



Aren't Grandparents Grand?
Exploring Intergenerational Relationships in the Classroom
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Bain Elementary School

This curriculum unit is recommended for:
First Grade, Literacy, Social Studies
K-2 Literacy, Social Studies

Keywords: intergenerational relationships, grandparents, Grandparent's Day, genetics, ageism

Teaching Standards: See [Appendix 1](#) for teaching standards addressed in this unit.

Synopsis: This unit will help students to explore the relationship that they have with an older adult. Students will read stories highlighting intergenerational relationships and study the aspects of those. Students will be discussing their chosen adult's life story and then completing a simple genetics activity to see how they are alike/similar to their chosen older adult.

I plan to teach this unit during the coming year to 20 students in First Grade Science.

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Aren't Grandparents Grand?

Exploring Intergenerational Relationships in the Classroom

Elizabeth Kerr

Introduction

I grew up living next door to my paternal grandparents and my maternal grandparents were only fifteen minutes down the road. I look back on those relationships now and realize how lucky I was. I was able to spend so much time with my grandparents. I learned so much from my family and know how much I benefitted from their knowledge and wisdom. My own child only has one set of grandparents that are still living. We try to make as much of those relationships as possible.

Rationale

According to 2021 United States Department of Labor statistics, 3.63 million children are being raised by a grandparent. Reasons given include poverty, parental incarceration, maternal mortality, parental illness, single parent families and military deployments.¹ Grandparents' roles in their grandchildren's lives are becoming even more important.

Students need to be able to explore these relationships with their grandparents and learn from their grandparents' life stories. This unit will enable students to have conversations with their grandparents/older adults about their lives and complete an activity that will show how much they are alike.

School Demographics

Bain Elementary School sits adjacent to the Bain Academy historical site in Mint Hill, a suburb of Charlotte, North Carolina. Bain Academy was founded in 1889 by John Bain. It is thought that he had a strong desire to improve the lives of the people around him. So, as a longtime member of Philadelphia Presbyterian Church, the church granted him permission to fund the school on the current site.

From the beginning, the school attracted students from all over. It is not so different now. Families moving to the area often examine the schools around and find Bain to be a good fit. It is a community school with a great deal of parental involvement. In 2013, students were welcomed into a new building that housed grades 1-5. Kindergarten students remained in the facility that was built in the 1980's and one of the oldest parts of the building was demolished.

Students at Bain are inquisitive and enthusiastic learners. There are many opportunities for them to explore different aspects of their learning. Students can participate in the morning closed-circuit newscast, Safety Patrol, Art, Music, Physical Education,

¹ "Grandchildren Being Raised by Grandparents."

Media Literacy and our own B5 Sensory Lab (designed to help students build core strength and engage their senses in different ways). Bain also now hosts a Pre-Kindergarten program.

We currently serve approximately 729 students and have a very active PTA (Parent Teacher Association). According to the 2022-2023 NC Report Card, 29.5% of students are economically disadvantaged.² Bain Elementary has a 96.5% attendance rate with 10.2% of students considered chronically absent. These families represent many different nationalities and backgrounds (29.1% African American/Hispanic, 8.6% Asian, 6.3% Two or More Races and 55.8% Caucasian). These students thrive in working together and learning about each other's cultures. As this shows, Bain has a long history of serving the families in the Mint Hill area.

Begin with the End in Mind: Unit Goals and Outcomes

While teaching this unit, the students will:

- Read fiction texts with a focus on intergenerational relationships.
- Conduct a talk with a older adult to get their story about a childhood event.
- Record observations by writing or drawing in a Venn Diagram.

By the end of the unit, students will be able to:

- Use conversation starters to get someone to talk about their story.
- Tell about similarities and differences in a variety of circumstances (between characters, between themselves and someone else).
- Give examples of how intergenerational relationships are helpful to the characters in the stories we read.

