OUR YOUTH AND SENIOR ADULTS: WORKING TOWARD POSITIVE ENGAGEMENT IN EARLY ADOLESCENT STUDENTS

by

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Abstract

This research project explored student engagement in an intergenerational learning environment. The project was directed by two questions: Would intergenerational programming bolster social confidence and social motivation in students who participate? What is special about intergenerational programs in special education? Three middle school students from an alternate school in British Columbia, and six senior residents of an assisted-living facility participated in the study. Program activities were game-oriented, and observation of student performance was situated in the social domain. In the spirit of research methodologies that honour mixed-methods approaches and pedagogical development, data were collected through observations, researcher’s field notes and reflections, and post-program semi-structured interviews with participants. When compared with baseline levels of engagement that reflect typical classroom behaviour, two student participants showed small gains in engagement levels during interactions with senior participants. Results suggest there are social benefits for early adolescent students involved in intergenerational programs. Furthermore, intergenerational programming has implications for personalized education, healthy communities, and further research into the complex interplay of relationship, motivation and achievement.
Acknowledgements

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Chapter One

On a sunny afternoon in April 2008 I glanced out my classroom window to witness a small group of grade 11 students walking toward the neighbouring seniors’ complex. A short while later another group, just as spirited as the first, this time with their teacher in tow, passed my window en route to the condominium-like facility. Students in my classroom, by this time craning through the windows, were as curious as I. What was creating all the excitement at the seniors’ complex?

Later that day I checked with the teacher to question the positive energy. She explained that her creative writing class was off to meet with their “grandbuddies”. The teacher detailed how her language arts program included weekly classes where students and seniors joined together for a time of learning and sharing. The rationale was to provide an alternate venue that would encourage and support reluctant readers and writers. The teacher shared how students and adults forged relationships, and how open most students were to participate in literacy tasks with their “grandbuddy”. The opportunity at the facility led to much more than just reading and composing: There was time to play, celebrate, perform, and build community. It was a successful program that benefited both students and senior residents. I pondered how this unique learning and teaching environment was simple yet effective.

Of particular interest was the transformation noted in one student who was at-risk socially and academically. I had taught this student the previous year, only to see him leave school before the end of term. He returned the following fall with most of his challenges in attendance, compliance, motivation and classroom engagement intact. This student was capable academically yet behavioural issues in a classroom setting overshadowed his minor successes. When traditional interventions seemed ineffective, the student was programmed into the
intergenerational sessions, and this is when his academic performance began to change. Over the course of a few months, the student discovered a hidden talent for writing poetry and composing music; performing his work at the closing celebration of the intergenerational program. His confidence rose, and his efforts and abilities spilled over into other courses. He made positive changes in his social life, and secured service work in the community following graduation that year. I believe the change in this individual to be remarkable and truly transformational. What underlying factors evoked positive changes in this young man? Was the intergenerational experience instrumental in his future success?

I have carried this story and the idea of intergenerational relationships with me over the years, and into a different teaching context at an alternate school. Typically, students are referred to our school when an extended history of academic and social non-engagement characterizes their educational experience. As a staff we explore a variety of personalized learning environments and teaching methods to support attachment and learning. To address school goals associated with social responsibility, I decided to investigate the connection between student success and intergenerational settings.

A study by Marx, Pannell, Parpura-Gill and Cohen-Mansfield (2004) compared intergenerational programming observations with classroom observations, and found significantly more interest and participation and less anxiety in at-risk elementary students when they visited with seniors than when they were in their classrooms at school. Newman, Morris and Streetman (1999) note that mentoring interactions led to an increase in students’ self-management skills, interest in school work, and improved peer relationships in boys of elementary school age. These readings led me to ponder the notion of student engagement in the contexts of relationship and social setting. Would intergenerational programming bolster the...
confident and motivation in students who participate? So what’s special about intergenerational programs in special education?

**Research Focus**

This study explored the level of engagement of three, pre-adolescent students during social interactions with senior adults, at an assisted-living facility. Student engagement was determined through data collected and analyzed using a mixed-methods approach: analysis of observations for engagement levels (Jones, 2009); qualitative analysis of field notes and interviews conducted with participants (Applewhite, 1997).

**Purpose and Intent**

Under phenomenological theories in child development, learning resides in many contexts outside the regular classroom setting. Studies by Eccles and Wigfield (2002) indicate that context greatly influences motivation and achievement of students in complex ways. Even though there has been much work examining intergenerational relationships, Langford (2007) writes:

A surprising number of teachers, rigorous in meaning curriculum-based work, resist observation of individual students’ progress in intergenerational projects and resort to sweeping generalizations. It is “a good thing” for young people to work with older people, a view shared by uncritical care home care managers. How can we question that? Developing a shared theoretical base for practical projects will only come as examples of good evaluation and best practice become more widely known and establish a requirement to drop the clichés and take seriously the young and older people involved (p.138).

