Overcoming Ageism: the Role of Pedagogy in Encouraging Inter-Generational Connections

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Bibliography
Ageism, or discrimination against the elderly, has already taken its toll on millions of seniors in our country. Research shows the awful effects that stereotyping and avoidance can have on older people. For too long we have ignored the talents and wisdom of our oldest citizens. Educators have the opportunity to use their classrooms as meeting grounds for minds, young and old alike. A pedagogy that values inter-generational connections can have drastic, redeeming effects on our new generations’ beliefs about the elderly. Simultaneously, these connections will foster authentic learning and enhance student motivation and comprehension. The oldest generations and the newest have much to gain from one another if and when educators build a bridge between them.
The elderly are one of the more vulnerable subgroups of our society as far as their financial status, living arrangements, and physical state of health, yet they are continuously stereotyped and discriminated against. Discrimination against the elderly cuts across all racial, religious, socioeconomic, and professional barriers, although the discrimination is more intense in some areas than others.

Examining the beliefs of health-care professionals, one of the few professions that many elderly individuals have regular contact with, it is possible to see that ageism is becoming more and more prevalent. In fact, a large-scale study of medical students in 1995 revealed such negative feelings toward the elderly that the authors of the study "recommended an 'elderly attitude profile' to be completed by medical students prior to them being awarded a place at medical school" (Weir 59). This article detailing the prevalence of ageism in health care, published in the International Journal of Therapy and Rehabilitation, draws attention to the fact that health-care professionals are only human. They are, indeed, "a part of society and as such, have matured in their own culture and socioeconomic background to become the people they are" (57). We need to realize that the views we consider acceptable, and may in fact encourage in our society, have long-lasting effects that may enable discrimination for generations.

Dr. Evelyn C. Weir, Lecturer at Queen Margaret University College, suggests that educators should take on the task of educating incoming professionals and argues that "gerontology should not only be a postgraduate subject, but should be fully integrated into the undergraduate curriculum" (61). Educators are, in fact, responsible for teaching gerontology or else their programs can be as dangerous as ageism itself. While this concept of a mandatory gerontology in undergraduate programs would not cause any
harm, it also may not have the positive results that Weir would hope for. It is not likely that gerontology education for college-age students would cause a significant change in their beliefs of the elderly. The reason for doubt lies in the results of age awareness training and in Weir's explanation, for the evolution of ageism itself.

Weir attributes existing ageism, in part, to the foundation that was made when health-care professionals and others were very young. Citing the influence of children's literature, Weir argues that seeing older, stereotyped individuals that play minor, unenthusiastic roles has an effect on children. The media is also cited as a very influential medium that especially affects young adults. These young adults are especially vulnerable as they are solidifying their values and beliefs, beginning to decide on a future career, and transitioning into becoming involved citizens. Weir recognizes that children and young adults are impressionable but recommends that an intervention of sorts be placed in college. An authentic pedagogy that focuses on the equality of all generations and embraces the benefits and wisdom that come with age would, in fact, be the most effective if launched in the later primary grades.

Several studies have supported the hypothesis that although age awareness training in adults may change the language they use when referring to older individuals, it is not likely to alter their beliefs or their propensity to positively interact with them, if at all. One such study examined individuals' scores on the Palmore Aging Quiz (PAQ) and Fraboni Scale of Ageism (FSA) tests during an initial encounter and also one month after an age awareness workshop (Hamilton & Maloney, page 259). The Palmore Aging Quiz, which required participants to identify "factual" statements as true or false, did show improved scores between the two administrations of the test. The Fraboni Scale of
Ageism, on the other hand, "measures attitudes towards, rather than knowledge of, aging and older people" (253) had mixed results. Higher PAQ scores did positively correlate with FSA scores in the initial testing. Those individuals who were more aware of the facts and the myths behind aging and the aged person were much less likely to have ageist views or take part in ageist behavior such as avoidance or discrimination. There was not a significant correlation between PAQ and FSA scores in the one month follow-up tests, however, supporting the belief that age awareness programs can improve one's knowledge bank regarding this population but will most likely have little or no effect on the actual behavior toward or beliefs regarding the population. Hamilton and Maloney go on to note that "courses on aging awareness which are primarily fact-based may be ineffective in addressing attitudes to aging" (259). A program which establishes personal connections between children or young adults and older individuals could have just the effect that Hamilton and Maloney would have been surprised to find in the administration of the second set of tests. If children are exposed to positive, meaningful learning experiences with many members of the older community, a generation of young people with a new found appreciation for and interest in the older population could emerge.