Content Research

The Power of the Role of Grandparents in their Grandchildren's Lives

As stated in the introduction, in 2021 approximately 3.3% of children in the United States were living with their grandparents.³ Causes can be linked to changing demographics and families in crisis. Therefore, grandparents are becoming even more important in their grandchildren's lives. This has brought the new term, "grandfamily," into the lexicon.⁴ Examining these relationships is becoming more prominent in gerontologic and sociologic circles.

Many factors have been documented to increase/decrease the quality of a relationship between a grandparent and a grandchild. Rachel Dunifon and Ashish Bajracharya conducted a study looking into some of these factors. This includes the increase in life expectancy, increased

² "Bain Elementary."

³ Bureau, "Southern States Had Higher Than Average Share of Adults Age 30 and Over Who Lived With Grandchildren in 2021."

⁴ Edmunds, "Grandparents Raising Elementary-Age Grandchildren and the Students' Academic, Attendance, and Behavior Outcomes."

financial security among older adults, and decrease in family size (from 2.18 children per family to 1.86 children per family). Communication is now made easier by email and other technologies allows grandparents to interact even more with their grandchildren.⁵ What can be concluded from the information that was gathered? Just like any other area of study, age (of the child and the grandparent), demographics, socio-economic status, race, gender, family structure and distance are all taken into consideration.

What many may find to be common sense is now supported by this study. Frequent contact between grandparents and grandchildren improves their relationship. If grandparents undermine or subvert parents, this decreases the quality of the relationship. Grandparents who provide emotional support to parents have a better relationship with their grandchildren. Families in Iowa reported that the feeling of closeness with grandparents translated into grandchildren feeling academically competent, personally competent, self-confident and mature. Obviously, drug-use by grandparents influenced their grandchild's behavior problems.⁶

In the position of a grandparent as caretaker of their grandchild, the Michigan Psychological Association points out that children in those situations often have experienced a great amount of trauma. The study cited on their website reports that many of these children were six times more likely to have experienced at least three of these traumatic events:

- Having their family torn apart by divorce or separation (more than four times more common).
- Observing physical violence between parents or adults (more than four times as likely).
- Being a victim of or witnessing neighborhood violence (more than twice as likely).
- Living with someone who was mentally ill, suicidal or severely depressed (twice as common).

These children are facing some very difficult challenges, and this affects their development.⁷

The Power of Intergenerational Relationships

Given the data on how many grandparents are now caregivers to their grandchildren, the power of intergenerational relationships cannot be denied. The American Society on Aging states that intergenerational relationships and connections can help to meet Stages 1-3 (physiological, safety and love) of this hierarchy. It is important to note that the higher stages cannot be met until the lower stages are met.

For both children and older adults, a lack of social interaction can lead to many detrimental effects, including a higher mortality rate. Therefore, increasing social interactions, even across generations, can have a positive impact, even on the immune system.

⁵ Dunifon and Bajracharya, "The Role of Grandparents in the Lives of Youth."

⁶ Dunifon and Bajracharya.

⁷ "Children Being Raised by Grandparents Often at Risk."

Intergenerational relationships also serve as a way for families to pass down knowledge, storytelling and traditions. This has shown to be helpful with coping in times of grief. Families are able to preserve their culture and values through these connections.⁸

The Power of the Aging Brain

Along with improving social interactions between generations, noted psychiatrist and gerontologist Gene D. Cohen advocated for older adults to be recognized as creative and high-functioning individuals.⁹ Older adults have so much to contribute in our society.

Cohen, in his work, has found the older brain to be more adaptable and flexible than previously thought. He found four key attributes of the brain important for this phase of development:

- The brain is continually resculpting itself in response to experiences and learning.
- New brain cells do form throughout life.
- The brain's emotional circuitry matures and becomes more balanced with age.
- The brain's two hemispheres are more equally used by older adults.¹⁰

This is very positive information for anyone approaching the second half of their life.

