

SILKEN THREADS WOVEN INTO CABLES: REFLECTIONS ON AN INTER-PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP AND A SCHOOL-BASED PREVENTION PROJECT

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A school psychologist and social worker brought together while collaborating on a middle school, truancy, and drop-out prevention project called the Alliance Team Program, jointly wrote this article. The program was conducted within a largely Latino, urban middle school where student disengagement and disenfranchisement were identified as top community and school concerns. This article is about the personal discoveries they made over the last three years while collaborating on this project. It is their hope that their professional journey will stimulate discussion on how best to promote inter-professional relationships, because they provide the cornerstone for preventive, school-based, therapeutic efforts.

Introduction

We viewed the invitation to contribute to this special issue as a unique opportunity to share our ideas about an ongoing school-based prevention project, called the Alliance Team Project (ATP), which has played a major role in our professional development during the last four years. This project is designed to build adult-student relationships during the transition from elementary to middle school as a means of preventing truancy, disengagement, academic failure, and dropout. Nationally, these issues affect over one-half million middle and high school students a year. In Colorado schools, non-completion rates have ranged from 20-24% in the last two decades. These figures, however, hide the substantially higher school dropout rates associated with students of color. On a national level, up to 35% of all Hispanic

school-aged students will not graduate with a traditional high school diploma (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998). Unfortunately, these statistics are even

higher in the school where the ATP is located.

Our goal in this paper is to focus less on the details of the project and more on the critical, interpersonal relationships that developed from this work. The project began with a simple premise, to strengthen adult-student relationships by inviting teacher-identified students to join an after-school team that would focus on leadership and community service. While the development of an alternative school-based venue to build prosocial adult-student relationships was the original focus, it was not long before we realized the relationships we sought to foster with students had a strong impact on our professional relationship as well. This article is about the personal discoveries we made while collaborating on this prevention project. We have chosen to focus on the relationships that sustained us, broadened our professional knowledge, and, most importantly, transformed our clinical competencies and supervisory skills.

Joining Forces

Our prevention project was propelled somewhat fortuitously by a joint concern for a particular, urban neighborhood. Connie



had recently been assigned as the new school social worker within the ATP community to work specifically on a state-funded truancy, suspension, and expulsion prevention project. Along with her school social work supervisor, Virginia Castro, Connie had instigated a pilot project for transitioning fifth-graders that involved a series of experiential outdoor leadership activities (i.e., rock climbing, a low ropes course). She also had conducted several fifth-grade focus groups where students were asked to express their fears and concerns regarding this transition.

Gloria, a new faculty member in school psychology, was committed to collaborating in local schools. She immediately had joined a university-community partnership based in the same ATP community. This partnership, composed of school administrators and staff, community members, and University students and faculty, had been in existence less than one year and had been an outgrowth of the University's service learning program. Its purpose was to collaborate on solutions to community-identified problems. The transition to middle school and the high levels of student academic disengagement already had been identified as top neighborhood concerns. Gloria volunteered to meet with a subcommittee of professionals, parents, and community members already working on these issues, and it was here that she met Connie's supervisor. A subsequent meeting with Connie and her supervisor, to share ideas and strategies, eventually led to our joint collaboration on an entity called the Alliance Team Project.

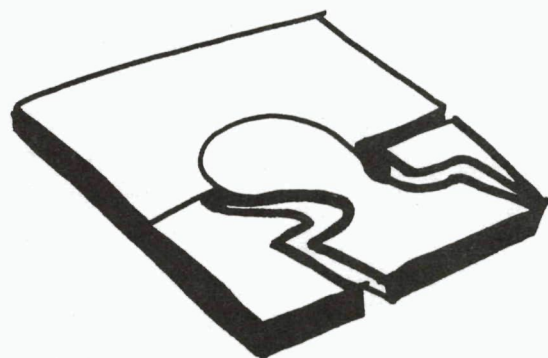
We came into this joint project with no false illusions. Each of us had prior responsibilities for developing, implementing and coordinating other projects with multiple stressed families and children in urban settings. Gloria had over twenty years of university and public school teaching, clinical experience, and supervision of

practicing psychologists in school settings. Connie had over twenty years of social work experience in a variety of agencies, had successfully weathered the storm of raising two teenagers, and most recently had established an outstanding reputation as a school-based social worker and supervisor of social work interns. While our combined history added confidence to pursue this challenge, it also had seasoned our sensibilities about the fallibility of school-based prevention efforts to address complex phenomena.

