

## Using simple interactions to improve pedagogy in a cross-aged leadership program

By: [Michael A Hemphill](#) and [Tom Martinek](#)

Hemphill, M. A. & Martinek, T. J. (2020). Using simple interactions to improve pedagogy in a cross-aged leadership program. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 39(1), 126– 130.

**Accepted author manuscript version reprinted, by permission, from *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 2020, 39 (1): 126-130, <https://doi.org/10.1123/jtpe.2018-0347>. © Human Kinetics, Inc.**

### **Abstract:**

Cross-aged teaching programs provide leadership experiences to youth who aim to influence children to be responsible, caring, and compassionate. Purpose: The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of a leadership development protocol on relationship development in an established cross-aged teaching program. Method: Guided by the developmental relationships framework, “Simple Interactions” was implemented with a group of nine youth leaders. The intent was to help them improve their relationships with children in four categories (a) connection, (b) reciprocity, (c) participation, and (d) progression. Data were collected through reflection documents and focus group interviews. Results: Qualitative results explain how Simple Interactions impacted reflection and revealed strategies youth leaders used to build relationships with children. Discussion: The findings suggest that the Simple Interactions protocol may provide an innovative strategy to promote reflective practice and develop positive relationships in a cross-aged teaching program.

**Keywords:** cross-aged teaching | leadership development | systematic observation | teaching responsibility | youth development

### **Article:**

Cross-aged teaching programs often represent “the beginning of developing leadership qualities that influence others to be responsible, caring, and compassionate human beings” (Martinek & Hellison, 2009, p. 76). Several examples of cross-aged teaching in the context of physical activity are grounded in the belief that all youth have the capacity to lead when given the opportunity and guidance. These cross-aged teaching models have engendered the spirit of self-responsibility in youth through lesson planning and teaching younger children sport and life skills. For example, Intrator and Siegel’s (2014) Project Coach program for at-risk youths in an urban setting used sport experiences to provide leadership opportunities for underserved children. The First Tee golf program (Petitpas, Cornelius, & Van Raalte, 2008) recruited high

school and college students to teach sports and life skills to underserved youths. The education of youth leaders in the program emphasized the importance of building good relational skills and acquiring sufficient pedagogical strategies to deliver the program content. Evaluation of the program showed that leaders enhanced their ability to teach and lead. Younger participants also developed golf skills and knowledge as well as some valuable life skills.

Several cross-aged teaching programs have been guided by the Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) model (Hellison, 2011). For example, the Project Lead program (Cutforth, 1997) provided an opportunity for middle school students to become leaders for fourth- and fifth-grade students. In Project Lead, the teacher and researcher identified potential leaders in the middle school who were willing to work with the younger students each week. Classroom teachers reported positive changes in the behaviors and attitudes from the students in the program especially those who were the leaders (Cutforth, 1997). The Urban Apprentice Teacher Program included students who were characterized as behavior problems and low achievers at their school (Cutforth & Puckett, 1999). These students taught basketball to younger children who were attending a summer camp. Results showed an increase in self-confidence, concern for others, communication ability, problem solving, and enthusiasm for learning for the student teachers.

Studies of Martinek's Youth Leader Corps program (Martinek & Hellison, 2009) looked at several elements of leadership. An early study focused on the factors impacting leaders' commitment to the program (Schilling, 2001). A significant factor in the leaders' commitment to the program was their relationship with staff and other leaders. In a subsequent study, Schilling (2008) profiled a leader's ability to face personal challenges in her school and personal life. Balancing school work with caring for her daughter and relying on welfare support presented formidable obstacles in her daily life. The leader's resilience to overcome the challenges was enhanced by her involvement as a youth leader and especially her relationship with the staff. A later investigation of the transfer of values of former Youth Leader Corps members was conducted by Melendez and Martinek (2015). Working with others and problem solving appeared to be the most relevant values that applied in various parts of their lives. A common outcome in all these studies of cross-aged teaching has been the significant role that the program played in fostering relational skills of youth leaders. This highlights one of the central features of the TPSR model—building relationships with others.

## Conceptual Framework

Developmental relationships refer to meaningful and reciprocal interactions among youth and adults that help them develop life skills. Li and Julian (2012) argue that developmental relationships are the “active ingredient” (p. 158) to success in youth programs. Developmental relationships enhance other important components, or “inactive ingredients,” such as curriculum, facilities, and professional development programs. This suggests that an exemplary curriculum is ineffective without developmental relationships to activate its promise. Similarly, the Search

Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework (Roehlkepartain et al., 2017) emphasizes the importance of relationships between youth and adults and youth and their peers. "Nothing – nothing – has more impact in the life of a child than positive relationships" (p. 3), according to the authors. In practice, developmental relationships are conceptualized as (a) bidirectional and with an emotional attachment, (b) reciprocal in nature, (c) progressively complex, and (d) contain a balance of power (Li & Julian, 2012). In youth–adult relationships, developmental relationships work best when power shifts in the direction of youth (Akiva & Petrokubi, 2016). For example, cross-aged teaching programs shift the responsibility of teaching children to youth leaders while providing appropriate levels of support.

