Integrating Aging Education into the PK-12 Curriculum: Combating Ageism through the Classroom
by Daltonesha Miller, 2024 CTI Fellow
Hopewell High School

This curriculum unit is recommended for:
Exceptional Children Secondary School Grades

Keywords: Ageism, Ableism, Discrimination, Intersectionality, Social Inequality

Teaching Standards: See Appendix 1 for teaching standards addressed in this unit.

Synopsis: Secondary students will learn about ageism and the intersection of ablism in the secondary classroom. Students can be expected to learn about the social issues of ageism and ableism, fostering empathy, critical thinking, and an understanding of the importance of inclusivity. Students will explore how stereotypes and biases toward age and disability manifest in society, their impacts on individuals and communities, and strategies to challenge these forms of discrimination.

I plan to teach this unit to my Exceptional Children students in High School.

I give permission for the Institute to publish my curriculum unit and synopsis in print and online. I understand that I will be credited as the author of my work.

Introduction

Rationale

Often without knowledge, students with disabilities face a crossroad between ableism and ageism. Though they are not interconnected they both share similar characteristics that students in the PK-12 setting can familiarize themselves with. Students interact with different cultures and ways of being. Through this curriculum unit I will implore my students to not just be passive in the end of ageism but also be accountable for sharing the information with one person that is outside of the K-12 setting. The overreaching goal is for students to shift cultural ideas and be equipped to combat ageism in their communities. I would love for my students to question ideas that don't serve older adults and advocate for those who are othered in our society.

Most of the students that I serve in the Extension Program require modified curriculum in the school setting and modified access to the environments around them. I believe that they will find value in learning that each person is an individual and overarching generalization can be harmful. At any given point assumptions and prejudice about a group or a single person can limit the possibilities and outcomes one may gain from another group or person. Debunking the myths of what aging is will lead to more understanding and knowledge of what the future holds for my students.

Demographics

Currently I work as an Extensions Science and Social Studies Teacher at Hopewell High School in Huntersville, North Carolina. The community in which Hopewell is in comes with strong familial ties as well as ties to the community. The school is made up of 1987 students. The population is 63% African American, 26% Hispanic, 5% Asian, 3% Bi-Racial, 2% White and 1% Indigenous American. Our school qualifies as a Title 1 school. Title 1 schools are schools that have more than 37.5% of the population of students living at or below the poverty line. In 2023 the poverty line was stated as a family of four with a total income of $27,750.

I am a seventh-year teacher, however, this is my first year at Hopewell. As an extension teacher I work closely with two other extension teachers to provide twenty-five students with the four core subjects. The students in our program complete work off the standard course of study. North Carolina created the Extend content standard for students with the most severe cognitive disabilities who are not able to master the Standard Course of Study. As an extension teacher I have three self-contained classes for students with varying disabilities. Our students range in areas of need, and we group them into three classes based on elevated level of needs, moderate needs, and low needs. I am the Science and Social Studies teacher; my other two colleagues teach English Language Arts and Math.

The students in our program vary in their abilities ranging from non-verbal and highly dependent in meeting their basic needs including toileting and feeding to independent requiring some assistance with social cues and a varied educational curriculum. The students have different accommodations which help them access the curriculum at the rate that is appropriate for their individual abilities. Some of those accommodations include smaller classroom sizes, repetition in learning, extended test times, and read aloud options to answer questions, voice output devices eye gaze for answering questions.

Objectives

At the end of this unit students will work as a class to develop their awareness of differences and similarities as they pertain to the life span and complete cultural competency activities to teach their peers about other cultures as they see them in their curriculum. Through thoughtful research on age throughout the lifespan and incorporating curricular concepts students will gain understanding of the diverse world around us and how intergenerational relationships can draw on a knowledge base that keeps everyone in tune with their communities leading to a well-rounded and balanced society.

