CHILDREN'S INTEGRATION INTO COMMUNITY LIFE: OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION AND FOR DEVELOPING MULTI-AGE RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

The integration of children into the daily lives of their communities, and engagement with adults in productive activities and shared endeavours, are two positive elements which have been previously overlooked in discussions of alternative educational approaches. Children, families and communities all benefit when children have regular opportunities to be embedded in the daily social fabric of family and community life, interacting across ages and generations. Interviews with families enrolled in British Columbia's SelfDesign Learning program demonstrate how the opportunities possible for children who learn outside of school are broad, powerful and should be recognized as legitimate by anyone involved with children.

Keywords: Community integration, intergenerational learning, informal learning

Whakawhanaungatanga is a Maori (New Zealand indigenous) concept describing how people are connected to each other, to previous and future generations, and to their environments. Looking through this sociocultural lens, children, adults and society can be seen as fundamentally linked (Brennan, 2009; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Whakawhanaungatanga, n.d). As easy

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as this statement is to agree with on the surface, the organization of Western societies provides an illusion that each are separate. To explore the web of invisible connections between child, adult and society, this paper will focus on two interrelated themes: the integration of children into the daily lives of their communities, and the benefits for children of time spent with adults engaging in productive activities and shared endeavours. I will argue that children, families and communities all benefit when children have regular opportunities to be embedded in the daily social fabric of family and community life, interacting across ages and generations. To accomplish this, the paper will reflect on a British Columbia Ministry of Education funded, independent school program called SelfDesign. SelfDesign places emphasis on learning out-of-school, from everyday activities and, while purporting to prioritize individualized learning, it is an educational approach which actually fosters individual, family and community well-being together. Interviews with SelfDesign families reveal the interesting benefits for children when they have the time to participate in traditionally adult activities such as lapidary groups, selling at farmer's markets, accompanying their parents to volunteer on farms or sit in on town meetings. While learning outside of school is often referred to as 'informal' and seen as supplementary or secondary to a child's 'formal' education in school, I will attempt to show how the kind and scope of learning opportunities possible for children who learn outside of school, with various ages and in community are broad, powerful and should be recognized as legitimate by anyone involved with children. While this paper will focus on the SelfDesign program, educational alternatives such as unschooling and homeschooling can all contribute to an integrative, intergenerational community life, an element which has been previously overlooked in discussions of these educational approaches. It is my hope that by seeing the possibilities of these alternatives, that schools might begin to prioritize the integration of children into community life as an important part of their

curriculum, and that people may begin to broaden their understanding of what constitutes learning.

Compartmentalization of society

In Western countries most children spend full days in schools, and adults are occupied through work at home or outside of the home. It is rare to see children at adult places of work or involved with activities other than child-specialized ones (i.e: daycare, school, sports, youth groups). This organization of society means that there are few opportunities for children to engage alongside adults in productive activities and shared endeavours, working towards a common purpose. The segregation of ages in our communities and thus from opportunities for children to participate in mature, adult activities has evolved for various historical and economic reasons, such as changes in "child labor laws, age-graded schooling, reduced family size, the nuclearization of families and communities, and other related societal change" (Rogoff, Morelli & Chavajay, 2010, p. 438). It is important to question the boundaries which have arisen between generations due to these changes, and the implications for child development, family and community life.

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Literature Review

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Research from various fields, such as cultural development, anthropology and educational theory can be pieced together to form a coherent background for this topic. While little research exists to explore how homelearning specifically supports greater embeddedness of children in community life, a literature review revealed key themes which support my thesis from various angles.

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A recent survey by the Vancouver Foundation, polling 3,841 residents and people belonging to community organizations, showed that people are increasingly feeling a sense of disconnection and isolation within their communities. The study cites key patterns for Vancouver, such as difficulty making friends, weak neighbourhood connections and retreat from community and civic life. Increasing segregation by age, ethnicity, income and language is contributing to this disconnection and a growing lack of participation in community activities and meaningful day-to-day neighbourhood relationships (Vancouver Foundation, 2012). Alternatively, a 2003 survey by the Homeschooling Legal Defense Association revealed that grown homeschoolers are active in their communities, are civically involved, and report high rates of work and life satisfaction (Ray, 2003).

