

Fostering Collaboration for Social Justice:
The Journey of a Counselor Education Program and Urban School
Kathleen Marie Barrett
Saint Joseph College

Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to Kathleen Marie Barrett, kbarrett@sjc.edu

Fostering Collaboration for Social Justice:

The Journey of a Counselor Education Program and Urban School

This is the story of a remarkable collaboration between an inner city Hartford, Connecticut charter school and a counselor education program at a small private college just around the corner, but a thousand miles away if the measure used to estimate the distance between the two was socioeconomic in nature. It is a story of a vibrant and fruitful connection between institutions and of a social justice agenda brought to life in the context of an initiative offering rich rewards both to the inner city youngsters who receive school counseling services and the graduate students who provide them.

As Counselor Educators, we saw the opportunity it presented for our graduate students to realize their own potential, to use their talents and skills, and to make a difference in the world. In the three years that have passed, our collaboration has grown from offering weekly school counseling services to five children, to now, serving over 150 children per week. Considering this from a social justice perspective, it is notable that these school counseling services wouldn't otherwise have been available, and given the reality of the level of risk implied by their urban and socioeconomic status, could be considered to be especially critical.

Saint Joseph College's graduate counseling students presently provide classroom delivered, evidence-based programs in social-emotional development, career exploration curricula and activities, and a range of service learning programs which marry counseling program content with academic goals. Importantly, the knowledge and skills gained as a result of these programs will function to help inner city children overcome obstacles that otherwise impede their success and compromise their ability to step prepared, onto a responsible and productive adult life path.

The story of the start of our collaborative adventure is a touching one. It began three years ago, with the unmet needs of two elementary aged siblings who were living with a terminally ill caregiver and were desperately in need of counseling. With no counselor available in school to help these children, Jumoke Academy reached out to nearby Saint Joseph College for support, and a counseling professor specializing in grief responded and began counseling the children. Two graduate students accompanied her, and soon were invited to provide a small group program for a few girls who were behaviorally challenged. From a college characterized by a commitment to service, little acts of community service like this one are common at Saint Joseph College. This little beginning however, offered more as an act of charity than an intentional move toward program development, was the impetus for the development of a wonderfully and mutually beneficial collaboration which has since both flourished and expanded.

Offering a brief chronicle of our program's development, at the end of our first year of service, we sat down to talk with Jumoke Academy leadership about our future work together. They expressed their desire that we provide additional support for their children, and we responded with enthusiasm. It was a wonderful opportunity for our students. We selected curricula that would best meet the school's stated needs, which were identified by Jumoke Academy administrators as focused primarily around social-emotional issues and career development. We chose school counseling curricular tools that were well-regarded in the research literature and supported by leaders in the field, such as the National Center for School Counseling Outcome Research. The experience in delivering the curriculum would offer our graduate student volunteers great professional experience and resume material.

In our second year of work together, a team of five graduate students provided the evidence-based *Second Step* social emotional development program in two first grade classrooms, and began offering the *Real Game* career development program on the middle school level to students in grades seven and eight. We concluded the year with a school-wide event, a Career Exploration Day, which brought in more than twenty members of the community to share their occupational paths with the school's children. We teach our graduate students about the value of building connection with community, and this event offered the chance for students to learn the strategies to plan and implement a program like this. All in all, our programs served about sixty children in our second year, more than ten times the number served in the year before. The five graduate students who stepped up to the plate to serve as volunteers in that second year came away from the experience truly transformed. Our end of the year meeting between Saint Joseph College and Jumoke Academy administrators at the conclusion of year two carried the same message as the year before, and we again, explored possibilities for program expansion.

In year three, we saw the number of Saint Joseph College student volunteers triple to 15, with our violence prevention and social emotional learning curriculum *Second Step* delivered on a weekly basis in grades one, two and six, and the *Real Game* career exploration program provided for grades seven and eight. In year three, we were able to be creative, expanding the career program to include panels of community speakers, and hosting a second, equally successful school-wide annual *Career Exploration Day*.