Although statistics do not support the idea that an undergraduate intervention would be effective, it is important to note that an article such as Weir's is promising. This is in part because the call for education's intervention is found in a therapy and rehabilitation journal. Weir recognizes that education can, and should, play an important role in battling ageism. This recognition is beginning to come from various fields and therefore support for a pedagogy that encourages intergenerational connections could follow.
While scholars are recognizing that education could play a key role in reversing the evolution of ageism, they are also beginning to identify that the popular media distorts the image of aging in another way, as well (Katz 27). A newborn focus on timelessness and the "New Age elderly" could in fact undermine attempts to instill values regarding the elderly in children by detracting from the need for the a new pedagogy. Portraying the elderly as "just like us" may encourage older middle and upper class individuals to buy younger clothes and products to preserve their youth. However, its sweet, superficial surface can be just as damaging to the public's view of conditions under which the elderly live as traditional ageism itself.

The threat of ageism is two-fold; the large population of needy, elderly individuals will continue to grow and become distanced from society while the general population sees aging transforming in a positive light through advertising and the media. The negative effects of ageism will continue to grow as the public begins to feel a false sense of reality regarding the elderly population. Katz says it best when he notes that "market jargon such as boomers and empty-nesters has itself become part of a popular sociogerontological vocabulary aimed at disguising the negative realities of poverty and inequality in old age." However convincing this disguise may be, real problems exist in the lives of those who do not live on the pages of the magazine or the set of the television show. The elderly in our country are suffering and educators could play an important role in combating ageism by encouraging connections between the young and old.
I. Acknowledging the Problem

Close to 10% of the elderly suffer from major depressive disorders, while another 8% suffer from minor depression. These rates are believed to be much higher in nursing homes across the country (Vierck, 84). While there are certainly many factors contributing to depression in the elderly, one of these factors could most certainly be loneliness once friends have died and many family members have moved away or do not have regular contact with their parents and grandparents. As our society becomes increasingly mobile, families become disconnected and seniors are the ones who ultimately suffer. Mary Ellen Schafer, of DuPage County Senior Services, spends her days communicating with independent seniors who receive county services in their home. She testifies to the fact that "we [society] have become so mobile that families often move away...even seniors who have five children may not see them." Schafer's claim is echoed in the Chicago censuses. In 1950, only 10% of adults over the age of 65 lived alone. While life expectancy has indeed increased since that time, the 1990 Chicago census revealed that one-third of adults over the age of 65 were living alone.

Without support from parents, friends, or teachers that depressed adolescents typically receive, depressed seniors can in many cases begin to wither away; some even ultimately commit suicide. Suicide rates among seniors are shockingly high, with roughly 20% of total suicides in 1999 attributed to those over the age of 65. In fact, these rates may be even higher since statistics do not include deaths resulting from self-neglect through starvation or discontinuing medications. Depression is especially devastating to seniors as it can affect how they tend to their medical needs, medications, and nutrition.
Loneliness, depression, and poverty can severely alter eating habits, and it is estimated that up to 60% of the elderly consume significantly less than the recommended amount of nutrients (Vierck, 72). These suicide and neglect statistics go widely unnoticed, unlike suicide rates for teenagers, which have gained national attention in the past decade. Depression among teenagers can have many causes, but dangerous social isolation is usually not one of them. Depression that results from social isolation combined with physical ailments can be especially lethal to the elderly in our country.

Measures have recently been taken by Dr. Bill Thomas to combat depression in nursing homes and recognize that seniors have a "fundamental human need for a reason to live." Thomas, a medical doctor and founder of the Eden Alternative, explores how seniors in nursing homes react to caring for birds (1994). He quickly identifies that the seniors who care for birds live longer and appear to be more fulfilled with their lives. The seniors feel a responsibility to take care of the birds and their task, even one as small as this, can give them a reason to live. Similar results were found in the Peretti study (1990) which brought "otherwise isolated individuals" into companionships with dogs. When questioned, an overwhelming number of seniors cited their dog as their "only friend", and Peretti attributes this relationship to the "psychological needs for attachment and nurturance" (Delta Society). These studies support the argument that humans do indeed need a reason to live. We all need to have attachments and be nurtured but, with thousands of seniors across our country living in isolation or insufficient nursing homes, these needs cannot be met without outside support.