My curriculum unit will be utilized in our daily 126-minute blocks with students with moderate needs then expanded to the other two classes after close reflection and modifications. While this curriculum unit is created for extensions, students throughout the classroom's grades can use this unit most for their classes.

In my unit, extension students will use their understanding of aging to master skills on the extended content curriculum. The driving question intended to spark each class project will be "How can we all benefit from intergenerational learning". Students will constantly return to this question to ensure they are incorporating intergenerational learning throughout their environments daily. The underlying goal is to enable students to refer to lessons and understandings that they have constructed from experiences with older adults.

Unit Goals

Intersectionality Awareness: Many students with disabilities will experience multiple forms of discrimination, including ageism. Learning about ageism helps them understand the interconnected nature of different types of discrimination and fosters a comprehensive view of social justice.

Empathy and Solidarity: Learning about ageism can foster empathy and solidarity among students. Understanding the challenges faced by older adults can help students with disabilities relate to and support other marginalized groups.

Preparation for Future Challenges: As students with disabilities age, they may face age-related discrimination in addition to ableism. Awareness and understanding of ageism

can prepare them for these future challenges and help them advocate for themselves and others.

Holistic Education: Inclusive education should encompass all forms of discrimination. By addressing ageism, educators provide a more holistic and comprehensive education, promoting values of equality and respect for all individuals, regardless of age or ability.

Promoting Inclusivity: Learning about ageism promotes a more inclusive environment in the classroom. It encourages students to value diversity and understand the importance of creating a society that respects and includes people of all ages and abilities.

Advocacy Skills: Understanding ageism can enhance students' advocacy skills. They can learn how to challenge stereotypes, fight discrimination, and promote policies that support both older adults and individuals with disabilities.

Personal Growth: Learning about different forms of discrimination, including ageism, contributes to personal growth. It helps students develop critical thinking, empathy, and a deeper understanding of social dynamics, all of which are valuable life skills.

Role Models and Representation: Learning about ageism can help students appreciate the contributions of older individuals, including those with disabilities, and recognize them as role models and sources of inspiration.

Overall, teaching students with disabilities about ageism not only empowers them but also fosters a more inclusive, empathetic, and equitable society.

Content Research

Ageism, or discrimination based on age, affects individuals across various stages of life, although it most commonly impacts older adults. Through our seminar I have learned some key aspects of ageism, definitions, causes, types, and its implications in society. Through learning this different aspect of ageism I believe it is imperative to begin teaching students in a K-12 program about ageism.

Ageism is stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination against individuals or groups based on their age (World Health Organization 2020). This can manifest in a variety of settings, such as the workplace, healthcare, media, and social interactions. Ageism often involves treating people as though they have reduced value, capacity, or relevance due to their age, regardless of their actual abilities or characteristics. Institutional Ageism is the ageism that is embedded in policies, laws, and organizational practices that disadvantage certain age groups. For example, mandatory retirement ages or age-based hiring preferences. Interpersonal Ageism is ageism that occurs in social interactions when individuals hold or express age-based stereotypes. This can include dismissive attitudes or condescension toward older or younger people.

Ableism refers to the systemic discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities, based on the belief that typical abilities are superior (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). Ableism can manifest in many ways, from overt discrimination to subtle forms of exclusion and implicit biases. Historically, ableism has roots in the societal valuation of "normal" bodies and minds, where individuals who deviate from these norms are marginalized or pitied. Fiona Kumari Campbell's *Contours of Ableism* (2009) argues that ableism is tied to societal standards of productivity and autonomy, with able-bodied norms dictating standards of value, worth, and inclusion**.**

Intersection of Ableism and Ageism

Ashton Applewhite highlights the intersection of ageism and ableism as gaining increasing attention in recent scholarship (Applewhite, 2016). Below I will point out some key themes and scholarly articles that focus on the overlapping experiences of ageism and ableism, examining how these forms of discrimination reinforce each other in social, healthcare, and policy contexts. The intersection of ableism and ageism reveals how society's biases against disability and age reinforce each other, impacting the lives of older adults with disabilities in unique and complex ways. This intersection highlights the overlapping prejudices, structural barriers, and social stigmas faced by individuals who are both older and disabled. Both ableism and ageism are rooted in assumptions about what is "normal" or "valuable," often prioritizing youth, independence, and physical/mental capability. Individuals at the intersection of ableism and ageism may experience a double disadvantage, facing both devaluation for their age and marginalization due to disability (Campbell, 2009).

