

We're going to Japan! What Happens When 8th Graders Become the Teachers?

"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
in the morning before their first day of teaching a third grade class about Japan.*

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We're Going to Japan!

What Happens When 8th Graders Become the Teachers?

Research Question

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

Subquestions

- 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

Last October I spent three weeks in Japan as a participant in the Fulbright Memorial Fund Teacher Program. Established by the Japanese government in 1995, the program is intended to bring 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.

When I observed schools in Japan, one of the things that impressed me most was how older students held so much responsibility and leadership within the elementary school, which includes grades one through six. 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. It was evident that the students respected each other and were used to functioning as a team. I thought a lot about this idea of multi-age 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,” “showing off,” and bullying, which undermine any team’s effectiveness, are minimized because students are grouped together with children of various ages.

I really liked this idea of multi-age students working together to accomplish tasks. I thought it could be particularly beneficial in a school like mine, which includes kindergarten through eighth grade. Often it seems like the middle school students are so different from the primary school students that it is hard to think of them as schoolmates. This is further exaggerated by the fact that our school is housed in two separate buildings,

one for kindergarten through grade three and the other for grades four through eight. Students are rarely given the opportunity to see each other, let alone work together. When I surveyed my school's staff, 78% of them responded that they either moderately or strongly agreed that it is good that the older students and younger students are housed in separate buildings. Only 17% disagreed.

What underlies this opinion that it is better for older and younger students to be separated? Certainly there are many explanations, including same grade-level teachers wanting proximity for purposes of collaboration, but I suspected that there was also an underlying belief that younger and older students need to be separated to keep the "misbehaving" older students from being "bad role models" for the younger students. In a staff survey, I found that only 21% of teachers responded that the junior high students are good role models, whereas 53% of teachers said they are not. As an eighth grade teacher, I observe my students on a daily basis and it is disturbing to me that our school staff does not see the amazing kindness, intelligence, and maturity that most of my students exhibit within my classroom. Inappropriate behavior, including violence, bullying, profanity, disrespect, "fooling around" and dress code violations does, indeed, occur, but this behavior is given paramount attention within the school compared to 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 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 a cross-age teaching project was an ideal way to showcase my students' hard work, intelligence, and responsibility. If empowered with a mentoring/teaching role, I believed my students would exceed expectations.

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 brothers and sisters. 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. Twenty-six out of twenty-eight of my students have younger siblings, and all but one of them professed to have significant responsibilities for their care at home. For example, when asked what responsibilities they have, 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 wrote, "I do everything," and a third wrote, "I have to do whatever my mother doesn't do." Thus, middle school-aged children are used to extensive responsibilities at home and therefore can and should be trusted to have such responsibility at school. Furthermore, teaching middle school-aged children how to appropriately and effectively teach younger children may serve to improve the quality of care the students are providing for younger siblings at home.

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 for the school as a whole. Inspired by Japanese children I saw playing, cleaning, and walking together, I was interested in seeing what happened when older students and younger students actively learn together in a classroom. Upon returning

from Japan, 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 happens when I provide learning opportunities for my students about Japan, then give them the opportunity to provide similar experiences for younger students.

Literature Review

Cross-age teaching stands among often-cited topics including peer teaching, peer and cross-age tutoring, reciprocal teaching, cooperative learning, and collaborative learning. Differentiating between each term is difficult because they are often used interchangeably by researchers and teachers. However, we can think of each instructional strategy as falling under the umbrella of "students teaching students," which involves the practice of students assuming the role of "teacher". Whether it is in a one-on-one setting as in a traditional tutoring relationship or if each member of a collaborative group is responsible for his/her portion of the teaching role, well-planned, well-organized, and well-executed student-student interactions have repeatedly proven to be effective methods of student learning.

