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INTERGENERATIONAL SCHOOL PROJECTS

Examples and Guidelines

by James P. Firman and Anita M. Stowell

The residential, educational, and recreational patterns of modern American society tend to isolate the young from the old. Because there is little interaction between the age groups, each generation tends to stereotype the other. Educators must realize that these age-related stereotypes affect our interpersonal relationships, our self-images, and, consequently, our potential to live a full, rewarding life.

Several research studies support the conclusion that traditional teaching techniques have virtually no effect on students' attitudes towards the old. Other studies indicate that one of the most effective means of ameliorating these negative stereotypes is through intergenerational projects—activities that bring the young and old together for their mutual benefit.

Over the past five years, several successful intergenerational programs have been developed, implemented, and evaluated, but information about these projects has not been widely disseminated. There are a variety of ways to bring high school students and older persons together; we hope the four projects described here give an idea of the range of possible intergenerational activities. Some of these projects were implemented in junior high schools or colleges, but seem quite appropriate for high schools.

The Jones-Village Partnership Program is an example of how older persons can enrich traditional curricula. For five weeks in 1979, 25 eighth graders from Jones Junior High School in Columbus, Ohio, spent two periods of their school day at First Community Village, a nearby retirement center. During that time, the students

exchanged views, offered assistance, and shared experiences with 50 older individuals.

The program replaced the group's regular English and American history curriculum for a little over a month. However, language arts and social studies were learned through such assignments as daily journals, taped "oral history" interviews with residents, and reports of the students' simulations of physical disabilities common among older persons.

Both participants and the school system viewed the program as a success. The final evaluation reflected:

- a greater ability to distinguish the myths of aging from fact;
- better comprehension of physical and psychological aspects of aging;
- less negative and fearful attitudes toward aging;
- positive feelings about the program from all participants;
- student projections of more active lifestyles for their own later years;
- greater student warmth and empathy for older persons.

A special effort to involve older people in the classroom is being tested in the San Diego School System through a program called SCOPE (Senior Citizen Opportunities in Public Education). Older persons are employed for five hours per week to provide scholastic and emotional support to youngsters in the Lindbergh and Miller Community Schools classrooms. The senior citizens are salaried through Title V of the Older Americans Act, which is coordinated through the local Area Agency on Aging. Motivated older participants have been volunteering many additional hours.

A noteworthy community service project in New York City is the Student Help for the Elderly project (SHE). SHE was initiated and is managed entirely by Columbia University students. The project's premise is that students can provide relatively low-cost, high-quality services to older persons who do not qualify for or cannot afford such services. Students

are paid three dollars per hour to provide a variety of services, including shopping, cooking, and companionship to homebound older persons. In its sixth year, SHE currently has more than 50 students who regularly provide, needed services to more than 65 older men and women.

A timely intergenerational community service project was an energy conservation effort organized in Fitchburg, Massachusetts. Students, older persons, and others replaced air filters, sealed vents, cleaned refrigerator coils, and assisted in dozens of basic energy-saving activities for neighborhood residents. More than 300 students joined with retired citizens to form the core of volunteer labor.

Based on these and other experiences in intergenerational programming, some principles have emerged which seem critical to the success of these projects.

- 1) *Provide for mutually beneficial exchange.* In order to reduce stereotypes and to promote mutual respect, all participants must give as well as receive.
- 2) *Involve both young and old in project planning.* The most successful projects are those that respond to the needs and interests of the participants. Students and seniors will surprise you with their insights about what needs to be done and how to do it.
- 3) *Start small.* Small-scale intergenerational programs should be encouraged. This provides participants with an early sense of achievement and allows for evaluation and modification of the program before a substantial commitment of time and resources is made.
- 4) *Don't operate in a vacuum.* In every community there are agencies and organizations that work with the elderly. They can be extremely helpful in program planning, recruiting capable older people, identifying community resources, etc.
- 5) *Encourage one-to-one exchange.* Friendships are one of the most signi-

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School Projects

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ficant byproducts of intergenerational experiences. Through them, each generation has the opportunity to transcend its stereotype and gain an appreciation of the experience, values, and contributions of the other.

6) *Tell the world.* Intergenerational programming is a relatively new and underdeveloped field with little available literature on what works, what doesn't work, and why. Publication and research is needed to help educational and aging institutions across the country develop more and better programs.

Intergenerational experiences should be a natural occurrence for most high school students, but they are not. Educators have a responsibility to help students understand the process and phenomenon of aging in our society, and to provide them with opportunities to learn with and from older people. American high schools are a fertile environment for experimenting and pioneering intergenerational programs. 

