

Peer partnerships: A best practice for preparing and empowering youth

Antonette W. Hood and Mary E. Mc Neil

Abstract

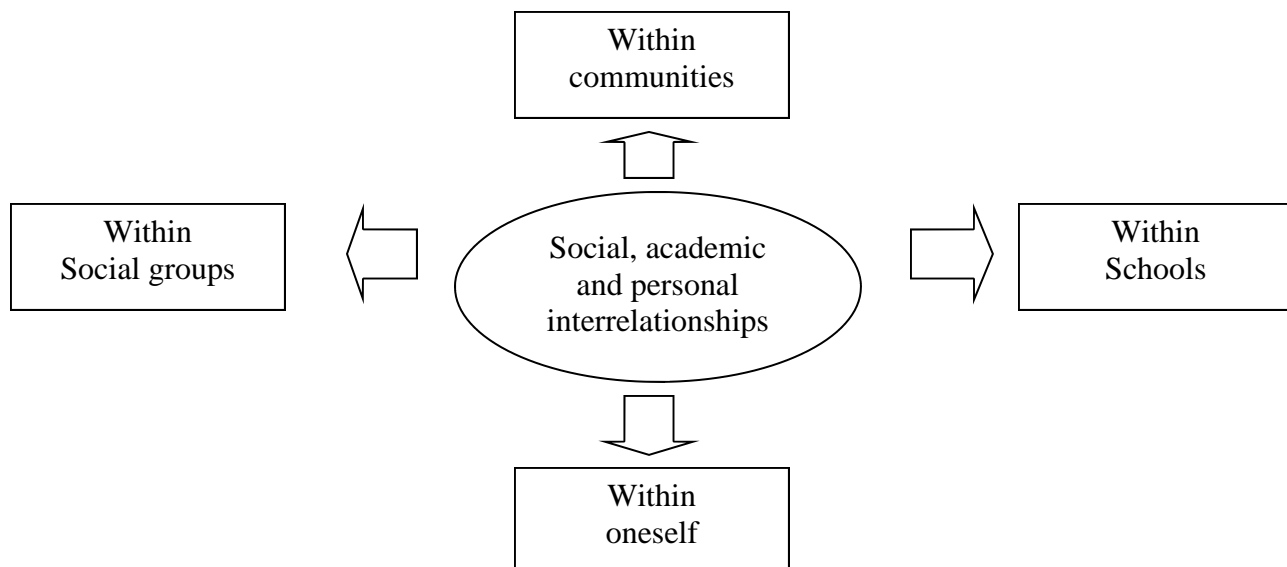
This article examines the research-based best practice of peer partnerships in schools and communities, as it relates to the principles of Whole Schooling. It also identifies complex issues of peer partnership program accessibility and the multi-dimensional needs of students and youth. The authors make recommendations that would lead to an increase in peer partnership program opportunities. These partnerships would enhance academic, social, and personal development, and prepare and empower students as they transition into productive membership within their communities.

Setting the Stage

The notion of peer partnerships is a common one. These partnerships are often described according to their specific focus (e.g., as peer tutoring, peer mentorship, peer-assisted learning, cross-age tutoring, and peer helpers). In this paper, the authors refer to peer partnerships as those empowering cooperative relationships in childhood and adolescence in which members team together for a common purpose: to support each other and/or their community.

During the past three decades, numerous researchers have documented social, academic, and personal interrelationships that have secured positions within our schools, neighborhoods, and families (i.e., Topping, 1988; Perske & Perske, 1988; Villa & Thousand, 1995; Wertheimer, 1995; Shapon-Sevin, 1998; Staub, 1999; Nisbet & Hanger, 2000; Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn, & Van Voorhis, 2002; McNeil & Hood, 2002; O'Brien and Pearpoint, 2002; Newton & Wilson, 2003). Peer tutoring, circles of support, collaborative teaming, and peer partnerships have become commonplace, and a "new" jargon has infiltrated professional conversations, formal and casual home-school communication, and the educational literature. The primary purpose of many of these partnerships has been to support the various essential needs of the children and adults in our local schools and communities.

