

SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING

The Relationship between Cross-Age Teaching and Social & Emotional Learning

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The 2013-2016 cycle of the Minnesota 4-H Foundation's Howland Family Endowment for Youth Leadership Development is dedicated to understanding social and emotional learning and its contribution to closing the achievement and opportunity gaps. This series of issue briefs, funded in part by Youthprise, is designed to help people understand, connect and champion social and emotional learning in a variety of settings and from a variety of perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

Youth development professionals recognize that social and emotional learning (SEL) happens when youth acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to identify and manage their emotions, demonstrate caring and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging social situations constructively (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2014). Though curriculum content enhances the competencies of SEL by focusing on related topics, using cross-age teaching as a delivery method may further enrich SEL development by providing opportunities to practice skills and build relationships through the process. This issue brief presents a case study of the University of Minnesota Extension's 4-H Youth Teaching Youth program to explore the benefits of having social and emotional skill building programs led by teen teachers. The goal of this study is to better understand how cross-age teaching fosters high impact social and emotional learning with both younger youth and teen participants.

CROSS-AGE TEACHING

Cross-age teaching is distinctively different than mentoring or tutoring because it is a method of content delivery that relies heavily on teens assuming responsibility for the program's success. Teens are not just assisting an adult teacher or informally sharing experiences—terms which define tutoring and mentoring respectively—but rather facilitating an entire learning experience by teaching curriculum and fully managing a group of younger peers.

Limited evaluative evidence exists on the benefits of cross-age teaching (Murdock, Lee, & Patterson, 2003), but some research does show positive results for both teens and the younger children, including acceptance and respect for diversity, increased academic achievement, development of collaboration/conflict resolution skills, a reduction in alcohol and drug abuse among participating teens, and increased empathy for teachers (Hedin, 1987; Dean & Murdock, 1992).

The terms “peer education” and “cross-age teaching” are often used in concert to describe a similar teaching model (Smith, 2014), but it is important to note the differences between these two delivery

methods. Peer education programs can be any peer to peer teaching system, including teaching those at the same status or age as the teacher (Guldal et al., 2012). Cross-age teaching involves youth teaching across a range of age groups (Russell et al., 2012), specifically when there are two or more years' difference between the teacher and the student (Karcher, 2014).

Peer education is currently one of the most widely adopted teaching mechanisms for health education and prevention with young people, and is almost universally represented as effective for those purposes (Price & Knibbs, 2009). In sex education, peer education has advantages over other educational techniques when talking about traditionally taboo subjects (Tolli, 2012).

A recent study on teen teachers that delivered a cross-age health and nutrition program found that the teachers were subsequently following the lessons that they were teaching and were making healthier choices around food (Smith, 2014). This study also looked at the social and emotional learning skills that the teachers gained through implementing the lessons and found that the teachers were not only absorbing the content that they were teaching, but also experiencing significant changes in leadership skills, confidence levels, role modeling capabilities, and need for self-improvement (Smith, 2014). This suggests that the teen teachers are both obtaining substantial content from the delivered lessons and gaining important social and emotional skills as a result of the cross-age delivery method.

Literature implicitly supports the idea that cross-age teaching enhances the five core competencies that define social and emotional learning for the teen teacher, the younger learner, or both groups concurrently:

- **Self-Awareness:** Cross-age teaching provides teen teachers with an opportunity to discover their own creativity and competence (Emil, Dworkin, & Skelly, 2007). High quality cross-age teaching programs offer opportunities for teens to make decisions and thus develop behavioral and emotional autonomy (Murdock et al., 2003), leading to increased self-awareness.
- **Social Awareness:** Peer programs give every youth the opportunity to help and be helped. This is critical because the teen teachers gain a feeling of “social usefulness” (Duncomb, 2005).
- **Self-Management:** Adolescents are becoming skilled abstract thinkers, and a well-developed cross-age teaching program leads to opportunities for teens to not only teach but to think about teaching (Murdock et al., 2003). The teen teaching experience allows youth to plan strategies for teaching while evaluating what worked, what didn't, and to plan accordingly for forthcoming skill application (Murdock et al., 2003).
- **Relationship Skills:** Pre-teens and younger children often respond more enthusiastically to modeling by teens than adults; because younger youth look up to teens, rapport is established very quickly (Duncomb, 2005)
- **Responsible Decision-Making:** Teen teachers tend to start “listening to their own advice.” From their experience as teachers, many teens begin to make more responsible choices (Marczak & Peterson, 1999). Responsible decision making is also evident in the classroom, as teen teachers must be prepared to lead the classroom, requiring them to learn the value of good work habits such as preparation, arriving on time, and being enthusiastic (Murdock et al., 2003).



