

# Empowering Youth through a Responsibility-based Cross-Age Teacher Program: An Investigation into Impact and Possibilities

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## **Abstract**

*A Responsibility Model-based (RM) (Hellison, 2003) cross-age teaching program was developed to promote the leadership of a selected group of youth from underserved communities. The participants, called the "Urban Youth Leaders," were eight 11 to 15 year old boys who taught various physical activity skills to a group of 40 fourth graders for eight sessions in a university sponsored program. The participants were specifically chosen for their potential to take on the advanced leadership and civic role of coaching younger youth. They were recruited from four separate RM-based programs that take place during the school year. The purpose of this study was to investigate the potential impact of this program. Data sources included formal interviews, field notes, and lesson observations to assess effectiveness, possibilities, and barriers of the program. Emergent themes included: program expectations, perceptions of the program, progression of teaching skills, familiarization of a university, personal growth, and responsibility development. These results indicated that the program was effective in providing the Urban Youth Leaders a venue to improve teaching skills, become familiar with a university context, gain new friendships, and become confident leaders. Keys to a successful cross-age physical activity program are also suggested.*

Today's urban youth are forced to deal with societal problems such as poverty, racism,

violence, and other social, economic, and political ills. As a result, there is a plethora of evidence that suggest children and youth who live in impoverished conditions are at risk of long-lasting psychological and emotional damage (Lundberg, 1993; Wilkinson, 1996), which may lead to deviant behaviors and a sense of hopelessness (Fitzpatrick & LaGory, 2000). Behavior problems are not only a major concern for teachers, but specific behavior problems such as sexual deviancy, cigarette and alcohol abuse, and gun homicides are leading causes of mortality in underserved youth (Wahlberg, Reyes, & Weissberg, 1997). Too often youth are blamed for these problems rather than the failure of institutions that compose their social contexts (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993). Benson (1997) suggests the development of youth programs based on social, emotional, and educational needs. Programs need to see youth as resources to be developed rather than as problems to be managed (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003), and provide educational challenges in a safe place with caring adults (Hellison & Cutforth, 1997). Continued reports on the inner-city plight that today's urban youth face and the lack of productive resources they have is a call for action in the physical education and sport fields (Lawson, 1997). Such programs are attractive in nature and have the potential to promote leadership skills (Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Jones, 2005).

Although sport and physical activity seem to be an ideal venue to promote social and personal

responsibility in urban youth, such programs are atypical outside a few successful programs (Hellison, Cutforth, Kallusky, Martinek, Parker, & Stiehl, 2000). More specifically, sport and physical activity programs do not always promote positive development and sometimes support unfavorable characteristics (Hellison, 1993). However, with a change of focus, physical-activity programs can provide an attractive and practical setting to teach important life skills to urban youth by offering opportunities to learn leadership skills and take on civic responsibilities in their community.

#### *Responsibility Model-Based Programs*

Physical activity programs for underserved youth have been developed based on Don Hellison's Responsibility Model (RM) (2003), which are empowerment-based and use various forms of physical activity and sport (i.e. basketball, martial arts, tumbling) to teach participants personal and social responsibility for their behaviors and attitudes. Essentially, the aim of these programs is to develop relationships with the participants, teach life skills through a physical medium, provide individual and group reflection opportunities, and help them make smart choices for themselves.

Several researchers have investigated RM programs (see Hellison & Walsh, 2003). More specifically, RM programs improved participants' self-control, effort, helping others, teamwork, communication skills, and responsibility (Cutforth, 1997; DeBusk & Hellison, 1989; Kahne et al., 2001). Additionally, RM programs helped participants to problem solve, care for others, improve self-confidence, have enthusiasm for learning, and enhance autonomy and self reflection development (Cutforth, 2000; Cutforth & Puckett, 1999).

#### *Cross-age Teaching*

Throughout a child's education it is important to make the connection between school and the

real world, which resulted in a push at the local and national educational systems for students to provide service to others (Cutforth & Puckett, 1999; Hellison et al., 2000). Cross-age teaching programs, that is, programs that use older students to teach and help younger students, provide an educational and developmental vehicle for students to provide a service to younger students while learning leadership skills and creating friendships. The primary emphasis is to support the social, personal, and cognitive development of the student teachers (Thomas, 1993). More specifically, cross-age teaching programs extend learning into the community by improving self-confidence, concern for others, attitudes toward adults and academics, and problem-solving skills (Calo & Ingram, 1994; Collier, 1995; Dashner, 1995; Smith, 1996; Sosa, 1986; Walsh, 2003).

Cutforth and Puckett (1999) conducted a RM-based cross-age teaching program and determined that it is a valid service-learning technique and an effective extension of RM. Their program improved the teachers' self-confidence, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, care for others, problem-solving skills, and interest in learning. However, primary problems were related to the apprentice teachers taking responsibility for their roles, the wide variance of teaching skills and athletic ability, and individual behavior problems. These obstacles may have hindered the development of the group as a whole and the effectiveness of the program. Thus, it was suggested that future research consider these obstacles in program investigations.

