

1-1-1995

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Recommended Citation

Laplante, Lisa, "Middle School: Intergenerational Experiences Support Teaching and Learning" (1995). *Intergenerational*. 38.

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Middle School: Intergenerational Experiences Support Teaching and Learning

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Community service learning closes the gap between youth and the elderly. Through community service learning, students not only study subjects like English, history, and science, but also gain perspective about the lives of our senior population. This arrangement allows students to dispel false assumptions as they learn about the lives of seniors, and, in the process, develop empathy. Using an intergenerational theme, teachers satisfy several educational objectives by offering activities that facilitate both cognitive and affective learning.

Veteran teachers involved in this type of project constantly emphasize the power of bringing seniors together with youth. For many teachers, the relationship formed with the senior partners becomes a powerful vehicle for conveying preestablished curriculum. The testimony that follows demonstrates how community service learning affects both learner outcomes and instructional strategy.

The two schools discussed in this chapter are middle-level schools serving small urban communities, with a small proportion of rural students. Students in both schools represent varied ethnic and socioeconomic groups. Agawam Middle School, in Agawam, Massachusetts, has an enrollment of about 590 students; West Springfield Junior High School, in West Springfield, Massachusetts, serves about 700 students.

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Living History

Jeanne Forgette and Louis Spiro, teachers at Agawam Middle School in Agawam, Massachusetts, used community service learning to teach history. In this project, students visited a senior center, where they conducted interviews that they eventually compiled into a class book entitled *Living History*. The students then gave the book as a gift to the people at the senior center. In addition, students performed a radio show for their older friends, featuring songs and commercials from eras through which their audience had lived. Both Forgette and Spiro were enthusiastic about the “fantastic” outcomes of the project. Forgette notes that students became more aware of elderly people. Because many of her students had limited contact with senior citizens, this opportunity allowed the children to be exposed to many different lifestyles of senior citizens. According to Forgette, the best part of the project was students’ increased level of comfort and caring toward the elderly.

Spiro echoes Forgette’s sentiments by noting both the academic and emotional outcomes of their project. He states:

The aim was to have the students write a book. So they learned to write. The hidden curriculum had to do with learning about the elderly. Most of the students (50–80 percent) never dealt with elderly [people]. Some didn’t have grandparents alive or nearby. Even if they had grandparents, the students gained a greater appreciation for the problems of the elderly.

The instruction used by Forgette and Spiro honored teamwork at all levels. The two teachers worked closely, both contributing equally; it was a “true partnership” that continues today. The teachers also involved students in planning, an approach that required the teachers to stay flexible so as to meet diverse student needs. Forgette and Spiro observe:

You can teach the same thing day to day, but when you do projects like this, it motivates you, it invigorates you and keeps you young. It involves experimenting and letting kids go to see what they can do.

The teachers guided the process by first working with students to set up questions that would lead to specific learning outcomes and then by helping the class compose essays based on the student findings. In addition, the teachers spent time preparing the students for what they could expect from the elders in terms of energy level, speaking, and

behaviors. The community-service-learning project required that the teachers change certain aspects of the curriculum to accommodate the service activities. Interview skills, general behaviors toward elders, and compiling books are specific areas included to enable students to perform the service activity.

Forgette stresses that this project made learning more relevant. She says she felt challenged to “do the real thing, to get out there!” She adds, “Anytime you can go out of the school there is a lot of learning involved.” Community service learning made her “more aware of the contribution children can make to a community. . . . Although ten years old, they can still accomplish some very wonderful things.”

Project BRIDGES

Maureen Perkins, Gala-Ann McInerny, and Ann Bongiorno, teachers at West Springfield Junior High School in West Springfield, Massachusetts, led their students through an intergenerational project entitled BRIDGES (Building Richness into the Development and Growth of Each Student) in which students adopted senior pen pals and corresponded with them regularly. Although connecting with partner teachers as well as the community takes time, McInerny found it worthwhile. When one student who is not the stereotypical “good student” is excited to share his first letter, she feels it is worth the extra time.

Perkins notes that from an academic point of view, students definitely improved their writing form and punctuation skills through the letter-writing activity. Involved in a meaningful rather than an abstract project, they were also more engaged. McInerny recognizes community service learning as a motivator for letter-writing because it revitalizes what is a rather stifling mandatory unit. Perkins notes that letter-writing is easy to learn, but tedious when not done for a real audience. She observes that students’ enthusiasm and pride increases as they write to elder friends. When students acknowledge the audience receiving their correspondence, responsibility is enhanced, especially with editing and time-management skills.

Using monthly themes for their writing during BRIDGES activities, students asked their senior partners very specific questions about World War II, inventions, scientific discoveries, fashion, and music. The feedback—the real voices—elicited fascination and enthusiastic response from the youth. Many students were shocked and amazed by the experiences of the seniors, and discussion was automatically stimu-

lated. Firsthand accounts, students felt, differed greatly from textbook coverage.

McInerny stimulated initial conversation by giving students leading questions so that the letters had a purpose. She notes that her teaching became more individualized once she started to meet with BRIDGES students. The student-teacher relationship changed, she notes, as students saw a more human side of their instructor. For Perkins, teaching focused more on affective learning than in typical instruction. Spending time on feelings and cause and effect required her to process with the students. For example, when she asked how the class might make the seniors feel more welcomed, they responded with suggestions of greeting and taking the coats of the older guests. Everyone acted as a team with a common mission to make the letter-writing a meaningful experience. Moreover, as an integral part of the planning process, the students had more choice and thus more power.

The seniors were easier to get involved once they saw how polite and nonjudgmental the kids were. The process became a reciprocal learning experience. McInerny views the project as facilitating public relations because positive attitudes were generated at all levels. The community respected the educational process, and learning became purposeful. The first year of the project fit the "show me" category for the community—but once they recognized its importance, outside agencies offered support so that the project could continue. As in other places where service learning is being woven into the fabric of the community, West Springfield recognized that, in McInerny's words, "community service learning is the way of the future."

As students involved in both projects learned new definitions of "senior citizen," their notion of this population expanded. As they watched senior tap dancers, or learned details about the lives of their partners, many responded by saying, "I didn't know senior citizens could do this." Before their contact with their senior partners, many students had a fixed notion of the older age group—for example, not recognizing significant differences between nursing home and retirement home residents. The community-service-learning experience broke down stereotypes both ways: The younger group's impression of the seniors changed, as well as the seniors' impression of the adolescents. Original reluctance to be involved often rested on these biases; but once the biases were lifted, all partners became more enthusiastic and dedicated to staying in touch. Concurrently, students became involved in the curriculum—whether history or language arts—and their enthusiasm spilled over into their schoolwork. Letter-writing and history will never be the same for these students.

Enhancing Peer Mediation Through Community Service Learning

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Peer mediation programs are probably the most popular and widespread examples of community-service-learning programs in middle and high schools today, although they are not commonly recognized as such. Frequently, within a school system, neither technical consultants to the peer mediation programs nor the immediate school department supervisor understand the relationship between community service learning (CSL) and peer mediation. Many schools with successful peer mediation programs would not categorize their programs as community service learning. Viewing these programs as discrete entities is yet another example of effective innovations that exist in schools in isolation from one another. As we have found, however, many programs—especially community service learning and peer mediation—can enhance and support each other when staff members cooperate and coordinate with each other and the community. Community service learning can be the *main vehicle of instruction* in any discipline.

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Forest Park Middle School is an urban school of approximately 900 students in grades 6–8. The school has a diverse student body.