

**Teenagers as Volunteer Cross-Age Teachers in Out-of-School Programs:
Introducing Job Readiness Skills to Middle School Youth**

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Abstract

Teenage volunteers are often underutilized in the delivery of youth development programs. Organizations facing limited staffing and adult volunteers can expand their outreach to children and youth in after-school and summer programs by recruiting, training, and supporting teenage volunteers as cross-age teachers in these settings. The teens as volunteer teachers model of program delivery can provide a powerful service oriented, community-based learning experience for teenagers while benefiting those they teach. The authors discuss the New Jersey Teens Teaching Middle School Youth Workforce Preparation Skills Program in which 89 teenage volunteers and 95 collaborating after-school staff delivered an average of 20 hours of job readiness programming to 767 youth enrolled at 19 sites. Key elements of such programming are highlighted.

Keywords:

after-school, cross-age teaching, teenagers, volunteers

Introduction

Youth development organizations can increase their volunteer base and expand their program delivery capacity by engaging teenagers as cross-age teachers in after-school and summer programs. While peer education or peer tutoring are often defined to include cross-age teaching (Kalkowski, 1995), these authors follow the approach of Murdock, Lee, and Paterson (2003), in which cross-age teaching is considered a process where teenagers are thoroughly trained and empowered with significant responsibility to teach groups of younger children a particular curriculum for a duration long enough to support the development of the teens and have an effect on the program recipients.

Benard (1990) outlined several rationales for what she terms peer resource programming, which includes a wide variety of peer education or cross-age teaching. These rationales include the role of peer relationships in social development, the value of giving youth service opportunities, and for the peer teachers, the development of collaborative and conflict resolution skills, improved respect for diversity, increases in academic achievement, and a reduction in drug and alcohol abuse. Murdock, Lee, and Paterson acknowledged these possible outcomes of cross-age teaching, but chose to focus on the role that it can have in supporting the adolescent development of the teenage teachers. In particular, they discussed its potential in affecting five challenges of teenagers: 1) the development of abstract thinking, 2) identity formation, 3) autonomy, 4) achievement, and 5) transition to adulthood.

As noted by Ponzio and Peterson (1999), with the recent increase in the number of after-school providers serving the growing need for after-school and summer programming, there is greater opportunity to utilize cross-age teaching models outside of

the traditional classroom setting. This is especially true since there has been a trend for these providers to address the academic, social, and developmental needs of the children they serve, instead of merely providing supervised care.

Recently, several youth development practitioners (Braverman et al., 1994; Hammond-Diedrich & Walsh, 2006; Kims, 1999; Ponzio & Peterson, 1999; Smith, 2007; Walker, 2006) have reported success with out-of-school time teenagers as cross-age teachers. These programs represent a diversity of curricular areas including science, computer technology, drug and alcohol prevention, violence prevention, and leadership development. Most noted the benefits of having someone closer in age to the program recipients as teachers, and all reported some positive outcomes for the teenage teachers, including improvements in leadership, teaching, problem solving, conflict resolution, and public speaking skills. Some also noted an increase in self-esteem among the teenage teachers and the value of the cross-age teaching responsibilities in developing identify and autonomy. Several also noted the benefit to the younger children, including their relationship with positive teenage mentors and the positive outcomes of their program's particular curriculum.

For the New Jersey Teens Teaching Middle School Youth Workforce Preparation Skills Program highlighted in this article, the four authors (all 4-H youth development professionals) recruited and trained teenage volunteers to work with children and youth in collaborating after-school and summer day camp programs. The perceived benefits of this type of cross-age program delivery included: 1) leadership, citizenship, and life skill development for the teenage volunteers; 2) positive teenage role models for younger youth receiving the program; 3) greater

outreach than what is possible with just organizational staff or adult volunteers; 4) greater program sustainability; 5) strengthened community collaborations; and 6) more effective use of the unique resources and expertise of the youth development organization and the collaborating after-school provider. For this cross-age teaching program, 4-H professionals provided resource development, curriculum and training, and program coordination and evaluation. The collaborating after-school program staff provided resource development, youth and teenagers, facilities and transportation, and site-based staff to serve as mentors to the teenage volunteers.

