



A University and School Partnership: Building Tools for Reconciliation, Healing, and Resilience

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Abstract

University-school partnerships have demonstrated much potential for supporting formational and educational initiatives by drawing on the resources and expertise embedded in both spaces. In this article, we describe our experience engaging in a collaborative, horizontal partnership between Marquette University and Notre Dame School of Milwaukee to support the development of a curriculum that helped students with reconciliation across levels: developing internal coping and resilience, as well as interpersonal skills to resolve conflicts and build peace. The initiative took place over a year early in the COVID-19 pandemic and offers an adaptable model for fully integrating a K-12 school partner and its community stakeholders (including teachers, parents, and students themselves) into the process of fostering skills to promote resilience. We first describe the background of the peace education curriculum that was at the heart of the initiative, and then detail the approach taken and lessons learned from this community-engaged work with a focus on informing best practices for these types of collaborations.

Introduction

As part of their psychosocial development, children and young adults observe, process, and learn about themselves and others. In schools, relationships and interactions with peers and adults strongly influence how young people understand reconciliation as a part of everyday life and how they think about repairing and healing themselves, their relations with others, and their spiritual connection with God. These spaces are also fruitful places for collaboration between K-12 Catholic schools and Jesuit universities given the resources of the latter and continuity of educational goals in forming resilient young people.

One example of such a connection is Marquette University's Center for Peacemaking (CfP) work with K-12 schools through the Peace Works program (MUPW). MUPW teaches students and supports educators in fostering new skills, knowledge, and behaviors to increase resiliency and self-efficacy and contribute to peaceful, restorative environments. As a social-emotional learning curriculum, MUPW provides tools and strategies for students to maintain personal boundaries, identity, and safety. The strategies prepare students to respond to indignities, conflict, and tension in peaceful and self-protective ways that heal and repair the self and relationships with others.

MUPW adheres to a model of progressive transformation. Learning peacemaking and conflict resolution skills can positively impact students' contributions to reconciliation in themselves (e.g., coping and resilience) and to building peaceful schools, families, and neighborhoods (e.g., conflict resolution, self-regulation). Teachers play a primary role in promoting the development of these skills by guiding and affirming productive coping responses to internal and interpersonal tension. Teacher-led classroom interventions also show promise in mitigating psychological consequences of trauma in students. This work intensifies in communities where fear or structural barriers precludes accessing institutionalized resources, as well as in the context of the pandemic and pervasive systematic racism.

Building Connections and Growing Resilience During the Pandemic: An Example

An example of the power of K-12 and Jesuit university partnership is the initiative to develop MUPW as an online toolkit during the pandemic. For half a decade before COVID-19,

MUPW and Notre Dame School of Milwaukee (NDSM)—which serves a largely Hispanic population—had partnered to teach the curriculum in school, *in person*. Isolation measures made in person teaching not possible yet isolation and the larger contexts of systemic racism and the pandemic increased the urgent need to support students with interventions like MUPW. With funding from Marquette University’s President’s Challenge Grant, the CfP and NDSM collaboratively created an online web-based toolkit derived from MUPW called the Promoting Resiliency & Improved Coping in Education (PRICE). PRICE was developed over the course of a year (see Figure 1) by NDSM teachers, students, and parents, university researchers and students, mental health practitioners, and education experts. We worked collaboratively on leadership, content development, and evaluation teams to develop the adaptable modules, which were identified through a needs assessment with the NDSM community. Modules included Managing Anger, Conflict Resolution, Forgiveness, Self-Care, and Positive Communication.

