Infusing Gerontology Into Grades 7–12 Social Studies Curricula

John A. Krout, PhD,¹ and Zenon Wasyliw, PhD²

Purpose: This paper describes a model process to increase the exposure of middle and high school students to information on aging so they better understand the implications of an aging population and the stereotypes of older adults. Design and Methods: A college Gerontology Institute, a social studies teacher education faculty member, and middle/high school social studies teachers collaborated on a program to develop and implement lesson plans that incorporate information on aging into existing courses. Institute staff provided expertise on gerontology and student teachers assisted in writing lesson plan objectives. Results: Teachers developed about a dozen lessons covering from one class to two weeks in subjects such as global history, participation in government, Western civilizations, economics, and government. This experience suggests a number of issues that should be addressed when developing a gerontology infusion initiative with school teachers. Implications: Information on aging can be successfully incorporated into existing school curricula within the constraints of mandated learning objectives.

Key Words: Education, Gerontology infusion, Curriculum change

The popular press reports daily on the challenges that the growing number of older adults present for individuals, families, and the private and public sectors in nations around the world (Couper & Pratt, 1999). In America, the aging of the baby boomers, in particular, is often portrayed as a coming crisis that will shake the institutional foundations of society and possibly trigger intergenerational competition the likes of which has not been seen before. Although these messages are often overly negative and deterministic, the media has served an important function by focusing attention on the need for individuals, the private sector, and government policy makers to consider the many ramifications of an aging America. This growing interest in aging has been mirrored by a considerable growth and maturation in gerontology programs in colleges and universities in the United States in the past 25 years (Bass & Ferraro, 2000).

However, most of the dialogue about aging occurs among researchers, practitioners, policy makers, older adults, and a relatively small number of college faculty and students. There is no comprehensive policy to prepare current, not to mention future, citizens to understand the issues and choices related to aging that they and society will face. Students in Kindergarten through Grade 12 (K–12) generally receive very little exposure to these issues. One reason for this is that aging has historically never been part of school curricula or state standards and guidelines. Another reason teachers may be reluctant to introduce information on aging is because they are unfamiliar and/or uncomfortable with the topic. A third reason is that curricula are already straining under the weight of numerous mandates to cover more information. Finally, there has been increasing pressure for schools to “teach to the test,” as test results are used to measure educational success and failure (and to allocate funding; Couper & Pratt, 1999).

Convincing arguments can be made to include information on aging and older adults throughout the K–12 curriculum. First, as more and more individuals

¹Department of History, Ithaca College Gerontology Institute, NY.
²Department of History, Ithaca College, NY.

Address correspondence to John A. Krout, PhD, Ithaca College Gerontology Institute, 411 Center for Health Sciences, Ithaca, NY 14850. E-mail: Krou@ithaca.edu.
live longer lives, they and their family members will need to plan for, and make decisions about, old age (Treas, 1995). Second, our country faces a potentially enormous shortage of health and social service paraprofessionals and professionals who are knowledgeable about and inclined to enter careers that care for older adults (Select Committee on Aging, 1992). The need for persons to work with older adults will not be adequately met if students leave high school (or college) with little or no understanding of aging. Third, and perhaps of even greater concern, is that much of what is communicated to society about aging and older adults is negative and misinformed (Ansello, 1977; Markson & Pratt, 1996). This includes stereotypes that are inappropriate, hurtful, and incorrect.

Schools, with their mission to transmit knowledge and understanding, need to provide students with a basic understanding of the aging process and the social, economic, and cultural implications of an aging society (Couper & Pratt, 1997).

What is the best approach? Since virtually no K–12 gerontology lessons or programs have been adequately evaluated in terms of learning objectives or other outcomes, we do not yet know. Some states and local districts have worked on including gerontological information in curricula. But these efforts have been uneven and largely undocumented (Lucchino, 1977; Markson & Pratt, 1996). This includes stereotypes that are inappropriate, hurtful, and incorrect. Schools, with their mission to transmit knowledge and understanding, need to provide students with a basic understanding of the aging process and the social, economic, and cultural implications of an aging society (Couper & Pratt, 1997).

The Ithaca Model

Identifying Institutional, Faculty, and Teacher Interest

The first step in the process that emerged in Ithaca was to determine if there was an institutional interest and commitment to implementing a gerontology infusion project with a local school. Initial discussions were held among several Ithaca College faculty and administrators, including a history faculty member who also oversees the Grades 7–12 social studies teacher certification program and who showed particular interest in the project. He contacted social studies teachers at the Ithaca City School District middle and high school and found significant interest among teachers and the department head. With the support of their principal, six social studies teachers (Grades 7–12) agreed to participate, covering subjects such as Participation in Government, Western Civilizations, Economics, Global History, and Government.

Developing a Plan to Empower Teachers

Because Ithaca College does not have any teacher preparation programs at the K–6 level, we decided to focus only on the middle and high school grades. The project was based on the premise that the teachers would determine the nature of the infusion activities and that the role of the College was to provide support and resources for the teachers, not to tell them what to do or how to do it. The model, then, was bottom up and not top down.