Much has been written about young children's access to community life and adult work through the research of Barbara Rogoff. Writing from a Vygotskian perspective, she shows how the people with whom children are involved, and the daily activities in which they participate influence development (Morelli, Rogoff & Angelillo, 2003; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Rogoff's primary research concerns the notion of Intent Community Participation (sometimes called guided participation), based on Vygotsky's theory that learning happens as children interact with more experienced peers and adults who take them out of their 'zone,' helping them develop skills beyond what they could accomplish on their own. While Vygotsky and many developmentalists focus on growth in school and academic settings, Rogoff focuses on how learning happens informally through everyday activities and interactions where teaching is not always explicit. For the purposes of this paper, her research will illuminate how different cultures provide children with differing levels of access to community and adult life, as well as demonstrate different cultural approaches to learning (Morelli et al., 2003).

In, *Beyond Child Care*, Margaret Brennan (2007) examines how the cultural arrangements of daycare and school separate children from community life. She notes how children have limited opportunities to contribute meaningfully to their families and communities, and to witness adult work. Children naturally have a social drive to participate in meaningful endeavours, and the structure of school creates an artificial separation which makes inclusion in community life difficult for both teachers and children. Children, as Brennan demonstrates, have a strong desire to be included in adult life. During her fieldwork in preschool settings, she observed how the 'children attended most closely to events and conversations that were not designed specifically for their participation,' and were keenly interested in the lives of the adults around them (Brennan, 2007).

Gunhild Hagestad in, "Should We Be Concerned About Age Segregation?," states that both the young and old alike need opportunities to build familiarity with each other across generations. He argues that this helps to break down and prevent us-them distinctions which can lead to prejudicial behaviours (Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2006). The documentary "Whose Grandmother Are You?" details a school program which relocated an elementary class into a retirement home. Examples are provided of how children and elderly people overcame their initial prejudices to develop meaningful relationships by interacting on a daily basis (Elderton, 2007).

A central theme in the literature reviewed is that learning takes place in context, through participation in social activities with others. According to Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) in, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation,* learning is relational, negotiated and always takes place within sociocultural communities. Learners begin on the periphery, growing their involvement as they intensify participation with knowledgeable others (Lave & Wenger,

1991). Lave and Wenger's work will serve to highlight how learning happens naturally as children are provided with the means to participate in meaningful community activities.

Taken together, the literature review findings indicate that children benefit developmentally, socially and educationally from being included in community endeavours and mature activities. Within cities and towns there are myriad opportunities for adults and children to interact alongside each other, strengthening community and neighbourhood connections which are clearly weakening as we maintain segregation across age, income and cultural boundaries.

Discussion

Questioning the value of child-centredness

Western society places a strong value on child-centredness: providing children with opportunities to interact with same-aged peers in specialized environments with professionals. While this is a commonplace and accepted norm, and is a convenient way to organize our societies, we must ask if this what young people need. What are the benefits for youth to spending more time with adults, and more time engaged in meaningful and useful family and community endeavours? Any challenge to the idea of child-centredness needs to be considered carefully, as the notion is connected to deeply entrenched Western educational practices and theories of child development. It seems ironic that 'in creating child-centred programs in our centres, we have further removed children from the day-to-day world and placed them in an artificial world—one geared to their needs, where they are central, but separated from the real world' (Fleer, 2003, p.66). While most people would agree that children do need opportunities to contribute meaningfully in the present, the current organization of the educational system focuses on preparing children for their futures and provides little opportunity for participation in life outside of school. Brennan calls attention to the discrepancies between what adults profess to want for youth—to fit

into society and contribute after their school years—and how educational institutions create barriers to meaningful participation in the present. She argues that while schools and childcare centres

> play a major role in preparing children for their roles in society, it is difficult
> to justify the cultural and social organisation of these institutions…children
> in child care spend large parts of their days divorced from the real world
> yet are expected to learn to use the tools of their cultures. (Brennan, 2007)

This raises the question of what young people need developmentally, and whether the educational system is neglecting an important aspect of growing up that would help young people to truly thrive and find increased meaning in their lives.

Young people's need to contribute

Peter Benson in, *All Kids are Our Kids*, points to studies done by the Search Institute which show that young people rarely feel valued in their communities, all too often feeling as if they are seen as too young, dangerous or irresponsible. Only one in five youth surveyed believe that they are valued by their communities; only one in four reported that they have useful roles to take on (Benson, 1997, p. 39). These findings are cause for alarm, as Benson (1997) notes it has

> produced a generation of young people who think of themselves as useless,
> and it has isolated that generation from productive interaction with older generations.
> It has relegated more than a third of our citizens to inaction or worse and has deprived
> our youth of the experience necessary for fulfilling their role as citizens and
> contributors to the community. (p.112)

