What about Aging? Perspectives from High School Teachers and Students on Integrating Aging into the High School Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

Most educational programs on aging target college students in disciplines which might provide services or work with older adults, such as medicine or social work, to the exclusion of students in high school. The purpose of this study is to better understand high school students and teacher's attitudes and perceptions regarding aging. Focus groups were conducted to collect data for this study. A total of 35 teachers and 55 students participated in the study. Findings indicate that attitudes about aging are both positive and negative, however there is a consensus among both teachers and students that incorporating aging into the high school curriculum would be beneficial. Teachers are in need of strategies to incorporate aging education into the high school curriculum, as there are many barriers. Results from this study can be used to aid in the development of educational modules designed to incorporate aging content into the curriculum.

Keywords: Gerontology, Aging, Students, Teachers, Attitudes, High School

INTRODUCTION

In the United States, the 65 and older population is projected to reach 83.7 million in the year 2050, which is almost double in size from 2012 according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2018). A large portion of this growth is due to the aging of baby boomers, however, individuals are living longer in general and the demand for health care and other services is increasing and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. The increasing number of older adults creates both challenges and opportunities. The challenges include developing strategies to allow older adults to live independently for as long as possible, providing health care and education for older adults who are managing multiple chronic conditions, ensuring high quality care for all seniors regardless of residential setting, and supporting family members and friends who are providing care for loved ones (Grady, 2011). Opportunities exist for those interested in careers in providing care to older adults and beyond.

Given the increasing number of older adults, younger individuals cannot afford to face the future with ageist attitudes. Furthermore, society cannot afford to be guided by individuals who are ageist, lack knowledge and sensitivity regarding aging. Currently, there is limited data on high school students' perceptions about aging. However, there have been several studies about young children's attitudes about aging and findings have been mixed (Mendoca, Marques, and Abrams, 2018). For example, Robinson, Zurcher, and Callahan (2015) found that when asked, children generally drew positive images of older adults. Robinson, Zurcher, and Callahan, also found that between genders girls drew more positive images than the boys, however, no significant differences for race or age were found.

Survey data suggests that university students tend to have negative attitudes about aging and older adults' (Wurtele & Maruyama, 2012). Researchers have found that "adults under 35 are more likely than middle-aged and older Americans to believe that the majority of older

people are lonely, miserable, senile, suffering from defective memory, “pretty much alike,” and are less effective than younger workers” (Abramson & Silverstein, 2004, p. 3). Several studies have examined nursing students’ attitudes regarding working with the aging population. Findings indicate that despite the demand for geriatric nurses, few nursing students select the field. Many reasons have been given. One reason may be lack of awareness of the opportunities available in the field of gerontology (Gross & Eshbaugh, 2011). Furthermore, nurse educators’ personal negative attitudes toward aging and long-term care facilities, students’ negative attitudes toward aging and long-term care facilities, as well as students’ negative attitudes that work in nursing homes is “beneath” registered nurses, affected attitudes toward clinical placement in long-term care facilities (Schrader, 2009; Sheffler, 1998).

Studies among undergraduate students have found that educational interventions that target gerontology and the care of older adults can be an effective method of improving the knowledge, skills, and occasionally attitudes toward aging. For example, Sarabia and Pfeiffer (2015) found that negative stereotypes towards older adults statistically significantly decreased following an aging nursing course. Moriello, Smey, Pescatello, and Murphy (2005) evaluated the influence of an educational intervention on pre-allied health student’s attitudes toward older adults. They found that the six-hour multi-modal workshop consisting of didactic lecture, group activities, and simulation activities significantly improved knowledge about aging, but did not significantly change attitudes towards aging.

In order for current and future healthcare professionals to provide optimal care for older adults, negative attitudes must be addressed. We know from previous research that it is possible to improve aging related knowledge and attitudes among undergraduate students, however not much is known about the ability to increase knowledge and improve attitudes among high school

students. The purpose of this study is to better understand high school students' attitudes and perceptions regarding aging, review current high school curriculum for aging specific content, as well as to explore perceived barriers among high school teachers to incorporating aging education into the curriculum. While it is important to teach students about aging and careers in aging as early as possible, until incorporating aging curriculum into early childhood education becomes standard we thought it best to begin with high school students as they are close to applying for college and making career decisions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

A total of 10 focus groups were held (five with students and five with teachers). A total of 35 teachers and 55 students were included in the focus groups. Altogether, a total of 90 individuals participated in this study, 39 in New Jersey and 51 in Kentucky. The teachers ranged in age from 24-65 and were all Caucasian (n=35). Some teachers in the focus groups indicated their subject areas, which include biology, history, technology, health teachers, economics, and library sciences. The students ranged in age from 14-18 and were Caucasian (n=40), Hispanic (n=2), and Black (n=13). A total of 39 high school teachers or administrators were contacted for participation. Of the 39 teacher/administrators contacted four agreed to participate. The reasons given for not being able to participate included not having class time to spare, requiring an internal review process that the school subsequently failed to undertake, and simply not being interested in participating, while others just did not respond.

