School-Based Intergenerational Programs: Laying the Foundations for Sustainability

Susan Feldman, MA
Helen Mahoney, PhD
Terence Seedsman, PhD

ABSTRACT. This paper focuses on experiences learned from being involved in the development of a sustainable school-based intergenerational program that simultaneously incorporated lifespan education into a Grade 2-3-4 curriculum. The program operated in an Australian primary school. A model was developed through this initiative that involved a tripartite collaborative partnership between school, university educators, and the primary school community (in particular its older adults). Older adult volunteers from the school’s community were invited to teach students. Program monitoring consisted of contextual and observational analysis ensuring the program was sensitive to school culture and took account of participants’ experiences. This monitoring process occurred throughout the planning, development, and implementation stages. Although school educators were always pressed for time, all participants actively contributed to the program. All of the educators saw purpose and worth in having the program. Ongoing support from teachers, the principal, and university personnel plus the provision of additional resources contributed to high student involvement and the overall success of the initiative. Having a school-based coordinator was found to be nec-
essary, yet, for school educators, problematic because of constraints on their time. The findings from this project indicate that the older adult volunteers were enriched by their involvement in the program and able to provide meaningful learning experiences for students. As well, the study suggests that educators would be better prepared for implementing this area of learning opportunities if lifespan education were provided in their undergraduate and post-graduate courses as well as in professional development initiatives.

KEYWORDS. Context monitoring, lifespan curriculum, intergenerational, school-based

INTRODUCTION

Working from the premise that most school-based intergenerational programs have much to offer (Bales, Eklund, & Siffin, 2000; Chetkow-Yanoov, 1991; Halford, 1998; Kazemek & Logas, 2000; Lubarsky, 1997; Metal-Corbin & Corbin, 1990), and realising that most of the evidence regarding these claims has emanated from Europe and the United States, the investigators of this research project wanted to explore aspects of intergenerational learning in an Australian school-based setting. To do this, a two-stage research project was conducted between the years 1999 and 2001. The focus of this article is on stage two. The aim in this stage was to plan, develop and implement a school-based intergenerational program that included the integration of lifespan education across the curriculum of a combined Grade 2-3-4 class. In addition, this project aimed to support the principle of sustainability by ensuring that Victoria University (School of Education) established collaborative partnerships with government and non-government schools that supports the application of university-based learning in school-based delivery of lifespan curriculum.

How to establish a sustainable school-based intergenerational program, which integrates lifespan curriculum into its activities, is a complex task. When studying such tasks, it is sometimes easier to examine ‘the parts’ after seeing the whole. Therefore, initially, a brief overview of each of the two stages is given. This is followed by an in-depth discussion of stage two, viewing it from within a framework of five interrelated elements found to be key factors
to the project’s success: contextual monitoring, understanding and working with change in a school setting, lifespan education, changing demographics (including the fragmentation of families), and curriculum project funding. Besides the complexity of issues being a reason for presenting an overview first, the fact that contextual monitoring was used throughout the project’s 12-month life meant the results had a temporal aspect to them. Hence, participant quotations or the researcher’s journal notes are provided within the discussion of the five elements to demonstrate key contextual factors that influenced decision-making throughout the program. Finally, conclusions are drawn that emphasise the importance of working with the multidimensional nature of schools to enhance sustainability of lifespan curriculum initiatives within intergenerational programs.

Stage One

In brief, stage one of this two-stage research project was a pilot program carried out in eight primary schools during 1999 and 2000 in Victoria, Australia. The attitudes of 305 students aged 8-10 years were surveyed with pre- and post-tests using the questionnaire instrument Children’s Views on Aging by authors Newman and Marks (1997). A brief intervention took place between the pre- and post-tests which involved an older person or persons taking part in an activity with the class. Comments were also subsequently gathered from the older adults and the class teachers about their experiences of participating in the study and about their own ageing selves. Additional details of the project and the findings from stage one are outlined elsewhere (Feldman, Mahoney, & Seedsman, 2001; Feldman, Mahoney, & Seedsman, 2002).

