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# Gerontology Theory Communicated in the Primary Grades through Picture Books

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## Case Study

### Gerontology Theory Communicated in the Primary Grades through Picture Books

by Edward F. Ansello, PhD

#### Educational Objectives

1. To recognize children's first literature as a means of socialization to aging and older people.
2. To identify children's books that reflect basic principles of gerontology theory.
3. To help primary school teachers, grandparents, and others interested in human development use books and activities to capture children's attention.
4. To identify a unit of six brief, overlapping modules, each with objectives, activities, and recommended readings.

#### Background

After publishing an analysis of children's first literature in *Childhood Education* in 1978, I continued to read and to identify books that seemed consistent with the emerg-

ing gerontological literature on human development across the life span. This piece represents the continuing organization of more than 30 years of school visits, readings, and experiments on this subject with elementary school children. Of necessity, it deviates from the format of past *Age in Action* case studies; think of each module as a "Case."

#### Introduction

Gerontological theories attempt to describe, explain or understand experiences of human aging, from physiological patterns to personal meanings. These theories, broadly defined, may be communicated to children during their formative primary grade years. These theories, at their base, attempt to capture the essence of human aging, namely, that there are commonalities in growing older, but that later life is experienced in different ways and that personal choices influence trajectories. These values reflect, among other things, the diversity of later life populations, the thrust toward individuation in human development, and the lifelong opportunity for continued growth.

Children's earliest literature is, in fact, a socializing medium regarding aging. These books remain highly regarded and much employed, despite the intrusion of electronic media into children's lives. Children's books seem more bright, varied, and sophisticated than their counterparts of 30 years ago. Illustrations are sometimes astonishingly impressive, with vibrant water-colored landscapes and figures that contrast sharply with yesterday's simpler line drawings. Content is also more varied. For example, now, as before, stories with an ethnic lineage often contain older characters, but today's settings may be Moroccan, Japanese, Indo-Pakistani or another more exotic locale. Story lines now address an array of issues, from alternative lifestyles to dementia to slavery.

Children's earliest books remain an important socializing medium to the concept and experience of aging. While there is enduring interest in the history and currency of stereotypes limiting adult development and how these are overcome, e.g., Henneberg (2010), children's first literature may possess

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the potential to shape the experience of growing older before it is lived. This body of literature warrants consideration, for often it contains, amidst beautiful artistry and illustrations, the boiled down or most basic assumptions of our society about various matters, reduced to pictures and simple words. We may see in children's first literature a distillation of values regarding aging and older people (Ansello, 1976; 1977; 1978; Seefeldt et al, 1977; Vasil & Wass, 1993).

### **Background: We Are Individuals, Even More So with Age**

Growing older brings the process of "individuation"; that is, we grow less and less like our peers and more and more like only ourselves with advancing age (Ansello, 2011; Berkman & Glymour, 2005; Quinn, 1987). The whole thrust of human development seems to be toward this process of differentiation, becoming uniquely ourselves.

Aging, therefore, brings with it individuality, as well as greater numbers of opportunities for personal experiences, travel, developing friendships and exchanges. It is a time of gains and losses, advances and declines. These happen within the same person, and to different rates and degrees when comparing older adults. Aging is anything but uniform or stereotypic. Children deserve to be exposed to this multi-dimensional mix so that their expectations of others and for their own aging are not narrow or constrained. Some efforts to portray only positive aspects of aging. e.g., Cohen (2004), miss this opportunity and effectively deny the full range of the processes of individuation in

human aging.

Learning about aging means going beyond older relatives like grandparents and great grandparents. Primary grade children have precious little interaction with unrelated older adults, for reasons that include parental admonitions about talking to strangers; these children may even consider interactions with grandparents as "family" experiences rather than as experiences with older people. Years ago our research team found that many of the primary grade children we interviewed who had regular contact with their grandparents or great grandparents said that they knew no older people (Seefeldt, Jantz, Galper & Serock, 1977). For these and perhaps most children of this age the various media, from television to children's first literature, play an important socializing role. They learn from these images what growing older "means." So, an intentional unit such as the following should include a wide range of depictions and categories of aging and older people.

This unit's themes and suggested picture books can readily be applied in the primary grades (K-2), while using more sophisticated books consistent with the objectives within each module would achieve the intended effects with the early elementary grades, that is, third and fourth grades.

