

Digging for Human Treasure

James R. Doyle

One of our country's greatest human treasures is wasting away for lack of use. It is not hidden in far-away lands and obscure places. It is waiting just around the corner, at the end of a bus line, inside a house behind a curtained window—all within reach of the neighborhood schools. Finding this treasure and sharing its wealth is one of education's most immediate obligations, a task recently undertaken in Ann Arbor, Michigan, through the inno-

vative Teaching-Learning Communities project.

Children in Ann Arbor talk about their newfound wealth in a variety of ways. If I delete the subject of their comments, will you know what human treasure they are talking about?

"Having _____ in my art class is much funner."

"From _____ you can learn a lot of different ways of doing things."

"_____ are wonderful and great, and very patient, too."

"_____ make me feel happy all over."

What is it that the children find so great, wonderful, and stimulating? In each of the above sentences, the missing word is "grandpersons," the affectionate term used to describe senior citizen volunteers who are now sharing their lifetime accumulations of skills and attitudes with children in the Ann Arbor Public Schools through a Title III grant from the Michigan Department of Education. The successful contributions of senior volunteers have grown and deepened each year under the direction of the project's innovator, Carol Tice, and its dynamic and articulate staff.

Grandpersons are one of our country's greatest assets. They are also a missing ingredient in educational planning. The children mentioned above know the value of grandpersons, but the educational system does not. If these "funner," "wonderful" persons waste away for lack of opportunity, for lack of tie-in to life's on-going processes, then



Senior volunteers are a valuable resource in Michigan schools. Earl Bell (above left) encourages a boy who is painting on a plaster relief; Eva Jensen (far right) guides a youngster on her bobbin lace project.



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educators must accept some of the responsibility. Are we really ignorant of their potential contributions, or have we suppressed recognition of the vast store of skills and knowledge that senior citizens could offer to the classroom, to curriculum, and most important, to children?

My eyes were opened last year when I witnessed grandpersons sharing their arts and crafts skills with children in the schools, with the school community responding very positively. More important, the data I gathered and examined as an external evaluator of the Teaching-Learning Communities project supported and confirmed my personal observations. My experience demonstrated that this elderly human treasure is mainly untapped, lying dormant, yet wishing to be involved, in a well paced manner consistent with each person's health and mobility.

There are 20 million people in the United States today over 65 years of age (almost 10 percent of our so-

ciety), and 1,000 more persons join these ranks each day. Consider the number of retired senior citizens who were master carpenters, master auto mechanics, or who, for example, served in World War II and could relate historical events they lived through. There are grandpersons who are retired musicians, bookkeepers, home economists—grandpersons with skills that could greatly enrich existing school district curriculum.

Rather than utilizing the human resource they represent, our society assigns grandpersons to benevolent ghettos where they serve no function in life's mainstream. We seem to assume that usefulness stops at a certain age. I am reminded of the Eskimo tribes who placed their aged on ice floes, with a minimal food supply—their solution for people whose physical contributions had become limited and who were therefore perceived as having little value. As educators, we too ignore the constructive role the aged could play

Senior citizens enjoy working with school children and are able to bridge the "generation gap."
Photo: James Foote.

as active participants in our schools. We too place the aging on an ice floe—one of mental exclusion, with only a minimal supply of stimulation.

Some groups in our society are recognizing the desire of the aging members of our population to remain part of the mainstream. Roger DeCrow, former Director of the Older American Project, Adult Education Association, Washington, D.C., completed a survey showing that 72 percent of the nation's community colleges that responded were initiating new programs for the elderly, while 50 percent of the public schools

enthusiastic statements of elementary school children regarding grandparents. School principals have also expressed positive feelings when applying for participation in the Teaching-Learning Communities project this year. One principal commented:

I think it [senior citizen involvement] will enrich the art program in a mutually beneficial way. The children will learn from the grandparents and benefit from the extra personal attention. The grandparents will feel needed and appreciated and have a channel to share their skills. Both groups will grow in respect and caring for each other. We would be happy to have grandparents as tutors in whatever skill area they choose. We just like them.

Other goals expressed by educators involved in the project are to create more small group work, to enrich students' lives, to foster greater rapport between students and grandparents, and to add a new dimension to the school program. It is very important to note that in addition to the art program, principals expressed interest in having grandparents tutor in woodworking, photography, cooking, science, music, reading, library skills, and gardening.

A detractor might say that it is one thing for children to feel warm and happy when working with a grandperson, but question what the students learn. The answer is: MUCH! Grandpa Pitts, for one, brings a lifetime of woodworking skills and talents to class. In a non-threatening atmosphere, he works elbow to elbow with children on various projects in a nongraded class. It is a situation in which children and seniors, as one teacher said, "take to each other like bees to honey." There exists a natural learning environment of inter-

reported doing the same thing.¹ This clearly is an indication that the elderly are looking for outlets to continue the process of learning and living, and that community colleges are responding commendably.

However, it is one dimension of living "to receive," as from a class or course, and quite another dimension "to give"—that supreme human act of giving to others in response to needs. Our aging citizens want to give of themselves, to give of their skills and knowledge. And one obvious beneficiary of this hidden treasure should be the public schools.

Fortunately, what is hidden can also be found. In the Teaching-Learning Communities project, grandparents do give of their skills and knowledge, and they are needed.

