

Bridging the Years: An Intergenerational History Project

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Billy is a nine year old in a fourth grade class at a suburban Florida elementary school. As the oldest of four children with no male role model at home, Billy only makes it to school a few days a week. On the day the class was scheduled to visit the local senior assisted living residence, Billy announced that the project was a “stupid waste of time” and frankly, he would rather be back in class “doing times tables.”

But as luck would have it, Billy was paired up with Hank, an 89-year-old retired fighter pilot for the U.S. Air Force. Billy sauntered into the senior’s room with a sulk on his face and hands in his pockets. He did not want to be there.

“Hey, you comin’ in or staying out? I haven’t got all day, ya know,” chided Hank, “well, actually I do ‘cause I’m not going anywhere.” This made Billy smile.

“How old are you?” Billy queried.

“I’m old enough to be your daddy’s grandfather,” Hank responded proudly.

“I ain’t got a daddy,” Billy noted in a matter of fact way. At this point, Billy’s teacher, Diane, left the pair to their own devices and worked her way around the care center matching the rest of her class with their senior “buddies.” When it was time to go back to school, the fourth grade teachers began to round up their students. While taking a head count, I (D.G.) realized that Billy was missing. My heart sank. I was so busy monitoring students and moving around that I had forgot to go back and check Billy and Hank. “This could be bad,” I thought,

as I raced to Hank’s room. The door was only slightly ajar. I nervously pushed it open and saw Billy sitting in front of Hank watching him as he raised his tattooed arms over his head to demonstrate a flight he had taken in a fighter jet. Billy’s eyes were as big as saucers. Hank’s face was lit up like a Christmas tree. I hated to interrupt them, but our bus was about to leave. These two friends, 80 years apart, had a very difficult time parting. Finally, totally unexpectedly, Billy wrapped his arms around Hank’s neck and gave him the biggest hug I’d ever seen. It took my breath away.

At first glance, a 9-year-old child may seem to have little in common with an 89-year-old senior. Yet the connection Billy and Hank found in their budding friendship is seen around the globe: it is the connection formed between grandparents and their grandchildren, elderly residents and their young neighbors, and in tribal settings, village elders and youth.

While the intergenerational bonds remain strong for children with elder relatives living close by, increasingly children in the U.S. lack meaningful connections with older adults. Divorce

and family mobility are two major causes, and some youth are affected by negative stereotypes of older people.¹ Bringing seniors into our classrooms or taking students to places where older adults live can help to fill this social and emotional gap in many young people’s lives. As social studies teachers, we can bring some of the benefits of intergenerational relationships to our students, providing many benefits for seniors and motivating children to become excited about the social studies curriculum. This article focuses on the many benefits of intergenerational social studies activities for children and seniors and a variety of ideas for developing intergenerational activities to enrich elementary social studies instruction.

Everyone Benefits

Successful intergenerational activities provide rewarding experiences for both generations. Seniors share their skills and life experiences, dispel negative stereotypes of the elderly, and create meaningful friendships at a time in their lives when they are often losing friends and relatives or watching their physical capabilities diminish. Youth gain first-hand knowledge of the past, broaden their understanding of aging, and learn to accept differences among people. Working together, youth and elders can pool their resources to build a stronger social network in their com-

munity, connect with social agencies, broaden the life experiences of both populations, and facilitate students' learning of social studies topics.

Our (P.D.'s and S.A.'s) fourth grade students found a gap they could fill at the King Veteran's Home in King, Wisconsin. Many of the war veterans living at the King home felt alienated from the rest of their community, largely because of the isolated location of their residence. After meeting with both administrators and veterans living at the home, the elementary students engaged in a variety of shared activities, from letter writing and visiting the seniors to cleaning the library, making banners with uplifting messages, and coordinat-

discuss the vocabulary, and consider how to relate these terms to their daily lives. Each group used dictionaries and artwork to create a poster about a different aspect of the preamble; helpfulness, democracy, peace, and goodwill were some of the topics. Older students used the Internet to investigate the charter documents and the initial purposes of several organizations, including the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the King Veterans Home.

Elementary students also conducted a hands-on investigation of U.S. history while exploring the cemetery across the street from the King home. Their chal-

young people's engagement with the social studies curriculum. Diane and her fourth grade colleagues, Nancy and Allison, focused on a history of social service. Their students interviewed the care center residents about how they helped out and made a difference in other's lives when they were young, thus providing the fourth graders with additional ideas for how they can help their community. Students could perceive how their community's needs, problems, and social service system had changed over time. Students developed their interview questions together during writing workshop time. Examples are: "What sport or activities did you enjoy in your childhood?" "What chores did you have to do to help your parents?" "Can you remember a time when you helped others?" "Is there some service that you wish could be provided for you here at the assisted living center?"