However, we incorrectly assumed that teachers would
be available over the summer for a 2-week workshop to obtain information on gerontology and to work on lesson plans. Because these teachers had many obligations and different schedules, even offering the course for credit might not have worked. This experience taught us early on that scheduling time to meet with teachers would be one of our greatest challenges and that the teachers themselves would set that schedule.

Identifying Resources for Teacher and School Involvement

We received a small grant to support our project, but most of the teacher and faculty time was provided in kind. We had monies to pay for substitute teachers several times during the year so teachers could attend half-day workshops or other presentations. We also purchased gerontology infusion materials, provided copies of several books on gerontology, and made copies of teacher-generated materials for class distribution. A college education major worked as a research assistant, gathered information on topics as requested by the teachers, and compiled handouts. At least one student teacher worked on infusion activities each semester.

Providing Information on Aging and Gerontology Infusion

Because the summer workshop was neither feasible nor desired by teachers, another approach had to be found. The answer was to meet with teachers regularly for about an hour after classes during the fall semester to provide basic information on aging and older adults. Sometimes teachers worked independently, but often they worked together at school to discuss what they were doing. It did not take us long to realize that the project would work not on our schedule but on theirs. Demands on their time made it very difficult to assemble all the teachers at one time, so the college faculty person and student teachers were key to providing information on class activities and getting information to the teachers one-on-one.

Student Teachers and Assistants

In the first year of the project, two cooperating teachers were assigned a student teacher who also fulfilled the duties of student assistant. The student teacher played a critical role by coordinating the research materials and by actually developing and teaching the first lesson on aging. The student teacher or assistant collected and organized the aging topics into more formal lesson plans. Her work on the project could also be regarded as a valuable internship, as she worked experientially with teachers. Three subsequent student teacher/assistants followed in the footsteps of the first student assistant.

Evaluation

To our knowledge, no instruments have been developed specifically to assess the effectiveness of gerontology infusion approaches or lesson plans. Thus, we did not begin the project with a sophisticated evaluation plan, but we did intend to collect information on both the process and the impact of activities on students. In terms of process, the teachers clearly liked our bottom up and flexible approach. However, we did not collect hard data on this. We considered their high level of interest, continued participation, and many positive comments as indicative of a successful process. Teachers reported that students were very interested in and liked the infusion lessons.

The collection of pre- and postdata from students was less successful. Our plan was to administer, pre- and postdata, the Facts on Aging Quiz (FAQ; Palmore, 1988) to students who were going to be involved in multi-class lessons. The FAQ has been used extensively as a measure of knowledge of, and attitudes toward, aging and older adults. However, neither we nor the teachers felt that the FAQ was the most appropriate measure of student learning or attitude change. Teachers often did not have the time to administer the FAQ, especially for shorter lessons. We were able to administer the FAQ to several two-week units in the class on participation in government, and the results indicated only a few items changed significantly in the anticipated direction. Also, the items in the FAQ did not reflect the information covered in the classes, making the quiz an inappropriate evaluation tool.

Our experience suggests that learning about aging within the context of other subject material is difficult to assess. The classes we worked with were social studies, not gerontology, classes, and the lesson plans were directed as such. This complicated the assessment of the gerontology component. Clearly, we should have had a more comprehensive and better-planned evaluation plan in place from the start and are currently implementing a detailed plan to assess infusion lessons.

Infusion Dissemination

An important objective of the project was to make the infusion activities that were developed available to other teachers and to state agencies and professional associations. This was done using several approaches. First, presentations were made at state and national gerontology conferences and state teacher conferences. Second, project staff attended meetings with representatives from the New York State Department of Education, the New York State Office for the Aging, and the State Society on Aging of New York. Third, a considerable amount of time was spent developing a web site (www.ithaca.edu/aging/schools), which includes lesson plans and other activities on gerontology infusion in social studies. Some of the activities were taken from other sources and others were developed by the Ithaca project.

Identifying Other Teachers and Institutionalization

The project recognized secondary school teachers’ expertise in matters of curriculum and classroom
instruction by supporting teachers’ initiatives and creativity in developing gerontology infusion lessons. This approach is very different from the larger teaching environment where teachers often find themselves responding to state curricular mandates. Our empowering approach led, for example, to an internal expansion of the project within the Ithaca City School District Middle School Social Studies Department. A notable example is the implementation of a 2-week gerontology unit in the Participation in Government course, a course required of all graduating seniors in New York State. A team of three teachers took the initiative to collaborate with the college faculty member and student assistant to develop a very successful unit. Subsequently, these teachers brought their gerontology lessons and experiences to fellow teachers in their schools and other districts. Thus, the project has begun to be institutionalized. Additional grant monies have allowed us to expand the project, and over a dozen teachers in five nearby districts have joined the project. This has increased the breadth of infusion activities and the diversity of students involved in them. We now have a good mix of rural and small city communities and students from a variety of racial and economic backgrounds. The different districts also vary in their curricular content and planning. All of these factors will be looked at in our evaluation activities.

