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## Intergenerational Education

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## Intergenerational Education

### Abstract

This study addresses the issue of intergenerational education and its effects on children, the elderly and society in general. Benefits, as well as problems, associated with intergenerational programs were discussed. Guidelines for planning and implementing a successful intergenerational program were outlined and conclusions were drawn from the literature. Recommendations were made for future intergenerational programs.



**Intergenerational Education**

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**by**

**Alison Sherer**

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background

During the past several decades increased attention has been given to the idea of intergenerational education. According to Rosenberg (1993),

American society has changed from an age-integrated one where the extended family plays an important part in teaching children about family history, nurturance, morals, cultural traditions, and socialization to an age-segregated society where traditional forms of contact between generations were limited or non-existent (p. 11).

Peacock and Talley (1984) described how society frequently separates people by ages as though no benefit can be derived from intergenerational interaction. They observed that schools are places where children are generally assigned to a class according to their age. These authors proposed that the increased mobility of our society and the changing family structure strengthen this age segregation as families become more spread out across the country and around the world.

Jantz, Seefeldt, Galper and Serock (1977) found in their study that "the majority of children (88%) at all grade levels were able to identify elderly persons within the family structure. However, (only) 39 subjects (21.7%) stated that they knew elderly persons outside the family" (p. 520). Conyers (1996) echoed this when he noted that "many children are growing up with only minimal exposure to other generations" (p.14).

In 1977, Jantz, Seefeldt, Galper and Serock found the following:

Children between the ages of three and eleven assigned positive characteristics of rich, friendly, and wonderful to old people but at the same time classified the old as sick, tired, and ugly. Children in this study described old people as inactive, passive, and dependent. (p. 520)

This lack of association with elderly and the resulting negative stereotypes that children have developed is troubling given that "census bureau projections indicate persons 65 and older will account for 13% of the population by the turn of the century and by 2030 there



will be about 65 million older persons, constituting about 20% of the population" (Lipson, 1994, p. 2).

As more people became aware of this trend, increased attention was given to intergenerational education. According to Seefeldt (1987), "there is a growing emphasis, however, on the development of programs that foster intergenerational contact between preschool-aged children (3-to 5-year olds) and the elderly" (in Dellman-Jenkins et. al., 1991, p. 21). In addition, numerous programs have been initiated throughout the country in an effort to promote contact between the young and the old, (Sparling & Rogers, 1985; Peacock & Talley, 1984; Seefeldt, 1987; Hill, 1987; Lipson, 1994; Newman, 1993.) For example, Lipson (1994) described a program that used senior citizens as school volunteers and Hill (1987) outlined the *Tridads with Youths, Elderly, and Students* intergenerational program which was operated at Hampton University.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of intergenerational education on children, the elderly, and society in general, and to present guidelines for implementing a successful intergenerational program. To accomplish this purpose, this paper will address the following questions:

1. What is intergenerational education?
2. What are the benefits of intergenerational education to young children, the elderly, and society in general?
3. What are the problems associated with intergenerational education?
4. What are the guidelines for a successful intergenerational program?



### Need for the Study

"People in the United States, as people everywhere, are ambivalent about aging" (de Beauvoir, 1973 in Seefeldt et al., 1981, p. 79). Yet, "between today and the year 2050, the percentage of persons age 65 and older will rise from the current twelve percent of the total population to 23 percent of the total population" (Aging America, 1991 in Woodward, 1993, p. 3). Further,

It is estimated that one fifth of the population will be over 60 years of age by the year 2000, (and thus) it seems critical that educators begin to examine how they are preparing children to adjust to their own aging and to relate positively to those who are older than they (Seefeldt et al., 1977, p. 305).

Neugarten (1971, in Seefeldt et al. 1981) explained, "stereotypes about aging and the aged create a particularly complex set of problems. In addition to making us fear aging, the stereotypes lead to a divisiveness in society at large that has been called ageism--that is negative or destructive competition" (p. 80). It is no secret that children hold many stereotypic ideas about the elderly, (Hauwiller & Jennings, 1981; Seefeldt et al., 1981; Sparling & Rogers, 1985; Seefeldt et al., 1977). In fact, in a study done by Hauwiller and Jennings (1981), teachers were given a variety of children's literature to review.