The point to take from Langford is the importance of working with specific intent when dealing with children. This is not to suggest that teaching should lose its heart and soul but rather our
thoughts and actions should be governed by evidence-based practice. Since the inception of non-
familial intergenerational interventions in the 1960s, scholars have been encouraging
practitioners and researchers to increase their use of theory-based and evidence-based practices
and techniques to further exploration and documentation of intergenerational benefits (Jarrott,
2011).

Supported by studies conducted by Marx et al (2004) and Cummings, Williams and Ellis
(2003), it was hypothesized that students in this current study would display more positive
engagement behaviours (e.g., interest and participation) in the presence of senior adults than
when in their classroom with no seniors present. The purpose of this current study was to explore
the effects of the intergenerational experience on student engagement, with the intent of
establishing consistent alternate learning environments outside the classroom.

The purpose of this intergenerational study was to provide an environment that would
foster relationship-building between youths and adults. The interrelationships were examined in
terms of levels of student engagement. This study would inform my teaching practice as to
intervention models that best serve the needs of students with behavioural challenges, and
address school goals associated with social responsibility.

It is because of these calls for further study in place-based education (Smith, 2007) and
making meaning of the connections between context, motivation and engagement, that I feel
exploration of the possibilities for enhanced attachment and engagement for behaviourally
challenged youth is important.

Further Considerations

This study has potential to raise the level of awareness of the benefits of intergenerational
settings for student learning. As outlined in a document prepared by Premier’s Technology
Council (2010), BC Ministry of Education’s vision of a 21st century K-12 education system is rooted in personalized learning. Learner engagement is an important dimension as we move forward with individualized plans and creative delivery models. By providing supports and opportunities in multiple settings, youth become more confident, skilled and connected, and find adult support to achieve personal goals (Benson, Scales, Hamilton & Sesma, 2006; Zeldin, Larson, Camino, O’Connor, 2005).

The ideal behind intergenerational programming brings together different or multiple generations within and outside the family context for the purpose of diverse and varied mutual benefit. Extending the school learning environment to include seniors can enrich the cultural, generational, and community experience for students and adults, leading to a healthier society. Furthermore, there is potential for social, emotional and academic benefit to senior adult participants (Ayala, Hewson, Bray, Jones & Hartley, 2007; Barton, 1999; Epstein & Boisvert, 2006; Herrmann, Sipsas-Herrmann, Stafford & Herrmann, 2005; Jarrott, 2011; McGuire & Hawkins, 1998).

Research in intergenerational programs helps to ensure the barriers between generations are not allowed to develop and deepen (Greengross, 2003). This current study offers an opportunity for evaluating and refining intergenerational programming, with a focus on the “insider’s perspective” of younger and older people whose ideas and perspectives are often overlooked and discounted by society overall (Ward, 1999).
Chapter Two – Literature Review

This chapter sets out to establish a solid foundation of evidence-based theory and practice associated with student engagement and intergenerational relationships. The first section contextualizes engagement in education. It is important to establish a common understanding of what scholars consider student engagement to be, or not to be. The second section examines current theories behind engagement, and proposes a working definition used in the current study. This too will allow for common ground of understanding. The third section considers specifically engagement and students with exceptionalities, and the unique challenges this presents. The final section in this chapter examines the history and efficacy of intergenerational programs, to support the purpose and intent of this study.

Student Engagement in Context

It has been shown that non-engagement and student resistance to school practices leads to high rates of absenteeism and drop-out (Fisher, Frey & Lapp, 2011). The Canadian Education Association (CEA), in First National Report 2009, suggests that student engagement is best viewed in subsets of social, academic and intellectual dimensions. Numerous studies by The National Research Council (NRC) in Washington, DC indicate that students are motivated to engage through three psychological factors: their beliefs about competence and control, what deCharms (1968) describes as a basic need for personal causation or self-determination; their values and goals, where goals have been shown to impact self-regulation (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002); and their social connectedness. Martin and Dowson (2009) offer the association between the effects of positive interpersonal experiences to intrapersonal motivation through relatedness. These dimensions and factors highlight the importance of students’ experiences in school and the connections among those experiences to the engagement process. Reciprocal practices between
teacher and student contribute to healthy human development, motivation to achieve, sense of confidence, pride in success in school, and other positive outcomes (Willms et al, 2009). Yet despite good intentions by Canadian teachers, research indicates that Canadian students have very low levels of engagement. In 2008, the CEA surveyed over 32,000 Canadian students from grades 5 through 12 and found that levels of participation and academic engagement fall steadily from grade 6 to 12, while intellectual engagement falls during the middle school years and remains at a low throughout secondary school. Although factors such as, family dynamics, socio-economic status, ethnicity and gender are identified as contributing factors to levels of student engagement in the reports by CEA and NRC, the reports conclude that the effects of classroom and school learning climate on student engagement are strong. This suggests a need for further study into the indicators (assessment) and facilitators (intervention) for student engagement in our schools.