How has it come to be that childhood now represents a time of almost exclusive preparation, rather than participation in society? Sociocultural and ecological theories of development show how people develop through interaction, relationships and being part of their societies. Brennan, summarizing sociocultural research, states that, 'Under whatever kind of conditions and forms human activity takes place, whatever kind of structure it assumes, it cannot be considered as isolated from social relations or from the life of society' (Brennan, 2007). According to Vygotsky,

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the individual development of people cannot be separated from their cultural, historical and social contexts. Cultures provide tools for thinking, and children learn these as they interact with more experienced people (Morelli, Rogoff & Angelillo, 2003). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory identifies different levels of environments which all impact a person's development— from families, school and peers, to culture and historical circumstances— with a focus on the interactions and connections between settings. The studies showing young people's lack of connection to their communities and lack of opportunity to participate could be examined more in light of these developmental theories.

Global variations in young people's access to community life

Following the transition from an agriculture-based economy to an industrial one, changes have followed in views about childhood. Whereas children were once actively involved in working alongside adults, childhood is now more often seen as a time to prepare for work, usually through formal schooling (Rogoff, 2003). While it is clearly not desirable to return to a time in history where children were exploited on farms and in factories (as still happens in many parts of the world), children and adults working and learning alongside each other is a natural, pan-human way that learning has always happened for children and still does for the majority of the world's children. What is different in most North American and Western countries is that children have limited access, on a daily and regular basis, to mature community life, and to these opportunities to work alongside adults. Rogoff contrasts several groups of middle-class, North American children with children from a Guatemalan town and from the Congo. She notes that the children from Guatemala and the Congo had more frequent interaction with people of various ages as they contributed to household and economic activities, play and leisure. The American children had fewer opportunities to observe adult work and

> little access to view or engage in productive community activities beyond the limited activities of the adults who tend or teach them and the household chores in which young children may be asked to participate as a way to teach them about responsibility. Rather than being involved in productive activities, children are required to spend much of their lives in school, which is treated as a preparatory experience for future productive work from which children are excluded.' (Rogoff et al., 2010, p.437)

Rogoff et al. (2010) offer the conclusion that 'perhaps the extreme age segregation experienced by many U.S. middle-class children needs a corrective at this point in history,' stressing the need for contributing meaningfully and learning from various ages (p. 438).

SelfDesign philosophy: teaching vs learning

A central difference between SelfDesign Learning and the traditional school system is that of a shift away from constant and explicit teaching towards processes of learning. The focus is placed on the child and their needs, interests and processes for learning and growth; there is less focus on whether they can demonstrate knowledge of content specified by government mandates. The SelfDesign philosophy raises questions such as, 'what is truly important to know?'; 'how can we tell when someone is learning?' and 'does every child need to learn the same things?' It pays attention to the deep, individual needs of children and families. As such, the full scope of a child's life and all activities, individually and within family and community, become an accepted part of the learning journey. The SelfDesign philosophy is about "rekindling interest in learning as a natural process rather than as an activity restricted to labs and schools" (Wolcott, 1982, p. 88).

Formal and informal learning

By observing the activities of a child's life, as well as their processes of growth and change within different domains (such as creativity, science, language as well as areas like relational skills), parents, learners and learning consultants become confident that learning is hap-

pening. The everyday activities and moments of a child's life, such as negotiating game rules with siblings, accompanying a parent on a car shopping excursion or managing an egg-selling operation can all be examined to reveal complex aspects of learning. Unfortunately, one of the great barriers to children's further inclusion in community life is connected to how these kinds of 'everyday' activities are portrayed as 'informal' learning in the educational literature. There is a large difference in attitude towards the 'formal' activities of school, and 'informal' activities which take place outside of school, with a widespread belief that informal learning is secondary and supplementary to traditional school-based learning (Greenfield & Lave, 1982; Falk & Dierking, 2010). Recognizing and legitimizing the full range of informal learning opportunities available to children through participation in community life would be a great step towards increasing community cohesion, as well as benefiting children educationally and developmentally.