Cohen also created four phases of development for the second half of life. While he provides age ranges for each stage, he notes that not everyone the same age is going through the same stage. Understanding that each person ages uniquely, with different life experiences, has been a major focus of this seminar. Cohen reiterates that point here.

The stages are as follows:

- Midlife reevaluation, approximately ages 40-65
- Liberation, approximately ages late fifties to early sixties
- Summing up, approximately ages late sixties, seventies and eighties
- Encore, approximately ages eighties and up.¹¹

Most grandparents of elementary school age children would probably fall between the midlife reevaluation phase and the liberation phase. During the midlife reevaluation phase, adults may feel the need to try something new and focus on what is meaningful in their lives.

Adults in the liberation phase may feel the desire to experiment and do away with earlier inhibitions and limitations. Cohen noted that there are physiological changes happening in the brain at this point that show that both hemispheres of the brain are working together in a more balanced fashion.¹²

When teaching this unit, be aware that the adults the students may be working with could be going through these phases and gear the interview questions accordingly.

⁸ "The Power of Intergenerational Connection."

⁹ "Gene D. Cohen."

¹⁰ Cohen, *The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain*.

¹¹ Cohen.

¹² Cohen.

The Power of a Story: Everyone has a Story to Tell

“The life course perspective (LCP) is a theoretical model that has been emerging over the last 45 years, across several disciplines. Sociologists, anthropologists, social historians, demographers, and psychologists—working independently and, more recently, collaboratively—have all helped to give it shape.”¹³

Elizabeth D. Hutchinson

The Life Course Perspective is a theory that posits that each person’s cumulative life experiences help to form their social identity. Each person’s economic and physical environments shape their own unique perspective and their life journey.¹⁴ With this in mind, this is the story that students are working to get through their interviews with a trusted older adult.

There are some techniques that can be used to help students learn more about their trusted older adult. These include asking indirect questions such as “My favorite childhood memory with my family is.....” This will lead the interviewee to think about their own experiences and, hopefully, relate them to the interviewer.

Another technique is allowing wait time. The interviewee can use cues such as nods or other encouraging body language to allow the interviewee to continue their thoughts. Interviewing a trusted older adult will help students gain insight into that person’s life course.

The Plan: Instructional Implementation

Materials needed to implement this unit are:

- chart paper
- iPad or mobile device
- Pre-Printed Post It Notes included in Appendix 2 for each read aloud.
- [*Mrs. Katz and Tush*](#) by Patricia Polacco
- [*The Hello, Goodbye Window*](#) by Norton Juster
- [*Mango, Abuela and Me*](#) by Meg Medina
- chenille stems
- pony beads (various colors, sorted into their colors)

Day 1, Introduction to Unit, How Do You See Older Adults?

Gather students around. Discuss the words “grandparent” or “older adult.” Ask students what they think it means to them. Have students draw a picture of what a grandparent is. Students should think about character traits (what they look like on the outside and what they are like on the inside). This we determine by thinking about what grandparents/older adults think, say and do.

¹³ Hutchinson, Elizabeth D., *A Life Course Perspective*.

¹⁴ “The Life Course Theory | Florida Department of Health.”

Next, ask students are older adults important and why they think so. Ask students to think about this question as you read [*Mrs. Katz and Tush*](#). Read the story using the provided Post-It notes as guided questions for a more interactive discussion.

Have students summarize the story when complete. Reiterate to students that Larnel and Mrs. Katz may not have been related, but they became very important to each other. Discuss the relationship between the two main characters.

Day 2, Who are My Grandparents? Looking Closely at Character Traits

Gather students around. Review the previous day's work. Review the pictures of the older adults that students drew from the previous day. Remind students that Larnel and Mrs. Katz were able to learn from each other and help each other quite a bit. Ask students who are some trusted older adults that they know. Students should mention their grandparents.

We are now going to look at some stories about grandparents and their grandchildren. Tell students that you want them to think about how grandparents in these stories are like their own grandparents. If students do not have any living grandparents or grandparents that they know, they can think about another trusted older adult.