Navigating the available literature, I focused my research on cross-age relationships, regardless of how the author defined them. I prefer the term cross-age teaching to cross-age tutoring because I feel that tutoring implies a more limited role for the older student where he/she bestows previously acquired knowledge to the younger counterpart as opposed to a more dynamic, creative shared teaching/learning experience. For ease of discussion, however, I will use the terms tutor/teacher and tutee/pupil because the attitudinal and cognitive consequences are similar and current research has focused much more on the practice of cross-age tutoring than cross-age teaching, if there is in fact a difference as I claim there is. There is extensive research on the benefits of such relationships for both the tutor/teacher and the tutee/pupil, particularly for reading and mathematics. In 1982, Cohen, Kulik, and Kulik selected 52 well-designed peer and cross-age tutoring studies to meta-analyze the program effects on test scores in reading and math. The results show a moderately beneficial effect on tutees' achievement and a smaller but significant effect on their attitudes toward subject matter. For the tutors, the researchers found a small but significant effect for academic outcomes and a slightly larger effect for their attitudes towards subject matter. In recent years, additional studies have continued to show positive benefits of cross-age tutoring. Kalkowski's 1995 synthesis of 82 documents related to peer and cross-age tutoring states that both tutors and tutees benefit academically from peer and cross-age tutoring in elementary mathematics and language arts. In addition, there has been a significant increase in studies focusing on the impact of cross-age tutoring on specific target groups, including low-achieving, limited-English-speaking, learning disabled, behaviorally disordered and other at-risk student populations. In studies where the high-needs students acted as the tutors, significant benefits were cited in academic achievement, locus of control, self-esteem, social skills, attitude towards school, and dropout rates, truancy, and tardiness. Various studies also show that cross-age and same-age peer-mediated strategies were as effective as or more effective than traditional teacher-mediated practices for regular and special education students who were tutees.

These findings are relevant to my topic in that they verify the positive academic and affective outcomes of cross-age student relationships. But why? What is it about students teaching other students that seems to work so well? Several causal explanations have been suggested. One category of explanations can be described as motivational or attitudinal. For the tutor, assuming the role of “teacher” means taking on a teacher’s characteristics, including status, authority, self-perceptions and attitudes (Puchner, 8). This responsibility prompts action rather than passivity and often even reluctant learners are energized by the idea that others, “novices,” are dependent upon them for assistance. Raising the tutor’s self-esteem is associated with academic success (Puchner, 8). Additionally, both tutors and tutees are motivated by this more flexible, democratic environment that reduces anxiety and facilitates learning (Cohen, 1986; Nevi, 1983).

In addition to motivational explanations, cognitive explanations also explain why student-to-student teaching/tutoring is effective. Bargh and Schul (1980) suggest that preparing to teach someone or using elaborated explanation may promote cognitive restructuring, encouraging the tutor/teacher to reorganize or clarify concepts in new ways, perhaps recognizing previous misunderstandings. Similarly, Slavin’s “cognitive elaboration” perspective suggests that “when children explain things to each other, they must relate the material and concepts in their minds to other ideas that they know, which makes new cognitive connections, and hence enhances memory and learning” (Slavin, 1996). This perspective explains why the tutor benefits from the relationship, because he or she must organize and re-organize his/her understanding of materials in order to explain them in various contexts to someone else.

As for the tutee, he or she benefits from having someone closer to his/her developmental level who may be able to explain concepts in a variety of ways and language that may not be apparent to the adult teacher. Damon and Phelps explain 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. (1989a, 138)

Thus, as Kalkowski puts it, student tutors/teachers may “simply be ‘good teachers’”.

In spite of the proven effectiveness of student-student teaching, researchers repeatedly warn that thorough training of the tutors is a necessary component of a successful program. According to Topping (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 “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.

Although research on the effects of peer and cross-age tutoring is extensive, there are certainly areas which require additional study. For one, research has been mostly limited to cross-age one-on-one tutoring relationships in reading and mathematics. Some

studies have focused on broader content areas such as science, music, and computer technology; however these studies have been significantly smaller in scale. There has also 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. This combination of the roles of tutor/teacher and mentor would, I believe, produce both direct and indirect outcomes for academic, social, and behavioral improvements. Finally, I have found no research related to adult teacher's attitudes towards cross-age teaching/tutoring and how it requires collaboration among the adult teachers in order to facilitate these sustained learning relationships. Thus, there is a significant need for additional research in these areas.