Greenfield and Lave (1982) acknowledge that the distinction between formal and informal education is not clear cut: around the world, most communities engage in variations of both, providing both formal and informal learning opportunities for learners. For example, in North American culture most children attend school while also participating in informal cooking sessions, or absorbing stories from grandparents (Greenfield & Lave, 1982). Apprenticeships are a type of formal learning central to most cultures. In North America, however, most informal opportunities happen outside of school hours and are rarely recognized as being on equal par with school-based activities— this being one of the barriers limiting children's access to community life and adult activities during most weekdays. To demonstrate the importance and the benefits of informal learning, the example of cooking is contrasted with learning multiplication tables, which has little immediate social impact or sense of contribution for the child. Greenfield and Lave (1982) recognize that a child participating in informal learning, such as cooking with fami-

ly, is often highly motivated, due to several factors: participating in a one-on-one relationship; being aware that the activity is worthwhile to friends, family and neighbours, and knowing they are making a social contribution (Greenfield & Lave, p.184).

SelfDesign legitimizes a wide variety of ways to learn. Children might study independently with math or language workbooks, having parents work alongside them or receiving direct lessons in certain skills. They might engage in experiments, creative expression or participate in classes. Informal play, conversation, reading, watching movies and engagement in imaginative activities might be part of a learner's day. One kind of everyday type of learning possible through SelfDesign resembles Intent Community Participation, a type of learning which is often more tacit and subtle than the child-focused and direct lessons of school. While this paper will not delve into whether there is a biological basis for this kind of learning, it is clearly something cultural and panhuman that happens by dint of being part of family and community life (Paradise & Rogoff, 2009).

Learning through Intent Community Participation

Intent Community Participation means that, while participating and simply being with adults in the course of daily life, children are encouraged to take responsibility for their learning by observing, questioning, listening and participating as they are able. All the participants involved stretch and adjust to accommodate different perspectives and the learning situation. Paradise and Rogoff (2009) note that, "In this way of organizing learning . . . children also display a highly developed capacity for careful and alert observation and self-sustained personal motivation. They collaborate as members of the community, taking initiative and responsibility" (p.107). When a young child helps her mother to create a shopping list, she is learning important information about her family, culture and community. Even though not receiving a direct lesson,

she is learning about planning, choosing food and where to find things in the store (Morelli et al., 2003, p. 283). During these kinds of interactions, children are engaging in shared endeavours with adults which have clear meaning and goals, and how they learn about the activity is largely up to the child. Rogoff contrasts this kind of learning with assembly line instruction, which "controls learners' attention, motivation, and behaviour in settings isolated from productive contributions to the community" (Rogoff, n.d., *Assembly Line*). This striving for meaning is a central aspect of SelfDesign learning, and stands in contrast to traditional school learning where the purpose of the activity as it relates to 'real life' may not be self-evident, and the way it is learned might be highly ordered and prescribed (Paradise and Rogoff, 2009). Participation in one kind of learning process does not preclude participation in the other, as home-learners often engage in direct activities with teachers, and school-attending learners engage in informal and community activities as well. I am simply aiming to bring awareness back to one mode of learning which was more common in North America's past, and still is today in more 'traditional' societies around the world. It is important to broaden our ideas about what constitutes learning, so that learning is not seen only as synonymous with schooling.

Learning through collaboration and alongside adults has been observed around the world in places where schooling is not dominant and where, due primarily to economic reasons, it seems that family and community needs often override the emotional and educational needs of the individual child (Boyden, 1994). I believe that SelfDesign is innovative and forward thinking in how it leads to a holistic integration of individual, family *and* community needs—linking a traditional way of learning through Intent Community Participation with a modern, reflective practice of noticing learning processes, observing how an individual's needs and interests are being served. As we are fortunate in Canada that most families do not rely on their children to

fulfill an economic role in the family, SelfDesign learners have support to choose how they would like to contribute, in ways that befit themselves, their families and communities.

SelfDesign Interview Responses

While much of the research surrounding children's access to community life remains in the domain of comparison, rather than critique, interviews with SelfDesign families demonstrate the perceived benefits for children (from a parent's perspective). Eleven families responded in written form or using video conference to questions such as: "In your experience as a home learning family, how do you see your children participating in mature family and community activities (versus activities that have been designed specifically for children) with people of various ages?" The children's current ages ranged from 6 to 15, with several parents reflecting on the earlier experiences of their now adult and young adult children. They were questioned about the benefits they notice for their children as they interact with various ages, and as they participate, contribute and observe real-world activities which have meaning to their family and community. They were also asked to speculate about the perceived benefits to their communities, of having children embedded in daily life activities.