They were asked as they read selections to notice the specific adjectives used when references were made to older persons...When their observations were discussed, the stories appeared to contain frequent use of adjectives such as *little*, *old*, and *poor* (p. 185).

Therefore, "as negative attitudes toward the elderly affect both the individual child and total society, schools would seemingly be interested in implementing curricula designed to foster positive attitudes toward aging and the elderly" (Seefeldt et al., 1981, p. 80).

Changing widespread stereotypical thinking is not a simple task; however, the Attitude Theory developed by Klausmier & Ripple in 1971 "postulated that attitudes are learned early in life and have enduring qualities that continually influence children's behaviors and actions throughout their lifetime" (Klausmier & Ripple, 1971 in Seefeldt et



al., 1977, p. 308). If this is indeed true, then the time to start teaching children about the value of intergenerational relationships is during the early childhood years. In fact, "the development of positive attitudes of younger persons towards older persons is preliminary to the acceptance of older persons as vital and contributing members of the community" (Sparling & Rogers, 1985, p. 42). The importance of such a task is echoed by Rich, Myrick & Campbell (1983) when they said that,

Futurists predict that life expectancy will increase, just as it has been increasing over the past decades. As people live longer, we must change our attitudes about the aging process and learn to help elderly citizens become more active, productive, and positive about life ( p.490).

Interestingly, an elementary school in Cook County, Illinois, hosted a roundtable in which students and senior adults shared their feelings about their life needs. The discussion found that the two groups have many things in common such as: "loneliness, the constant need for reassurance ("Will I be liked?"), and the fear of failure in their relationships." Later, these findings became part of the final report of the White House Conference on Aging (Conyers, 1996, p. 14).

Perhaps John (1977) summed it up best when he said,

To be young is to reach for the future; to be old is to possess the past. Old and young meet in the present and hold the key to the betterment of humanity. Surely a mutual understanding is needed if this is to be accomplished (p. 527).

### Limitations

The literature examined for this study was mainly limited to materials presently available at the University of Nebraska at Omaha library. Limited access to professional materials was a problem; however, access to Area Education Agency 13 resources and materials in the writer's own professional library helped to alleviate this problem to some extent. Some secondary sources were used because primary sources were not available.



### Definitions

For purposes of use in this paper, the following terms will be defined:

**Ageism**: "...The systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old" (John, 1977, p. 524).

**Alert**: A term used to describe elders who are aware of what is happening around them and who do not show signs of dementia.

**Infirm**: A term used to describe elders who are physically and/or mentally impaired to the extent that their independence is greatly limited.

**Intergenerational Education**: "...Those systematically planned activities with the overall aim of developing mutually beneficial relationships between the old and the young" (Hill, 1987, p. 156).

**Seniors**: A term used to identify individuals aged 65 years and older.



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Value of Intergenerational Relationships

Intergenerational education involves two groups of people: the young and the old. Research has shown that both groups can benefit from intergenerational experiences. Newman (1982) stated that "a consistent interaction between the young and old in intergenerational school programs can and does impact on older persons' feelings of life satisfaction and on children's growth, learning, and attitudes toward the elderly" (in Hill, 1987, p. 156). Likewise, Seefeldt (1987) in her study concerning the effects of preschoolers' visits to a nursing home found that "...the staff of both the child care center and nursing home overwhelmingly agreed that the visits were of immense and significant value to the elders, children and themselves" (p. 231).

