Tulsa Writing Camp

BY EILEEN SIMMONS

“Writing camp? Don’t you mean riding camp?”
That’s the reaction from friends of some Tulsa, Oklahoma, elementary school teachers when they hear about the teachers’ summer plans. For non-teachers (and even some teachers) the idea that kids will return to school voluntarily during the summer to write is unbelievable. But two Tulsa elementary schools—Marshall and Cooper—are proving that writing is as much fun as riding.

Three years ago, Oklahoma State University Writing Project (OSUWP) teacher consultant Mary Losoncy accepted the invitation of OSUWP Co-Directors Joyce Alberts and Mary Jane Fahey to start a writing camp at Marshall Elementary. Based on the OSUWP writing camp held each summer on the Stillwater campus, the Marshall Writing Camp, funded through Title I, provides outreach into a low-income urban area.

Marshall Elementary School’s poverty rate among its 420 students is 100 percent; the mobility rate is 90 percent and a majority of the students live in subsidized housing near the school, according to principal Kayla Bruce.

Tulsa’s “Marshall plan” expanded the OSUWP’s Youth Writing Project (YWP) model to provide a lab for teachers and a camp for students.

Teacher consultants from OSUWP provided professional development the first week; the following two weeks, teachers worked with students, putting into practice what they had learned. (Funding constraints, however, limited the student camp to just one week during the third year.)

The immediacy of putting professional development into action is a powerful part of the model. Marshall fifth-grade teacher Jenna Suleiman gave an example: “Mary Losoncy read Dr. Seuss’ My Many Colored Day and we brainstormed ideas for writing about colors. As a result, the kids put their writing into their own books and tie-dyed the covers for the books.”

The lab setting provides students with a non-threatening environment in which to try new strategies. “It’s fun to see kids take an idea and run with it. They’ll take the risk and do anything because they know they can do it. I enjoy the energy of the kids as they have the freedom to go where they want to and to make choices,” said camp founder Mary Losoncy.

Second-grade teacher Wendy Couch, who has just finished her first year of teaching, came to the writing camp looking for ways to motivate her students to write and to get new ideas. She found that, and more. “We were still writing ten minutes past quitting time yesterday,” she said. She’s also discovered that writing encourages reading. “Young authors want to read to everyone.” Wendy also enjoys the low student-to-teacher ratio at the writing camp where six teachers work with 22 students.

Ginger Mendenhall, a Marshall fifth-grade teacher, relates the kind of special experience that brings teachers back to writing camp. “Last year, we took the kids on a fieldtrip to Central Library and Gilcrease [Art Museum]. I had my cell phone with me and I was sitting on the bus next to Timmy, a blind student. Timmy wanted to use my cell phone, so I had him call my house and leave a message on my answering machine. He described what he “saw” on our way downtown. That’s what we teach kids to do in descriptive writing, to see in their minds, and here was this blind student reciting images, describing what he saw in his mind.”

Writing camp isn’t just for the kids; it also serves the Marshall faculty. “There’s a bonding among the faculty,” said Terri LaRock, another fifth-grade teacher. “We never see anyone else teach. It’s fun to see how others teach.”

Marshall principal Kayla Bruce is enthusiastic in her support of the writing camp. “We’ve seen a phenomenal growth in writing test scores, and it’s not necessarily the kids and teachers involved in the writing camp. The teachers-teaching-teachers model has spread to the upper grades. Creative writing is part of our reading block in every classroom.”

Across town at Cooper Elementary, the success of the writing camp has been repeated for two years. The year after Marshall’s first writing camp, OSUWP Co-director Mary Jane Fahey began a Cooper Writing Camp. Because Cooper is not a Title I school, funding is a challenge. The first year was funded through a Tulsa Public Schools Professional Development grant; the second year was funded by the National Writing Project.

“We combined professional development and National Writing Project ideas,” Mary Jane said. “Our locus that first year was on writing and art.”

