

Cross-age Teaching: Maximizing Youth Development Impact

Limited resources, decreased funding, understaffed, and overwhelmed- all of these terms can describe current youth development programs and some of the challenges facing them, especially during a period of economic downturn and a time when many adults are too busy to volunteer. Despite overwhelming evidence of the benefits of positive youth development in the lives of young people, how can programs not only survive in this day and age but also thrive by maximizing their impact on the youth they serve? One of the best strategies for youth development professionals to consider is integrating cross-age teaching into their programs as a way to expand their influence and make the most of their resources. The purpose of this article is to inform youth development professionals of the reciprocal benefits of cross-age teaching and to provide recommendations for designing successful cross-age teaching programs.

Definition and Description

Cross-age teaching is defined as “a process in which teens teach younger children a general concept or subject matter” (Murdock, Lee, & Paterson, 2003, p. 1). Cross-age teaching is best understood by comparing and contrasting what it *is* with what it is not. Carefully selected and trained teenagers assume primary responsibility of providing instruction to small groups of children (5-12 students), usually 2-3 years younger than the instructor in cross-age teaching programs (Lee & Murdock, 2001). This differs significantly from other programs in which teenagers provide peer-to-peer instruction, one-on-one tutoring, homework assistance, or teaching assistance. Additionally, cross-age teaching utilizes curriculum taught for enrichment or new knowledge as opposed to remediation or review (Murdock et al., 2003). Cross-age teaching programs are designed to be sustained over a period of time which allows teenagers to develop meaningful relationships with the children they teach as well as their fellow teen instructors (Lee & Murdock, 2001).

Characteristics of Teenage Teachers

Doctors Brennan and Barnett (2012) refer to youth as being a “vast and untapped resource” (p. 309) in community development efforts, and nothing could be truer of young people in regards to their

potential as cross-age teachers. Teenagers may often get overlooked as significant contributors to community youth development efforts as some still fail to view them as assets in the making. However, studies have found teenagers to be even more effective than adults at delivering messages about certain subject areas, like drug and alcohol prevention, to younger students (Duncomb, 2010). As youth development professionals, we must tap into the wealth of teenage teaching potential.

Careful selection of teenage teachers is paramount to a program's success. Researchers have found that some prior experience working with peers or younger children is beneficial for potential teenage teachers as well as experience and comfort with taking on leadership roles (Hammond-Diedrich & Walsh, 2006). However, contrary to thought, Dean and Murdock (as cited in Murdock et al., 2003) have found that teenagers' ability to teach does not seem to correlate at all with their grades in school. Youth who have struggled academically in some areas should still be considered as potential cross-age teachers. In fact, research has repeatedly shown that cross-age teaching reaps the greatest benefits for these teenagers, who may not have achieved high levels of academic success in their own schooling (Murdock et al., 2003). One of the best attributes to consider when selecting teenagers is a genuine interest in the program and a desire to be a part of teaching younger children (Hammond-Diedrich & Walsh, 2006; Lee & Murdock, 2001). Motivated teenagers who believe in what they are doing are tremendous resources for youth development programs incorporating cross-age teaching.

Adult Guidance

In their extensive study of cross-age teaching in the San Francisco Bay Area, Murdock, Lee, and Walsh (2003) found that the most prominent common thread among exemplary programs was a passionate, committed program director. For teenagers to be successful in their cross-age teaching roles, they must have adequate adult guidance and support. Adults provide initial training in the foundations of teaching and curriculum instruction. As teenagers assume their teaching roles, adults continue to offer advice and encouragement, provide additional training, and answer questions. Adults mentor their young teachers and serve as positive role models, both of which are essential ingredients not only to the success of the program (Duncomb, 2010), but also to the positive development of the teenage teachers

themselves. Finally, adult supervision and advice helps teenagers involved in cross-age teaching mature, think introspectively, and consider ways to give back to their community (Hammond-Diedrich & Walsh, 2006).

