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## WORKSHOPS

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### Farm Friends: Exploring Intergenerational Environmental Learning

Linda Peterat  
Jolie Mayer-Smith

**ABSTRACT.** Intergenerational programs have proliferated in community and educational settings, yet research on their effects and impacts lags (Kaplan, 2002; Kuehne, 1998/99), and the benefits and learning that occur for participants are under-theorized (Abrams and Giles, 1999; Smith and Yeager, 1999). Similarly, insufficient research has been reported on the learning that takes place in environmental education programs. In this paper we focus on the relationship that developed between community elders and elementary school-aged children during the first year of an intergenerational environmental education project. Our goal is to better understand these experiences so we can sustain participation and develop programs rich in rewards for elders and children. We are particularly interested in the nature of intergenerational learning that occurs when children are brought together with community elders for environmental education that is integrated into a school program. Granville and Ellis (1999) propose that for a program to be de-

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Linda Peterat and Jolie Mayer-Smith are affiliated with the University of British Columbia.

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defined as intergenerational, it must show a benefit and value for both generations and “demonstrate an improvement in the quality of life for both, and from that, an improvement in the quality of life for all” (p. 236). We concur with these criteria and designed a program linking community elders with farming backgrounds with one class of 18 grade-seven girls for the purpose of fostering environmental consciousness. In this paper we focus our attention on the learnings of participants in order to understand the *mutual* learning that occurs in an intergenerational environmental program. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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### ***PROGRAM DESIGN AND RESEARCH METHODS***

We began our program in 2002 with a design informed by McNamee's (1997) argument that ecological caring develops gradually over time through caring interpersonal relationships in families. We sought to replicate these relationships in the intergenerational partnering of community elders with farming backgrounds and children. The farm is a space where caring communities can flourish across generations and provides opportunities for tangible hands-on participation with the land, essential for developing environmental consciousness (Morris, 2002).

The project was located at an urban farm that retains a student-operated market garden and a few sheep and chickens in a vast pastoral setting on the margins of the University of British Columbia campus, in Vancouver, Canada. Our participating school was a private girls' school located a 20-minute bus ride away where the science teacher, a recent graduate student with whom we worked, was eager to involve one grade-seven science class and attempt to integrate learning of environmental issues into science, social studies and information technology classes. Our goal was to create a space where intergenerational conversations about land, food, community, society, and environmental issues would begin and be sustained in the hope of re-establishing 'biophilic sensibilities'—the primal and innate dimension of humanity that moves us to connect with nature and all its life forms (Cajete, 1999). We identified seven community adults, mostly retired farmers, who volunteered

to be 'farm friends' with the grade seven girls and were willing to work with groups of three girls in growing fruits, vegetables and flowers. From January to June 2003, farm friend teams met on three occasions at the school and 11 times at the farm to talk about farming practices, build cold-frames, plant and transplant seedlings, maintain their beds, and harvest their crops. The girls arrived by school bus and the farm friends cycled or drove, some traveling relatively great distances to work with the students.

The first year in this project, we intentionally provided few directives for the community farmers. We believed it was important that the students have unstructured time to explore, discover, and wonder about the farm environment and that the farm friends be able to create the roles they desired and were comfortable with, influenced by few directives from us. This allowed leadership to emerge from the farm friends.

Qualitative methodologies were used to study the project. The research team documented events using video, photographs and field notes. Interviews were conducted with the students and teachers at the beginning, middle and end of the project year. An interview was conducted with each farm friend near the beginning of the project and a focus group was held at the end. Student assignments and journals kept throughout also constituted data.

The data we focus on in this article come from student and farm friend interviews, a focus group with the farm friends, and video footage of interactions in the farm friend groups throughout the project. The elders' interview and focus group data were analyzed for the range of rewards reported by the farm friends and the frequency with which similar rewards were mentioned. Video data were analyzed for communicative events and specific discourse that substantiated the views expressed in the students' and farm friends' interviews.

### ***UNDERSTANDING INTERGENERATIONAL EXCHANGE AND LEARNING ON THE FARM***

Farm friends were volunteers, specifically invited to participate in an environmental education project on a farm, thus they interpreted their role according to their interests in agriculture and the environment, and their desires to pass these on to the children. Each worked on relationship building with their group, and over time bonding and powerful learning was evidenced in the images and words of all participants. In

seeking to understand intergenerational learning we considered a range of theories. A number of these are discussed in what follows.

