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Teenagers as Teachers Programs: Ten Essential Elements

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Teenagers as Teachers Programs: Ten Essential Elements

Abstract

Teenagers teaching younger children can be beneficial to both the children whom they teach and the teens themselves. This qualitative study identified current practices in 14 teens as teachers programs that contribute to positive outcomes for teenaged teachers and the children. Using in-depth individual and group interviews, this study found that complex planning and skilled implementation are requisite in programs with positive outcomes. A dedicated adult who supported teens was found to be the most critical element in successful programs. Other essential elements included active recruitment strategies and a strong curriculum.

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Both research and practical experiences support the notion that youth service and/or participation in communities can contribute to alleviating many of the problems faced by today's youth. These problems include alienation from families, schools, and communities, and involvement in activities that may lead to teen pregnancy, substance abuse, and other problems (Benard, 1990). Cross-age teaching is believed by many to be among the most effective at providing youth with opportunities that will lead to healthy development and avoidance of delinquent behaviors (e.g., Resnick & Gibbs, 1986; Schine, 1989). Having teenagers teach younger children is a commonly used model in Extension's youth development programs. Despite limited research on the benefits of cross-age teaching, many of us have observed first-hand the positive outcomes for the children who are taught by teens as well as the teenaged teachers.

The limited evaluation research from early programs showed 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 (e.g., National Commission on Resources for Youth, 1974; Hedin, 1987; Dean & Murdock, 1992). Evaluation research also suggested that successful programs include critical ingredients, such as high-quality training in social skills, time for group processing, and positive interdependence in which teens and younger youth learn together and depend on one another. It was noted that programs that lack these ingredients may be ineffective (Benard, 1990).

The purpose of this study was to identify current practices that contribute to positive outcomes for teenaged teachers. Specifically, this study examined:

- Current practices of teenagers as teachers programs,
- Critical elements of teen training and support, and
- Strategies that contribute to successful teenagers as teachers programs.

Research Methods

Sample

The study sample included 13 programs in the San Francisco Bay Area that used teenagers as cross-age teachers of younger children. Although the teen teaching programs were varied in terms of settings, size, ages of teens and youngsters, and the subject matter taught, all of them shared the following common characteristics.

- Teenagers were responsible for all teaching. They did not merely assist an adult.
- Teenagers taught children who were at least 2 to 3 years younger than the teens.
- Teenagers taught small groups, usually 5 to 12 children, not one-on-one.
- Teenagers were trained and taught a particular subject matter curriculum (not homework help or counseling).
- The curricula taught to younger children were for enrichment, not remediation.
- Programs were of sufficient duration so that teenagers developed relationships among themselves and with the children they taught.

Methods

Qualitative research methods were used for this study because the research questions were exploratory in nature (e.g., "what is happening in these programs?" and "what are the salient characteristics?") and explanatory (e.g., "what events, attitudes, and so forth are shaping the programs?" and "how do these forces interact to prepare or not prepare teens for their teaching roles?").

Three University of California Cooperative Extension Advisors from three San Francisco Bay Area counties conducted the research using individual and focus group interviews, participant observation, and program document review. Seventeen in-depth interviews of agency staff and cross-age teachers from a wide variety of San Francisco Bay Area agencies were conducted using an open-ended, conversational format (as opposed to an oral survey).

Agencies were selected for diversity in the sample. An attempt was made to involve both large and small agencies; public and privately funded agencies; and agencies with varying organizational structures, missions, clientele, and so forth.

All of the sites selected were relatively well-established programs or pilot programs within established organizations. All offered direct service programs to children and youth on a regular basis.

Interviews were audio taped, transcribed, coded, and analyzed. Five participant observations were made of adult trainers and teen teachers during training and as the teens worked with younger children. Ethnographic field notes were completed, coded, and analyzed according to standard procedures (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Program records and documents of various programs were examined. A literature review and past assessments by the agencies were used to inform the research as well as for validity by comparing past findings with the current research.

Validity

Several strategies were employed to address validity in this study. Multiple data collection strategies, as described above, were used to triangulate methods. Within-method triangulation was also used in the in-depth interviews by asking key questions several times in different contexts. The three researchers involved in the study reviewed and discussed all of the data to reach consensus regarding the findings. Preliminary findings were presented and discussed with professional colleagues and some of the interview respondents.

Findings

There were 10 elements that were found to be essential to the success of teenagers as teachers programs.

