

## Urban Semester

*Pamela G. Mouchaham and Amanda R. Barnhart*



**Pamela G. Mouchaham** is currently finishing up her third year at Ball State. She is majoring in Elementary Education with a concentration in Mathematics. She is also pursuing a Middle School and Junior High Mathematics License. She will be student teaching in the Fall at Storer Elementary in a fourth grade and a fifth grade classroom.

**Amanda R. Barnhart** will graduate from Ball State in May of 2008 with a major in Elementary Education with a Kindergarten concentration and a minor in coaching. Both Amanda and Pamela participated in the Urban Semester program during Fall 2006.



Pamela G. Mouchaham and Amanda R. Barnhart are two of the 30 elementary preservice teachers who chose to participate in the Urban Semester program during Fall 2006. The Urban Semester is an immersive experience where preservice teachers spend all day every day for a full 16 week semester working side by side with a classroom teacher in an urban school. It is similar to student teaching but happens BEFORE student teaching while students are taking their methods classes. For their efforts students earn 18 credit hours in coursework that applies toward their major. In this article Pamela and Amanda share some of their experiences working in an urban elementary school in Indianapolis.

### **Pamela G. Mouchaham**

I chose an elementary education major because of my two passions, the joy of learning and being around children. I chose to participate in the Urban Semester because of an interest sparked in me my freshman year at Ball State. I was introduced to the Urban Semester program during my EDEL 100 class and ever since then I developed an interest in urban schools. Urban schools give back to the community for they provide education to children living in those areas under tough conditions. Urban schools have various cultures and are more diverse. I wanted the opportunity to teach in an urban setting because

it would provide me with the skills to be a more successful teacher. Having never lived in a large city, the Urban Semester experience would provide me the opportunity where I could develop my independence and my cultural skills even farther.

As a future teacher, I believed that working in a diverse classroom would be advantageous towards understanding different societies and developing cultural awareness. I am originally from Lebanon in the Middle East, and being from a diverse culture I had a sense of understanding and diversity that I could contribute to teaching in an urban school. My previous job at an after-school program, Latchkey, consisted of helping the children with homework, organizing games, and organizing art projects. I worked with children in grades kindergarten through sixth. After being in an urban setting this semester I have been able to see differences between the areas.

At the beginning of the Urban Semester experience, I was somewhat disappointed with my placement in fourth grade. I had requested kindergarten, first, or second grade. I was not sure how I would like being in a fourth grade classroom. The day before school, I went to the school to meet the teacher with whom I was to work. The school was a mess. It was going through construction and renovation. There were construction workers everywhere, the hallways were a mess, and the cafeteria was not even ready. I met my teacher and it was a good experience. She was very nice. She was a young but experienced teacher who had just moved to Indiana from Florida where she taught for five years. She was very helpful, showing me around the school, discussing the semester, telling me about her life, and providing me with many resources. I had intended to spend about half an hour there, but ended up spending three hours.

On my first day of school, I was very calm yet excited to meet our children and be a part of the classroom. I was introduced as a teacher so the students saw me as another teacher instead of as a student. We had a total of 25 students. It was interesting to see that the first day of school is actually about the teacher getting to know the class and the children getting to know the classroom procedures. The children talked and wrote about their summer, their families, and themselves. I noticed that the school placed all the children for whom English is a second language in one classroom together. I felt that having all those children in one classroom would increase their chances of speaking their first language and lessen their chances of speaking English. It turns out that they were more comfortable being placed in a classroom with all the other students needing language assistance. They have definitely progressed since the beginning of the semester. They are more fluent in English and they get along with all of their classmates.

During our first week, there were a few students who never showed up. I realized that there is a higher rate of student absences in urban settings. I noticed that many of these students came from rough neighborhoods. When they did show up, they became quickly comfortable with the teacher and me. The students started to share stories about their home lives after seeing that my teacher and I could be trusted.

During the first five weeks of school, students grades 3 through 6 had some

ISTEP+ prep time. For two hours each day they would go back to their teachers from the previous year. The school decided that looping with their previous teachers would help improve the students' scores. The school placed a lot of emphasis on ISTEP+ tests. I took charge of reviewing the math section of ISTEP+. This was a different and interesting experience for me. My concentration for my major is mathematics, and I am also attempting a middle school license in mathematics. This was time for me to develop my math skills, and think about different ways to teach/review different math concepts to children. I began to think outside the box and use a variety of strategies. The students enjoyed the techniques. Even though ISTEP+ was a good experience for me, I felt like the rest of the day was a waste of time. The students were not learning many new things. The main focus was ISTEP+. We did a lot of reviewing.