For the elderly, intergenerational experiences can give them a sense of being needed and appreciated. Many elderly people are often retired and have the time available to commit to regular contact with young children. In fact, Kocarnik and Ponzetti (1991) believed that "the elderly may be available to assist the child care staff by reducing the adult-child ratio, thus improving the quality of the child care and reducing the stress on the staff by creating a more relaxed atmosphere" (p. 101). Newman (1993) observed that "for the elders, (intergenerational programs) address the need to have a significant place in society, to utilize the life experience and wisdom generated during three score or more years of life and the need to nurture and enhance the growth and learning of children" (p. 2). By creating intergenerational opportunities, we can potentially improve the quality of life for the elderly and for children. As educators, we owe it to our children and our parents to create for them opportunities to experience a high quality of life. Even elderly who may be institutionalized can benefit from contact with the young. Kocarnik and Ponzetti Jr. (1991) noted that "institutionalized elderly



reported not only less loneliness and depression but feelings of youthfulness following volitional interaction with preschool children, and the children exhibited a marked reduction in stereotypic thinking about old people" (p. 99). Conyers (1996) believed that "seniors are a tremendous community resource--willing and eager, knowledgeable, interested and interesting" (p. 14).

For children, intergenerational experiences can provide a wealth of positive effects. Perhaps the most important benefit that children can gain from having regular, quality contact with the elderly is an increased understanding of the aging process and the resulting reduction of stereotypes that are associated with aging. Seefeldt et al. (1977) believed that "only as children are able to adapt to their own changing, growing, aging bodies, will they develop the positive self concepts necessary for full living at every stage of life" (p. 304). Seefeldt et al. (1987) went on to say that "the more positive children's attitudes toward aging and the elderly are, the more fully they will be able to live all of life" (p. 86). Intergenerational education is one way that we can help our children prepare for their futures.

Rogers (1979) found that "intergenerational contact gives both young and old a sense of being part of an ongoing society" (in Peacock and Talley, 1984, p. 17). In an age where family ties are often weak or non-existent, intergenerational education may be the answer to some of society's problems. For example, Sparling and Rogers (1985) found that "by encouraging mutually beneficial relationships between different age groups, intergenerational programming is purported to enhance an understanding of one's cultural heritage, the developmental aspects of aging, and the assets of members of disparate age groups" (p. 41). In addition, Newman (1993) observed that elders who participate in the Generations Together program at the University of Pittsburgh "seem to be providing for children and youth, a special role model, a non-judgmental friend, and a reliable support person who encourages their efforts to learn, grow, and become competent and worthy persons" (p. 2). Perhaps if more programs such as this existed, there would be fewer



youth who would turn to gangs and violence for the support that they so desperately need as they grow up and find their place in the world.

### Problems Involved With Intergenerational Education

While the benefits of Intergenerational Education can be numerous, such programs are not without problems. Intergenerational exchanges, as with any other interactions between groups, must be carefully planned and expertly implemented. If a program is to become successful, it must be started in a successful way. If a program is implemented haphazardly, people's first impressions and experiences can be tainted in a negative way, resulting in a lack of interest or support for future improvements and the program would quickly die. Seefeldt (1987) did a study in which children were taken to nursing homes to *perform* for infirm elders, many of whom were not alert to what was happening around them. At the end of the study, children were asked about their attitudes towards the elderly and the research showed that these children held more negative attitudes towards elders than children who had not participated in such a program. In her conclusions of the study, Seefeldt commented that "if children are taken to nursing homes and brought into contact with infirm elders, then such visits should be balanced with contact with elders who are competent, active, and able" (p. 232). Indeed if an intergenerational program is going to work, the participating seniors should not reflect negative stereotypes.

Another area for possible problems in Intergenerational programs is in the choice of appropriate activities. Intergenerational programs do not (or should not) just happen, they should be well planned and thought out. Unfortunately, when many programs are implemented, they consist of children going to a nursing home and only performing a song or a dance. Kocarnik and Ponzetti (1991), however, found that "activities which children *perform for* rather than become *involved with* seniors often imply a lack of understanding or respect for the underlying abilities of seniors" (p. 104). It implies that



seniors do nothing worthwhile except watch the children perform. Hill (1987) likewise found that "the identification of activities is too often based only on the recognition of the service needs of youth and elderly as opposed to the identification of their strengths and assets" (p. 156). These impersonal programs also minimize both the quality and quantity of time that children and seniors have to form friendships and nurture budding relationships. Perhaps Kocarnik and Ponzetti (1991) said it best when they stated the following: "Without personal interaction, children are more likely to see only physical declines and losses rather than the individuality and potential of each aged person" (p. 105).