There were a wide range of activities and experiences described as part of the everyday lives of the SelfDesign families interviewed, many of which could be described as *mature community activities* (Rogoff, 2003). Several learners were involved with farmer's markets, selling fruits and vegetables, while others volunteered at farms and community gardens. Parents described how their children often accompanied them during the day, attending appointments related to real estate, funeral arrangements and banking. Learners attended traditionally adult activities such as lapidary and naturalist clubs, Toastmaster's meetings, political gatherings and adult-focused concert and theatre performances. Volunteering opportunities included time spent at re-

tirement homes (getting to know residents and participating in musical programs), wildlife rehabilitation centres and toddler drop-in centres. Some learners had part-time jobs such as picking seabuckthorn berries, playing music at cafes and selling jewelry. Learners also participated in many intergenerational activities such as cooking classes, church, community drama groups and mixed-age martial arts. This is a broad overview of the types of activities which are part of the everyday lives of SelfDesign learners. These particular experiences relate to a wide range of ages, from 6-15 year old learners, demonstrating how it is quite possible for even young children to contribute to their communities in meaningful ways.

Of course, it is still possible for youth who attend school to do many of the activities described by the home-learners, during evenings, weekends and holidays, and some school attending children are quite involved in their communities. By focusing on the experience of home-learners, it becomes possible to see the wide variety of opportunities available and to note how these experiences are seen by SelfDesign families and learning consultants as relevant, primary learning experiences (rather than as 'extra' curricular activities). Young people benefit from having opportunities to contribute and participate in society in the present moment, rather than waiting until age 18 or 22. It is crucial that as adults we shift our attitudes around children and especially teenagers, to begin seeing them as resources rather than as problems (Benson, 1997).

Time

An underlying theme which emerged from the interviews was that of time. During interviews several parents stated that because their children have time freed up during weekdays, and are not confined to traditional school scheduling, they could take advantage of different opportunities in contrast to their school-attending peers. Also, since SelfDesign holds the view that

learning is always happening, families feel comfortable to not rush through interactions, activities, or everyday errands which might be seen as inconveniences if they weren't being seen as learning opportunities. SelfDesign parent Sheila notes that, "We have time in our day to interact with people who if we were in a hurry we might not make time for such as disabled neighbours in a group home, homeless folks and street buskers," and that elders in their community "seem to enjoy seeing and being with children which would not occur as often if we were tied down to a typical school schedule and routine. They are able to offer help to others during the day, shoveling for the neighbours, opening doors for elders, helping to watch little ones at gatherings" (Sheila C., email interview, Jan 16, 2013). By simply having the time to be available to places of work, community organizations and neighbourhood people during daytime hours, learners are able to find many ways to be involved.

Age-integration

Another key theme parents reflected on was age-integration, and the benefits for their children of being able to spend time engaged with younger children as well as more mature people. The Western practice of separating children by age and permitting them access mostly to child-specialised activities is not the norm in many places around the world. More useful would be recognizing this as a cultural approach to education and child-rearing which has evolved in Western countries in the past 150 years as a result of industrialization, compulsory schooling and other societal changes. Before the use of age as an approach to organizing society, intergenerational relationships were crucial and children were embedded in family, work and farm life, working alongside adults (Rogoff et al., 2010). Benson (1997) reminds us that

> there is an important place for age-specific opportunities. Society, however,
> has become so age-segregated that these experiences define the world for young

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> people, isolating them from the rich experiences of intergenerational relationships. Furthermore, the exclusive emphasis on age-specific opportunities has increased fragmentation and isolation within communities." (p. 103)

Most research about socialization focuses on how children influence other children, and this is important as many children and teenagers spend a great deal of time with similar aged peers. However, in the context of homelearning, there is much to consider about how socialization occurs through interaction with various ages, how intergenerational connections are formed and the benefits for children.

Peter Gray (2011), in "The Special Value of Children's Age-Mixed Play," states that "From an evolutionary perspective, the normal social play of children involves kids of various ages . . ." (p. 1). He cites anthropological research showing how typical hunter-gatherer groups would have been comprised of children from 2 to 17, with few opportunities for interaction with those of the same age. From observations of multi-age schools and various settings, we know that younger children benefit from having the chance to learn from older ones, and older children thrive when they can practice teaching, nurturing and leading (Gray, 2011). Anne, SelfDesign parent to 10 and 13 year old girls, reflected on how her youngest takes great pleasure from interacting with children younger than her, enjoying the opportunity to play and exercise her imagination (Anne L., personal communication, Feb 13, 2013). Sheila's 'oldest child has spent more time with younger children and has as a result become very patient, dependable, entertaining and seems to feel proud of being the older 'cool' kid (Sheila C., personal communication, Jan 16, 2013). Margie, parent to a son now in high school, describes his confidence at age ten to organize and lead a game for young adults in their 20's, as well as participating in a youth coalition with older students (Margie P., personal communication, Jan 25, 2013).