Challenges

Older adults with disabilities may receive substandard care due to biases about their quality of life or potential for improvement, leading to disparities in healthcare access and outcomes (Krekula, Nikander, and Wilińska 2018). Ageism and ableism in the workplace can limit job opportunities, retirement income, and access to disability benefits, making financial independence difficult. Physical barriers, lack of accessible public spaces, and negative stereotypes often limit older adults with disabilities from fully participating in social activities, increasing isolation and loneliness (Charlton, 1998). The stigma from both ableism and ageism can lead to feelings of worthlessness, depression, and anxiety, especially when compounded with physical health challenges (Garland, 2022).

Myths and Stereotypes

Older adults and people with disabilities are falsely seen as dependent, helpless, or burdensome, which can lead to exclusion from social and professional circles (Ayalon and Tesch-Römer 2018). Through implicit and explicit teaching older adults are not thought of as contributing citizens, particularly those with disabilities, treating them as invisible or infantilizing them, which can diminish their autonomy and respect. This may lead to a belief that older adults with disabilities cannot contribute meaningfully to society.

Barriers and Gaps

Policies to address the unique needs of aging workers and workers with disabilities do not change frequently (Colella & Stone, 2009) .Medicare and other aging-focused health programs may lack adequate coverage for long-term disability-related needs, creating gaps in essential care for older adults with disabilities. Public spaces and transportation may fail to meet the needs of older adults and adults with disabilities, limiting their mobility and independence.

Inclusivity

Creating spaces and opportunities where older adults with disabilities can engage with other age groups helps reduce stigma and builds mutual understanding. Furthermore, designing environments, products, and services that accommodate people of all ages and abilities helps break down physical barriers and the segregation of older adults with disabilities. Public awareness starting in PK with initiatives that educate people about the contributions, capabilities, and value of older adults with disabilities can counteract negative stereotypes and promote a more inclusive society (Drum, Krahn, 2009)

Representation

Positive, accurate representation of older adults with and without disabilities in media can challenge prevailing stereotypes and provide role models who reflect resilience, wisdom, and capability (Ellis, Goggin 2015). Fostering community programs that support participation and leadership by older adults with disabilities enriches communities and breaks down social isolation.

Policy

Recognizing the intersection of ableism and ageism allows for more inclusive advocacy efforts that address the unique needs of older adults with disabilities. Cross-generational advocacy can benefit both younger individuals with disabilities and older adults facing age-related impairments (Shakespeare, 2015) Policies such as comprehensive disability benefits, affordable healthcare, and accessible public services are critical to addressing this intersection. Addressing biases within social services, healthcare, and the workplace is essential for a fairer society. Programs that encourage autonomy, self-advocacy, and representation in decision-making processes are key to dismantling stereotypes and ensuring respect and support for this demographic.

Outcomes

Addressing the intersection of ableism and ageism is essential for a truly inclusive society, ensuring that everyone, regardless of age or ability, has access to equal opportunities and dignity. Policy and practices that reduce ableism and ageism can significantly improve the health, financial stability, and social well-being of older adults and people with disabilities. As populations age globally, focusing on these intersecting issues will become increasingly important to ensure that society meets the needs of all its members.

Instructional Implementation

Teaching Strategies

Think-Pair-Share: Students think individually, discuss with a partner, and then share with the larger group.