A focus on relationships is central to cross-aged teaching models. As Martinek and Hellison (2009) described, "individual positive relationships with kids in the program are at the core of both TPSR and youth leadership . . . the three Rs of youth work are relational, relational, relational" (p. 103). Several responsibility-based teaching strategies have helped define the pedagogical practices of program leaders in TPSR programs. For example, empowerment-based strategies such as assigning leadership roles, giving youth voices and choices, providing a role in assessment, and emphasizing the transfer of life skills help shift power in the direction of youth participants (Wright & Craig, 2011). To date, these strategies have only been used to investigate adult teachers and leaders of youth programs. The pedagogical strategies that youth leaders employ to facilitate relationship development in cross-aged teaching have not been studied in previous research. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the Simple Interactions leadership development protocol on relationship development in an established cross-aged teaching program (Akiva, Li, Martin, Horner, & McNamara, 2017).

## **Methods**

### **Participants and Setting**

Nine students (three males and six females) enrolled in the 11th ( $n = 4$ ) and 12th ( $n = 5$ ) grades were purposively selected to participate in this study based on their participation in a cross-aged teaching program called the Teach and Lead Program (TLP). Following approval from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro institutional review board, all youth participants who served as youth leaders assented to participation and informed consent was received from their parents. Pseudonyms are used when referring to these participants. The youth leaders self-organized into three teams of two and one team of three. The teams collaborated as partners throughout the program by designing, implementing, and reflecting on values-based physical activity lessons. Two pairs of youth leaders had consistent weekly attendance in the program (Grace and Vance; Martin and Anthony), while one pair and the team of three often had one member missing from the program (Mick and Brett; Zoe, Logan, and Lisa). All participants were in attendance during data collection for this research project. Each week during the academic year, the youth leaders gathered equipment and traveled to an elementary school where

they implemented physical activity lessons with approximately 35 fourth- and fifth-grade students who were selected to attend by a school counselor. The elementary school was situated in an urban area and was impacted by the low-income status of the families it served. For the purposes of this research project, researchers videotaped lessons with an emphasis on capturing video that reflected the strengths of youth leaders as opposed to any weaknesses that might occur as they taught lessons to the children.

### Program Description

During each weekly meeting, the youth leaders taught a short physical activity lessons in which they were encouraged to integrate responsibility skills. During each 60-min lesson, all four of the youth leader teams taught the children. The children, who were organized into four equal-sized groups, rotated from one youth leader team to the next every 10–15 min during each weekly lesson. Hence, the children received instruction from each team leader group every lesson. The TPSR model lesson plan format was implemented by the youth leaders in each of their 10- to 15-min lesson segment (that were repeated four times during each lesson). This included an awareness talk, physical activity time, and a group meeting at the end of the lesson that concluded with individual reflection time (Hellison, 2011). After the children departed for the day, the youth leaders spent approximately one hour reflecting on the day's activities as a group, writing individual reflections, and planning the lesson for the next week. Then, all youth leaders and the staff who administered the program attended a group dinner each week at the university dining hall. For the purpose of this study, the Simple Interactions leadership development program was added to what was already taking place in the TLP.

### Simple Interactions Leadership Development Program

Simple Interactions (Akiva et al., 2017) is a professional development program designed to enhance developmental relationships between youth and adult leaders. The program operationalizes the developmental relationships framework by defining four key ingredients for relationship development and providing a process for youth service providers to examine their interactions with youth. First, program leaders should establish a personal connection with youth. This can include eye contact, gestures, and positive affect, depending on the situation. Second, the relationship should include reciprocal roles during activities. Reciprocity includes the opportunity for voices and choices in programming. Third, program leaders should facilitate the participation of all youth, particularly those who are least able to be involved. Fourth, activities should be incrementally progressive to provide appropriate levels of challenge and support. Simple Interactions engages program leaders in viewing short video clips of their interactions with youth to evaluate their strengths in the four categories (i.e., connection, reciprocity, participation, progression; see Figure 1). At the time of this study, Simple Interactions had not been examined in a sport context or in youth-led programs.

