

What Happens When Eighth Graders Become the Teachers?

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Background/Context: Significant research has been done on the cognitive and academic outcomes of older-younger and peer-peer student relationships. Whether in a one-on-one setting or a setting in which responsibility for teaching is shared among members of a collaborative group, well-planned, well-organized, and well-executed student-student interactions have repeatedly shown positive evidence of student progress and learning. This action research project differentiates itself from previous research in several ways because it focuses on motivational and attitudinal outcomes when every student in a classroom of eighth graders serves as a teacher of “new-to-everyone” content for three classes of younger students.

Purpose/Objective/Research Question/Focus of Study: The research question I asked was: What happens when my eighth-grade students teach younger students about Japan? My purpose was to find out if and how teaching younger students affected eighth graders in my K-8 inner city public school. I was also interested in whether and how the project affected the school community.

Setting: The research took place in a K-8 inner city Chicago public school.

Population/Participants/Subjects: The participants were 27 eighth-grade students, and a second-grade, a third-grade, and a fourth-grade class of approximately 25 students each. Approximately 96% of participating students were African American, and 4% were Hispanic.

Intervention/Program/Practice: The project consisted of a 10-week period during which my eighth-grade class was split into three groups that developed and taught lessons about Japan to classes of younger students.

Research Design: This was an action research project that I did in my classroom while teaching full time.

“We’re going to Japan today!”

“I’m so nervous I have butterflies in my stomach! I could hardly sleep last night!”

“Me either! I practiced my part in the shower this morning for so long that my momma had to yell at me to get out.”

— A conversation heard between two eighth-grade students the morning of their first day teaching a third-grade class about Japan

In October 2005, I took time from my position as an eighth-grade teacher in a Chicago public school to spend 3 weeks in Japan as a participant in the Japan Fulbright Memorial Fund Teacher Program. Established by the Japanese government in 1995, the program brings American teachers to Japan to learn about the history, culture, and people of their nation with the hopes of strengthening the ties of understanding and cooperation between the two countries. While I was there, I visited beautiful temples, listened to government officials, sampled delicious cuisine, learned about the history, economy, and religious practices, and met many wonderful people. But what I enjoyed the most was spending time in their schools.

I visited three schools—an elementary school, a junior high school, and a senior high school. Although I was fascinated by each experience, it was my day in the elementary school, which consisted of Grades 1–6, that had the greatest impact on me. I was impressed by the older students’ levels of responsibility and leadership. Students of all ages and grade levels worked together; they walked to school together in groups, they played games together on the playground, and they cleaned the school together every afternoon. In each case, the oldest student, typically a sixth grader, was responsible for the group. For instance, during morning recess, each group of children had a leader. All the children wore reversible hats. The leader’s hat was black, and everyone else in the group wore white. At the conclusion of recess, each group of children crouched in a huddle around the leader, who recorded that day’s play activities on a clipboard. It was evident that the students respected each other and were used to functioning as a team.

What I observed that day was not an anomaly in Japanese elementary schools. Contrary to my (and many other Americans’) preconceptions about Japanese schools, the idea of community and teamwork is a central

tenet of Japan's educational philosophy. In fact, Japanese elementary teachers believe that students' "personal growth, fulfillment, and self-understanding" and "human relations skills" are a higher priority than "academic excellence" and "specific occupational skills" (Lewis & Tsuchida, 1998, p. 1). As a result, Japanese elementary schools are structured to promote community and responsibility: "There is no ability-grouping or tracking; students stay together for two years (usually with the same teacher); and about 30 days of the school year are devoted to activities designed to build human connections within the school community" (Lewis & Tsuchida, p. 1). What I observed while I was there—multiage groups of students playing and working together—is merely one example of how Japanese elementary schools strive to educate "whole" individuals.

Throughout my visit to Japan, I thought a lot about this idea of multiage students working and playing together. It seemed to accomplish several things. First, it teaches the older students responsibility and leadership; second, it provides younger students with mentors and role models; and third, "clique-iness," and showing off, which undermine any team's effectiveness, are minimized because students are grouped together with children of various ages.

I believed this model could be particularly beneficial in a school like mine, which consists of kindergarten through eighth grade. It is often difficult to think of middle school students and primary school students as schoolmates because they are so different. This is further exaggerated because our school is housed in two separate buildings, one for kindergarten through Grade 3, and the other for Grades 4–8. Students are rarely given the opportunity to see each other, let alone work together.

My school is located on the Southwest side of Chicago. Approximately 700 students attend prekindergarten through eighth grade. Almost all of them are from low-income families and receive free lunch. The racial/ethnic breakdown is 96% African American and 4% Hispanic. According to 2006 Illinois State Achievement Test (ISAT) scores, about 40% of our students meet or exceed state standards in reading, and about 45% meet or exceed standards in math.

My homeroom class was unique in several ways. First of all, I "looped" with my class from sixth grade through eighth grade. At the beginning of this project, I had 27 students, 14 of whom I'd had for 3 years, 9 for 2 years, and 4 for 1 year. During the 10-week project, 2 of my students transferred out to new schools and 1 was expelled, and I received 1 new student who was moved from sixth grade to eighth grade because of his age (data from all students were included in the study). My class was also unique because my students' test scores were notably higher than the

average for the rest of the school. According to 2006 ISAT scores, 80% of my students met or exceeded grade level in both reading and math. My students' high achievement levels and their familiarity with my classroom culture of teamwork and independent learning positioned them, I believe, for success with a long-term multiage teaching project.