School Context

My school is located on the Southwest side of Chicago in the Englewood community. Approximately 800 students attend Pre-Kindergarten through eighth grade, 99% of which are from low income families and receive free lunch. The racial/ethnic breakdown is 95% African-American and 5% Hispanic. The mobility rate is 41.4%, the chronic truancy rate is 6.4%, and the attendance rate is 89.7%.

The school consists of two buildings – one that houses Pre-K through grade 3 and the other housing grades 4-8. My school has been on academic probation since 2003. According to 2004 ITBS scores, only 24% of students are reading on grade level. Currently, we have an acting principal who was assigned to our school during the 2004-2005 school year when our principal was removed from his position after being charged with a crime. We have two assistant principals, one for each building.

The seventh and eighth grade classes are partially departmentalized. All four teachers teach reading to their homeroom, and students rotate for math, science, and social studies. In addition to teaching my homeroom reading for 90 minutes, I also teach eighth grade math to two classes for 80 minutes each.

My homeroom class is unique in several ways. First of all, I have looped with my class from sixth grade through eighth grade. At the beginning of this project, I had 27 students, 14 of whom I have had for three years - 9 of them for 2 years, and 4 of them for 1 year. During the 10 week project, two of my students transferred out to new schools, one of my students was expelled, and I received one new student who was moved from sixth to eighth grade because of his age. Besides having been with many of my students for multiple years, my class is also unique because my students' test scores are notably higher than the average for the rest of the school. According to 2006 ISAT scores, 80% of my students are on or above grade level in both reading and math. I think my students' high achievement levels and their familiarity with my classroom culture of teamwork and independent learning positioned them for success with a long-term, multi-age teaching project.

Methods

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

Pre- and post-project surveys completed by students and teachers: Prior to the start of the project, 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 what the adults in the school felt about the 8th graders and their influence on the overall school community and particularly on the youngest students. The 8th 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 8th graders and how they felt about the upcoming project. At the project's completion, I surveyed all participating students to see if and how their perceptions may have changed and how they enjoyed the project.

Student journals: At the conclusion of each week's lesson, all participating students responded to prompts in their journals. I envisioned this to be a very effective data collection tool, however by the third week of the project I realized that the responses I was getting, particularly by the youngest students, were very general and vague. The participating teachers said that my students had a very difficult time transitioning their students from an active, hands-on activity, to calm, reflective journaling. We had planned to move the journal time to later in the day after my students had left and the younger students were more settled, but that never successfully occurred. Thus, the student journals were disappointing to me because I had planned for them to be a rich source of data.

Teacher journal: Beginning the it is week of the project, I kept a detailed journal of my observations and reflections on my successes, questions, and frustrations.

Observations and notes: Over the course of the project, I kept a notebook chronicling my observations of students preparing for and debriefing their lessons and from conversations I heard among students about the project.

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. I took notes at each of these meetings to record their thoughts. Also, I emailed the teachers specific questions I had throughout the project so that I would have written responses in their own words.

Data and Analysis

Project Overview

Getting Started

In November, I began planning a 10 week unit about Japan that integrates language arts, social studies, visual arts and mathematics. Each week focuses on a

different topic such as geography, language, food, schools, haiku, theater, origami, and traditional folk tales. My eighth grade students would spend the first part of each week learning the content, then would be teaching it to younger grades 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 them time to practice the lesson, and then have them teach it to their assigned class of younger students.

I divided my class of 27 students into three groups and assigned each group to one of three classrooms, including a second grade class, a third grade class, and a fourth grade class. I chose classrooms where I had a previous good relationship with the teacher because I felt that they would be easy to work with and would support the curriculum outside the time my students were there teaching. 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 that the overall impact on the school community might be greater and/or easier to see if the project spanned three grade levels rather than three classrooms in one grade level.