The primary purpose of the current study was to discover what can be learned from a RM-based cross age teaching program that brought together selected urban youth from different RM programs. Some of the key features of this program included providing the participants an introduction to a university campus, a high adult-student ratio, developmental activities during discretionary summer time, and an opportunity to meet youth from different RM programs.

## Methods

The present investigation was a case study aimed at determining the potential impact of a RM-based cross-age teaching program. A case study is a way of obtaining an in-depth understanding, intensive description, and analyses of the program (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995). More specific methods of inquiry included formal interviews, field notes, lesson observations, and attendance records during the eight sessions of the program throughout a five-week period.

### *Participants*

The participants, called the “Urban Youth Leaders,” were eight 11-15 year old African American boys who were the top leaders brought together from four different RM-based programs from underserved communities in a large metropolitan city. The content of these programs included basketball, tumbling, and martial arts. The Urban Youth Leaders all had at least one year of experience coaching peers through their local programs. The primary responsibility of the Urban Youth Leaders in the summer cross-age program was to use the knowledge and skills—both personal and social responsibilities and physical activities—gained during the school year to teach/coach a group of 40 fourth graders involved in a summer sport program.

Informed consent and assent was obtained from the parents/guardians, the eight Urban Youth Leaders, the five staff members, and the program director. The institutional review board at the University of Illinois approved the study. Both authors of this article were staff members, which places them in a teacher-as-researcher role, an accepted form of research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

### *Research Design*

Several techniques were used in designing and evaluating this study to ensure trustworthiness and validity (Glesne, 1999; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First,

triangulation was used in that multiple investigators and multiple data sources were used to confirm findings. Second, the investigators were present to observe each session of the program to ensure credibility. Third, the director of the program, who is not one of the investigators, verified the data collection and analysis.

### *Data Sources*

Evidence for the RM-based cross-age teaching program came from three sources:

1) *Formal Interviews*: Prior to the program, open-ended interviews were administered to each participant individually. The interview questions were designed by RM experts and approved by a panel of education professionals (see Walsh, 2003). The principal investigator explained each question to the youth leaders and recorded their responses. This process took between five and ten minutes. This interview assessed reasons for participation, confidence levels in coaching, and feelings about the university (i.e. What do you think when you hear about college?).

At the end of the program the Urban Youth Leaders participated in focused interviews (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1990). A question protocol guided the interviews, which ranged from 15 to 30 minutes in length, to assess four specific categories including perceptions of the program (i.e. What did you like about the program?), perceptions on coaching (i.e. What did you learn about your coaching skills?), perceptions of the university (i.e. What did you learn about the university?), and perceptions of responsibility outside the gym (i.e. Do you look at your parents or teachers any differently after being in charge of younger kids?).

2) *Field Notes*: The project staff also played a role in the investigation. Each of the five staff members was responsible for monitoring one or two leaders. They each answered six daily questions about their perceptions of the leaders and the program (i.e. How are the students handling their coaching roles?). Daily attendance was also recorded.

3) *Lesson Observations*: Finally, the principal investigator observed the program operations and recorded daily notes under three categories: 1) Field notes- observed daily events, kids' behaviors, group meetings, and any other significant events; 2) study logs- included program objectives being met and whether the leaders were demonstrating their roles and responsibilities; 3) theoretical diary- addressed questions, concerns, and personal comments of themes that emerged (Graber, 1988).

#### *Program Description*

The Urban Youth Leaders taught 40 fourth graders from a local summer sport program for one hour a day for eight sessions. On the first day of the program, the fourth graders were divided into four groups. They participated in two station rotations run by the youth leaders with minimum guidance from staff.

The daily format of the program was as follows:

11:30 to 12:30: Staff provides leaders with transportation to university

12:30: Leaders arrive and discuss their plan for the day with staff members

1:00: First of two rotations begins (two basketball stations, one tumbling, and one martial arts station. Fourth graders participate in tumbling and martial arts on alternate days and basketball every day)

1:30: Second rotation begins

2:00: Stations end, leaders get lunch, and group meeting begins

2:30: After group meeting, leaders discuss upcoming sessions with staff, take campus tours with staff, and play basketball with each other

3:00-3:30: Leaders return home via staff cars or public transportation (free passes were provided)

The Urban Youth Leaders had preparation time with the staff prior to each day's activities. They would meet and discuss what they were planning for the day, go over the lessons and activities, and

informally interact with each other and staff. At the conclusion of each session, they participated in group meetings in which they discussed the day's difficulties, successes, and strategies for future improvements, all the while providing support and feedback to each other. The staff provided assistance and encouragement during both the preparation time and concluding group meetings. Staff also took them on tours of the university campus, showed them classrooms and facilities, introduced them to university faculty, and probed their future aspirations, encouraging them to see university as a possibility. Occasionally, the Urban Youth Leaders had free time to participate in physical activity together or simply got to know and enjoy the company of the other leaders and staff.