So, as a follow-up to my experience in Japan, I decided to do an action research project and look at what might happen if my eighth-grade students became teachers in a primary-grade classroom. I wanted my students to work together in teams and assume high levels of daily responsibility for their younger peers. I wanted them to be mentors, role models, and school leaders. In doing so, I was interested in studying how these roles and relationships would affect my eighth graders and their "students."

CONSIDERING "CROSS-AGE" TEACHING

To begin my data collection, I first surveyed my school's staff. I was surprised to find that 78% of the 23 teachers and other faculty members responded that they either "moderately" or "strongly" agreed that it was good that the older students and younger students were housed in separate buildings. Only 17% disagreed that this separation was beneficial.

What underlies this opinion that it is better for older and younger students to be separated? Certainly there are many explanations, including grade-level colleagues wanting proximity for purposes of collaboration, but I suspected that there was also an underlying belief that younger and older students needed to be separated to keep the "misbehaving" older students from being "bad role models" for the younger students. In the same staff survey, I found that only 21% of teachers responded that the junior high students were good role models, whereas 53% of teachers said they were not. As an eighth-grade teacher, I observe my students on a daily basis, and it was disturbing to me that our school staff did not see the kindness, intelligence, and maturity that most of my students exhibited within my classroom. Inappropriate behavior, including violence, bullying, profanity, disrespect, "fooling around," and dress code violations do indeed occur, but this behavior is given more attention within the school community as compared with positive behavior and achievement. Thus, assumptions about my students' capability as role models stem from observations of junior high students seen on the playground before and after school and walking through the hallways, which is when and where problems most frequently occur. The "bad" students attract enormous attention, and the "good" ones are overlooked. To overcome the misconception that the typical junior high student sets a bad

example, I thought that a cross-age teaching project would be an ideal way to showcase my students' hard work, intelligence, and responsibility. I believed that my students would exceed expectations if empowered with a mentoring/teaching role.

Further, I thought that cross-age teaching was a natural fit for my school's neighborhood and community because older children do in fact assume major responsibilities in their families, particularly regarding younger siblings. Many of my students prepare dinner, help siblings with homework, and get them ready for bed every evening while the household adult(s) is/are at work. Of my 28 students, 26 have younger siblings, and when asked, all but one of them professed to have significant responsibilities for their siblings' care at home. For example, in response to the question, "What specific responsibilities do you have caring for younger siblings at home?" one student wrote, "I do everything. I get him ready for school, make sure he gets in the tub at night, make sure he brushes his teeth, make sure his hair is combed, make sure his shoes are clean, and make sure he goes to bed on time." A second student echoed, "I do everything," and a third wrote, "I have to do whatever my mother doesn't do." Thus, for some middle-school-age children, it is typical to have extensive responsibilities at home, and therefore, as educators, we can and should entrust them with relevant responsibilities at school. Older children–younger children relationships have a prominent place in many communities and therefore should be valued, nurtured, and guided through leadership and mentoring development opportunities at school.

I thought that providing opportunities for older students and younger students to work together would have many positive results not only for the students directly involved but also for the school as a whole. Inspired by the Japanese children I saw playing, cleaning, and walking together, I was interested in seeing what would happen when older students and younger students actively learned together in a classroom. I had been planning to teach my eighth graders a 10-week unit on Japan. However, in the spirit of Japan's educational mantra—to inspire a "zest for life" within its students—I decided to see what would happen when I provided these learning opportunities for my students and then gave them the opportunity to provide similar experiences for younger students.

STUDENTS TEACHING STUDENTS

In researching cross-age and multiage teaching, I found relevant, though limited, studies that pertained to my action research project. Most studies cited the cognitive and/or academic outcomes of older–younger or peer–peer student relationships. My research focus was neither cognitive

nor academic outcomes; rather, I was interested in looking at if and how my students' attitudes and motivations toward school were affected by participating in the Japan project. I was similarly interested in the younger students' attitudes toward their participation in the project and perceptions of the older students. Naturally, it was important to me that all students meet the learning objectives stated for each lesson, but it was not my intention, nor within the scope of my project, to analyze any quantitative measure of student academic achievement or growth.

A second difference between my project and the studies I read about was that I wanted *every* student from my class to participate in teaching every student from three other classes during the regular school day. I did not find any other studies in which such inclusiveness was the case. In most projects, some students were specifically targeted to tutor or teach other targeted students based on preexisting criteria.

A third difference between my project and others is that I wanted my students to teach their students something that was new to everyone. Unlike teaching younger children how to add double-digit numbers or fill out a Venn diagram, the Japan unit required that my eighth-grade students learn new content and then adapt it in a developmentally appropriate way to teach their students. Although I did not know this at the time I initially began my research, one of the things that most distinguishes this action research is the active role that my students would take in planning and designing the actual lessons they taught.

Despite these differences, I found extensive research on a variety of multiage teaching relationships that showed how and why student-to-student teaching experiences seem to benefit children. Whether in a one-on-one setting or in a setting in which responsibility for teaching is shared among members of a collaborative group, well-planned, well-organized, and well-executed student-student interactions have repeatedly shown positive evidence of student progress and learning (Cohen, Kulik, & Kulik, 1982; Kalkowski, 1995).

But why? What is it about students teaching other students that seems to work so well? Several causal explanations have been suggested, including theories of cognitive restructuring that benefit the tutor by increasing his or her own understanding of the content (Bargh & Schul, 1980; Slavin, 1996). But for the purposes of my research, I was most interested in motivational and attitudinal explanations. For the tutor, assuming the role of "teacher" means taking on a teacher's characteristics, including status, authority, self-perceptions, and attitudes (Puchner, 2003). This responsibility prompts action rather than passivity, and often even reluctant learners are energized by the idea that others, "novices," are dependent on them for assistance. Additionally, both tutors and tutees are

motivated by this more flexible, democratic environment that reduces anxiety and facilitates learning (Cohen, 1986).