The students also were interested in taking civic action on behalf of the seniors as part of their social studies lessons back at school. The last question on their interview sheet read: "We are learning about our local, state and federal government this year. I would like to be an advocate (a person who wants to speak on your behalf) for you by writing a letter to a public official concerning your needs as a senior citizen in America (for example, on the topic of healthcare, social security benefits, etc.). Is there any issue that concerns you now that you would like me to advocate for you?" This question led to several opportunities for further learning and letter writing.

Specific Topics

Consider the following additional ideas for incorporating intergenerational sharing in your social studies curriculum:

- Oral Histories - Students can interview seniors on a variety of topics in their life experience, for example, schooling, games, foods, careers, community development, and civic organizations. (See the interview ideas in the **Handout**). Or students can interview seniors



ing an intergenerational dance. Students also performed patriotic programs and collaborated with their older friends on a craft project. The culminating activity for the year saw the King residents who were physically able bussed to the elementary school for an intergenerational celebration with dances, snacks, and shared conversation.

The intergenerational collaboration also provided the elementary students with meaningful opportunities for learning social studies content. We helped our students read the Preamble to the Constitution of the American Legion,

challenge was to find time-related data on the headstones from all eras of history since the Civil War. Students particularly enjoyed searching for, and discovering, the gravesite of Brownie, a dog that had served in the Canine Corps during WWII.

Links with the Curriculum

The lessons on the documents of citizen organizations and U.S. history from Paul's and Sandy's classrooms are just one example of how elementary social studies teachers can integrate youth and elderly collaborations to motivate

about a significant historical event they are studying—such as the Great Depression or the Civil Rights Movement—to gain further insight into how these events have influenced daily life.

- **Intergenerational Service Learning:** Students and seniors can work together to meet community needs. For example, they could sew quilts for babies, create alphabet books for Head Start pre-school students, build bird-houses, or create a meal for a local soup kitchen.
Computer projects: Students can teach seniors how to use the Internet and simple programs such as PowerPoint. Together, they can research a social studies topic and create a presentation for the class or community, and maybe videotape the presentation for airing on a local television show.
- **Field trips:** Seniors can serve as field trip “guides” to community locations or historical sites, providing additional adult supervision

and perhaps insights from their own life experience.

Primary Sources: Elders can often provide primary sources from earlier time periods that will enrich young students learning of history; letters, journals, clothing, uniforms, postcards and other memorabilia can give students insight into the recent past.

- **Global Studies:** Students can learn about other countries and cultures from seniors who have traveled or lived abroad. Immigrants to your community can be a rich resource of knowledge of other cultures and places.
- **Family Heritage:** The elementary social studies curriculum typically includes units on family or activities on family heritage. Seniors can share the legacy of their families with the class and assist young students with unit activities, such as constructing a family tree.
To insure that your intergenerational activities are supportive of your social studies curricular goals, align discus-

sions or interviews with the NCSS thematic strands (**Figure 1**).

Building a Relationship

The fourth grade team from Florida included art projects in their intergenerational program. Students took photos of their senior buddies and conducted interviews with them about how they had served and helped others in their lives. With the purchase of scrap booking materials through their CiviConnections grant,² the students created scrapbooks of their senior buddies’ lives to present to them. Subsequent class visits built upon the success of our (D.G.’s) earlier activities. On one visit, the older adults were waiting for the students in the cafeteria. They could not contain their excitement. The students came rushing in, searching the faces to find their senior buddy. Carly ran to Ms. Rose and practically sat on her lap! With a child’s arms wrapped around her frail neck, Ms. Rose went on and on about how much she loved her “girl.”

In two weeks, we will be visiting the assisted living center to conduct our

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Figure 1. **Intergenerational Activity Ideas and Social Studies Thematic Strands**

I Culture

Learn about seniors’ home cultures, or cultures of places where they have lived or visited.

II Time, Continuity, and Change

Explore the changes in schooling, play, lifestyle, community, etc. from when seniors were young until the present.

III People, Places and the Environment

Talk about how the environment has changed over seniors’ lives. Mark on a map where seniors have traveled and lived.

IV Individual Development and Identity

Explore the key influences on seniors’ individual development from youth to adulthood.

V Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Discuss how schools, churches, families and other societal groups and institutions have changed.