My goal was two-fold. First, I wanted my students and their younger counterparts to learn about Japan and be able to compare aspects of the culture to the United States. Second, I wanted all of my students to assume a role of 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 remains consistent from week to week.

We officially began the project the week of January 25, 2006. I met with the three participating teachers and gave them a copy of the unit curriculum. We decided that my students would come to their classrooms every Thursday and Friday for 45 – 60 minutes. We had to stagger the times throughout the day because the lessons I planned required materials that the groups would need to share. A significant disadvantage of this situation was that I would not be able to observe the lessons because I would always have 2/3 of my class with me while a group was teaching. 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 wanted my students to feel entrusted with a major responsibility, so I treated it like a business meeting. I brought in donuts and 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 two weeks so that everyone had 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 were to have a debrief conference with me immediately upon their return from teaching.

Expected vs. Unanticipated Outcomes

After the 10 weeks, I found that looking back on how the project evolved over the ten weeks was much more interesting to me than any before-after comparisons. I had anticipated that this project would increase my students' motivation, 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 is exciting to validate those assumptions with the data I collected.

Overall, my students were highly motivated by this project. This was evident by their language, enthusiasm, attendance, and adherence to school rules. 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?” In March, which was the project’s culmination when my students worked with their classes to prepare reader’s theater performances of Japanese folk tales, my class had a 97% attendance rate, which was the highest in the school. And over the ten weeks I only had 4 dress code violations, which was a drastic improvement and is extremely atypical for a middle school class in our school. 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. At the time, I happily assumed that my students’ decision to come in dress code proved that they valued their participation in the project more than their dress. Since the project’s completion, though, my students have overwhelmingly continued to come to school in uniform despite the trend in the rest of the school to wear jeans and other street clothes. My students grumble at the injustice, but admit to feeling a sense of pride that our class “dresses like scholars.” Clearly, their role as teachers has gone to their heads!

Although such results validate my assumptions about the benefits of multi-age teaching, I believe that the more interesting results of this project were the outcomes that I hadn’t anticipated – that I wasn’t necessarily looking for. Looking at my data, particularly my teacher journal, I began to see three central themes emerging:

- Student “ownership” changed the project from *my* pre-designed lessons/plans to *their* new, improved lessons/plans.
- Whereas I had primarily been thinking about how the project would affect the group as a whole, the most striking results were seen in individual students.
- 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. The first 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 they practiced their “parts.” It felt scripted, but I think this was helpful because the students were nervous and it gave them confidence to know exactly what to say when. The energy level was high, and as each group left and returned, nerves were replaced with confidence. Everyone was talking at once, tripping over each others’ words to tell the countless stories of their new young students. Ms. Burack, the third grade participating teacher’s immediate feedback was, “My students listened better to your students than they listen to me.” Ms. Rudin, 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 seemed to work. The younger

students were intimidated by their new teachers and were happy to listen and participate. I was excited and 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 day, aligned them to the state standards for the four different grade levels, and gathered and organized all the necessary materials. And this was just the introductory lesson! A survey, KWL, and icebreaker. Had I gotten myself in over my head?

The second 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 lesson I had designed was a failure. Even though I had spent several hours over the weekend finalizing my detailed lesson plan, on Monday I still felt unprepared. The topic for the week was the geography of Japan and the United States. I wanted them to study a map to compare and contrast the two countries using a Venn diagram. To make the lesson more interesting, I thought the students should actually make their own map by gluing continent puzzle pieces onto blue construction paper, then label the continents, oceans, and two countries. A kinesthetic activity – how fun, or so I thought. I had wanted to model it for my students on Monday morning during our reading time, but even though I had gotten to school early, I couldn't finish all the cutting and sorting in time, and therefore I 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 up my objectives, 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 the principal's office 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 was frustrated! (*Teacher Journal, 1/30/06*)

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, 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 group about how the lesson could be improved, and then I split them into their groups to

finalize their agendas. Circulating to help, I was slightly amazed at how seriously two of the 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 Kimesha 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. (*Teacher Journal, 1/31/06*)

At this point I thought back to my original research question – What happens when my eighth grade students work in teams to teach second, third, and fourth grade students about Japan? – and I realized that by trying to do all the planning 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.