As for the tutee, he or she benefits from having someone closer to his or her developmental level who may be able to explain concepts in a variety of ways and in language that may not be apparent to the adult teacher. Damon and Phelps (1989) explained this idea in the following way:

Unlike adult-child instruction, [in] peer tutoring the expert party is not very far removed from the novice party in authority or knowledge; nor has the expert party any special claims to instructional competence. Such differences affect the nature of discourse between tutor and tutee, because they place the tutee in a less passive role than does the adult/child instructional relation. Being closer in knowledge and status, the tutee in peer relation feels freer to express opinions, ask questions, and risk untested solutions. The interaction between instructor and pupil is more balanced and more lively. (p. 138)

Thus, child-to-child interactions not only empower the designated tutor but also may equally empower the tutee. Knowledge may feel more accessible coming from someone relatively close in age, and the process may feel more collaborative; therefore, the tutee may feel more actively involved and thus participate more in the process of learning.

In addition to understanding how and why student-to-student teaching seems to have positive motivational and attitudinal outcomes, I was also very interested in reading about the criteria for a successful program. According to Topping, Campbell, Douglas, and Smith (2003), research evidence shows that it is not enough just to put children together and let them “get on with it”; training is required. Lee and Murdock’s (2001) “Ten Essential Elements” emphasizes that a strong curriculum, initial training, ongoing training and support, attention to details, recognition and reward, teambuilding, setting the stage for success, and providing feedback and evaluation are crucial elements of any teaching/tutoring program. Perhaps for this reason, I found little research on, or evidence of, effective student-to-student teaching experiences that occurred during the normal school day. Most programs cited were either after-school or summer programs in which adult guidance for training and support was more accessible.

Although research on the effects of peer and cross-age tutoring is extensive, there are certainly areas that require additional study. There has been little research on students assuming larger scale teaching responsibilities aimed at larger pupil groups or classrooms. Further,

many of the existing studies have focused primarily on academic outcomes of cross-age student relationships rather than on more social outcomes such as how a school community may be affected by developed and sustained positive relationships between older and younger students. Finally, I have found no research related to adult teachers' attitudes toward cross-age teaching/tutoring and how it requires collaboration among the adult teachers to facilitate these sustained learning relationships. Thus, there is a significant need for additional research in these areas.

DATA, DATA, AND MORE DATA

Over the course of the research I collected data in the following ways:

Pre- and postproject surveys completed by students and teachers. Prior to the start of my research, I distributed surveys to the school staff, my eighth-grade students, and the second-, third-, and fourth-grade students participating in the project. The staff survey asked questions about the prevailing behaviors exhibited by junior high students in the school. I wanted to see how the adults in the school felt about the eighth graders and their influence on the overall school community, particularly on the youngest students. The eighth graders' survey was similar. I wanted to gauge how they perceived their own behaviors and how they thought the teachers and younger students perceived them. The second-, third-, and fourth graders' survey was a simpler form intended to find out how the younger students viewed the eighth graders and how they felt about the upcoming project. At the project's completion, I resurveyed all participating students to see if and how their perceptions changed and how they enjoyed the project.

Teacher journal. Beginning with the 1st week of the project, I kept a detailed daily journal of my observations and reflections on my successes, questions, and frustrations. I usually wrote an email to myself at the end of the school day so that my memory and reflections were fresh. I later compiled the e-mails into a chronological journal.

Observations and notes. Over the course of the project, I kept a detailed notebook chronicling observations of my students preparing for and debriefing their lessons; comments from conversations I heard among my students about the project and their work; and feedback I received from teachers, administrators, and other faculty members.

Feedback from participating teachers. I received feedback from the participating teachers in several ways. Formally, we met as a group at the beginning and at the end of the project. Informally, I met with each of the teachers individually at least once a week to get their feedback on how

the eighth graders handled both themselves and the lessons; how their students enjoyed (or not) and benefited (or not) from the lessons; problems, issues, or concerns that I needed to address; and other data they noted while observing my students teach. I took notes at each of these meetings to record their thoughts. In addition, the teachers responded via e-mail to specific questions I asked regarding the lessons, my students' behavior, and their students' reactions so that I would have the teachers' responses in their own words.

OFF AND RUNNING . . .

In November 2005, I began planning the 10-week Japan unit, integrating language arts, social studies, visual arts, and mathematics. Each week focused on a different topic: geography, language, food, schools, haiku, theater, origami, and traditional folk tales. During our Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday language arts periods, my eighth-grade students would learn that week's Japanese content, and then they would teach it to their designated classes on Thursdays and Fridays for 45 minutes each day. I planned to write a lesson plan for each topic, model the lesson for my class, give the students time to practice the lesson, and then have them teach it to their class of younger students.

I divided my 27 students into three groups and assigned each group to a second-, third-, or fourth-grade class. I chose classrooms where I had a good relationship with the teacher, whom I felt would be easy to work with and who would in general support our curriculum. I thought that by working with three different grade levels, I would be able to compare the types and quality of interactions between them and my eighth graders. I also felt, and hoped, that the overall impact on the school community might be stronger and more visible if the project spanned three grade levels rather than three classrooms in one grade level.

My goals were twofold. First, I wanted my students and their younger counterparts to learn about Japan and be able to compare aspects of its culture to the United States. Second, I wanted all of my students to assume leadership and responsibility within the school. From an action research perspective, I would be looking at what was happening as a result of my students acting as teachers. It was very important to me that all my students participate in the project and that the scheduling remain consistent from week to week.