**What is Student Engagement?**

There are many descriptors and definitions of student engagement. It is clear that engagement extends well beyond on-task or compliant behaviours. Engagement could be conceptualized not as an attribute but as a state of being, influenced highly by contextual factors of home, school and peers, and the capacity of each to provide consistent support for learning (Wentzel, 1998). This aligns well with Martinez (2011) who suggests that engagement is not a goal but rather an outcome of doing interesting, trusted, and personally meaningful work. McFadden and Munns (2002) add that emotional attachment and commitment as a member of a socially meaningful group captures the concept of student engagement, and that it is important to understand pedagogies as relationships that are culturally produced between teachers and students, in the sites and spaces of schools and classrooms. From this perspective, the highest
level of engagement is seen to be linear and lie on a continuum in the form of “membership” and “a sense of belonging”. As McMahon and Portelli (2004) point out, the problem with this perspective is the constructs of the engaged culture are defined by “engaged and engaging teachers and administrators who operate within engaged schools located within communities” (p.65). They argue that popular definitions of engagement do not consider the value or purpose of being engaged in a particular activity, thus stifling participatory “democratic and/or social transformation” (p.69). The idea of engagement being generated through the interactions of students and teachers, in a shared space, for the purpose of democratic reconstruction, through which personal transformation takes place, is supported by CEA’s call for teachers to design learning environments that promote reciprocity (Willms et al, 2009). What emerges from the discussion to this point is the importance of high-quality interpersonal relationships in student engagement. Martin and Dowson (2009) identify relatedness, connectedness, and belonging as key underpinnings for motivation and achievement.

In keeping with attention to a holistic overview of engagement processes (Leach & Zepke, 2011), engagement can be defined as a sustained state of involvement in a trusted transaction considered to be interesting and meaningful by all participants. The challenge of this definition, however, is determining how something becomes interesting and meaningful to a student.

**Student Engagement in Special Education**

In an American study, entitled “2006 High School Survey of Student Engagement”, data based on responses from 81,499 students in grades 9 to 12 indicated that students felt less engaged if they were in special education rather than vocational, general education, or advanced classes (Furlong & Christenson, 2008). In special education, teacher behaviour is seen as a
contributing factor to disengagement of students with behavioural challenges: The ongoing reciprocal influences of teacher and students are noted to affect rates of direct teacher instruction, and certainly voluntary engagement is favoured over coerced engagement (Sutherland, Lewis-Palmer, Stichter & Morgan, 2008). It seems when dealing with students with exceptionalities, themes of democracy, reciprocity and interrelationship are of particular importance.

Factors that influence learner engagement in students with emotional and behavioral disorders include developmental factors, contextual factors, teacher behaviour, and instructional interventions (Fisher, Frey & Lapp, 2011; Gunter, Coutinho & Cade, 2002; Landrum, Tankersley & Kauffman, 2003; Sutherland et al, 2008). Also, academic performance has been shown to impact student behaviour. For example, researchers have found a direct association between reading development and aggression (Miles & Stipek, 2006), and anti-social behaviour (Trzesniewski, Moffitt, Caspi, Taylor & Maughan, 2006). Given that multiple studies report that teaching approaches need to consider the cognitive, emotional and behavioural domains in order to move and maintain students in the active process of engagement (Furlong & Christenson, 2008; Jones, 2008; McFadden & Munns, 2002; Willms, Friesen & Milton, 2009), it is reasonable to assume that a deficit in one or more of these domains will make engagement all that more challenging to experience. Furthermore, students who fail to meet teacher expectations are at risk for social and academic failure and rejection from the teacher (Sutherland et al, 2008). When working with students with exceptionalities, evidence shows it is important that teachers establish contexts and instruction that allow for meaningful interactions with peers and other adults.
Overview of Intergenerational Programs

Intergenerational programming in North America has evolved into a distinct field since the early 1960s, when the American government initiated the Foster Grandparent program. The idea was simple: bring youth and seniors together in a mutually beneficial arrangement. This indeed has been the findings of many research studies (Barton, 1999; Epstein & Boisvert, 2006; Herrmann, Sipsas-Herrmann, Stafford & Herrmann, 2005; Jarrott, 2011; McGuire and Hawkins, 1998). Established in 1998, The Journal of Intergenerational Relationships (JIR) provides a forum for research, practice and policy initiatives. The mission of JIR is to “serve as a global forum for discussion and exchange of ideas about the growth, development, and impact of intergenerational approaches to social issues, to family connections, and to new social structures” (Newman, 2003, p.2). In the Netherlands in 1999, the International Consortium for Intergenerational Programs (ICIP) was established to promote and develop intergenerational programming efforts worldwide. ICIP’s aim to ensure social inclusion for all generations seems appropriate for an aging and increasingly global society.