Stage Two

Utilising the data obtained from the stage one survey allowed the researchers to establish a basis for the development of a model to promote lifespan curriculum within the context of a school-based intergenerational program that supported realistic presentations about ageing and old age. Using one example to highlight this point: When students (N = 248) described how you can tell when people are growing old, 59.3% of them in the stage one pre-test identified physical aspects of growing older such as ‘wrinkles,’ ‘grey hair,’ and ‘looks.’ (There were no significant differences between the pre- and post-tests.) This was reinforced in a section of the questionnaire where students rated (using a semantic differential scale) older people as less ‘pretty’ than young people. The finding was significant (F(1,199) = 31.06, p < .001). Also, gender was found to be a factor. Although only marginally significant, it was also
found that girls perceived older people as being more ‘pretty’ than young people. Given ‘looks’ are highly valued in western industrialised societies and issues such as eating disorders being prevalent amongst young girls and women, this had implications for the lifespan curriculum.

Hobson’s Bay Primary School met the research project’s criteria for selection in that it was located close to Victoria University (within a fifteen-kilometre radius of the central business district of Melbourne), thus ensuring the establishment of regular ongoing communication and cooperation between the research team, the school community and the three pre-service teachers from Victoria University. Also, the school had participated in stage one.

The pre-service teachers from Victoria University’s School of Education Project Partnership scheme selected Hobson’s Bay Primary as the school where they chose to do their 2001 teaching practicum. They opted for this school knowing that they were going to have responsibilities in relation to the school’s plans for the stage two lifespan curriculum initiatives. Sustainability of the program was a requirement of the funding authority and was seen as the capacity of the lifespan curriculum to successfully undergo changes and overcome problems in the course of being implemented. As well, the initiative was expected to provide salient considerations for others wishing to establish similar programs. Planning began at the end of the 2000 school year and continued during the first two terms (10 weeks per term) of 2001 with the intergenerational program being put into operation in Term 3 (of a 4-term year), 2001. It took place every Tuesday afternoon with the combined Grade 2-3-4 class of 55 students, their two team-teachers and principal, three pre-service teachers, five older adult volunteers and the researcher-facilitator. The volunteers came from within the school community. Others who proved vital to the success of the program were the various school staff, as well as the project’s two principal investigators from Victoria University (who obtained funding for the project, oversaw its activities, and acted as facilitators when required).

The fieldwork researcher attended the school once a week in the combined role of research project officer and university liaison staff member, for the pre-service teachers’ practicum experience requirements. The curriculum activities conducted by the older volunteers (and overseen by the teachers) were gardening, games, dance, knitting, cooking, and information technology. During Term 2, the pre-service teachers and two team-teachers began to incorporate lifespan concepts into their curriculum planning and instruction, and they continued to do this in Term 3 during the morning sessions that they taught.

A reliance on ‘observational monitoring’ throughout stage two meant that the program was able to evolve, within the school’s culture and the confines of
a planned framework, into a sustainable model that allowed a teaching and learning fit with: (a) in-service teacher programs, and (b) existing undergraduate and post-graduate teacher education programs at Victoria University—thus creating a tripartite model involving school, university, and the school community (particularly its older population).

Further details of the model can be found in a recently published article by Feldman, Mahoney, and Seedsman (2002). By the end of stage two a project Website was established to assist with sustainability via broad dissemination of project information (www.lifespanpartnerships.com).

VIEWING A SCHOOL-BASED INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAM FROM WITHIN A CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

A robust case has been made for having school-based intergenerational programs (Friedman, 1997; Larkin & Newman, 1997; Seefeldt, 1987). In the last three decades, the number of educational intergenerational programs appearing in schools has steadily grown. There are many reasons for this occurrence, and while it is a positive development, it also warrants careful consideration if we are to nurture the growth of school-based intergenerational programs. Friedman (1997) argues that future planning for intergenerational programming must consider “the quality of programs that exist and the quality and depth of aging education that accompanies those programs” (pp. 104-105). In this situation, where an intergenerational program was being established, and lifespan curriculum related to ageing was being developed and taught by the classroom teachers, there were five elements we considered important to the enhancement and sustainability of the program. In what follows, each of the five elements is discussed with examples included from the experiences gained while establishing the multidimensional program. The five elements were: contextual monitoring, understanding and working with change in a school setting, lifespan education, changing demographics (including the fragmentation of families), and curriculum project funding. Pseudonyms have been used for the names of student participants.