Most of the children's books referenced are meant to be read to children, notwithstanding precocious young readers. Additionally, some of these books have controlled vocabularies that young readers can negotiate. Library classification is

not uniform, but typically library systems classify these books as JP (Juvenile Picture) or E (Easy). The books recommended in this unit are currently in active circulation in typical city and county library systems. Simply put, most library systems cannot afford to stock the newest books, so what is available for library loan tends to be books that are several to many years old. These books are also a mix of humorous, fantastical, realistic, and serious stories, and are, of course, illustrated in ways that attract the children's attention.

### **Overall Objectives: Growing Older Is A Gift. How Do We Learn to Use It?**

Children are already in the process of forming aging-related attitudes that are predisposing them to behaviors, whether or not they have actual experiences with older people. The research literature has long reported numerous examples of negative stereotyping about aging and older persons, as well as findings of ambivalent to negative attitudes held by young children, e.g., Ansello, 1977; Couper, Donorfio & Goyer, 1995; Horner, 1982; Seefeldt et al., 1977.

This unit does not attempt to replace negative stereotypes and attitudes with positive stereotypes and attitudes. Stereotyping is stereotyping. Rather, it seeks to expose children to a fuller range of the aging experience and the tremendous variety of lives lived among older persons. In this way, it is hoped that children will see growing older as another broad period of potential growth and change.

The six modules within this unit are intended to address children's: 1) Understanding of the processes of growing older; 2) Assignment of behaviors to people who grow old; and 3) Affective feelings toward elders and their own aging.

### **Methods: Keep It Short and Interesting**

Each module involves discussion, questions of the children, reading a related book or two, and, sometimes, use of supplementary materials. Modules typically are 20-30 minutes each and are deliberately somewhat overlapping.

Each of the six, inter-related modules contains assumptions, objectives, and suggested activities, including use of relevant children's books. (A fuller list of relevant titles, each annotated according to which of the six modules it relates, is available by request. This Recommended Sampling is not casually derived but, rather, reflects ongoing, periodic editing, adding and deleting titles to keep the number manageable.)

### **Values: Four Basic Keys in Depicting Aging**

This unit employs books that advance four basic values in the depiction of aging: *diversity, individuation, story relevance, and interest*. Because diversity within a group increases with age, that is, "within group variance" grows larger, older characters are portrayed in **diverse** roles and behaviors, with diverse ethnic, racial, and other characteristics; they may be active, passive, good, bad, strong or weak, humorous or serious. They are por-

trayed as **individuals**, not as stereotypical representations of a group. They are **relevant** to the story line, rather than being gratuitously drawn into the background visually or behaviorally. Finally, their character is of **interest** to the reader or listener; a number of these books engage the children's interest through humor or highly creative story lines. If the older character is not relevant to the central story and if the children's interest is not captured, it is difficult to realize the values that older adults are heterogeneous or diverse and are individuals who are still developing.

### **The Six Modules**

#### **Module One: The Gift of Time**

##### Assumptions:

Children's misperceptions about aging are legendary but are quite often exaggerated. Children in grades K-2 do tend to have an ordered sense of age progression, even if the number of years of age that they assign to those older is incorrect. Children in these grades are open to learning what these extra years can provide and, in important ways, are less constrictive than older children and adults in their opinions of what old age is and what it means. This module attempts to foster in the children a sense of wonder regarding the extended life course; an appreciation of the multi-generational connections long life sets in play, and openness to the possibilities that a long life might allow.

##### Objectives:

1) To communicate accurate infor-

mation about the length of human life and to compare human and non-human life spans  
2) To explore the benefits of longevity, the positive correlation between time lived and experiences

##### Activities:

- 1) Use tape measure to indicate visually years of life of different generations: the children, their parents, their grandparents, etc.; stretched out to the ceiling or across the room, the tape is a graphic representation of added years and provides a "concrete" display of increasing numbers of years.
- 2) Discuss how long humans and creatures typically live, i.e., life span concept [*How Old is Old*, Leonore Klein; discusses the varying life expectancies of animals; *Grandma Elephant's in Charge*, Martin Jenkins; describes the leadership responsibilities gained from living longest.]
- 3) Draw four bar graphs or stack four columns of blocks to show the children in the class concretely how many of them have living grandfathers, grandmothers, great-grandfathers, and great-grandmothers.
- 4) Discuss relationship between extra time and extra opportunities, as when there is more time to draw, to play, to learn, to meet people or travel places; introduce "*if you're lucky, you get to be old*" which will be developed more fully later.