One parent, Gloria, described how her three children (6, 7 and 10) volunteer regularly at a residential care home for seniors as part of a musical program, working with a musical therapist

and the residents to create songs with hand chimes. The children take on various roles as they are able, the youngest handing out materials, moving residents around and playing chimes. Collectively, they have performed in several concerts with the residents, and their songs have been included on a Christmas CD for the home. The children have developed friendships with some of the residents, who visibly perk up upon their arrival. Participation in the program has increased since they have begun volunteering. Gloria notices that her children, when interacting with the residents, have been able to "look beyond their physical and cognitive challenges to see the human beings" (Gloria F., personal communication, Jan 17, 2013). Marilyn, parent to three boys, explains how her sons play music in a women's choir, without concern for age or gender differences: "My children have always thought of themselves and others as people with varying interests, abilities and characteristics. Age is simply one of those characteristics" (Marilyn C., email interview, February 7, 2013).

Other parents described how their children have developed meaningful relationships with adults through their volunteering experiences and through mentorships. For example, Nicolette described an occasion where her daughter, then nine, accompanied her to a dinner event. Over the course of the evening, she connected with an older woman who had previously worked as a seamstress. In the days following the event, Nicolette's daughter took the initiative to set up cooking and sewing lessons at the woman's home, developing a positive friendship (Nicolette M., personal communication, Feb 11, 2013). Anne described the benefits of her daughters' involvement in mixed-age Tae Kwan Doe classes, through which they have formed connections and friendships beyond class time (Anne L., personal communication, Feb 13, 2013). Overall, parents report that these casual relationships with adults outside the family empower their children, helping them to see other generations in a positive light. According to Benson (1997),

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"Many of the most essential aims of youth development are advanced when young people are embedded in a web of relationships with competent, caring adults" (p. 35).

Especially important to parents is how these kind of friendships lack the pressure of conformity which can be typical of same-aged friendships. Shonna reflects on how she witnesses positive interaction between her five children, who enjoy spending time together at malls, parks, pools and outdoors without concern for being seen with younger siblings. They have developed relationships with other adults outside of the family, connecting with their friend's parents over Facebook and in the community. She mentions the ageism which is often present in society, where it can be difficult for children to break out of the norm of spending time mostly with same-aged peers (Shonna M., personal communication, Jan 16, 2013). When Marilyn's 11-year-old son connected with an 18 year old through mixed-aged drama lessons, she challenged her own mindset around age:

> I must confess that alarms went off in my head when my 11 year old told me he wanted to play Dungeons and Dragons with an 18 year old—what would an 18 year old want with my 11 year old son, after all? As it turns out, he recognized a kindred spirit and wanted him as a friend. I met the young man, immediately liked him, and they have been good friends for the past 9 years. He could have missed this opportunity for friendship if either of them, or I, had been hung up on age. (Marilyn C., email interview, February 7, 2013)

Clearly, age-integrated activities are an important way to challenge 'us-them' distinctions, allowing for easier communication, understanding and interaction across generations.

Gordon Neufeld in, *Hold On To Your Kids*, uses the term *orientation* to describe how children have evolved magnetic-like attachment instincts to turn to people near them for security. Usually these are parents or a few select caregivers. If this attachment or bond is not secure or available from an adult, children will turn to other figures around them, or else an *orientation void* might appear. *Peer orientation*, as Neufeld describes, as opposed to *adult orientation,* is what has resulted from the past half century of social change. There has been a growth in youth

culture and focus on special child-focused programs, music, TV shows, video games, clothing and technology. This is a unique culture distinct from the world of adults, where "instead of culture being passed down vertically from generation to generation, it is being transmitted horizontally within the younger generation" (Neufeld & Mate, 2004, p. 9). Children are more often taking their cues for identity-formation from peers due to peer pressure and the desire to conform. This is a change which in a short span of time has resulted in strong implications for parenting, education and society in general, in terms of the passing on of values, traditions and sustaining communities across generations. SelfDesign parent Sheila notes that her children 'seem to display less awareness and concern about brand names, labels and 'fitting' in' (Sheila C., email interview, Jan 16, 2013). The experiences of SelfDesign families demonstrate how some elements of peer culture which are common are not necessary normal. Children naturally seek out and form relationships with people of various ages, often without parental intervention, and conformity and peer pressure does not need to be a central part of growing up.

