Take a Closer Look: Combating Ageism Through the Use of Children's Literature

Janice Buehrer
jgbuehr@bgsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/honorsprojects

Part of the Civic and Community Engagement Commons, Educational Technology Commons, Gerontology Commons, Psychology Commons, and the Social Work Commons

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Repository Citation
Buehrer, Janice, "Take a Closer Look: Combating Ageism Through the Use of Children's Literature" (2024). Honors Projects. 934.
https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/honorsprojects/934

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@BGSU.
Take a Closer Look: Combating Ageism Through the Use of Children’s Literature

Janice G. Buehrer
Department of Psychology, Bowling Green State University
HNRS 4990: Honors Project
Dr. Vivian Miller
April 22, 2024
I. Introduction

In the United States (U.S.), there is a disconnect between adults’ expectations of aging and the lived reality of those aged 65 and older. Individuals expect the aging process and later life experiences to be much more negative than they are, a reflection of societal biases toward old age. This shows there is a need for a change of opinion regarding older adults, especially as our population continues to grow older. Past research has also shown that literature and picture books are one of the strongest educational tools for youth and that our values, which influence our behavior, are formed early on in life (Gibbs and Earley, 1994). The goal of my creative research project was to create a children’s book designed to combat ageism and instill value for older adults in younger generations. I chose to follow through with this topic after completing an internship with Erie County Adult and Child Protective Services. A lack of resources, funding, and social support for the older adults we worked with reflected to me that, in the U.S., we lack value for the aging population.

My children’s book *Take a Closer Look* is designed to be used as a value-socialization tool that depicts a positive perspective on aging and being an older adult. The storyline consists of a grandmother, Nana, and her grandson, Myer, walking through their neighborhood. As they roam, they bump into many older adults who at first glance appear to Myer as struggling in some way, so his Nana encourages him to take a closer look into what their lives are truly like and the various skills of each individual. Myer then goes on to share his newfound perspective with a friend at school, representing socialization in action. The scenes depicting older adults are based on a focus group I conducted at a senior center in the Toledo, Ohio area. I also received a stipend from the Ohio Association of Gerontology and Education (OAGE) for completing this project as a part of the 2024 Ohio Scholars in Aging program. I hope that my book will help to combat
negative stereotypes towards older adults and display their strengths to better the lives of those present and future.

II. Research Questions

The research questions I used to guide my creative research project are as follows:

“What are United States societal views on aging and older adults?”

“What is the efficacy of using storytelling to educate and instill values in children?”

“What storybook designs do children best respond to?”

“How do older adults wish to be portrayed to younger generations?”

III. Literature Review

The Pew Research Center (2009) conducted a survey on the topic of aging from a representative sample of 2,969 U.S. adults whose ages ranged from eighteen to sixty-five and older. The general findings revealed that in reality, growing old is not as bad as younger generations expect it to be, however, it is not as enjoyable as either. When respondents were asked about negative benchmarks associated with aging – illness, memory loss, loneliness, and more – older adults reported experiencing such instances at extremely lower levels than younger adults expect to encounter them. For instance, 57% of respondents aged 18-64 reported expecting memory loss, while only 25% aged 65+ reported experiencing it, a 32% gap (Pew Research Center, 2009). This highlights the existence of negative biases, whether conscious or unconscious, that many individuals hold toward aging. Additionally, when asked about beneficial aspects of aging – traveling, second careers, time with family, and more – those aged 18-64 again reported expecting more benefits than older adults were found to experience. For example, 86% of respondents aged 18-64 expect to spend more time with family and only 70% aged 65+ reported doing so. Older adults are not experiencing enough of the benefits many hope
and look forward to receiving. Altogether, there is an unfavorable divide between how younger generations view aging and the reality of being an older adult. There is a need for more positive experiences and less negative expectations toward aging. The focus group I held to inform my project allowed older adults to share their realities and help close this disconnect. These survey findings also emphasize the need for tools to combat ageism and negative views on aging, such as my children’s book.

While ageism is discrimination based on presumed age, benevolent ageism refers to the overaccommodating behaviors of younger individuals toward older adults. The stereotype content model explains this concept as older adults fit a paternalistic stereotype – they are seen as being high in warmth and low in competence, which leads to receiving unnecessary help. *Benevolent Ageism: Attitudes of Overaccommodative Behavior Toward Older Women* by Michael Vale et al. (2020) examined this stereotype in an experiment where an older (or younger) woman was depicted as receiving overaccommodative help at a grocery store and either refusing or accepting the help. Participants had to report their attitudes toward the offer of help as well as make judgments about the woman’s competence and warmth. Overall, they were more likely to help the older woman than the younger one, and when help was accepted, competence was rated lower, and warmth increased. Overaccommodation has often been ignored in the subject of ageism but can have negative effects on the independence and well-being of older adults. Overaccommodation also often involves the use of elderspeak – an exaggerated, slower, louder tone – which is associated with lower self-esteem for older adults. When older adults hold these negative perceptions themselves, they are found to have shorter life spans, poorer memory performance, poorer hearing, and overall, less functional capacity. Moreover, while these seemingly helpful behaviors may be well-intended, it is important that older adults
maintain as much independence as possible and that individuals do not presume, they are incapable. This informed my research as avoided illustrating overaccommodative behaviors and showed that many older adults maintain their competence and independence.