#### *Data Analysis*

One of the investigators transcribed the Urban Youth Leaders' interviews and staff members' daily responses. As the data were being collected, an inductive data analysis of emerging themes was conducted using constant comparative analysis (Ristock & Pennell, 1996). More specifically, data analysis consisted of organizing, examining, categorizing, and clarifying the interviews, field notes, and lesson observations. The goal of the analysis was to capture the meanings, processes, and outcomes of the participants, staff, and program. Unlike statistical analysis, few formulas guided this data analysis phase; instead, much depended on the researchers' own style of rigorous thinking, along with a sufficient presentation of evidence.

Several themes emerged from the interviews, field notes, and lesson observations. Initially, the themes were organized around the interview categories. However, with careful attention to the data analysis, these were revised until the following six themes emerged: program expectations, perceptions of the program, progression of teaching skills, familiarization of a university, personal growth, and responsibility development. The following sections outline these emergent themes.

## Program Results

### *Program Expectations*

Pre-program interviews revealed that the majority of the Urban Youth Leaders have not been on a university campus prior to the cross-age teaching program. Only three had seen a university or college prior to the program but were too young to remember any significance of their visit. Anthony stated, "I went to a college with a church group, but I don't know which school... I don't remember." When the leaders were asked what they think about when they hear college, they all responded with excitement and expressed a desire to go to college. Simeon said, "I want to go to college. I want to see a lot while I'm here [at the university]", and Anthony said, "I think college is da bomb." The program seemed to offer a venue for the Urban Youth Leaders to ease their way into learning about the various dynamics of attending a university.

Visiting the university was not the only aspect of the program the Urban Youth Leaders were excited about. Having fun was mentioned by half of the leaders. For instance, Samuel said, "I came to the program to have fun and stay out of trouble." Five of the Urban Youth Leaders expressed wanting to teach other kids. Thomas mentioned, "I want to have fun and teach younger kids." Aaron came to the program "to teach other kids what I learned, and to make them a better person." Additionally, Michael wanted to "teach other kids to play ball and have fun with other youth leaders." Four of the Urban Youth Leaders expressed wanting to improve their teaching/coaching skills. "I want to teach younger kids and expand my skills," said Simeon. Anthony explained, "[I want to] learn to teach better, so I can help my brothers, I am the oldest." A specific skill articulated was leadership. Rodney said, "I came so I can work with kids, be in charge, and work on leadership." Thus, the leaders had a variety of expectations for the program including spending time at a university, teaching younger

kids, improving their leadership skills, and having fun.

### *Perceptions of the Program*

Overall, the leaders reported that they had fun and enjoyed their time in the program. More specifically, they valued being with program staff, having leadership opportunities, and establishing friendships with other Urban Youth Leaders. For example, when asked what they liked about the program, responses varied from "I liked it because I got to hang with you all [staff members], teach other kids what's right from wrong," and "It was educational, I got to learn about myself teaching and that I can change myself. Another responded, "I got to know the kids and they taught me a few things about leadership." Additionally, each leader enjoyed developing friendships with other Urban Youth Leaders from different areas of the city. Thomas said, "yes [I met new friends], I got along with everyone."

The program staff also had positive perceptions of the program. For example, one staff member stated, "I really think the program is offering the youth leaders a quality leadership experience. They realize that this is something very different for them." Another stated, "The program is an exemplar cross age teaching program... our young coaches roll with the punches and teach quality physical education." A third staff member added, "I think the program is great because it allows the student coaches the opportunity to build confidence and understand the importance of good leadership. Also, being part of the staff helps the coaches learn more about problem solving and organization."

The program appears to be just as successful or perhaps even more successful than other cross-age teaching programs due to the progress, behaviors, attendance, and perceptions of the leaders, which may be due to them being selected for their leadership skills during the school year. Four of the Urban Youth Leaders attended each session, while the other four missed one session. One staff

member stated, "It is the best cross-age teaching program I've seen in ten years because we have the best from each of our programs around the city." Selecting the best leaders from other responsibility-based programs ensures that they have at least some experience and comfort with their leadership roles. Additionally, these leaders really wanted to be part of the program and they viewed it as an accomplishment to be selected.

#### *Progression of Teaching Skills*

Based on the analysis of the staff members' daily evaluations, it appears that all of the Urban Youth Leaders showed improvements in their coaching skills. One staff member stated, "[Anthony] is very responsive to comments and asks questions about his coaching. He is also getting better at teaching defense." The improvements that the leaders made were aided by the guidance of the staff primarily in how they provided instructional feedback by helping them design daily lesson plans.