I have already mentioned the

Eva Jessye (left) chats with a student about soft sculpture.



¹ Roger DeCrow. *New Learning for Older Americans: A Survey*. Washington, D.C.: Adult Education Association of the U.S.A., 1975. p. 146.

generational understanding—an empathic communicative link between two age groups that society has tended to perceive as having little to contribute.

Involvement between the generations has great potential for teaching more than skills. One outcome is that children learn a sense of time and an understanding of history. Surprisingly, senior citizens participating in some scattered secondary school programs throughout the country are being accepted as part of the *adolescent peer group*, a group that has historically tended toward psychological emancipation from its elders. Adolescents tend to perceive grandparents as non-authoritarian and in most cases, as non-directive humans, who relate experiences that they had in similar settings many years ago. It seems as if most grandparents have retreated from the battle of moralizing; instead, they simply relate their experiences, giving examples of alternative behaviors they have found effective in coping with problems and in living their own lives.

Grandpersons also benefit tremendously from working with students. In an interview with one elderly grandlady, I asked, "Do you like coming to the Teaching-Learning Communities art classes?" She answered, "Yes, on Tuesdays when I come to Teaching-Learning Communities, I am out of bed early in the morning getting dressed for my children. Before I used to just sit in my bed until noon and watch T.V."

This grandlady's comments shouldn't surprise educators. We have studied and restudied the concept of "feeling needed" and its relationship to motivation and to self-concept. We write about, talk about, and lecture on these basic needs of children. But don't these same needs also exist for our seniors? Is age the sole determinant of when one stops

learning, growing, and contributing, or is attitude the critical variable? If attitude is not the important variable, how do we account for the fact that grandparents—using 22 different types of art media ranging from oil pastels to clay, from styrofoam to tongue depressors—worked on more than 246 projects, all in a three-month period of time in the Teaching-Learning Communities program?

We educators have all been engaged in activities designed to get children "ready." We have developed the kindergarten to ready children for first grade. We have developed the preschool to ready children for kindergarten. Now there is talk of 0-3 learning. If we prepare children for entry into the mainstream of life, why do we draw the line at age 55, 60, 70, or 80 and arbitrarily consider the value of this experienced segment of society as irrelevant to the educational process? Perhaps we need to get ourselves "ready" to deal with this problem.

The report of the White House Conference on Aging in 1971 stated that: "We should create opportunities for the aging for life-long involvement in community affairs."² It is ironic to note that sociologists have found the aged much more thoroughly integrated into the life of the so-called "primitive" rural societies than they are in our modern industrial society.

Those who have studied aging in pre-industrial societies have found one of the basic needs of the aged is to remain active and to maintain intellectual acuity. In this area, too, the Teaching-Learning Communities project has demonstrated what stimulation-deprivation research has shown for a long time: that human beings

²Committee on Labor and Public Welfare and Special Committee on Aging. *Toward a National Policy on Aging: A Final Report*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973.

must be actively involved. In this vein, the Director of the Ann Bach Nursing Home in Ann Arbor has gone so far as to state that the program has "saved the lives of some of our seniors who were literally giving up their spirit."

Naturally, there are some practical considerations to be met when involving grandpersons in educational programming. It must be recognized that the very old and those with extremely serious health problems will not be able to participate. This is a reality that can't be avoided. However, the same situation exists for middle-aged and young people who are not functioning effectively due to physically or emotionally inhibiting factors. One needs also:

- To consider and plan for transportation and to recruit volunteers to assist with logistics;
- To recognize that personal conversations with grandpersons are an important part of their involvement;
- To survey the interests and existing skills of grandpersons and to match them carefully with the teacher and the teacher's general classroom style;
- To establish a good working relationship with teacher organizations and unions to ensure that a senior involvement project does not thin the ranks of professional teachers needed.

All of these considerations are part of the real world and all have been built into the Teaching-Learning Communities program in Ann Arbor by its Director, Carol Tice, who has shown that such logistical problems are no different from other school district problems.

Another essential building block is the cooperation of the school principal. Bob Stevenson, principal of

Pittsfield School in Ann Arbor, says that from his perspective, the grandpersons have a calming effect on children. He strongly supports the Teaching-Learning Communities project and reports no complaints from teachers.

Ann Arbor Superintendent Harry Howard has said:

At Teaching-Learning Communities, we are discovering that the involvement of senior citizens is an important step toward developing a total community concept. Numerous students have never had the opportunity to relate with a grandparent generation. Our program is often the first opportunity students have had to interact with a person having a fairly long historical perspective that involves a time period beyond the student's own experiences.

Other districts, such as my own Wayne-Westland, are adopting the program. Timothy J. Dyer, Superintendent of Wayne-Westland and a regent at Eastern Michigan University has said, "Both the local school district and university must share in the responsibility for developing an increased awareness of the great potential our most experienced citizens have to offer to education."

Margaret Mead has said that older people should again assume the role they have played throughout human history—a role that aids in the total development of the younger generations and recognizes the deep need children have to grow under the affectionate and genuinely caring eye of the aged. Indeed, we might sew some of the wounds of our decaying family system with the greying threads of aged wisdom.

We have our hidden treasure nearby. Educators should look for it around the corner and at the end of the bus line. We must open our eyes and see behind the curtains; and most of all, we must open the school doors and bring grandpersons into the mainstream of educational programming. [E]

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