

Kids Teaching Kids

Middle school classrooms come alive when students teach their peers.

Yvette Jackson, Tyrone Geronimo Johnson, and Ahmes Askia

In Newark, New Jersey, middle school students are taking over the classrooms—and the excitement is palpable and contagious. At Avon Avenue School, students Stephanie and Antonio lead their peers through a lesson on key stages in the water cycle, moving around the classroom answering questions and guiding differentiated small groups as they construct a graphic organizer to sequence the information. At Mount Vernon School, Tamara and David interrupt the proceedings in their math class to regroup their peers. Asked why, they answer, “We know these kids—they’ll talk and goof off unless we do something drastic.” At Maple Avenue School, several students lead a professional development session for 35 adults—including parents—engaging them emotionally and intellectually with a presentation on culturally relevant pedagogy.

No, the teachers are not on strike, nor are these scenes from a movie starring Denzel Washington or Hilary Swank. And this is not a dream—at least not literally. Figuratively, it’s any educator’s wildest dream. These students are teaching demonstration lessons as part of a professional development program implemented in the Newark Public Schools by the National Urban Alliance. The students resonate to the task of teaching, which most of them find energizing and eye-opening. In the process, they build their self-direction and competence not only as teachers, but also as learners.

The Newark/National Urban Alliance Partnership

Newark Public Schools is an urban district serving approximately 40,500 students, 75 percent of whom are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch.

For the past four years, 19 Newark middle schools have used a federal Striving Readers grant to partner with the National Urban Alliance in implementing the alliance’s Pedagogy of Confidence program. The program builds the capacity of math, science, social studies, and special education teachers, as well as teachers of English language learners, to increase the literacy skills of underperforming middle school students.

Each participating school has an assigned National Urban Alliance mentor, who visits the school once a month for two consecutive days. The mentors lead seminars to help teachers with individual or schoolwide concerns and to help them examine their own knowledge, attitudes, and expectations. The mentors also conduct demonstration lessons in participating teachers’ classrooms, showing teachers how to



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apply the instructional and literacy strategies presented in the seminars. Before each demonstration lesson, the mentor leads a meeting to discuss what the lesson is about, the strategies he or she will use, the rationale for selecting the strategies, and the principles of learning on which the strategies are based. After the demonstration lesson, observers meet to discuss and reflect on what they and the students experienced.

The 2009–10 school year, the fourth of the five-year grant, took an amazing turn when the team of mentors, brainstorming ideas to infuse new energy and excitement into the upcoming school year, decided to include students as team teachers in the classroom demonstration component of the program. During the year, as these students collaborated with mentors to learn about

the strategies, plan their lessons, teach their classmates, and reflect on their teaching experience, they displayed a reinvigorated commitment to learning. Here, we describe how the program works and discuss why the opportunity to teach has been so powerful for Newark middle school students.

How Student Demonstration Lessons Work

During the mentor's visit each month, two or three participating teachers give the mentor the names of several randomly selected students from their classes. Every student in the participating teachers' classes will eventually be part of a student teaching team.

The mentor and another teacher, who has requested that a certain demonstration lesson be taught in his or

her classroom, work with the selected students to help them prepare a lesson on the relevant topic or literacy skill. During a six-hour training session with the mentor and weeks of working with their teachers, the students learn

- Components of their lesson—what must be done before, during, and at the end of the learning to push it into long-term memory.
- An attention signal for getting students to focus on them as the instructors.
- Community builders to establish and maintain cooperative relationships.
- The content and strategies that they will teach.
- Who will be responsible for each part of the lesson.
- How to use video and music in the lesson.

Students learn how to design the lesson by placing the cognitive strategies they will teach within the National Urban Alliance's Pedagogical Flow Map, a 12-step, sequential tool that is now familiar to all the middle school students in the program. The flow map guides the instructor through each component of the lesson: introduction, concept development, vocabulary development, skill development, teaching the lesson, mediation for mastery, teacher (self) reflection, releasing the lesson, review, student reflection, concept confirmation, and assessment. After receiving this training, the students design the lesson and present it to their peers with little additional input from the adults.

In one such lesson, we observed Ashante. Hair pulled back with a bow, and wearing her favorite black leather jacket, Ashante stood at the head of the class with no open book or note cards nearby. If you didn't see her tapping her feet behind the desk, you would never have guessed that she was a little nervous. Armed only with colored pens

and poster board, she guided her peers through a lesson on the Spanish Armada of 1588, dispatched by King Philip II to quell the Protestant uprising.

Two days before, the teacher had introduced the students to the material by reading aloud to them from a text on the Spanish Armada and the Protestant uprising and then having them break into pairs and retell what she had read to a partner.

Ashante began by introducing herself to the class of excitable 6th graders and teaching them an attention signal she would use when she wanted them to stop working and look at her: "I'll say, 'if you can hear me, clap two times,' and you clap two times and then look at me, OK?" The students gave her their full attention.

After conducting a community-building exercise in which students stated who they were and what they liked to do, Ashante taped a poster board to the wall and showed them the taxonomy strategy they would be using that day, which fell in the vocabulary development section of the Pedagogical Flow Map.