Gallery Walks: Students will have exposure to questions or topics around the room, and have students rotate through each, adding their thoughts or learning collaboratively.

Multiple Means of Representation: Presentation of information in diverse formats (e.g., text, video, audio).

Collaborative Learning: Students will work in groups to promote problem-solving, communication, and critical thinking skills.

Socratic Questioning: Open-ended questions will prompt critical thinking and deeper understanding.

Problem-Solving Challenges: Students will be presented with a problem or scenario and have them devise solutions.

Funds of Knowledge: Familial, home, and community knowledge and experiences as a foundation for new learning.

Self-Assessment: Students will evaluate their own learning and set goals for improvement.

Lessons/Activities

Introduction to Ageism

Objective: Understand the concepts of ageism and why it is important to recognize and address it.

Activities:
- Discussion and Definitions: Start with a class discussion on stereotypes and ask if students know what ageism is. Define the term and give examples.
- Video Introduction: Show a short video explaining ageism.
- Think-Pair-Share: Have students discuss in pairs any experiences or observations they might have related to ageism topics, then share as a class.

Materials:
- Vocabulary Journal
- Age-appropriate video https://youtu.be/5vIrL7fiNgw?si=4U0NvysckqO6dddF

Exploring Ageism in Society

Objective: Identify, observe, and discuss examples of ageism in everyday life.

Activities:
- Brainstorming: On poster, create a list of common stereotypes about older people (e.g., "all old people are weak").
- Case Studies: Share stories or scenarios where ageism is present (e.g., young people assuming an elderly person doesn't understand technology). Discuss how these assumptions can affect people emotionally and practically.
- Role Play: In pairs or groups, have students role-play a scenario where ageism is confronted and challenged.

Materials:
- Scenarios or stories about ageism
- Whiteboard for brainstorming

Understanding Ableism and Its Impact

Objective: Understand what ableism is and recognize how it affects people with disabilities.

Activities:
- Guest Speaker: Invite a guest with lived experience of disability to speak to the class from Charlotte Center for Advocacy.

- Discussion of Disability Representation: Discuss what disabilities are and whether they can be visible or invisible. Introduce terms like "accommodations" and "accessibility."
- Activity on Empathy: Give students the ability to navigate the school campus and understand how a person with a disability would need accommodations to do the same activities.

Materials:
- Guest Speaker
- Vocabulary Journal

Intersection of Ageism and Ableism

Objective: Explore how ageism and ableism can intersect, especially for older adults with disabilities.

Activities:
- Class Discussion: Review what students have learned so far and discuss how someone can experience both ageism and ableism.
- Video and Story: Show a video and read a story about an older adult with a disability and an older adult that does not have a disability.
- Sorting: Ask students to come up to the board and write feelings that may be ageist vs ableist.
- Reflection Activity: Have students write a short paragraph or draw a picture on what they learned about the experiences of older adults with disabilities.

Materials:
- https://youtu.be/ggIKtfBYr3U?si=JEwTXvtt3XVosTCJ
- Fajua Singh Keeps Going Book
- Paper and art supplies for reflection activity

Creating a Respectful and Inclusive Community

Objective: Encourage students to practice inclusion and respect for people of all ages and abilities.

Activities:
- Class Pledge: Work together to create a classroom pledge to respect people of all ages and abilities. Have each student write or sign it.
- Poster-Making Activity: In groups, students design posters that promote awareness of ageism and ableism, showcasing positive, inclusive messages.
- Sharing Session: Have students present their posters to the class and discuss their ideas for making their school more inclusive.

Materials:
- Large poster paper, markers, colored pencils, and art supplies for posters

- Handout for the class pledge

Assessment and Reflection

End-of-Unit Reflection: Have students fill out a short reflection sheet with the following questions:
- What surprised you most about ageism or ableism?
- How can we help others feel respected and included?
- What will you do differently after learning about these topics?