Other detrimental effects of isolation can be seen in catastrophes such as the Chicago heat wave of 1995. Out of 521 deaths in the city of Chicago during the heat...
wave of 1995, roughly 73% of those who died were over the age of 65 (Klinenberg, 18). Of course older, frailer, individuals would be more susceptible to such conditions, but the question still remains: why were seniors over the age of 75 found alone, sealed up in their suffocating apartments, without contact with the outside world for several days or even weeks?

Support will not likely come from a culture obsessed with youth and the future. For centuries, the human race has discriminated against specific subgroups of society. We have suffered, and still do to a large degree, from racism, social class exclusions, and sexism. As our seniors have begun to suffer the same discrimination of minorities and women, many scholars have proposed ageism as another "ism" that blankets our country. Sociologists Jack and William Levin studied race and ethnic relations for many years before turning their attention to ageism, a phrase coined in the late 1960s. Levin and Levin cite Gordon Streib's application of the elderly to Criteria for Minority-Group Status, as established by the field of majority-minority relations. Streib argues that the elderly do in fact meet all of the criteria, including: stereotypes held against them by the majority group, a sense of group identity, victims of deprivation and differential access to power, privilege, and rights (Levin and Levin, 70).

Stereotypes of the elderly are nothing new. In Tuckman and Lorge's "Old People Questionnaire" of 1953, graduate students revealed that they held very biased views of the elderly. Close to 70% of the students stated that they believe the elderly are bossy, and almost 80% believe that those same individuals have lost most of their teeth and walk slowly (Levin and Levin, 76). Later, in 1975, the Harris survey of American adults found that the majority of Americans believe that individuals over the age of 65 are not useful
members of their community, are not good at getting things done, and are not bright or alert. If these same generalizations were made for African-Americans or women today, much of our society would be outraged. Yet the support for equal rights for the elderly is almost nonexistent today compared to other calls for equality in the past century.

Numerous studies in the field of psychology have supported the claim that stereotypes, such as those previously discussed, can have physical and psychological implications on their victims. One such study, published in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* in 1999, explored how positive and negative stereotypes affected the walking performance of men and women between the ages of 63 and 82 years. Gait speed and swing time, or the amount of time the foot is off of the floor in between steps, were measured before and after the exposure to stereotypes. Participants played a computer game in which words were flashed on the screen and participants were asked to identify at which location on the screen the flash occurred but not the words themselves. The authors of the study found that positive words, such as “wise”, “astute”, and “accomplished”, decreased walk time by an average of 7 to 9% and increased swing time by about 1.5%.

On the other hand, negative stereotypes, such as “senile”, “dependent”, and “feeble”, had virtually no effect on walk time or swing time. The authors attribute this consistency to the fact that participants have most likely been exposed to negative stereotypes for some time and they therefore do not affect their already poor performances. Positive stereotypes, however, are something new and as a result have a unique effect. The authors believe that these results “suggest that ageism influences physiological function, even among older people, and that age-related loss of
physiological function may be partially countered through simple modification of implicit self-perceptions” (Hausdorff, Levy, & Wei, 1999). It is not unreasonable to assert, therefore, that positive relationships with children in which seniors are appreciated, needed, graciously thanked for their time, and shown the student work that comes as a result of their interaction will have a positive impact on how they feel about themselves and their lives.

Minority groups often have a sense of group identity, as do the elderly. Besides being generally named “senior citizens”, the Gray Panthers is one specific association that fights for the rights of the elderly and all human beings. Founded in 1970 by Maggie Kuhn, this group of retirees joined forces with younger individuals to fight for rights for young and old alike. The name “Gray Panthers” was given to them by a New York City producer based on their reputation of being “lively, quick witted, controversial, and action-oriented”, contrary to stereotypes of the elderly prevalent in the 1970s or today. According to Dave Brown, a member of the Gray Panthers, his association embraces two concept that are generally agreed upon by most progressive organizations: “the unfairness of the present social system of exploitation of people by people…and the need for a society that meets the needs of all humanity” (Brown, 43). The elderly have become another minority that must fight for equal rights and combat exploitation by the majority.