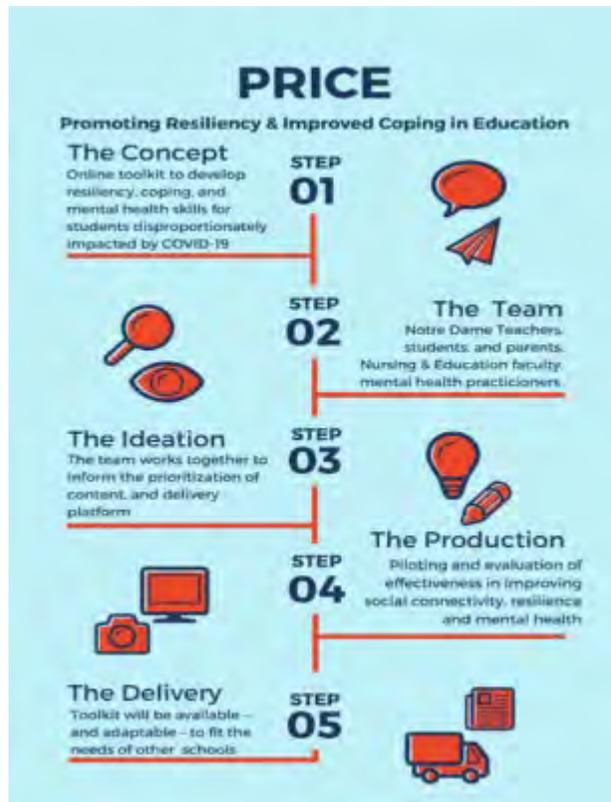


Figure 1

Steps of PRICE Project

PRICE was well-received at NDSM; having students, parents, and teachers lead the development process ensured the toolkit was designed and adapted to fit the needs of the NDSM community. For example, our evaluation team was led by students and teachers who gathered perspectives and experiences of parent, teacher, and student team leaders to assess effectiveness and sustainability of the modules in improving social connectivity and supporting resilience and mental health. Students and parents indicated the toolkit provided engaging socioemotional lessons that helped students in coping with stress, anxiety, and uncertainty, and in maintaining focus and motivation. Nearly half of the students mentioned they applied the lessons to their lives in and out of school. Several parents responded that they noticed positive differences in their child's behavior that aligned with the toolkit's lessons. Finally, the teachers felt the toolkit offered effective ways of engaging students and beginning conversations on social-emotional skills and interpersonal healing, including self-care and conflict resolution.

Lessons Learned and Takeaways for Best Practices

From the PRICE experience, we learned valuable lessons for collaborative, effective partnerships between Jesuit institutions of higher education and K-12 schools. One major takeaway was the importance of developing resources in conjunction with stakeholders across ages, experiences, and positions. Our project was an engaged community academic partnership, and the process brought together a diverse group of people including students, parents, staff and faculty from NDSM, Milwaukee Public Schools, and Marquette University. This broad coalition collaborated on the project from beginning to end, ultimately ensuring that the final product had been created from the ground up with input from everyone.

The content of the toolkit was focused on developing key skills for resilience and coping. Furthermore, community engagement in and of itself is directly related to reconciliation and healing as a means of listening to, understanding, and acting on the experiences, concerns, and priorities of people and their communities. In this project, community partners were leaders, experts, and collaborators. They were teachers for the academic partners (which included Marquette University students) to learn from and about this partner community. This level of community engaged teaching and learning is fundamental to becoming men and women for and

with others. The integration of all stakeholders from the beginning thus highlights this best practice in community-engaged work.

An extension of this lesson was the importance of giving voice and leadership to students, especially younger ones who often are not involved in creating curriculum. Our project was intended to benefit children and support their internal and interpersonal coping resources, especially during the many challenges that surfaced during 2020. Students on the PRICE teams and at NDSM shared their expertise, knowledge, experiences, and leadership to advance this project. The importance of working together with young people is fundamental in a faith-based approach to bolstering reconciliation and justice as recognized by the 2018 Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment: “This is not about simply doing something ‘for them,’ but living in communion ‘with them,’ growing together in understanding of the Gospel and in the search for more authentic ways of living it and bearing witness to it...it is through them that we hear the voice of the Lord asking us for conversion of heart and renewal of structures.” PRICE--intended to advance reconciliation, healing and resilience for children, their families and school--offered those benefits to the academic partners as we all reflected on and grew from the experience.

A final takeaway was the importance of responding to what is needed at a given time. NDSM is a sponsored ministry of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, and the charism of this order corresponds well to the Ignatian perspective in drawing attention to responding to the need of the time. As part of PRICE, this took extra planning and sacrifices, remote meetings, and patience, but everyone believed in the purpose and mission, and was willing to be flexible. As a result, both the process and the toolkit helped students grow socially, emotionally, and spiritually in ways that equipped them to be more resilient emotionally and mentally, as well as interpersonally.

Opportunities for Improvement

One improvement would be even deeper leadership by young people and make more connections between socio-emotional curriculum and the social issues that matter to them. In focus groups, some NDSM students noted finding strength and empowerment in the anti-racism movement, but also said their school could do more to foster discussion about structural

racism. As it was set up, PRICE focused on developing applicable lessons to foster skills and inner and interpersonal strategies, but not explicitly to take action on these types of social issues that require large-scale thinking, action, and, ultimately, reconciliation. One extension would thus be to move beyond having students being active participants in curriculum planning, design, and evaluation, to building opportunities for action so that they can cope and make change when encountering hate, violence, climate change, societal discord, and other salient ruptures to social fabric. The lesson, in other words, is how we can work with them to consider how skills involved in reconciliation, healing and resilience can be actionable tools for coping with and addressing large scale problems that matter to them.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic--coupled with increased exposure of systemic racism and other inequities, war and mass shootings, and a nationwide mental health crisis--have intensified the many internal and interpersonal challenges for young people. These difficult issues have led to stressors, fears, and pressures that can compromise mental health and psychosocial well-being, while contributing to disconnections and ruptures in the social fabric of families, schools, and neighborhoods. Educators can serve as critical frontline workers in helping children draw from their strengths to advance reconciliation, healing, and effective coping within themselves and their communities. Our project demonstrates the potential of collaborative university-school partnerships to draw on local strengths and build resources to foster the development of resilient peacemakers.