Interview Guide

A semistructured interview guide was developed for the focus groups. The interview guide focused on identifying both high school teachers and students' attitudes and perceptions

about older adults, current curricular experiences regarding aging, and future opportunities for including aging into the high school curriculum. Each group was asked the questions from the interview guide and additional questions to follow up on points made during the focus group session. All of the questions in the interview guide can be found in Tables 1 and 2. Follow-up questions varied from group to group and were only asked as deemed necessary for clarification of a participant's responses.

Procedures

Participants were recruited through a combination of sampling strategies, including purposive, convenience, and snowball in Kentucky and New Jersey. Schools were selected with varying national rankings in an attempt to be more representative of what you might find nationwide. Additionally, a goal of selecting schools with varying rankings was to increase the reliability and validity thereby increasing generalizability. In order to be included in the current study, individuals had to be in high school or a high school teacher and speak and read English. For teachers, the sample was selected based on the availability of contact information, for instance email address via school directory. If contact information for the teacher was not available, an administrator was contacted. Once contact information was obtained, potential participants were recruited through email messages, and/or personal telephone calls and asked about their willingness to participate in a study about attitudes and perceptions regarding aging and the inclusion of aging specific content into the curriculum. Furthermore, teachers and/or administrators, were asked if we could hold a focus group with their students.

Focus groups ranged in time from 13 minutes to 45 minutes. All focus groups took place in a high school, either in the classroom, breakroom or library. All focus group sessions were face-to-face. All protocols and consent procedures were approved by the University of Kentucky

and Rutgers University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Informed consent was obtained from each teacher prior to the start of the focus group. The researchers reviewed the informed consent with participants as a group and then were asked to sign if they were comfortable and wanted to participate. Informed consent was sent to students ahead of the agreed upon date for the focus group. Parents had to sign a parental consent form for their child and return it prior to the students taking part in the study. Additionally, students had to sign an assent form prior to the focus group. As with the teachers, the purpose of the study was explained to the students and they were asked to sign the assent form if they felt comfortable participating. All teachers and students agreed to participate. Participants did not receive monetary compensation, but we provided refreshments (i.e., fruit, water, crackers, cupcakes, and trail mix).

Analysis

All focus group discussions were digitally recorded and transcribed *verbatim*, using Microsoft Word. Data analysis was conducted simultaneously with data collection by reviewing transcripts, making interpretations and notes, and revising questions, as appropriate. Once data collection was completed, the transcripts were reviewed repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the data and to make sure that there were no errors. Data from the focus groups were organized and analyzed using thematic analysis (Burnard, 1991). Both authors coded each transcript and developed overarching themes. Both authors have previous experience with qualitative research and have coded qualitative data on a number of occasions. The resulting themes were compiled into a codebook using Microsoft Excel. The Excel spreadsheet organized relevant key phrases and ideas by frequency to identify and explain repeating ideas or themes in relation to each of the research questions. Once all themes were compiled the authors went through each theme to check for agreement. If there was a disagreement the coders discussed it and came to an

agreement that both were comfortable with. Saturation was reached with a total of 10 focus groups.

RESULTS

A number of themes emerged when the focus groups were analyzed in this study. A total of nine themes emerged—four themes for the teachers and five overarching themes for the students. Overarching themes for the teachers included the following: (1) personal attitudes and perceptions regarding aging, (2) barriers to including aging into the curriculum, (3) informal aging activities, and (4) formal aging curriculum. Overarching themes for the students included the following: (1) negative views toward aging and older adults, (2) positive views towards aging and older adults, (3) definition of aging/old, (4) formal aging curriculum, and (5) careers.

Teachers

Personal Attitudes and Perceptions regarding Aging

When asked about their thoughts regarding older adults in general, many teachers responded positively indicating that older adults are a valuable resource to society. For instance, one teacher said, “Now seeing my parents and my in-laws help in taking care of our kids it has helped me see an entirely new role.” Sharing a similar sentiment one teacher stated, “our family and society absolutely depend on them.”