Figure 1: The range of partner interrelationships



Academic underachievement, issues of linguistic, ethnic, or socio-economic diversity, or ability difference influence these interrelationships. These may be further compounded by economic disadvantage, antisocial activity (such as gang participation), alternative family arrangements, and safety within our communities. The result is often higher dropout rates, increased crime and violence, and dysfunction and disharmony within families, schools, and communities. Children who experience low self-worth, underachievement, or a sense of hopelessness also experience an unsatisfactory level of success within their interrelationships. Participating in peer partnerships is one way to ameliorate these conditions.

The Partnership Model Search

Finding, understanding, modifying, adapting, or constructing effective models of partnerships has been a challenge. Of particular note are issues of:

- access to education and social services;
- the development of an individual's positive sense of self-worth;
- the need for families to connect with other families who also find themselves faced with the challenges of everyday living and childrearing;
- advocacy and support for families of students at-risk;
- the development of friendships;
- the academically and socially healthy sides of schools; and
- community well-being that stems from active, service-oriented participation of its members.

Convenient access to useful examples and instructional modules about relationship building for families, teachers, and community organizations presents another challenge. These resources are generally scattered on the self-help shelves at local bookstores or libraries. Information may also be hidden among an endless supply of conference workshop offerings and professional literature that usually extend beyond the reach of students, families, and even teachers.

Those family, school, and community members who hold a glass half-full view of these issues find hope and opportunities in them; not problems. They are collectively committed to meeting the academic, social, and emotional needs of children. Partnering with each other is one way to actualize their hope. Another important way to eliminate the barriers to those goals is to make accessible to them a comprehensive array of effective peer partnership practices. In so doing, the lives of many people would be enriched by the variety of opportunities that social and learning partnerships have to offer.

A Pursuit of Effective Practices

Topping (1988) examined several models of internationally practiced peer support structures. One of the earliest was a peer-tutoring model designed in 1789 by Andrew Bell for students in India. Commenting on the advantage of peer tutoring for the young tutors, Bell noted, "The very moment you nominate...a tutor, you have exalted him in his own eyes...The tutor...far more effectually learns his lesson than if he had not to teach it to another. By teaching he is best taught" (cited by Topping, 1988, p. 13.). Bell also observed positive changes in students' behavior and learning, claiming that when children assist each other, their dispositions are well cultivated (ibid.).

Bell's model was further developed in England and Wales by Lancaster, and eventually influenced practices in Eastern and Western Europe, and Western territories around the world (Topping, pp. 14-15). Bronfenbrenner (1970), for example, studied school children in the Soviet Union, who were "explicitly taught in school to help each other, and especially help younger children" (Topping, p. 8). The notion of cross-age tutoring may have been borne out of this early model. In still further examinations of international models, Topping observed that the notion of peer tutoring in North America differed somewhat from its counterparts in Europe. In North American peer tutoring projects, he noted, children were often perceived as "mini-teachers" (p.7). In Europe, on the other hand, peer tutors were viewed as complementing (rather than supplanting) a teacher's instruction (pp. 7-8).

Topping's (1988) handbook on peer tutoring has been followed by several other resources that have supported partner learning and peer support structures (i.e., Perske & Perske, 1988; Villa & Thousand, 1995; Wertheimer, 1995; Shapon-Sevin, 1998; Staub, 1999; Nisbet & Hanger, 2000; Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn, & Van Voorhis, 2002; O'Brien and Pearpoint, 2002; Newton & Wilson, 2003). In 2002, Epstein, et al. published a handbook that supports the notion of active partnerships between schools and their local communities and families, offering a range of opportunities for involvement to strengthen student success, which they refer to as "Six Types of Involvement – Six Types of Caring" (pp.12-15). Their vision, which is in concert with that of Whole Schooling advocates, encourages the development of learning partnerships and communities in which strategies are articulated and practiced among participants.

Researchers (e.g., Agran, King-Sears, Wehmeyer, & Copeland, 2003; Gilberts, Agran, Hughes, & Wehmeyer, 2001; McNeil & Hood, 2002; Snell & Janney, 2000; Thousand & Villa, 2000) have also emphasized the importance of student-to-student partnerships in the emotional, social, and academic development of students. According to McNeil and Hood (2002), students who engage in peer support structures often transition from a place of dependence and low performance to positions of confidence and skill, and consequently lead fuller, more independent lives.