In terms of research, there is abundant empirical evidence suggesting that school-aged children who participate in intergenerational programs are likely to show diverse and varied benefits (Herrmann et al., 2005). A study by Marx et al (2004) found intergenerational programming to benefit elementary students in need of a positive self-image or a sense of appropriate social conduct, even with limited exposure. Their study consisted of one-hour monthly visits for four months. Moreover, the children in their study were observed to be significantly more anxious at school than when visiting with the seniors. Research has also found positive effects of intergenerational interaction on middle-school aged students and teenagers,
particularly for at-risk students (Cummings et al., 2003). The authors attribute this to higher
teacher-student ratios, increased role models, and non-traditional teaching methods.

Aside from pedagogical implications, senior adults can also benefit from
intergenerational programs. Reisig and Fees (2006) found that older adults experience enhanced
well-being from interacting and forming relationships with children in intergenerational context,
particularly for adults 75-84 years of age. Cattan, White, Bond and Learmouth (2005) conducted
a systematic literature review to determine the effectiveness of health-promotion interventions
that target social isolation and loneliness among older people. Their findings suggest that the
most effective interventions had an educational or social support component to them—supports
that can be incorporated into an intergenerational program.

When we consider bringing together youth who present behavioural challenges, and
senior adults, it is important to address critical issues shared by both groups. Despite the age
difference, troubled youth and older adults are stereotyped, stigmatized, and regarded as having
their own subset of medical problems (Barton, 1999). As suggested by Ward (1999), there is a
need for more ethnographic research in intergenerational programs, to examine how the
perspectives of younger and older participants may differ or coincide.
Chapter Three - Methodology

This field study explored effects of intergenerational interactions on student engagement. Specifically, the design of this study was to address two questions: Would intergenerational programming bolster the social confidence and social motivation in participating students? So what is special about intergenerational programs in special education? This study followed the dimensions of what D'Andrea (2006) refers to as pedagogical development, in contrast to pedagogical research. Actions in this study aim to improve practice, have informal methodology, are context specific, are aimed at a local audience, and have limited generalizability. The questions posed in this study were asked in the context of providing non-traditional teaching and learning opportunities to otherwise non-engaged students. The rationale was to motivate students to practise and improve social and academic skills, and in doing so, improve performance in social responsibility related to school goals. Benefits of intergenerational programming were supported by a large body of research. The possibility of continued work in this area was considered at time of study, with potential contributions to teaching, learning, and healthy communities. A mixed-method approach was used to enhance the collection, analysis and interpretation of data in terms of consistency, clarity, richness of detail, and implications for further work. Data were collected through observational checklists, field notes, and semi-structured post-interviews conducted with participants. A qualitative approach was incorporated as it tends to allow for the identification of unexpected phenomena and influences (Llamas & Boza, 2011).

Overview of Method

Participants were sorted into two groupings: three male students from an alternate school in British Columbia, aged 10 to 12; and six volunteer residents of varied age, gender and
ethnicity who reside at an assisted-living facility located in the same city as the school. The school offers community-based programs with an individualized approach in academics, visual arts, culinary arts, music, adventure education, and employment readiness. Students who participated in this study were enrolled at the alternate school because they required intensive interventions to mitigate problems associated with socio-emotional behaviour challenges.

The intergenerational program consisted of eight weekly, hour-long visits to a seniors’ assisted-living facility. During visits, students and senior adults were directed and guided through a variety of planned activities, with outcomes in literacy, numeracy, and social responsibility. Activities director for the facility, a Child and Youth Care Worker employed by the school district, and the teacher-researcher were present during the visits. Sessions were held in a large common room that accommodated splinter groups for reading and writing activities, and math games. All participants provided signed, informed consent to participate in the study. As children are identified as a vulnerable population, only those students who signed an assent form and possessed informed consent by a parent or legal guardian to participate in this research, had data collected and stored. The activities director for the facility vetted senior volunteers for mental and physical competency, and willingness and ability to commit to the program. Participants were given a pseudonym for the purpose of anonymity and confidentiality. Data that were specific in nature that could potentially identify or be traced back to an individual were not used for publication, and approval to conduct this research was procured from Tri-Council ethics review board, the superintendent of schools, and manager of the assisted-living facility.