Personal attitudes and perceptions varied among the teachers. Perception of age reflects a variety of factors or measures for aging, including one’s own age, health, level of activity, how one feels, and personal experience of others considered old (e.g., parents, grandparents). For example, regarding what age is identified as “old” according to one teacher, “I don’t know if it is an age anymore. It is a concept. It is really how active you want to stay.” Similarly, another teacher said, “old is not a number, it is about attitude, health, feeling...”. One 45-year old

participant indicated that she felt old already, while another participant said, “I mean my parents are in their 60s, and they are old...”. Others felt that individuals in 70s, 80s, and 90s should be considered old.

Some teachers had more positive attitudes and perceptions, for instance one teacher shared, “my personal experience with aging has been a good one. For me, life has gotten better as I have gotten older.” Another teacher described aging as a moving target, “aging is a moving target, it is always somewhere else—it is not where you are!” Other perceptions and attitudes were more negative, for instance one participant said, “they (older adults) are resistant to certain things...you become a little more simple-minded.” Some teachers associated aging with poor health, the presence of disease and/or disability and change in independence status. For example, one teacher said, “I feel like I call people old when I see them doing old things like stopping driving.” While another talked about the fear of fatality and loss. And yet, some suggested that they did not think about aging. According to one teacher, “you are not aware that you are aging, everything is so fast paced, until something happens, like injury or health issue...there is no time to think about it.”

Informal Aging Activities vs. Formal Aging Curriculum

Participants in both Kentucky and New Jersey indicated that no specific aging content was included in the current curriculum. Several participants mentioned that there are other courses, such as life skills courses that address finances, anger management, but not aging. Other participants indicated that they incorporate aging when they can. For instance, one teacher stated, “There is not a specific topic for me in anatomy, but I feel like in every body system we talk about the aging population. I would say every week it is getting talked about but in a fairly

small way.” Further, an English Teacher mentioned that aging was addressed in some reading assignments for instance, *Tuck Everlasting* and *Tuesdays with Morrie*.

There was a general consensus that high school is a good place to provide/improve aging awareness. However, not as a separate course, but perhaps infused or integrated into individual subjects as part of an overall grand plan to systematically provide aging awareness and/or address perceptions about aging. Several teachers suggested integrating aging perceptions/awareness in courses such as biology, sociology, literature, business/economics, and physical education. While other participants felt that it could be detrimental to force students to engage in aging activities, as it might turn students off from older adults and aging studies. Several participants suggested informal methods of increasing aging awareness, for instance, a teacher stated, “I think for that type of education I think the best way to have the students learn is to interact with older people and just learn firsthand” - in other words having students talk to their parents or grandparents—first-hand knowledge, having guest speakers come in and talk to the students (e.g., Vietnam veterans), or service projects through the National Honor Society or Key Club.

Barriers

While the general consensus was that increasing aging awareness among students was beneficial, teachers described numerous barriers to doing so. Most teachers reported that scheduling would be the biggest barrier. For instance, one teacher stated, “honestly for our health classes we go out on like four week rotations so honestly to be able to squeeze in something else would be difficult.” Many other participants mentioned similar scheduling issues with a set curriculum and activities scheduled for the foreseeable future. Other teachers indicated that they weren’t sure how to make the subject relevant to students, suggesting that

students' own attitudes about aging and their inability to think beyond the here and now would hinder the experience. Some participants acknowledged their own attitudes about aging and lack of knowledge and comfort in addressing aging related issues. There was also reticence regarding creating one more thing that teachers needed to score, track, or provide progress reports on. Several teachers mentioned the cost associated with incorporating aging activities, such as service projects through the National Honor Society or Key Club.

Students

Negative Views toward Aging and Older Adults

Students reported negative views of aging and older adults. Several students reported their own personal fears related to aging. Generally, participants equated aging with decline in physical and mental features and activity. The focus on physical decline is seen in response to the question about what aging is, the responses included the following: “annoying, mean, can’t hear, stingy, stinky, grouchy, forgetful, fat, and wrinkled.” There was an element of sexism in perceptions of older women versus older men, for instance the description of older women/ladies as “small and cute”, and older men as grouchy”. There was also an element of racism on both the part of the older adult and towards older adults. One student described an experience from “Take your child to work day”. The student and her sister went to work with their grandmother in a long-term care or similar facility and an older Caucasian man said to the student and her sister to “come over here you monkey.” On the other hand, one student remarked, “not to be racist, but black old women—their food is burnt when they cook.” Students were also likely to treat aging as a subject of humor, especially with regard to its shortcomings as well as in some instances with condescension and annoyance.