While it is important that we understand the complexity of developing positive interrelationships and intrasocial well being, it is perhaps even more important that we actively pursue effective practices and promote them in our schools and communities. To create safe and productive communities, live generous and confident lives, and continually improve the social landscape of our nation, partner learning needs to remain at the foundation of our efforts.

The Principles of Whole Schooling

The principles of Whole Schooling (Figure 2) support the application of research-based best practices to improve student success and well being (Whole Schooling Renewal, p. 2).

Figure 2: The Principles of Whole Schooling

- Empowering Citizens for Democracy
- Including All
- Providing Authentic, Multi-Level Instruction
- Building Community
- Supporting Learning
- Partnering with Parents and Community

Marzano, Pickering, and Pollack (2001), reported that, since the 1970s, when the influence of effective teaching practices on student success was first scientifically examined, current thinking has shifted. Researchers (e.g., Brophy, 1986; Edmunds, 1979; Sanders & Horn, 1994; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997) agree that teachers who infuse research-based best practices into their instruction are, in fact, “effective with students of all achievement levels, regardless of the level of heterogeneity in their classrooms” (Wright, et al., 1997, p. 63). In their discussion of the future of inclusive education, Gartner and Lipsky (2000), remind us that,

School districts implementing [best practices, such as] inclusive education have recognized the benefits and consequences of such implementation for all school activities, including curriculum, instructional strategies, assessment, student grouping, personnel utilization and deployment, parental participation, pupil transportation, fiscal affairs, and building and district organization. (p. 50)

Many of the principles of Whole Schooling are visible in schools using peer support structures. Traditionally, American schools have endeavored to prepare and empower children and youth. Students thus prepared are able to assume positions and responsibilities within local, national, and global communities in which they are poised to protect and advance democratic values and ideals. The goals of education are met on many fronts and by many means. These goals are evident in John Goodlad’s seminal work (1994), *What Schools are For* (Table 1). According to Lilly (2000),

These goals... are important outcomes of effective education...The standards movement in the United States has brought to the fore the importance of academic goals, and there is increasing pressure across the United States...fueled by language in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997 (PL 105-17)...to apply high standards for educational performance to all teachers and their students, including those in special education. (p.2)

High Quality Education

Recent U. S. legislation – the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) – emphasizes the adequate yearly progress (AYP) of school children, and focuses on academic improvement. As a consequence, public schools now publish annual report cards that summarize assessment results and academic progress made by the student body. To accomplish this progress, substantial funding is specifically earmarked for programs and resources that positively effect academic achievement. The goal of NCLB is to provide every American child with a high quality education. One objective of NCLB is to unite parents, teachers, school officials, politicians, and community and business leaders in this effort.

Table 1. A synthesis of Goodlad's goals of education

Goal	Descriptors
Academic Goals	Development of functional literacy, core knowledge and skills
Vocational Goals	Preparation for school-career transition
Social and Civic Goals	Preparation of our children and youth for productive lives in a democratic community
Personal Goals	Fostering goals of self-actualization and the pursuit of happiness

To date, preparation of students has relied significantly upon local school districts, which, in turn, rely upon long-standing traditions, local norms, and contemporary, research-based programs. In the Parents' Guide to No Child Left Behind, a publication from the U.S. Department of Education (2002), Secretary Rod Paige suggests, "Real, nationwide progress can be made when we help our teachers learn proven methods and actually use them in America's classrooms to make sure that every child becomes...successful" (p. 17).

Hopefully, the broader vision of Goodlad (1994) and Lilly (2002) will not be compromised in this new legislation. Creative partnerships in all aspects of the lives of children need to be ignited so that a whole person emerges with the inter- and intrapersonal skills and dispositions necessary to safeguard and promote the principles of a democratic society.

The Current Scene

According to Bronfenbrenner (1986), the pivotal aspects of fostering a child's positive development are family, peers, and community. Teachers and school officials who invest in the learning and utilization of best practices in education are more likely to prepare all of their students for successful transition into independent, productive adulthood. Having access to and knowledge of effective practices, however, will not alone ensure success.

