. "I have to be right out there in their rooms asking 'How's it going?' instead of waiting for them to come to me with their concerns or celebrations."

Basic to the trust that Nagaji nurtured with the teachers were the many personal friendships already in place before the partnership began. Nagaji commented that the school staff trusted the university faculty to deal with whatever came up, no matter how trivial the concern. "This trust was further enhanced as university faculty did not hesitate to join in with activities going on at the school. Whatever apprehen-

sions teachers had about university professors observing in their classroom were diminished as Joe [Zilliox] came in to help with math lessons or William [Greene] did storytelling with their classes...our university partners 'walked the talk.'"

Developing effective communications and trustful relationships with student teachers was viewed by mentor teachers as a vital part of their job. They used a number of strategies which included the use of verbal and written reflections, dialogue journals, debriefings through evening phone conversations (especially when school activities prohibited one-on-one discussions during the day), listening intently and attentively to learn about the needs of the student, and being clear about expectations and feelings. Teachers placed a high value on establishing and maintaining open and trustful communication with their students. For example, in communicating to her cohort students, Gloria Shoda made a conscious effort to "find the words, no matter how difficult the situation, to speak about things that are important to bring up."

Simultaneous Renewal

Everyone in the study had examples of how the partnership fostered professional growth, and at the same time, benefitted the preparation of pre-service teachers in the cohorts. The presence of university faculty on campus provided teachers with opportunities to enroll in on-site courses in language arts, health, and math education. Wendy Larrow recalled how her action research project, conducted as a student teacher, was a bridge to her on-going professional development. Later, as a mentor teacher, she realized that her education did not stop with a degree and certification but that "action research became my vehicle for reflecting and evaluating my classroom on a daily basis and for looking at the larger picture of education in a democratic society."

Teachers found that their confidence in their ability to mentor increased through practice. Student teachers introduced them to current research-based strategies and new-paradigm approaches to instruction in math, reading, and writing. Many were similar to strategies the school was already trying to adopt, but as Kathy Nagaji observed, "it's so much easier, after seeing the cohort students try it in the classroom and watching the children's response, to try it out by yourself." Teachers were also able to implement new ideas with a student as a partner. Of course, this teamwork required time to plan. Gloria Shoda remarked that she tried to learn many of the new things that her student teacher wanted to try out, such as reading and writing workshops.

To do this, we conferenced, planned, and reflected about our students' needs and what these in-class workshops would look like. These experiences as a mentor caused me to examine and re-examine what I believed to be true and to challenge myself – to hold my beliefs about teaching, about

children, and about teaching children up close for scrutiny and to examine whether I do what I say I believe. The willingness of the student teachers to attend and support extracurricular school activities also had an impact, not only on teachers, but on parents as well.

Confidence in the program and partnership brought a number of unforeseen benefits. It had the effect of "opening up the classrooms," as the principal, Ray Sugai, observed. There was an increase in the number and variety of adults coming and going, working with the children, and exchanging ideas.

Culture of the School

Philosophically, the school was predisposed toward an inclusive educational environment. In Joe Zilliox' view, this environment provided a common language and grounding for the partnership and that a common set of values were more easily established and a feeling of mutual respect created that permeated all aspects of the school's cultural milieu. Nearly all respondents mentioned that as a TRIBES trained school, Pearl Ridge staff and students knew how to honor their relationships with each other. Strategies fostering mutual respect became part of a common language and common goal that helped nurture a partner relationship with the university. Cohort students were treated as members of the Pearl Ridge faculty rather than as guests, and this introduced them as contributing members of the school community.

There was a structure and a vision already in place for having 'outside' people become part of the school. Because of that structure, the involvement with the pre-service program was not seen as a major disruption with the operation or orientation at the school.