We officially began the project the week of January 25, 2006. Each participating teacher received a copy of the unit curriculum and was expecting my students in his/her classroom every Thursday and Friday for 45–60 minutes. We staggered teaching times throughout the day because

the lessons required materials that the groups needed to share. A significant disadvantage of this scheduling was that I would not be able to observe my students teaching because I needed to be in my classroom with my other students. Thus, I would need to rely on my students and the participating teachers to give feedback on the lesson.

Following the teacher meeting, I had a kick-off meeting with my students. I passed out copies of the unit overview, detailed lesson plans, and a document outlining logistics. Each teaching team would have two lead teachers, two assistant teachers, two materials managers, and three student assistants. I clearly defined the responsibilities of each job and planned for students to switch positions every 2 weeks so that everyone would have the opportunity to participate in each role. I planned for all participating students to journal each week about what they had learned and how they felt about the lessons. In addition, each of the groups was to have a debrief conference with me immediately upon its return from teaching.

EXPECTED AND (EVEN MORE EXCITING!) UNANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

Looking back on how the Japan project evolved over 10 weeks has proved more interesting to me than any before–after comparisons. I anticipated that this project would increase my students’ enthusiasm for school, teach them more patience and responsibility, and help establish more positive relationships with younger students in our school. Indeed, that was why I implemented the project in the first place. It was exciting to validate those assumptions with the data.

Overall, my students were highly motivated by this project, as evidenced by their language and enthusiasm, attendance, and adherence to the school’s dress code policy. Unprompted by me, they referred to the project by saying things such as, “We’re going to Japan today,” and “When do we leave for Japan?” On the postproject survey, 100% of my students responded that they had enjoyed teaching younger students and wanted to do the project again. A total of 62% of my students responded that the project made them think about their behavior at school and “act better.” When asked what they liked most about the project, typical positive responses included, “Helping the little kids learn something new,” “Acting like a teacher,” “Walking around the school without teacher supervision,” “Thinking of games to play with the little kids,” and “Being in charge.” When asked what they didn’t like or would change, typical responses included, “Being in the class with a substitute teacher,” “Getting the kids to be quiet,” and “Only going two times a week.” When

asked what lesson was their favorite to teach, the responses widely varied. Each week's theme received at least two "my favorite" votes, with "Comparing Japan's Schools to Our School" receiving the most votes overall. On a separate survey that I gave at the end of the school year, 22 out of 26 of my students responded that the Japan project was the most memorable part of school that year.

A second indicator of how the Japan project motivated my students was the improvement in daily attendance. Typically, eighth-grade attendance is lower in the months following winter break and in comparison with the other grade levels. In March, however, my class had a 97% attendance rate, which was the highest in the school and our class's highest for the school year. When I announced this to my class and asked why they thought our attendance was so improved, one student responded, "Probably because nobody wanted to miss school because we were helping the little kids practice for their [reader's theater] performances." Another student added, "Yeah, school was fun in March."

A third indicator was the improvement in dress code. At my school, students must wear blue pants and a white shirt. Students were not allowed to participate in their teaching assignment if they came to school out of dress code because it would set a bad example for the younger students. Over the 10 weeks, there were only four dress code violations, which was a drastic improvement and very atypical for eighth graders at my school.

Although such results validated my assumptions about the benefits of multiage teaching, I believe that the more interesting results of this project were the outcomes that I hadn't anticipated. Looking at my data, particularly my teacher journal and notes, I began to see three central themes emerging:

- *Student "ownership."* Student investment changed the project from *my* predesigned lessons and plans to *their* new, improved lessons and plans.
- *New leadership.* Whereas I had been thinking primarily about how the project would affect my class as a whole, the most striking results were seen in individual students.
- *Pedagogy.* My approach to teaching was significantly enlightened by watching and listening to my students plan and teach their lessons.

STUDENT OWNERSHIP

When the project began, everything was very structured, and the 1st week proceeded just as I had planned. Within their teams, students chose the roles they wanted and planned their detailed agenda based on the lesson

I modeled for them. They actually wrote down who would say what and practiced their parts. It felt scripted, but was helpful because the students were nervous, and it gave them confidence to know exactly what to say. That first Thursday, the energy level was high, and as each group left and returned, nerves were replaced with confidence. Everyone was talking at once, competing to tell stories about their new young students. Ms. Butler,¹ who was the third-grade participating teacher, offered this summative feedback at the end of the first day: “My students listened better to your students than they listen to me.” Ms. Rockford, the second-grade teacher, told me that one of her students went to the school library and checked out the only book about Japan, which made another student angry because he wanted to read it first!

Thus, the project began better than I hoped. My students were invested, the younger students were engaged, and management within the classrooms was tight. Each team had taught and practiced a “quiet” signal that had worked. All three participating teachers reported that their students were intimidated by their new “teachers” and were excited to participate. I was relieved, but I was already exhausted! From my end, it had required a lot of extra work. I had set the objectives, planned the activities, written a meticulous lesson plan for each class, aligned them to the state standards for the four different grade levels involved, and gathered and organized all the necessary materials. And this was just the introductory lesson! Had I gotten myself in over my head?