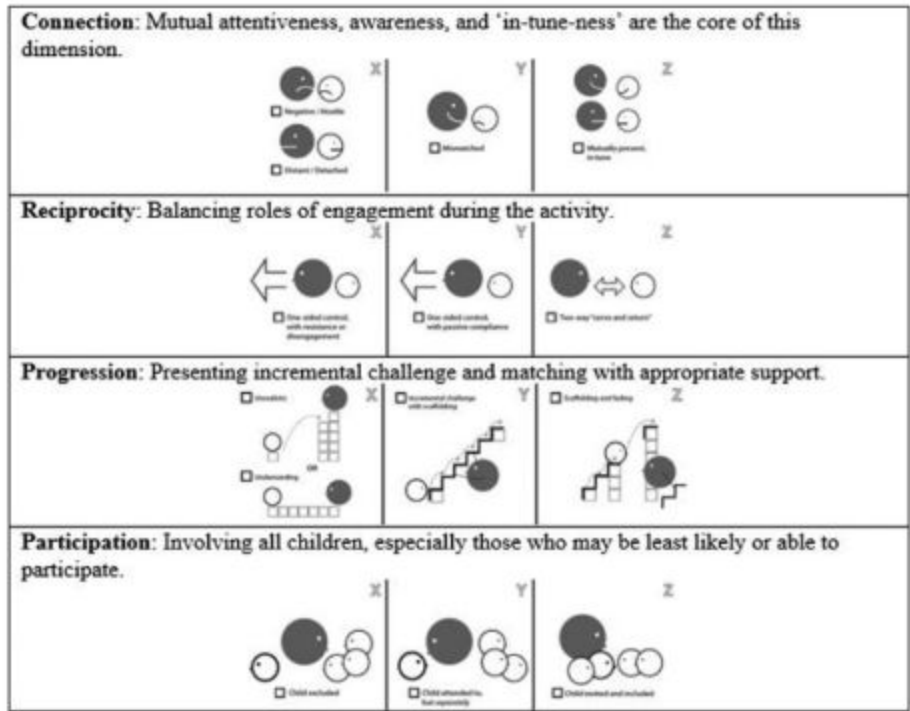


Figure 1 -- Simple Interactions Tool. Note. Visual illustrations provide participants with a pictorial description of the leader's relational interactions with children.

At the beginning of the year-long TLP, youth leaders were presented with an overview of Simple Interactions. The Simple Interactions training included three 75-min workshops scheduled at 6-week intervals where brief (i.e., 4 min or less) video clips were presented to the youth leaders. Unique video clips of each of the four youth leader groups were created for each workshop and then viewed collectively as a group. The videos spliced together brief segments of the TPSR lesson format. For example, a typical video might include 1 min of awareness talk, 2 min of physical activity time, and 1 min of reflection time. In each 75-min workshop, the youth leaders were provided opportunities to discuss Simple Interactions as a group, to view video clips of their teaching, to write reflections, and to have a group discussion about the implementation of the new program (Akiva et al., 2017).

#### Data Collection

Data were collected over the course of one academic year, during which time 24 TLP meetings took place. The three Simple Interactions workshops occurred after the sixth, 12th, and 18th TLP meetings. To ensure fidelity of implementation of the workshops, the first author (M.A. Hemphill) conducted a site visit to a research lab and to a youth center to gain insights into the best practices for research and implementation of the Simple Interactions program. He observed the implementation of Simple Interactions in an adult context, reviewed procedures for

collecting, editing, and disseminated video clips, and discussed implementing the project in a cross-aged teaching program.

#### Reflection documents

Following each Simple Interactions workshop, the youth leaders completed one-page structured reflection document based on their experience. The reflection included a self-rating for each Simple Interactions category where the youth leaders could rate the quality of their interaction with children on a 3-point Likert-type scale (i.e., X, Y, Z; see Figure 1). There were several open-ended reflection questions on each document, including “what strengths did you observe in today’s video” and “what strategies can you use to build on those strengths?”

#### Focus group interviews

At the end of the TLP, the youth leaders completed a focus group interview with the research team. The interview was semistructured, lasted about one hour, and focused on the youth leaders’ experience with the Simple Interactions program protocol. The interview protocol specifically focused on each of the four categories of Simple Interactions and the efficacy of the model.

#### Data Analysis

All focus group interviews and reflection documents were transcribed verbatim. The first author (M.A. Hemphill) and a graduate student engaged in a collaborative qualitative data analysis process (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). This analysis process included the two researchers independently analyzing the data using open coding to identify patterns in the data. The two researchers then compared notes and identified how their emerging themes fit together and generated a final codebook (Strauss & Corbin, 2015). Finally, to enhance the trustworthiness of the results, the director of the TLP served as a peer debriefer and provided feedback on how well the themes aligned with his perceptions of the program.