Keys of Successfully Engaging Teenagers as Cross-Age Teachers

Lee and Murdock (2001) outlined ten essential elements to successful teenagers as cross-age teachers programs: 1) dedicated adults who support teens; 2) active teen recruitment; 3) strong curriculum; 4) initial training; 5) ongoing training and support; 6) attention to details; 7) recognition and rewards; 8) team building; 9) setting teens up for success; and 10) feedback and evaluation. Based on their experience, the directors of the New Jersey Teens Teaching Middle School Youth Workforce Preparation Skills Program determined the following as key to the success of their teens as volunteer teachers programs: a positive, productive relationship with collaborating after-school programs, teenager involvement in the design of the program, high quality training of teenagers and after-school or summer camp staff (initial and on-going – including a focus on team building and practice teaching), equipping each site with curriculum resource kits (setting teenagers up for success), and incentives for teenagers (a

stipend for each 20-hour program completed and certificates).

Program Objectives and Overview

As a program utilizing teenagers as volunteer teachers, the New Jersey Teens Teaching Middle School Youth Workforce Preparation Skills Program included the following objectives:

1. Teens will increase their leadership, citizenship, and life skills.
2. Middle school youth will increase their knowledge of workforce preparation skills.
3. Teens will increase their skills and knowledge of educational techniques for working with middle school youth.
4. Adult mentors (collaborating after-school and summer camp staff) will increase their skills and knowledge of educational techniques for working with teens and middle school youth.

The program's design was based on the principles outlined in the 4-H Afterschool Resource Guide, *Teens as Volunteer Leaders: Recruiting and Training Teens to Work with Younger Youth in After-School Programs* (Junge, 2005). A team of four 4-H youth development professionals collaborated to recruit and train 89 teenage volunteers and 95 collaborating after-school and summer camp professional staff in a job readiness curriculum. As a result, teams of teenagers and staff at four separate sites (two urban centers, Trenton and Atlantic City; a suburban high school, Sayreville; and the Picatinny Arsenal Teen Center) provided an average of 20 hours of programming to 767 middle school-aged youth enrolled at 19 after-school sites and summer day camps during the spring and summer of 2006. Of the teen teachers and middle school youth, approximately 70%

were African American, 14% Latino, 10% multi-racial, 5% white non-Hispanic, and 1% Asian.

Program Curriculum and Training

A core group of teenagers helped design the 20-hour job readiness curriculum after attending a national grantee training. The program included the following 10 lessons: Lesson #1: Learning More About Myself – Personal Awareness Activities (Lowry & Echols, 2000); Lessons 2 and 3: Learning How to Work with Others – Team Building Activities (Tavares, 2006); Lessons 4 and 5: Learning Important Life Skills – Communication and Goal Setting Activities (University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension System, 2000); Lessons 6 and 7: Job/Career Exploration – Personal Inventory, Types of Jobs/Careers (University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension System); Lessons 8 and 9: Job/Career Attainment – Job Search, Application, and Mock Interview Activities (University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension System); and, Lesson 10: Expectations on the Job – Character Education Activities (Nish, 1996).

The state training team recognized the importance of high quality initial and on-going training and support for the teenage volunteers and their adult mentors (Junge, 2005; Lee, Murdock & Paterson, 1996; Lee & Murdock, 2001; Murdock, Lee & Paterson, 2000). The training team (four teenagers, four 4-H youth development professionals, and a collaborating after-school site director) trained 25 teenage volunteers and nine collaborating after-school staff from the four participating counties at a two-day overnight training retreat. The 15-hour training included a program overview; two hours of team building activities; eight hours of activities from the identified curricula; four hours of instruction on teaching methods, lesson

preparation, and practice teaching by the teenage volunteers; and time to develop action plans for implementing the project in their home communities.

All participants believed the team building activities at the beginning of the training proved essential in introducing program directors, teenage volunteers, and adult mentors to one another and in “breaking the ice” or getting everyone comfortable working with one another and recognizing the skills and capabilities of each individual. The practice teaching session at the end of the training allowed the youth to further familiarize themselves with the curriculum’s activities and experience the challenges of organizing and presenting the lessons. As teams of teenagers presented their assigned activity in order of the curriculum outline, it also served as a review of the material that was presented the prior day.