The documentary "Whose Grandmother Are You?" follows the journey of the Meadow School Project, in British Columbia, an intergenerational immersion program. After several years of taking her Gr. 5-7 students on brief visits to residential senior's homes, teacher Sharon MacKenzie noticed that "communication between the generations seemed restrained and lacking in empathy" (MacKenzie, Carson and Kuehne, 2011, p. 207). Hoping for more meaningful interaction between her students and the adults, MacKenzie moved her classroom into the home, integrating their curriculum with the daily lives of the residents. Students participated in a service-learning aspect around the home, as well as helping to set tables, unload groceries, play games with residents, engage in crafts, music and listen to stories. Several goals of the program were to "break down stereotypical thinking of both generations about the other," and to "give students

authentic opportunities to develop personal and social responsibility through daily involvement with older adults and public service at the seniors' residence" (MacKenzie et al., 2011, p. 208).

Of note for this research study is how attitudes shifted over the course of the time students spent in the home. Students surveyed at the beginning of the year held stereotypical views about older people (i.e.: that they would be boring, spend their days sitting, and wouldn't have much to say) and some of the residents harboured skepticism about whether they would enjoy having young people around (Elderton, 2007). Findings from the Meadow School Project demonstrated "the establishment of important social connections between the youth/students and older adult residents involved. These social connections, in turn, resulted in improved health, social, educational and developmental outcomes for both youth/students and the older adult residents involved in the program" (MacKenzie et al., 2011, p. 212). The study also noted examples of spontaneous caring that developed between students, their families and the residents, such as when residents were invited and transported to the student's homes for tea (MacKenzie et al., 2011). Again, it is clear that provided with opportunities, children show a natural inclination to interact intergenerationally, and to participate in the 'mature' activities of workplaces and adult life in their communities.

During the interview process with SelfDesign families, a few key points emerged about the connections between children, adults and society. First, I noticed how integration of children into the daytime life of communities leads to connections with people and places, which then leads to *more* connections and opportunities for participation. Second, it became clear that the most meaningful learning experiences are connected to the positive relationships children develop with their network of caring adults. Third, when meaningful relationships exist between

adults and young people in their communities, the integration of young people does not pose as much of a challenge to society as it might seem.

Connections lead to connections

Something powerful arises in communities, and between generations, when children are integrated on a daily basis. Michal explains how her children (6 and 13) benefit from learning in community:

> I think they have a stronger connection to their community and know and recognize people of all ages when we're out and about in town. By doing things together, we all make more connections, which gives us more opportunities for doing things locally and finding mentors locally. (Michal S., personal communication, Jan 16, 2013)

It seems that small steps toward relationship building between generations might be the most crucial part of integrating children further into community life. Shonna, describing her 13-year-old daughter's experience working at a farmer's market, noted how the experience led to a valuable connection with a retired Cirque du Soleil member. Her daughter, now 15, is embarking on a two month, self-funded trip to Costa Rica, made possible due to the vast network of people she has been able to connect with around North America (Shonna M., personal communication, Jan 16, 2013). Lisa, parent to a now young adult in university, reflects on her daughter's home-learning experience and how casual connections in their town snowballed, leading to a treasured volunteer experience at a wildlife rehabilitation centre (Lisa H., personal communication, Jan 15, 2013).

Real and perceived barriers to young people's community integration

While detailing her daughter's wildlife centre experience, Lisa notes that the centre was initially not open to having a young person volunteer. Due to the difficulties of being a small or-

ganization and having little time or resources to devote to supervision, some home learning families seeking authentic experiences for their children find themselves facing logistical and bureaucratic walls. Lisa describes the snowball effect which opened the door for her daughter to volunteer. During her Gr. 6 year of homelearning, Lisa and her daughter stepped up efforts to make connections in the community. At a bookstore she frequented, the learner connected with a staff member through enjoyment of her kitten. Upon learning that the woman played flute and penny whistle, the relationship blossomed into lessons. Through these lessons, Lisa's daughter met a mandolin player who also worked at the wildlife centre. This woman committed to take Lisa's daughter, then 11, on as a mentee at the centre, supervising her and training her. Through this series of personal connections, the volunteer experience evolved into a six year period, two hours weekly, year round. Adults at the wildlife centre were elated to have a young person's help, and Lisa's daughter knew how much she was valued and needed by the organization (Lisa H., personal communication, Jan 15, 2013).