VI Power, Authority and Governance

Talk about when seniors first voted, what elections they

remember, their perceptions of changes in government.

VII Production, Distribution, and Consumption

Learn about how products and prices have evolved over time. Talk about what items we use today that did not exist when seniors were young. Consider changes over time in options for jobs and careers.

VIII Science, Technology, and Society

Students and seniors could come up with a list of the Top Ten scientific discoveries and technological inventions that have most significantly changed society in the past century.

IX Global Connections

Talk about how seniors learned about the world when they were young, and compare with children’s experiences now.

X Civic Ideals and Practices

Explore how seniors were involved in their neighborhoods and communities as youth and young adults and contrast these experiences with the options for youth today.

Interview Questions for Older Adults

Handout

Student (Interviewer) _____ Date _____

Older Adult (interviewee) _____

1. When and where were you born? _____

2. Who was in your family? _____

3. What was your elementary school experience like?

4. Who was your favorite teacher? _____

5. What was your favorite subject? _____

6. What games did you play? _____

7. How did you spend your free time?

8. What chores did you have at home? _____

9. When did you get your first job? _____

10. Where did you live as an adult? _____

11. Did you work as an adult? If so, what did you do?

12. Where have you traveled? _____

13. What has been most important to you in your life?

14. What advice for living a happy life do you have for children today?

celebration. Balloons are on order and the children have volunteered to make all of the baked goods. We've asked the director to give us the name of some large print books and music that the seniors might enjoy as a donation from our students. Everyone is very excited about this last visit. We hope that students won't make this their last visit. At least two students have visited their senior buddies on a Saturday, on their own volition.

"I had nothing to do and then I thought of my senior buddy and how lonely she must be. I asked my mom if we could stop by on the way to the store

met, in addition to the teacher's. You might begin by writing a letter to send home to your students' parents, informing them of the collaboration and inviting their input, as well as permission for and assistance with transportation. A planning meeting between seniors and children could happen either at the school or at a local residence for older adults.

2. Prepare youth and seniors before they get together. They need to know what to expect in terms of each other's physical abilities, attention spans, interests, and conversa-

do together."³ Meaningful activities will accomplish at least three goals:

- a. meeting the companionship and self-esteem needs of the seniors
 - b. providing enjoyable cross-age interaction for children, and
 - c. incorporating social studies content and skills in the experience.
- One activity that meets all three goals is to have students interview seniors about their lives and create a book of the biographies to give back to the seniors.⁴

Intergenerational friendships can provide a "real life" connection to the study of history, extra hands of adult volunteers for in-class activities, and an opportunity for students to provide companionship for their elderly neighbors. With so many possible connections to the social studies curriculum and so many benefits for both elders and youth, we hope you will consider an intergenerational activity for your students soon. 🌐

Notes

1. Lorine Matters, *Intergenerational Relations: Older Adults and Youth*. County Extension Program Guide (Columbia, MO: Missouri University Center on Rural Elderly, 1990).
2. CiviConnections is a program for 3rd through 12th grade classrooms to link local historical inquiry with community service-learning. It is funded by the National Council for the Social Studies, with support from the "Learn and Serve" program of the Federal Corporation for National and Community Service. Training will be offered during July 2007. For further information, contact the project director Rahima Wade at rahima-wade@uiowa.edu.
3. Generations Together, *Share It with the Children: Preschool Curriculum on Aging Instructional Guide* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh, 1990): i.
4. Alison Parker, "Visiting and Interviewing Older Adults: Service-learning in the Sixth Grade," *Middle Level Learning* 15 (September 2002): 3-7.

Photographs courtesy of Youth Service America, www.YSA.org

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Sharon Brender, Youth Service America

and she said, "Yes!" explained one of my students. This is the best example of a motivated student, one who seeks additional experience on her own.

Planning Checklist

There are many more stories we could tell about how motivated elementary students become when they work with older adults. Planning ahead is important for a successful experience. These elements are essential for creating positive intergenerational collaborations:

1. Involve youth, seniors, and personnel from senior care centers in planning the collaboration so that everyone's needs and interests are

tion skills. Staff at the residence might be able to come to your classroom to inform students about the mental and physical capabilities of the particular group of older adults with whom they will be working. You and your students could also take a preliminary tour of the senior facility.

3. Engage students and seniors in meaningful activities. Generations Together, a longtime intergenerational program based at the University of Pittsburgh, notes that "It is not just enough to bring people together. They have to have something worthwhile and appropriate to