Contextual Monitoring

There have been regular calls for intergenerational programs to be evaluated (Bocian & Newman, 1989; Ward, 1997). Whilst there are many voices in favour of evaluating intergenerational programs, the nature of how evaluations should proceed remains contested (Bengston, 1971; Kuehne & Collins, 1997; Ward, 1997). The views of Kushner (2000) and Kuehne and Collins (1997) on
evaluation broadly informed the approach taken in stage two of this project. In brief, Kushner argues that program evaluations should strongly acknowledge the experiences of participants and the contexts in which they operate. Historically, program evaluators have given too much attention to the interests and views “of those few for whom programs are useful instruments to advance their careers . . .” (Kushner, p. 10). As well, Kushner claims that “program evaluation voicing the concerns of individuals (and groups of individuals) can be an instrument for giving pause to policies that seek to apply universal treatments” (p. 11). Like Kushner, Kuehne and Collins emphasise the importance of contexts and participants. Kuehne and Collins suggest that an effective way of capturing both is through observational research. According to Kuehne and Collins (1997), observational research is “greatly underused as a method of studying and evaluating intergenerational programs and the relationships among the people within them. There exists a real need and opportunity in the field of intergenerational programming to enhance our understanding of intergenerational relationships and intergenerational program effectiveness” (p. 186).

There were two unique features of this project that meant Hobson’s Bay Primary was entering new curriculum terrain when it joined forces with Victoria University on this research project. First, the school had not conducted an intergenerational program of this type before. Second, the school had not been in a position to blend lifespan education across the curriculum at the same time as an intergenerational program was operating in their school. Hence, in the initial planning meetings between the principal, two team-teachers and the field researcher, apart from clarifying the goals of the project, there were numerous issues discussed concerning how to proceed. All agreed, that to a certain degree, we wanted the program to be allowed to evolve—meaning that we would put certain plans in place and monitor (or ‘observe’) the progress and subsequent needs which arose as time passed. The decision to allow the program to evolve was based on a premise that taking this stance would help with sustainability because activities would be allowed to be shaped by the participants (their expertise, time, enthusiasm, and commitment). Knowing that we were operating on a tight timeframe (12 months), and realising the extensive time some activities were expected to take, meant we needed someone to take a coordination role. It was thus agreed that the field researcher would coordinate an ongoing observational process guided by four activities.

The evaluative process comprised the following activities: first, once the pre-service teachers began teaching in Term 2, the researcher would visit the school weekly to assist with their practicum assignments related to both the development of the lifespan curriculum and an intergenerational program. At the same time, it was agreed the researcher would discuss with the classroom
teachers and principal any program matters that may have arisen during the
previous week. These meetings varied in length for some key program staff
members (which included the pre-service teachers) and all meetings had to oc-
cur during the lunch hour due to the typical time constraints found within
schools. Despite these time pressures, everyone participated.

Second, all participants involved agreed that they would stay in touch via
e-mail and that, when anyone had ideas or comments about the program, they
would convey them to the researcher. Comments and views were also can-
vassed from the older people, initially in planning meetings and then more reg-
ularly once they visited the school each Tuesday afternoon in Term 3. (They
were given the option of e-mail as well, but declined.)

Third, the Fieldwork Researcher took notes throughout stage two, drawing
upon observations, experiences and views of participants. Many times, the
classroom teachers diligently recorded student comments or incidents that had
occurred in relation to either the intergenerational program or aspects of life-
span education. These were either passed on to the researcher or raised in group
meetings. The following examples demonstrate how this feedback sometimes
provided evidence of ways in which the project was influencing the teaching
and learning within the class:

The teachers had included a book about an older person in their book
reading-listening time (approximately 15 minutes per day when the
teacher read a storybook to the class). This in turn lead to the inclusion of
spelling words being taken from the book and integrated into their Eng-
lish curriculum. As well, the students did artwork about older people
they knew. The teachers also noted that after the focus on lifespan issues
began, the children were looking for library books about older people.
This led to the purchase of new library books that reflected aspects of
ageing.