The last criterion to be met for minority status, being victims of deprivation and differential access to rights, can be seen in some of the most recent crime and poverty rates in our country. While the elderly are less likely to be victims of crime than other age groups, they are much more likely to be attacked within their own homes during daytime hours. There is something unsettling about the fact that criminals would prey
upon the elderly in their homes during the day because they know they are less likely to be able to defend themselves and do not need to be surprised in order to be successfully robbed. Pat Moore, author of “Gray Like Me: A Young Woman’s Experiment with Aging”, dressed up as an elderly woman in an attempt to experience first-hand what day to day live is like for seniors. Unfortunately, she did learn. Walking home late one night, she was attacked by several young men who not only robbed her but kicked and beat her until she passed out. Moore recalls the incident and her emotions afterward:

Had I been an elderly woman, I might not have survived that night.

Today, as a woman of thirty-five, my body reflects the damage of the attack. I still have trouble moving all the fingers on one hand.

But with the pain has come revelation. Nothing calls into question our very humanity, our core as beings, more than the abuse of those who can’t defend themselves. (Swisher, 22)

Many seniors are also victims of poverty. The standard procedures for calculating poverty levels do not take seniors' unique characteristics, such as heightened health costs, into consideration. The Economy Food Plan is used to determine poverty levels and considers only nutritional information. The 2002 Edition of Growing Old in America summarizes this situation in the following way:

In 2000, the Census Bureau’s statistical poverty level for a single adult under 65 years of age was $8,959; for a single adult aged 65 years or older, it was $8,259. A 64-year-old woman, then, with a yearly income of $8,300 is poor, but on her sixty-fifth birthday, she becomes “not poor.”
Given this evidence, the elderly can be viewed as another minority living in our country, our cities, our neighborhoods, and even next door. The difference, however, may lie in how this minority is disregarded by those around them. Very few Americans would cite their neighbor's race or gender as a reason for a lack of communication, but the same cannot be said for neighbors of the elderly. The influential, powerful majority is young or middle-aged, comfortable financially, active, independent, and successful. This particular minority is old and perhaps the oldest-old, struggling financially, isolated, dependent, and ignored. But this minority is also experienced, wise, frugal, desperate for interaction, and in need of help.

It is possible that help could come from our educational system, which is already familiar with battling inequality. Our schools today celebrate diversity because it makes our country unique and vibrant. Teachers attempt to integrate diversity into their curriculum in order to open students' minds to others' customs, beliefs, and points of view. As teachers, we recognize that one role of education in the elementary years is to prepare students to become informed, involved citizens of our country. We want students not only to accept but also become interested in learning more about other cultures. For years, we have recognized the benefits that come from an intercultural curriculum: our students appreciate one another and their individual differences, and students gain a fuller understanding of other areas of the world, or other regions of the United States by exploring traditions and customs, among others.

G. Stanley Hall was an American psychologist and educator who took a unique interest in the aging population. Hall spent much of his time studying children and adolescents but also "emphasized the unique psychological processes connected with
aging and their societal significance” (Hareven, 220). His belief that seniors consolidate their knowledge and experience should make them a fountain of wisdom for our youth today. Only one's years can bring certain knowledge and judgment, according to Hall, which is contrary to the popular notion that the forties, or an even younger age range, are the prime years for accomplishments and decision-making. The debate is likely to continue for many years: do the elderly continue to improve in old age or ultimately spoil? Hall believes that aging should have societal significance—themselves, but also their psychological contributions—and Hall certainly would not have objected to the aged making contributions to the education of children and adolescents while gaining respect and encouragement in return.

As early as the 1960s and 70s, gerontologist Irving Rosow argued that the “status of the elderly would be markedly enhanced by a basic change in our values” (Levin, 95); what better way to influence the values of a society than through its children? This is not to say that we should delve into a new variation on character education but, rather, address old age in the same way we address race or gender in our schools. By introducing children to other cultures we are essentially encouraging them to accept one another and appreciate diversity. In much the same way, actively using seniors as a resource in the classroom would directly affect how the students viewed seniors and what they felt their value was worth. Rosow also suggests that a better value system would be one in which individuals could be “evaluated and rewarded for their attributes and relationships”, which could easily be done at a young age in our classrooms.
II. Addressing the Problem: Potential Strategies

Social Studies is the most logical area to target with a revision and improvement of the curriculum aimed at connecting adolescents with the elderly. Social studies teaches about communities, cultures, government, citizenship, and the history of fighting for rights. This content area lends itself well to integrating information about the elderly but, more importantly, allows students to interact with older individuals. There are countless ways to take advantage of the knowledge and talents of seniors in the classroom but expounding upon a few can give a clearer picture of the pedagogy that is envisioned.