Optional Extensions:
- School Assembly: Present the posters or pledges at a school assembly to raise awareness.
- Book Reading: Read age-appropriate books that discuss disability or age, *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio or *The Old Woman Who Named Things* by Cynthia Rylant, *My Grandpa My Tree and M*e by Kendra Binney

Appendix 1
Teaching Standards:

K-5: Understanding Self and Community
- Civics and Government (K.C&G.1): Understand the roles and responsibilities of people in society (e.g., respecting diversity, including older adults).
- Civics and Government (2.C&G.2.2): Explain how people can work together to solve problems (e.g., combating stereotypes like ageism).
- Civics and Government (4.C&G.2.3): Explain the importance of civic responsibility in promoting inclusion and equity.

Middle and High School: Civics and Social Justice
- Civics and Government (8.C&G.2.3): Analyze how the rights and responsibilities of citizens can promote social change, including addressing discriminatory practices like ageism.
- Civics Literacy (CL.C&G.2.5): Analyze the rights of individuals and how groups can be marginalized in society, including the elderly.

English Language Arts (ELA) Standards
K-12: Reading, Writing, and Communication Skills
- Reading Informational Text (RI):
  - (RI.3.2): Determine the main idea of a text and explain how it is supported by key details (e.g., reading about the impact of ageism).
  - (RI.7.8): Evaluate the argument and claims in a text (e.g., analyzing articles about ageism and its consequences).
- Speaking and Listening (SL):
  - (SL.5.1): Engage in collaborative discussions on topics and issues (e.g., discussing stereotypes about aging).
  - (SL.11-12.4): Present information and analysis clearly and concisely (e.g., creating advocacy presentations).

Health Education Standards
K-12: Personal and Social Responsibility
- (3.ICR.1.3): Explain how diversity in people and culture enhances communities.
- (6.ICR.1.4): Explain the importance of showing respect for self and others, including those of different ages.
- (9.ICR.1.2): Evaluate the impact of stereotypes and discrimination on individuals and society.

Interdisciplinary Opportunities
- Visual Arts (K-12): Explore how art portrays aging and address stereotypes visually.
- Science (K-12): Discuss aging as a natural biological process and dispel myths related to aging and health.

- Career and Technical Education (CTE): Explore careers in gerontology, healthcare, or advocacy for aging populations.

Appendix 2

Definitions

Ageism - prejudice, discrimination, or stereotyping directed at people based on their age. It can affect people of any age, but it primarily devalues older people.

- Stereotypes: How people think about others based on their age
- Prejudice: How people feel about others based on their age
- Discrimination: How people act towards others based on their age
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Ableism - a system of discrimination and prejudice against people with disabilities.

Accommodations -Special arrangements that help individuals with different needs access things in their environment.

Appendix 3

Resources

Combat Ageism - https://youtu.be/5vIrL7fiNgw?si=M1YSrcyiGelHrHFl

Older Adults Can - https://blog.elliq.com/5-inspiring-seniors-defying-age-stereotypes

Book- Ms. Tizzy by Libba Moore Gray

Aging with a Disability https://youtu.be/ggIKtfBYr3U?si=WyiFs2SJL_mHBq8c

Book- Grandpa's Garden by Stella Fry

Appendix 4

Worksheet

1.What surprised you most about ageism or ableism?

2. How can we help others feel respected and included?

3What will you do differently after learning about these topics?

Appendix 5

Materials

- Vocaulary Journal
- Posters
- Whiteboard
- Earplugs
- Gloves
- Ms. Tizzy by Libba Moore Gray
- Fauja Sing Keeps Going
- Grandpa's Garden Stella Fry
- Plain Paper
- Art Supplies (Crayons, Markers, Colored Pencils)

Appendix 6

Case Studies

Fauja Singh (Marathon Runner)
Celebrated figure in the world of athletics. Known as the "Turbaned Tornado," Singh defied ageist stereotypes by becoming the oldest marathon runner at the age of 100. His remarkable achievements are a testament to the power of resilience, discipline, and a positive mindset (Smith 2020).