Using effective practices in the preparation of children and youth for independent, productive lives requires a focus on the whole child. In a meta-analysis of preliminary data, the authors realized previously unavailable generalizations about education are now possible. The use of proven educational approaches addressing the critical outcomes of effective teaching is now available, and the opportunity for teachers, families, and communities to learn and utilize these approaches ensures student learning and the assumption of social and civic responsibilities will improve.

Partner learning is a well-documented practice that clearly supports the goals of education. The authors found from Head Start to high school, partner-learning programs may take the form of peer and cross-age tutoring arrangements, facilitated communication, and cooperative learning approaches, to name a few. In their investigation of partner learning, the authors consistently noticed that peer support structures enhance the learning and the lives of students, families, schools, and communities. School-community examples, such as Youth Reading Role Models (Family Literacy Foundation, 2000), Study Buddy, the Washington Project (McNeil & Hood, 2002), and Project SUCCESS (Brannon, 1998) further illustrate the Whole Schooling concepts described above. Building upon cooperative relationships, these partner structures cultivate the social and academic potential of all participants, while expanding the community building within schools and classrooms. In the past, children who may have been isolated, were at risk of failing in school, or who dropped out of school, became more actively engaged and empowered as contributing citizens in their schools and communities (McNeil and Hood, 2002).

The Socially Healthy Side

Snell and Janney (2000) eloquently captured the essence and importance of developing and sustaining social relationships.

For most of us, social relationships give life meaning. Relationships are usually a motivating force of children's school attendance; adult relationships at work usually make the week more interesting, if not actually pleasant. Relationships provide opportunities to give support to others both socially and emotionally, and to receive support in return. Our ability to build and keep relationships goes hand in hand with our social skills. We call on these skills repeatedly in a given day; when we forget to do so, disharmony and conflict with others can result. Over the long term, our relationships have a strong impact on our general outlook on life and on our self-concept. (pp. 3-4)

Within the context of schooling, McNeil and Hood (2002) see a parallel. In their review of the effectiveness of structured partnerships within schools, they conclude,

While schools are certainly institutions of academic learning, they are also important social systems in our society...[We] have found that students in socially healthy schools are very likely to experience a sense of belonging. They demonstrate this by maintaining healthy friendships with classmates and interacting in positive and productive ways with their teachers. Educators who take seriously the social side of schooling can do much to promote the positive social behaviors that enhance school climate and foster healthy and caring environments for all learners. (p. 257)

Table 2. Characteristics of creative partnerships

Characteristics of Creative Partnerships
They provide children and youth with opportunities to develop personally, academically and socially.
They add substantial quality to the well being of schools and communities.
They provide opportunities for the development of skills needed for competence in everyday life.
They are adaptable to the unique circumstances of numerous settings within schools and communities.
They enhance the learning and the lives of participating students, families, schools, and communities.

The notion of social health can certainly be generalized to our communities, as well as to one's personal sense of well-being. As a child moves from the network of a family system to the local playgroup, to neighborhood friendships, and on into school, these networks play an important role in the child's healthy social development, "and cannot be minimized over the child's lifespan" (Snell and Janney, 2002, p. 22). These are well illustrated in Van Bockern, Brentro, and Brokenleg's model, "A Healthy Ecology," in which schools also contribute to a child's well-being (2000). In socially healthy schools, communities, and families, children receive some of their best gifts: a sense of belonging, an opportunity for mastery, skills for independence, and the ability to give and reciprocate love and generosity (Brentro & Van Bockern, 1994). Children who experience these gifts are free to enjoy friendships as they learn and grow. They report positive memories of school and childhood, and they have the self-assurance that they are valued and appreciated.

How to Get Started

Based on their work, the authors make several suggestions that would enable schools and communities to locate, learn about, and begin partner-learning opportunities. The following ideas represent the various steps that could be taken to provide students and youth with peer partnerships opportunities that would assist them in their academic, social, and personal development.

Assess local practices.

While using journals, texts, or the World Wide Web are excellent alternatives as well, a good place to begin one's research is in one's own backyard, including nearby school districts. Making inquiries locally frequently yields excellent results, and saves time and expense.

Pay attention to local news stories.

The local newspapers, radio, and television programs are replete with wonderful examples of exemplary school and community programs. There may be regular reports devoted to the exciting activities of neighborhood schools and programs for children and youth. Scan your local radio and television listings regularly for programming information.

