

The Wisdom Chronicles: A Conversation with Jamilah R. Jor'dan

by Billie Young

“Wonder is the beginning of wisdom.”
Socrates

From the first time I met her at an NAEYC conference, I knew that Jamilah R. Jor'dan possessed leadership and wisdom and that she would be a major influence and innovator in the field of early childhood education. In this article, I hope to capture some of the lessons Jamilah offers to us that can inform our efforts to improve the quality of early childhood programs — for every child, whether through QRIS, Pre-K, or professional development initiatives.

Jamilah's professional work has centered on racial equity, social justice, and ensuring that all children and families have the highest quality early learning experiences. Jor'dan is currently interim



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Jamilah R. Jor'dan, PhD, is the Interim Dean of the College of Education and Associate Professor in the Department of Early Childhood and Bilingual Education at Chicago State University. Dr. Jor'dan is past vice-president of the governing board for the National Association for the

Education of Young Children (NAEYC). She co-chairs the Family Specialist Credential Committee as part of Gateways to Opportunity, Illinois Professional Development System. In addition, she serves as a trustee for Children's Home and Aid social service agency. She earned her doctorate at Loyola University Chicago and her master's from Erikson Institute.

dean, College of Education and associate professor in the Department of Early Childhood-Primary and Bilingual Education at Chicago State University (CSU), and owner of Jor'dan Consulting Group, Inc. Like many of us, Jamilah began her career in early childhood education working as an assistant teacher in a Head Start program. She has been the Vice President of the Governing Board of NAEYC and convener of the NAEYC interest forum, *Violence in the Lives of Young Children*.

A Passion for Teacher Excellence and Program Quality for All Young Children

Those early years working in Head Start were the foundation that fueled Jor'dan's passion for teacher excellence and program quality. Jamilah built on this experience and her deep understanding of and respect for Chicago's low-income neighborhoods to bridge theory and practice for both her students at CSU and in her program quality improvement projects.

One of the 'mothers' of accreditation facilitation projects, which were designed to provide support and resources to child care centers and family child care homes as they worked to meet national accreditation standards, Jamilah served from 1994–98 as

the project director for Chicago Metro AEYC's Accreditation Facilitation Project. From 1999–2007, she was the founder and president of the Partnership for Quality Child Care (PQCC), whose goal was to improve the quality of Head Start, family child care homes, and child care centers in low-income neighborhoods through supports for achieving accreditation from NAEYC or the NAFCC, including mentoring, professional development, financial investments, and related quality improvement strategies. The partnership was a public-private initiative, which produced the largest number of NAEYC-accredited programs in the nation — more than 150 programs accredited or reaccredited by 2007.

Lesson #1:

Focus on strengths, not barriers

My first question to Jamilah was, “Tell me about the providers you worked with and the barriers they faced.” There was a long pause, and then Jamilah reminded me, “I prefer to focus on the strengths providers bring to our work together.” This idea — focus on strengths, not barriers — is not new, but few quality improvement programs have at their heart a focus on strengths. The first step in most quality improvement programs is to do an assessment of the program, its teachers, and envi-

ronment — and deficits are most often the focus of improvement plans.

Partnership staff collaborated with directors, teachers, and family child care providers to identify strengths and opportunities for moving toward accreditation standards, but first they needed to move from disparate definitions of what ‘quality’ means and a baseline of little or no knowledge about accreditation standards, the process, and the benefits.

Jamilah notes, “With accreditation, we found this disconnect between wanting quality and achieving it. Accreditation helped name the elements of quality — it got people beyond the global vision of quality. When you drilled down with teachers and directors to get specifics from them about quality, it was hard to talk to them about it in a concrete way. If you can’t articulate the ‘it’ with specifics, then it’s hard to get to where you want to be.” The success of the partnership was dependent upon a shared vision of quality and trust in national standards that define it.

This shared vision of quality helped with the pushback on developmentally appropriate practice and concerns that play-based learning is not culturally appropriate for children who struggle in schools geared to white majority learning styles. There was real fear that without academic rigor in early childhood, children from low-income neighborhoods wouldn’t be adequately prepared to succeed in school. Jamilah found that while everyone believes in the idea of quality and is committed to it, that “quality for you might be different than it is for me.” Accreditation standards “help us all frame it in the same way. They provide a roadmap that ensures that we are all on the same path to the same destination. It’s from a strengths basis, not a deficit.”

Lesson #2: Don’t forget that it’s all about the children

When asked how QRIS and other accountability measures have impacted definitions of quality, Jamilah observes, “We are being bombarded with so many requirements. Even within teacher preparation, we have to meet so many different expectations. Accountability is increased at many different levels, but the support has not kept pace with what we are asking to achieve quality.” She worries that sometimes there can be a disconnect between what we know is developmentally and culturally appropriate and what is required to meet these standards. “What’s in the middle? The child! Sometimes we forget that in the middle, there is the child. I watch administrators and teachers struggle — I need to make sure this child passes this test... it’s a challenge. When the stakes are so high it can sometimes make classroom practice so structured, it’s almost scripted.”

