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Intergenerational Gaps: Collaborative Projects for Social Studies Curricula

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I. INTRODUCTION

The aging population is becoming a significant issue, and this has begun to contribute to several social issues as well. In particular, this has led to a significant intergenerational gap between the younger and older generations. This is furthered by changes in family structures, which have moved away from large family units and towards more nuclear family units. As such, generational segregation has become an important issue.

South Korea has not been immune to this phenomenon, which is plaguing many of today's modern industrialized societies. According to Thang (2011), "The social structuring of age has contributed to an extent the gap among generations. One important dimension of age segregation is 'institutional age segregation' where different age groups are isolated from the socially constructed division according to chronological age, such as the channeling of the young into day care and schools and expecting seniors to live separately in age-homogenous retirement communities" (p. 1). In order to narrow the intergenerational gap, people need to realize the importance of intergenerational bonding. Governments, local communities, and schools need to make a concerted

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effort to inform people about the benefits of intergenerational bonding.

In this paper, I discuss a collaborative project that aims to narrow the intergenerational gap between seniors and elementary school students. The seniors, aged 72 to 83, were from Goheung, a small rural town in the southern part of South Korea. The elementary school students were third graders from Gwangju, a major South Korean city more than 100km away from Goheung.

II. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

Throughout history, the interaction and interconnection between families and societies has been a key element of human life. As Mitts (2003) says, "families are units where values are learned, culture is transmitted, and children learn relationship skills" (p. 18). Therefore, it is critical to have intergenerational solidarity in both family and society. Ultimately, this bondage will be the foundation for composing citizens of the world (Butts, Thang & Yeo, 2012). Reduced intergenerational interaction and low consensus between generations may result in age segregation, which has several undesirable consequences. According to Thang (2011), this produces ageism in which young people discriminate against the elderly and the elderly discriminate against the younger generation. Thang (2011) also warns that when vertical connections of individuals across different ages weakens, social support networks within families and within societies are expected to weaken. Thus, frequent interaction between generations and forming consensus is very important. Often intergenerational programs can be effective for improving the relationship between different generations.

According to Hopkins (2000), intergenerational programs are important because they "encourage mutual understanding and respect between generations" (p. 317). In addition, they "give children positive role models and break down barriers created by fear and uncertainty. They give older adults needed feelings of accomplishment, worth, and joy. They offer both groups a medium through which they can share their talents and experiences" (p. 317). There are many programs that have been developed for mutual understanding across different generations. Through these intergenerational programs, both the younger generation and the elderly can build social relationships



and break down stereotypes (Cohen, 2006; Hopkins, 2000). One program by Newman et al. (1997) found several positive outcomes resulting from implementing intergenerational programs between younger and older generations. Thus, intergenerational programs can be effective tools for reducing generational gaps. We found that implementing and developing various intergenerational programs can be effective in reducing gaps between generations.

III. RESEARCH PURPOSE AND METHODS

The purpose of this research is to investigate whether this collaborative intergenerational project can be a bridge between seniors from rural areas and students who were raised in a nuclear family. Also, we examine the types of preconceptions, if any, that the students hold of the teaching materials that have been prepared by the seniors.

We investigate different ways to improve communication between different generations so that, ultimately, we can attain a better intergenerational relationship among individuals throughout the society.

The overall goal of the project was to examine if we could establish a meaningful relationship between rural seniors and urban elementary school students, and see how such a project could help connect schools and broader societies. The following questions guided this research:

- Can seniors' participation in photography activities help to build intergenerational solidarity between seniors and elementary school students?
- Can the collaborative program developed between seniors and elementary school students serve as a useful tool for the students' social studies classes?
- Can the collaborative program between seniors and elementary school students affect the students' attitudes towards seniors?
- What kinds of learning opportunities can this provide the participants?

IV. RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

In selecting participants for Phase I of the project, I prioritized areas within South Korea with a high proportion of senior citizens. According to the figures reported by the Korean Statistical Information Service, Goheung County in Jeollanam-do Province had a high percentage of senior citizens in 2011, and as of 2013, it had the highest percentage of senior citizens at 33.8 percent (Statistics Korea, 2013). For this reason, I selected Goheung County of Jeollanam-do Province as my research site, which is located in the southernmost area of the South Korean peninsula and is surrounded by ocean on three sides. Thirteen senior citizens from the Goheung senior center who were interested in studying photography formed the Goheung photography group. These participants ranged in age

from 72 to 83. Twelve participants were male and one participant was female.

For Phase II of the project, participants were selected from a private elementary school in a major city. There were a total of 90 participants, consisting of third grade elementary school students and Ann Byung Sang, their social studies teacher, from Gwangju Song Won Private Elementary School, located in Gwangju, South Korea. Gwangju is a major city in South Korea, and it takes around two hours to drive there from Goheung.