The first year’s camp was staffed by eight teachers, at least one teacher from every grade. Ten teachers staffed the second year’s camp, including principal Janet Bassett who became one of the teaching staff.

As in the Marshall experience, the student bonding was significant. “One mother asked if her mentally handicapped daughter could come with her sister. She was just another camper as far as the other kids were concerned. She was happy to be there and would dictate her ideas to other kids to write down,” Mary Jane said.

The day that stands out most for Mary Jane during the first year of writing camp was a trip to the park next door to Cooper. “We didn’t have funding for a field trip, so we took the kids to the park,” she said. “There’s a pond running through it. The kids spread out, observed, wrote and drew. They looked for small details—the bark on a tree, a leaf, dirt. They drew what they saw inside a circle on their paper and wrote about it on the outside of the circle.”

Mary Jane observed significant changes in teacher practice that first year after the writing camp. “Writing across the curriculum increased. I saw increased writing time and strategies for all teachers. Teachers did more kinds of prewriting and more revision instead of just editing.”

Cooper Elementary’s second writing camp incorporated the ideas of Rural...
Entrepreneurship Through Action Learning (REAL), Mary Jane and colleague Pat Mumford trained at a week-long conference in Hilton Head and brought back the ideas to incorporate in the writing camp.

As part of REAL, students set up and ran a bank, a post office, a TV broadcasting studio, a newspaper and a mall. Students had to generate income every day and were paid every day.

“We had a job fair and had the kids fill out applications, listing their first and second choices,” Mary Jane said. “We were able to give all of them one of their choices. I was surprised at how excited the kids were about having a job.”

Mornings were spent getting ready for the REAL simulation in the afternoons. “The newspaper staff would be out interviewing people and getting stories for the paper, which they’d publish in the afternoon,” Mary Jane said.

Writing was incorporated into the REAL experience. “The students wrote letters every day so the post office could deliver them. The last day they wrote thank-you notes to the adults who helped with the camp,” Mary Jane said. Kids and teachers also spent the last 30 minutes of the day writing in their reflective journals.

“Teachers have the freedom to decide how to implement new strategies in a lab setting. There are no grades. We get to know each other and know our strengths. During the school year, the faculty camaraderie level increased. We did more networking, asking for help from each other and bouncing ideas off each other,” Mary Jane said.

Like her colleague at Marshall, Cooper Elementary School principal Janet Bassett is enthusiastic about the writing camp and the effect it had on the school. “I’ve seen a lot of crossover,” Janet said. “More teachers are using writing in their classrooms, integrating it into the subject areas. And there’s a lot more writing displayed.”

She agrees with Mary Jane that faculty camaraderie has increased. She sees “more cross-grade-level talking and planning and a greater comfort level. At faculty meetings, you see teachers sitting together talking instead of staying in their grade-level groups.”

The Marshall/Cooper professional development model “builds camaraderie, sparks creativity and brings all grade levels working together,” Janet said. “It creates a community of learners across grade levels and subject lines. The teachers continue sharing ideas and materials. The lab setting is non-threatening—no grades, no large number of students. Teachers are willing to risk new ideas, to step over the lines, to think outside the box. They have others to back them up, to say ‘Try it this way … This worked … This didn’t.’ The debriefing and reflection was important and so was the assistance throughout the day.”

She continued, “Sometimes you go through intense professional development, but when you don’t get to try it right away, you lose some of its essence, the immediacy of trying it out. In this model, you learn something new and you try it immediately.”

OSUWP Co-Director Joyce Alberts commented about the long-term effects for both students and teachers. “The benefits of this experience continue long after the camp ends and result in more authentic reading and writing during the school year and more sharing of ideas and resources among teachers in the school.”

After hearing about the writing camp success at Marshall and Cooper Elementary schools, writing project TCs in other parts of Oklahoma plan to replicate the writing camp/professional development model in their own schools.