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AN EXPERIMENT IN CROSS-AGE TUTORING

Connie Strong Morrison

FREMONT, MICHIGAN, PUBLIC SCHOOLS

"I thing (think) that I learned to taik (take) lais (lots) of tim (time) wiher (with) the boy. and I thing (think) that I now no (know) mor (more) abuo (about) the respalte (responsibility) you have to have weim (when) wiking (working) wihte (with) a pupil.

"I feel that he learned that he is not liked out in laf (life), and I thing (think) that he nois (knows) how to do thing baidar (better)."

The writer is Carl H., fourteen years old in the seventh grade. He is so deficient in reading and writing skills that he can be labeled functionally illiterate.

Carl, and thirty-three other seventh and eighth grade boys and girls at Reese Junior High School, Reese, Michigan, participated, along with approximately forty elementary students, kindergarten through sixth grade, in a six weeks experimental program in cross-age tutoring. Standardized tests had verified the suspected fact that junior high students in this public school system were reading on the average of one to two years below grade level. Reasoning that teaching is often the best learning experience, a project was undertaken, with the support and cooperation of both the elementary and secondary principals, to provide elementary pupils with tutors from the junior high school. Both groups of children initially exhibited marked deficiencies in reading skills, and these deficiencies were reflected in other class work, as well.

Participating elementary students were chosen by their classroom teachers. Seventh and eighth graders were selected by the junior high reading teacher. All of the students involved participated by choice, and none were required to be a part of the program. It was interesting to observe that in a very short period of time tutoring became a status symbol in the junior high, and several students went so far as to feign reading problems in order to be eligible for the tutoring project.

Tutoring was completely individualized, depending upon the needs of each elementary student and the directions of the elementary teachers. The junior high students were encouraged to be innovative and to make suggestions and recommendations to the teachers. A variety of methods and materials were used.

The results of the six weeks program were dramatic, especially in regard to the self concepts of the older students. Children who had come to regard themselves as academic losers became highly motivated and were proud of their successes with their younger students. Carl, who had long voiced his intention to drop out of school as soon as possible, was described by the elementary teacher as having a "dignified way about him and good poise. Good attitude. He was quiet but effective."

Some of the remarks of the junior high students directly reflected their enhanced self images. "I feel they can read better to a friend than to a teacher." "The teacher said he did wonders while I was working with him." "I learned to be more kind to little children and see that others have problems in learning like I did." "I think he learned to like me, too, as I liked him. We are friends. I had fun working with this boy." "Both of them looked up to me, and it made me feel good." "I feel more responsible for what is going on around me." "I have learned that it's not just me that has a reading problem." "I even think that if I paid more attention in class, I could get better grades." "I think my student has learned to trust me." "I think it is nice to feel wanted by kids that are smaller than you." "I would like to teach young children when I grow up."

The following statement by Brian W., a bright eighth grader who was almost totally non-productive in school, is especially revealing.

"I learned that everybody has their own special problem. I learned that some people really need and want to be helped but pretend that they don't because they feel that you will make them feel inferior. I really think that feelings can help or hurt the human that is trying to learn."

Many junior high students used imagination and introduced innovative ideas into their tutoring. Some made flash cards, used tape recorders, brought treats as reinforcers, introduced new and entertaining reading materials, and even took their little pupils fishing after school hours.

Handling behavior problems was an eye-opening experience to several of the older students who had fallen into the habit of clowning their way through their own classes. One boy had a new insight into himself when he remarked, "I think my student behaved better than I have." Another observed, "I learned that it is not easy to teach a student who does not want to read, and I think that is the way I am. I can see the teacher's way of thinking when she loses her temper."

Other students noticed the embarrassment of students whose skills were deficient and who made frequent errors.

Most surprising, in light of the short six weeks experimental period, was the academic achievement of all the students, both elementary and junior high. Without exception, every elementary teacher involved in the project remarked on the growth and progress of nearly all of the younger pupils, both in basic reading skills and in self confidence. Improvement was observed in word attack skills, oral and silent reading, comprehension, phonics, spelling, completion of assignments, interest in school, and social adjustment. Some elementary teachers actually insisted that several students had advanced as much as two grade levels in their reading ability.

Academic improvement of the seventh and eighth graders can best be expressed in their own words. The following statements were written by some of the junior high students at the conclusion of the program.

“I figure it helped me just as much as it did them.”

“I noticed that my student could read with more expression than I did. I never liked reading, but now it is more interesting.”

“I can read faster than usually. I can understand what I read better now.”

“I learned that I should slow my reading speed down in some hard parts and zip right through the easy parts.”

I learned that I have forgotten a lot of things from when I was in elementary.”

“What I got out of it is now I stop at periods, and I don’t have to look back to see what I read.”

“I learned to know what I’m reading, and to sound the vowels out better.”

“I think I have learned a little more about how to behave, and a lot more about reading.”

“If you want to do something right, you have to take your time about it. Before I was a tutor, I would do my work fast and get it wrong without knowing it.”

“My pupils would learn something every day, and so would I.”

“Now I know what my problem is when I read. I always have to read it over to get what the sentence means.”

“Greg and Jimmy had a habit of using their fingers to read, and skipping sentences. I used to do the same thing. Now I don’t, so it helped me, too.”

“Now I’ve been trying to read books that are harder for me.”

“I have even learned some new words.”

“I think that the girl I tutored hasn’t learned as much as I have.”