

We're Going to Japan!

What happens when 8th graders become the teachers?

Executive Summary

Research Question:

What happens when my eighth grade students work in teams to teach first, second, third, and fourth grade students about Japan?

- Does assuming the role of “teacher” change eighth grade students’ attitudes towards learning?
- How do both the older and younger students feel about this way of learning?
- How do the teachers feel about this way of teaching/learning?
- How do sustained relationships between older and younger students affect the school climate?
- Is this an effective use of our limited classroom time? Are students effectively learning the stated objectives for each lesson?

Rationale

While observing an elementary school in Japan, I was amazed by all the multi-age teamwork I saw. The oldest students had many leadership roles – walking younger students to school, facilitating games on the playground, and leading clean-up teams after lunch.

In contrast, how are the 8th graders regarded at my school?

- Only 21% of teachers at my school said the 8th graders are positive role models; 53% said they are negative role models
- 78% of teachers said that it is good that the younger and older students are housed in separate buildings

The reality:

- In general, 8th graders receive negative attention in the school – fighting, bullying, dress code violations, fooling around, etc.
- Positive attention is always given to the same small group of students, the “favorites”, whether it’s deserved or not. The same kids do everything.
- There are very few leadership opportunities for students in the school.
- The school community does not see what I see – caring, intelligent, responsible role models.

So . . . What if I create a project where my 8th graders build and sustain meaningful relationships with teachers and younger students?

What if my students teach other students about Japan?

Data Collection Tools

- Initial survey of school staff
- Pre- and post- project surveys completed by all participating students
- Formal and informal observations and note-taking
- Formal and informal meetings with participating teachers
- Debrief sessions with each team following each lesson
- Student journals
- Teacher journal

Data & Analysis

Impact on 8th graders

- Excitement, enthusiasm, and self-confidence
- Responsibility – individual and collective
- New leaders emerged
- Teamwork – not cliques
- Awareness of their influence and impact on the students and the teachers
- Real relationships with the younger students emerged and are being maintained
- Drastically improved dress code adherence
- Excellent attendance: 97.5% for March – highest in the school
- Appreciation for teachers and teaching

Impact on younger students

- Excitement & Enthusiasm
- “I thought they’d be mean, but the 8th graders are actually nice!”
- Intangible sense of “being a part of a something”
- Positive, lasting relationships have emerged and are being sustained with the older students
- New knowledge about a new culture
- Improved attendance
- Peaked curiosity - More, more, more!

Impact on me

- Revelation 1: **Why don’t we listen to the kids?** (“Mrs. Stecz, no offence, but those little kids are going to be bored and start running around the room. We should have them work in small groups instead. And let’s make it into a contest. That always makes them pay attention better.”)
- Revelation 2: **We MUST have high expectations.** (If we treat them like teachers, they act like teachers)
- Revelation 3: **We underestimate kids.** (Let THEM lead guided reading groups!)

Policy Recommendations

- (Especially) In K-8 elementary schools, we need to find ways to invest and utilize older students. We should train them to lead literature discussions, facilitate guided reading, mentor younger students, tutor, and assist teachers with creating meaningful lessons.
- Teachers of different grade levels should collaborate to create multi-age projects.
- A wide variety of leadership opportunities should be available to all students in schools and all students should be encouraged to participate.