Building A Foundation

As we look back, it is not clear what explicit steps we took, yet somehow our earliest actions affirmed our shared beliefs and values, enabled us to build a strong trustful relationship, and led to a greater appreciation of each other's positive personal qualities. In retrospect, this common ground established the foundation of our relationship and forged a deep mutual respect that has permeated all of our subsequent work.

We immediately discovered our shared views about prevention and about what kids needed to become more successful. We both felt the traditional 50-minute individual therapy session was untenable for meeting the needs of most students within a school-based setting and saw prevention efforts as the most defensible and sustainable therapeutic strategy in schools. We also shared a distain for the label "at risk"—a term frequently attached to students unlikely to complete high school or to acquire skills necessary for higher education or employment. While well aware of the array of documented "risk variables" associated with our target population (e.g.,



poverty, alcohol or drug dependency, mental health concerns, high rates of delinquency, family abuse and violence, and single parent households), we did not feel this term adequately represented the leadership potential within these students. In fact, we informally agreed in an early meeting that we would instead use language that characterized students as having unlimited potential for educational and personal success.

Our trust in each other grew as we observed over and over again behaviors that demonstrated a commitment to the project. We both attended lots of meetings that could easily have been handled by one, and neither of us missed our weekly planning meetings. Even though keeping up with all of our other demands was difficult at times, it was as though we made an unstated pact that our planning time was sacrosanct and that missing a meeting would let the other person down. Our trust also grew as we consistently followed-through on things we volunteered to do. We remember feeling—OK this is a person whom I can really count on. This mutually demonstrated commitment helped bolster our spirits and strengthen our resolve to get the project off the ground.

Our complimentary views of each other's positive personal qualities provided another critical building block. Connie was struck by Gloria's visionary and leadership qualities, seemingly unlimited energy and enthusiasm, and ability "to be real and not stuffy or academic" with 11 year olds, with their

parents, and with high level officials in the mayor's office, the school district, or at the University. Gloria was struck by Connie's ability to relate authentically to students, staff, parents, and administrators and was inspired by Connie's strong sense of caring,

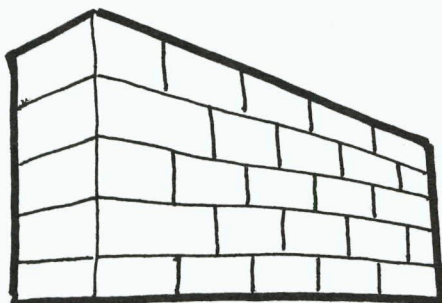
her ability to stay focused and calm in even the most hectic situations, and her keen awareness of the needs of individual members within a group. Thinking back, we now realize that our qualities and strengths complemented each other and enabled us to forge a relationship outside of the project.

Our meetings at school were somewhat formal in order to achieve our goals and tasks, but at some point we also began meeting outside of school over lunch or dinner. These informal work sessions were productive and yet also allowed us to digress from work and to share with each other on a more personal level. These times became invaluable to us. We both recall a high point when we spent one summer afternoon hiking together in the mountains. It was clear that these out-of-school encounters allowed us to engage in discussions not only about the project and professional lives, but also about our personal and family lives, which further developed the connection between us and, indirectly, further cemented our commitment to the project.

Defining Our Vision

After several initial meetings where we shared prior experiences and accomplishments, we began to make plans for the specific format of our alliance. We now realize that the foundation of our professional and personal relationship also served as a metaphor for what we hoped to create with our ATP students.

We first reviewed what we knew from the literature on successful dropout, violence, and truancy prevention efforts. Two critical protective factors surfaced that seemed to be included on every list published within the last decade—the existence of supportive adult-student relationships and the development of individual social and leadership skills. Our initial thinking



about the project also was strongly impacted by Gloria's familiarity with a theory of social bonding, originally proposed by Catalano and Hawkins (1996). This theory stresses pro-social connection and communication with significant adults as a buffer or deterrent against negative outside influences. We were encouraged by several studies that supported the notion that meaningful participation with significant adults who set high educational expectations, who model and foster effective interpersonal skills, and who recognize individual accomplishments can strongly contribute to students' educational success and social well-being. We decided that the formation of strong adult-student relationships would be the cornerstone of our joint venture.