Teacher as Researcher

Inherent in this study was the dual role of teacher and researcher. As such, it was important to identify and connect the types of methodologies that was used for either
pedagogical or research purposes. As suggested by O’Brien (1998), a cyclical, collaborative and co-learning process through stages of planning, executing, observing and reflecting guided the design and delivery of activities used in this program. These principles of action research served to inform teaching and learning, and the efficacy of the intergenerational program itself. Through personal reflections, I examined and evaluated the success of various activities to inform future directions and interventions. Activities were designed to encourage younger and older participants to communicate with one another, learn from and about each other, and share new experiences (Kaplan & Hanhardt, 2003). As teacher, it was imperative to set each participant up for safety and success by providing structure, pre-meeting activities, and a sense of value to the individual and collective experience. Lessons on aspects of aging, and stereotypes of elderly adults were delivered to student participants prior to meeting senior participants. Similarly, stereotypes of youth were discussed with senior participants prior to meeting student participants. This information was exchanged and discussed at the initial session in the presence of both groups, as a means to bring common and different perspectives to the forefront.

Procedure

Activities were chosen based on age-appropriateness, availability of resources, and suitability to the group. Activities were inspired from two compilations entitled “The Intergenerational Activities Sourcebook” (Butts, 2003), and “Tried and True: A Guide to Successful Intergenerational Activities at Shared Site Programs” (Jarrott, 2007). Most of the activities were game-based, and played in a large group. At the beginning of each session, the group would decide what the primary activity would be for the morning. All activities were conducted indoors. Whole-group activities included bocce ball, bowling, horseshoes, and other
tossing games. A senior and student participant could elect to pair off and play card games, board
games, puzzles, and digital games. There was also time for knitting and quilting lessons.

Prior to the program, student participants were assigned a base level of engagement
described as very low to very high, based on classroom observations. The teacher-researcher in
this study was confident with the assigned descriptors as observations included engagement
behaviour from the previous school year. During the intergenerational activities, observations of
student engagement levels were recorded on a five-point scale from very low (1) to very high
(5), using a checklist of engagement characteristics suggested by Jones (2009). Observations
were recorded every 15 minutes during the hour-long sessions, and a generalized score was
assigned for the morning. The following characteristics were considered:

1. Positive body language - Student exhibits body postures that indicate listening
   and attention while interacting with other people. Eye contact, head position,
   leaning forward or backward, and positions of arms all indicate a student’s
   level of interest and attention.

2. Consistent focus – Student is focused on the learning activity with minimum
   disruptions. Questions to consider are: Is the student focused on the learning
   experience? Does attention waiver due to lack of interest, lack of knowledge
   of procedure, frustration, or some outside distraction?

3. Verbal participation – Student expresses thoughtful ideas and answers.
   Questions are posed that are relevant or appropriate to learning. Participation
   is not passive; it involves sharing of opinions and reflecting on complex
   problems.
4. Student confidence – Student exhibits confidence to initiate and complete a task with limited coaching or approval-seeking and can actively participate in team-based work.

5. Fun and excitement – Student exhibits interest and enthusiasm and uses positive humour.

Field notes were taken during the sessions to record environmental conditions, and unique or anomalous events or circumstances. Post-program semi-structured interviews were conducted with student and senior participants. Lines of questioning followed:

1. What did you like best about the program?
2. What did you like least about the program?
3. How have your views about students/senior adults changed?
4. What learning took place for you?
5. What could improve the program for next time?

Following the interviews, data were amassed and analyzed for emerging trends or themes. Through observation of student behaviour during interactions with senior participants, and analysis of participants’ comments following the program, it was anticipated that data would reflect an increase in levels of student engagement as relationships developed.
Chapter Four – Data Analysis

The design of this study was to provide an environment that would foster relationship-building between youths and adults. This chapter reports on the data collected through a mixed-method approach. Interrelationships were examined in terms of five observable characteristics that demonstrate levels of student engagement (Jones, 2009). It was hypothesized that engagement levels would increase as students proceeded through the intergenerational program. To follow are the results of the intergenerational interactions, situated in the five parameters of engagement. Results from post-program interviews with student and senior participants are outlined at the close of this chapter.

Positive Body Language

The observed levels of body language suggesting activity engagement within this set varied according to student. Student participant “A” showed a slight increase described as “high” in the third and fourth session, had a decline to “low” in the fifth session, followed by a return to what was evaluated as “medium”, a baseline established for this individual, for the final three sessions (Appendix A). Student participant “B” also showed a slight increase in this set, moving from a baseline of “low” in the first two sessions, and maintaining a level described as “medium” for the balance of the program (Appendix B). Student participant “C” moved from a descriptor of “low” to “medium” in the two sessions attended mid-way through the program. Of the three student participants, student “C” displayed a level of positive body language that was less than an established typical baseline, for the first session (Appendix C).
Consistent Focus

Consistency in social focus increased for student participant “A” from a “medium” level to “high”, after the first two sessions. This student typically exhibits a “low” to “very low” focus in the classroom (Appendix A). Similarly, student participant “B” moved from a “low” level after the first session, maintaining “high” consistency throughout the remaining sessions. This student typically struggles with maintaining focus in the classroom, having “low” consistency in the classroom for baseline (Appendix B). Student participant “C” maintained consistency of focus observed as “medium”, for the two sessions attended (Appendix C). As with the other student participants, this student struggles with staying focused in the classroom, and would typically show “low” to “very low” engagement in school-related social and academic activities.