1. Dedicated Adults Who Support Teens

The adult(s) who ran the various cross-age teaching programs in this study appeared to be a critical factor in the success and long-term sustainability of these programs. Although the program model of the study sites varied in areas such as underlying operational theories, training strategies, and day-to-day operations, they all relied on passionate, committed adult program directors who were the driving force and the backbone of these programs. The cross-age teaching programs that were sustaining and enjoying a good community following all had adult leaders who were committed to the teens and youth with whom they worked. A program director, who also gave credit to her executive director, put it this way:

I think that any program can be successful. I don't think it's the program. I think it's the commitment that SOMEbody gives to the kids. And it not only comes from me. [My executive director] is very committed to the program. If it hadn't been for her, this program would have been scratched a long time ago. The Board has numerous times recommended that they

scratch it because it's costly and they say that it doesn't bring income because we don't pay dues and we don't sell candy. So, she's very committed to it, and she has always been very committed to it and will fight and stand up for it. And I believe that I have a lot of commitment too. (Int.5).

There were few commonalities in the personal characteristics of these directors. The leaders who lived outside of the communities where they worked seemed to be as effective as people who lived in or were from these communities. Salaries, backgrounds, and educational attainments varied as well. The few commonalities of the program directors of the sites included: congruency between the program director and his or her particular program model; a professional as well as personal commitment to the teenagers with whom they worked; and an ability and dedication to conducting teenage cross-age teaching programs.

The program directors interviewed were generally also the founders of their programs. As a result, the program matched the director's philosophies of education, youth development, and so forth. In other instances, the match appeared to be related to the program director's career choice: for example, a child development teacher facilitated a program in which teens ran a preschool and a director with a background in recreation ran a recreational program. Like successful teachers, these program directors shared their passions and commitments with teenagers and children.

Most of the directors were involved with their teen participants outside of work and often for years later. Similarly, many of the adult staffs established personal relationships with the teens. A former teen teacher who was a junior in college at the time of the interview described her relationship with the program director:

I don't think we ever lost contact between each other, even though I was working with another agency. Whenever I needed something, I'd always call her and let her know. . . . Oh, I'm doing this . . . Can you help me with this? (Int. 11).

Many of the directors seemed to have the ability and dedication to conducting teenage cross-age teaching programs. An interviewee described this as a special ability to work with teens:

She's (program director) a real, kinda, I don't want to say charismatic but, you know, verging on that. But you know, I mean when Vivian talks, they (teenagers) really listen, that's what it amounts to. (Int. 10)

The program directors of the sites had a wide range of personalities and skills but they all created learning environments that gave teenagers the opportunity to contribute positively to the lives of the youngsters with whom they worked.

2. Active Teen Recruitment

Most teens joined cross-age teaching programs from a larger pool of youth, such as their school or a community-based organization. Recruitment methods included informational meetings, posting signs, and/or distributing applications when students register for school. Completion of some type of teen participation record was also part of the induction process. Some agencies required formal, contractual agreements with the teens, whereas others only maintained records for administrative purposes. Many agencies used the application procedure as an opportunity to teach job seeking skills:

They come in and we interview and it's like a job interview. I want to give them that kind of experience, and we talk about them. And a lot of times they don't realize that some of the stuff that they've done is considered background for your employment history on applications, like baby-sitting, like dog-walking, those kinds of things . . . so we talk a bit about that and I try to find out what they've actually done and we fit their interest and time into the programs that are available for volunteering with the agency. (Int. 6).

The philosophy regarding the necessary qualifications of teens differed among respondents. Generally, however, all agencies required that the teens demonstrate a genuine interest in the program.

3. Strong Curriculum

A strong curriculum with a series of detailed lessons to teach the children is essential to develop strong, confident teenaged teachers. The subject matter can be anything that is of interest to children and the teenagers. Sciences, nutrition and cooking, health, gardening, and reading are popular subjects.

A strong curriculum consisted of at least five lessons of 1 to 1 1/2 hours each. Most sites initially provided detailed lesson plans for teenagers. As teenagers gained confidence and skills, lesson plans became more flexible. Teenagers were particularly effective when using hands-on and interactive learning activities. A strong curriculum enabled teenagers to gain a high level of teaching competence quickly. Becoming competent, successful teachers is fundamental to the teenagers' self-confidence.

4. Initial Training

The number of hours that the teens were trained, the methods used, and the follow-up support provided were as varied as the programs studied. Initial training for teenagers ranged from no initial training to 50-minute daily classes for one and one-half semesters. However, a range of 10 to 30 hours seemed most common. Whereas no agency staff reported spending too much time on training, staff commonly reported that more training was needed. The director of a gardening project noted:

For me it's all a training issue. Those poor leaders could be good leaders...I think you can get those kids to be good leaders, solid leaders, and I think it has to do with training and then time. (Int.1).

5. Ongoing Training and Support

Almost all of the agencies provided ongoing support and training in addition to their initial training. In fact, many agency staff persons indicated that follow-up training was the most important. Some noted that too much initial training may be overwhelming to the teens and that they could better absorb the material in increments. One staff person felt that every venue at which teens teach will be different from the previous one and stated that training should be "event specific" (Int. 4). Another noted, "You can go over this stuff, but when you're in the situation . . . THAT'S when the questions come up. So I'm a firm believer in ongoing training." (Int. 6).