Examples of Infusion Activities

We have described the process we used to engage teachers in gerontology infusion and have suggested ways to improve upon it. Approximately 1,000 students have been in one or more of the 75 class periods incorporating gerontology into their lesson plans. For example, the seventh and eighth grade curriculum emphasizes U.S. history along with New York and local history, as well as contemporary political and social issues in the news and community. The middle school teacher, in collaboration with his student teacher or assistant, identified and taught a number of gerontology-related lessons that fit into the state and school curriculum. An example of a specific lesson chosen for field-testing was “Common Issues for Young and Old.” The middle school teacher determined that an interactive simulation lesson would work best for his students. This specific lesson was an adapted version of “Town Budget Meeting Simulation: Young Versus Old” found in Social Studies Classroom Activities for Secondary Schools (State of Connecticut, 1992). This publication served as a valuable source of examples and ideas for the cooperating teachers. This specific lesson and several others were adapted and expanded from this publication, including a tenth grade global history lesson, “Aging in Ancient Greece.” The lesson evolved to include the historic Middle Ages and gender issues based upon the cooperating teachers’ interpretation and application of state curricular standards and additional historical research.

An interesting infusion lesson in Global History utilizing historical monographs was “Otto von Bismarck: Social Policies in Germany.” This lesson specifically focused upon the Old Age Pension Act and evolved into an appraisal of contemporary European pension policies within the context of a rapidly aging European population. The lesson “Old Age in America: History and Future Transitions,” utilized the work of historian W. Andrew Achenbaum (1978) to offer a pictorial overview of changing perceptions of old age throughout American history. Another valuable resource was a publication produced by the Tompkins County Office of the Aging, The Millennium Project (Tompkins County Office for the Aging, 1999).

The social studies curriculum for Grades 7–12 is tightly constructed and allowed for infused gerontology lessons rather than extended thematic units. Cooperating teachers identified a required course for graduating high school seniors, Participation in Government, as a perfect place in the curriculum for a specific 2-week gerontology unit. Classroom presentations were given by representatives of the County Office for the Aging, the Ithaca College faculty participant, government representatives, and, most importantly, older people. This was the second year in a row that all graduating seniors of Ithaca High School completed this unit, which served as a model for adaptation in other senior Participation in Government classes and related senior elective classes such as Sociology. One lesson that teachers and students found valuable throughout the curriculum was the “Interview with an Older Person.” A set of guided interview questions led students to gain an appreciation for the history and contemporary issues of old age, and intergenerational communication and understanding.

Summary

This article describes a model developed at Ithaca College to infuse gerontology into Grades 7–12 social studies classes in a local school. The infusion approach generally does not involve a set, stand-alone curriculum, but rather encourages teachers to introduce information on aging as part of a variety of topics and learning objectives. The model identifies specific tasks or steps that should be addressed when planning gerontology infusion in schools. It uses (where appropriate) the limited information available on infusion activities that has been developed elsewhere. The centerpiece for the success of the project was recognizing teachers’ professional expertise and empowering their knowledge and status by supporting their creative efforts rather than dictating from above what they should do. Teachers determined what and where gerontology issues would best fit within the social studies curriculum. Thus, the approach is bottom up and does not presume there is one best way to teach students about aging.

This valuable partnership has not only led to the development and implementation of important gerontology lessons in the social studies curriculum, but has produced a core of social studies teachers who are both mentors for their colleagues and enthusiastic.
supporters of introducing gerontology issues into the social studies curriculum. A key element in the success of this program has been the leadership of faculty involved in teacher education and strong linkages between that program, the school, and the college’s gerontology program. The teacher education faculty person provided the entrée, sustained contact with teachers, and engaged student teachers with the project. The gerontology program provided information and resources used by the teachers in their curriculum design. The student teachers were also key resources for the teachers and faculty. In addition, efforts were made to involve members of the community (older persons, human service, and other organizations) in the infusion activities. Finally, the project worked to build linkages with, and provide information to, agencies and organizations outside the local community that might be interested in gerontology infusion.

We learned many lessons during the course of this project: (a) the need for flexible planning; (b) the need to have a well-defined evaluation plan and the resources to implement the plan; (c) the need to empower teachers to identify how infusion activities fit into each class by providing resources, not a preset plan; (d) the importance of incorporating student teachers into the development of lesson plans; and (e) the importance of identifying key teachers as leaders and mentors.

As we look to the future of gerontology infusion in the schools, it is evident we need to work on many levels. This includes working with teachers and school administrators, teacher preparation programs, state and national professional teacher associations, local and state education departments and boards, college gerontology programs, state and national gerontology organizations, local service organizations, textbook publishers, and older persons. All of these actors can play important roles in increasing the amount of information on aging students receive in schools. It is clear that if all of these groups work together, the lives of people of all ages will be enriched, and individuals and society will be better able to respond to the many challenges and opportunities of our aging world.

References

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