Note: Follow up viewing the broadcast with an e-mail or phone call to the administrator of the school or other site of the program, and schedule a visit, a phone interview, or make some other arrangement to gather information you need.

Interview local school officials.

Call or visit administrators of local schools, and ask them to describe the partnership practices being used by their teachers and students. Principals of schools usually enjoy the community's interest, and you may have the opportunity to observe their practices in action.

Visit local partner learning programs.

Perhaps you are already aware of a school's exemplary program. Call the principal's office and ask to arrange an escorted visit. Interview project leaders, students, teachers, and parents. You may find a program that will complement or exemplify your own school's programmatic vision or plans. Make direct contact with those involved in the development and implementation of the established program. An outcome of this interview may result in a successful design and implementation at your own school or in your community.

Peruse professional and popular journals and magazines for ideas.

Many teachers (and many public schools) subscribe to education magazines and journals, which may be good sources of information about exemplary partner learning programs and best practices in education. Even some popular press magazines provide useful information about these.

Contact your local university.

Contact the College of Education at local universities for referrals to faculty who may have information about research, development, and locations of partner learning programs in your area. There are generally several teaching preparation programs at universities, such as elementary education (multiple subjects), special education, middle school, and secondary (single subject) programs. In many cases, you may be able to speak with faculty whose disciplines are a good match to your own needs.

Watch for announcements of community volunteer partnering opportunities.

These might appear in local newspapers, on local television or radio broadcasts, on bulletin boards at local libraries, or on the World Wide Web. Search the World Wide Web (e.g., keywords: peer tutoring, mentorships, partner learning, community building). You can search broadly, or within your own geographic region. Look for research articles, general or specific information, web sites of model programs, and opportunities to communicate with people who share your vision, questions, and concerns.

Attend lectures, conferences, and workshops to obtain knowledge and materials.

By checking the resources already mentioned, you may become aware of relevant lectures, conferences, and workshops to attend. Learn directly from those who have successfully implemented partner-learning programs.

Contact community-based service organizations supporting youth activities (e.g., YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, scouting organizations, and preschool and after-school programs).

Frequently, these organizations have ongoing projects that involve partner learning and peer mentoring. For local contacts, use the telephone directory or Yellow Pages.

Partnering Thoughts

Partner learning, creative social partnerships, youth service programs, and other interwoven partnership designs entwine the strong and significant threads of America's distinctive fabric. The empowering opportunities they afford students, schools, and communities make us hopeful that life can and will be better.

In this article, the authors examine the literature on models of partnerships to support the essential social and learning needs of children. They discuss the necessity of improving convenient access to useful models for families, teachers, and community members. While many of the principles of Whole Schooling are visible in schools using peer support structures, more systematic efforts are required to prepare and empower children and youth to assume positions of responsibility in their schools and in their communities.

The development and implementation of peer partnerships for children and youth will enable us to create for them safe, productive, and satisfying lives. Preparing and supporting them in their life experiences through authentic, collaborative, and cooperative peer partnerships will continually fortify and enhance student success and well being. Peer partnership is a democratic approach toward social and academic vitality that must be thoughtfully and seriously considered as a viable method through which we practice only the best in education. It is, after all, what our children and youth deserve.

Dr. Antonette Hood is an Assistant Professor in the College of Education at California State University San Marcos. Dr. Mary McNeil is with the College of Education at California State University San Marcos.