Not only do intergenerational programs need to identify and draw upon the participants' strengths and assets, but a careful balance must be considered when planning the nature of the activities. Hill (1987) found that "depending on the origin of intergenerational programs...the variety and quantity of activities often unevenly reflect the interests of either one or the other age group" (p. 156). If this program is to be beneficial to both age groups, then activities geared for both age groups must be equally included.

Seefeldt (1987) made an interesting analogy in comparing the implementation of intergenerational programs to many of the interracial programs that were developed in the 1960's in an effort to bring blacks and whites together. In fact, not all of these programs were successful, and many led to increased tensions and hostility between the races. Seefeldt went on to describe how Amir (1969) developed some hypotheses regarding the value of contact between diverse groups.

Amir contended that the following conditions must be present if, in its simplest form, contact between diverse groups is to result in positive outcomes: 1) There (is) equal status between the members of the two groups. 2) The members of the groups are a majority group, or higher-status members of a minority group. 3) The contact is of an intimate, rather than casual nature. 4) Contact is pleasant and rewarding for both groups. 5) There is a functional interaction taking place, with both groups involved in goal-setting, and participation in important activities (Seefeldt, 1987, p. 16).



As Kocarnik and Ponzetti (1991) warned, "simply implementing intergenerational activities without adequate training, planning and evaluation can lead to frustration on the part of staff as well as participants and could become a negative experience for all those involved" (p. 102). If we want intergenerational programs to be successful, then we must take the time that is necessary to properly plan, organize and implement a quality program. The next section of this paper will outline what steps should be taken in order to accomplish a problem-free intergenerational program.



## CHAPTER III

### GUIDELINES FOR A SUCCESSFUL INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAM

#### Planning the Successful Program

Before the planning of an Intergenerational Program begins, it is important to remember that "three major groups have roles in intergenerational programs--seniors, a middle group to represent interests of both seniors and youth, and youth" (Matters, 1990, p. 10). Likewise, "the opportunity for both (or all three) to actively participate in the planning and implementation of activities as well as to share their assets with others aids in building self-respect, self-esteem, a sense of responsibility and a sense of belongingness leading to enriching experiences for all participants" (Hill, 1987, p. 156).

Keeping this in mind, it should be noted that as with any kind of successful program, the first step in planning a quality Intergenerational Program should be to do a needs assessment, (Lipson, 1994, Newman, 1993, Oliva, 1992). "These needs can be assessed by using an informal or formal needs assessment procedure, e.g., interviews or surveys that may be conducted among the leadership, staff and some representative constituents of the agency" (Newman, 1993, p. 3).

Once a needs assessment has been done, goals and objectives should be determined, (Oliva, 1992, Newman, 1993). Sparling and Rogers (1985) offered examples of social, affective, cognitive and physical goals for intergenerational programs on page 43. For example, the social goal of an older person involved in an intergenerational program may be to "maintain and develop meaningful relationships," while a younger person's social goal may be to "extend social contacts and knowledge of western culture" (Sparling & Rogers, 1985, p. 43). Likewise, the cognitive goal of an older person may be to "maintain skills and teach interests," while a younger person may be interested in "developing new skills and teaching current skills" (Sparling & Rogers, 1985, p. 43).



After the goals and objectives have been defined, Zig Ziglar's steps to achieving a goal should be implemented. That is, a date to accomplish the goal should be set. The obstacles, such as transportation, money, adequate facility, etc. should be listed. People or agencies that could help should be discussed. Necessary knowledge such as state regulations, daily schedules of the two groups, special diets, physical limitations, etc. should be listed, and a step by step plan should be developed. Finally, Ziglar recommends addressing what is to be gained by achieving these goals. Woodward (1993), agreed. She believed that planners of intergenerational programs must assess their motivation for doing it. In fact, according to Woodward (1993), "the primary focus of the program must always remain on the children and the elders, and the program leaders must at all times be attuned to protecting the emotional needs of those interacting in the program" (p. 5).