The 2nd week was a crucial milestone for me. I had anticipated that each week would progress as the first, with me planning and modeling a lesson and the teams practicing and implementing it. But the second lesson I had designed was a failure. Even though I had spent several hours over the weekend finalizing the details, on Monday I still felt unprepared. The topic for the week was the geography of Japan and the United States; I wanted students to study a map to compare and contrast the countries using a Venn diagram. To make the lesson more interesting, I wanted students to make their own map by gluing continent puzzle pieces onto blue construction paper and then labeling the continents, oceans, and two countries. I wanted to model this activity on Monday morning but couldn’t finish all the cutting and sorting in time and had to wait until the end of the day, after we had finished our departmental classes:

I wasted about 35 minutes of valuable instruction time passing out materials and getting organized (writing my objectives on the board, covering the class map, etc.) I feel like I modeled *really bad* organization. The kids were sitting there bored. By the time I got their attention it was 1:50 and two of my students had

to leave at 2:00 for an extracurricular activity. Then one of my students who had been in detention arrived back to my room and of course that caused further disruption. I was really flustered before the lesson even began. I was exhausted from the long day and had no patience left. I was unclear about my directions and was yelling. The whole class was sharing 4 bottles of glue, most of which didn't work and had to be opened and poured onto the paper and spread with their fingers. Thus, kids wanted to wash their hands in the middle of the lesson. I kept getting more and more frustrated and finally just sat down at my desk. The kids were being too talkative but I knew it was mostly my fault because I was unprepared. After about 5 minutes I got up and continued the lesson, but then I never finished it. I was hanging up our work on the bulletin board and the kids were milling about the room. There was no sense of conclusion; no reflection; no debrief.

I assumed the whole week—the whole project—was ruined. If I couldn't model a good lesson, then they wouldn't teach a good lesson.

The next day, I talked to my class about the lesson and what I thought had gone wrong. They didn't seem to think it had gone as badly as I thought—"It wasn't *that* bad; it was just boring"—which made me feel both better and worse. I was glad that they hadn't realized how unprepared I was, but I felt guilty that they didn't recognize an ineffective lesson for what it was. This was a bad sign, considering I was trying to teach them to be teachers. It seemed worse to have them teach badly than not to teach at all! But I wasn't ready to give up. We talked as a whole group about how the lesson could be improved, and then I split them into their teams to work on their agendas. Circulating to help, I was amazed at how seriously two of the three groups took this responsibility:

The second grade team decided that the students would work together in small groups to create big, poster-size maps rather than individual ones. Why hadn't I thought of that? Group work is always more fun and what an excellent way to reduce the prep work of cutting out the puzzle pieces and the amount of glue needed. They also wanted to make the activity into a game and Karisha said she'd bring in candy for the winning team. The fourth grade team also did a good job. They decided to do the map activity individually but in a smaller group setting where a teacher could oversee each group. I thought that was a really good idea.

At this point, I thought back to my original research question—What happens when my eighth-grade students work in teams to teach younger students about Japan?—and I realized that by trying to do all the prep work myself, I was depriving my students of a fundamental aspect of teaching—designing and planning! Having my students simply deliver a lesson I had planned was the same as having a teacher deliver a scripted, direct instruction reading lesson. How many times had I heard teachers complain about that? I realized that I was underestimating my students; if I was giving them the responsibility of going into a classroom and teaching for an hour, I needed to entrust them with the responsibility of preparing the lesson they wanted to teach.

This project required two distinct levels of teaching from me—teaching the content and teaching *how to teach*. This made my job both easier and more difficult. I no longer needed to agonize over modifying a lesson to four different grade levels, but I did need to demonstrate how to develop, plan, and execute effective, appropriate lessons.

I quickly realized that my students didn't have a problem brainstorming activities to meet stated objectives; that was the fun part. The third week, they changed the "Compare and Contrast the Japanese Alphabets" lesson by stapling paper plates together to make a Venn diagram, then premaking fact cards taken from an informational article that could be glued to the correct area of the graphic organizer—much more interactive and fun than writing on a boring Venn diagram! The 4th week, they enhanced the "Compare and Contrast Our School to a Typical Japanese School" activity, which was to clean the classroom from top to bottom (wearing slippers, of course) just like Japanese students would and by blasting music on the radio while they worked. This transformed the task from a chore to a party. Other classes wanted to know if they could clean their classrooms, too!

And so the weeks progressed, with me relinquishing more and more creative control to my students. At times it was hard for me to sit back and watch when I suspected they were underestimating an activity's difficulty or overpromising candy rewards for winning teams, but I realized that this was all part of the learning process. There was no doubt that the project was theirs, not mine. The final 2 weeks, when my students worked with their students every day for an hour to prepare reader's theater performances of Japanese folk tales, probably best illustrates the extent to which my students owned this project. As each group performed, I watched in amazement as props, costumes, and painted backgrounds were brought in and set up. Everyone participated, and everyone had fun. To give just a sample of the many accolades I overheard my students give their students: "You guys did great!" "That was awesome!" "Our

group was definitely the best!" I don't know who was prouder that day—me or my students.

Looking back, I'm glad that I decided not to micromanage the project. By giving up (or at least sharing) my control over the actual lesson being taught, I introduced a new layer of complexity to my research. Once I had decided to truly let them be the teachers, I was able to observe as the groups' strengths and weaknesses emerged. Nine students make a very large group when it comes to decision making, and their abilities to negotiate a cohesive plan, delegate tasks, and take personal and collective responsibility became critical components of their effectiveness as teachers.

Coping With Challenges.