Rather than using video clips or small bits of personal information that may be included in the social studies textbooks, teachers should invite seniors into the classroom who have experience with the content being covered in class. The most promising, beneficial way to begin to encourage and welcome seniors into our classrooms is through their gift of oral history. Oral history brings new life to the study of the past and can most definitely affect the future. It frees history from the pages of the textbook and allows emotion and a unique perspective to shine through. One such video, titled “A Century of Living”, sheds lights on these unique perspectives. As centenarians share stories from their lives, the viewer gets a glimpse at a more personal history.

Jessie Lee Foveaux, born in Missouri in 1899, experienced the agony of a boyfriend leaving for war during World War I. Now, over 70 years later, she cries as she recalls the day she received news of his death. The mustard gas had gotten to his lungs and he soon became “too weak to write.” Foveaux also recalls the common experience
during the war of “working with someone one day who was not there on the next and then dead on the next.”

Bert Wilbur recalls another, less troubling event with the same emotion. As he recalls Lindbergh’s flight he gets tears in his eyes and stops speaking. When asked why he is emotional about the event, he responds that what Lindbergh did was so heroic and “I guess it’s because I would like to do the same thing...I would like to do something heroic.” Lindbergh’s flight, if even mentioned in more than a couple of sentences in the textbook, would not have any emotions attached to it under normal circumstances. But seeing a 90-year-old man with tears in his eyes recalling what an amazing event it was would be enough to alter the way students, young students, view Lindbergh’s flight or any other great accomplishment ever again.

Another man advised, to no one in particular, that “life is going to knock you down but you gotta get up and keep on going” while another woman informed the viewer that she believes “time rolls on...I don’t think the numbers we put on it make much of a difference.” The difference, however, is that no one lives forever. These individuals, as the producer puts it, have “lives that have spanned the twentieth century” and they have experienced many significant events. But they will not be around forever and reporters are not standing in line for interviews with them. We, as teachers, should be in line anxious to bring individuals such as these into our classrooms. Some day soon, there will be no African-American alive to testify what it was like to live during the time of the Jim Crow Laws and then we will be forced to teach from the book. Until that day, however, we need to take advantage of our resources and do both our students and our seniors a great service by fostering connections between them.
 Individuals similar to those seen in the video, though not quite as old, are available in almost every community across the nation. One pedagogical strategy that could be used in the case of a guest speaker is to make sure that the material in the textbook is being covered or was just finished prior to the visit. Students should not be working on anything or taking notes during the visit but, rather, be seated on the floor in front of the speaker unless he or she prefers to circulate the room. If possible, educators should videotape or audiotape the time that the senior spends speaking to the students. Reviewing tapes later, during planning, can allow the teacher to prompt students in journal writing about why this individual might have felt a certain way or how things might have been done differently to accommodate people during that time period. The beauty in having students listen to someone speak about an event or time period is that it allows the teacher to expand their knowledge through later discussions, as well. Students now have a unique, personal story in their minds as they discuss the content and are more likely to be successful in critically thinking about the text.

A reflection assignment that can be completed later that day or the next is to have students write about how their view has changed or been brought into focus now that they have had the chance to hear the individual speak. KWL charts, used often in primary and middle grades classrooms, could be useful to organize the new social studies format for those students who need a more concrete plan and set of directions. These charts, which can be completed or begun as a whole-class activity, ask students to report what they know about the topic, then brainstorm what they want to know, and finally reflect on what they have learned. After reading the text, the Know portion of the chart can be completed as a class before allowing students time to individually think about what is not
clear to them and brainstorm possible questions that they would like to ask the speaker. Each student should have the first two sections of his or her own chart completed at this point and several questions could be volunteered to be written within the Want section of the class chart. After the guest speaker experience, the class can reflect on what they have learned and record it on their own charts, perhaps in small groups, before reporting to the Learned section of the class chart. Depending upon the grade level, many teachers may find that it is essential to complete this type of activity to keep their students focused and engaged in the learning experience. Photocopying portions of students' reflections can be nice to add to a large thank-you card constructed by the students which would be a very nice gift for the speaker.