4-H YOUTH TEACHING YOUTH: A CASE STUDY

A prime example of cross-age teaching is the 4-H Youth Teaching Youth program (4-H YTY). The program model includes strong partnerships between county based 4-H programs and local schools. Throughout the 2013-2014 school year, 4-H staff trained 761 teen teachers (grades 8-12), and those teens taught 4-H YTY curriculum to nearly 10,000 elementary and middle school aged youth (grades 2-7) in 21 Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area school districts throughout four counties, making it one of the largest 4-H projects in Minnesota. 4-H YTY fosters SEL in two ways:

- ***The curriculum delivered to the younger youth focuses on healthy living topics that promote SEL.*** The curriculum that the teens deliver has been specifically developed to use in a cross-age teaching setting. The content is educational for both the youth that receive the lessons and for the older youth that teach. Teen teachers tend to start “listening to their own advice.” From their experience as teachers, many teens begin to make more responsible choices (Marczak & Peterson, 1999). 4-H YTY offers seven age-appropriate curricula for youth in grades 2 through 7. For the younger group (grades 2-4), the lessons focus on character building, healthy decision making, defining feelings and empathy, and teaching appropriate conflict management tools. Youth in grades 4 through 7 are provided topics that focus on diversity, relationship skills, managing choices when faced with stress, alcohol, tobacco, and internet safety issues.



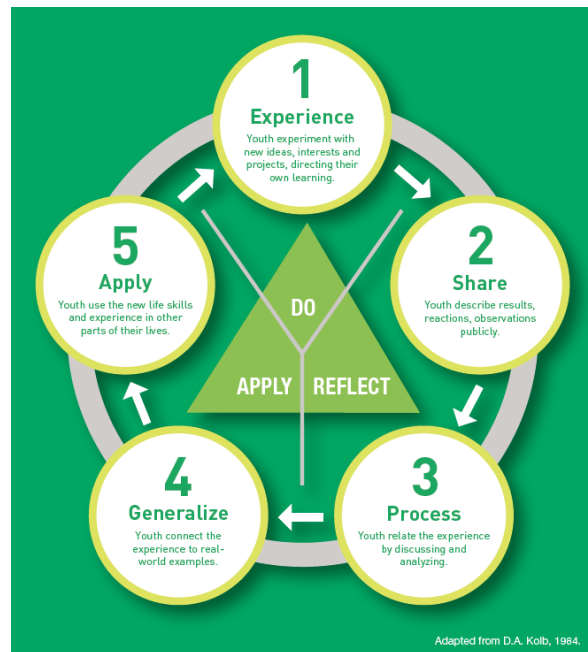
- ***The delivery method—cross-age teaching—encompasses all five SEL competencies.*** Through the delivery process, teen teachers and their younger peers build a relationship that holds dual benefits for each party; the teens are mastering a new skill (teaching) and appreciate being viewed as a role model, and the younger youth are observing a peer making positive choices, showing compassion for each student in the classroom, and acting as a role model. Research indicates that cross-age teaching is an effective delivery method because pre-teens and younger children often respond more enthusiastically to modeling by teens than adults; younger youth look up to teens, so rapport is established very quickly (Duncomb, 2005). Some researchers would go as far as to say that it is the most effective way of providing opportunities for positive youth development and encouraging youth to avoid delinquent behaviors (e.g., Resnick and Gibbs, 1981).

The 4-H Youth Teaching Youth Model

Benefits for both the teen teacher and the younger youth occur only with careful planning and execution of cross-age teaching programs (Lee & Murdock, 2001), so simply asking teens to jump into a tutoring or mentoring role will not yield the same results. To ensure quality results, the 4-H YTY program incorporates the following characteristics into all of their programming by utilizing the experiential learning model:

- ***Experience.*** All teens receive training by 4-H staff on the specific curriculum that they plan to teach and are provided with refresher trainings if the time-lapse between teaching sessions is great. Teens have an opportunity to practice with their co-teacher prior to entering the classroom. Before teaching, teens are equipped with strategies for managing a classroom and tools for answering difficult questions. They are also provided with education on how to interact with specific age groups and how to handle the youth’s corresponding developmental stage. Teen teachers are responsible for all of the teaching, which enhances the ownership that they have over the success of their teaching experience. Self-awareness and enhanced relationship skills are occurring throughout the experience stage.

- **Share.** They then share what they have learned by teaching the curriculum to the younger students while utilizing the tools and strategies that were taught to them. This stage reflects social-awareness and relationship building as youth modify their teaching approach to account for the unique personalities in each classroom.
- **Process.** 4-H staff facilitate reflection exercises after each teaching experience, providing an opportunity to discuss what went well and to identify areas of improvement with the teen teacher. The competency of self-management appears at this stage as teens evaluate their experience both internally through introspective contemplation and externally through reflective discussion.
- **Generalize.** Teen teachers are gaining valuable social and emotional skills through their 4-H YTY experience that will translate far beyond the confines of the elementary classroom. All five SEL competencies occur during this explorative stage. Responsible decision making is incredibly apparent at this stage, as youth begin to connect positive experiences to real-world opportunities. For example, teens can identify that their teaching time was more or less successful based on their preparedness, timeliness, and by applying learned classroom management skills. Teen teachers can generalize this experience through an assumption that applying these same techniques to school, sports, or work will lead to increased personal growth.
- **Apply.** Teens begin to apply their social and emotional experiences to other aspects of their life, completing the full circle of experiential learning.



