

# Master's student adapts early childhood training to international orphanages

Curriculum and Instruction master's graduate continues professional development

It was an opportunity of a lifetime for Frank Mahler, an early childhood instructor working at PSU's Helen Gordon Child Development Center. He was invited by a local nonprofit, Hands to Hearts International (HHI), to develop curriculum for young children in third world orphanage settings, starting with India.

Frank Mahler grew up in an Air Force family. "I love to travel and usually go to Europe about once a year," said Mr. Mahler. He always knew he wanted to work with very young children, so he earned a bachelor's degree in elementary education at Western Oregon University. His first job after college involved working with preschoolers. Mr. Mahler worked in Head Start and Early Head Start programs for many years before seeking a master's degree. In 2005, he entered the GSE Master's in Curriculum and Instruction program and chose a specialization in early childhood education. When he looked around for a part-time job to help with school, he discovered the Helen Gordon Child and Family Development Center. He worked for the Center and attended classes at the same time, completing his master's



Helen Gordon's Frank Mahler enjoys working with tots. He completed a master's in curriculum and instruction at PSU and continues to welcome professional growth opportunities in early childhood.

degree in June 2007. In addition to his work at Helen Gordon, he teaches curriculum and instruction classes for PSU.

When Dr. Christine Chaillé invited him to participate in the HHI project last year, he was thrilled to work with his colleague and mentor in a new context. "I've collaborated on the development of curriculum for young children as part of my work at Early Head Start,

and also at Helen Gordon, but nothing on this scale or this formal," he said. "It was truly an opportunity for professional growth."

When they met with Laura Peterson from HHI, Mr. Mahler quickly realized, "we shared many of the same values, and that her organization was one that I would be proud to work with and support." The project included writing the curriculum and training the trainers who would work directly with the orphanage caregivers, and travel to India to implement and observe the results in the actual settings. This provided an opportunity to assess and adjust the curriculum to fit the children's specific needs.

It wasn't long after he got to India that Mr. Mahler realized this trip would be different from his other travels abroad. "India is not for the faint of heart," he

I think nothing can fully prepare you for the experience of being in India. It's a very intense place, full of contradictions. There is great beauty, but at the same time there is also great suffering and poverty there. It was difficult to witness some of the situations that the children were in, but then we met the caregivers, who have little education or training, and are not given much in the way of tangible rewards for the incredibly difficult work they do, and yet there they are, dedicating themselves to working with very limited resources to try to improve the prospects of the children. To me that was just incredible...to see their determination and hopefulness in the face of such enormous challenges. —*Frank Mahler*

commented. “You have to let go of the expectation that things will be easy.”

Mr. Mahler and Dr. Chaillé spent two weeks working with the trainers and visiting orphanage and adoption centers in Chennai (Madras) India. Some of the curriculum was modified because there very were few materials to work with. They soon realized that when confronted with extremely limited resources, it becomes much more important to step back and rethink what’s really essential in the learning process and how to adapt it to a local situation. The early childhood project will continue with HHI adapting the curriculum and taking the lessons learned in India to other settings throughout the globe.

Frank Mahler credits the GSE master’s program and working at the Helen Gordon Center for providing him with unique opportunities for professional growth. He has come to realize that learning must be made culturally relevant and meaningful, no matter where you are. “You can make the biggest difference in the lives of children when teachers, students, community, and parents work together,” he says.

## Hands to Hearts International (HHI)

HHI works throughout the globe to improve women’s empowerment and to positively impact the health of thousands of orphaned and vulnerable children. For more information on their work visit [www.handstohearts.org](http://www.handstohearts.org).



GTEP student Neil Reisner works with middle school students at a Jefferson County school. A grant will help content area teachers find the best ways to promote reading instruction in their classrooms.

## Literacy skills focus of new grant

The Carnegie Corporation awarded Susan Lenski (PI) \$100,000 to work with her colleagues Swapna Mukhopadhyay, Ron Narode, and Micki Caskey in a project to redesign its Secondary Graduate Teacher Education Program so that it better prepares new teachers to incorporate literacy skills within content area instruction. Portland State University has joined four other universities (Michigan State, Florida State, Teachers College of New York City, and University of Michigan) to seriously address the problem of low reading skills in our country’s adolescents.

While teachers in primary classrooms place much emphasis on reading strategies, literacy skills typically take a back seat to content area material in later grades. If students continue to struggle entering middle school, few options exist to help

bolster reading skills. If American students are to achieve higher levels in reading, then the task of intermediate-advanced reading instruction falls to the content area teacher.

The PSU team is looking at ways that middle and secondary school teachers plan for literacy. This investigation, they believe, will help new teachers become more cognizant of the role literacy plays in students’ learning. The PSU team has also been collecting exemplary lesson plans in science, math, and English that use a variety of formats from teachers around the state. These lessons, as well as revised syllabi and links to the other Carnegie projects, are on a Content Area Teachers Network website that will be unveiled on June 19, 2008. For more information visit [www.teachers.ed.pdx.edu](http://www.teachers.ed.pdx.edu). —Susan Lenski