Next, we struggled with the form our adult-student relationships should take. We did not feel that our normal roles of counselor, therapist, teacher, or supervisor adequately stressed the equal footing envisioned as part of forming a true "alliance." The thesaurus provided us with synonyms for such an alliance: "A grouping, association, union, coalition, league, connection, or partnership." Webster's (1977) Second Edition *Unabridged Dictionary* defined alliance in seven ways, only two of which seemed to capture what we thought of as central features: "(a) a union or connection of interests between persons, families, states or corporations, and (b) a similarity or relationship in character, an affinity." A more acceptable definition was obtained from a student dictionary where alliance was defined as "a union or joining and a close association for a common objective and mutual benefit."

We decided that we would strive to build strong adult-student relationships via meaningful group activities that contributed to the welfare of others. Instinctively, we felt our development had been strongly affected

by the times we unselfishly contributed to others. We shared personal stories where this sense of giving without gain had significantly impacted our childhood (e.g., taking baked goods to an old folks home, helping out at a local hospital, giving our hard-earned allowance to a food-drive) and adult lives (e.g., sitting all night with a student whose mother was ill, directing a student written play, volunteering to coach the girl's basketball team, serving at a homeless shelter). As we shared, our vision for this project was further clarified. It revolved around the notion that strong adult-student relationships were essential as students transitioned into middle school and would best be fostered through leadership and team-building experiences where adults and students collaborate on projects designed to address important needs within their school or community. While our "vision" was not entirely new, we felt that this notion of having adults and students work together on school and community-service projects was a unique framework for a dropout prevention program.

Initial challenges, doubts, and triumphs

Our next challenge was how to "sell" this prevention project to others and obtain initial funding. An after-school program format was selected because we were uncertain if the school administration or faculty would support this effort as a core "academic" endeavor. Besides, we felt that an after-school program would enable interested teachers and parents to attend and would create an informal environment where adults and students could work as "equal partners." However, funding from the school district was unlikely for an "after-school" activity that was viewed as outside the central mission of the school. While the middle-school principal was supportive, it was clear that monetary support would be unavailable from his budget, so we wrote a

grant and sent it to several nonprofit organizations.

Our stated goal was to facilitate successful transitions to middle school by increasing students' school attachment and engagement as a means of ultimately increasing high school completion. We said we would form a team of teachers, school staff, parents, sixth-grade students, and university graduate students who would meet weekly after school during the entire school year. All participating adults would be compensated in a small way for their time. We also built into our initial project funds for an activity budget that would be

dedicated to team-building activities and to school and community service projects. We planned to recruit up to 20 sixth-graders by asking teachers to nominate students with potential leadership abilities, no matter if these abilities were expressed in a negative or positive fashion. Parents of these students would then be invited to an evening dinner meeting where we would explain our hopes for the project and ask parents for permission for their child to participate. On paper the Alliance Team Project was born.

It was not until midsummer that we were notified we had received grant funding from a city initiative focused on dropout prevention. While we were thrilled and encouraged by this news, we also were stressed by all the practical hurdles and required human subjects' approvals that would be necessary before we could begin the project in September. We remember the long hours that first summer and how we ended up having to divide the responsibility for a seemingly unending number of tasks. We also began to worry about how to find staff willing to work with us on this adventure. A

high point was when four University of Denver graduate students signed on, two from social work and two from school psychology, and when two bilingual teachers and one counselor also made the yearlong commitment after Connie introduced the project at the initial faculty meeting.