I realized that this project required two distinct levels of teaching - 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 three Japanese alphabets* lesson by stapling 3 paper plates together to make a triple Venn Diagram, then pre-making "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 fourth 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 just like Japanese students would, by blasting music on the radio while they worked. This seemingly 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 over-promising candy rewards for winning teams, but I realized this was all part of the learning process. There was no doubt that the project was theirs, not mine. The final week, where 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. I don't know who was prouder that day – me or my students.

Looking back, I'm glad 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 ability to negotiate a cohesive plan, delegate tasks, and take personal and collective responsibility became the predominate factors in their effectiveness as teachers. Even when I had thought that the groups would be teaching the lessons I had modeled and that group members would be fulfilling clearly defined roles, I knew that there would be varying levels of participation, and I had tried to group students who I thought would work best together. This was very difficult because middle school students are ceremoniously vocal about who they will and who they will not work with. To separate best friends and worst enemies when I was only dealing with three groups was unrealistic, but I consciously tried to disperse similar personality types and cliques.

The second grade team worked particularly well together and was therefore the most successful, which I define 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 their class when the regular teacher was absent and a substitute was there instead. The second grade teacher 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." This comment definitely reinforced my belief that this project was as beneficial for the younger students as it was for my eighth graders. When my students returned from teaching the next day, they expressed some frustration in 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. For instance, the third grade team had such a miserable experience the first time, that when they showed up several weeks later and she was absent again they decided not to even stay and 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 amongst the group members over whether or not it was a good decision. Of course I could understand their frustration with out-of-control students; however I was trying to teach them the importance of dependability. I realized that I was asking a lot of fourteen year olds, but I wanted them to take their roles seriously and not think of the project as optional. But since 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" 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 since it "looked bad" that they left? There wasn't a consensus and there wasn't full participation, but it was a conversation rarely heard among eighth graders.

Over the ten weeks, the project continued to evolve in such progressive and regressive strokes. It was a huge learning curve for my students, but there was no

question that they took ownership of the project. It had started as mine, but now it was theirs, for better or worse.

New Leadership

When assigning students to their teams, I had consciously separated my “natural” leaders; the ones whom I had seen assume leadership positions in the past. Those were the ones 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 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 it. Darian is an excellent example. Darian has been in my class for three years. He is extremely well-liked by his peers, mainly for his quick sense of humor. He can invent amazingly creative raps on the spot. He has above average standardized test scores in both reading and math, but he has never applied himself in school and therefore typically earns D’s and F’s in most subject areas. I have always liked Darian, but I would never have chosen him for a leadership position because he never seems to take things seriously. He is often out of dress code, and I constantly am telling him to go to his desk, sit down, and stop talking. During the it is 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 where 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!* (Teacher Journal, 1/25/06)

Darian sat out that first Thursday, and then he came to me Friday morning and begged to have another chance. I was happy to comply because I really did want all my students to have this opportunity, but I was afraid I was setting a dangerous precedent by letting him back in. Looking back, I know I made the right choice. Darian was an excellent teacher! The second graders thought he was so funny, but they respected him, too, because he kept them on task. The second grade teacher told me about one of her observations of Darian the second 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. (Teacher Notes, 2/9/06)

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 most of my students, Darian responded that no, he had not acted differently. I was so surprised, because to me, he had definitely 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. The one thing he definitely had changed was his dress code compliance, but that was because I had given him a reason to. How many other students are waiting to be given responsibilities, given the chance to prove themselves?

