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Changing negative attitudes of elementary children toward the aged through positive interaction and aging education within the school curriculum

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CHANGING NEGATIVE ATTITUDES OF ELEMENTARY CHILDREN TOWARD THE AGED THROUGH POSITIVE INTERACTION AND AGING EDUCATION WITHIN THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM

by

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Abstract

Children develop attitudes at an early age, both positive and negative. Negative attitudes toward the aged can be changed through direct contact between the elderly and through aging education within the curriculum. Children have negative attitudes toward the elderly and the aging process. Direct contact can change these views by providing interaction between children and the elderly while aging education can bring about an awareness of the aging process and of the aged. With aging being an inevitable and important part of being human, it is necessary as well as important for educators to help children develop positive attitudes toward the aged. Activities have been included, integrating aging education within the curriculum focusing on attitudes children have toward the aged, an awareness of aging and the aged and direct interaction.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Problem Statement

How can the image of the elderly, held by elementary children, be enhanced through direct interaction with the aged and by integrating aging education within the structure of other subjects?

Rationale

Approximately 25 million people age 65 and older make up the 11% of the total United States population (Prose, 1984). The elderly are rapidly growing faster than any other age group. People are living longer through advanced medical technology.

Living in a youth centered society, advertising shows the young having fun, busy doing significant activities and living happy, worthwhile lives while the elderly are viewed as passive and unproductive. They are also portrayed as being needy and sad. This stereotype is unhealthy for society and unfair to older citizens as well as the young.
In a study by Kastenbaum and Durkee (cited in Kastenbaum, 1964), they concluded that adolescents had predominately negative attitudes toward the elderly. The elderly were described as being tired, ugly, helpless, and ready to die. Children are often afraid of growing old and want to avoid old age.

Hickey and Kalish (1968) did a similar study based on the idea that values, attitudes and beliefs internalized during childhood, remained throughout life.

With aging being an inevitable process that all human beings must face, it is important to change negative attitudes toward the elderly. These changes can take place by educating children about aging with guidance units being presented or even integrating aging within the structured curriculum.

Providing opportunities for positive interaction between the child and the elderly also assists in changing negative attitudes. These interactions add excitement and create a dynamic learning process (Rich, Myrick & Campbell, 1983). Satore (1976) and John (1977) concluded that children should have more opportunities for positive
interaction through programs such as "Foster Grandparents" where the elderly volunteer at school. It was also recommended that children visit community centers for the elderly.

Through educating children about the elderly and providing times for interaction with the elderly, positive attitudes toward the elderly can be developed early. These attitudes will assist the child in dealing with the aging process in the present and in the future.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to show how negative attitudes, of elementary children toward the aged, can be changed by providing opportunities for positive interaction and by integrating aging education within the structure of other subjects.
CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this study is to show how negative attitudes of elementary children toward the aged, can be changed through direct interaction and aging education within the structured curriculum.

Within Chapter Two, studies on negative attitudes toward the aged will be reviewed as well as how direct interaction and aging education affects these attitudes.

**Attitudes**

Attitudes are learned through experiences that a person has while interacting with family, friends and acquaintances. Children develop attitudes in their early years and are maintained, with some changes, throughout their lifetimes.

Attitudes are also learned through direct exposure to an attitude object, whether it is a person, symbol, phrase, slogan or idea. Trent, Glass, and Crockett (1979) stated that, "Attitudes developed from direct contact with the attitude object are more intense" (p.35). As attitudes
develop, behavioral and affect intentions are associated with these developments. The major ways that attitudes are formed are through interaction with others, direct experiences with attitude objects and by increasing knowledge. Attitudes are learned, so therefore, new ones can be learned. If children have negative attitudes toward the elderly, it is not necessary for this to continue. Positive attitudes can be learned through interaction, experiences and increased knowledge with the aged.

Only a minimal amount of data has been gathered and reported in the literature concerning children's attitudes toward the aged. Most data that is recorded shows that attitudes are negative with strong stereotypes toward the elderly.

Using a story technique, Hickey, Hickey, and Kalish (1968) studied the perceptions of 208 third graders in upper and lower class schools. These children wrote stories describing old people. The responses were divided into two major categories; Physical Characteristics and Social Characteristics. The physical characteristics perceived by the children included mobility differences such as slow moving, limping and
difficulty in walking. Visual and auditory differences were described by the children as old people being hard of hearing and not able to see well. Hair was described as gray, white or balding and frequent responses were made about skin differences which included wrinkling and bones sticking out.