During the initial meetings with our "new" ATP team members, we struggled with how to translate our seemingly idealistic concepts and theoretical notions into practice. Our project was located within an inner city middle school occupied by sixth through ninth grade students of whom 91% identified themselves as of Latino descent. High levels of poverty, single parent homes, substance abuse, and gang and domestic violence impact the neighborhood associated with the project. One in five families earn less than \$15,000 a year, and crime rates in the neighborhood are as high as 123 per 1,000 persons. Approximately 86% of the students receive free or reduced lunches, and standardized achievement scores fall way below local and national averages. These factors often spilled over into school and manifested in high levels of peer conflict and school-related discipline. As we made plans for the project, we worried that an unrelenting force had propelled us into uncharted territory. What could we hope to know about building relationships with seemingly "alien" adolescent beings, differences in cultures notwithstanding? Were we really ready for this adventure?

We remember thinking how great it was to be working with very committed adults who were so knowledgeable about these students and the intricacies of working in this particular school. But we also felt discouraged when our early ATP staff meetings got bogged down with discussions of what we would do "for" and "to" students rather than "who" and "how" we



wanted to be with students. Maybe we all felt overwhelmed and hesitant about volunteering for something that was so undefined. Yet, we could not help but wonder if we missed important opportunities to focus on the relationships we hoped to create. While everyone implicitly agreed on the importance of this issue, practical necessity dictated that a tremendous number of "arrangements" dominated early staff meetings. Locating a meeting place, obtaining transportation, purchasing and collecting materials, following up with permission forms, and contacting all appropriate people (including janitors and bus drivers) were just a few of the many tasks to be completed.

We were elated when over 60 family members and students attended the introduction meeting and when over twenty students signed up to make the yearlong commitment. We scheduled our first meeting with students for mid-October. We found ourselves rejuvenated by setting a date to start. Yet, as we prepared for our first meeting, it was apparent that our staff was divided by "practical" versus "dreamer" concerns. Gloria, the dreamer, was most interested in focusing on how to immediately make this experience one where adults were in a collaborative versus authoritarian partnership with students. Yet most other staff members were convinced that these sixth graders would require substantial adult guidance before they could fully collaborate as equals or be expected to apply leadership skills. Thus, Gloria reluctantly agreed that initially adults would need to play a more directive, instructional role by preparing structured, non-competitive team-building activities to foster group problem solving, conflict resolution and decision making.

Our first meetings with students went well—or as well as can be expected when 24 hormone-injected, mixed-gender, sixth-

graders meet after a long school day. Teachers tended to take a back seat and let the graduate students lead the meetings. Activities were conducted that centered on communication, respect, and consideration of others, active listening, and handling disagreements and conflict. Discipline was a concern since kids were tired of sitting all day and wanted to move and socialize. We wanted them to be able to do this but within a structure that also allowed us to accomplish our goals. Staff were often tired at the end of the day and did not seem to have the energy to use all their classroom-management tricks.

Much of our early staff planning time was spent discussing discipline problems and strategies. While discouraging at first, we worked through these issues and ultimately came to a compromise of structure and developed some clear ground rules so the group could move forward. It felt awkward needing to encourage our teachers to take more active group facilitator and enforcement roles so that our graduate students could learn effective group-management skills. By December, however, it seemed that a shift occurred where staff members implicitly increased their trust in each other and in the students. We began to feel that the ATP meetings reflected more of the collaborative spirit that we had envisioned. Students were encouraged to take on more mutual decision-making responsibilities during the meetings.

Valuable Early Lessons

Looking back, we think that an important impetus for this change was when the team began using part of the meeting to discuss how to spend the team's activity budget. It should have come as no surprise when the first unanimous "student-generated" proposal was to use the ATP funds to pay for an evening excursion to an indoor amusement center. Our initial less-than-

enthusiastic reaction centered on how this expenditure could be justified as a service-oriented, community project! A heated discussion of the pros and cons of this activity dominated our next staff meeting and we ended with a split decision on whether to approve this expenditure. We resolved to place the burden of justification on the students. Unknowingly, this initial spending dilemma and our subsequent staff decision to engage the students more strategically in this decision led to several critical and valuable early lessons.

- *The importance of resolving real-life dilemmas.* Never deny the cleverness of adolescents. They argued, quite convincingly (and with unanimity), that this excursion would help all members become more connected and that they would learn valuable leadership and problem-solving skills as they worked together to plan the evening's activities. Was it our imagination or was there a noticeable change in our students' demeanor as they rose to the challenge of convincing the adults that their decision had not been made lightly? In the end we went along with their decision when we realized that the collective and unanimous voice of the students actually represented the self-determination and reflective decision-making we sought to instill. Fortunately, the evening went without a hitch and it also unexpectedly fostered a great deal of family involvement since more than half of our students invited family members to attend.