Clearly, the efforts and willingness of adults to mentor young people is a crucial part of their involvement in mature, adult activities and workplaces. Once personal and meaningful connections are made, the barriers that seem to exist can come down more easily. And while the connections developed by Lisa's daughter in her community are commonplace in many children's lives, schooled and homeschooled, the SelfDesign philosophy supports awareness and reflection around the learning possible through these personal connections. In a society based largely on efficiency, time management and economic growth, how can we create more opportunities for these kinds of personal connections, and place more value on them, among children in all educational settings?

A public school example of community integration for teenagers

One example of a school which prioritizes community and age integration for teenagers is the Big Picture Learning network. With over 100 schools worldwide, Big Picture schools have 'learning in the real world' as a central element of their philosophy. Students create and participate in several internship opportunities each year based on their interests and goals. The organization believes that, 'students learn how to be adults by being with adults,' and that regular interaction and mentoring in the community is the best way to prepare for adulthood ("Learning in the Real World," n.d.).

Finding, attracting and maintaining relationships with mentors comprises a large amount of time and energy at a Big Picture school. The process illuminates some of the challenges of breaking down barriers, whether generationally, or around the perceived benefits/inconveniences of incorporating young people into workplaces. It is clear, though, that once relationships are established between students and adults, that everyone involved values the experience. Many mentors become quite enthused about being role models to youth and being able to pass on their passions and skills. As one mentor states, "There is something to be said about having the responsibility and accountability of showing and teaching someone your life's calling" (Littky & Grabelle, 2004, p. 131).

While programs such as Big Picture provide opportunities for teenagers to spend daily time participating in community life, younger children are also able to work alongside adults, volunteer and contribute in meaningful ways. Looking past barriers such as insurance, age restrictions, time and efficiency concerns, a young child's route towards participating in community does not need to look much different than an older child's. Once again, establishing relationships and networks of caring adults is the key, giving more consideration to safety concerns and

supervision. With few elementary school programs providing regular, immersive community-based learning opportunities, homelearning programs such as SelfDesign provide ideal circumstances for incorporating younger children into community life.

Research corroborating the benefits of community integration

Further research corroborates the experiences of the SelfDesign families who contributed to this paper. Commissioned in 2003 by the Homeschooling Legal Defense Association, Dr. Brian Ray published a U.S. Based study of over 7000 grown homeschoolers which assessed their involvement in community. Of 5232 respondents to the question, "Do you participate in any on-going community service activity, for example, coaching a sports team, volunteering at a school, or working with a church or neighborhood association?" 71% of homeschoolers responded yes, compared to 37% of the general population of similar age. When asked whether they belonged to any community groups, 88% of homeschoolers responded yes, compared to 50% of the general population. More homeschoolers used public libraries regularly, and more felt confident that they could understand politics and influence political decisions. Generally, civic involvement on the part of homeschoolers was significantly greater, and they were also generally more satisfied with their work situations. Grown homeschoolers also reported themselves to find life more exciting (73% vs 47%) rather than routine or dull. This study indicates that children who learn at home and have opportunities to part of their communities maintain strong connections and desire to be involved as they grow up (Ray, 2003). As SelfDesign parent Marilyn writes, "children who feel they are part of a community will grow into adults who feel the same way, and will take care of it" (Marilyn C., email interview, February 7, 2013).

Conclusion

During our exploration of the relationship between children, adults and society, the SelfDesign families who participated in this project reported strong overall benefits that they felt their children and communities received as they consciously fostered multi-age, community connections. Marilyn writes about the sense of pride, belonging and responsibility acquired by her children:

> By participating in meaningful activities, I believe that my children feel themselves as an important part of the fabric of our society. When they pick seabuckthorn berries and see the juice being sold at the market, they know that they were indispensable in its making. When they umpire a baseball game, they know that the game is better because they were there to make the calls. They develop a sense of responsibility and a feeling that they belong here; a feeling of pride in their accomplishments which cannot be acquired in the absence of having accomplished anything. (Marilyn C., email interview, February 7, 2013)

From the confidence gained by developing resumes at young ages, to knowing that their children are growing into kind, aware citizens, these diverse experiences paint a picture of the advantages inherent in age-integrated, connected community life. It is unfortunate that our current educational paradigm continues to equate formal education with learning, an attitude which simply maintains the false barriers between children, adults and society. It is my hope that our views about learning and education can widen to allow for interactions between ages, across generations, and to provide opportunities for young people to engage meaningfully in their worlds in the present moment.

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Children's Integration Into Community Life: Opportunities For Meaningful Participation And For Developing Multi-Age Relationships

<div align="center">**References**</div>

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