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Helping Younger Students: A Cross-Age Tutorial Program

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The faculty in Castle Hills Baptist School, with an age-diverse population–225 high school students, 125 middle school students, and 350 elementary students–in three adjoining buildings, became interested in starting a cross-age tutorial program. After reviewing the literature, the faculty recognized the need for careful planning (Rosenshine and Furst 1969); high intensity instruction (Cohen, Kulik, and Kulik 1982); and a structured program (Graesser and Person 1994). Believing that cross-age tutoring could benefit teachers, younger children, and older students, teachers looked to tutoring to further academic growth and increase interest in academic subjects (Fitz-Gibbon 1977; Vacc and Cannon 1991; Cochran 1993; Drake 1993; Gartner and Riessman 1994).

Implementation

In organizing the cross-age tutorial program, educators followed three basic guidelines: (1) the teacher was to prescribe the subject matter for the tutor; (2) the tutor determined appropriate activities; and (3) tutor training was available when necessary (Fitz-Gibbon 1977).

When Castle Hills first offered the student tutor elective, 17 high school students became involved by signing up for a class that met 50 minutes daily. Castle Hills sent a notice to all elementary school parents, explaining that high school students would be involved with tutoring selected students throughout the year. As classroom teachers identified individual students to be tutored, they sent notes home advising parents that their children would be tutored for the next six weeks.

Before the tutoring sessions started, high school tutors met for two weeks with a designated staff member, the sponsor teacher, to explore different ways to make learning fun, motivate younger students, and tutor in math, phonics, spelling, and language. Then the sponsor teacher assigned each student tutor to an elementary classroom where the tutor observed 50 minutes daily for one week to become acquainted with the classroom teacher and general classroom procedures.

At the end of the third week, each classroom teacher in grades 2–5 identified one or two children whose work in at least one subject was at C level or below, indicating a need for tutorial support. First-grade teachers selected children who were struggling with reading as observed from their classroom performance. In all, 33 students in grades 1–5 participated in the first cross-age tutorial program.

During the fourth week of school, elementary teachers introduced each student tutor individually to the two students he or she would be tutoring. The student tutor also met with the classroom teacher for about 10 minutes during which time the teacher prescribed specific skills to be taught in the following week. Student tutors then attended a meeting with all of the tutors and the sponsor teacher to discuss ways to implement assignments for the following week.

During the next six weeks, high school student tutors worked with their assigned students four days each week, either in the hallway or in the back of the classroom. On Fridays, student tutors scheduled a 10-minute meeting with the classroom teacher for the following week's assignment and reported to the sponsor teacher for continued training sessions that covered sharing suggestions, discussing specific ways to tutor, making audiovisual teaching aids, listening to guest speakers, and micro-teaching a skill to other tutors for practice and feedback.

To encourage greater accountability, student tutors were required to maintain a log describing daily activities with each student. The logs revealed these comments: "I can tell my tutoring is helping him"; "Teaching is harder than I thought it would be"; and "This [tutoring] is my favorite part of the day."

Results

After six weeks of tutoring, teachers compared the tutored students' beginning numerical grades for the subjects being tutored with

High school student enjoys tutoring.

their new grades. They noted a grade improvement of approximately seven points (on a scale of 100) in each subject tutored in 23 of the students in grades 2–5. Three children showed no numerical gain in the subject in which they were receiving help.

Because first graders were not evaluated with numerical grades, teachers were asked to share their observations of progress. Three first graders appeared to make significant improvements in reading. Four first-grade students, according to their teachers, made progress by "holding their own" and not falling farther behind, as teachers had anticipated might happen without tutorial help.

Evaluation

In future implementation of the cross-age tutorial program, participants suggested two modifications. First, reducing the training sessions to one week, followed by one week of classroom observation, would allow tutors to begin tutoring during the third week of class instead of the sixth week. Second, instead of holding a 10-minute meeting with student tutors, teachers could write the following week's assignment to the student tutor.

Anecdotal reports from participating teachers indicated positive teacher feelings about this program and the training high school tutors were receiving. Teachers commented that the individualization of the program saved time, that they were impressed by the eagerness of the high school tutors to follow up on teachers' suggestions, and that the tutors used creativity in designing games and activities.

Although no measures of general self-concept were taken, teachers commented that improved self-esteem was a benefit for the high school student tutors, as well as for the children being tutored. A first grader's mother commented that her daughter did not want to leave school early to go out of town because "my 'special teacher' comes to see me then." In the words of a high school tutor, "I feel that I am doing something important when I help my [younger student] learn."

Parents of students being tutored were pleased that the school was attempting to meet these needs without requiring costly outside tutoring. Most of the students being tutored made academic progress, and their attitudes toward "dreaded" subjects seemed to improve.

In the high school, faculty observed that student tutors displayed a gentleness and a concern for the younger children that, in turn, contributed to a better understanding of the high school students involved. In short, this cross-age tutoring program seemed to benefit high school students, elementary students, teachers, and parents, and to motivate all to become more involved in the learning process.

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