An alternative method of oral histories can be very engaging and beneficial to all involved. The possibility exists that a class would visit an assisted living facility after the teacher has made preparations for willing seniors to be paired up with members of the class. During visits, students and seniors would spend time talking about themselves and their interests but students would also always have some sort of prompt to guide one portion of their conversation. A sample prompt might be, "Can you tell me about what school was like when you were in fifth grade?" in order to compare schooling in two very different eras. Students should have a special notebook in which they record any important information while they speak with their friend and be informed that a culminating activity will require them to use the information from their notebooks.

Straying a bit from the area of social studies, this time spent with the senior friend could contribute to the language arts curriculum, as well. If students have recently written a narrative about the happiest day of their life, for example, they might ask their
friend what the happiest day of his or her life was and why. This would allow the student to get to know the senior better and then embark on writing about their friend's happiest day and perhaps report to the class. Teachers might also consider inviting a senior who enjoys storytelling into the classroom to tell an exciting story about his or her life. Students might retell the story by writing and illustrating their own story books of the tale or perhaps the senior may end the story at the climax and come back a few days later to finish. Students can predict how the story will end by writing their own endings and will be anxious for the storyteller to return. They will begin to value the time spent with older individuals and the seniors will value the interest and attentiveness of the class.

Another possibility would be to have a pen-pal program, either in addition to or instead of a visiting program, which would allow more frequent contact between the students and seniors. This pen-pal program would give the students written reports from their friends, in the form of letters, which would make it easier to expand upon the information in additional assignments or activities. A pen-pal program or a visiting program could end with the each student in the class creating an oral history book. Students could request photographs of the individual both now and when they were younger to photocopy and might also photocopy portions of the hand-written letters to include as well. Any written assignments regarding that individual that the student completes throughout the year could be included as well as factual information to accompany their experiences. Students should be encouraged to find information on the internet or in the library about events or dates that the senior might casually mention or tell a story about. This learning experience could most certainly take the place of a written report that calls upon the textbook and library research alone.
Storytelling by students can also be practiced with the assistance of the senior program. Students may take turns telling a story to the class about an experience that their friend has had and, in turn, students will recognize that they will be storytellers of their own lives someday. The connection can be made that students will someday tell stories that will be written about in textbooks. The class might brainstorm ideas of events that they have lived through and will still be talked about in 50 years in history classes and social studies textbooks. They might also imagine how things will change and new inventions will be created that will change the way they live. Students can work on a project in which they tell the story, through pictures and descriptions, of what an object or experience was like 50 years ago, how it is different today, and what they predict that it might be like 50 years from now. Through consultation with their senior friend, or other older individuals, the connection can be made that things are different than they were when these seniors were young but things will be much different when the students are older as well. Imagining themselves as storytellers, and actively taking part in the practice within the classroom, connects them to the time period and the senior to a degree that no textbook or age awareness workshop can accomplish.

Other possibilities exist within a pen-pal program. If an oral history project is done during one half of the year, a literature experience could take place during the other half. Students and seniors might read the same book and write back and forth weekly with predictions and connections to the text. Seniors should be updated with all the same information that the student receives but in a letter format from the teacher that is constant in expressing appreciation for their time. Students and seniors might also analyze the author's writing style and discuss major themes present in the literature. In
this case, the student will have the chance to discuss the book with an adult, rather than with fellow classmates in literature circle activities, and receive one-on-one guidance through the text. The senior receives an opportunity to act as a mentor, teacher, and friend to the student as they complete the reading, discussion, and analysis of several texts together throughout the course of the program.

Rather than only inviting guests into the classroom that are identified as older, the teacher should make an effort to invite older guest speakers because they are talented in subject areas such as science and math. John S. Carter, a professor at The Citadel College in South Carolina, conducted a study of older adults from the age of sixty to eighty-five years. Carter found that the adults repeatedly expressed their desires to "use their skills, knowledge, and abilities developed during an active and fruitful lifetime to benefit others" (Bridging Education's Generation Gap). This desire and energy that many independent seniors have can be harnessed and used to benefit the students in the classroom. For example, a senior from the community who is a retired meteorologist might be brought into the classroom during a science unit on weather. The focus would not be on how predicting weather has changed in the last 50 years, although the topic may arise, but rather on the subject matter. The difference between inviting a current, 30-year-old meteorologist and a retired senior is that the senior speaking on his or her area of expertise shows students that older individuals are not solely grandparents. They may be grandparents but they are also current or retired meteorologists, airline pilots, brain surgeons, university professors, CEOs of large corporations, and newspaper editors. Occupations of willing seniors in the community can be matched to virtually any content
matter in science, social studies, and math. Carter argues that these seniors can be used to rejuvenate education as we know it.
III. Brighter Futures: Devising a Bridge Curriculum

A curriculum that allows students to have interaction with older adults and actually write and speak about events that have been experienced by someone, when the student has only ever read about them in textbooks, is successful and engaging because it is authentic. For years, educators and psychologists have recognized that authentic learning has numerous implications for not only retention of knowledge but many other personal and social effects as well.