The social characteristics, i.e., kindness, meanness, poverty, loneliness, and senility, were frequent responses in how the children pictured the age. Hickey, Hickey and Kalish (1968) found that generally "old age was labeled as a time in life with nothing to do" (p.232).

Further study was done by Hickey and Kalish (1968) on negative attitudes of children toward the aged. A written questionnaire was based on the paragraphs of the 208 third graders, studied previously, and on taped interviews with other children. Tested were 335 students from four different age groups and grade levels. It was found that children perceive age-related differences between age groups and that these differences become greater as the child becomes older. The older the adult, the less positive image the child has.
Kastenbaum and Durkee (cited in Kastenbaum, 1964), used the Age Appropriate Attitudes Technique to investigate the attitudes of different groups of adolescents and young adults. Young people had strong negative attitudes toward older people and tended not to even consider the later years of their own lives. Old age was viewed as being risky, unpleasant and without positive value.

A study with nursery to sixth grade children by Seefeldt, Jante, Galper and Serock (1975), using drawings of man at four stages of life, showed that children appear to understand the idea of old, however, an abundance of negative statements from the children confirmed negative attitudes toward the aged. These attitudes suggested elderly as being sick, passive, and unattractive people. Evidence showed that children were often afraid of the thought of growing old and tended to avoid the subject of old age.

Miller, Blalock, and Ginsburg's study (1984), clarifying and examining children's understanding of attitudes toward the aged, included 68 three to six year old children. The results were consistent with other research, reporting negative attitudes. Using
pictures of young and old men and women along with questioning, the children more often preferred the younger people to the older people. The young were considered more fun, nicer looking and more physically able than the elderly.

Most studies found that children have little knowledge or contact with older people and perceptions of age and aging are generally negative. These negative views can lead to avoidance of the aged, neglect of their contributions and a fear of growing old. With this evidence, it is important for the cycle of negative attitudes to be broken. An understanding of the aged and aging is necessary in order to develop positive attitudes.

Direct Interaction

Social interaction and contacts are important for children. Bekker and Taylor (1966) stated "Contact with elderly persons apparently is a mediating factor in reducing negative behaviors toward the elderly" (p.116).

Educators have become interested in aging because of the increasing number of older people in our society and because of increase in funding of
programs for the aged. Because of these developments, several types of model projects toward changing attitudes of children toward the aged, began. Two environments have been created to accomplish that goal. One is where older persons care for young children and the other is when children care for the older people.

In 1969, the ACTION Program, Foster Grandparents, began and has been successful. This national program employs older persons to provide care, attention, love and role modeling for children who are disadvantaged, emotionally disturbed or mentally retarded. Both young and old have benefited from this program and it is considered successful because it fulfills needs that both groups have. Little research, however, has been done or reported on the effects of the program in regard to the attitudinal changes of children.

An innovative program begun by Esstoya Whitley in 1968 at P.K. Yonge Laboratory School in Gainesville, Florida has been successful in providing contact between young children and the elderly. It is called the Adopted Grandparents Program. Whitley believed that the elderly were an
excellent learning source and she used that resource by having second and third grade children "adopt" a grandparent from a nearby nursing home. With regular visitation, 2 or 3 times a week, the children experienced direct interaction with the elderly while increasing their understanding of aging in the human life cycle and of the aged.

In a study conducted by Whitley (1976), she found that children who had contact with the elderly had more positive attitudes toward them. She also discovered that talents were shared and respect and love grew between the child and the "grandparent". The children came to view growing old just as much a part of life as growing up.

Through contact with the aged, children can view the elderly as being accepting, caring and realistic, while they are learning, sharing and growing. This direct experience leads to positive attitudes.

Aging Education

Owen and Whitfield (1982) define aging education as "a vehicle through which students are able to learn about the process of aging" (p.334).

Such a program is a way of obtaining beliefs
and attitudes that will assist students in being more prepared and accepting in the reality of growing old. Facts on aging and the elderly are gained, consequently, eliminating falsehoods. An appreciation of the natural life processes is gained and positive attitudes and sensitivity toward the aging of others and self is developed.

There are several components of the Aging Education Program as described by Owen and Whitfield (1982). These components are useful in helping children explore their feelings and attitudes toward growing old while dispelling myths.