Harriette Thompson (Marathon Runner)
At age 92, Harriette Thompson became the oldest woman to complete a marathon. She finished the San Diego Rock 'n' Roll Marathon in 2015. Despite battling cancer and other health challenges, her accomplishment redefined what aging bodies can achieve (Jones 2019).

Tao Porchon-Lynch (Yoga Instructor)
Tao Porchon-Lynch was recognized as the world's oldest yoga teacher by Guinness World Records in 2012 at age 93. She continued teaching yoga until her passing at 101, demonstrating extraordinary physical and mental vitality (Dover, 2022).

Gladys Burrill (Adventurer and Marathoner)
Nicknamed the "Gladiator," Gladys Burrill completed the Honolulu Marathon at age 92, earning her a place in the Guinness World Records as the oldest female marathon finisher (Roberts 2018).

Iris Apfel (Fashion Icon)
Iris Apfel, a businesswoman and style icon, gained global fame in her 80s for her bold fashion and design sense. She signed with a modeling agency at age 97 and remains active in the fashion industry (Smith 2020).

Peter Roget (Thesaurus Creator)
Peter Roget published his famous thesaurus at age 73. His work demonstrates that creativity and intellectual contributions can flourish later in life (Johnson 2015).

Diana Nyad (Endurance Swimmer)
At age 64, Diana Nyad became the first person to swim from Cuba to Florida without a shark cage, completing the 110-mile journey after multiple failed attempts earlier in her life (Williams 2019).

Anna Mary Robertson "Grandma" Moses (Artist)

Grandma Moses started her professional painting career in her late 70s. Her folk art gained widespread acclaim, proving that it's never too late to pursue creative passions (Miller 2017).

Colonel Harland Sanders (KFC Founder)

Colonel Sanders launched the Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise in his 60s, showcasing entrepreneurial success later in life (Sanders, 1995).

Appendix 7

Teacher Resources

https://www.asaging.org/ This site provides a comprehensive hub for professionals involved in aging. ASA offers resources like webinars, toolkits, advocacy initiatives, and professional development programs to combat ageism and support inclusivity. Its focus is on connecting members, advancing education, and addressing equity issues in aging-related professions. Members also gain access to publications like *Generations Journal* and participate in initiatives like Ageism Awareness Day to drive cultural and systemic change in aging.

https://www.who.int/health-topics/ageism#tab=tab_1 The WHO site highlights the global impact of ageism, defining it as discrimination based on age. It emphasizes the negative effects ageism has on mental and physical health, policies, and societal equality. The site provides research findings, policy briefs, and educational tools to support global efforts to reduce ageism across all age groups.

https://www.reframingaging.org/resources This resource offers tools and guidelines for shifting public narratives about aging. It provides communication strategies to combat stereotypes, encouraging positive and inclusive representations of older adults in media, workplaces, and communities. Resources include messaging guides and research findings to support advocates, educators, and policymakers.

https://library.lmunet.edu/booklist This library provides a curated selection of books addressing various aspects of aging, ageism, and related social issues. It serves as a resource for academic research, classroom instruction, and community education, supporting a deeper understanding of age-related challenges and societal attitudes.

https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9271398/ This academic article examines the intersection of ageism and health outcomes, exploring how negative societal attitudes toward aging can exacerbate health disparities. It provides empirical evidence on the impact of ageist attitudes in healthcare settings and highlights interventions to address these issues

https://www.geron.org/Portals/0/files/Career%20and%20Learning This toolkit by the Gerontological Society of America aims to inspire students in grades 7–12 to consider careers in aging-related fields. It includes lesson plans, career profiles, and promotional materials to raise awareness of the importance of professions that support aging populations. The resource is designed to address workforce shortages in aging services and highlight the diverse opportunities available

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