One of the teachers frequently observed from week to week the heightened
interest of students who “were so keen and looked forward to Tuesday after-
noons.” In addition, the teacher observed:

Our students have gained confidence in dealing with people of another
age group. Some of them haven’t worked with older people in these ways
before. It has shown the older volunteers in active and positive roles.

This form of feedback from the class teachers contributed to what Newman
(1997) called “synergies” between project participants. They often resulted in
new ideas being generated for inclusion in the lifespan education curriculum.
Coincidentally, the stage one survey instrument (Newman & Marks, 1997) it-
self acted as a stimulus for students and teachers to consider, reflect upon, and subsequently discuss issues and perspectives about older people and ageing. An example of this arose while the students were completing the pre-test when the word ‘dishonest’ caused many to ask what it meant. ‘Dishonest’ was one of the descriptors used on the bipolar semantic differential scale. The questionnaire had two of these scales—one for old people and another for young. Using one-way repeated measures Analysis of Variance, it was found that in the pre-test the students (N = 248) perceived older people as being more ‘honest’ than young people (F(1,201) = .068, p = .794). In relation to human virtues, it was also found in the pre-test findings that when the students (N = 248) assessed people on the continuum between ‘bad’ and ‘good’ this was the only item of the 11-point scale where students presented similar perception of older and younger people. However, the mean score attributed by children to older people (M = 4.35) was higher than the mean score attributed to younger people (M = 4.222) which indicates that children perceived older persons as slightly ‘better’ than younger persons. These findings presented rich material for the teachers to follow up in class discussions when they received the findings. All participating schools were sent the results of the study.

Finally, it was agreed that wherever possible, the principal and research officer would attend to the off-school-ground activities such as obtaining resources for activity sessions or visiting older people in the community during the recruitment stage. As it turned out (and this reflected the enthusiasm and commitment of the teachers involved) the two classroom teachers and the three pre-service teachers joined the principal and research officer in one visit to a local senior citizen club to solicit volunteers from the club membership.

Before any volunteers were sought, the planning group decided that the volunteers needed to be well-briefed about the initiative and engage fully in it—thus offering the volunteers a potentially empowering experience. (For a lengthy discussion of the importance of empowering older people in intergenerational programs see Cusack, 2000.) The following is an extract from the field researcher’s notes made at a planning meeting with the volunteers:

There was some hesitation evident with a couple of the volunteers early on. One mentioned concerns about student discipline. However, I assured them that there would be a teacher present at all times and that teachers were responsible for discipline. This is something that would have been covered more extensively in a training program—i.e., more than what our briefing included this time.

After much discussion, the volunteers settled on activities that they felt they would be comfortable conducting with the students.
About two-thirds of the way through Term 3 the two principal investigators interviewed the pre-service teachers from Victoria University. The pre-service teachers were asked for their suggestions in relation to how teacher education ought to prepare teachers to teach lifespan development curriculum: They both agreed more emphasis was needed on how to integrate lifespan concepts across the curriculum; and secondly, they wanted access to more resources to broaden their understanding in this area. These responses echoed comments they had made to their team-teacher colleagues and the field researcher during their time in the school, hence a form of triangulation. At the completion of this project, a booklet was prepared and placed under Resources on the project’s Website (www.lifespanpartnerships.com) to satisfy that request. (See Promoting Positive Ageing: A Flexible School-Based Lifespan Curriculum Model, “Promoting Lifespan Curriculum: Suggested Themes–Imaginative Ideas–Practical Implementations” pp. 7-23.) As well, arrangements were put in place for Victoria University’s School of Education to include this workshop material in four undergraduate teacher education subjects in 2002 and also to conduct in-service workshops for teachers associated with the existing School-Based Project Partnership Scheme in 2002.

At the end of Term 3, when the intergenerational program came to an end, all the participants and their invited guests celebrated the program and their achievements at a school function one Tuesday afternoon. The city’s mayor attended, as did the local member of Parliament, representatives from the university’s Partnership Scheme, funding agencies, and philanthropic associations. The speeches gave formal recognition to the efforts of all those involved and was reinforced by giving the volunteers, students, and teachers certificates to symbolise and acknowledge their contributions to the program. The researchers video-recorded the ceremonies and a number of interviews (of a range of participants, including some students and volunteers). The video-recording met four objectives related to program development and sustainability: to record the views of participants for evaluative purposes, to provide a record of the celebrations for the school (for newcomers when those involved with the program moved on), for use as a teaching tool at Victoria University, and to provide information for other schools or universities wishing to develop similar programs. Segments of the video were also placed on the project’s Website.