Verbal Participation

Student participant “A” exhibited an overall increase in verbal participation following the first two sessions. During the third session, the participant was engaged in a knitting activity with a senior resident, moving from “low” to “very high” output. This was followed by an observation of “medium” output for the remaining five sessions—a typical baseline for this student (Appendix A). Student participant “B” showed a slight decline from “medium” to “low” verbal participation after the initial three sessions. “Low” participation in the classroom is typical for this student (Appendix B). Student “C” demonstrated “low” verbal participation during the two sessions in attendance, something that is typical in a classroom setting (Appendix C).
Student Confidence

Student participant “A” demonstrated a “high” level of confidence throughout the program. This consistent expression of high level of confidence is typical for this student in a classroom setting (Appendix A). Student participant “B” showed movement from a “low” to “medium” level following the first two sessions. There was a “high” display of confidence during weeks five and six, when the student was involved in a point-counting activity during a card game with a senior participant. Confidence returned to a “medium” level for the final two sessions. Baseline for confidence as observed in the classroom was marked as “low”, for this student (Appendix B). Student participant “C” demonstrated “very low” confidence during the two sessions of participation. This was typical behaviour in a classroom setting (Appendix C).

Fun and Excitement

Student participant “A” displayed an increase in interest and enthusiasm from a “medium” level for the first two sessions to a “very high” level in the third session. This was followed by a steady decline to “very low” interest by the fifth session, only to return to a “very high” level the following week. The last two sessions saw a steady decline to a “low” level of fun and excitement. Unpredictable and sporadic displays of excitement are common for this student in a classroom setting. Baseline for this student was set as “low” (Appendix A). In terms of fun and excitement, student participant “B” entered the intergenerational program at a “very low” level. By the fourth session, there was a steady increase to a “medium” level, followed by “low” levels in the final three sessions. Typically, this student displays “low” to “very low” physical excitement in the classroom (Appendix B). Student “C”, in attendance for two sessions,
displayed a “medium” level of interest and enthusiasm, more than what is usually demonstrated in the classroom (Appendix C).

Levels of student engagement according to five sets of characteristics (Jones, 2009) are represented numerically on a five-point scale from very low (1) to very high (5) in Table 1.

Table 1

**Summary of Levels of Student Engagement According to Observable Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive Body</th>
<th>Consistent Focus</th>
<th>Verbal Participation</th>
<th>Student Confidence</th>
<th>Fun and Excitement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student “A”</td>
<td>3*</td>
<td>1.5*</td>
<td>3*</td>
<td>4*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1**</td>
<td>3.6**</td>
<td>3**</td>
<td>4**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student “B”</td>
<td>2*</td>
<td>2*</td>
<td>2*</td>
<td>2*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.8**</td>
<td>3.9**</td>
<td>2.4**</td>
<td>3**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student “C”***</td>
<td>3*</td>
<td>1.5*</td>
<td>2*</td>
<td>1*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.5**</td>
<td>3**</td>
<td>2**</td>
<td>1**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Denotes baseline level of engagement indicative of typical classroom behaviour.

** Denotes averaged level of engagement over an eight week period.

*** This student participant attended a total of 2 out of 8 sessions.

**Interviews**

Two students and two senior adults participated in interviews following the eight-week program. Interviews were conducted on the basis of willingness and availability, and they took approximately 20 minutes for each participant. Questions were kept semi-structured and open-ended to allow participants to talk about how the intergenerational experience affected them.
When questioned about his experience, student participant “A” responded with:

At the very first few minutes I felt nervous, then, you know, then it felt pretty nice… I thought it was going to be boring but it turned out to be interesting. I found their past, in general, interesting… I didn’t think I learned very much… Oh! Right! I learned how to knit… I think that was a good amount of classes, or sessions. I would have gone to start not liking it if there were more.

Student participant “B” had this to say about his interactions with others:

I learned a lot about other people, and [this] gave information toward studies, such as, how I react with others and how others react with me. Even though they are older, they can still act like a kid… I thought I wasn’t going to enjoy it because when I am with seniors they usually are family and some of them are ill. I feel sad because of it. I can’t really pick one thing I enjoyed the most. I enjoyed most of it. Maybe I would do it again—most likely… I was surprised when stubborn [student C] went when I suggested he should go. I didn’t even have to pressure him… I kind of connected with people there: sort of becoming friends.