Structured Fantasy is the first component. "This process of leading children in fantasy trips by suggesting vivid mental images, presents an interesting and enjoyable method for harnessing creative mental activity and permits an individual to experience what it is like to be someone or somewhere else" (Owen & Whitfield, 1982, p.335). This simple unstructured exercise gives the children a chance to project their own ideas of being seventy years of age. The student then shares this fantasy experience with the group for discussion. This discussion allows each member to gain better
insights on his or her own feelings and attitudes as well as learning about the feelings and attitudes of others.

The Social Issues of Aging Component is the second area of the aging education program. This aspect enables a child to understand and gain knowledge of the major social and community issues of the aging. During this phase, older citizens become involved with school children for social contact as well as the school children making visits to nursing homes to brighten the lives of the elderly.

With this type of aging education program, students will be better prepared in living and working in a society that is growing older.

Remer and Schrader (1982) developed guidance activities related to aging to broaden goals of decreasing negative stereotypes. Using these activities, specific goals were developed, to achieve a more positive attitude about the aging process, to create new meanings for old age and the elderly and to be aware that the elderly are individuals who aging affects in various ways.

The guidance unit contains seven 30-minute
sessions to be used once a week with fourth, fifth and sixth graders. Each session is made up of a series of related activities with required follow up sessions, as well as suggested follow up sessions that are coordinated with the structured curriculum such as language arts, social studies and art.

Remer and Schrader (1982) believe that in order for this guidance unit to be successful, counselors must prepare themselves first. Counselors need preparation in order to become aware of their own feelings and attitudes toward the elderly. This identification must include their own relationships with older people and addressing their own fears about getting older.

A second stage of this preparation is for counselors to identify resources that are available within the community. Senior Citizen Community Centers, nursing homes, and "Meals on Wheels" are just a few examples of resources available. By preparing for this unit, a counselor can obtain a greater awareness of problems of the elderly as well as getting in touch with their own stereotypes and becoming more knowledgable of communities' response to needs of older people. "A healthy attitude for
counselors to have is that they have much to learn by implementing an aging unit that will enable them to explore and share their own feelings" (Remer & Schrader, 1982, p.307).

This unit was used with fifth grade students and proved to be a positive experience for them. The children were eager to participate in the activities which enabled them to understand aging and the aged and positive comments were made in regard to the elderly. The unit was effective in exploring stereotypes and attitudes about the aging with students in a classroom guidance environment.

Rich, Myrick and Campbell (1983) conducted a study with third graders in Alachua County, Florida to find out if a counselor led guidance unit would make a difference in behaviors and attitudes of students toward older people. The guidance unit consisting of eight, 30 minute sessions, with a focus on increasing student awareness of older people and the developmental process of aging. Visual aides, art, language arts and creative writing were incorporated into the unit while also having elderly people come to class sessions to provide contact and interaction between the students.
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and them. A bulletin board, with numerous pictures of the elderly in various situations, was displayed. Reading materials were also used to enhance the unit.

This study suggested that an eight week counselor led guidance unit on aging and the elderly was effective with third grade students. This unit proved to be easily led by the counselor and worked into the existing curriculum well. As a result, attitudes were changed and knowledge was gained which will make a difference in how children deal with aging and the aged.

Summary

Elementary children have stereotypes and negative attitudes toward the aged. These stereotypes and attitudes do not portray the elderly in a positive role in our society, where the number of elderly people is rapidly growing. These attitudes can be changed by providing opportunities for contact and interaction between children and the elderly. This direct contact will allow children to experience the positive resources that the elderly have.

Aged education integrated within the structured
curriculum will also be an asset in changing negative attitudes. Knowledge about the elderly will help to delete these attitudes and will help in gaining a better understanding of the aged.

By changing negative attitudes toward the aged, counselors and teachers can help children deal with the aging process in their own lives as well as dealing with the elderly in our society.
CHAPTER THREE

Conclusions and Recommendations

It has been the purpose of this paper to show that children have negative attitudes toward the elderly and that these attitudes can be changed with providing opportunities for direct interaction and through educating children about the aged within the structured curriculum.

Conclusions

Evidence has shown that children's attitudes toward the aged are negative. Children view the elderly as slow, tired, senile and nonproductive individuals. These stereotypes do not portray the aged in a true sense and these stereotypes cause children to dread old age as well as develop negative attitudes toward a rapidly growing group in our society.

Direct contact with the elderly is a meaningful, worthwhile experience for children in developing positive attitudes toward the aged. This interaction provides direct contact with the elderly, allowing the child to see for themselves,
that the elderly are loving, caring, knowledgeable and productive people. Direct contact enables the child to develop a strong relationship with an older person and this helps the child in establishing realistic views about them.

