

Garden Mentorship Program

In Downsville, Louisiana, third-grade teacher Donna Alford had a bounty of science-focused books, but no time to dig into them with students. Meanwhile, at the high school next door, teens had worked with community volunteers to bring a greenhouse and garden to life. English and biology teacher Keli Bryan imagined some fertile connections: Create a service-learning project in which tenth graders serve as mentors to the third-grade reading class by using gardening literature and curricula. With matching funds from a Learn and Serve grant, a “literacy garden” project was born. The \$5,000 grant covered the costs of new garden beds, homemade reading benches, and an innovative publishing project. But the *real* value was in what emerged from the partnerships.



Building Perspective and Skills

Part of Keli's fall English curriculum is dedicated to social and emotional learning: resolving conflicts, setting goals, developing empathy, and so on. She figured that by serving as mentors, her students could hone some of those skills and dispositions. In preparation, she asked individuals to reflect on and journal about how they felt when they were young. “Before my students paired up with the third graders, we talked about how to interact and engage them and the types of questions they might ask,” says Keli. The class also explored reading strategies they could use and ways to check for comprehension. Finally, they shared concerns they had about being mentors.

Reading Mentors: The Basics

The core concept was simple. Randomly pair the older and younger students to read select books together. (The literacy grant paid for a collection of garden-related fiction and nonfiction books.) Once a week, teens walked to the elementary building for a 45-minute session, during which the partners took turns reading to one another and discussing the content and their reactions to it. “In the beginning, the whole group played games to get to know one another,” says Keli. When time allowed, they'd also draw or do another activity together.

After each session, the older students went back to the high school to discuss and respond to journal prompts about techniques they tried, what they learned, what went well, surprises they encountered, and so on.

Meanwhile in the Garden

Wearing her biology teaching hat, Keli involved the same pairs of third and tenth-graders in planting, tending, and harvesting in the school garden and greenhouse. “Before our garden sessions with third graders, my students and I talked about things like what needs doing and how to plant things properly,” says Keli. The older students, in turn, taught the younger students the ropes. Sometimes the teens worked alongside university students who grew transplants for the school greenhouse. Together, the young farmers pulled off projects such as butterfly, veggie, and pizza gardens and an arbor meant for gourds.

In addition to gardening, the tenth-grade mentors also guided lessons that had been introduced to them by local educators such as Shelby McDuff, a VISTA volunteer. For instance, the teens had their young charges dig into decay. “My students went into the third-grade classroom and involved them in being compost chefs,” says Keli. The teens had the third graders add kitchen compost ingredients – eggshells, paper, and banana peels – to a bowl. After learning about the role of leaves, grass, and moisture in a compost pile, the youngsters

KidsGardening is a nonprofit educational organization. Support provided by sponsors and donors is critical to our ability to provide free garden-based resources for parents and educators. All gifts are tax-deductible.

added those items and mixed them all together. Next, the tenth graders brought in piles of leaves from home and, with their buddies, explored compost in action in the schoolyard.

The older students also tried to raise their mentees' awareness about some pressing environmental issues. In biology class, for instance, they made artistic globes that represented different environmental problems and possible solutions. They shared these with the primary class and discussed the representations. On Earth Day, the cross-age pairs drew pictures and environmental messages on grocery bags left at a local store for customers to use.



Publishing Partners Produce Books

With new insights gained from reading and reaping, students worked together on a culminating venture that combined technology, literacy, and science learning. Keli asked her tenth graders to narrow down possible topics for homemade books (e.g., insects) and suggested different formats they might choose, such as a gardening alphabet book or the life cycle of a garden insect. Small groups of younger and older students then met to choose formats and dig in.

In many cases, the third graders came up with specific ideas within the larger topics, such as focusing on the life cycle of a ladybug. "The tenth graders prompted the younger students to imagine storylines and then pulled their ideas into written tales," says Keli. "The third graders did illustrations and wrote about

KidsGardening is a nonprofit educational organization. Support provided by sponsors and donors is critical to our ability to provide free garden-based resources for parents and educators. All gifts are tax-deductible.

themselves as authors." Some books even included student-taken photos. One of these was a garden "eye spy" book that featured hidden creatures, and other garden finds. For instance, a page reading "I spy a dragonfly" also featured a paragraph about the insects. The opposite page had an enticing image.