### **Results**

All youth leaders suggested that Simple Interactions should remain a part of the TLP. They described the program as “fun,” “interesting,” and “beneficial” for future youth leaders. Two qualitative themes emanated from the data analysis. First, the program provoked reflective practice among the youth leaders. Second, the program helped reveal common strategies that the youth leaders used to build relationships with children.

#### Reflective Practice

According to the youth leaders, the Simple Interactions program helped enhance their reflective practice. Lisa (focus group) explained that the video observation prompted more specific reflection because “watching it on video makes it easier to pinpoint what’s good and bad.” Youth leaders reflected on several specific strategies that Simple Interactions helped them learn about. “Sometimes I get ahead of what the kids are capable of,” Mick explained in a workshop reflection. “I learned how to set goals for where I want the kids to be and plan progression into my activities.” Brett mentioned that “I have learned not to rush . . . patience is a virtue,” and Zoe noticed that Simple Interactions “can help kids learn for themselves instead of me constantly teaching” (focus group). Anthony’s reflection notes explain that he “learned how to better evaluate my leadership” which led him to focus on “how to connect and interact with the kids better by simplifying and clarifying instructions.”

Youth leaders also benefited from the perspectives of their peers during Simple Interactions workshops. During the focus group interview, all agreed that they observed other youth leaders and borrowed their ideas. “The workshops gave us a different perspective, like being about to get help from my fellow leaders . . . getting tips from them on how I could interact much better” (Logan). Lisa explained that by watching her peers, “I realized that I have to be more involved as a leader . . . you can’t just stand on the side and tell them what to do.” The opportunity to view video clips helped youth identify teachable moments that may not otherwise be apparent to them. For example, Anthony explained that “one or two kids didn’t have any connection” during his awareness talk. “By seeing myself and then getting advice from others, I was able to get a better understanding of connection.” Zoe noticed that “the kids who were looking away didn’t know English well,” which led her to think of nonverbal communication strategies. For Martin, “I learned to judge kid’s willingness to participate in activities.” He explained that this helped him to “change some things that will keep the kids together . . . it changed my character toward the kids.”

Finally, the youth leaders took note of the strength-based approach. Several leaders suggested including more videos that display weakness would be helpful. “I’m interested in seeing my mistakes . . . [Simple Interactions] should make us more aware of our mistakes when interacting with the kids,” Lisa explained (reflection document); Zoe suggested we “talk more about ways we can improve on certain downfalls” (reflection document). At times the youth rated themselves high on Simple Interactions, while being aware that they have “flaws” that did not get captured on the videotape. They also noted the variance in different lessons. For example, Grace reflected, “please don’t film me on the first rotation – the kids are too hyper and the leaders don’t have their rhythm yet” (interview).

### Strategies for Relational Leadership

Youth leaders identified common practices that they used, sometimes through trial and error, to build relationships with children. These strategies were often remarked upon in reflection documents and during back-and-forth conversations among the leaders during focus group

interview. The youth leaders provided several examples of using questioning and discussion strategies to connect with children.

One of the most important relational leadership strategies learned was “getting the attention” of learners. Grace explained, “establish a way to gain the attention of the children” (reflection document). This can be as simple as an introductory activity where children are asked to “repeat after me” (Zoe), or by using “thumbs up, thumbs down” gestures (Brett), or remembering their names (focus group). No matter what strategy was chosen, gaining the attention of all children established the connection and allowed the leaders to maximize participation. Several youth leaders mentioned challenging the children “by asking more demanding questions” (Logan) and specifically by “asking the kids to think more about our TPSR goals” (Martin; focus group).

Youth leaders used questioning and discussion strategies to establish connection and participation. They explained during focus group interview that engaging with the children helped with reciprocity and progression. One way to achieve this was to empower the children, “allow them to kind of control what they are doing . . . like let them have some suggestions and then implement it” (Martin). At other times, Mick suggested to “join in . . . sometimes we would join in because we felt like the kids would be more focused and it would be more of a two way ‘serve and return’ thing.” The youth often used the “serve and return” metaphor to explain reciprocity. Anthony explains, “you know what a good two-way relationship is when we serve and they return; then they serve and we return.” Joining the activity helped the youth leaders engage with students as a whole group or to “pull a kid to the side” (Brett) and interact with them individually.