The school even made special arrangements for cohort students to participate in staff in-services and workshops. For example, Pearl Ridge funded and hosted a four-day TRIBES training for two groups of cohort students with the conviction that the training would contribute significantly to their work at Pearl Ridge and their future in the classroom. As a result of this "invitational" approach, cohort students responded and grew in positive ways. They were part of something much bigger than a traditional, solitary classroom experience could have provided; they were part of an entire school community.

Learning New Roles

As individuals shared perspectives on their roles within the partnership, it became clear that this model compelled them to adapt to some new beliefs and expectations.



From left: Randy Hiltz, Art King, Joe Zilliox, June Uychara, Judith Hughes, Tom Stone and Joy Marsella

Principal

Early on, Ray Sugai had become aware of the larger network of educational renewal in the state and across the country through his involvement as an associate with the Hawai'i Institute for Educational Partnerships (HIEP). As a result, he viewed his role as a partner school principal as an important agent in promoting the professional education of his staff and supporting educational reform. He knew that it would require a whole-school "investment" to be effective. He aimed to give his staff a thorough sense of how partnerships could benefit the educational system. He also shared his ideas with new groups of cohort students as they began their field experience at Pearl Ridge. He spoke about the culture of the school, its interdependent parts, and how everyone who set foot on the campus shared in and had an impact on that culture. One university faculty member commented that this was a liberating idea, an open invitation to be a part of the school. Sugai acknowledged that principals who have not had a chance to assess the partnership idea or witnessed the benefits that accrues to the school and faculty may be reluctant to take on this kind of change. He suggested that an orientation presentation to prospective partnership principals may be of some use, but people need to be open to it and somehow see the value before they can be expected to commit to it.

Curriculum Coordinator

Kathy Nagaji's role as curriculum coordinator existed before the partnership began. Her broadly-defined job description involved "supporting teachers in whatever new program we are undertaking." The extensive list of her responsibilities included work with the Success Compact Literacy program, drama and First Steps Writing (both grant related), teaching media literacy in classrooms, teaching video



Wendy Lum and students

production with grades 4-6, grant writing, and creating a tutoring program using parents, staff, and community volunteers. When Pearl Ridge adopted the partnership, Kathy's role as liaison was "squished" in with other responsibilities. The key element to learning this new role was making time to talk to the teachers, to keep in touch with what they were experiencing in the classroom. This included a lot of listening, brainstorming, and "passing on" of information to the university coordinator.

A university faculty member noted that "Kathy heard many of the teachers' concerns before they reached me. We stayed in close touch through drop-in visits on campus, e-mail, and phone conversations. When concerns surfaced, we tried to see issues from both mentor and student perspectives and discussed what, if any, action to take."

Many of her interactions with teachers occurred after school or on the phone at home. She wanted teachers to know their voice was valued and would be taken seriously.

Dealing effectively with conflict was another aspect of her new role. Handling conflict entails a willingness to listen patiently and a capacity to seek possible solutions. The most challenging conflicts stemmed from unwillingness to see beyond certain limited perceptions. Classrooms with two adults can add to the strain of work. Other challenges emerged as decisions had to be made whether to continue the partnership of student and teacher, or make a new placement. Fortunately, "only one situation demanded this drastic measure as the rest of the conflicts were resolved through intervention and mediation with the UH faculty."

Mentor Teachers

Mentor teachers tended to describe their roles in different terms than would be expected from teachers in strictly supervisory roles. All of the teachers questioned in this survey emphasized the need to nurture supportive, trusting

relationships. Several extended the use of their TRIBES strategies to the mentor-student relationship. For instance, collaboration, working as colleagues, trust, emotional safety, inclusion, and open communication were concepts that loomed largely in their statements regarding their role as mentors. Wendy Lum commented that "we were challenged to help them find the space to grow roots into the field of good teaching practices and acquire the confidence to develop their own personal style." Wendy Larrow recalled that much of her efforts reflected the kind of mentoring she had received as a student teacher and that learning together as a team was a valued part of the mentor-student relationship. Part of the roles learned by mentor teachers involved openness to personal growth and change as well as the challenge to bring to the task all of their knowledge and experience in working with others. Gloria Shoda described in detail how this process worked for her:

"Each pre-service student that I work with is unique in personality, in attitude, in strength, and in needs. Each time I choose to work as closely as I do with them, my best practical understanding of how to make a relationship work is called up for real practice and application. My school has invested and served me with tools so that I can be as successful as possible with relationships. I know TRIBE strategies, collegial coaching skills, conflict mediation strategies, and breathe the full inclusion philosophy. I have an understanding of what works best in order to be collaborative. The relationship as partners teaching side-by-side on the floor is one that is to be nurtured so that seeds may be sown, so that successful practices in the craft of teaching can be passed on from one generation of teachers to the next. Students have their own style. I need to be flexible enough to allow them time to develop things their way. When I try things that my pre-service teachers want to try, I invite them to join me in doing things that I believe are important for them to do, like presenting to parents, fellow students, and teachers at faculty or district math conferences. If we work together at things that have value but are difficult and uncomfortable, we will get better at it – like rope jumping, playing jacks, or riding a bicycle for the very first time. I want my partners to be able to recognize those feelings of anxiety before they take risks and when they stretch themselves. I want them to feel confident that not all of their questions need to be answered before they begin but that they will find answers to their questions as they journey on that risk-taking road. The floor that we share in the classroom is where my partner will gain confidence. And as confidences and relationships successfully develop, my confidence in my own ability to be a mentor is strengthened."

Mentors also grew into new roles as leaders, both within and outside of the school. Nancy Morikawa conducted TRIBES training for two cohort groups, participated as an

associate with the (HIEP), and served on a panel about stewardship. Through her experiences, she realized "my desire to give back to the profession that I have the greatest respect for."

College Faculty

College faculty roles adapted to fit the learning curve and struggles of the partnership process. These roles needed to be supportive and to integrate seamlessly into the culture of the school. At the same time, staff needed to view the university coordinators as collegial participants who were learning along with them. The professors didn't have all the answers. Indeed, it was important that they searched for answers together with the teachers. Constant communication helped to prevent concerns from festering, and there was a certain value to maintaining a casual and frequent presence on campus. Part of the renewal of university faculty involved coming to terms with what constructivist teaching would look like in a teacher preparation program. How were they to apply and model some of the same principles of constructivism to student teachers that the students were learning as an approach to their own teaching? This approach to the field experiences of the students also presented some challenges when questions arose such as, "What should cohorts be doing and when should they be doing it?"

Teachers were encouraged to provide a scaffold so that the students could gradually widen their circle of responsibilities and experiences. At times, even some of the most experienced and capable teachers expressed doubt in their ability to provide appropriate levels of assistance. This approach placed a lot of trust in the unique contributions of the individual mentor, and university faculty tried to recognize and acknowledge the many different and creative ways that teachers employed to rise to this challenge.

Challenges

Generally, according to Ray Sugai, the partnership relationships developed "fairly smoothly," though there were probably more individual challenges than programmatic ones. This observation echoed others' responses. The philosophical compatibility that had emerged between the university teacher education program and Pearl Ridge was established early in their relationship and care had been taken to work through differences collaboratively. But at the level of individual teachers and student teachers, differences in personality, style, and philosophy emerged as the process of building relationships progressed. Two recurrent themes stand out in the comments: "getting along" and "making teaching public."