I did learn a lot from teaching mathematics during ISTEP+. I realized that mathematics is a very hard subject for most students. It is a subject that can cause confusion for some children. As a pre-service teacher, I have tried to use many resources to help me explain math concepts. I also realized that children like to see more than one way to solve a problem. Different students have various learning styles. Some learned by repetition, some by visualization, some by reading, and some by listening.

After ISTEP+ testing, I started to see more of a typical day without testing. I began to take over more subjects, teaching pretty much all day. I would teach some science, math, and reading. I was surprised at the curriculum that the school follows. Many of the teachers use worksheets, whereas only a few teachers use hands-on activities to teach lessons. My teacher and I tried to include different strategies. I personally dislike the use of worksheets and try not to use them. Another surprise for me was that schools focus heavily on reading and mathematics, and less on science and social studies. I noticed students get excited to learn about science and social studies. They love experiments, history, and different cultures.

These first ten weeks have definitely been a great learning experience. I have gotten many resources. I realized the amount of effort and time teachers put into their plans to ensure their students get a meaningful learning experience. Teachers are full 24-hour workers, always spending their time and money on their students and classrooms. I have grown each day learning how to teach certain subjects. I have had many experiences teaching mathematics. I have taught lessons over rounding, basic facts, place value, and graphs. For one particular lesson, I used M&Ms to help the students understand line plots. They were each given a random sample of 15 M&Ms and were led through the process of constructing a line plot. The students enjoyed the activity and the experience. During their work time, I noticed children discussing their different graphs.

We have also used numerous activities to assist students in learning place values. In one activity students were to form the largest seven-digit number possible when rolling a single die seven times. This activity reinforced the idea that when large numbers were rolled, those digits needed to be placed in the larger place values. We also used body movements to help the students remember the place values. For instance, they knelt on the floor for the one's

place and they stood up with arms in the air for the million's place. These are just some examples of the different strategies we used to make concepts more understandable and memorable.

I have grown closer to my students. I have definitely had more experience than I would have had in any on-campus class. Being in a classroom with the students has taught me much. I have become more proficient with management in the classroom. I have learned the different ways to plan lessons. I have grown to understand diversity in a classroom. Diversity is about various learning styles, various cultures, varieties of gender, race, and age, and different backgrounds. I have become more skillful in understanding students' behaviors and learning styles. I have learned how to deal with an emotionally unstable student. At the beginning of the semester, my emotionally distraught student had a tough time trusting me. I learned to choose my battles and help the student. Now she is able to trust me by sharing stories and asking me for help during our class time. I have received many resources from other teachers. I have received a lot of advice. I realized that teachers work in teams to aid each other through the days.

The Urban Semester so far has been an amazing experience. It has taught me a lot about myself. I have come to realize my philosophy on education. This experience has made me stronger and has encouraged me to continue my career and future goals. I look forward to having my own classroom.

### **Amanda R. Barnhart**

I grew up in Lafayette, Indiana, a community that embraces diversity in religions, races, and socioeconomic levels. Lafayette is home to Purdue University and many multi-national corporations. My high school, located in the heart of the city, had a very diverse population. Just as the community does, Jefferson High School embraces the diversity within the school. I believe this helped me realize that everyone is different and some may not be as fortunate as others.

I have always known that I wanted to teach in an urban school setting. I volunteered in an urban school for a couple of years starting my freshman year of high school, so I felt like I understood the types of homes and cultures from which the children may come. I also felt I had many skills needed to help the students succeed in this setting. When I heard about the Urban Semester experience I knew I wanted to take advantage of this unique opportunity. I knew the experience I would gain from this program would be one of a kind. Urban Semester was a chance for me to be in a classroom setting everyday and also have the experience of being in an urban setting. One of the main reasons I wanted to participate in this experience was to work with urban students. I felt as a future educator that I should have a diverse background, not only with ethnicity but also with poverty levels. I also knew this program would help me in my future teaching career because I would have the opportunity to work with parents, other teachers, and the local community.