The Urban Youth Leaders also viewed themselves as effective coaches and believed that they made a positive impact on the fourth graders. Rodney stated, "I could tell I taught them new things," and Simeon mentioned, "I really do think I helped them learn new skills and get a feel for martial arts and get more interested." The younger leaders tended to rate themselves higher than the staff members did; whereas, the older coaches were more critical of themselves. For example, Simeon said, "I think I am a good coach, but like all good coaches, we all need guidance and help." He continued, "I learned not to expect too much from the kids, because they are just learning. . . they learned to be more patient, and that definitely helped me teach better." Thus, providing these youth with teaching opportunities along with guidance and feedback from staff assisted in the development of the leaders coaching skills.

#### *Familiarization of a University*

The program helped each Urban Youth Leaders think about attending a university in the

future. They enjoyed spending time at the university, getting a tour of the buildings and classrooms, being a part of university staff, and talking about college with the staff and faculty. Thomas mentioned, "I want to be a basketball player, but now I also know I need other careers in mind. . . . Being around the university made me want to go," and Rodney added, "It helped me even more want to attend a university." The university has become a less foreign environment for them. Conversations about careers, future aspirations, and steps needed to achieve specific careers provided a clearer picture of their future.

#### *Personal Growth*

Several of the leaders mentioned the positive impact of the program beyond the gym. For example, after leading the fourth graders Anthony stated, "I know now what [my mom] feels like when I do something wrong." The leaders also explained how the program will help their performance in school by improving their leadership, focus, confidence, and patience. Simeon stated, "I am already a good student, but it helps my leadership," and Thomas added, "it helps me focus more." Samuel mentioned, "Like when the kids did something that made me mad, I know what my teacher feels like when I make her mad." Some of the leaders clearly demonstrated an understanding of how their behavior impacts adults, peers, and younger youth.

The leaders also felt they improved their behavior and became more mature. For example, Aaron said, "my behavior got better," and Simeon said, "I definitely feel like a more mature leader, and I can think on my own." Additionally, the staff members were pleased with the leaders' composure during the sessions, and their maturity when in charge of the fourth graders. One staff member stated, "I thought they were very resilient to programmatic issues." One of the instructors of the summer sport program said, "Our kids are often much better with your youth leaders than they are with my staff." The responsibilities of this program allowed the participants to positively

develop their leadership skills, focus their attention, improve their behavior, and help their understanding of the impact their behavior has on others. Their reflection on daily lessons, and the program as a whole further enhanced maturity and introspection.

#### *Responsibility Development*

The program was successful in extending RM for the Urban Youth Leaders. Each leader acknowledged transferring what they learned from their school year program to the cross-age teaching program. The staff members also expressed how they acted very responsibly. One staff member said:

“They continue to be very responsible other than Thomas forgetting his shirt. They are on time, prepared, and discuss their coaching on the way to the program. They have not missed a day and still seem to look forward to following days in the program.”

There were a few instances when the leaders were talking and eating during a group meeting, lacked motivation, arrived late, and did not call when they were going to be absent. One staff member stated, “There are some problems with consistency but they are working on it.” However, overall the leaders acted very responsibly. One staff member said:

“For the most part they are being responsible. They are on time, work hard coaching, run solid group meetings and reflection times, and participate in our meetings in the office. Other than being a bit silly and at times spacey, they are very responsible.”

#### **Keys to a Successful Program & Conclusion**

Several keys to a successful cross-age teaching program can be drawn from this investigation. First, it is essential to provide advanced leadership opportunities for youth. The leaders in this program took their roles seriously, enjoyed their

time as leaders, experienced personal growth, and advanced their leadership skills. Second, it is important to establish meaningful relationships between adults and youth. The leaders and the staff of this program genuinely enjoyed their time together, which seemed crucial to the development of the leaders. Third, guidance and feedback are vital to the development of young leaders. The leaders were capable of teaching younger kids when the program began, but the continued supervision and advice from the staff enhanced maturity, introspection, and civic responsibility. Fourth, the staff and the leaders had daily group meetings after each session. These meetings allowed the leaders to get to know each other, share their joys and challenges of teaching younger kids, reflect on their teaching and problem-solve as a group.

The primary purpose of this investigation was to discover what could be learned from a cross age teaching program that brought together selected urban youth from different RM-based programs. Data suggested that the program appeared to fulfill its purposes of providing advanced leadership opportunities, familiarization with a university, developmental activities during summer discretionary time, continued contact with significant adults, and create relationships with peers from various programs across the city. These youngsters are faced with difficult choices everyday due to inner city plight that is out of their control. It is hoped that participation in this program also helped the Urban Youth Leaders make smart decisions and create positive pathways in their journey through adolescence.

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