Positive Views toward Aging and Older Adults

Some participants did report positive feelings about older adults. Several students suggested that growing older is a luxury that not everyone is afforded. For example, one student stated, “if you make it to old age, you are lucky because some people especially now-a-days a lot of people don’t make it to old age.” Similarly, another student said, “If you make it to old age, congratulations and if you are with the person you love then that is even better.” One student reported being excited to get old because she felt that older adults have many good experiences. Other students recognized that older adults may be a positive resource, as one said, “You need old people. Especially when you have kids. They know everything and can show you how to care for your child without having to spend money.”

Formal Aging Curriculum

The majority of participants indicated that they believed that a life skills class on aging would be beneficial, however they indicated that such a class should not be limited to aging/old age alone or by itself, but rather a life skills course on every stage of life. For instance, one student stated, “we are all going to age eventually, so we should know about it and for our parents.” Similarly, another student shared, “we should learn about what not to do now when we are younger so we can be healthier when we are older.” Participants suggested that aging content should cover specifics, such as financial topics that address costs that come with old age, help with retirement as well as what to expect as one ages. One student shared, “And, we should learn how to manage money and know what resources are available. Old people are everywhere.” There was concern that such a class not be another mandated class with statewide testing, as testing was not considered a beneficial learning method. Interest and awareness regarding careers in aging was mixed. Students in Kentucky generally had no interest in learning

about careers in aging. In each focus group there was some confusion about what careers in aging meant, except as careers relate to the healthcare industry. When asked to list some of the possible careers in aging students shared the following, geriatrics, occupational therapy, nursing, physician assistant, teaching, writing, home health aide, psychology, and guidance counselor. Regardless of whether or not students reported negative or positive attitudes towards older adults, the majority of students realized the value of including aging curriculum in high school education.

DISCUSSION

High School teachers and students in this study evinced certain similarities in their attitudes and perceptions about aging. For instance, they shared some of the negative perceptions of old age as a time of limitations and disability, as well as positives such as the value of being old and the benefit of experience that comes with age. They also shared perceptions related to the variability and plurality of the definition of what “old” is, and the relativeness of age - as referent to where one is him/herself.

Both groups agreed that there is a need to educate high school students about aging, and that high school is a good place within which to do so. Students’ perceptions and awareness of aging was rightly considered important not just in terms of understanding older adults, but also to prepare them to navigate their own old age. What students know or don’t know about aging reflects factors more common in today’s society such as reduced interactions between younger and older adults, as well as media images and portrayals of old age.

High schools by their very nature provide a good forum for dissemination of aging information, but as seen in this study, there is very little aging-related content in school curricula. Further, because what is available is delivered or occurs in a piecemeal or non-intentional

fashion - it lacks an integrated approach which would facilitate a more nuanced and broader handling of the germane aspects of aging, embedded as it were in the general curriculum, and delivered on a subject by subject basis.

This study sheds light on the value of aging education for high school students. For students, the stated preference is for such knowledge and awareness to be delivered through courses such as a life skills course, as part of a general body of knowledge to better prepare them for life. Such preparation would include understanding about the aging process, its implications for self, others and society, as well as about ancillary or related matters such as careers in aging before/as they consider further education and future career options. Consequently, a useful approach would be to teach to areas of gerontology that occur organically in each course as indicated in Table 3.

In each course, integration can take the form of illustrative examples to explicate concepts, introduce aging concepts and application or relevance, as well as the creation of assignments that provide opportunities to engage with aging as appropriate. Incorporating education about careers on aging or aging related career opportunities into the high school curriculum or learning experience can be done in a number of ways: inclusion in a life skills course, as part of career guidance counseling workshops/programs, speaker series, and school-wide career fairs. Shadowing and internship opportunities, for example, in the summer can also be made available through partnerships with aging-industry organizations.

Barriers to successfully enhancing high school curricula with relevant aging content will need to be addressed. For instance, providing teacher education and awareness on aging issues will help boost comfort and confidence in tackling these issues in their classrooms. Teachers should be able to attend in service training on incorporating aging into the curriculum and at the

very least be provided with curricular suggestions for the inclusion of aging curriculum. Teachers can be assisted in creating aging content modules that can be adapted for specific courses, and/or instructed on how best to infuse more aging related content into their courses, e.g. through facilitated discussions, assignments, service learning, and practica. It is also important that school administrators earmark resources to support this effort, and visibly show institutional commitment and support to students, staff and other stakeholders.