Read [*The Hello, Goodbye Window*](#) by Norton Juster. Use the provided Post-It Notes as guided questions for a more interactive discussion.

Next, have students complete the provided character traits form to further analyze the characters in the story. Use the anchor chart in Appendix 2, Day 2 to help remind students what they are analyzing.

Day 3, Who are My Grandparents? Looking Closely at Character Traits, Part 2

Gather students around. Review the previous day's work. Remind students of character traits. These words are adjectives that are used to describe a character on the outside and on the inside. We think about what the characters think, say and do to help know how to describe them on the inside.

Today, the story is a fantastic example of an intergenerational relationship where both the grandmother and the granddaughter learn from each other. Tell students that they will need to listen closely for the central message in the story (or the lessons that the characters learn). Use the chart provided to create one with your students. Read [*Mango, Abuela and Me*](#) by Meg Medina. Use the provided Post-It notes to guide your questioning on the central message of the story.

At the conclusion of the story, have the students turn and talk with each other about what they think is the central message, using the guiding questions on the anchor chart. Students can illustrate their responses as their exit ticket on the sheet provided in Appendix 2, Day 3.

Day 4, Getting a Good Story

Gather students around. Tell the students that we have heard several good stories about how children and older adults help each other and listen to each other. Now, they are going to get to tell their own stories about their time spent with an older adult. Tell students that they are going to practice their listening and speaking skills by interviewing and talking with a trusted older adult.

First, students should practice with each other. Display the sentence starters provided in Appendix 2, Day 4. These sentence starters use an indirect questioning strategy. Pair students up. You may want to use cards or sticks to make sure pairings are random and students meet up with someone that they don't normally talk to. I use index cards with numbers and number words, one through ten (one – 1, two – 2, etc.). Then you could say the person with the number asks the questions first.

You should model how an active listener looks and sounds. See the Active Listener Anchor Chart in Appendix 2, Day 4. Have students engage in their conversations, taking turns using the sentence starters to guide their questioning.

At the conclusion of the time, have students fill out the questionnaire in Appendix 2, Day 4 as an Exit Ticket.

Remind students that the point of talking with their trusted older adult is to get THEIR story, to find out about that person. Listening is important!

Give students approximately one week to complete their conversations with their trusted older adult. Students will work to schedule a day to talk with their chosen Senior Adult and write down what they spoke about OR record it with permission.

Day 5, How are We Alike? (After Conversations are Completed)

The focus of this day is helping students to discover that older adults enjoy many of the same activities that they do and are active in their lives. Use the images provided or search out some others. Show a small section of the image initially and discuss with the students what they see. Next, show more of the image and discuss with the students. Finally, show the entire image and discuss. Do the students' perceptions change? Are they surprised to see older adults participating in those activities?

Next, students will complete a Venn Diagram showing how they are like their trusted Senior Adult and how they are different. Venn Diagram is provided in Appendix 2, Day 5. Review how to read a Venn Diagram (ways that your student and their trusted older adult are the same are written in the middle). Review diagrams upon completion.

Day 6, Making the Bracelets

Students will invite a senior adult to come into class. Groups will go around to different stations, answering certain questions at each one. Groups will answer the question by placing a bead on a pipe cleaner. Questions will be something like:

- Can you roll your tongue?
- Are your eyes the same color?
- Do you have curly hair or straight hair?
- Do you have dimples?
- Do you have freckles?
- Do you have a hitchhiker's thumb?
- Do you have cleft chin or a smooth chin?
- How do you fold your arms? Right on top or left?
- Is your pinkie finger bent?
- Did you like school when you were in first grade (substitute grade)?

Students will compare their bracelets to their older adult's bracelets to see how they are alike and different. See questions provided in Appendix 2, Day 6.