- *The importance of compromise.* We were humbled! Our students were right to predict that this event would allow us to become more of a team. As a consequence of collaboratively resolving this real life dilemma, we all learned a lot about the tenacity of a group of adolescents coming into their own. It was clear to us that this

experience had strengthened and ignited our relationship with the students far beyond that which had been achieved from any artificial team-building activity. We learned a valuable lesson, that our initial collaborative success would be fostered by demonstrating a willingness to meet on turf familiar to students and to work through decisions that result in real-life compromise. Finally, we sensed that our student partners recognized their input was valued and would be weighted equally in all ATP decisions.

- *The importance of staff relationships.* Another outgrowth of this activity was that it forced our adult team members to more clearly define our mission and to more specifically focus on building our own relationships. Until then, it was not clear that all staff members truly believed that Connie and I sincerely wanted to empower the team with all major decisions. We also took some explicit steps to nurture and build our staff relationships and we held a staff retreat where we explored our common mission, values, and beliefs. Most importantly, we began to share some of our personal issues and life outside of school. As we became more attuned to each other, we began to recognize that this advanced our mission in many unexpected ways. We smile thinking of one special instance that helped us recognize the benefits of improved staff relationships: during a staff meeting we listened to one teacher discuss several stressors in her life and, to our surprise, at the next meeting we all, unsolicited, brought in several needed items for her family.

Taking Pride in Our Accomplishments

Looking back over the first and subsequent years of the project, we are astounded by the variety, quality, and quantity of our team accomplishments. Each year, ATP members have planned a family activity night for the entire sixth-grade class; have

participated in outdoor and rope-climbing excursions—some in conjunction with middle school peers with troubling attendance records; and have taken field trips to local colleges and universities where they experience campus life and talk to student leaders and career counselors. During the first year, ATP members, with the help of a media arts graduate student, developed a video about what it was like to be a sixth-grader and wrote an accompanying Student Handbook. This video has been shown and the handbooks have been distributed each year as ATP students give presentations and lead school tours for incoming fifth-grade students.

At the end of our first year, evaluations from students, parents, teachers, and staff overwhelmingly supported the success of the project. ATP students reported higher self-confidence, greater social problem-solving competencies, and more positive attitudes about school and the future on several objective measures. They also improved their grades and attendance and parents reported that students evidenced greater leadership skills at home (Miller, Clifton, Whitehouse, & Reed, 1999). Our project evaluation also pointed to several important suggestions for change. Nonparticipating teachers voiced a desire to find a way to share regular information or concerns about a student with ATP staff, and ATP staff recommended that the team engage in more service activities that went beyond the school walls.

We strongly resonated to these suggestions and, in subsequent years, have taken various measures to address these concerns. Most significantly, we shifted our goals to include team activities that focus on serving one's community without expectation of personal gain. For example, in years two and three, ATP members decided to make regular visits and to bring handmade holiday gifts and cards to the residents of

the local nursing home. They also planned an Easter egg hunt for the neighborhood preschool. During these and other activities, our students not only presented their gifts but also seemed to present themselves. Our favorite recollection of the magic of such simple, self-giving experiences was when a macho male student with significant behavioral challenges sang a holiday song to one of the elders at the nursing home and then encouraged the rest of us to join in for a group serenade.

Other fondest accomplishments are our recollection of students' personal stories. One initially shy and withdrawn student amazed us by volunteering at the end of the year to speak to a community grant panel about the team's accomplishments. Another student who had been referred by her elementary teacher for several high-risk behaviors became one of our most outstanding contributors and received a school-wide leadership award. A different female student with a dismaying history of family abuse and truancy has stayed in school, has continually volunteered to be an ATP peer mentor, and, most significantly, this year as an eighth grader found the courage to run for the student council (which she subsequently won). Overall, these stories of personal transformation and our continued observation of students' increased poise, confidence, and leadership are the main reasons we have sustained our motivation for the project over the years.