References

- Agran, M., King-Sears, M. E., Wehmeyer, M. L., & Copeland, S. R. (2003). *Student-directed learning*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Brannon, M. C. (1998). Project SUCCESS: An inclusive service-learning curriculum for youth. Washington, DC: United Cerebral Palsy Associations.
- Brendtro, L.K. & Van Bockern, S. (1994). Courage for the discouraged: A psychoeducational approach to troubled and troubling children. *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 1-15.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1986). Alienation and the four worlds of childhood. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 67, 430-436.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1973). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist*, 32, 513-531.
- Brophy, J. (1986). Teacher influences on student achievement. *American Psychologist*, 41, 1069-1077.
- Epstein, J.L., Sanders, M.G., Simon, B.S., Salinas, K.C., Jansorn, N.R., and Van Voorhis, F.L. (2002). *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.
- Gartner, A. & Lipsky, D. (2000). Inclusion and school restructuring: A new synergy. In Villa, R. A., & Thousand, J. S. (Eds.) *Restructuring for a caring and effective education: Piecing the puzzle together* (2nd ed.) (pp.38-55). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Gilberts, G. H., Agran, M., Hughes, C. Wehmeyer, M. (2001). The effects of peer-delivered self-monitoring strategies on the participation of students with severe disabilities in general education classrooms. *Journal of The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, 26, 25-36.
- Goodlad, J. I. (1994). *What schools are for*. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation.
- Family Literacy Foundation, 2000. Youth Reading Role Models: Community Coordinator Manual. San Diego: Author.
- Haring, N. G. (2000). Prologue. In Villa, R. A., & Thousand, J. S. (Eds.) *Restructuring for a caring and effective education: Piecing the puzzle together* (2nd ed.) (p. xvii). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997, PL 105-17, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 *et seq.*
- Lilly, M. S. (2000). Re-examining the purposes of schooling: Working toward a common goal. In Villa, R. A., & Thousand, J. S. (Eds.) *Restructuring for a caring and effective education: Piecing the puzzle together* (2nd ed.) (pp. 1-6). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Lipsky, D. K., & Gartner, A. (Eds.) (1997). *Inclusion and school reform: Transforming America's classrooms*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Marzano, R., Pickering, D., & Pollack, J. (2001). *Classroom instruction that works: Research-based strategies for increasing student achievement*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- McNeil, M. E., & Hood, A. W. (2002). Partner learning: The power source for students, schools, and communities. In Thousand, J., Villa, R., & Nevin, A. (Eds.) *Creativity and collaborative learning: A practical guide to empowering students, teachers, and families in an inclusive, multicultural, and pluralistic society* (2nd ed.) (pp. 247-265) Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

- Newton, C., & Wilson, D. (2003). *Creating circles of friends: A peer support and inclusion workbook*. Nottingham, England: Inclusive Solutions UK Limited.
- Nisbet, J., & Hangner, D. (2000). *Part of the community: Strategies for including everyone*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- O'Brien, J., & Pearpoint, J. (2002). *Person-centered planning with MAPS and PATH: A workbook for facilitators*. Toronto: Inclusion Press.
- Paige, R. (2002). What to know and where to go: Parents' guide to *No Child Left Behind*. Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Education.
- Perske, R., & Perske, M. (1988). *Circle of friends*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Sanders, W. L., & Horn, S. P. (1994). The Tennessee value-added assessment system (TVAAS): Mixed model methodology in educational assessment. *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education*, 8, 299-311.
- Sands, D. J., Kozleski, E. B., & French, N. K. (2000). *Inclusive education for the 21st century*. Stamford, CN: Wadsworth/Thompson Learning.
- Sapon-Shevin, M. (1998). *Because we can change the world: A practical guide to building cooperative, inclusive classroom communities*. New York: Allyn & Bacon.
- Snell, M.E., & Janney, R. (2000). *Social relationships and peer support: Teacher' guides to inclusive practices*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Staub, D. (1999). *Delicate threads: Friendships between children with and without special needs in inclusive settings*. Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House.
- Thousand, J. S., & Villa, R. A. (2000). Collaborative teaming: A powerful tool in school restructuring. In Villa, R. A., & Thousand, J. S. (Eds.), *Restructuring for caring and effective education: Piecing the puzzle together* (pp. 254-291). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Topping, K. (1988). *The peer tutoring handbook: Promoting cooperative learning*. Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books.
- Van Bockern, S., Brendtro, L. K., & Brokenleg, M. (2000). Reclaiming our youth. In Villa, R. A., & Thousand, J. S. (Eds.), *Restructuring for caring and effective education: Piecing the puzzle together* (pp.56-76). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Wertheimer, A. (1995). *Circles of support: Building inclusive communities*. Bristol, England: Circles Network.
- Whole Schooling: Renewal Strategies. Retrieved May 7, 2004, from <http://www.wholeschooling.net/WS/WS%20Renewal.html>
- Wright, S. P., Horn, S. P., & Sanders, W. L. (1997). Teacher and classroom context effects on student achievement: Implications for teacher evaluation. *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education*, 11, 57-67.