A notable highlight of our third year's experience at Jumoke Academy, and of my own career as a counselor educator involved the students' participation in a career-related poetry contest. Our graduate students used the contest as a means to both demonstrate collaboration

with classroom teachers and the joining of counseling and academic curricular goals. Grade eight students were encouraged to submit a poem to the state and national level career poetry and poster contests sponsored by the National Career Development Association. The response was remarkable, the children did amazing work and swept their state competition, winning first, second, and third places in their age category and one of the three placed second in the national competition. It was quite wonderful news.

From the perspective of potential gain that volunteer involvements may offer graduate students, collaborative initiatives like this one offer the valuable hands-on experience of delivering school counseling services in an inner city school. This exposure may represent a first professional contact between the primarily white, middle class graduate students from our small private college and youngsters of the inner city. It can be extremely challenging, but offers a great sense of reward. It is our hope that those who take part in the Jumoke Academy initiative will be more inclined to consider bringing their energy and talents to urban settings when their degrees are complete and they are ready to step into the professional world. Their reflections tell us quite sincerely, that this is indeed, the case.

A second valuable advantage for our participating graduate students lies in the opportunities for learning it offers prior to beginning the official field work segment of their programs. Student counselors benefit from both exposure to the very best tools of the trade and hands-on experience in their use.

I cannot imagine a better place for our Saint Joseph College students to learn than Jumoke Academy. This remarkable inner city charter school has moved from the position of the lowest performing Hartford school to being consistently identified as among top inner city performers in the state. The school's exceptionally strong leadership, evidenced in a keen vision

to identify both the nature of need and the creativity to match that need to previously untapped resources, helped to transform this remarkable school into the success story it has become today. Jumoke Academy shows all who would cast doubt, that inner city children can indeed, step up to the plate if we offer them the tools they need to do so. It is indeed, exactly the kind of place we most hope for our students to learn from.

I conclude in sharing a profoundly moving moment for me as a counselor educator, a moment of insight and inspiration that took place as I attended an awards ceremony at the Jumoke Academy middle school, which was to include recognition for the youngsters whose career poems were selected as winners on state and national levels. Both the children who won the poetry contest and my own graduate students were to receive certificates from representatives of our State Department of Education and Department of Community Development and Planning. Standing in the auditorium that day, I remember vividly, the response of that middle school crowd of students when poetry contest winners were called to the podium. As they stood, the room veritably exploded with cheers, and I felt the profound sense of victory, and of accomplishment that touched every child in that room. I heard their belief that any one of them could indeed, step up to the table despite the odds that life may seemingly have stacked against them. The feeling of community, belonging, and belief, were powerful. I heard pride in their applause and most importantly, I heard evidence of the kind of hope that helps us face and overcome the greatest of life's challenges. I smiled in knowing that my own students there that day heard it too, and that they'd take that message with them on to all the children they would serve in their own future professional paths.

I hope that our story will inspire colleagues in counselor education to explore the rich opportunities that may be present in their own backyards to use graduate student resources to

provide counseling services, needed and otherwise not available to urban youngsters. In creating social justice-inspired collaborative relationships, we offer our students, the kind of valuable and ultimately transformative learning experience that no amount of book learning could hope to provide and offer them tools needed to best use their talents to make a positive difference in the world around them.

Finally, in summarizing the most valuable lessons learned on this journey, I'd identify the following as most significant.

- In our own communities, many opportunities exist for the kinds of collaborative initiatives that can ultimately serve to both enrich graduate students and truly respond to existing community needs. We need to find and embrace them.
- For students, hands-on involvement in social justice inspired initiatives engages, inspires and teaches in a way that classroom lectures cannot hope to accomplish. Students speak of the power of the learning, and its capacity to transform them and shape their professional identities as counselors. We need to celebrate transformative learning opportunities and integrate them into our programs.
- As counselor educators, few rewards are greater than those that come from knowing that our work truly makes a difference, and living true to our professional role as advocates opens the door to the best of those kinds of rewards. I often tell my students that I look at them as a gardener might look at a packet of seeds. Watching them graduate and step out into our profession, I know they will carry with them the kind of vision, experience, and tools needed to make the world a better place. What reward could be greater than that?