I think that I was wrong in that early diary entry about positive leadership roles not suiting all students. 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 I think it was more that they felt the importance of their responsibility and truly stepped into the role of a teacher. Initially it seemed surprising that troublemakers could easily step into such a role, but when you think of troublemaking itself as an exhibition of leadership – in the sense that it grabs one's attention and persuades one to do something – acting as a teacher is simply a more constructive way to exercise the same skills. What is it that troublemakers most often seek? Attention. And isn't multi-age 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. Thus, Darian never felt like I was making him wear his school uniform; he simply decided that it was worth it for him to do so.

I think this element of self-control, of self-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 dismantle 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're showing that we trust them and respect them to do something extremely important – teach other students. And what are the results? First, they are learning the content we want them to learn; Second, they 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, the younger students are learning the content we want them to learn; Fourth, the younger students are observing positive behaviors from older students who are serving as role models and mentors.

These outcomes validate my belief that a multi-age teaching project is not only appropriate but also extremely beneficial when all students in a given classroom are involved. Through my research, most of the multi-age teaching projects I found were geared towards specific populations at both ends of the spectrum, either honor students or highly at risk students. Further, most of these projects involved one-on-one or small group multi-age learning where the older student was designated as a reading buddy or math tutor. They proved successful; however, I believe 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 certainly achieve the results for “natural” leaders, but it also affords the opportunity for new leadership to emerge. Darian is just one example of many students who shocked me with their enthusiasm and leadership. In little and big ways, all of my students contributed to the success of our Japan project because they were all able to relate to their students in unique ways.

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. The whole process was fascinating. 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, their favorite teachers are not necessarily the men and/or women that they would identify as the best teachers. To be a good teacher, they told me that you must be “strict,” “structured,” and “organized.” You must also “be really smart and know what you’re talking about.” Some of the kids claimed that they actually, “usually like the easy teachers better because we 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 extremely interested in how my students would present themselves to their students. Initially, I was concerned that my students would try to be too friendly, too casual with their students. I know many new teachers make that mistake of trying too hard to be liked instead of respected. It definitely was the case with three boys in the second grade group who let the girls be the “enforcers” while they were more the “clowns.” When all of them worked together it was fine, but it became a major problem the last week of the project when they split into two groups to work on the readers’ theater performances. At it is, the boys wanted to work together and were boasting 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 refused to comply with the boys’ 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 switch to their 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. It didn’t mean that the kids liked her any less; it was simply that she had presented herself as someone who was focused on the task and expected them to take it seriously, too. After the readers’ theater performances, I talked to the boys about how they could have handled the situation differently. Frank 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. Rayshawn replied, “It was cool.” I then asked if they thought the kids, their students, had more fun playing around with them or performing readers’ theater. Frank responded, “I think they probably had more fun doing readers’ 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."

This conversation, along with the observations I had made over the ten week project, made me reflect on this idea of "fun" in the classroom. Was it really that important to student learning or was it just an extra bonus when a focused lesson was also 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. 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, etc. They always wanted there to be a winner, because they knew from their own experience that competition is a strong motivator.

Watching and listening to my students plan lessons was a fascinating way for me, as their teacher, to access what they believe is important in a lesson and the way they like to learn. It was crucial to them that each lesson has a *purpose*. This is different than an objective. An objective is teacher-directed; it states the actual content or skill a teacher wants the students to master. The purpose, on the other hand, is the student-centered motivation, which is more than, "Why do I need to learn this?" Despite the pressure teachers feel to defend the validity of a lesson's content, the question of "why do I need to learn this" is usually overstated and, in my experience, is more of a procrastination mechanism than anything else. Implicitly, students know that it is in their own best interest to learn what a teacher says is important, especially if it is written in some thick textbook. The content itself is rarely controversial. It is a lesson's format and delivery that most determines students' participation and engagement.

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. So, what can we learn from each other? So much. By watching my students teach, I learned how they want to learn. They want to play games, they want to compete, they want projects, they want to draw, color, cut, and glue, they want to listen to music, they want to act things out, they want to work in groups, they want to stand up and move, they want a product – something they've made – and they want it displayed in the hallway where kids from other classes can see it. My students want activities. 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 occurred to my students 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 Frank said, it is more fun when you're actually learning something.