For Further Information

On the Jones-Village Partnership Program, circle Infocard 50 or write:

Ms. Ellen Brianger
Jones Junior High School
2100 Arlington Avenue
Columbus, OH 43221

On the Senior Citizens Opportunities in Public Education, circle Infocard 51 or write:

Dr. Maxwell Jarvis
SCOPE Coordinator
Lindbergh Community School
4133 Mt. Albertine Avenue
San Diego, CA 92111

On the Student Help for the Elderly (SHE), circle Infocard 52 or write:

Natalie Eiman
Student Help for the Elderly
119-A Law Library
Columbia University
New York, NY 10027

On the Fitchburg Home Weatherization Project, circle Infocard 53 or write:

Tim Miller
Montachusett Opportunity Council
Energy Services Program
7 Fairmont Street
Fitchburg, MA 01420

On National Council of the Aging's programs and publications, circle Infocard 54 or write:

Jim Firman
NCOA
1828 L Street, N.W.
Suite 504
Washington, DC 20036

On programs and publications of the National Retired Teachers Association/American Association of Retired Persons, circle Infocard 55 or write:

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Films

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Philly's changes are, of course, a joy to behold. When the film opens, he stands docilely as his father shaves him. During the early stages of the filming, Philly is moody, glum, and antsy around his parents. At the end, he confidently shaves himself in his new bedroom at the attractive residence home. Now 52, he is finally "a man." Like many young men before him, Philly has left the nest. He has a future.

Best Boy proves without a doubt that truth is more vital than fiction. It has a linear narrative—a beginning, middle, and happy ending—that is rare in cinema verite film, even as it tackles many weighty issues: mental retardation, aging, death and dying, parenting, marriage, family life, the psychology of dependency, and the ethics of cinema verite filmmaking. The film is remarkable.

Grandpa (29 min, b&w, \$40 \$325, FI) by Stephen L. Forman and Paul Desaulniers is an equally gutsy cinema verite short with a much more cynical tone. The emotions that arise between filmmaker Steve Forman and his grandfather, Ben Forman, are powerful and easily identifiable by anyone—male or female—who has ever fought to be his or her own person.

Eighty-six-year-old Ben Forman made it the hard way. Growing up an impoverished Jewish immigrant boy on New York's Lower East Side wasn't easy, and he has some harrowing stories to tell—for example, being beaten for wearing out his paper-soled shoes in one day. He has much to say about his overworked, downtrodden father whom he loved but feared. Exhausted from excruciatingly long hours in a sweatshop, Ben's father either ignored or beat his children if they got in his way. His wife, considering her husband a failure because he always worked for others, pushed her son, Ben, to establish a business of his own.

Ben's beloved son, Howard, followed in his father's footsteps and is a comfort to him in his old age. But Howard's son, the bearded filmmaker, is a "stubborn" thorn in the old man's side. Thus, grandson and grandfather confront each other, pitting one value system against the other, each fighting for control.

Grandpa has little patience with Stephen's so far unprofitable career choice and his beard. By prodding his grandfather, sometimes crassly, Ste-

phen gets what he wants on film. We are treated to a realistic, unromanticized view of ethnic life in turn-of-the-century New York City, a clear feeling for the family dynamics that drove Ben to pioneer his own business, and the nature of his relationship with his grandson who, the audience will conclude, is as much a rebel and trailblazer as the grandfather was in his early days.

Grandpa is a subtle study of four generations of male Formans: the first and third generations chose the safe, traditional route for their life's work; the second and fourth generations broke from their fathers in search of something new. *Grandpa*, although cinema verite, is extremely well edited. The juxtaposition of Ben's voice-over with old photos and fine home movies is often quite moving.

In *Murita Cycles* (28 min, c, \$40/\$415, DIR) Barry Braverman profiles his aging, eccentric father, Murray. Like Ben Forman, Murray Braverman is a widower and has always been self-employed. However, all comparisons end there. Murray has probably never taken a businessman's lunch in his life; rather, he has been content to make a marginal living repairing and selling bicycles and buying and selling junk. Since his wife died ten years ago, he, more often than not, has foregone regular bathing (we catch Murray taking one of his rare baths—not the most tasteful sequence, but it does serve to underscore the extent of his eccentricity). His proclivity for junk collecting is now an all-consuming obsession, so that the once classy bicycle shop, *Murita Cycles* (named for Murray and his wife, Rita) so overflows with paraphernalia that Murray must conduct his business outside on the sidewalk.

And the junk is not confined to his business establishment. As his kids grew up and left home, Murray's wares came home and filled the spaces they left behind. Also a poet and philosopher, Murray rationalizes his unique lifestyle to his son, Barry, who aims some sarcastic barbs at the questionable merchandise. Murray's neighbors try hard to be kind in their assessment of his quirky ways, but his daughter Lola, heard only in voice-over, denigrates her brother's film exposé. She is obviously ashamed of her father.

To Murray Braverman, it is "not important to be a successful businessman," but "to live each day" and to do what makes him happy. His son Barry ends the film on an upbeat note—with a freeze frame of his father's