A final guideline for planning a successful Intergenerational Program would be to assess the attitudes of those who will be involved. According to Stremmel et al., (1996, p. 318), "the attitudes of professional providers toward intergenerational exchanges may have a significant influence on the likelihood that (a) high-quality, well-designed programs will be offered, (b) thoughtful and appropriate methods of evaluation will be used, or (c) resources will be allocated to sustain the programs over the long term." In other words, if the attitudes of those to be involved are positive, the program will stand a much better chance of being successful. On the other hand, if people have serious doubts about the program, these doubts should be addressed before implementation takes place. Similarly, Woodward (1993), suggested that "participation must be voluntary, however, and if a student does not want to be involved in the program, other arrangements must be made" (p. 5).



### Implementing the Successful Program

Once the planning process has been completed, the implementation of the Intergenerational Program can begin. Newman, (1993) suggested four basic steps to follow in implementing a program. "These are 1) recruitment; 2) orientation and training; 3) maintenance and support and 4) evaluation" (p. 4).

Step one involves recruitment in order to enlist participants to join the Intergenerational Program. In a study done by Dellman-Jenkins, Lambert & Fruit (1991), preschool children were exposed to the elderly in a variety of ways. First, the children's own grandparents were invited to visit the nursery school. Then, those grandparents who were interested were asked to return for regular visits to the nursery school as "grandparent volunteers." In addition, the preschoolers in this study had contact with elders in a nursing home and an adult day care center. Their preschool teachers also planned activities which were designed to provide positive and realistic information about older people and the aging process. This study may serve as a good model for others interested in engaging elders in their preschool or public school programs. Other ways to recruit participants may include "presentations to the members or staff of organizations, service groups..., (and) the use of the media..." (Newman, 1993, p. 5).

Step two of the implementation process involves orientation and training. According to Newman (1993), "orientation and training refers to those activities designed to increase the participants' effectiveness in and enjoyment of their intergenerational experiences" (p. 5). During this process, it is important to remember who the participants in the program are (e.g. preschool children, elementary aged children, independent elderly, nursing home residents, special needs children or adults, etc.) Newman (1993) then suggested that a series of formal and informal meetings and workshops be designed to help participants prepare for the program implementation.

In addition, it is important to note that several authors have indicated that intergenerational programs should be positive experiences for all involved, (Seefeldt,



1987, Rosenberg, 1993). For example, Newman (1993) stated that intergenerational programs should provide "experiences that are mutually beneficial, that meet some needs of both populations and that foster growth, understanding and friendship between the generations," (p.1). Therefore, the training and orientation process should not only provide pre-service training prior to implementing an intergenerational program, but also in-service training should be incorporated along the way. In fact, Kocarnik & Ponzetti (1991) believed that "in order to implement a successful intergenerational program, it would be helpful if staff had training in development across the life span; that is to say, knowledge of both gerontology and child development" (p. 102).

Step three of implementing an intergenerational program is maintenance and support. "Maintenance and support refer to those activities designed to contribute to the effectiveness of the program, to provide reinforcement to the participants, and to secure the future of the program" (Newman, 1993, p. 6). In-service training, as mentioned earlier would also be a part of maintenance and support. As problems or issues arise, they should be dealt with upfront in a professional, caring way. Staff meetings should be held to review the strengths and weaknesses of the program. In addition, Newman (1993) stated that "consistent and meaningful recognition for volunteers and professional participants" (p. 8) should be part of a successful intergenerational program. Finally, public relations activities that involve and inform the community about the program should be incorporated. This may include anything from a press release to an open house.