"College methods courses, taught on-site, provide a forum where faculty interact regularly with classroom teachers and K-12 students" page 5

Getting Along

According to Kathy Nagaji and others, probably the greatest fear of the teachers is, "What if I don't get along with my cohort student?" These situations usually fell into the category of philosophical differences. Ray Sugai remarked that some of the teachers had to confront the old versus the new paradigm in teacher training. "They had to be more constructivist instead of having a check list of requirements to follow," he said. Trying to accept and work with reasonable differences was a necessary part of moving ahead in the partnership. Kathy Nagaji and the university coordinators worked together to match mentors and cohorts each semester. A number of variables were considered, including individual style and personality. Even with these considerations, the reality is that conflicts will still arise. These may be due to personalities, different expectations or perspectives, and even challenges to authority. Such differences underscored teachers' awareness of the importance of communication, teacher standards, documented agreements and timelines, the necessity of building relationships, and accepting diversity. Nancy Morikawa said in reference to a small number of students passing through the cohort program may not become teachers:

"But we still need to give them the best teacher training possible. Equally important is the need to share with them our lives and to model and guide them toward maturing into caring individuals who can contribute positively in some way to the future of our society."

Making Teaching Public

Gloria Shoda remarked insightfully at the end of a mentor-faculty-student three-way conference: "I can't tell you how hard it is to make our teaching public." She was referring to the difficult task that accomplished teachers face of verbalizing their wisdom of practice. Wendy Lum refers to this as

“thinking aloud as a mentor.” It is an important part of mentoring as it helps the cohort student to grasp the multi-faceted perspectives that go into the decisions that teachers make. Thinking aloud demands that teachers be reflective about their teaching which in turn requires time to question, analyze, and discuss. One of the common frustrations among teachers and cohort students was not having time available each day for this kind of conversation. Ray Sugai and Kathy Nagaji were responsive to this need in a two ways. Teachers were released from recess duty 30 minutes per week to allow a small, but significant, time to dialogue with their student teachers. Kathy Nagaji was also able to juggle schedules and shift responsibilities without adding costs to the budget. In addition, Ray Sugai rescheduled staff meetings to allow mentors and students time to meet together every fourth Wednesday.

Conclusion

The bonds and relationships created among school and UH faculty were a key factor in the Pearl Ridge decision to continue as a partner site. The staff felt supported by its university partner, particularly because “we were listened to and actions were taken promptly.” As one of the teachers observed “a partnership that lacks this level of responsiveness, can quickly go downhill.” Both Ray Sugai and Kathy Nagaji, however, agree strongly that more support for mentor teachers at the institutional level is needed.

“Although none of our teachers participated in the partnership for any reason other than investing in the future and providing for the present, the reality is that teachers are professionals and need to be compensated for sharing their wealth of expertise and precious time.” He also added that while every school doesn’t have a curriculum coordinator position, the role is vitally important in the success of the partnership, and the funding of such a position between the Department of Education and the College of Education should be considered.

Currently, Pearl Ridge is taking a year off to allow time for staff to reflect, assess, and re-focus before mentoring a new cohort next fall. “We want to make sure we’re not burning anybody out.”

All of those contributing to the text of this article expressed overwhelming agreement on the positive value of the partnership to the children, to the school community, and to themselves. Speaking of the accomplishments of the program in training teachers, Kathy Nagaji remarked, “We look for every opportunity to hire them back.” There may be no stronger statement of the enduring potential of school-university partnerships.



Kathy Nakagi, Gloria Shoda, Wendy Lum, Nancy Morikawa and Ray Sugai in front of a mural painted by children of Pearl Ridge Elementary School

William Greene is an assistant professor in the department of education at Southern Oregon University. He taught in the elementary cohort program at the University of Hawai‘i-Mānoa from 1995 to 1998.

Kathy Nagaji is curriculum coordinator at Pearl Ridge Elementary School in central Oahu.

Ray Sugai has been principal at Pearl Ridge Elementary School for the past ten years. In addition to leading two schools to National Blue Ribbon awards, he received the National Distinguished Principal Award in 1995 and the Milken Award for Education in 1996.

Gloria Shoda is a third grade teacher at Pearl Ridge Elementary School. In addition to her 30 years of experience, Gloria was a Presidential Awardee for Excellence in Science and Mathematics Teaching.

Nancy Morikawa has spent 27 years teaching at Pearl Ridge Elementary School.

Wendy Lum teaches fifth grade at Pearl Ridge Elementary School.