

THE MENTOR PROJECT

Conceptualizing Strengths in the Mentors of Novice Math Teachers

By A. J. (Sandy) Dawson, PhD

Beginning in 1999, the National Science Foundation (NSF) funded Pacific Resources for Education and Learning (PREL) to direct two professional development projects whose goals

wonder: *Why are these two projects working when others before have not? What is it about these two projects that is different that contributed significantly to their success?*

In an article in the December 2004 *Educational Researcher*, Shawn Malia Kana'iaupuni draws attention to

ing, and intimately bound to the land and genealogy. This worldview is a source of resilience and strength."

- *Compassion*, which is "...what invokes values of a collective rather than individual good. These focal points of compassion and collective good are often at



Photo: Alice Miller

▷ A strength-based approach to PD is based on competencies, capabilities, and expertise of individuals.



Photo: Sandy Dawson

▷ Project MENTOR is grounded in values like respect and acceptance of learners' capabilities.

were (a) to develop a cadre of college and department/ministry of education personnel capable of providing site-based mathematics teacher education, and (b) to assist this cadre in supporting and working with novice teachers of mathematics as they embarked on their teaching careers. When Project DELTA concluded in September 2002, there were approximately 50 school- and college-based teacher educators prepared to offer in-service assistance to teachers in their home communities. Later in 2002, this cadre of mentors began their work with novice teachers of mathematics. At the July 2005 Pacific Educational Conference, selected mentors and novice teachers will report on the work that has occurred in the past 3 years of the MENTOR project. Data collected indicates that the two projects have met and are meeting their goals. Some people

"strength-based" approaches to professional development that are based on the competencies, capabilities, and expertise of the individuals engaged in the activity. From a Pacific perspective, these individual capabilities are grounded in "...the strengths of family and community relationships" (p. 30). Though the article focuses particularly on Hawai'i, the attributes and values defined seem characteristic of the many Pacific communities where the projects operate: American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia (Chuuk, Kosrae, Pohnpei, and Yap), Guam, the Republic of Palau, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands.

According to Kana'iaupuni (p. 30), the attributes and values are:

- *Relationship*, that is "...spiritual, giv-

odds with Western values of individual ownership and advancement."

- *Respect*, which "...gives voice to the expertise of our kūpuna (elders) and culture as sources of community and family strength."

From the beginning, projects DELTA and MENTOR strove to base their work on these attributes and values. The ways of working adopted during the various project institutes held during the past 6 years were based fundamentally on the attributes and values noted above. Some of the central features of these ways of working include the following:

- A deep respect for and acceptance of the capabilities of learners. A mentor always expects learners to be able to grasp the concepts being presented. At the same time, a mentor does not expect the learner to do that every time, in every circumstance.



- An acknowledgement that in the teacher/student dyad, the learner is central; that is, the learning of the student is of paramount importance, and the teacher's performance and lesson must be subordinated to the learning of the student.
- The recognition that it is the learner who must do the learning, and that the teacher's function is to create situations and experiences that focus the learner's attention on the key concepts of the mathematics being presented. The mentor realizes that not all learners will gain the same understandings during any particular activity, so the mentor requires an ever developing, rich collection of activities that direct learners' awareness to the key ideas being presented.
- The discipline to provide the learner with the minimum essentials for understanding to occur, to not "tell" the learner everything, or almost everything, in the belief that "telling" fosters learning. In order for knowledge to be a permanent, accessible, and useable aspect of learners' repertoire, they have to play with it, mold it, modify it, and finally make it their own.
- The further recognition that conversations among learners are valuable tools in a teacher's instructional repertoire, because often one's peers can ask a question or provide a focus of attention that enables the learner to see something not previously seen through teacher-designed activities.
- The understanding that teaching is subtle work that is delicate, restrained, and finely grained.
- An appreciation that, in the words of Caleb Gattegno (*What We Owe Children: The Subordination of Teaching to Learning*, Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1970), "only awareness is educable," meaning that learners can only acquire knowledge of that which they are aware.

These understandings are central to the MENTOR Project's work with mentors, and experienced and novice teachers, and form the instructional basis for workshops and seminars conducted during the twice-yearly MENTOR institutes. Institutes are characterized by set-

tings that encourage communication and conversations with and among the mentors, experiences that endeavor to direct mentors' awareness to significant mathematical understandings while engaging them in challenging mathematical problems, and assignments that flexibly offer opportunities for mentors to expand their own awareness. When possible (once or twice a year, on average), project leaders also visit mentors on their local islands to offer support and assistance as the mentors undertake the task of fostering learning among the novice and experienced teachers with whom they work.

A second tool used to foster respect and understanding among mentors and project staff is the wisdom circle, described in Christina Baldwin's 1998 book *Calling the Circle: The First and Future Culture* (Bantam Books). Introduced during the project's first institute in January 2000 as a tool for opening dialogue between and among the mentors, it became clear that this

form of communication is well known to and used by many Pacific communities.

The talking piece (or talking stick, as it is called in the project) used is a sacred eagle's feather presented to the author by a First Nations band of northern Canada. Whoever is holding the talking stick is the only one allowed to speak, and all others in the circle listen attentively to what is being said. The wisdom circle is typically used once a day during institute time, perhaps to open proceedings in the morning or to bring everyone back together at the end of the day.

Whatever successes the DELTA and MENTOR projects have achieved can largely be attributed to the good will and willingness of all participants to practice and exemplify in their behavior the attributes and values central to Pacific communities. If the projects have succeeded, it is because they honored and respected the ways of being of Pacific island peoples and cultures.

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Baldwin's Principles and Practices of Circle Operation

The Three Circle Principles as Practiced in the Project

- *Rotating leadership.* Each person helps the circle function by assuming small increments of leadership. Thus, leadership shifts moment-by-moment and task-by-task. Rotating leadership demonstrates confidence that the resources to accomplish the circle's purpose exist within the group.
- *Sharing responsibility.* Each person pays attention to what needs doing or saying next and does his or her share. Thus, responsibility also shifts moment-by-moment and task-by-task. Shared responsibility is based on the trust that someone will come forward to provide whatever the circle needs.
- *Relying on spirit.* Each person places ultimate reliance in the center, and takes his or her place at the rim. Through simple ritual and consistent refocusing, the center, literally and symbolically, becomes sacred space—a place where everyone's willingness to listen dwell.

Circle Agreements as Practiced in the Project

- *What is said in circle belongs in the circle.* Confidentiality allows people to speak their minds knowing that they will not be gossiped about. Confidentiality allows people to take verbal risks, to experiment with ideas, and to keep changing their minds as their understanding grows.
- *The circle is a practice in discernment.* Discernment is the ability to listen, sort, and speak without having to be "right" or in total agreement before other people's opinions and views can matter. Someone else's view doesn't have to be right or wrong; it may simply be different.
- *Practice listening without interrupting.* This can be an important reinforcement of the talking piece idea, even when the form of council currently in use is open discussion.