When the responses from student participants are explored, the overarching theme of relationship seems to emerge. This is not surprising if we consider the role relationships play in the context of engagement processes. Clearly, the intergenerational experience moved students to more positive attitudes toward elderly adults and the environments associated with them. Student participants’ trepidation and doubt about attending intergenerational sessions were dispelled early in the program. Their attitudes shifted from “nervous” and “boring” to “pretty nice” and “interesting”. This change in attitude of teens following the intergenerational experience has
been documented in other experiments (Cummings et al., 2002). Responses from student participants also revealed socio-emotional growth in terms of a sense of belonging or connectedness. There was movement from positive interpersonal experiences to intrapersonal motivation through relatedness (Martin & Dowson, 2009), evidenced by student participant “C” attending only at the suggestion of student participant “B”. Whether this growth was borne from the development of positive relationships or feeling comfortable with one’s surroundings (environment), a sense of belonging is important to the adjustment and engagement of students with high-incidence disabilities (Murray and Greenberg, 2006).

Comments from senior adult participants targeted the program in terms of missing time to establish authentic relationships with student participants. One participant said:

Well, I was a little bit disappointed in that because it was an hour...it wasn’t long enough, really. There wasn’t enough interaction with the children... Like a couple of them [students] would start asking me questions and then we are going to play games...so I never did get the chance to answer their questions.

When I asked this participant whether he felt students engaged more because of the relationships that were being built, he replied:

You see, you’re a teacher. You’re an authority figure, so that’s what they’re [students] looking at. But when they’re interacting with us [senior adult participants], they’re not looking at us [making judgements about us].

The other senior adult participant who was interviewed had this to say about the program:
Well, it’s good for both groups to meet the other group. Elderly people can somehow relate to children…maybe [we needed] more one-to-one relationships… Yeah, the curiosity [from the students], I didn’t find.

What emerges from comments made by senior participants is a theme of reciprocity—an important element in student engagement (Willms et al, 2009), as discussed in Chapter One of this study. It appears that the senior adults who participated in post-program interviews did not experience the same connectedness felt by the students. This suggests that, from the perspectives of senior participants, the intergenerational interactions within large-group activities were less effective in fostering relationships and student engagement than through one-on-one exchange. Without reciprocity, is our view of gains in student engagement brought into question?

There are three key points to take from participants’ responses during post-program interviews: Firstly, the two students who were interviewed enjoyed the intergenerational experience more than they had anticipated. Of particular note was the power of peer-suggestion for motivating student participant “C” to attend. Secondly, student responses indicated the presence of connectedness and relationship-building with senior adult participants. Thirdly, two senior adult participants did not feel a sense of connectedness with student participants, as there was a need for more one-on-one interactions in the program. These points are important considerations for future design and delivery program models.
Chapter Five - Summary

This study explored the level of engagement of three, pre-adolescent students during social interactions with senior adults. Findings suggest middle-school aged students who typically disengage in the classroom could benefit socially from participation in an intergenerational program.

Discussion

Results from observations of student engagement varied for individual student participants. Student participant “A” demonstrated an increase in positive body language, ability to focus, and verbal participation during an individualized knitting activity, suggesting the activity was interesting and meaningful to him. Similarly, student participant “B” demonstrated substantial gains in positive engagement when he was able to exercise his counting ability during a card game of cribbage with a senior adult. One could argue that these one-on-one activities required mental and physical alertness in order to complete the tasks, and the perception of heightened engagement becomes the overlay. Nonetheless, these examples demonstrate a perspective on engagement that Leach and Zepke (2011) term “motivation and agency”. Accordingly, engaged students are intrinsically motivated and want to exercise their agency. In these activities, students were able to work autonomously, interact in a relationship with a senior participant, and felt competent enough to achieve success. These needs, along with relatedness, are aspects of self-determination theory of motivation (Martin & Dowson, 2009). The effect of the intergenerational experience on student participant “B” was a sustained increase in focus. During the interview, he mentioned how “interesting” people were, and that he “learned” a lot about others. This participant also enjoyed the program more than what he had anticipated, suggesting motivation explained by aspects of feeling-relatedness in interest theories (Eccles &
Wigfield, 2002). This could also explain why student participant “C”, an individual with very low self-confidence, succumbed to the encouragement of his peer, and began attending the sessions.

Interviews with senior participants indicated they enjoyed the whole-group activities, however, they would have preferred more one-on-one interaction with students. The initial plan for this study was to examine student engagement in the academic domain through activities that focused on literacy and numeracy skills. Ideally, student participants would have paired with senior participants, and work together over the duration of the program. On the advice of the activities director, activities became game-oriented, with a few exceptions, in a large group setting. As such, the study took on a social focus with an element of competition. Goal theory, where students were motivated to work toward performance goals, could explain slight increases in engagement during activities that involved games.