The Challenge of Sustaining A Project

Without a doubt, three prevailing issues—change, staffing, and funding—have posed continuing challenges in sustaining our collaborative efforts. Fortunately, our ability to address these challenges have slowly and subtly been transformed over time. Initially, we were determined to attack these issues head on so that the ATP would not just fizzle and die like other initiatives

that have a great initial spark. With each passing year, however, we have moved from a kind of frenetic obsession to a more reasoned expectation that staff turnover, changing school circumstances, and the lack of continued funding are natural elements of any ongoing, school-based prevention effort. Thus, even though these issues have continued to dominate our future planning, our changing expectations have led to several important revelations.

Even within the same school and with returning personnel, there have been substantial changes in the ATP format each year. Systems and environmental changes in schools are a given. We struggle yearly with reassignments, new staffing, varying school priorities and policies, and shifting community demographics. The survival of a school-based prevention project, like the ATP, is clearly tied to its ability to weather the tumultuous storm of change. One way we have tried to accomplish this is to create flexible formats and parameters that still allow us to sustain the project's core goals and mission. Another strategy has been to encourage school personnel, who have been only peripherally involved, to take a more directive role in determining the form and function of the project.

Over the years, changing staff members have brought personal strengths and talents that add new dimensions and energy to the project. For example, after discussing the year one evaluation and setting our new goals, staff members in the second year developed several team rituals and ideas that helped foster a greater team and community focus. Meetings began with a pledge song authored by the school psychologist who had joined the team, and ended with the passing of a talking stick around a circle where each team member was encouraged to add a personal reaction to the day's activity. Finally, a bead symbolizing the theme of the meeting was added to

a personal necklace and the completed bead necklace was ceremoniously given over to each partner at the end of the school year to represent the team's accomplishments.

With each passing year, our funding has come from a variety of new community agencies. While piecing together alternative sources of funding has at times been viewed as a mixed blessing due to the frustration of figuring out the appropriate channels for reimbursement and salaries, in reality we feel that our students have benefited tremendously from these new community partners. The greater involvement of non-school personnel also has helped ease the staffing issues that we face each year. Moreover, these partners bring a wealth of personal resources and provide students with new relationships and community-based opportunities. For example, last year and for the upcoming year, our project received funding from a neighborhood community health clinic. This affiliation has led to an important new aspect—high school team members who regularly attend our ATP meetings and who are responsible for presenting monthly “mini-lessons” on youth health topics (i.e., drugs, dating). Last year we also benefited from funding awarded to a local mental health residential center that enabled its staff to work collaboratively with us on a variety of outdoor, team-building, experiential learning activities during the year. Thus, we now more optimistically anticipate new staff, funding, and community collaboration opportunities since they bring a renewed enthusiasm that has more than compensated for any reduction in our overall funding.

A significant challenge for sustaining the project will be posed during this upcoming fourth year. Changing circumstances will force both of us to play a less central role in the project as Gloria takes over as school psychology program director within the

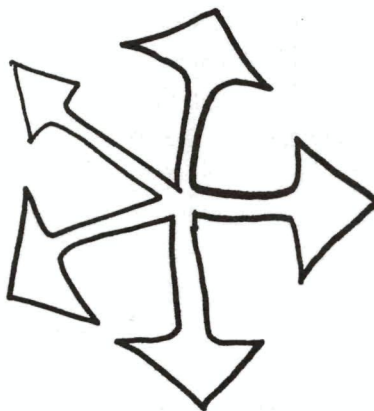
University and Connie takes on a new supervisory role within the District. Even so, we are confident that key school staff and administrators will continue to support the project and that personnel changes and new community liaisons will create an ATP format that will grow and flourish over time.

Continuing Lessons

The last three years have taught us many lessons about ourselves, students in general, and working collaboratively in schools.

- *What we have learned about ourselves.* We have learned to stretch ourselves: Connie in the area of public speaking, team coordination, and supervision, and Gloria, in the art of compromise and in gaining a fuller appreciation of the time it takes to give all team members a voice in a collaborative partnership. From the adrenaline rush of jumping from the platform of the high ropes course, we both experienced an afterglow of self-confidence and renewed trust in others as we worked together as a team. Our community activities surprisingly brought an enhanced sense of the gift of service as it enriches the giver as much as the receiver. Finally, we agree that somehow this experience has led to renewed motivation for our work, which had begun to waiver and wane from the stress of being pulled in too many directions.