V. INTERGENERATIONAL PROJECT

The project took place over the course of two years and it was comprised of two major parts: Phase I and II.

a) Project Phase I

For the first 1.5 years, we focused on transforming the seniors' attitudes on life through learning photography and participating in a photography exhibit. Phase I of this project is described in a previously published paper (Song, 2014). Thus, in this paper, I only discuss Phase II of the project.

b) Project Phase II

During a time period of eight weeks, photographs taken by the seniors were used as teaching materials for a third grade social studies class. I investigated the effectiveness of this process in allowing the elementary school students and seniors to communicate with each other and work to overcome the generational gap.

When I visited Song Won Elementary School before the start of this project, I had a meeting with a few teachers. The topic was on intergenerational gaps. The teachers were concerned that this was a growing issue, and felt the need for a project or program to address it. Shin Myung Soon, the vice principal and a classroom teacher for over thirty years, stated that she noticed a worrisome increase in the generational gap between the elderly and her students over the years. She stated, "As many students today live in nuclear families, they tend to have more individualistic personalities, mental instabilities, and interpersonal problems compared to the past." Other teachers commented that while in a large family, elders naturally become a teacher to the children, in a nuclear family, the parents' role is essential as children are not exposed to other relatives who can be their teachers. Another teacher stated that the present-day students tended to have more trouble cooperating with or competing against others.

In order to address these issues, Ann Byung Sang, Shin Myung Soon, and I developed an intergenerational project with a rural senior center and a

third grade class at Song Won Elementary School. This project sought to develop an environment in which students could connect with seniors in a different province through technology. As a researcher, I observed the influence of this project on students' attitudes about the elderly, and monitored whether this project had educational value and could be adaptable to different settings.

VI. PROJECT PROCEDURES

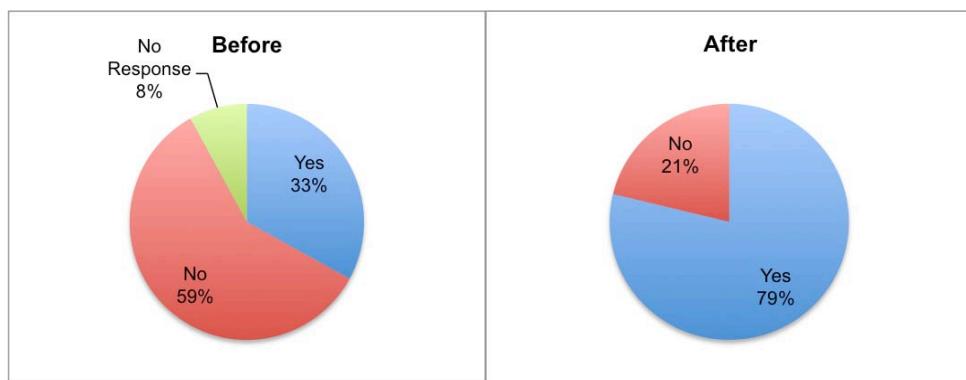
1. Before implementing the collaborative project, the social studies teacher for the participating third graders, Ann Byung Sang, conducted a survey to measure the baseline intergenerational attitudes of the students.
2. At Song Won Elementary School, the teacher selected eight topics from a chapter called 'A study of different towns and lifestyles' in their third grade social studies textbook.
3. At Goheung Senior Center, I asked the seniors involved in the photography class to take photographs related to the topics above as their weekly photography class homework. Every Monday for eight weeks, the seniors posted topic-related photographs online on their blog called "Goheung Sajinteam". The topics included: pride and joy of our hometown, the process of vegetable growing, a day in a farmer's life, the village marketplace, and spring arrival at the village home.
4. Every Tuesday during social studies class, the teacher showed the third graders photographs from the Goheung Sajinteam blog on a wide screen. Each week, the teacher used these photographs as teaching materials for the class.
5. For eight weeks, the teacher asked the students to write down thoughts and feelings about the photographs in their journals. Students also had discussion sessions expressing their thoughts regarding the photographs.
6. Ann Byung Sang took notes about the students' discussions and documented the students' writings. Other teachers observed the progress of this project

and gave comments. At the end of the collaborative project, we repeated the same survey of intergenerational attitudes with the third grade students.

VII. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

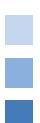
After the project, Ann Byung Sang stated that he felt the project had been more productive than he had expected. In particular, he expressed that it had been much more effective than simply using a textbook. He said, "I was using live photos taken by the seniors and it enabled the students to think more broadly, move their hearts, and expand their minds outside of the textbook." He also mentioned that the students were very surprised that the photographs were taken by people over the age of 73, and that this caused them to show a greater interest in the photos. Students eagerly awaited the new photographs that the seniors would upload every Monday, and were excited to attend the next class on Tuesday to see them. One student commented that he was "very impressed that old people can take these great photos." Another expressed surprise about their familiarity with technological tools: "How did they learn to use the computer and have a blog?" Overall, the teachers noted that the students showed greater engagement than they would have otherwise, and that the project had a positive educational effect.

