

## The Role of Cross-age Teaching in Supporting Adolescent Development

*"Today is Wednesday and we have been working on ways to deal with situations with kids as they arise. We have also been working on experiments for the kids to observe and learn from. I think as the days go by we are learning a lot about how to teach and about each other."* APRIL, AGE 16, GROUP HOME RESIDENT AND TEEN TEACHER

From one-room schools in the 1800s, to summer youth employment programs in the 1960s, to junior leaders in 4-H clubs, teenagers have often been enlisted to teach younger children. Cross-age teaching continues today because many adults have found teenagers to be highly effective teachers. They relate well to younger children and can serve as positive role models. Youth practitioners have also found that teaching younger children produces positive outcomes for the teenage teachers. Teenage teachers report increased acceptance of and respect for diversity, increased academic achievement, development of collaboration and conflict resolution skills, a reduction in alcohol and drug abuse, and increased empathy for teachers (e.g., Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002; Lee & Murdock, 2001, National Commission on Resources for Youth, 1974; Hedin, 1987; Dean & Murdock, 1992). But few, if any, youth practitioners have addressed how the teenage teaching experience can address adolescent developmental challenges.

In this report, we describe how cross-age teaching programs have the potential to support positive adolescent development. We will first define cross-age teaching and then describe the links between cross-age teaching programs and adolescent developmental tasks.

### CROSS-AGE TEACHING

Cross-age teaching can best be defined as a process in which teens teach younger children a general concept or subject matter. Teen teacher programs can occur in schools and non-formal educational settings such as after-school and summer programs, clubs, and enrichment programs. Cross-age teaching is not the same as a tutoring program. Following are some typical characteristics of cross-age teaching programs.

- ❖ Teenagers are responsible for all teaching. They do not merely assist an adult.
- ❖ Teenagers are trained and teach a particular subject matter curriculum, not simply provide homework help or tutoring on information already covered in the classroom.
- ❖ Teenagers teach small groups of children (usually 5-12), rather than teaching one-on-one which is common in tutoring programs.
- ❖ The children are usually at least two to three years younger than the teenagers.
- ❖ The curricula taught to younger children are for enrichment and acquisition of new knowledge, not remediation or review.
- ❖ Programs are of sufficient duration so that teenagers develop relationships with the children they teach.

Benefits for the teenagers and children they teach, however, occur only with careful planning and execution of cross-age teaching programs. In our study of cross-age teaching programs in the San Francisco Bay Area (Murdock, Lee & Paterson, 2000) we identified characteristics common to a wide

**Authors:**  
**Shelley W. Murdock,**  
**Faye C. H. Lee,**  
**Carole A. Paterson**

range of effective programs. These characteristics included the following:

- ❖ High expectations of teenagers with significant levels of responsibilities
- ❖ A variety of strategies, such as providing ongoing support and incremental increases in responsibility to ensure a successful experience for the teenage teachers
- ❖ A passionately committed program leader or other adult who works with and supports the teens.

### CROSS-AGE TEACHING ADDRESSES ADOLESCENT CHALLENGES

Substantial research in adolescent development suggests that successful experiences in cross-age teaching should result in positive outcomes for teenage teachers (e.g. Gambone, Klem & Connell, 2002, Steinberg, 200). It is well-recognized that adolescence is a time of developmental challenges and transitions. During both early adolescence (roughly ages 10 –14) and older adolescence (15-18), teenagers experience significant physical, emotional, and cognitive changes creating a variety of developmental challenges. Cross-age teaching has the potential to address several of these challenges: 1) the development of abstract thinking, 2) identity formation, 3) autonomy, 4) achievement, and 5) transition to adulthood.

#### Abstract Thinking

A hallmark of adolescence is qualitative changes in cognition. Although theorists differ in their beliefs as to how this occurs (e.g. Piaget, 1952 versus Gelman & Baillargeon, 1983) it is generally accepted that adolescents are developing increased capacity to think logically, manipulate mental representations, think in three dimensional aspects, and to plan and implement a plan of activity. A key process that moves the adolescent to abstract thinking is the exposure to situations that allows the teen to practice this emerging skill.

As previously noted, a well-developed cross-age teaching program allows opportunities for the teenagers to not only teach but to think about teaching. In the cross-age teaching programs we studied (Lee, Murdock & Paterson, 2000), the teens:

- ❖ Learned about the children they were to teach
- ❖ Learned a subject matter curriculum, such as science or oral language literacy

- ❖ Planned strategies to teach the curriculum to younger children
- ❖ Carried out their plan
- ❖ Evaluated “what worked” and “what needed improvement”

Throughout the experience they were challenged to explore what they might do differently when they taught again. Their increased ability to think about their work and plan future teaching is shown in this teen’s journal entry.