While both of us came into this effort with the prior realization that the world of professional helping goes beyond the 50-minute therapeutic session, this project has, in fact, affirmed our trust in the power of therapeutic prevention activities to affect significant client and system change. As our ability to articulate what we have accomplished through the ATP project has grown, this experience has spilled over and significantly touched other areas of our lives, including our teaching, mentoring, supervi-



sion, and parenting. We have come to recognize the importance of promoting leadership more through example than discussion, setting clear goals without imposing one's expectations, and pushing students just beyond but not over their current views of the world and means of solving problems. The fact is we have begun to internalize our role as a gardener who strategically plants seeds (e.g., lessons) and then fertilizes, weeds, and trusts that most, on their own time, will blossom into newfound skills.

- *What we have learned about students.* This project has strengthened our belief in kids and their resilient capabilities. While they continue to struggle against a multitude of external pressures and with the difficulty of successfully working in mixed-gender groups, our ATP students proved over and over that they could make powerful and positive personal choices. Over the year, our students never failed to surprise us with their ability to buckle down, to make responsible decisions, and to work wholeheartedly towards team goals. We saw them learn to attribute personal and team accomplishments to effort rather than chance or outside influences.

Clearly the relationships and skills developed in one year are tenuous at best, but an old Spanish proverb has helped us to view these new associations as silken

threads that, like habits, will strengthen into cables overtime. Our dream is that relationships developed as part of the ATP are stepping-stones for young people on their journey towards creating value and meaning in their lives. An important message conveyed to ATP students is that we all can choose our life story — that people “are not formed by destiny alone but by free will and determination.” As adults, we have tried not only to tell but also to model this truth within our team relationships. We also have underscored how joining together with others to work towards a common objective can lead to untold rewards and personal gains.

Yet, we know these students will continue to struggle with tough life choices. Our hope is that the skills and relationships gained here will help pave the way for ATP students to stay committed to school, to take part in pro-social extracurricular activities, and to view themselves as leaders who can make a difference. Our sense is that many students experienced significant and indelible personal change while working and contributing to a team whose goal was to implement solutions to important community issues. Our hope is that these students will have a new means to reflect upon important life decisions because of the alliances experienced here.

• *What we have learned about collaboration.* Our early feelings about what it means to be involved in a collaborative alliance have been both affirmed and clarified through this ongoing effort. We have come to believe what we originally only acknowledged—that successful collaborative school-based prevention will be achieved only through generative, ongoing, and creative liaisons with numerous agencies, across various disciplines, and with the input and involvement of home, school, and community members. Components that

seemed critical in the beginning, such as the importance of joint discovery, of feeling connected, and of creating a sense that every member makes significant contributions, are still at the forefront. Yet, we also have developed a deeper appreciation of the importance of building strong professional and personal relationships based on shared values and a clear, jointly developed vision.

We attribute our collaborative success to three other critical lessons. The first is the recognition of our collective and unique strengths that allowed us a wider array of means to achieve our goals. For example, Connie was able to provide ongoing supervision for graduate students in counseling and school psychology that helped to broaden their internship experiences and also helped fulfill our staffing needs. The second is the importance of empowering others to assume co-facilitator roles. Such empowerment was especially critical in year three when Connie’s assignment at the school was reduced to two days per week. As a consequence, an additional social work graduate intern, a willing first year teacher, and a newly appointed coordinator at the local health clinic all took on greater ATP coordination responsibility. The third is the absolute necessity of overcoming scheduling issues so meetings can be held with everyone in attendance. Invariably, we learned that if we eased the scheduling burden by conducting meetings without everyone present, we lost the benefit of team cohesion. But alternatively, if staff meetings were shortened so that everyone could attend, we lost the ability to percolate ideas and the opportunity for true group decision-making.