Prior to this intergenerational project, many students believed that seniors who live in a rural village would not be able to help their studies. Also, the majority of the students did not want to live in the countryside. After this intergenerational project, however, there was an increase of 46 percentage points in the proportion of students who believed that the elderly possessed knowledge that could help teach them. Initially, only 33% of students reported thinking that seniors who live in a different location could teach them something. This proportion increased to 79% after the project. Students attributed this to being able to study the chapter 'A study of different towns and lifestyles' not simply through their teacher but through the seniors' photographs (see Figure 1).

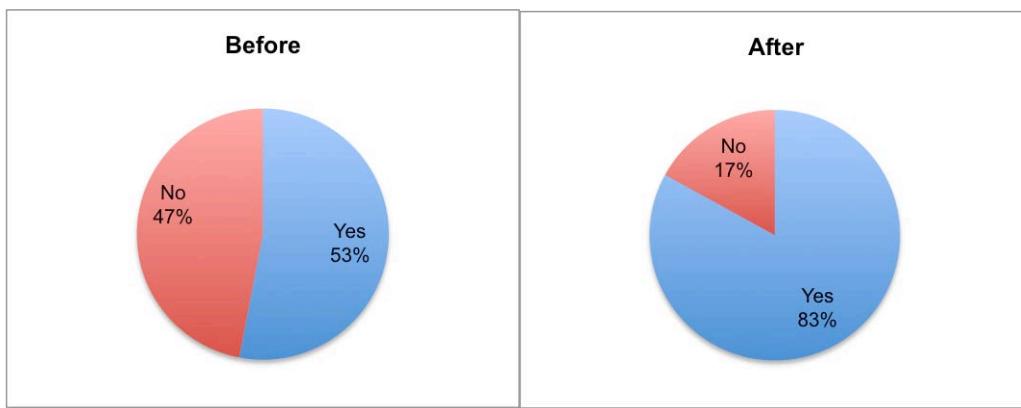


Note: N=90

Figure 1 : Do you think seniors' knowledge can help your study?



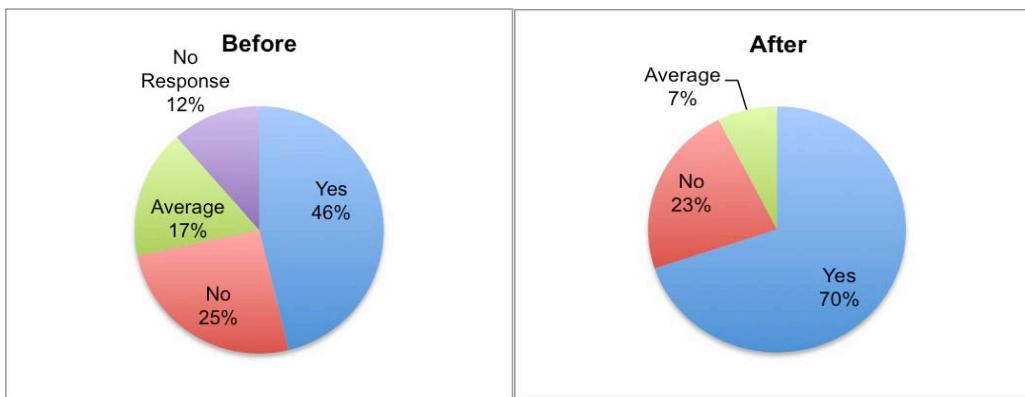
Prior to the project, 53% of students reported that they thought seniors could not use computers. After the project, this also increased to 83% of the students (see Figure 2).



Note: $N=90$

Figure 2 : Do you think elderly who live in the countryside can use computers?

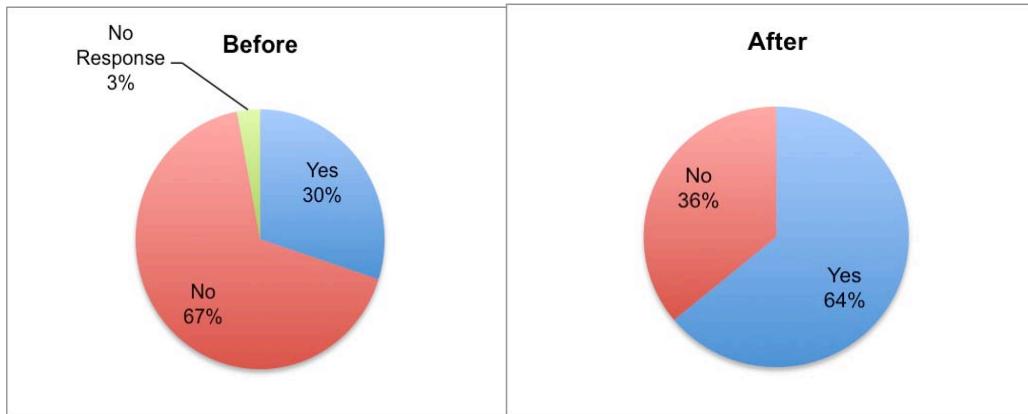
In response to the question of whether they thought the work of rural seniors could be relevant to them, 46% of students responded yes prior to the project, whereas 70% of them answered positively to the same question after the project (see Figure 3).