Understanding and Working with Change Within a School Setting

School principals and teachers are now subject to complex work demands and heightened work pressures, which renders precious the time available to take on new curriculum initiatives such as integrating lifespan education across the curriculum while operating an intergenerational program. Part of this com-
plexity comes from schools having to work with outside agencies—a growing trend in the past twenty years. However, it must still be remembered that this is a short period of time, historically speaking, and in that time the literature on curriculum change in schools has given growing recognition to the importance of understanding school culture (Lieberman, 1988; Louis, 1994). Over that same period of time, Australian public schools have become less centrally controlled (Blackmore, 1999), but whilst schools have greater autonomy in terms of their budgeting, management, and decision-making, they must still implement core elements of statewide curriculum. At the time that this project was undertaken, there was no requirement on Victorian schools to provide intergenerational programs for students, nor was there any core or statewide lifespan education curriculum. However, public schools are still required to address certain “key learning areas.” (These are found in the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority’s Curriculum and Standards Framework II, 2000.) Aspects of lifespan development are currently covered within the areas of ‘Health and Physical Education’ and ‘Studies of Society and Environment.’ It is the responsibility of each school to address these concepts in ways that are best suited to their school community.

It is a challenging task for teachers to integrate new concepts into their already ‘crowded curriculum.’ Thus, this project’s researchers acknowledged and were guided by three important principles in relation to the objectives of the project that involved demands on teachers’ time: First, the literature on failed curriculum initiatives is replete with stories of teachers being handed non-negotiable curriculum to implement (Leithwood, Menzies, & Jantzi, 1994; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993). Second, they endorsed Kushner’s (2000) view that universal school programs developed without reference to context or those who implement them are increasingly facing contested futures in schools.

Numerous comments the principal and staff made demonstrated their support for the curriculum initiative. As stage two was getting underway, the principal commented:

Because of the success of the project last year, I believe the initiative would help students establish cooperative relationships with older people. It would be nice to know we would develop a program here that promised to be exciting for the school and rewarding for the older people.

The two team-teachers who had been involved in stage one had, at its completion, continued to integrate ageing concepts across their curriculum areas. They said that the survey questionnaire “had given them some ideas.” They
also were open to the prospect of participating in stage two, as one of the teachers stated:

Our kids are still really keen about these issues and we are incorporating ageing issues into our curriculum.

And third, they were familiar with the differences in cultures between universities and primary schools and realised the potential for support amongst teachers could be jeopardised if this was not accommodated in their relations with the university. Grundy (2001) recently highlighted these differences and pointed out the increasing necessity for schools and universities to work at understanding those differences. There were various ways the researchers in this project endeavoured to ensure these differences did not impede success; they included knowing the school’s mission statement, working in with the teachers’ timetable (that is, being available when they said they could find time to meet), encouraging the principal’s and teachers’ creativity and ownership of their work–by default acknowledging their curriculum expertise, and including, where appropriate, the provision of information and support for the other colleagues in the school. Working in this collegial manner helped to avoid placing the principal or the researchers in a role of ‘telling the teachers what they would do.’

In an effort to ensure that, at least in part, the lifespan curriculum provided would be relevant and responsive to the school community, the involvement and support of the School Council and Hobson’s Bay City Council was sought and obtained. The School Council gave their approval to the project and were kept informed of progress throughout. A representative from the City Council was invited to an initial planning meeting to inform them about the project and to ask their advice about the most efficient way to locate volunteers within the community. By the end of Term 3, additional collaboration had taken place between the school, the City Council and two philanthropic organisations resulting in donations to the school toward an inclusive gardening curriculum in 2002 (involving older adult volunteers).