Once the text and images were complete, the tenth graders took on the publishing piece. They scanned their partners' artwork and placed it along with digital photos into their text documents. "We printed the stories out in colored ink on glossy paper, used a heavy-duty stapler to bind them, and then attached them with sticky paper to cardboard covers we ordered," says Keli.

At year's end, the group held a publishing celebration and invited parents to attend. "We showed slides with photos students had taken to document their experiences," says Keli. Students chose one of the books – *The Life of a Butterfly and Her Friends* – to read and act out in front of the group. Finally, each mentor handed a copy of the finished book to his or her young partner.

What They Gained

The tenth-grade mentors grew academically, personally, and socially through the project. "For a lot of them, it was the relationship – making a new friend and being a big buddy," says Keli. It also revived their curiosity in the garden." She explains that tenth graders had gotten a bit blasé about it, but the third graders' excitement was infectious. She also noted that adolescents who struggle with classwork had a better grasp of concepts after reading and discussing books for younger grades. It didn't hurt that the older kids were responsible for answering or finding answers to their partners' questions!

Keli also noticed a rising level of maturity and confidence in many students throughout the year as they served as teachers, role models, and presenters. "One of my more 'off the wall' students got randomly paired with a third grader who was very much like him," says Keli. "I think he saw himself in the student and kind of grew up through the experience. Many found they had lots more to contribute than they thought they did in the beginning." In fact, in a pre/post survey about the project, students responded to questions about whether they contribute to their communities; most shifted from *no* to *yes*.

And what of their third-grade counterparts? Besides the sheer excitement of working and exploring in a garden, the youngsters relished having teaching buddies who were just a bit older than them. "The one-on-one attention and extra reading practice are so important," says Keli. And the tenth graders noticed that their partners' literacy skills really did improve.

Advice on Cross-Age Mentoring

Keli offers some tips on initiating a mentoring project like hers.

Preparation: "One of the most important things in doing a project like this is to prepare your students," says Keli. In her case, this meant reviewing the process up front, discussing logistics and teaching strategies, and anticipating students' concerns.

Consistency: Keli urges educators to maintain a consistent schedule in order to organize planning and sustain younger and older students' excitement. She adds that her end-of-year student reflections indicated a lack of initial excitement. The teens evidently expected the project to "slowly fizzle out because that's what usually happens with new projects." They were surprised that the reading was just a starting point leading to a host of terrific gardening and publishing activities.

Reflection: "It's very important in a project like this to have students reflect all along the way through writing and discussion," says Keli. This enables both teachers and students to see how they've grown. To this end, in addition to using in-class discussions and journaling, Keli conducted some in-depth video

KidsGardening is a nonprofit educational organization. Support provided by sponsors and donors is critical to our ability to provide free garden-based resources for parents and educators. All gifts are tax-deductible.

interviews. She figured she could also use “sound bite” clips from these in two-minute fundraising videos. Finally, with a looming required state English/writing test, she worked student reflections into essay writing practice. “I’d ask students to address these types of questions in essays: *What did you think first about service learning? How has it changed? What did you learn and think the kids learned? How does it have a broader impact, for instance, on volunteering and civic responsibility?*”

Look for grants: Keli’s school received a Learn and Serve grant from the [Corporation for National and Community Service](#) and a community grant from [Entergy](#). “These covered our book publishing kit, printing costs, gardening curricula and supplies, mural materials, and reading benches made by kids in our agriculture class,” says Keli.

Believe that it’s worth doing: “You might at times have questions about whether the effort is worth it,” says Keli. But she advises pushing through those doubts. “Everything I did related to this project was fun for me; the kids love it, and you can create things that people can really see. Reading every week was key, but the garden was visible, and the kids’ pride was big because of that.” Besides, she explains, you have a great context for helping kids develop their social and emotional skills, *and* you can tie it to standards. Most of all, explains Keli, “it’s a meaningful context for learning. I was better able to meet state curriculum requirements because my students were more engaged in a topic if they knew they were going to have to go teach it to the younger students.”

KidsGardening is a nonprofit educational organization. Support provided by sponsors and donors is critical to our ability to provide free garden-based resources for parents and educators. All gifts are tax-deductible.