#### **Module Two: Same and Different**

##### Assumptions:

The process of aging produces individuals, each with a distinct history and personality, contrary to the social shortcut of grouping older

people together and assuming that they are alike in their characteristics and needs. At the same time, the processes of growing older tend to bring common developmental tasks that have remained relatively constant for generations. So, children yesterday and today have had to discover themselves and develop relationships, while older adults have had and continue to have developmental tasks like dealing with work and non-work, and changes in relationships, physical appearance and capacities. Thus, today's children and today's elders continue to develop, with the elders having the advantage of having accomplished many of the same challenges that the children are now encountering, even if the "trappings" of the challenges have changed.

#### Objectives:

- 1) To demonstrate the concept of the life course, that one grows from being young to being old as a natural progression, noting especially the parallel development of those who are now old to those who are now young (the children)
- 2) To introduce the concept of diversity of lives among those now older, underscoring how different and individual older people can be, rather than how they can be stereotyped

#### Activities:

- 1) Discuss the childhood of grandparents or of other older people, what they did as children, how these activities are similar to and different from the children's [*My Very Special Friend*, Lucille Hein; about a great-grandmother's relat-

ing things she loved to do as a child; *The Storytellers*, Ted Lewin; grandchild is apprenticing with his grandfather in contemporary Morocco to continue the ancient tradition of public storyteller; *I Go with My Family to Grandma's*, Riki Levinson, multi-generational family get-togethers in early 1900s.]

- 2) Explore with the children how some things do not change, how certain activities or relationships seem always to remain important or enjoyable to children, even in different periods of history [*Our Old House*, Susan Vizurraga; shows how previous inhabitants of a house played and interacted, in ways not so different from today.]
- 3) Discuss a variety of types of grandparents, their lives, interests, and occupations, where and how they live [*Grandma is Somebody Special*, Susan Goldman; grandma lives in a high-rise in the city, whereas many first graders live in suburbs; *My Two Grandmothers*, Effin Older; child has two very different grandmothers, one who lives on a farm, the other in the city, one who is Jewish, the other Christian; *Great-Grandmother's Gourd*, Cristina Kessler; a modern water pump in a Sudanese village pits progress against grandmother's traditional ways. The point in each story is to present parallels and contrasts to listeners' norms.]

#### **Module Three: If You're Lucky, You Get to be Old**

#### Assumptions:

Aging may or may not bring wisdom. Our own experiences probably bring to mind some who gain insight with added years and some

who remain stubbornly impervious to it. However, the indisputable logic is that growing older allows the possibility of a continuing range of experiences, from gaining new skills, to making friends, to adjusting to troublesome challenges. The message is that aging brings not inevitable decline but developmental opportunity, and that older persons have met life's opportunities in myriad ways. Importantly, the intention is not to substitute positive stereotypes for negative stereotypes, for stereotyping itself is inappropriate. Rather, the intention is to communicate that growing older offers opportunities and possibilities.

#### Objectives:

- 1) To demonstrate the benefits of longevity in terms of tangibles and intangibles, i.e., friendships made, places traveled, knowledge gained, things acquired, insights and perspectives gained.
- 2) To counterbalance impressions, based upon physical changes with age, that growing older is only a time of decline or deterioration

#### Activities:

- 1) Discuss the accumulation of experiences with age [*When I Am Old With You*, Angela Johnson; African American child and her grandfather experience a variety of things, e.g., corn roast, hunting in the attic, fishing, etc., all within a context of a wide circle of friends; *No Friends*, James Stevenson; tongue-in-cheek storytelling by Grandpa in this and several of the author's books gives perspective and reassurance to grandchildren's problems.]

2) Discuss the rich variety of life events of someone who grows old as part of two cultures [*Grandfather's Journey*, Allen Say; grandfather emigrates from Japan to California, explores North America, then returns to Japan to marry, intending to return to America.]

3) Talk about all the things one has the chance to learn if one lives a long time. [*Keeping Up with Grandma*, John Winch; contrasts the special skills of Grandma and Grandpa, how each in his or her own way has learned things over a life time that fit and shaped personality.]

#### Module Four: The Cycle of Life

##### Assumptions:

When all is said and done, growing old is a personal interaction with all of life's experiences, the good and the bad, each being interpreted and given meaning by the individual. No two people, even twins, experience the life course exactly the same. So, older persons are stories themselves. This makes age stereotyping all the more unfortunate when transmitted to children. At the same time, no one person, even no one older person, has all the answers or all the insights, for these are his or her answers and insights alone. Nonetheless, observers have spoken over the centuries of a rhythm or pattern to the life course, with losses, adjustments, and challenges being typical in later life. The point for children in grades K-2 is an appreciation of how older persons meet or have met these challenges.