**Lifespan Education**

In keeping with a spirit of inclusion, intergenerational programs that incorporate lifespan perspectives have the potential to recognise the needs, interests, aspirations, circumstances, and contributions of individuals of all ages. In this respect, such programs can challenge ageist stereotyping, myths, and other forms of ignorance, which serve to limit and marginalise particular members of society. Universities are in an ideal position to provide undergraduate and
post-graduate courses for education professionals, enabling them to become more knowledgeable in the field of lifespan development. Such learning, as Seedsman (2001) claims, challenges ageism: “The importance of having an accurate and contemporary knowledge of ageing cannot be overstated. The graduate who lacks such knowledge is more than likely to perpetuate stereotypical attitudes and beliefs” (p. 20). Putting stage two of this project into context, it was undertaken at a time when many Australian universities were reviewing the ways in which they worked with schools (Grundy, 2001). In broad terms, there was growing support for academics and teachers to work on a more equitable and collegial basis.

As stated earlier, schools in Victoria have much more autonomy than they did a few decades ago. The Grade 2-3-4 team teachers in this project were adept at incorporating concepts across the key learning areas at the same time as ensuring their students’ needs were met. Thus, they collaborated with the three pre-service teachers to ensure the curriculum in the intervening week (between the intergenerational activity lessons) related to the experiences of the students in those Tuesday afternoon sessions. An example of concepts raised in the sessions is demonstrated by Pauline’s comment [one of the team teachers]:

The Tuesday afternoon sessions also extended students’ understanding of a different time of life—the child’s perspective about now versus the child thinking about when the older person was young. The children were fascinated by how things used to be and it opened up discussion in a lot of curriculum areas.

Two other examples demonstrate the rich examples gained from the intergenerational program. One of the volunteers decided to teach the students how to create equipment for games out of odds and ends around the home. He explained:

I lived through the Depression when we had to make our own equipment—if we wanted to play a game that used equipment we had to make our own. We used anything we could, like we played konkers with chestnuts. I could show them how to make a kite that won’t cost anything.

Miguel’s comments to the volunteer in the first knitting class demonstrated the importance of addressing gender issues within the lifespan curriculum:

Ricky and I were called sissies because we wanted to be in the knitting group. They [the other students] said ‘boys don’t knit.’ But I wanted to learn how to knit a football scarf. When I told my mum I wanted to learn to knit and that men were the first knitters because they did it while they
watched their sheep, she told me about my aunty [in another country]. She had taught herself to knit when she used to mind their flocks of sheep, and so she missed school, and she got put in jail. My mum said knitting was good.

The need to ensure gender issues were addressed in the lifespan curriculum was also evident from the findings in the stage one pre-test (N = 248) where a Kruskall-Wallis test used in the analysis of Question 2, “How do you think it feels to be an older person?,” revealed a significant gender-based difference (Chi-square (1) = 5.36, p = .021) with girls reporting more positive thoughts about becoming an older person than boys.

A main event for the Grade 2-3-4 class throughout Term 3 was reflecting on the Tuesday afternoon session the following morning. Every Wednesday morning the class shared their experiences with one another in a class discussion and then produced artwork depicting their thoughts and feelings. These were pasted into a large spiral folio book. The book was made available to the volunteers each week in the staffroom, providing them with some feedback. By the end of Term 3 a project Website (www.lifespanpartnerships.com) had been set up and pictures from the workbook were placed on the site, while the book remained with the class.

This activity appeared to have positive benefits for all participants. While there were no questionnaires to ask participants to comment on the perceived benefits of the intergenerational program, the teachers felt very strongly that the program had positive benefits in all aspects (social, intellectual, emotional, and physical) of the students’ lives. In addition, there was considerable agreement amongst students that the classroom and afternoon programs had been very enjoyable. Sally’s [a student] comments at the end of the final afternoon typified those of most students when she said:

It was wonderful. I really enjoyed it. We did lots of different things. We learnt a lot. Their [volunteers] stories were interesting. I want to do it again because I want to do all the other groups.

There were positive lifespan education benefits for the adult participants (teachers, volunteers and researchers) too. Working with others, who in combination covered the lifespan range, inspired much reflection for all adult participants about their own ageing selves, in particular, seeing themselves on a continuum and asking themselves questions in relation to past, present, and future. Also, the teachers commented that they had become more ageism-conscious. The volunteers all expressed an interest in participating again if the program operated in 2002. In the past, it would have been relatively easy for
school communities to involve multiple generations within a family in curriculum programs. However, over the past twenty-five years the changing nature of work, as a result of the new global economy, has meant this is no longer a guarantee. The changing demographics within school communities have become an important consideration for curriculum planning.