In addition to ongoing training, most programs offered ongoing processing. That is, the teens met on a regular basis, such as weekly or soon after teaching, to debrief about the experience and talk about anything else going on in their lives. This served as a means for the cross-age teachers to acquire the support of the adults and their peers and to gain new knowledge.

6. Attention to Details

A well-coordinated and functioning program depends on attending to a myriad of essential details. Although generally not considered central to any program, these elements are often called "nuts and bolts" because they hold programs together. Communication among all of the stakeholders, such as teenagers, director, parents, school is essential. Good programs also attend to teens' basic needs, such as food, transportation, and rest and relaxation. Safety and emergency procedures were also established in high-quality programs.

7. Recognition and Reward

Compensation for teenagers seemed to be related to the philosophy of the program and as such, varied. Compensation included an hourly wage, "the kids are paid \$4.25 an hour and work ten hours per week " (Int. 5); a promise of a letter of recommendation; or a certificate of completion for the teen's portfolio. Some sites lost volunteer teens to paid jobs. Others noted the value of volunteerism while acknowledging the accountability that comes with a paid position:

I know when we've used teens and when we have given them a stipend you do have a certain sense of control over them because it becomes more of a job, but yet it does take away from that whole notion of volunteerism and service learning. (Int. 1).

8. Team Building

Creating a positive teen peer support network was an important goal for many teens as teachers programs. Teens interviewed indicated that they enjoyed and benefited from interactions with other teen teachers. A teenaged teacher put it this way:

In training we would have a group discussion about problems that we have, major issues that we face - gangs, AIDS, teen suicide, date rape, sexually transmitted diseases, parents, racism . . . we talk about everything. This is the most important part.

The teens that are recruited are at-risk teens and through training we talk about gangs and problems that we might face with schools or parents or different cultural conflicts, or racism, and just talking about it is like therapy. It's better than serving jail time, right? (Int. 14).

9. Setting Teens Up for Success

Good program directors don't expect success to "just happen." In addition to providing high-quality initial and ongoing training, they take active steps to ensure that the teenagers will experience success. Adult staff and teen teachers frequently expressed their confidence in the teens' ability to be good teachers. Adult staffs have high expectations of teenagers, and these were also frequently expressed. Adult staff paid attention to teens' teaching readiness. Here's how one program director described her strategy:

I don't take the kids out until I feel they're ready. Because I don't want them to go out and have a HORRIBLE experience . . . So I make sure the kids are comfortable, and then I sort of take them out and bring 'em in, take 'em out and bring 'em in and then I sort of PUSH them on.

10. Feedback and Evaluation

As part of ongoing support, most staff persons provided teens with feedback immediately after their teaching experience. Some programs held weekly teen staff meetings to debrief and plan for future weeks. Some offered opportunities for self-reflection through journals and portfolios (Int. 7). On-site observations and critiques were also used. One teenager noted about her director:

She was really serious about us. She did a lot of observing, and then if she noticed like if we needed help, she'd come up and help us out if we were getting into trouble with the kids . . . she also cared about how we felt, like she knew if we were going to be embarrassed so she would take us out. (Int. 9).

Effective evaluation for teens provided them with positive and constructive support.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

Teenagers can be extremely effective teachers of younger children. Children respond well to teenaged teachers. Having teenagers teach is also efficient. A team of eight teenagers can teach 60 or more children working in small groups. Moreover, teenagers benefit from being teachers. Attitudes toward teachers and school, self-confidence, and sense of accomplishment can all improve. Teenagers can also be positive role models for younger children.

However, these positive outcomes do not magically occur. This study uncovered some of the essential elements of successful teens as teachers program. Extension staffs who conduct or train other organizations to conduct teens as teachers program should be aware of the complex planning and skilled implementation that are essential to create programs that benefit both teenaged teachers and the children whom they teach.

As many youth development professionals have already discovered, the effort and dedication devoted to producing high-quality teens as teachers programs can have multiple payoffs. The community benefits because programs such as teens as teachers can help create an ethos of cooperation, caring, and mutual respect (Benard, 1990). The children who are taught by teens benefit as they learn from an educational enrichment curricula taught by positive role models. Most important, teens benefit as they are challenged, are successful, and contribute positively and significantly to their communities. When adequately prepared and supported, teenaged teachers can make tremendous personal gains, as successful program directors already know:

The real success in the whole program is the teen element. Teens have learned more than they ever thought they would, than WE ever thought they would. (Int.1)

They had truly come--and they used to be tongue-tied and cowering--now they had actually done something and they could get up . . . they're just incredible. (Int. 3)

I had a teenaged girl who had attempted suicide. This year she will be graduating from Stanford and I'll be going to her graduation this weekend. (Int. 5)

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