### ***FARM FRIEND GRANDPARENTING***

Initially we drew from research on grandparenting to analyze the farm friends' experiences, believing that their roles as farm friends would be most like their grandparenting. Among the seven farm friends, four were grandparents, two were parents and recent 'empty nesters,' and one was recently a new parent. Noller, Feeney, and Peterson (2001) describe a typology of grandparenting developed by Neugarten and Weinstein (1964) that differentiates four types of grandparents according to the roles they fulfill: a *formal* type that perceives their role in providing special treats for grandchildren; a *fun-seeker* type that enjoys fun and interactions with the grandchildren; a *distant figure* whose contact is primarily during holidays and family rituals; and the *reservoir of family wisdom* who provides advice when needed and was constituted mainly by grandfathers who perceive an authoritative role for themselves. Three of the four types of grandparents were consistent with the types of roles the farm friends enacted. The distant figure role was not apparent.

Peterson (in Noller, Feeney and Peterson, 2001) categorized what 146 Australian grandparents reported as the 'best thing' about grandparenting. Five of these rewards: teaching or conveying knowledge and experience; usefulness; pleasure in activity and companionship; watching them relate; and pride are similar to those reported among our farm friends. But five additional rewards were espoused by the farm elders in our project: learning from the children; pleasure in anticipation; part of something beyond self; remembering and thinking back on life; and promise of the future. These elements identified by the elders speak to the reciprocal learning that was taking place.

### ***CROSS-GENERATIONAL SOCIAL LEARNING***

As we watched and studied our adults and girls working together we saw clear evidence of powerful mutual learning taking place, with children learning from the elders and the elders learning from the children. We believe this cross-generational social learning is a separate dimension that warrants a theoretical framing that goes beyond grandparenting the-

ories. The children in our project spoke about how they valued learning about farming and how to grow food crops by hearing stories from their elder friends. One child referred to conversations with her farm friend as learning from “a primary source.”

The intergenerational exchanges contributed to the girls’ learning about farms and farming, learning about self, and learning about working with others. One student described how she changed her beliefs about farmers through contact with her farm friend. She was surprised to learn that her farm friend knew a lot about “the science of farming” as well as how to do it. She also realized because three of the farm friends were women that not all farmers were men. “In books or movies they are always male and in overalls and straw hats and that kind of stuff.” Another student reflected on learning about others and interdependence with others and the environment:

Through planting you learn lots of lessons [of] life. You learn that you have to be cooperative with other people in order to get things that you want. In order to grow a plant you have to work with others. . . . It teaches you about the environment and how it interacts with things around it. Like how the insect interacts with the plant and how the plant interacts with us and how we really depend on each other.

The reciprocal learning of the elder participants included learning about the children, who one elder saw as much younger and of a different racial and cultural background than himself. He saw “an opportunity to learn a little bit about the different group of people who may see the world a little differently than I do.” Another elder commented that the intergenerational experience caused him to reflect back on his own life and wonder what it was like to be the age of the children with whom he was working. He found it, “Stimulating . . . re-visiting old stuff.” The elders formed supportive friendships and delighted in learning about and from each other. They also enjoyed keeping in touch and learning about schools, science and environmental education.

The farm elders also found rewards in sharing their knowledge and experience with the children. One stated: “If I can help those girls to understand farming, I will be satisfied.” They also felt enriched by their companionship with the children: “I get a lot of satisfaction out of working with kids.” Many were inspired because they were making a difference in the children’s lives. One described her relationship with the children as, “A small group . . . I was in contact with . . . who will have a

better idea of the problems of the people who are growing our food.” Seeing change in the young people added to the elders’ realization of their contribution. As one farmer stated: “It is very gratifying to see these children, even in the short time you work with them, you see them grow—not in size or stature—you see them with a little more strength in knowledge as you progress.”

Some elders felt the experience kept them in touch and made them feel a part of something larger. The work with the children was “something to look forward to,” and an experience that, “puts you back in . . . touch.” A number of the farm elders were particularly moved by the unique and rewarding relationships they formed with the young people. One farmer described this as “a really nice relationship. It’s a step removed from being a grandmother . . . it’s nice to be part of some kind of a contact with another generation. . . . It’s not like where you are with a grandmother and there is a kind of expected love, behaviour, attachment.” The experience for the elders also provided hope and pride. They took pride in the bright, energetic, and enthusiastic students. Others recognized they might influence the children’s future and found hope in imagining the promising futures ahead for the children. These benefits of self-worth, satisfaction and enjoyment acknowledged by the farm friends correspond with significant personal gains reported by older people acting as mentors for primary and secondary students (Granville and Ellis, 1999).