Changing Demographics

With the changing nature of work over the past few decades, many people find themselves moving to live where they can obtain employment. This often leads to fragmentation of families and, in particular, extended families. Intergenerational programs that draw on older volunteers can provide students with additional social learning opportunities and connections. In turn, such relationships can prove highly purposeful and satisfying for the older persons involved. Given the increasing numbers of older people within our industrialised world, it is highly probable that opportunities for older people to be involved in school curriculum activities will continue to expand.

Most teachers know the demographics of their student population; it helps to better inform the relationship between student and school. In the instance of the population where this project took place, the following demographic details prevailed: Most Hobson’s Bay citizens live in freestanding houses, with around 70% of the residents purchasing or owning their own home; forty-two percent of the households in Hobson’s Bay are made up of two-parent families with another 42% comprised of lone person households and couples without children; and unemployment is above the national average (Hobson’s Bay City Council, 2001).

The team-teachers in this program mentioned at one of the meetings that they believed the increasing number of housing developments in the area were the cause of what they perceived to be a change in the demographic profile of their school population. They related this information to their curriculum activities in the lifespan development area using one example in particular:

Each year they were noticing dwindling numbers of students in their class who had parents or grandparents that had lived in Hobson’s Bay when they were younger. This meant a shift for the teachers in how they related studies about the history of the area—from having older relatives (of students) tell stories to the class about their community—to having an older person (unrelated) tell stories about their community.

The stage one questionnaire drew the attention of the class teachers to the fact that there appeared to be an increasing number of their students having less contact with grandparents or older people. This was a factor in the teachers
deciding that it would be best if the students spent each Tuesday afternoon working in the same activity group. It was hoped that this would allow for a positive relationship between an older person and student to develop. When community demographics change in ways that bring about less communication and cooperation between its residents, effort is required to prevent or remedy negative social changes. Inevitably, financial considerations play a key role in this process. What follows is a description of how the partnership between Hobson’s Bay Primary School and Victoria University played an important role in demonstrating a positive way of accessing funds to proactively enhance intergenerational communication.

**Curriculum Program Funding**

Since the 1970s, school personnel and programs have faced increased accountability demands from funding agencies and employing authorities (Hansberry & Green, 2001). As well, funding constraints have often limited the extent to which resources can be channelled toward new areas of learning such as intergenerational programs or lifespan development curriculum. Nonetheless, although funding shortfalls can inhibit the development of new curriculum, some schools offset this factor by conducting evaluations of their teaching and learning. In this sense, the trend in favour of conducting program evaluations can have the twofold effect of discovering teaching and learning trends and can result in a better use of resources and more relevant and meaningful curriculum.

With an increasing emphasis on intersectoral collaboration amongst government and non-government bodies, the number of funding sources that schools are able to access has also increased. However, finding the time to do this remains a problem for principals and teachers. When discussing the issue of program funding with the researcher, Kerry [one of the team teachers] commented:

> Victoria University has been very supportive of us. We’re very busy in schools these days. A lot of the things we talk about amongst ourselves [school colleagues] just don’t end up occurring because the time element is against us. [The researcher] has been able to access a lot of resources on our behalf and keep the momentum happening.

When she was asked if she thought programs like the Hobson’s Bay one needed a person such as the fieldwork researcher (who helped facilitate the program’s requirements) to be established, or indeed to be sustainable, she replied that she felt it would be important “to have a coordinator on staff” [if the program was not part of a research project]. The proceeding discussion highlights the complex challenges that engaged the collective attention of the re-
spective players in the Victoria University-Hobson’s Bay Primary School partnership project.

**DISCUSSION**

Having infrastructures in place throughout this project, plus at the same time remaining flexible and open to situations and circumstances allowed the program to evolve into the success that it was. A recently completed study in the United States found that when major policy changes were thrust upon schools, there were five important areas, that if taken care of, would add to the support and sustainability of those changes. The five areas were: school structures, teacher culture, professional learning, professional discretion, and school leadership (Hargreaves, Earl, Moore, & Manning, 2001, p. 115). While this project may not have been on the same scale of policy change as, for example, one imposed by an Education Department for all schools to adopt, there are parallels that can be drawn. Overlaying these five areas with the five elements considered crucial to this project’s success (contextual monitoring, understanding change within a school setting, lifespan education, changing demographics, and curriculum program funding), the similarities between the two are apparent.