The second-grade team worked particularly well together and was the most successful, which I defined in terms of consistently meeting the curriculum objectives, maintaining excellent classroom management, and exhibiting positive attitudes even in the most challenging situations. For example, at some point during the project, each group had to teach its class when the regular teacher was absent and a substitute was there instead. Ms. Rockford actually called me at home and told me that she would be absent the next day and wanted to be sure that my students would still go to her class to teach, "because it may be the only time of the day that they actually learn something." When my students returned from teaching the next day, they expressed some frustration about their students' behavior and remarked that they had to spend extra time "reviewing the rules and expectations." Even as they told me this, they handed me a pile of beautifully written and illustrated haiku poems completed by every student. I was impressed.

The other two groups fared less well when confronted by the teacher's absence. The third-grade team had such a miserable experience the first time this occurred that when they showed up 2 weeks later and she was absent again, they decided not to stay and even attempt the lesson. They simply walked into the room, saw the substitute, and left. Personally, I was very disappointed and upset. During our debrief session, there was a lot of arguing among the group members over whether this was a good decision: "Those kids were out of control," "That lady needed to control those kids," "They weren't listening to us anyway," "There was nothing we could do," "We should have at least tried to stay," "Some of the kids were being good." Of course I could understand their frustration with out-of-control students; however, I was trying to teach them the importance of

dependability and consistency. I was asking a lot of 14-year-olds, but I wanted them to take their roles seriously. But because I had consciously stepped back and allowed them to make their own decisions, I had to support them. I withheld my judgment and listened as they ranted about the “lack of home-training” that the third graders had. Ironically, it reminded me of an actual teacher’s lounge conversation. But like most good teachers, once the venting had passed, potential solutions were offered. Should they ask to stay an extra 30 minutes tomorrow to make up the lesson? How would they reestablish their authority because it “looked bad” that they had left? There wasn’t a consensus, and there wasn’t full participation, but it was an unusual conversation for eighth graders.

Over the 10 weeks, the project continued to evolve in such progressive and regressive strokes. It represented a huge learning curve for my students, but there was no question that they took ownership of the project.

NEW LEADERSHIP

When assigning students to their teams, I had consciously separated my natural leaders. These were the students I pictured at the front of the classroom, teaching. But over the course of the project I was surprised by how group dynamics had a profound impact on the leadership that actually emerged. Some of the students who I thought would exert tremendous leadership failed to take charge; some of my natural leaders exceeded my high expectations; and, most gratifying, many of the students who had never exhibited any leadership suddenly blossomed in their roles!

I believe that these new leaders weren’t really new leaders at all; they had probably been that way all along, but no one had ever asked them to exhibit these qualities. Darian is an excellent example. He had been in my class for 3 years. He was extremely well liked by his peers, mainly for his quick sense of humor. He could invent amazingly creative raps on the spot. He had above average standardized test scores in both reading and math, but he had never applied himself in school and therefore typically earned Ds and Fs in most subject areas. I had always liked Darian, but I would not have chosen him for a leadership position because he never seemed to take things seriously. He was often out of dress code, and I was constantly telling him to go to his desk, sit down, and stop talking. During the 1st week of the project, Darian was fooling around—hanging out the window when he was supposed to be working with his team—and I kicked him out of the project. I wrote about the incident in my journal:

I already kicked Darian off the project. I feel bad, but at this point I had no choice. If I can't trust someone to make the right decisions in the classroom, there's no way I can send them to another classroom when I won't be there. That's not fair to that teacher. So he'll have to serve as an example. I gave sufficient warning and I have to look at it from the bigger picture perspective. *It is about students serving as positive role models and that role, let's face it, does not suit everyone!*

Darian sat out that first Thursday, and then he came to me Friday morning: "Could I please have another chance? I promise I can be good." I was happy to comply because I really did want all my students to have this opportunity, but was afraid that I was setting a dangerous precedent by reinstating him.

Looking back, this turned out to be the right choice. Darian was an excellent teacher. The second graders thought he was funny, but they respected him, too, because he kept them on task. Ms. Rockford described her observations of Darian the 2nd week:

Darian was working with a small group reading the article about the Japanese alphabets. He had them taking turns reading and turned to Johnny and said, "It is your turn." Johnny put his head down and said he didn't want to read because he had a headache. I was about to tell Darian that Johnny couldn't read, but I didn't want to embarrass him. Before I could decide what to do, Darian said, "Naw, it is not your turn to read, it is your turn to glue the stuff on." Johnny instantly sat up and grabbed the glue. I was so impressed that Darian had been so perceptive and handled the situation so kindly.

At the project's conclusion, I surveyed all my students and asked them if they behaved any differently while participating in the project, and like many of my students (38%), Darian responded that no, he had not acted differently. I was surprised, because to me he *had* acted differently. After thinking more about it, though, I think that he was right. He had been himself; it was just that I was observing him in a new context. I had never given him leadership responsibilities before, nor had anyone else, so he hadn't needed to act like a leader. I could not help but wonder, how many other students are waiting to be given responsibilities, given the chance to prove themselves?

Perhaps my early journal entry about positive leadership roles not suiting all students was wrong; I discovered that each of my students

contributed to this project and that many of the students I expected the least of actually showed the most dramatic transformations. Besides Darian, many of my other “troublemakers” also proved to be excellent role models. Perhaps they have some special insight into why wayward students act the way they do, but it may have been more that they felt the importance of their responsibility and truly stepped into the role of teacher. When you think of troublemaking itself as an exhibition of leadership—in the sense that it grabs others’ attention and persuades some to “do” something—acting as a teacher is simply a more constructive way to exercise the same skill. And isn’t multiage teaching a much more affirming source of attention? It allows students like Darian a chance to feel valued, respected, and successful while still maintaining a sense of control.

