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Building Resiliency Through Intergenerational Connections

by Sharon MacKenzie

How often these days do children and youth spend quality time with older adults within their community, listening to stories of the good old days, playing games, or explaining how their new ipod works? Visiting with grandparents every week, common in decades past, is no longer the norm. Now, more than ever, there appears to be a visible disconnect of children and youth from older adults in society. Along with the physical and social separation of generations, attitudes about stereotyping, ageism and a lack of empathy towards the issues of growing older are generating critical misunderstandings that foster societal rifts.

Could this breakdown be turned around to become instrumental in building community resiliency?

The Canadian demographic is shifting to include a growing number of older adults (by 2035, 25% of Canadians will be over 65 years of age). Immigration has brought many children to Canada without the support of their extended families, and has left many grandparents alone while their grown families move across the country or around the world. Intergenerational (IG) activities can offer rich opportunities for our youth to benefit from the experience and maturity of these older adults. Generational bridging helps our older population remain active and involved and creates a climate for both generations to forge meaningful relationships within community.

As social issues arise from dis-connection of generations, our provincial and federal governments and the UN are becoming increasingly aware of the value of IG initiatives. In July 2010, the Canadian government moved to make Intergenerational Relations a top priority for the next year. The seed for such development lies in education.

Seeking to assist in bridging the generational gap, the i2i Intergenerational Society of Canada (helping generations see “eye to eye”) is a not-for-profit society

that strives to promote and support sustainable IG activities between schools, communities and health care facilities. One of the many goals of i2i is to demonstrate to teachers how intergenerational learning is not just another subject to be taught, but rather can be easily integrated to enrich what is already being done in the mandated curriculum. A complete list of curriculum connections for IG learning, grades 4 – 12 (all provinces and territories), will soon be available on the i2i website.

Recent government funding facilitated i2i’s involvement in the creation of a National Intergenerational Curriculum. “Across the Generations – Respect All Ages” focuses on connecting 9 – 13 year olds respectfully to older adults. It includes twenty-one classroom-tested lessons, leading from the example included in this article, to plans for full intergenerational immersion. The second resource, a grade 9 – 12 Teen Kit on “Elder Abuse Awareness,” was developed this spring for the International Federation on Aging, and the International Network for Prevention of Elder Abuse. This project-based learning kit fits well with Social Justice Studies, Behavioural Psychology, Conflict Resolution, English, Health, Home Economics and Arts courses in Middle and High Schools.

The i2i website www.intergenerational.ca will be hosting these two downloadable curriculums commencing this month. As well, this website offers lesson ideas, networking opportunities and a community IG calendar, an IG “Community Toolkit” developed for BC by i2i, a blog, photo galleries and IG activity suggestions. For any teachers interested in beginning an intergenerational immersion project, i2i is eager to assist in planning, development and implementation. As well, for school-based teachers, or teacher conferences, the society provides workshops on IG education, elder abuse awareness and community resiliency-building.

Get on the i2i Intergenerational Society mailing list

(www.intergenerational.ca) and be the first to access these exciting resources as they come online. Also, share on the website any intergenerational projects you have done or are involved in now. Together we are better!

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE OLD?

Time required: 30 – 60 minutes

Intent: Guiding questions

- What does it mean to be old? (investigation of stereotyping)
- What characteristics do we generally connect to something old?
- Do these same characteristics apply to all things? to all people?
- Are all older adults the same? How might they be different?
- How can we change our views of older adults?

Participants will be given opportunities to reflect on how they personally view “old,” and through discussion they will list characteristics of things they believe to be old. They will be invited to reflect on differences they perceive between “old” and “new,” “young” and “aged” (Why were some ideas included on their list and others not?) There will be a discussion regarding perceived values attached to “old” and “young” as they pertain to people (as opposed to objects).

Design: Discussion

- using comparison and contrast of old/new/young/aged
- reflection on previously held views—possible stereotyping

After opening discussion, participants will collect photographs from media that they perceive to represent “old” and “young,” with reflective guided discussion to follow.