Limitations and Significance

It is acknowledged that this study’s findings cannot be generalized to other students who present similarities in behaviour, skills, performance and/or age. Transferability of the findings is limited by the small sample group, and unique logistical parameters such as, the learning environment, program duration, and availability and willingness of participants. Through the exploratory process, I believe the results of this study support efficacy of intergenerational programs in three critical areas: Firstly, teaching and learning environments that bring senior adults and students together address the notion of personalized learning through motivation and engagement. Secondly, there is a need to address and dispel the misconceptions that exist between generational groups, for societal reasons: A program that fosters intergenerational relationships addresses prejudices and stereotypes. Thirdly, the complex associations between
intergenerational relationships, motivation, engagement and achievement require further explication. This study is significant in the potential to encourage other schools and districts to consider similar projects that support students with behavioural challenges, and to increase our understanding of the value of intergenerational learning.

Conclusions

In this current study, results indicate that social confidence and motivation were bolstered in students who participated in intergenerational programming. In the context of learning interventions that use intergenerational experiences, increases in attributes of social engagement for students with behavioural challenges are predicated on a two primary conditions: Firstly, the design and delivery model of a program should provide opportunities for group and paired activities. One-on-one interactions are important to senior adults, as well as students, for establishing connectedness and building relationship, and in doing so, promote reciprocity. Secondly, it should be pre-determined what activities students deem to be trusted, interesting and meaningful, in order to facilitate positive outcomes. This will avoid coerced engagement and promote voluntary engagement.

Intergenerational programs play a vital role in special education. Given that students with challenges in one or more domains possess difficulties in engagement processes, there is a need to explore how student-adult relationships can address motivation issues. As educators move forward with school models that support personalized programs with a focus on learning to learn, our senior population has a lot to offer.

Further Research

This current study was inspired by witness of positive transformation of a former student. I regret not having the foresight or opportunity to meet with this individual to suss out the affects
his personal intergenerational experience had on his life. In this light, there is a need for further case studies that examine the efficacy of intergenerational programs in education. Research that honours ethnographic approaches would best serve this need because the insider’s perspective is not always easy to capture—it must be spoken. Furthermore, given the complex nature of student engagement, future studies could explore the intergenerational experience in terms of current pedagogical theories associated with attachment, self-regulation or capacity-building.
References


Jarrott, S.E. (2011). Where have we been and where are we going? Content analysis of
evaluation research of intergenerational programs. *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*, 9, 37-52.


*Journal of Community Psychology, 33*(1), 1-10.
Appendix A

Student Engagement Observations for Student “A”

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## Appendix B

### Student Engagement Observational for Student “B”

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**Positive Body Language:**

- Student exhibits body postures that indicate listening and paying attention to others, according to task. Eye contact, head position, body and arms positioning all indicate a student’s level of interest and attention.  
  - Baseline = Low (2)

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**Consistent Focus:**

- Student is focused on the social or learning activity with minimum disruptions. Consider the following questions regarding student behaviour: Is the student focused on the experience? Does their attention waiver due to lack of interest, lack of knowledge of how to proceed, frustration, or some outside distraction?  
  - Baseline = Low (2)

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**Verbal Participation:**

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<td>Student expresses thoughtful ideas, reflective answers, and questions relevant or appropriate to the learning or social context. Student participation in not passive; it involves sharing opinions and reflecting on complex problems. Baseline = Low (2)</td>
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**Student Confidence:**

| Student exhibits confidence and can initiate and complete a task with limited coaching, and can work in a group. Baseline = Low (2) |
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**Fun and Excitement:**

| Student exhibits interest and enthusiasm and uses positive behaviour. Baseline = Low to very low (1.5) |
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## Appendix C

### Student Engagement Observations for Student “C”

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<td>Student exhibits body postures that indicate listening and paying attention to others, according to task. Eye contact, head position, body and arms positioning all indicate a student’s level of interest and attention.</td>
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<td>Student is focused on the social or learning activity with minimum disruptions. Consider the following questions regarding student behaviour: Is the student focused on the experience? Does their attention waiver due to lack of interest, lack of knowledge of how to proceed, frustration, or some outside distraction?</td>
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Student expresses thoughtful ideas, reflective answers, and questions relevant or appropriate to the learning or social context. Student participation in not passive; it involves sharing opinions and reflecting on complex problems.

Baseline = Low (2)

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**Student Confidence:**

Student exhibits confidence and can initiate and complete a task with limited coaching, and can work in a group.

Baseline = Very low (1)

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**Fun and Excitement:**

Student exhibits interest and enthusiasm and uses positive behaviour.

Baseline = Low (2)

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