Note: $N=90$

Figure 3 : Do you think the work of other local people is relevant to you?

Lastly, while only 30% of students reported that they would be willing to live in a rural area before the project, after the project this proportion increased to 64% (see Figure 4).



Note: $N=90$

Figure 4 : Have you ever thought that you would like to live in a rural village?

These results indicate that the photographs used in the social studies class influenced the students' conceptions of seniors living in rural areas in positive ways.

This project was developed to help younger generations connect with seniors, so that they can learn from their wisdom and life experiences. Seniors can be great mentors for the younger generation. Simultaneously, this relationship can benefit the seniors as well, as they also desire more activities.

After the project, one teacher from Song Won Elementary School stated: "I often feel obligated to make an environment for students to experience a large family.... This project helped students overcome the age gap with their grandparents and enhance an ability to communicate with others." As the results above suggest, intergenerational programs often help develop positive social relationships between seniors and students. Also such a program may take a role in breaking down the existing stereotypical relationships between the two (Cohen, 2006; Hopkins, 2000). This project is an example of such a program, and it contributed to breaking down the generational gap between third grade students and the elderly.

At first, the students' view of seniors living in a rural area was very marginal. Through the project, the students started to recognize the seniors as community educators and intelligent people who can use new technologies. Additionally, students grew to respect the hard work of the rural farmers, particularly after a week when the seniors who work as farmers showed photographs of their daily routines from dawn to dusk. Looking at the significant change from the surveys conducted before and after the project, I realized that photographs may serve to transform a person's mindset. As Sherman (2006) states, "the arts are often a language for communicating new ideas and acquiring new technical and interpretive skills. They help develop new ways of seeing, knowing, and experiencing" (p. 43). Using the photographs that the seniors took just a few days prior to class helped the third graders realize that the material was very relevant and contemporaneous. This was a much different experience than simply studying the images and paragraphs written in textbooks.

From the perspective of the senior participants from Goheong senior center, participating in Phase I of the project allowed them to see different aspects of the world with greater interest and curiosity through photography. Through this different lens, it was their hope to realize a greater richness of life (Song, 2014). Furthermore, this project helped the participating seniors adopt a more positive attitude toward life. It also encouraged them to be more active participants in society. Moreover, it was a transformative learning experience that provided them a variety of learning opportunities (Song, 2014). As a result, it

helped the participating seniors improve their emotional stability, confidence, and self-esteem, and it helped them realize their full potential (Song, 2014).

Through participating in Phase II of the project, the seniors gained more self-confidence and felt more valuable to others. In their post-interview comments, they made the following statements: "I am very pleased and could not believe the photos I took could be used as teaching materials." "I feel alive and like I am a valuable person." "I am so happy that I can do something for the school." "My grandson said I am a cool grandpa!"

Through this two-year project, the seniors interacted with their families, friends, neighbors, and young students with photography as a novel medium. This helped the participants move away from the view that seniors are useless people with nothing productive to do. Instead, they gradually adopted a more positive outlook on life (Song, 2014).

VIII. CONCLUSION

Although it may be a positive experience for seniors to participate in one-time art activities in their senior centers or to have a get-together with young students, a long-term activity like this project is likely to be much more helpful in enhancing the seniors' level of confidence and boost their feelings of value in the community. In this project, being helpful to both parties was a key aspect. Helping seniors become familiar with new technologies improved their self-confidence. Using the creative output produced by the seniors was very satisfying for both the seniors and the younger students. I encourage teachers to be creative in engaging their local community members when inviting guests. Instead of only relying on established experts, other unexpected figures in society, such as the seniors in a nearby rural town, can provide a supportive and educational role for the students' curricula. Also, I recommend that teachers incorporate educational technology tools to teach the younger generation. In a project such as this, there was no need to purchase any expensive software for the school. This project utilized a free technology tool (i.e., the photography blog) for a teaching purpose.

This intergenerational project sought to help simultaneously address issues facing the younger generations and the aging population. These types of projects can serve as a productive bridge that connects a rural community and its more urban schools. Projects like these may begin to bridge the intergenerational gaps and improve connections between rural seniors and urban youth. Based on the feedback from the participating teachers, community center educators, and conference audiences, the results of this project seem very encouraging.



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