Schools are under pressure to have more ‘time on task,’ and Jor’dan wonders, “How do we broaden the definition of the tasks? And what can we do for the children who have checked out? They may not fit the script. They get lost as teachers struggle to meet the needs of the larger group of children. I always ask about the children who are sitting in the back, disconnected, ‘Tell me about this child, what have you noticed?’”

Lesson #3: Without trusting relationships, it’s hard to make lasting progress

Trust-building was the bedrock of the partnership. At first, directors wouldn’t cooperate with the consultants in their efforts to gather data about the programs. They were concerned about how the information would be used — *will you use this to take away our license, our funding, or similar concerns?* Big initiatives had been started before, with little follow

through. No one wanted to experience failure. Jamilah had to use her personal integrity to build trust. “I can only give you my word. We are here to work with you and support you.” Jor’dan reassured her provider partners, “We will hold your hand; we will be there with you,” and then she followed through on those promises.

Teacher-child interactions were a significant focus for the partnership, which used facilitators and consultants to build relationships, starting with observation and feedback sessions that included directors. According to Jamilah, “If there were intensive needs, consultants provided on-site coaching. We were sure to incorporate the directors — they have to be part of it — and we worked on strengthening director skills in supervision. It was a holistic model.”

This connectedness and focus on collaborative, respectful relationships was based on the theory that, “The more you can help me and guide me, the more we can focus on providing the exact supports you need to get to the level of quality that children and their families should have.”

One provider who participated in the partnership accreditation project said that the day Jor’dan came out to her program, “We rolled out the red carpet. I’ve got somebody who really cares about what I’m doing.”

Lesson #4: Be part of your larger community

“Come out of your office or classroom and be part of the larger community,” urges Jor’dan. The partnership encouraged directors, teachers, and family child care providers to get out into their neighborhoods, to meet their colleagues, observe other programs and classrooms and learn about the resources available to the families they serve. The partnership fostered community building through monthly meetings for focused professional development and peer support. They created

learning communities among program participants that were dealing with similar issues.

One of our major lessons for the partnership was how isolated family child care providers can be. They didn't even know each other were there — down the block and in the neighborhood.

"We built learning communities with family child care providers and a sense of community within the community (neighborhood-based,) and it evolved into providers visiting each other, helping each other, and networking," Jor'dan said. Professional learning communities are a powerful tool for quality improvement work, combining professional development with networking and relationship-building.

Jamilah urges providers to consider joining and participating in a professional association. "Be part of the community. Engage with other directors; participate in professional development and community events." She reflects, "Not everything is learned sitting in a workshop — visit other child care programs. Observe your own teachers and those in other programs. Be part of professional learning communities and networks." Jor'dan believes that it is important to "take responsibility for your own development and cultivate your own self-reflective practice. What are your strengths? What can you strengthen as a director as a leader? Seek out coaches, mentors, others who can help you. At each level, there is always an area you can strengthen."

Lesson #5: Go for the gold because our children deserve no less than our very best

In 2001, members of the African American Child Care Task Force and the Latino Child Care Task Force observed a fast-moving train called NAEYC accredi-

tation. African American and Latino child care providers were not on board. Sandria Woods-Pollard, founder of the AACCTF, observed, "They did not understand the importance of this accreditation or they were unable to get the resources to go through accreditation. They were concerned that the process of accreditation lacked cultural and linguistic relevance for their constituents."

Task Force members were aware of the transformative work and leadership of Jamilah R. Jor'dan through Chicago's Partnership for Quality Child Care. They engaged Jor'dan to kick off a pilot accreditation project focused on African American and Latino providers serving children of low-income families. Through collaboration with her, they implemented a full-day seminar in Seattle, Washington, about NAEYC accreditation. During the sessions, Jamilah included participatory opportunities for providers to voice what works best for them to get through the process successfully. She was the catalyst to get African American and Latino providers excited and committed to accreditation.

"The work and inspiration from Jamilah has created a foundation for our providers to understand and commit to high-quality, culturally relevant child care. Her support made a difference," said Sandria Woods-Pollard, retired manager, Early Learning and Child Care, City of Seattle Division of Youth and Family Empowerment.

I've learned so much from Jamilah over the years, and every time I wonder if we can truly change the quality of early childhood education that most children receive, I hear her impassioned answer to concerns such as, "We can't do this; we don't have the resources or the capacity." From her heart's core, she responds, "No excuses. The stakes are too high for our children — they deserve our very best!"