Benefits for Youth

Cross-age teachers can deliver instruction on any number of topics and in a variety of settings. Surprisingly, though, the primary target of youth development in cross-age teaching programs is NOT the children they teach but rather, the teenage teachers themselves. Teenagers reinforce their own knowledge in the subject matter they teach and find themselves listening to their own advice through their experience (Duncomb, 2010). Cross-age teenage instructors who presented Mothers Against Drunk Driving's elementary school program, Protecting You/Protecting Me, showed not only an increase in their alcohol-related knowledge after teaching but also exhibited positive change in their behavior toward alcohol (Padget, Bell, Shamblen, & Ringwalt, 2005). Teenagers who participated in a cross-age coaching program also exhibited improved behavior and developed greater maturity and more advanced leadership skills (Hammond-Diedrich & Walsh, 2006). As Simeon, one of the teenage coaches, said, "I definitely feel like a more mature leader, and I can think on my own" (Hammond-Diedrich & Walsh, 2006, p. 139).

Academically, teenage teachers reap the benefits as well as they are more motivated to study and learn (Hedin, 1987). Teaching helps them see connections between academic study and practical life as well as better assimilate and retain information (Hedin, 1987). Teaching younger children also provides an excellent opportunity for teenagers to review material a few years below their grade level and master the content as they explain it to others (Hedin, 1987). Cross-age teachers learn to empathize with their own teachers and often improve their attitudes towards adults and academics (cited in Hammond-Diedrich & Walsh, 2006). As Samuel, a teenage teacher in the Urban Youth Leaders program, said, "Like when the kids did something that made me mad, I know what my teacher feels like when I make her mad" (Hammond-Diedrich & Walsh, 2006, p. 139). Teenagers are often surprised and delighted by the way their students look up to them and admire them, thus motivating them to be good role models

(Murdock et al., 2003). In addition to developing skills in managing groups of children, youth who teach younger children are gaining valuable experience in preparation for parenthood (Murdock et al., 2003).

Furthermore, serving as a cross-age teacher assists teenagers in several key challenges of adolescent development. As Murdock et al. (2003) have found, teenage teachers develop abstract thinking as they have opportunities to consider and evaluate their own teaching during times of reflection. They form a worthwhile identity as they find acceptance in their role as a teacher, learn teamwork, and receive positive feedback from peers and adults for their work (Murdock et al., 2003). Teen teachers gain autonomy as they make decisions on their own, learn that success is their responsibility, and gain a sense of achievement as they master content and feel competent, especially if they teach subjects in which they have previously struggled (Murdock et al., 2003). Youth involved in cross-age teaching prepare for their transition to adulthood by learning adult work skills and practicing good work habits such as arriving on time, being prepared, and being enthusiastic about their role (Murdock et al., 2003). Teenagers feel empowered by standing up in front of their own class, and their cross-age experience at times has guided them to careers in education or a field related to the subject matter they taught (Duncomb, 2010). While teenagers involved in cross-age teaching are focused on their work and making a difference in their students' lives, their experience is truly an investment in their futures as they grow and develop in ways they could never have foreseen.

Even as the secondary target of cross-age teaching programs, younger students greatly benefit from the time teenagers spend developing relationships with them and providing instruction. Since teens relate well to younger children (Murdoc et al., 2003), they are able to develop rapport with their students (Duncomb, 2010). Cross-age teachers quickly become role models and have a broad scope of influence as younger children desire to emulate them. Teenage teachers are most effective with interactive and hands-on learning activities (Lee & Murdock, 2001), methods that not only make learning fun but that also motivate children to explore and discover on their own. Children respond enthusiastically to messages that teenagers give as well as their leadership examples (Duncomb, 2010). In fact, one adult instructor in a summer sport program observed, ““Our kids are often much better with your youth leaders

than they are with my staff" (Hammond-Diedrich & Walsh, 2006, p. 139). Teenagers can impact other youth in powerful ways as cross-age teachers by enriching learning and providing a model that younger children aspire to someday become like.