Thus, we come back to 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 (I forget who)'s back-up dancers are Harajuku girls, and animè? 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?

Thus, as a result of this project, I have learned a myriad of new things that have forever changed my view on teaching:

- Teachers should not feel constrained to only expose their students to explicitly culturally relevant material. (In my case, social studies should be more than African American history.)
- Students crave active, purposeful activities that result in some product when they are learning new things.
- Students overwhelmingly prefer to work in groups because it is more fun and they get more attention from the teacher.
- Students want to share what they learn with people outside their classroom.
- When in doubt, ask the kids what and how they would like to learn something.
- And most importantly, let students be teachers!

Conclusions and Next Steps

I believe this project is a valuable contribution to the research pertaining to multi-age teaching and learning. First, it is unique in that it looks at what happens when all students from a classroom are involved in teaching all students from other classrooms, rather than hand-picking tutors and tutees based on any pre-defined criteria. The significance of this is that it allows new leadership to evolve because students are not pre-judged as to how they will perform in this new context. A second important distinction is that in this study the students are teaching an integrated unit of new-to-them content. This makes it very different from being math tutors or reading buddies, which rely on previously acquired (and mastered) skills. It equalizes the older students because being “good at reading or math” is irrelevant to being able to teach younger kids how to count to ten in Japanese. This can be seen as one model for differentiated instruction. A third distinction is that in this project not only are the older students teaching new-to-them 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! These three elements provide new insight into the effects of multi-age teaching.

It is also important to note, however, that this project has certain limitations. It was not my intention to look at whether or how participation in this project affected academic achievements. I did not administer any formal assessments to measure new knowledge they had 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 it because we were not technically the “teachers” at that time and it was outside the scope of this project for me to teach my students how to assess student work. Further, I also did not look at whether or how my students’ or the younger students’ participation in this project affected their achievement in other subject areas. I was focused more on their behaviors and attitudes than on academic achievement.

For me, the natural next step would be to expand upon this idea of multi-age teaching over the next year. I am switching from eighth grade to fifth grade, which will be an interesting vantage point from which to continue. Many of my new students will

be from the fourth grade class my eighth graders taught this year. Interestingly, they keep asking me if they can teach the little kids about Japan next year. None of them have asked if the new eighth graders will be teaching them. This shows me that they are more excited to be the teachers than the students, which I think is positive. Although one of my primary goals in establishing this project in the first place was because I was frustrated by the negative attitudes towards the junior high students, now that I've seen the benefits I think the project will be equally as meaningful for fifth graders as it was for eighth graders. I do plan, however, to collaborate with an eighth grade teacher and to teach her students how to facilitate guided reading and literature circles so that they can assist me with teaching reading in my classroom. That experience paired with an on-going project where my students are teaching in a primary classroom will allow me to observe how my students negotiate their roles as both students-of-students and teachers-of-students.

I also plan to look more at how these multi-age teaching projects impact the greater school community. Because the Japan Project ran so late in the school year, it has been difficult for me to assess its impact on the school community. However, I can say that as a result of our project, a sixth grade and fourth grade class partnered to do a joint project on Egypt, a successful tutoring arrangement was made between several first grade and eighth grade students, and the librarian from the primary building has asked several times for eighth graders to assist her with supervising and assisting children. My hope is that as relationships between junior high students, teachers, and younger students develop, the school community will begin to recognize and use the older students as responsible and dependable resources. I also hope that the collaborative relationships that we are encouraged to have with our same-grade colleagues will expand into meaningful multi-grade collaboration projects.

Policy Recommendations

Based on my research, my policy recommendations are as follows:

- (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. 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.
- Teachers must have the flexibility in their teaching schedule to be able to implement lessons outside the designated scope and sequence for content areas that both the teachers and the students are curious and excited about.
- A wide variety of leadership opportunities should be available to all students in schools and all students should be encouraged to participate.

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