## **Discussion**

For these youth leaders, Simple Interactions provided a renewed focus on relationship development. Given the developmental nature of leadership, various types of supports are needed to help youth develop effective pedagogy in cross-aged teaching programs (Martinek & Hellison, 2009). This has previously been done through intentionally planning lessons and reflecting on the outcomes after each TPL meeting. The effectiveness of reflections may be limited by the ability of youth to recall events that took place during the activity. Simple Interactions focused the attention of youth on four specific elements and isolated different aspects of the lesson plan such as physical activity time or reflection time. The four categories—connection, reciprocity, progression, and participation—were presented to youth as active ingredients for developing relationships with children (Li & Julian, 2012). From the perspective of youth, those relationship development skills were already a strength of theirs in most cases. However, often times there were missed connections, one or two students who were left out, a power imbalance in conversations, or an activity that was not challenging. Identifying these blind spots seemed to help youth employ their leadership skills to improve their relationships with children.



Simple Interactions may have implications for TPSR programs beyond cross-aged teaching given that Simple Interactions was initially designed and validated in adult-led youth development contexts (Akiva et al., 2017). Video observation strategies complement those previously employed by the Tools for Assessing Responsibility-based Education instrument (Wright & Craig, 2011) and are designed to be more practitioner friendly and cognizant of the limited time available for professional development. Finally, as relationship development comes into focus in youth development research (Roehlkepartain et al., 2017), cross-aged teaching programs deserve further consideration as a mechanism to develop quality relationships between youth leaders and the children they serve (Akiva & Petrokubi, 2016). Research and practice in this area can be enhanced by better understanding what pedagogical strategies youth leaders employ in cross-aged teaching programs and how to help leaders develop relationship skills such as those described in Simple Interactions.

## References

- Akiva, T., Li, J., Martin, K.M., Horner, C.G., & McNamara, A.R. (2017). Simple Interactions: Piloting a strengths-based and interaction-based professional development intervention for out-of-school time programs. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 46, 285–305. doi:10.1007/s10566-016-9375-9
- Akiva, T., & Petrokubi, J. (2016). Growing with youth: A lifewide and lifelong perspective on youth–adult partnership in youth programs. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 69, 248–258. doi:10.1016/j.chilyouth.2016.08.019
- Cutforth, N. (1997). What’s worth doing: Reflection on an after-school program in a Denver elementary school. *Quest*, 49, 130–139. doi:10.1080/00336297.1997.10484228
- Cutforth, N., & Puckett, K. (1999). An investigation into the organization, challenges, and impact of an urban apprentice teacher program. *The Urban Review*, 31, 153–172. doi:10.1023/A:1023231523762
- Hellison, D. (2011). *Teaching responsibility through physical activity*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Intrator, S.M., & Siegel, D. (2014). *The quest for mastery: Positive youth development through out-of-school programs*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Li, J., & Julian, M. (2012). Developmental relationships as the active ingredient: A unifying working hypothesis of “what works” across intervention settings. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 82, 157–166. PubMed ID: 22506517 doi:10.1111/j.1939-0025.2012.01151.x
- Martinek, T., & Hellison, D. (2009). *Youth leadership in sport and physical education*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Melendez, A., & Martinek, T. (2015). Life after Project Effort: Applying values acquired in a responsibility-based physical activity program. *Revista Internacional de Ciencias del Deporte*, 11, 258–280. doi:10.5232/ricyde2015.04105

- Petitpas, A.J., Cornelius, A., & Van Raalte, J. (2008). Youth development through sport: It's all about relationships. In N. Holt (Ed.), *Positive youth development through sport* (pp. 61–70). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Richards, K.A.R., & Hemphill, M.A. (2018). A practical guide to collaborative qualitative data analysis. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 37, 225–231.  
doi:10.1123/jtpe.2017-0084
- Roehlkepartain, E.C., Pekel, K., Syvertsen, A.K., Sethi, J., Sullivan, T.K., & Scales, P.C. (2017). *Relationships First: Creating connections that help young people thrive*. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.
- Schilling, T. (2001). An investigation of commitment among participants in an extended day physical activity program. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 72, 355–365.  
PubMed ID: 11770785 doi:10.1080/02701367.2001.10608972
- Schilling, T. (2008). An examination of resilience process in context: The case of Tasha. *The Urban Review*, 40, 296–316. doi:10.1007/s11256-007-0080-8
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (2015). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Wiley.
- Wright, P.M., & Craig, M.W. (2011). Tool for Assessing Responsibility- Based Education (TARE): Instrument development, content validity, and inter-rater reliability. *Measurement in Physical Education and Exercise Science*, 15, 204–219.  
doi:10.1080/1091367X.2011.590084