The final step in implementing a successful intergenerational program is evaluation. Information for the evaluation can be collected in several ways. For example, written surveys or oral interviews may be used for evaluation. According to Newman (1993, p. 7), the program evaluation should include information regarding:

- \* the realization of programs goals;
- \* the activities in which the participants are engaged;
- \* the number of participants; demographic description of the participants;
- \* the frequency and duration of the intergenerational interactions;



- \* the impact of the program on the life satisfaction and well being of the older persons;
- \* the program's impact on the growth and learning of children;
- \* the program's impact on attitudes toward children, youth and older persons;
- \* the program's impact on attitudes towards aging; and
- \* the participants' ideas for improving the program.

By providing an opportunity for participants and staff to evaluate the program, the lines of communication are being opened and encouraged. Of course many would agree that communication is integral to any successful organization, relationship or program. In fact, Rosenberg (1993) stated that "perhaps the single most vital factor requisite for successful implementation is communication. Participating staff and elders must have ample opportunities to communicate their concerns, ideas, opinions, and suggestions" (p. 40).

As with any successful organization or program, the evaluation should be ongoing. That is to say, evaluation procedures should be implemented periodically throughout the first year and then annually (or sooner if needed) as long as the program continues. "Used effectively, the evaluation can help to improve the program, determine the impact of the program, identify ideas for its expansion and garner support from the community" (Newman, 1993, p. 6).

Finally, Seefeldt (1987) gave several recommendations for implementing successful intergenerational programs. They include:

- \* Protecting the prestige of elders as well as children.
- \* Limiting frustration for both adults and children by arranging for contact that is intimate, not casual.
- \* Planning for interaction that has integrity and is functional for both groups.
- \* Ensuring that contact between old and young is rewarding and pleasant for both groups, (p. 16).



## CHAPTER IV

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of intergenerational education on children, the elderly, and society in general, and to present guidelines for implementing a successful intergenerational program. The study addressed four questions to accomplish this purpose:

1. What is intergenerational education?
2. What are the benefits of intergenerational education?
3. What are the problems associated with intergenerational education?
4. What are the guidelines for a successful intergenerational program?

In an effort to answer these questions, it was determined that Hill (1987) described intergenerational education as "...those systematically planned activities with the overall aim of developing mutually beneficial relationships between the old and the young" (p. 156).

This study also determined that many benefits can be derived from participating in an intergenerational program. In fact, for the elderly, intergenerational programs can give them a sense of being needed and appreciated. Many elderly people are retired and have the time available to commit to such a program. This can aid in reducing child-adult ratios in early childhood settings. Even elders who may be institutionalized can benefit from intergenerational education. By working with children, they will be less lonely and depressed.

Likewise, children can benefit from participating in an intergenerational program. Perhaps the most important benefit that children can gain from having regular, quality contact with the elderly is an increased understanding of the aging process and the



resulting reduction of stereotypes that are associated with aging. Intergenerational education is one way that we can help our children prepare for their futures.

Even with the many benefits that are associated with intergenerational education, these programs are not without problems. Intergenerational exchanges must be carefully planned and expertly implemented.

Also, intergenerational programs that only consist of children going to nursing homes to *perform* for the elderly lack an understanding of the true nature of these programs.

This study determined that a successful intergenerational program requires a lot of planning. The first step should be to do a needs assessment. Next, goals and objectives should be determined. Once goals and objectives are established, Zig Ziglar's seven steps to achieving a goal should be implemented. Finally, the attitudes of those who will be involved in the program should be assessed. Only those with positive attitudes should become involved with the program. Also, the entire program should be evaluated on a regular basis.

Once the planning process has been completed, four basic steps must be followed to implement a program. These steps involve the recruitment of personnel, children and elders; setting up an orientation and training program for the participants; providing nurturance and support for the participants; and conducting an evaluation of the program.

### Conclusions

The following conclusions were drawn from this study:

1. There are problems as well as benefits in setting up intergenerational programs.
2. Communication is vital to the success of an intergenerational program.



### Recommendations

Based on a review of the literature and my own observations of successful intergenerational programs, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Educators should expose children to a wealth of knowledge and experience about the elderly.
2. Educators have an impact of the developing attitudes of young children.
3. Educators should promote positive attitudes toward all people, especially our elderly, for they are the ones who have paved the way for our future.
4. More studies need to be conducted with this topic.



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