The benefits of service learning and intergenerational communication have been studied in numerous schools across the country. Service learning has many of the same benefits that bringing seniors into the classroom would have including: “building students’ self-esteem, encouraging moral development and reinforcing values and beliefs, motivation for learning, a gain of insight, judgment, and understanding, social responsibility and concern for others, fostering of citizenship, and appreciation of diversity” (Fertman, White, & White). These benefits certainly outweigh the cost of the time it takes to set up such a program by contacting community members and resources. These benefits would be valid even if they were only temporary, but they are not. In fact, these qualities that are obtained in primary and middle grades become a part of each person and therefore remain within them throughout adulthood. This type of program is therefore more powerful than any age awareness workshop which improves politically correct language at best. Politically correct language alone is not good enough when looking at the issues of race or gender and it should not be good enough for age either.
Service learning programs understand that schools can play an important role in bettering the community and intergenerational programs have the capacity to transform our communities and our society in general.

Authentic activities have been shown to be the most effective in encouraging civic participation, which is one of the main goals of social studies. One road block for teachers attempting authentic instruction, however, may be assessment. Authentic activities can be more challenging to assess, but a teacher who relies on dynamic assessment in order to gauge understanding, in these cases, should not find the task too difficult. Assessment such as portfolios, artistic representations, technological efforts, or self-reflections (Schneider, 133) can be used at a surprisingly young age. These assessments, in fact, can be much more accurate in assessing comprehension and critical thinking in particular.

Teachers attempting to engage their students in authentic learning must also keep in mind that authentic instruction should be used on a continuum (Schneider, 132). It is impossible, and inappropriate, to attempt to make every activity in the classroom authentic just as it would be inappropriate to attempt to connect every aspect of the curriculum to an inter-generational program. Instead, when used on a continuum, authentic learning can drastically enhance student motivation and comprehension. On the other end of the continuum, however, is the classroom where no authentic learning takes place because no attempt to bridge textbook content and real-life issues is made. In these classrooms, and “for many teachers, real-life problems, despite their promise, seemed incompatible with classroom realities” (Gordon, 391). Real-life problems, such as
ageism or racism, can seem daunting if not broken down to examine what activities might make an impact on students’ values or attract interest in assignments.

It can be helpful for teachers to think of knowledge that comes from authentic learning as “a tool rather than as a goal in itself” and place “less emphasis on the teaching of facts and greater emphasis on the personal aspects of knowledge” (Roelofs & Terwel, 205). Among their goals that are set before the beginning of a school year, educators need to make several goals that focus on making their pedagogy authentic, personal, and memorable. Instruction that is one hundred percent facts and content may or may not be lucky enough to yield the same percentage of knowledge. On the other hand, instruction that is sixty percent content and forty percent instruction or immersion in an authentic context will yield far greater results and students are likely to learn and retain more than they ever have from traditional instruction.

It is true that there will be no statewide examination to measure a change in beliefs, a greater appreciation for the elderly, or a simple friendship. Schools may not be recognized or given grants for the success of an intergenerational program but the results will be seen, even if they come ten years from now. Ira Shor, author of Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change, recognizes that “teachers help develop the intellects of millions of people who then develop society” (170). Hundreds of researchers have studied ageist beliefs and the individuals who hold them, the effects of ageism, the effects of age awareness programs, and the effects of authentic learning but now all heads should be turned to education. Researchers have paved the way by providing statistics and strategies that have been proven effective and now it is up to teachers to use their pedagogy to make a transformation. As teachers, we need to play
the role of “cognitive guides” and allow our students to be “sense-makers” (Roelofs & Terwel, 221). The ultimate goal is for students to make sense of their content and experiences and come to the conclusion that the elderly are worthwhile and, in fact, valuable. This realization will be the critical tool in eradicating ageism.
Bibliography