Day 7, Closing Activity

On the first day, students were asked to draw pictures of how they saw older adults in their minds. Now, as the unit is closing, students will be asked to revisit their ideas. Provide students with drawing paper. Talk about everything that they have thought about while learning about their grandparents/older adult. Ask them again to draw a picture representing their idea of an older adult. Then have students compare their pictures.

Discuss with students any big ideas that they gained from these activities. Answers may include things that they learned about the person or learning that older adults can do so many things. Let students share their pictures and big ideas with each other.

Students may complete the self-evaluation on the unit included in Appendix 2, Day 7.

Appendix 1: Teaching Standards Addressed in this Unit

RL.1.1 Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.

RL.1.2 Retell stories, including key details, and demonstrate understanding of their central message or lesson.

RL.1.3 Describe characters, settings, and major events in a story, using key details.

RL.1.9 Compare and contrast the adventures and experiences of characters in stories.

SL.1.1 Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about grade 1 topics and texts with peers and adults in small and larger groups.

a. Follow agreed-upon rules for discussions.

b. Build on others' talk in conversations by responding to the comments of others through multiple exchanges.

SL.1.3 Ask and answer questions about what a speaker says in order to gather additional information or clarify something that is not understood.

SL.1.4 Produce complete sentences to describe people, places, things, and events with relevant details, expressing ideas and feelings clearly.

SL.1.5 Add drawings or other visual displays to descriptions when appropriate to clarify ideas, thoughts, and feelings.

W.1.3 Write narrative in which they recount two or more appropriately sequenced events, include some details regarding what happened, use temporal transition words to signal event order, and provide some sense of closure.

a. With guidance and support from adults, organize information and ideas around a topic to plan and prepare to write.

b. With guidance and support from adults, focus on a topic, respond to questions and suggestions from peers, and add details to strengthen writing as needed.

W.1.5 Participate in shared research and writing projects.

Appendix 2: Implementing the Unit

Day 1, Exit Ticket

Name: _____

Mrs. Katz and Tush

Page 1

I see by Larnel's posture that he doesn't look very interested in talking to Mrs. Katz.

What do you know about Larnel's mother from the text and the illustration? (She is a very kind and caring person.)

Page 5

Predict: Will Larnel keep his promise?

Do you like the name Mrs. Katz gave the kitten?

Page 9

What is one thing Larnel and Mrs. Katz have in common?

Page 12

I see that Larnel is helping Mrs. Katz and Tush.

What does this tell you about Larnel's inner character traits?

Page 15

Can you show on your face how you think Mrs. Katz felt when Larnel's dad brought Tush home?

Page 17

Passover is a traditional Jewish holiday.

What do you think a tradition is? What traditions do you have?

Page 21

Predict: What is the surprise?

Page 24

How did Larnel and Mrs. Katz help each other?

Was this relationship important to Larnel?

How do you know?

Day 2

Page 1-2

I wonder what is so special about the window....

Page 5-6

How do you think the little girl feels about her grandparents' house?

Page 11-12

**Do you think Nanna really knows all of the stars?
Why?**

Page 19-20

**I think the little girl enjoys her time with her grandparents.
What do you think? Why?**

Page 25-26

This little girl is having bittersweet emotions, happy and sad.

Have you ever felt this way?

Last Page

Predict: Do you think this girl will have a special window in her house?

Character Traits

On the Outside

**What does the
character look
like?**

On the Inside

**What does the
character think?**

**What does the
character say?**

**What does the
character do?**

Name: _____

Let's Look at Character Traits

Poppy	Nanna	Little Girl

What is the Central Message?

- 1. What is the problem in the story?**
- 2. What does/do the character/characters about the problem?**
- 3. What lesson does/do the character/characters learn from this?**
- 4. What do you think the author is trying to teach you?**

e:

What is the Central Message?

Day 4

Sentence Starters for Getting a Good Story

“I like to read books about weather. I also like to read books on.....”

“I love to visit the beach.....”

“I like to play with”

“I like _____ in school.....”