Finally, it is clear to each of us that our interest and energy could not have been sustained without the unswerving dedication of a collaborator whose support consistently boosted spirits and refueled a desire

to face the many challenges confronting us each year. The strength of having a colleague who then becomes a friend provides the inspiration to keep going forward. Our respect for each other's roles has been broadened and we have cherished the experience of sharing work, frustration, and triumphs with a professional in another discipline who lives what she believes.

A Look Towards the Future

Taking the time to reflect upon the project in this fashion after three years has given us the opportunity to assess what worked and what did not and to identify where we may need to go next. It also helped us to more specifically appreciate how this inter-professional relationship has impacted our teaching, supervision, therapy, and personal lives. We hope others can learn from these reflections and may be inspired to create similar structures to foster adult-student relationships in school-based settings. While we have been strongly encouraged by our findings, we recognize that without a true control group, we cannot definitively allude to causation nor are we comfortable suggesting that such outcomes can be easily replicated.

Nevertheless, our lofty dream is that the Alliance Team Project will continue self-sufficiently and indefinitely. We hope that the ATP will become a more integrated and sustainable aspect of the school. The many school and community partnerships forged over the years have strengthened our confidence that there will be individuals who will continue to refuel, regenerate, and sustain its momentum in the future. We fully expect that the ATP will take on new formats reflecting the changing personalities and circumstances of its members. However, we also are certain that the core mission of the ATP will remain focused on developing strong adult-student relationships through a year-long collaborative

effort where team members plan meaningful service projects that require the application of critical team-building, problem-solving, and leadership skills.

As professionals interested in students' academic and mental health, this experience has strengthened our conviction that we all must work harder to build unique and sustained adult-student relationships, especially during the critical transitions into middle and high school. Of course continuing questions remain. Could we integrate similar team-building, leadership and service activities more fully within the academic mission of the regular school day? Could we find ways to involve parents and high school students as more active team participants? Significantly, as we came to the end of this article, each of us had a dream about a time in the future when we found ourselves in a life-and-death situation, fully dependent upon our ability to work side by side with a past Alliance Team student. What more evidence is needed that the cost of responding to students by building relationships is minimal, but that the cost not to do so will be much higher.

A Post Script

We must admit that we initially were hesitant to write this article since neither of us was sure of how to construct a narrative or "professional story." More daunting was the question: Did we have a right to share a "subjective" version of our own collaborative project? Thankfully, John Kayser, a colleague in the School of Social Work, shared his enthusiasm and insights on narratives (Kayser, 1995, and personal communication) and encouraged us to read several articles that clarified the important role narratives can play in therapeutic and psychological discovery. Our effort was most strongly influenced by Miller Mair (1988) and George Howard (1991). These authors argue, respectively, that personal

life stories represent our struggle to discover meaning and that narratives can be viewed as an alternative scientific activity that does not only reveal empirical relationships, but helps to build theories through an alternative form of reasoning. Since our training had been similar to that of many scientist-practitioners, we at first found it difficult to abandon a regimented "scientific" packaging with a narrative form. However, one of Dr. Howard's arguments particularly resonated with us: "Just as one would never say that a squirrel is a better animal than a chipmunk, one should not make the bold assertion that scientific insights are superior to the wisdom of the humanities. Instead different types of stories serve different functions" (p. 189).

Our remaining fears about constructing a narrative were abated by a final "consultant" closer to home—the first author's seven-year-old daughter. When asked, "What is a story?" she replied: "A story is lots of ideas combined together. You can write mostly anything and you can write stories about your life" (Erica Czajka, 2000, personal communication). Thinking back to the countless hours we have spent reading narratives to ourselves and with others, we were struck by the "raw" truth to this definition. Wasn't it Jung who said that "we are motivated not by reason or reinforcement but by fantasy?" Shared stories have certainly helped us to experience, explore, and ponder complex issues such as life-death, love-hate, good-evil, and truth-reality.

These readings and personal accounts were instrumental in overcoming our hesitancy to construct a narrative. While the unfamiliarity of this genre should have left us little doubt about the difficulty of the task ahead, we grew excited about the opportunity to write a narrative account of our prevention project. We hope that our shared insights will foster other inter-

professional endeavors that will further our understanding of how to develop and sustain effective school-based prevention programs.

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