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Grade 9: Cross-Age Literacy

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School:

Kelvyn Park High School

The Purpose and Essential Questions:

Because our double-period English classes are designed for those students who are reading below grade level, the cross-age tutoring partnership was an excellent opportunity for our students both to experience success as readers while working with children's books and to serve as mentors to younger children in their community. As teachers we believed the best chance for our students to master the strategies we had taught them would be by teaching those strategies to someone else. The cross-age tutoring partnership gave them the opportunity to share their reading expertise with a young child and to gain confidence as readers. The first graders also benefited from the relationship they developed with their "big buddies" as they began to realize that the high school students they encountered in their neighborhood were not to be feared; rather, they were to be trusted and admired. Kelvyn Park is a neighborhood high school. Some students see Kelvyn Park as a school of last resort if they do not get into selective enrollment high schools. Our ability to connect to and build relationships with pupils in our feeder schools is essential to attracting neighborhood kids to our school. We believe the Cross-Age Literacy Project creates some of those important relationships.

The Story:

Over the past decade, Chicago Public Schools has placed a major emphasis on improving literacy. Our strategy through the Cross-Age Literacy project was to use service-learning as a way to excite students about reading by providing them with a chance to teach children literacy skills. The cross-age literacy partnership between Kelvyn Park High School and two feeder elementary schools, Funston Elementary and Monroe Elementary, began in 2008. All ninth grade students in our double-period English classes were paired up with a first grader with whom they met with on a monthly basis. Visits focused on a specific reading strategy they were learning in their freshmen classes. The students then practiced with their first grade "little buddies." Our freshmen took the time to plan every aspect of the tutoring lessons from the icebreakers to the pre-reading activities to the closing activities. Both the high school students and the elementary school students experienced academic and socio-emotional gains as a result of the partnership.

Service-Learning Theme(s) and Community Need**Service-Learning Themes:**

Literacy and Mentoring

Community Need:

Like most urban schools in Chicago, the elementary schools we partnered with suffered from overcrowding and underfunding. Some classes had over thirty students in them who were reading at all different levels, and many of the classes contained both bilingual and special education students. Because one teacher alone could not tackle all of the diverse needs in these classrooms, our students provided the additional support necessary to ensure that the first graders were making progress in reading. Once a month, the first graders had an opportunity to work one-on-one with an older mentor who could guide their reading and provide focused instruction on a reading strategy such as summarizing or predicting.

Community Partners:

Kelvyn Park High School partnered with Monroe Elementary School and Funston Elementary School to complete this project. The Logan Square Neighborhood Association (a local community organization) and GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) also helped us initiate and coordinate our partnerships.

Place of Impact:

School

School Setting, Grade Level and Duration**School Setting:**

Urban

Grade Level:

6-8 (Middle School)

Target Population:

All Students

Duration:

More than 9 weeks

Connection to Curriculum

Academic Subjects:

English Language Arts

State Standards:

FL

Subject:

Language Arts

Definition:

1C. Comprehend a broad range of reading materials.

Subject:

Language Arts

Definition:

1A: Apply word analysis and vocabulary skills to comprehend selections.

Content Areas of major themes of study:

Students participated in cross-age literacy through their Reading classes once a month beginning in December and ending in May. The lessons corresponded with the strategies they were learning in our reading classes.

Skills being introduced or developed:

Each month the ninth grade students focused on a different reading strategy in their lessons for the first graders such as predicting, summarizing, visualizing, and questioning. Students also taught two or three new words to their "little buddies" using the vocabulary strategies they had learned in class.

Books, Media, Websites, and other Resources:

Students used a variety of children's books to plan their lessons as well as the America's Choice *Ramp Up to Literacy* curriculum.

Career-Related Learning:

For those students interested in becoming teachers or working with children in another capacity, this partnership was a great opportunity to learn about and experience the process of planning, implementing, and reflecting on lessons.

Five Stages of Service-Learning (Procedure)

Investigation:

During the investigation stage, the lead literacy teacher and the lead English teacher at Kelvyn Park worked in partnership with two local community organizations, the Logan Square Neighborhood Association and GEAR UP, to identify elementary schools interested in partnering on this project. We then met with teachers and administrators from the elementary schools to discuss the parameters of the project and to refine the partnership.

Reflection:

As a course team, the ninth grade teachers continued to discuss how we could best prepare our students for this partnership and which elementary schools would be most suitable for this work depending on their need, their distance from our school and their willingness to welcome our students into their classrooms.

Preparation and Planning:

Each month, our students spent several class periods preparing for their visits to the elementary schools. As a class, we would design each aspect of the lesson including the icebreaker, the pre-reading activity, the during-reading activity, the post-reading activity and the word study. Students would then choose an appropriate children's book for the lesson and practice reading the book several times until they reached an appropriate level of fluency. Finally, students would run through their entire lessons with each other, so they felt comfortable when they had to execute the lesson with their "little buddies."

Reflection:

Through classroom discussion, our students negotiated which activities and strategies they believed would most successfully meet the needs of their little buddies based on what they had seen in last month's visit.

Action:

After planning their lessons, students spent an hour each month tutoring their "little buddies" at either Funston Elementary or Monroe Elementary.

Reflection:

Throughout the lesson, teachers would walk around and take brief notes on what they observed. On the way back to school, students and teachers would debrief about what happened during that month's session. A longer reflection took place the next day during class.

Reflection:

During the class period following each tutoring session, students completed a written response reflecting on their visits. They usually shared what they did in the lesson, how it went, and what they wanted to focus on during their next visit. At the end of the school year, students completed a longer written reflection and participated in a peace circle in which they discussed the successes and shortfalls of the cross-age literacy partnership.

Demonstration:

Assessment and Evaluation:

Students received a monthly grade for the planning and implementation of their cross-age literacy lesson plans. They were assessed on a rubric developed by the America's Choice team as well as the teachers at Kelvyn Park. Our students' reading achievement was also assessed throughout the year both formally and informally using independent reading logs, reading conferences, and standardized tests.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps:

While some teachers were initially skeptical that all of our ninth grade students could participate in this project, the results were overwhelming positive. Students looked forward to this experience every month, and it was extremely gratifying to watch them articulate their knowledge about reading to others. In the future, we hope to begin the partnership a bit earlier in the school year and to involve the elementary school teachers more fully in the planning and evaluation process.

About the Teacher:

This is my seventh year as both a teacher and the service-learning coach at Kelvyn Park High School. I have been using service-learning as a teaching tool since I began my career in 2003, and I first experienced the power of service-learning as a student at the University of Michigan. I currently teach in a service-learning/community leadership based program at Kelvyn Park called the Social Justice Academy and believe that service-learning is most effective when teachers can collaborate on projects that are directly tied to the community needs that students deem important.

About the School:

Kelvyn Park High School is a neighborhood school on the northwest side of Chicago that serves approximately 1400 students. Our population is predominately Latino, and 96% of our students qualify for free or reduced lunch. In 2007, Kelvyn Park was recognized as one of only six "Generator Network Schools" by the National Youth Leadership Council for our outstanding work in service-learning.

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