ACTIVITY

Requirements

- whiteboard, chart paper, black board or smart board
- 11X17 paper, one per child
- felt pens, glue sticks
- stopwatch (optional)
- magazines and newspapers, scissors for each child

Process

- What do participants know about "old"? What is their perception of "old"?
- (Hint: use K and W of Know - Want to Know - Learned - Want to Enquire Further)
- "K" - Start discussion of what it means to be "old" by recording participants' opinions.
- "W" - Define and investigate "What is a stereotype?"
- Have participants inquire into perceptions of "What does 'old' look like, and act like?" Consider how some comments might be based on stereotyping.
- From magazines and newspapers, have participants cut out photos of things that I would consider to be "old" and things that I would consider to be "new/young."
- Have participants share within groups why they selected these representative photos.
- What do participants characterize as "old"? (Identify stereotypical thinking.)
- The adult lead may guide participants in understanding "What does it mean to be an older adult?" by brainstorming a list or mind map of various aspects of "old" (e.g., young at heart, some retirees participate in their professions as volunteers, some continue or begin participation in hobbies and competitive sports, some have mobility issues, are unwell and require care, some travel, some must leave their homes for care, etc.).
- Post this information on a wall for future reference.

Evaluation

- Adult lead can request that individual and pairs of participants show this broader definition of "old" and "older adults" by: writing a poem, rap, song, creating a poster showing all aspects of "Being an older adult is..."; making a chart showing pictures of older adults doing a variety of things (selected cut-out images from beginning of activity), making a collage that unmask stereotypical thinking about older adults.
- Present these in a shared public space.
- At the completion of this activity, have all the guiding questions been addressed?

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Write and Be Published

by Michael Ernest Sweet

"They may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel."

Carl Buechner

In the more than eight years that I have been teaching, nothing has been more satisfying than seeing the look on children's faces when they pick up a copy of their own book. As an author myself, I know that feeling—it's amazing. You see, for the past five years I have been building the non-profit student press that I founded in 2004. Learning for a Cause, as it is called, has made nearly two thousand students authors, and has published more than a dozen anthologies. This week the press comes to a turning point. I am stepping down as the publisher and handing the press over to the Quebec-based educational non-profit Youth Fusion (youthfusionquebec.org). Youth Fusion works to counter high school drop out rates in the province and will make the Learning for a Cause publishing program a central project in its repertoire of high school projects. I am sad and I am happy. One thing is for sure—publishing kids and their work has made the last five years of my teaching practice a complete pleasure. More teachers should be getting their kids' work out to the world. Here is how you can do just that!

There are many websites that can help you publish from the classroom. Many want money and a few do not. Of those few that don't, there are three that rise to the top as tested and true. Although I am not officially endorsing any of these sites, trust me that in publishing more than a dozen titles I have come to know which ones are the best overall. All of these sites will allow you to publish a real book, get it into distribution and pay only when you order actual copies of the title. In other words, no set up fees!

If you plan to publish a novel or anthology (primarily text-based) then you will want to head over to Lulu. Lulu will give you many options. Their online easy-to-use interface will walk you through uploading a PDF of your book interior, designing your cover and assigning your ISBN number. They will even provide you with options to place your book on Amazon.com and more.



Michael Ernest Sweet is a writer, educator and social activist. He founded the Learning for a Cause Initiative in 2004 and was a recipient of the Prime Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence in 2009. Michael divides his time between Montreal and New York City. www.LearningforaCause.org

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What began as simply a publishing project in my classroom five years ago became an internationally award-winning student press. My students have won book awards, entrepreneurial awards and have had their work shelved in more than one hundred libraries around the globe including Library of Canada and the Library of Congress. We have worked with Martin Sheen, Candy Spelling and David Suzuki to name but three. We have traveled to Atlanta, San Francisco, St. Louis, Toronto, New York, Rome, London and Paris as part of this fascinating project. You don't have to take it so far or you can take it further. Teaching is what you make of it. One thing is for sure though, in English language arts it all starts with a pencil, a piece of paper and a touch of imagination. What are you waiting for? Make your students feel like the brilliant writers they are. They will never forget the fact that you believed in them, that you took their work and put it into print. Go ahead, write and be published!