Aging education for children proves to be a successful way in which children become more aware of the aged and the aging process. Educating children about the aged will prepare them to better understand, live and work with the elderly. Knowledge gained from aging education will make an important impact on how children view the elderly in the present and in the future.

Both direct interaction and aging education make positive changes in attitudes toward the aged as well as helping children cope with growing old.

Recommendations

Children have negative attitudes and stereotypes about the aged as the research indicated. These attitudes and stereotypes can be changed with direct interaction, however, little research has been documented to show how this interaction changes these attitudes. Further studies should be conducted to support the idea that
contact between the elderly and the child is positive and changes negative attitudes.

As with direct interaction, little research has shown that aging education can change attitudes. Further studies should be conducted to show the effects of aging education toward the changing of children's negative attitudes toward the aged.

Educators cannot correct all the problems of society but they can provide experiences to change negative attitudes toward the aged. This can be done easily by integrating aging education within the already structured curriculum.

Three goals to be considered within this aging education unit are: (a) focusing on attitudes that children have about the aged, (b) an awareness of the aging process and the aged, and (c) contact and interaction opportunities provided between children and the elderly.

The activities listed in the following categories, taken from Pratt (1977) and Stickle (1982), will be helpful in incorporating aging education within the curriculum.

The following activities will help in discovering the attitudes children have toward the
1. Have children make a list of 10 adjectives or terms they use to describe people over 65. For every term listed, put a plus sign (+) for a positive response, a negative sign (-) for a negative response, and a zero (0) for a neutral response. Have students examine their list and have a discussion about the list. (Language Arts)

2. Exploration of children's attitudes can be discussed using the following topics:

   A) What things worry you about growing old?
   B) What things would be neat about growing old?
   C) What are some things you dislike about the elderly?
   D) What are some things you like about the elderly?
   E) Where are some places that you would find older people in your community?
   F) What are some advantages of growing old? (Language Arts)

3. Assign students to watch family programs on television such as "Little House on the Prairie", and "The Waltons". Discuss the characters by age differences and any ways these characters are
presented as stereotypes of their age groups.

(Language Arts)

4. Have children analyze advertisements and note the youth orientation of our culture.

Teachers can do the following activities to develop concepts and awareness of older people:

1. Read stories about or including elderly people and discuss their characteristics. (Reading)

2. Set up a display table with items from the "olden days" that have been borrowed and brought in by the children from their grandparents. (Social Studies)

3. Have a poster contest showing young and old people together. (Art, Health)

4. Have students write a story on "How I hope to be when I am old". (Creative Writing)

5. Have students bring in photographs of their grandparents for display.

6. Have children make a mask of how they might look at 65 years old and discuss what the mask represents. (Art)

7. Have children bring in clippings found in magazines and newspapers about the elderly to display on a bulletin board. (Social Studies)
8. Sort pictures of various people by age, youngest to the oldest. Discuss the characteristics of each age group. (Health)

To help in providing opportunities for contact and interaction, these activities are suggested:
1. Have students tape record or write down tales the elderly learned as children. (Language Arts)
2. Have the children interview their grandparents about some topic or historical event and report to the class. (Social Studies)
3. Encourage students to list things that they could teach an older person and have them teach one thing to a selected person. (Language Arts)
4. Have a tea for grandparents of children in the classroom with the children planning, organizing and initiating the tea.
5. Have the class adopt "grandparents" from a local nursing home and visit on a regular basis. Encourage the children to write to their "grandparent" along with the visits. Children can read, do arts and crafts, play games, sing songs, visit, plant flowers and perform plays during this time. (Art, Music, Drama, Language Arts, Science)
6. Have students conduct an oral history interview
with an elderly person. (Social Studies)

7. Arrange for elderly people to come to the classroom to volunteer time to help children with assignments, learn a new game or learn a craft.

8. Arrange for elderly to come to the classroom and have rap sessions with the students. (Language Arts)

9. Visit a local historical society or museum and have an older person show the children around. (Social Studies)

These suggested activities will allow the child to benefit from direct interaction and aging education as well as identifying the attitudes they have of the aged.

Summary

Children develop attitudes at an early age, both positive and negative. Negative attitudes toward the aged can be changed through direct contact between the elderly and through aging education within the curriculum.

Children have negative attitudes toward the elderly and the aging process. Direct contact can change these views, by providing interaction between children and the elderly, while aging education can
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bring about an awareness of the aging process and of the aged.

With aging being an inevitable and important part of being human, it is necessary as well as important for educators to help children to develop positive attitudes toward the aged.
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