### *ENVIRONMENT AS A TEACHER*

A third dimension of intergenerational exchange that appeared as a powerful force in the learning between the generations was the environment itself. The plots of land the farm friends shared and worked became the source of lessons about the earth and thus the environment served as a teacher (Cajete, 1999; Jardine, 2000; Riley-Taylor, 2002). That is, in this context the natural outdoor setting of the farm became an important teacher for both the children and elders involved. Riley-Taylor (2002) quotes Orr (1994) in recognizing that the out-of-doors and nature teaches, as they surround us with sensual experience and “the pace of life and learning slows, allowing a sort of mindfulness to ensue and to be cultivated, a space conducive for a deeper kind of knowing to occur” (Orr in Riley-Taylor, 2002, p. 140). One farm friend, reflecting on the project, alluded to the idea of learning from the land. She encouraged:

I don't think we should sacrifice any of the value of the spontaneity and the experiential part of it because I think that's what reaches the girls on a really deep level. 'Gee this was fun and we worked with these people' [they might say]. They probably couldn't even express what they got out of it, but I think that kind of experience of working with somebody in the outdoors like that goes through at a deeper level.

We are beginning to explore this dimension and as our program continues to unfold we intend to probe the learning that occurs for the farm friends and children as they learn in, from, and through the land: the extent and ways in which they let the land teach. Our initial understanding of learning from the land through theories of embodied learning remind us that learning occurs through all our bodily senses and a blurring of the senses occurs through synaesthesia, when we, for example, taste the rain or smell the golden blossoms (Pajaczkowska, 2001). These can be bolstered with attention to phenomenological and aesthetic accounts of environmental experience (for example, Caldicott, 1998 and Gelter, 2000) and indigenous education approaches (Cajete, 1999).

How teaching and learning about the land-food-environment relationships ought to occur remains a challenge. We suggest that conceptualizing learning and teaching in new ways is an important place to begin. Jardine (2000) proposes that pedagogy and ecology are inherently intergenerational. He writes: "Ecological awareness always and already involves the presence of our children. Ecology thus always already involves images of pedagogy and the teaching and learning of the tales that need to be told for all of us to live well" (Friesen, Clifford and Jardine in Jardine, 2000, p. 10). Our experience with intergenerational partnering and the evidence of learning that occurs within these groups of children and community farmers convinces us of the value of intergenerational environmental learning. However, if we are to realize the potential that Jardine suggests, it is necessary to construct experiences across the generations that create consciousness of the generations' inherent mutual concerns. We need to let learning occur in community and natural settings, and provide experiences that involve more storytelling, attunement and attentiveness to the environment, listening, and observing. These environmental ways of learning which seem counter to the boisterous hyperactivity that appears natural when young children are placed in vast, outdoor spaces need to be cultivated and honored.

**CONCEPTUALIZING INTERGENERATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL LEARNING**

Dillon, Rickinson, Sanders, Teamey and Benefield (2003) examined what is known about young people's views toward and learning about food, farming and land management. In their survey of 190 studies published internationally in English between 1960-2002, they found few studies that were framed in terms of learning theories. Our preliminary review of research on intergenerational projects has also found limited attention to what is known about learning. In our initial conceptualization of this project we relied on situated learning theory advanced by Lave and Wenger (1991) and furthered by Wenger (1998). This theory is useful in conceptualizing and understanding the whole project because it emphasizes learning that occurs in apprentice-type relationships, in social-community settings where individuals work together on a task in which individual actions have real consequence.

This inquiry into intergenerational environmental learning also illustrates that uniting the generations for the environment has numerous benefits for community elders, school children, and teachers. As we have planned and carried out successive years of this project, we have continued to develop and refine the intergenerational model that partners small groups of children with one or two community farm elders on approximately 12 occasions for growing food crops. We have attempted to foster community building among the generations. We have provided time for the elders to get to know each other and learn from each other. Each year the children have interviewed the farm friends about their farming pasts. They have kept either individual or group journals that document their learning and experiences. They have represented their learnings to the farm friends through multimedia and other types of presentations. The elders have discussed issues of sustainable food production with the children and each other and some have presented short lessons to the children, drawing on their lifelong experiences and present-day passions in growing plants. The year-end harvest and celebration are special components of the project for all.

This research contributes to the argument that intergenerational projects can result in improved physical and mental well-being through life-long learning and meaningful engagement in quintessential intergenerational concerns such as the environment. We have been struck by the enthusiasm the children develop for the farm and the care they display for their farm friends. We have been equally touched by the passion of the farm friends for the project. Some have now been part of the

project in all three years it has operated, some assist in all components of the now-expanded project, and many take special initiatives to enrich and sustain it. The laughter, hugs, tensions, joy, disappointment, delighted sparkle of the eyes are not captured in this account. They are, however, always present in the intergenerational experience and they are the energizing and inspirational moments that sustain us all.

Managing intergenerational projects and understanding the learning that occurs within them are complex undertakings. We support Waddock and Freedman (1998/99) who proclaim that “schools should play a leadership role in bringing together generations for mutual benefit, one that might radiate outward to other aspects of the community and to other settings in society” (p. 1). We have also found that our elders are an incredibly valuable resource willing to take leadership and give generously in intergenerational environmental learning.

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