##### Objectives:

- 1) To demonstrate the relationship between passage of time and the accumulation of personal memories, each with individual meaning
- 2) To examine the cycle of human development, the pluses and minuses, the common features of development that both the children and current elders go through, as well as to discuss impairments and death, more associated with advanced age

##### Activities:

- 1) Discuss different meanings of experiences; [*Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge*, Mem Fox; a boy who lives next door to an adult care residence / nursing group home helps several residents "recover" their memories.]
- 2) Discuss the link between people of different ages, for the older were once younger, and younger will become older [*I Know a Lady*, Charlotte Zolotow; a girl discovers the humanity of an elderly neighbor and wonders what she was like as a girl; *Verdi* by Jannell Cannon explores youthful exuberance and cross-generational connections through the life cycle of a feisty python.]
- 3) Discuss the legacies of older persons who have impairments or have died, in terms of their impact and continuing influences; [*Singing with Momma Lou*; little girl attempts to revive memories in her grandmother with dementia; *Sweet, Sweet Memory*, Jacqueline Woodson; Grandpa's death deeply affects a young girl, but she comes to realize that she has a common bond with many family members influenced; *Grandad Bill's Song*, Jane Yolen; little boy discovers the many

sides of his beloved grandfather's life, and takes comfort in the memories others share with him; *Badger's Parting Gifts*, Susan Varley; field animals mourn the passing of old Badger but discover the legacy of his time with them.]

#### Module Five: The Gift of Giving

##### Assumptions:

Grandparents, older relatives, and unrelated elders may teach important, positive lessons to children. These older adults may have the time to listen or to share with children. They may have the perspective gained through long life to give comfort, encouragement, moral bearings, or reassurance. Not all are sage elders, of course, and not all children have the opportunity for regular or sustained interaction with older persons, related or not. The point is that older persons, because of their vantage point on the life course, are sometimes models of caring, perspective, and positive values for others. At the same time, children may be positive influences. To be sure, children may help redeem elders through the children's gift of giving.

##### Objectives:

- 1) To examine the affective dimension of human development, love expressed to others, giving to others.
- 2) To present subtly that unselfish giving is often a lesson best learned with added years.

##### Activities:

- 1) Show that the gift of giving means love is expressed to others

without the expectation of anything in return; [*Miss Tizzy*, Libba Moore Gray; elderly woman cooks, dances, explores, takes children to visit the sick, and they mimic her behavior when she is ill; and *Alejandro's Gift*, Richard Albert; elderly recluse builds a waterhole out of sight of his cabin, since animals wouldn't come near; they benefit from his gift but he can't see and enjoy them.]

2) Discuss relationships between children and elders where the children acted unselfishly. [*The Boat*, Helen Ward; courageous boy rescues reclusive elder and his animals and rekindles the man's connections with the community.]

## Module Six: Continuous Growth

### Assumptions:

Old age is more than reflection, more than looking at what was. Many older persons continue to dream, aspire to achieve, imagine what might be. Some create in the tangible, some in their imaginations. Some prefer or are forced to live alone; others seek to begin, renew or replace relationships. The point for children is that aging can be a time to grow, and older persons and children may help each other's growth.

### Objectives:

- 1) To demonstrate that we continue to grow and dream throughout life
- 2) To show that intergenerational relationships may be mutually beneficial to growth, benefiting both the child and the elder

### Activities:

- 1) Explain that we can always dream or aspire, and that we can attain dreams at any point in life [*Lottie's Dream*, Bonnie Pryor; a young girl dreams of the ocean, grows up and grows old in Kansas, and realizes her dream of living by the sea as a widowed grandmother]
- 2) Ask the children if a person is ever too old to learn. If they think so, explore what they think makes this happen and what limits the ability to learn new things. Explore whether physical disabilities mean a person cannot learn; ask if having people tell you that you cannot learn would limit your ability to do so. [*The Grannyman*, Judith Schachner; old cat re-engages and learns to adapt because of kitten's needs; *Mrs. Peachtree's Bicycle*, Erica Silverman, an older woman is determined to learn to ride, despite discouragement by others]
- 3) Discuss the importance of relationships to others in attaining our dreams and resetting them [*Jim and the Beanstalk*, Raymond Briggs; humorous sequel to "Jack and the Beanstalk"; Jim befriends the giant's son who has grown old and lonely; Jim's friendship rejuvenates the giant, physically and psychologically.]

This module ends the unit on an upbeat note: in this instance, Lottie, now elderly, sitting on her porch on the seacoast of Maine, and the giant reinvigorated through Jim's help.

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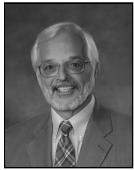
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