“I have 2 brothers. We play together a lot.....”

How to Be an Active Listener

Eyes on the Speaker

Quiet Lips

Quiet Bodies

Thinking Brains

Name: _____

Did You Listen?

- 1. What is one thing your partner said that surprised you?**

- 2. What is one thing your partner said that they like about school?**

- 3. What is one thing your partner said that they like to read about?**

- 4. Did you and your partner have anything in common?**

Day 5



15

¹⁵ “Senior Running Free Stock Photo - StockSnap.Io.”



16



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¹⁶ Recreation, *Senior Adult Volleyball*.

¹⁷ Limited, “Music Band of Elderly People Isolated on White Background Stock Photo - Alamy.”

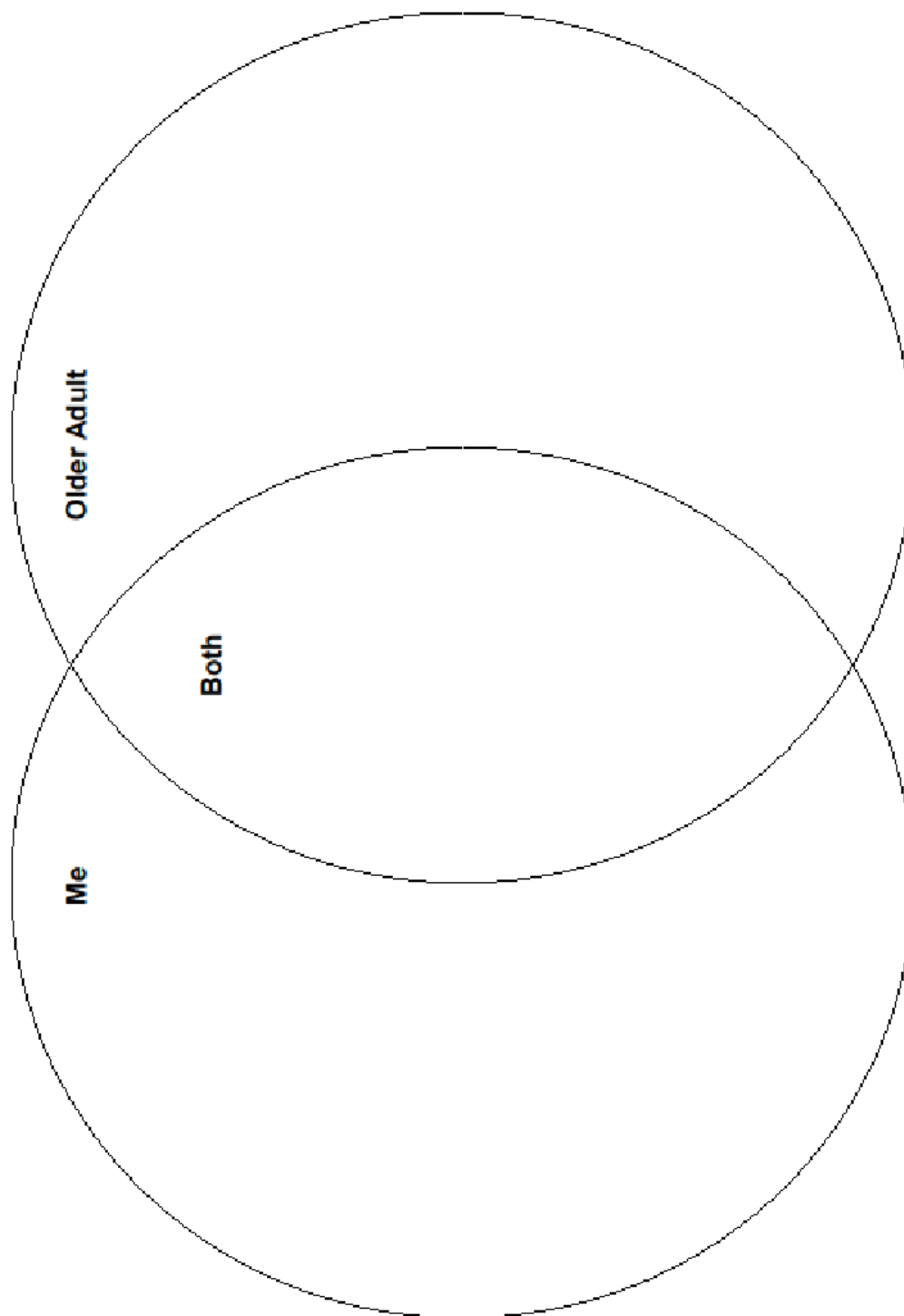


Gene Dykes, running in the 2017 Rothman 8K, part of the Philadelphia Marathon Weekend
COURTESY DAVE BROADBENT

Venn Diagram created using [Worksheet Works](#).

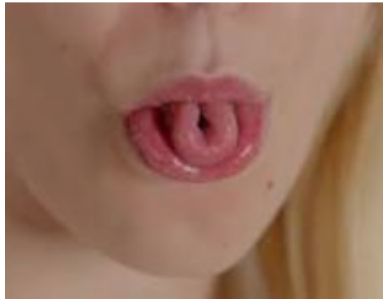
¹⁸ “Older Runners Lacing Up in Greater Numbers.”

How are We Alike?



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Can you roll your tongue?



Put a dark blue bead on
your bracelet if you can.



Put a light blue bead on
your bracelet if you can not.

Are your eyes the same color?

Put a dark green bead on
your bracelet if your eyes
are the same color.

Put a light green bead on
your bracelet if your eyes
are not the same color.

Do you have curly hair or straight hair?

Put a red bead on your bracelet if you have curly hair.

Put a pink bead on your bracelet if you have straight hair.

Do you have dimples?



Put a brown bead on your bracelet if you have dimples.

Put a black bead on your bracelet if you do not have dimples.

Do you have freckles?



Put a yellow bead on
your bracelet if you
have freckles.

Put a clear bead on
your bracelet if you
do not have freckles.