From a distillation of participants’ observations and comments, there were several elements which contributed to the success of the program. First, the initiative and those involved with it received clear and continuing support from the school principal. Second, staff, and in particular the teachers most closely involved with the intergenerational program, were strongly supportive. Third, the class teachers were highly expert and motivated by the prospect of providing their students with new and worthwhile learning experiences. The quality of the lifespan learning experiences they provided in classes captured a high degree of student interest and participation. Fourth, extra resources were provided to assist with the venture and included the liaison role played by the field researcher, funds for excursions, and children’s literature. Fifth, the older volunteers were very effective in communicating with students and provided meaningful, engaging learning opportunities. And sixth, the school and non-school personnel collaborated extremely well throughout the planning, development, implementation, and monitoring stages of the project.

Despite the clear student benefits and high satisfaction expressed by the principal and teachers toward this initiative, several contextual issues emerged which require consideration—particularly in relation to sustainability. These issues, in part, may point to why some schools do not, or are slow to, develop intergenerational programs. First, the issue of time—for principals and teachers
most particularly—is problematic so far as getting new programs introduced in schools. This organisational issue is, of course, faced by all new curriculum initiatives. Second, in many schools the curriculum is ‘overcrowded,’ and competition amidst prospective programs to gain a foothold into timetables is often fierce. Third, if teachers have taken part in related professional development, pre- or post-graduate study, they are more likely to be open to new teaching and learning areas. And finally, it could be argued that if a new curriculum area receives the imprimatur of central authorities, it is more likely to be accepted in schools. Yet, at this stage, few state departments of education have identified intergenerational programs, augmented with lifespan education, as being sufficiently vital to warrant being a part of school curriculum. This situation may change ultimately because, for example, on many fronts, there are increasing calls for making society more cohesive and inclusive (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1999; Parliament of Victoria, 1997).

As we know from the current world stage, where citizens do not have any understanding of, or perceive they have nothing in common with another citizenry, alienation and mistrust abound. Having older persons’ skills, understandings, and experiences regularly shared or exchanged with school students will likely add to trust and mutuality within society. And, importantly, any learning from or teaching about older persons should not romanticise or downplay some of the challenges associated with ageing. Such a stance could deny students opportunities to learn about, for example, adaptability, resilience, and optimism. These are potentially vital attributes for students to acquire, and one way of fostering their development is through drawing on the lived experiences, contributions, and stories of older persons.

Favourable as the experiences appeared to be for participants, the impact of the program should not be overestimated. The program was in its infancy and the monitoring process was conducted over a timeframe of just over three school terms. Rather, it ought to be considered as a starting point in terms of one school’s efforts at introducing curriculum change.

CONCLUSIONS

Schools and society stand to benefit from intergenerational programs if they provide meaningful learning opportunities which recognise rather than stymie the potential of individuals. Intergenerational programs, such as that at Hobson’s Bay Primary, cast human diversity and differences in a favourable light by affirming disparate life experiences. In that way they challenge stereotypes which can limit what we understand of individuals and how they live.
As schools are increasingly involved in providing intergenerational curriculum in partnership with universities and other organisations, it is important that non-school personnel work equitably and collaboratively in concert with teachers and principals so as to improve teaching and learning experiences of all. The demands on school personnel are considerable and their time is now at a premium, which is all the more reason for curriculum initiatives to be carefully considered and sensitively executed–taking account of the contexts and culture in schools.

If intergenerational programming is to be truly supportive of educational reform then due recognition must be given to Friedman’s (1997) call for creative integration of “aging education into already existing curricula and age-appropriate skill developments” (p.103).

REFERENCES


Seefeldt, C., Iantz, R., Serock, K., & Galper, A. (1987, August). *Children’s attitudes toward the elderly: A study of curriculum implementation*. Extract from Final Re-
port presented to the American Association of Retired Persons and the National Retired Teachers Association.


Received: 02/27/02
Reviewed: 05/01/02
Revised: 07/07/02
Accepted: 12/16/02