Findings from this study help elucidate both teacher and student's perceptions and attitudes about adding aging studies to the high school curriculum. Recommendations for future studies and improvement can be gained from these findings. Focus groups with a broader range of high school teachers and students should be conducted to build upon the foundational information gained from this study. By conducting focus groups with a broader range of teachers and high school students, we can gain insights from teachers and students in different geographical regions who may have different perspectives. Once additional focus groups have been conducted, we can build a survey to allow us to collect data from a much larger and more broad population. Data collected via focus groups would allow us to be able to develop and test a survey instrument that could be used to collect data from multiple geographical regions. Additionally, prior to testing curricular interventions principals, vice principals, and other administrators in the school district will be interviewed to better understand system barriers and facilitators. Once sufficient data on this topic has been collected, interventions should be developed and tested to increase aging education in high school settings. The high school curriculum could be reviewed to identify places where aging content could be added and interventions such as modules about aging could be tested in various courses. For example, modules could be developed for courses where it makes sense to incorporate aging.

Furthermore, intergenerational activities could be developed and tested among high school students and older adults in the community.

This study is not without limitations. Study participants were recruited using both snowball and convenience sampling methods. Snowball and convenience sampling methods can lead to a sampling bias (Henry, 2009), resulting in a sample that can be more homogenous and less representative of all high school teachers and students in Kentucky and New Jersey. Multiple recruitment strategies should be used to increase the number of participants included in future studies. Participants in our sample were largely Caucasian. The findings of this study might differ for teachers and student from other racial and ethnic backgrounds or from other regions of the United States. In future studies, a larger, more diverse sample, including more high school teachers can enhance our understanding of opportunities to incorporate more aging education into the high school curriculum.

CONCLUSION

High school students are in a prime position to benefit from increased knowledge and awareness about aging - whether to provide care for parents or other family members, to start preparing for their own aging, and/or to include options in gerontology as they begin to figure out what they want to do career wise.

This study found that students lacked adequate awareness about aging and varying attitudes and perceptions. They showed both positive and negative attitudes regarding old age, and were more likely to treat aging as a matter of humor or disparagement. There was no to very little interest in careers in aging, and no awareness of such outside of healthcare related professions.

In the high schools in this study, although most teachers and students felt that aging content would be beneficial, there were no classes with an articulated curriculum on aging. Barriers to

including aging content in high school curricula include challenges with scheduling, resources, teacher expertise, students' perception of relevance, as well as administrative support. Students indicated that a life skills course which included aging-related content would be the best model.

Creating subject based learning modules, introducing aging concepts and issues as topics, illustrative examples, as well as assignments are some of the ways in which aging content can be meaningfully integrated or infused into high school curricula. Such efforts may help improve attitudes about older adults/aging among high school students, improve perceptions and enhance knowledge base prior to enrolling in college or higher education and increase their awareness of career opportunities in the aging field.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Table 1. Focus Group Questions for Teachers

<ol style="list-style-type: none">1) What are your thoughts or views about aging and old age? Positive or negative?2) What are your thoughts about older adults in general? Positive or negative?3) Thinking about the current curriculum is there any content specifically regarding older adults or information that could apply to older adults?4) Should specific content about aging be included in high school curriculum? Why or why not? If yes, where could it be included?5) What are the barriers and facilitators to including aging content into the current curriculum?

Table 2. Focus Group Questions for Students

<ol style="list-style-type: none">1) What are your thoughts about aging or old age?2) What are your thoughts about older adults in general? Positive or negative?3) Thinking about the courses that you've completed thus far as a part of your education, have you learned anything specifically about older adults or that could apply to older adults?4) Should specific content about aging be included in the high school curriculum? Why or why not?5) Have you ever considered a career in aging? Why or why not?
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Table 3. Suggestions for the integration on aging topics into high school courses

Subject/Course	Aging Content	Topics/Components
Biology	Biology of aging	Physiology of aging Physical/Mental aspects of aging Normal vs. abnormal aging/age related changes Life course perspective
Business/Economics	Financial planning	Employment Retirement and leisure Long term care planning
Social Studies	Global perspective on aging	Profiles of an aging society Demographics Examination of aging in other countries Compare and contrast social and health care policies
Health	Healthy aging	Clinical Preventive Services, Exercise Nutrition and Weight Management Complementary and alternative medicine Long term care and end of life planning