Urban Semester has surprised me in a very positive way. I knew this would be a great experience and I would grow as an educator but I have enjoyed this semester more than I ever imagined. By participating in this program I have

confirmed the fact that I am meant to be an educator. I am excited every day to go to school and work in my kindergarten class. My students are so excited to learn new things and to be a part of our classroom community. I never expected to be so excited to go to work to see what new challenges I would face that day or what concept finally connected for a student. I have been pleased by the fact that I am able to put into practice what I have learned and then observe whether or not it works well.

I have a student being raised by a single parent who works a night shift. As a result, the little boy is with a baby-sitter for the evenings and nights. He has had a lot of people come in and out of his life, which has understandably made him an emotional child. He has a hard time trusting people and understanding that we want to help him. He would not answer any questions we would ask him at the beginning of the year. If he had a wrong answer he would get very upset and say he couldn't do it, and he would back away and scream if we tried to talk to him. I tried a discipline method called 2x10 where I would talk to him about things not related to school for two minutes for ten days in a row. The first one or two days I would get no response but I stayed next to him, asked him questions, and told him about myself. On day three he was reading a book when I went to talk to him and I noticed it had a dog in the book. I asked him if he liked dogs, he nodded yes, and then started to openly talk about his dog. Everyday after that he would respond to my questions and actually looked forward to talking with me. This allowed him to trust me because I showed him that I cared about him and not just his schoolwork.

Since then his behavior has changed. It's not 100% better but we are making great progress. He will now participate in class and not get upset if his answer is wrong. He does not back away when a teacher is talking to him. It has been very rewarding for me to see how this has worked in my classroom.

I have been surprised by how the students respond to me as a teacher. This is a fall semester program so I have been in my kindergarten class since August 9th. The students met the classroom teacher and me at the same time. I thought that the students would test me or not respect me as much as the classroom teacher because they can tell that I am still learning. But it has been the complete opposite. Every student in my class shows just as much respect to me as they do to the classroom teacher. This has made it very easy for me to be able to control the class and get their attention when needed. I have been pleased with how much teaching experience I am getting. I have been teaching and leading the class since the first week. I started out by just doing simple routines such as the morning work. My teaching responsibilities have gradually increased to planning lessons, teaching the lessons to the entire class, and planning a week's worth of station activities.

I am very surprised at how much interaction with parents I am getting. The parents respect me as another teacher in the room and address issues with me and expect me to be able to answer and help them. When they volunteer in the classroom I interact with them and show them what we have for them to do. They treat me like I am a teacher. They understand that I know and have worked with their child all year.

One of the things I enjoy the most is watching my students grow intellec-

tually. One of the main areas in which they have shown progress is math. We do math throughout the day starting with "calendar". Our calendar has the numbers in a shape and color. Every month there is a new pattern with the numbers. For example, this month the 1 and 2 were in white squares and the 3 was in a green square. This represents an AAB pattern. Using the calendar we test the students with their numbers and shapes by pointing to a number and having them say it aloud. At the beginning of the year we had students who could not recognize anything past the number 1. Now they can recognize every number at least to 10. Our students who already knew 1-10 now know 1-20. It is amazing to see their growth and how excited they become when they figure it out the first time. When teaching a math lesson I have noticed that my students obsess about any manipulative I use, such as unifix cubes or wooden blocks. All they want to do is play with them. To prevent this I now introduce the math manipulative a couple of days before my lesson and allow them to explore with them during other times throughout the day.

In the 10 weeks of participating in Urban Semester I can already reflect on how much I have grown as an educator. I remember being so nervous about everything the first two weeks. The first time I took over calendar I was so nervous and that calendar ended up being five minutes shorter that day because I went through it so fast. Now I do calendar almost everyday and don't think twice about it. When I look back it makes me laugh that I was so nervous that first day.

Not only have I grown in my teaching but also in my classroom management. At the beginning I was afraid to discipline the students because I didn't want the students to dislike me. I was worried about my students liking me as a friend instead of as an educator. Now I am very confident and not afraid to discipline a student. They understand that the same rules apply with me as they do with the classroom teacher. I have also grown in my planning. I have learned about more resources and have taken advantage of using these resources to make my lessons more engaging and fun. I have learned to think outside of the box when making lesson plans.

Participating in Urban Semester has raised my confidence as a future educator. I also feel better prepared for my future and the experience has confirmed that I belong in an urban school.