Case Study Methods

This case study sought to explore the relationship between specific SEL competencies and cross-age teaching. Does cross-age teaching enhance SEL for both younger and older youth in all five competency areas? The hypothesis leading into this study was that SEL competencies were enhanced in all areas for both teen teachers and their students.

Three educators committed to participating in this case study. These teachers had teaching experience that ranged from one to twenty-three years in elementary education and had all recently observed the 4-H YTY *Building Up: Growing Communities in the Classroom* curriculum (Shanahan et al., 2014) in their classroom. This curriculum was designed explicitly for delivery to youth in grades 3 and 4. The content of the *Building Up* curriculum focuses on defining feelings, sharing positive conflict resolution strategies, and appreciating differences. High school aged youth were trained in the curriculum and delivered the content over three one-hour sessions in an elementary classroom setting. All classrooms were located in Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area counties in Minnesota.

This case study was explanatory in nature. Key-informant interviews were implemented two to three weeks after the participating educators had observed *Building Up*. Seven questions were asked about why educators chose to incorporate cross-age teaching in their classroom, what benefits and challenges were observed, how the classroom climate had changed because of participation in the program, what SEL competencies were observed, and whether or not cross-age teaching leads to high impact SEL. Educators were asked to answer questions based solely on what was explicitly observed during the cross-age teaching experience. Educators were also asked to share relevant evidence and stories that had been noted in the weeks following the observation.

What the Educators Said

Interviewed educators unanimously agreed that cross-age teaching programs are an effective way to support high impact social and emotional learning, both for the students and their teen-teachers. Educators observed the following SEL competencies during the practice of cross-age teaching:

- **Self-Awareness.** Educators observed the older youth forming an identity around the role of “teacher,” and the teens became more confident and competent in their role from week to week, highlighting increased self-awareness. The younger youth, participated in activities that define feelings and allow for opportunities to practice this new terminology through cross-age discussion and journaling.
- **Social Awareness.** The lesser age gap between teen teacher and younger student emphasizes social-awareness as both parties tackle each other’s strengths and limitations. Younger youth were noted as being extra attentive and understanding of their teen teacher’s imperfections, and gained empathetic skills through the experience. Teens were able to tailor their teaching to foster student’s needs through examples and verbiage.
- **Self-Management.** Educators observed self-management through the teen’s ability to provide high quality classroom management, which signifies strong training and preparation by the teen teachers. 4-H YTY curriculum provides an easy to follow “script” for teen teachers, yet it also allows for improvisation. Teen teachers quickly learn how to manage their reactions while managing others. The younger students are observing positive role-model skills that they can immediately apply both within and outside of the classroom.
- **Relationship Skills.** Enriched relationship skills were highly notable, as educators distinctly witnessed relationships being built between the younger and older youth. These relationships allowed for honest question and answer discussion between teen teacher and student, and provided opportunities for the younger youth to learn about issues and topics that teens are presently facing. Teen teachers work in groups of two or more, so they must plan their team teaching techniques in advance. The students observe positive teamwork occurring through this model.
- **Responsible Decision-Making.** Responsible decision making is reflected in the fact that the teens are the lead provider of this content, as the act of teen teaching in and of itself substantially models positive peer-pressure (i.e. working collaboratively with a co-teacher, participating in a healthy activity, openly discussing tough topics as a method to manage stressors in an effective way, etc.) to the younger youth. The students are learning how to make responsible decisions through the curriculum content itself, and deepen their understanding of this content through role-plays and situational activities.

What the Teens Said

This case study further sought to understand what teen teachers were explicitly gaining from participating in their cross-age teaching program and, more specifically, what they were learning about themselves as a result of 4-H YTY participation. An electronic survey was administered to teens who had taught during the 2013-2014 school year. 242 recent teen teachers completed the survey across all four participating Minneapolis/St. Paul metro area counties.

90% of teen respondents consider participation in the 4-H YTY program an important or extremely important reason to make healthy living choices. This is due, in part, to the role-model relationship that is formed between teen-teacher and the younger students. Teens are consciously choosing to make healthier life choices due to heightened self-awareness and social-awareness, enhanced relationship skills, and a strong desire to make responsible decisions.

- *“I’ve made healthy living choices because I want to be a role model for younger kids. Being in this program has made me realize that a lot of younger kids look up to me, and I think that if I demonstrate healthy living choices, they will too.”*

94% of teens surveyed state that the YTY teaching experience has helped them make healthy living choices. This is, again, a result of high impact SEL. Teen teachers are being more intentional about their choices due to an increase of self- and social-awareness.

- *“Reading over the lessons and seeing the videos helps me as much as it helps the kids I teach. It’s a constant reminder to keep making the right choices... also, knowing the kids I teach look up to me; I would never want to do anything that might disappoint them.”*

CONCLUSION

This case study suggests that cross-age teaching can result in enhanced social and emotional learning for both the teen teachers and their students. However, it should be noted that this study was limited to one program and it did not capture information from the younger students. While more research is needed to understand the relationship between cross-age teaching and SEL skill development, cross-age teaching is certainly a promising approach for supporting SEL among both youth participants and teen teachers.

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