This element of self-control, of choice, is extremely significant for all young teenagers, but perhaps particularly so for inner city children, who are often forced to confront complicated life situations from a very early age. They become accustomed to making decisions and assuming responsibilities at home, and that mentality doesn’t just switch off when they enter school every morning. If we entrust them with responsibility at school, we are meeting their needs in a very different way because we are showing that we trust and respect them and expect them to do important things *in* school. The results, in terms of the Japan project, are multiple. First, both older and younger students are learning the content we want them to learn. Second, older students are learning important and relevant life skills, including how to work in peer groups, how to manage time and resources, how to teach younger children, how to meet and debrief with adults, and how to deal with problems and make on-the-spot decisions. Third, younger students are observing positive behaviors from older students who are serving as role models and mentors.

These outcomes validate my belief that a multiage teaching project is not only appropriate but also extremely beneficial when *every* student in a given classroom is involved. The literature I read indicated that most multiage teaching projects were geared toward specific populations, either honor students or “at-risk” students. Most of these projects involved one-on-one or small-group multiage learning situations in which the older student was designated as a reading buddy or math tutor. They proved successful; however, I believe that the experience is much richer when all students from the “teaching” class are involved and the content is something new to both the “teachers” and the “students.” Including all students will showcase natural leaders, but it also affords the opportunity for new leadership to emerge. Darian is just one example of many students who surprised me with their enthusiasm and leadership. In little

and big ways, all my students contributed to the success of our Japan project because they were all able to relate to their students in unique ways.

PEDAGOGY: MY "ENLIGHTENED" VIEW OF TEACHING

One of the things that most surprised me about this project was how much I learned about teaching by watching my students teach. Children have an embedded image of what teaching is "supposed" to be. After all, it is the career they have been exposed to the most. Further, by eighth grade, students have witnessed many different teachers and their various teaching styles, and they have a clear idea of what (and who) is "good" versus what (and who) is "bad." Interestingly, my students' favorite teachers were not necessarily those they identified as the best teachers. When I initially surveyed my class prior to starting this project, I asked them to identify the characteristics of a good teacher. The most common responses were that good teachers must be "strict," "structured," and "organized." They must also "be really smart and know what [they're] talking about." I then engaged my students in a discussion about "good versus bad" and "easy versus hard" teachers; one student claimed (with the consensus of his peers), "I usually like the easy teachers better because I have to do less work, but if you really think about it, the easy teachers aren't really doing their job and in the long run I'll have to make up that work anyway."

I was interested in how my students would present themselves to their students. Initially, I was concerned that they would try to be too friendly or too casual. I know that many adult new teachers make the mistake of trying too hard to be liked instead of respected. It definitely was the case with 3 boys in the second-grade group who let the girls be the "enforcers" while they were the "clowns." When the whole group worked together it was fine, but it became a major problem the last week of the project, when the class split into two smaller groups to work on the reader's theater performances.

The boys wanted to work together and boasted that their group would have more fun, but they quickly realized that the second graders had become so accustomed to chasing them around and climbing on their backs that they now refused to comply with directions. The boys knew their group was in trouble and that they "couldn't handle it." They asked Whitney, a strong leader from the other group, to help them. Immediately, the same second graders who had literally been running around the room began rehearsing with diligence for Whitney. She had established herself as an authority figure the first day; she was well liked, but she had presented herself as someone who was focused on the task

and expected them to take it seriously, too. After the reader's theater performances, I talked to the boys about how they could have handled the situation differently. Freddy said, "We shouldn't have tried so hard to be like them. After all, we were the old ones and should have acted like it. I think we were *too* fun." I followed up by asking how it felt to watch their group perform so well. Raymond replied, "It was cool." I then asked if they thought their students had more fun playing around with them or performing reader's theater. Freddy responded, "I think they probably had more fun doing reader's theater because it made them feel smart and good about themselves. Don't get me wrong, fooling around is fun, but it is probably better to do on the playground than in the classroom."

Where does "fun" fit in? This conversation, along with the observations I had made over the 10-week project, made me reflect on this idea of "fun" in the classroom. Was fun really that important to student learning, or was it just an extra bonus when a focused lesson was enjoyable? When planning their lessons, my students adamantly and consistently insisted that the lessons they taught be conducted in small groups and, whenever possible, structured as games or contests. They always wanted to have a "winner" because they knew from their own experience that competition is a strong motivator. I was amazed at how they could make anything into a game: a chopsticks tournament, geography hot potato, pick a haiku topic out of a bag, and so on.

Watching and listening to my students plan lessons was a fascinating way for me, as their teacher, to access what they believed was important in a lesson and how this was best learned. To my students, the lessons they planned were only successful if they were "fun." To me, lessons are only successful if I meet my curricular objective. By watching my students teach, I learned more about *how* they wanted to learn. They wanted to play games and do projects; to compete; to draw, color, cut, and glue; to listen to music; to act things out; to work in groups; to stand up and move. They wanted a product—something they'd made—and they wanted it displayed in the hallway where kids from other classes could see it. This is not earth-shattering, but it affirms what we, as teachers, must do if we want to achieve maximum results in our classroom. It would never have appealed to my students (as teachers) to stand at the front of their classrooms and read aloud from a sheet of paper or write things on the board; that was "too boring." But like my boys who taught the second grade realized, just being fun isn't enough either. In fact, as Freddy said, it is more fun when you're actually learning something.