She guided them in creating their taxonomies by saying, "Get out a clean piece of paper and follow along with me. Fold your paper in half and label the left side of your paper A-L just like this. Go over to the other half of your paper and label it M-Z." Ashante gave the students time to write as many words as they could remember from their previous lesson about the Spanish Armada and the Protestants. She then asked them to sit in groups of four and compare their lists. When Ashante saw that the students were hesitant to share, she pushed them by saying, "Remember, we learned that words are free." The students laughed but started writing more words on their taxonomies.

After consulting with the teacher about how much time she had left, Ashante used the hand-clapping signal



Empowering students changes the classroom climate.

to call for the students' attention. She then gave them another exercise in which she asked them each to write a sentence using at least three words from their taxonomies. When Ashante asked for volunteers to read their sentences, eager hands flew into the air.

Sometimes, the student teachers themselves determine which literacy strategies to teach. For example, Ms. Jefferson's social studies classes were studying ancient civilizations across the Fertile Crescent. In preparation to teach this content, the student teachers read about the three major religions in the region—Christianity, Islam, and Judaism—and discovered that these religions had many commonalities.

At the end of the reading, Travis commented that "religion is so much more than just my neighborhood church." Another student teacher, Eric, stated,

"It's too complicated to think that we all know what religion means without defining it." Concerned that an unclear definition of the term *religion* would hamper their peers' learning about the Fertile Crescent, the student teaching team decided that they should lead students through a vocabulary strategy that would establish a common classroom language to define religion.

Using a strategy called *defining format* (Rothstein, Rothstein, & Lauber, 2007), students listed the essential characteristics of the term *religion*. Their answers included *church, preaching, singing, saying prayers, the Bible, and communion*. Travis and his team perceived that their concerns had been justified—many of the students viewed religion in the narrowest context, actually the few city blocks that their church boundaries encompassed. "Not a good sign," Eric commented.

"Let's just move to the reading," Lisa said. "Maybe they'll get it then." While reading, the class discovered many things the three major religions had in common. The student teachers then helped the students compare and contrast some of these characteristics. "Whew, that was hard," Travis told his team. "But I'm sure they at least know that the religions are more like each other than different."

The Opportunity to Shine

Under the supervision of National Urban Alliance mentors, scenes like these are occurring daily in Newark middle schools. As an active learning strategy, student team teaching can't be beat. As the old adage goes, "If you want to learn something, teach it." The act of teaching spans the entire range of Bloom's taxonomy, from the acquisition of foundational concepts up through evaluation and synthesis. Students build important skills as they plan how to approach a given learning task, monitor comprehension, and evaluate progress

toward completing the task.

In their role as teachers, students assume ownership and develop confidence, competence, and poise. Experienced mentors like Eyka Stephens reinforces presentation skills such as posture and projection in student training sessions. The student teachers realize that they must stand up straight and project their voices. They help one another understand that the hats must come off and the hoods come down if they are to command the attention of the room. The students willingly adapt.

Placed in the role of teacher—and therefore, role model—these middle schoolers assume a sense of responsibility and purpose that transforms them. Like the proverbial unpolished diamond, they have just been waiting for the opportunity to shine. They also acquire content knowledge, have fun, and often hold the class's attention as effectively as the regular instructor does.

One reason the student teachers are so motivated is that they are preparing to teach real content to a real audience—their peers. Students who participate in bands, debate teams, and sports teams have experienced the power of such an authentic audience to motivate (Levy, 2008).

The program also gives students the opportunity to be the experts. No one understands youth culture like young people themselves (Jackson, 2001). Teachers are realizing that empowering students changes the classroom climate. Students on both sides of the learning are engaged and motivated because the student teachers naturally design lessons that are relevant for their peers.

But the student teachers and their peers aren't the only beneficiaries. Designing and delivering a lesson gives students a greater appreciation for their teachers. In the weeks following their teaching experience, the student teachers are more attentive, observant, and self-reflective, which makes teaching them more rewarding for Newark teachers.

Harnessing the Energy of Peer Instruction

Observe any K–12 cafeteria and watch students huddle together over iPhones, handheld video game consoles, and MP3 players. Watch as they teach one another to sync, tweet, and tag. Although you might not recognize those terms, your students probably do. Ask them how they learned such skills, and they'll often say, "It's obvious. Everybody knows that."

What that really means is that the kids teach one another—so efficiently, so effortlessly, and so expertly that it doesn't even feel like learning. The Pedagogy of Confidence program in Newark middle schools harnesses the natural energy that students display outside the classroom and brings it into the classroom to increase student motivation and engagement. **EL**

Authors' note: Student names are pseudonyms.

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Yvette Jackson is chief executive officer of the National Urban Alliance in Syosset, New York; y_jackson@nuatc.org. **Tyrone Geronimo Johnson** is curriculum specialist for Level the Playing Field, Berkeley, California; Geronimo.johnson@berkeley.edu. **Ahmes Askia** is chief of staff of the National Urban Alliance; a_askia@nuatc.org.

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