After the initial kick-off training, teams of teenagers and adult mentors returned to their home counties where they recruited and trained additional teenagers and collaborating staff (a total of 33 hours of formal training). To help facilitate success, curricula and resource kits were provided to each of the 19 participating after-school and summer day camp sites.

Evaluation Process and Impact

A retrospective pre-post Teen Leadership Survey with 15 items using a four-point scale (0 = no ability, 1 = some ability, 2 = good ability, 3 = excellent ability) was used to measure changes in self-perceptions of the participating teen teachers’ leadership skills. Following the completion of their training and teaching commitment, teens self reported their organizational, time management, leadership, teamwork, speaking, writing, decision-making, planning, and teaching skills (objective #1). Twenty-nine of the 38

teenagers from the Sam Naples Community Center's summer teen camp who taught 153 youth at four day camps throughout Trenton during the summer of 2006 completed the Teen Leadership Survey. Their mean teen leadership score increased from 2.10 to 2.55. Six of the teenagers who completed 20 hours of teaching during the spring of 2006 session at the Hedgepeth-Williams Community Center also reported a increase in their teen leadership score, 1.68 to 2.82.

The middle school-aged youth participants receiving the job readiness programming from the teenagers completed a retrospective Workforce Skills Survey. The youth responded to 18 items using a three-point scale (1 = not at all, 2 = somewhat, 3 = to a great extent). Skills surveyed included decision-making, communication, responsibility, goal setting, teamwork, job exploration, and job attainment skills (objective #2). The Workforce Skills Survey was completed by a convenience sample of 530 of the 767 total youth at the 19 sites in attendance on the final day of the program. The overall workforce skills score significantly increased in each group (Table 1).

Because of their involvement in the program, three of the teenage volunteers who completed their teaching hours during

the spring session were hired by the City of Trenton as junior staff for their summer day camp. Two of the participating teenagers co-presented the program at the 2006 Children, Youth, and Families at Risk (CYFAR) Conference.

Summary and Implications

The authors wish to note that evaluation findings for this program may not be inferred to any larger group other than the convenience sample of participants involved in the actual program. However, the following discussion could be used as a point of exploration and dialogue regarding similar programs involving teenagers as cross-age teachers in out-of-school settings.

Teenagers are often underutilized in the delivery of youth development programs. Community-based youth serving organizations often struggle to recruit traditional adult volunteers and to keep teenagers engaged in their youth programs. Using teenagers as cross-age teachers presents opportunities for youth development professionals to expand their volunteer base and reach a greater number of children and youth while successfully engaging teenagers in authentic, community-based service activity.

Table 1
Total Workforce Skills Pre- and Post-test Mean scores for Program Participants Taught by Teen Teachers at Four Separate Sites.

Location/ Collaborator	Youth Reached	Youth Surveyed	Pre Mean	Post Mean
Trenton (spring): after-school sites	420	258	2.08	2.74
Trenton (summer): summer camps	153	127	2.09	2.53
Atlantic City: after-school sites	101	54	1.74	2.58
Picatinny Arsenal Teen Center	71	69	2.24	2.40
Sayreville Middle School	22	22	2.19	2.50

In the New Jersey Teens Teaching Middle School Youth Workforce Preparation Skills Program, teenagers significantly improved their organizational, time management, leadership, teamwork, speaking, writing, decision-making, planning, and teaching skills while effectively delivering 20-hour job readiness programs to 767 youth enrolled in 19 out-of-school programs. The lead author is currently using a similar cross-age teaching program delivery method to teach lessons on the importance of healthy eating habits and physical activity to children and youth at after-school and summer camp programs. Twenty teenage volunteers were recruited and trained as Food and Fitness Ambassadors using the Get Moving – Get Healthy with New Jersey 4-H curriculum in the spring of 2007. Since, they have planned and delivered Get Moving – Get Healthy events for over 300 youth at programs sponsored by Boys and Girls Club, a charter school, and the city’s parks and recreation department. As with the job readiness program, dedicated program directors and adult mentors; extensive initial and on-going training and support; a structured curriculum with clear lesson plans and engaging activities; and resource kits for the teenage volunteers and collaborating staff have proved essential to the success of the program.

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