*“...We separated the class into two groups and read to them separately. We thought it would be easier if the group was smaller because they would pay more attention to the story that way.”*

GEORGE, AGE 16

#### Identity Formation

Another critical task of adolescence is identity formation. In Erikson’s stage development theory (1963) he defines identity as a “sense of continuity that gives adolescents a link to their past and a direction for their future.” This sense of identity is developed after a period of confusion and experimentation with possible identities.

More recently, researchers (e.g. Steinberg, 2002) have hypothesized that the lines between childhood and adulthood are so blurred, with no clear passages, that many adolescents suffer an identity crisis resulting in lowered self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy. The National Research Council (1993) goes so far as to say the contradictory and confusing passage to adulthood can be the root of problems such as juvenile delinquency and teen alcoholism.

Young adolescents especially need opportunities to try out different roles, to master tasks and to feel they belong to a group and are accepted. Urdan, Midgley and Wood (1995) suggest that task-focused activities divert attention from social and ability comparisons and allow young teens to acquire competencies. Urdan et al (1995) advocate teamwork, authentic roles in the community, and recognition for task mastery by peers and adults.

High quality cross-age teaching programs can help with identity formation as they incorporate all these strategies: 1) Youth become part of a new group where they are accepted: in most programs, youth come from a variety of schools and/or program settings, allowing them to leave behind reputations as “geeks”, clowns, or overachievers, and start

anew; 2) Teamwork is not only encouraged, it is a requirement in most programs; and 3) Finally, good programs include reflection and evaluation. During the reflection time, a component of most all the programs we studied, each teen teacher describes “what went well” and one thing they would do differently to improve. Adults and peers are also asked to provide positive feedback. Teens are amazed and elated to hear their peers speak highly of their work (Lee, Murdock & Paterson, 2000).

*“My partner and I took turns reading the book and according to him, my reading has improved.”* CHRISTINE, AGE 16 (ENGLISH IS HER SECOND LANGUAGE)

### **Autonomy**

Tied to abstract thinking and identity formation is the development of behavioral and emotional autonomy. Behavioral autonomy generally refers to the ability to govern one’s own behavior (as opposed to being directed by adults), whereas emotional autonomy usually refers to an adolescent’s growing capacity to think, feel and act on his or her own (Steinberg, 2002). Thornburg (1983) notes that typically adolescents try very hard to become independent, make their own decisions, and increase their freedom while trying to maintain the security and benefits of childhood.

To help develop autonomy and establish independence, adolescents need opportunities to make decisions, express opinions, and imagine the consequences of their behavior (Fertman, 2000). Others note that living with the consequences of earlier decisions increases the adolescent’s ability to make later decisions.

Characteristic of high quality cross-age teaching programs are opportunities for the teens to make decisions and thus develop autonomy. First and foremost, the teens are teachers, not teacher helpers or “go-fers.” Teens quickly learn that the success of the teaching experience is their responsibility:

*“The day I was most effective was the buttons. I was organized and the kids gave me respect. . . I found a game for them to play. They liked the games and the buttons book. . . .”* RON, AGE 15

Initially, the teen teachers are taught a curriculum and how to best teach it to the children. However, as their confidence in

their teaching increases and they experience success, they seek out and appreciate opportunities to make more program decisions:

*“One great idea we came up with is drawing little frogs and cutting them out. So then the kids can use the paper frogs to create a story about them going to the mall.”* BETTY, AGE 16

### **Achievement**

A fourth developmental challenge of adolescence is that of achievement. Steinberg (2002) broadly defines achievement as “the development of motives, capabilities, interests and behaviors that have to do with performance in an evaluative situation” (p. 384). Achievement is an important challenge because we, as a society, place a premium on it. Adults increasingly emphasize adolescent competition, performance, and achievement as important to youth’s success as evidenced by the proliferation of highly competitive adult organized sports teams and college testing preparation services. However, there are tremendous variations in achievement levels among youth. Some youth will go on to very competitive colleges and others will barely pass high school or even drop out.

Recent research (Steinberg, 2002) shows that the effort adolescents apply to an educational task depends on their beliefs about whether or not they will succeed or fail. For example, if they believe they are poor at reading, they do not try hard to read because they already expect to fail. A cycle of failure results.

Cross-age teaching is an opportunity for the teens to experience success in a subject matter topic in which they may have previously “failed.” The subject matter material they teach is at a lower level, so they can master it. For example, teens engaged in cross-age teaching from our curriculum, *One Book at a Time: Teens Engaging Young Readers* will enthusiastically read *Red Riding Hood* since they are learning it in the context of their role as teachers, yet it would be humiliating to read it as part of their own school work. Also, their ability to teach the material does not seem to correlate at all with school grades (Dean & Murdock, 1992). Hence, they can feel competent regardless of previous academic success or failure.