Thus, I discovered what students really want—focused, purposeful, "fun" lessons. They want to learn new things. I was amazed by how curious my students were about Japan and how they especially craved

learning to say things in Japanese. It made them feel intelligent to be able to converse about Japanese culture and compare it to the United States. When I first started planning this project, I wasn't sure if my students would be enthusiastic because Japan seems so irrelevant to their daily lives. But they found connections that never even occurred to me. *America's Next Top Model* went to Tokyo. Some famous singer's back-up dancers are Harajuku girls. And animé? The boys love it! The fact that my students knew very little about Japan made it *especially* relevant, and what could make an eighth grader feel more significant than teaching an entire class of "little kids" something totally new? As teachers, we must consciously consider both *what* and *how* we teach and not be afraid to share the responsibility of both with our students!

CONCLUSIONS

I believe this action research makes a valuable contribution to current thinking about multiage teaching and learning on a number of levels. First, it is unique in that it looked at what happened when *all* students from a classroom were involved in teaching *all* students from other classrooms, rather than selecting tutors and tutees based on predefined criteria. This allowed new leadership to evolve and latent skills to become apparent because students were not prejudged as to how they would perform in this new context. There are natural academic, social, and physical stratifications that exist amongst classmates; this type of equally inclusive leadership opportunity allows students to reshuffle themselves and perhaps distinguish themselves in completely new ways.

A second important distinction is that students taught an integrated unit of "new-to-them" content, which is a different experience from being a math tutor or reading buddy, which relies on previously acquired (and mastered) skills. This levels the playing field for older students; being good at reading or math is irrelevant to being able to teach younger children how to count to 10 in Japanese. This is a refreshing and healthy departure from the necessary practice of "differentiating instruction" because it positions *all* students first as new learners and then as experienced teachers. Last, not only are the older students teaching new content, but they are also helping to create and plan the lessons. This teacher-student collaboration, quite literally, is a teacher-teaches-students-how-to-teach *and* students-teach-teacher-how-to-teach-better situation.

This research certainly has limitations. It was not my intention to look at whether or how participation in this project affected academic achievement in any subject area, whether for my own students or the younger

ones; the focus began as, and remained, behaviors and attitudes. I did not administer any formal assessments to measure new knowledge gained or retained. Although the participating teachers and I considered the activities as performance-based assessments, we did not assign grades. We felt that it was not appropriate for us to do so because technically we were not the “teachers” and because it was outside the scope of this project for me to teach my students how to assess student work. In implementing this project, I was fortunate to have support from administrators at my school who recognized students’ participation as a valuable use of school time, despite the content (Japan) being outside the mandated scope and sequence of the various grade levels’ curriculum. This may not be the case at other schools.

POLICY AND PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on my research, my recommendations for teachers and administrators are as follows:

- Especially in K–8 elementary schools, we need to find ways to invest in and meaningfully develop older students as mentors, role models, and teachers for younger students. Beyond traditional tutors and book buddies, older students can learn and teach something brand new (like Japan!), monitor literacy and math centers in primary classrooms, facilitate literature circles, open a writing center where teachers can send students to get help revising and editing their work, and write and/or direct reader’s theater performances for younger students, to name just a few examples.
- A wide variety of schoolwide leadership opportunities should be available to all students in schools, and all students should be encouraged to participate. In addition to traditional forums such as student council and team captains, we need to provide a wealth of activities before, during, and after school hours. These can include roles such as office, library, and teacher assistants; lunchroom, bathroom, and playground monitors; and special event committees (Open House, Field Day, assemblies, field trips, holiday parties, spirit week, fundraisers, toy/food drives, and so on). Schools should reflect on what they *need* and allow students to help make these changes happen.
- Teachers of different grade levels should collaborate to create multi-age projects. This requires time for planning and flexibility in the scope and sequence of content areas so that teachers can find effective ways to partner with other grade levels. There need to be opportunities for teachers and students to choose new-to-everyone content.

It seems that there is a trend toward every minute of the school day being consumed by predetermined content, which is important for school-to-school consistency but which has the unintended consequence of alienating teacher innovation and creativity. It is imperative that we integrate teachers' and students' interests and passions into our school curriculums.

- Teachers must have the flexibility in their teaching schedule to be able to implement lessons. If every minute of the school day is specifically designated for predetermined core subjects, it is impossible to find the time to teach cross-curricular units, especially when partnering with other classes. In my case, I often had to shift my schedule to accommodate the Japan project, which meant teaching reading/language arts and math at "unconventional" times. I was fortunate to have the flexibility, especially as a middle school teacher, to do so. For a multiage project to succeed, teachers need some control in their daily and/or weekly schedule to accommodate special projects.

In conclusion, I believe that this project achieved its two goals: First, all participating students learned about the country and culture of Japan, and second, my eighth-grade students assumed leadership roles and served as mentors and role models for younger children. On a larger scale, I also believe that this project had a positive effect on my entire school community. In the weeks following the Japan project's completion, a sixth-grade class and a fourth-grade class partnered to study a unit on Ancient Egypt; the school librarian "employed" middle school students to assist in the library and work at the school book fair; and several primary-grade teachers set up small-group tutoring sessions facilitated by middle school students. In addition, I was approached by countless teachers asking me if my students could come teach their students or, at least, if I could help them set up a similar partnership with another class. Students, too, have sought me out to ask when my students are coming to *their* class. Whether it was the music blaring from the classrooms while the students were cleaning "Japanese style," the vast amounts of multiage student work exhibited in the hallways, the laughter erupting from the auditorium during the reader's theater performances, or just the general excitement of the four participating classes, it seems that every member of our school community knew about the Japan project. My hope is that many more student-student and student-teacher relationships continue to develop over time and that schools like mine stop seeing the older students as behavior problems or poor role models and instead begin to see and utilize our older students as agents of positive change and transformation.

Note

1. All names of teachers and students have been changed.

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