Do you have hitchhiker's thumb?



Regular thumb



Hitchhiker's thumb

19

Put a grey bead on
your bracelet if you do

Put a white bead on
your bracelet if you

¹⁹ "Hitchhiker's Thumb Deformity - Causes, Symptoms, Treatment."

not have hitchhiker's thumb. do have hitchhiker's thumb.

Do you have a cleft in your chin?



Put a light purple bead on your bracelet if you do have a cleft.



Put a dark purple bead on your bracelet if you do not have a cleft.

How do you fold your arms?



Right arm on top.

Put an orange bead on your bracelet if you fold your arms with the right arm on top.



Left arm on top.

Put a sparkle bead on your bracelet if you fold your arms with the left arm on top.

²⁰ "Myths of Human Genetics: Tongue Rolling."

Is your pinkie finger bent?



Put a silver bead on your bracelet if your pinkie finger is bent.




Put a gold bead on your bracelet if your pinkie finger is straight.

Did you like school when you were in first grade?

Choose ANY same color you both want if you both liked first grade.

Choose ANY different color you want if you did not like first grade.

Day 7, Student Self-Evaluation

I did my best work!	
I learned something new.	
I know that I am different from older adults in some ways, but there are many ways we are alike.	

Appendix 3: Annotated Teacher Resources

[United States Census Bureau Information, 2017-2021](#)

[Generations United](#)

This is a website dedicated to connecting people across generations for the benefit of all. Also, this site provides resources and support for grandfamilies and kinship families.

[Post-It Note Template](#)

[*Mrs. Katz and Tush* YouTube Read Aloud](#)

[*The Hello, Goodbye Window* YouTube Read Aloud](#)

[*Mango, Abuela and Me* YouTube Read Aloud](#)

[American Society on Aging](#)

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Endnotes