We have repeatedly observed that the youth who seem to derive the most benefit from serving as cross-age teachers are those who have not achieved high levels of

academic success during their own schooling. Recently, special education high school students in a Contra Costa County school were taught to read aloud to younger youth. Not one of the six in the pilot had ever been asked to serve as a role model to younger youth or to read aloud to them. Immediately after mastering *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* they became so excited by the prospect of reading to the young children that they began begging the teacher to “Let us go (read) now!”

### **Transition to Adulthood**

Historically, adolescence was the period of time during which youth learned how to become workers, parents and citizens. Steinberg (2002) notes that in more recent years, teens have become increasingly segregated into groups of their same-age peers, away from the rest of society. He claims this separation does not allow teenagers to receive adequate preparation for the world of work; they have little contact with younger children that will help prepare them for child rearing; and they lack preparation for participation in government and community roles.

Researchers agree that adolescents need strategies and opportunities to help transition to adulthood. In their review of the literature, Gambone, Klem and Connell (2002) found that community service opportunities helped adolescents learn responsibility and adult roles and was shown to make them more productive as young adults. The National Research Council (2002) calls for programs to strengthen communities and bring adolescents in contact with adult mentors. Research from the field of resiliency also point to the importance of caring adults who believe in and guide the individual to positive normal development (e.g., Werner & Smith, 1982). Suggestions from other researchers include similar ideas along with restructuring secondary education to make it more relevant to the youth.

Cross-age teaching promotes skills that help teens transition to adulthood. As noted earlier, the hallmark of cross-age teaching programs is that the teens are the teachers and in addition to teaching, must prepare their materials. They quickly learn adult work skills and the value of good work habits such as preparation, arriving on time and being enthusiastic.

*“Today was my first time that I had to read to the students. Again, our team prepared early with the materials and the visuals. That’s a win.”* GEORGE, AGE 16

*“Today we was (sic) getting ready to teach and we had to do a lot of things today in a little time. We worked hard and got everything done and when Monday comes we will have everything we need to go teach.”* GEROME, AGE 17

We also found that the teens need and want to understand children’s behavior and to acquire skills in managing groups of children.

*“(I) need to know how to get them to listen without yelling at them. I need to know how to get them to respect what I say.”*

DEVONNA, AGE 15

Time and again adults who observed the teens at work noted that the teens were patient and nurturing with the young children. A universal comment made by teens is that they were surprised and delighted at the level of admiration shown them by the children. As a result, they tried harder to be good role models, certainly a skill they will need if they become parents.

Their work as cross-age teachers also helped the teens connect to their communities. The work is authentic, that is, it has value and fills a real need as opposed to “mock” activities. Whether helping young children improve literacy or science skills or acquire knowledge about nutrition and health, they are fulfilling an unmet need. Most teens quickly make the connection:

*“I felt like I was giving back to the community and doing something. And that something I was doing was worthwhile.”* MARIE, AGE 17

### **Implications for Practitioners**

High quality cross-age teaching programs use many strategies, such as training and a strong curriculum, to ensure successful experiences for the teens. We found the most prominent, common element was a passionate, committed adult program director. The director either worked directly with the teens, training, supporting and monitoring them, or hired an equally passionate adult to coach the teens.

Of equal importance, however, is that programs be designed and implemented with the explicit purpose of addressing the challenges of adolescent development. With careful planning and execution, cross-age teaching programs have the potential to positively influence adolescent challenges including abstract thinking, identity formation, the development of autonomy, achievement, and the transition to adulthood. ☞

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**SHELLEY W. MURDOCK** is a 4-H Youth Development Advisor in Contra Costa County specializing in cross-age teaching, service-learning and adolescent development.

**FAYE C. H. LEE** is a 4-H Youth Development Advisor in San Francisco County specializing in issues of low-income and ethnic minority youth and families living in urban areas.

**CAROLE A. PATERSON** is a 4-H Youth Development and Career Exploration Advisor in Solano County specializing in community development, group facilitation, and event planning.



## REPORT

- **Stephen T. Russell, Ph.D.**, Director
- **Katherine E. Heck, M.P.H.**, Editor
- **Carolyn McCain**, Publications Coordinator

4-H Center for Youth Development  
Dept. of Human and Community Development  
University of California  
One Shields Avenue/3325 Hart Hall  
Davis, CA 95616-8523

Phone (530) 754-8433  
Fax (530) 754-8440  
CYDdirector@ucdavis.edu  
<http://fourhcyd.ucdavis.edu>