Benefits for Communities

Creating opportunities for teenagers to serve as cross-age teachers helps move them beyond “fully prepared” to “engaged partners” as they actively invest in the future of other youth in their communities. In the words of Hammond-Diedrich & Walsh (2006), cross-age teaching “extends learning into the community” (p. 135). As others have invested in these teenagers, through school, home, extracurricular activities, and youth development programs, employing them as cross-age teachers provides the opportunity to put their learning into action, pass their knowledge onto others, and positively influence someone else’s life. Cross-age teaching programs enable teens to participate in positive change in their communities (cited in Duncomb, 2010) and provide meaningful service in a way that no one else really can. Teenagers connect with their communities in a new and unique way through cross-age teaching as they provide valuable work that fills an authentic need (Murdock et al., 2003), and the benefits reciprocate as teenage teachers gain skills, confidence, and leadership development through their collaborations with adults (Brennan & Barnett, 2012). Youth development programs that utilize cross-age teaching create a cycle of growth and meaningful service far-reaching in the communities they impact.

Recommendations for Programs

As various researchers have studied effective cross-age teaching in action, they have compiled a list of characteristics that exemplify successful programs. Although the descriptions they use may vary, the underlying principles remain the same and can be applied to any youth development program. Lee and Murdock (2001) determined that successful cross-teaching programs have the following components: (a) dedicated adults who support teens; (b) active teen recruitment; (c) strong curriculum; (d) initial training; (e) ongoing training and support; (f) attention to details; (g) recognition and reward; (h) team building; (i) setting teens up for success; and (j) feedback and evaluation. They go on to recommend that

programs provide high-quality training in social skills for teenage teachers, schedule time for group processing, encourage positive interdependence where teens and youth learn together and depend on one another, and allow for more flexibility in lesson-planning as teenagers gain confidence and skills (Lee & Murdock, 2001). From their examination of a responsibility model-based cross-teaching sports program, Hammond-Diedrich & Walsh (2006) recommend that practitioners (a) provide advanced leadership opportunities; (b) establish meaningful relationships between adults and youth; (c) provide vital guidance and feedback to young leaders; and (d) conduct daily meetings after teaching sessions. Finally, Cooperative Extension designs their Youth Teaching Youth programs so that youth teachers (a) work on projects that affect someone other than themselves; (b) feel they are stretched by the activity; (c) have some power over what they do; (d) have time for reflection; (e) collaborate with adults on the activity; (f) participate in a group activity; and (g) see that the activity satisfies a genuine community need (Duncomb, 2010). All of these characteristics contribute to valuable cross-age teaching experiences for both teenagers and younger children and should be considered by youth development professionals when implementing cross-age teaching into their programs.

Examples of Cross-Age Teaching Programs

As with any youth development program, each is unique and creative in its content and approach to developing youth. The following are some examples of cross-age teaching in practice in communities throughout the United States.

- **Project Coach:** Teenagers coach elementary sports teams in Springfield, Massachusetts.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HiqdVWde7Zk>
- **Youth Teaching Youth: Alcohol and Tobacco Decisions:** University of Minnesota Extension program in Dakota, Anoka, and Scott county elementary schools utilizes cross-age teaching.
http://www.national4-hheadquarters.gov/about/pod-health/youth_teaching_youth_rev10.pdf
- **Farm to School:** Iowa high school students teach elementary students about local foods and nutrition.
<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/node/13234>

- **Church Children's Ministry:** Teenagers play key roles in teaching various children's programs throughout the country.

<http://childrensministry.com/articles/teens-take-the-lead?p=1>

Further Information

The following are some resources that may be helpful in integrating cross-age teaching into youth development programs:

- **Teens as Volunteer Leaders: A 4-H Afterschool Resource Guide**
- **The 4 P's of Planning a Presentation** (University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension 4-H Communications Series)
- **National Education Association Works4Me** (Tips and ideas for teaching)

<http://www.nea.org/tools/Works4Me.html>

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