The article Using Children’s Literature to Develop Core Values by Laura Gibbs et al. (1994) discusses the reason behind and importance of using children’s books as a socialization tool for teaching and instilling values in youth. Children grow to understand and accept or disregard certain values through their everyday interactions and experiences, for example, by learning to take turns while playing a game. These values are learned early on and then influence behavior later in life. With increasing exposure to the media, children mustn't receive only skewed, negative messages, therefore other tools are needed for positive values education. Gibbs and Earley (1994) discuss how literature depicting “real” or relatable stories can integrate values into education as children learn to read and think about characters and situations in a safe environment. Engaging youth with the relatable situations of such characters allows them to internalize values and act accordingly. To illustrate, they present the example of One-Eyed Cat by Paula Fox, a tale of a boy whose one lie multiplies into many, hence teaching the value of honesty. Gibbs and Earley (1994) continue with classroom techniques for values education. This article highlights the use of children’s books in instilling values, putting research-based evidence behind my intent of using literature to instill values for older adults in youth. As children will undoubtedly be exposed to ageism and negative stereotypes in the media, literature can be used to combat the internalization of such ideas. This also shows that values form at a young age and guide behavior throughout life, hence the importance of targeting children.

The research study Judging a Book by its Cover: Preschool Children’s Aesthetic Preferences for Picture Books by Danko-McGhee and Slutsky (2011) examined the artistic
preferences of children aged 2-6 years old. They wished to discover whether findings regarding
the artistic preferences of children toward paintings transferred to picture books, so they
presented children with multiple cover styles. Book covers also help researchers understand
young children’s literary preferences. Understanding what children like artistically allows one to
create appealing book covers, leading to increased engagement with the literature. McGhee and
Slutsky presented children with cover books that were combinations of abstract or
representational, and high color or black and white. They found that children aged 2-4 gravitated
towards representational, colorful covers where images felt familiar. Five-year-olds preferred
colorful images, as well as black and white images. The difference here is that the scary or
mysterious images appealed to them. This also highlights their finding that children’s aesthetic
preference for picture book covers changes as they age. Information already known about
children’s aesthetic preferences, such as that they like bright colors and depictions that include
animals or children, is also discussed. These study results and prior knowledge regarding what
images, colors, and designs children gravitate toward will be used to inform the design process
of my children’s book. Finally, the article also discusses the importance of literacy in childhood.
Children’s primary source of learning is through sensory channels, such as seeing and hearing.
Many children’s first reading experiences are through picture books, which influences what they
know and like. They reference Piaget’s importance of illustration as children learn that pictures
represent actions, events, and consequences. This relates to my project as it highlights the
importance of using a picture book to combat ageism as children will learn positive attitudes
toward aging through illustrations and hearing the book.

The scholarly review The Impact of Colors on Learning by Bo Chang et al. (2018) covers
the results of studies on the influence of color on memory, cognition, stimulating emotions, and
motivating learning. Colors can draw in learners and increase their attention to certain pieces of information. Warm colors such as red and orange are ideal for grasping attention and stimulating active participation. Using color to organization can also decrease search time for readers, therefore color-coding information better supports the internalization of the knowledge. In terms of color affecting cognitive performance, studies have shown that red enhances performance on detail-oriented tasks (ex. memory) due to its association with danger, which reminds people to prevent negative outcomes. Opposingly, the color blue is associated with openness and freedom, promoting positivity, and enhancing creative task performance. Color is also linked to emotion, therefore if it causes positive emotions, positive information will be recalled, though what colors are positive can be subjective or unique to the individual. Moreover, arousing, warm hues keep individuals engaged, and passive, cooler hues keep them calm. This knowledge of how individuals perceive color and the associations connected to colors helped me in designing my book. I used color-coded messages to help with vision tracking and warm, inviting colors throughout the book.

IV. Methods

To conduct this creative research project, I first researched articles and sources regarding U.S. societal views on aging, the use of children’s literature for value socialization, and the use of color and other methodologies behind creating a picture book. The sources and how they were specifically utilized are listed under the literature review section. I then submitted an application requesting approval from the Bowling Green State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct a focus group at the Zablocki Senior Center in Toledo, OH. Information gathered from the focus group was used to inform the drawings and storyline of my book, as well as answer the question of how older adults wish to be portrayed to younger generations. BGSU’s
IRB approved this project on December 4, 2023 (IRBNet #: 2114078-5). After receiving IRB approval on the proposal, informed consent form, and script for the focus group, I held the focus group which encompassed one hour. Five individuals participated, though just over double had signed up originally. The guiding questions I used are as follows:

“When have you felt truly valued, respected, and/or happy as an older adult?”
“What are some activities or things you love to do?”
“How do you want to be treated by younger generations?”
“Can you describe a time when you have felt discriminated against based on age?”

After gathering information from the focus group, I wrote the storyline for the book in a Word document. This was reviewed by an elementary school teacher and deemed suitable for children from kindergarten through second grade. I then met with my secondary honors project advisor, Jodi Fall, and planned out what programs we would be using to design the book. I first sketched the main images by hand, then used image trace in Adobe Illustrate to turn them into vector images. I then used Adobe InDesign to create the format and arrange my images into pages of a book. The book, including the front and back covers, is twenty pages long, ten inches wide, and seven inches tall. Jodi then printed the book out for me on campus.

V. Results

My project should have positive implications for the field of Psychology and all fields involving work with older adults. The objective is to, as stated, combat ageism and instill a positive outlook on older adults within younger generations. Considering we learn values early on in life and behave according to them, we must target youth when changing opinions on aging. Though the book is designed for youth, I believe it has the potential to reach the entire lifespan as adult role models will be reading the book about older adults to children. As children are
learning to value older adults, those doing the reading would also be gaining a new perspective on aging. Therefore, not only would this positively change the way older adults are viewed by younger generations, but it would also combat ageism and negative stereotypes held in adults themselves. I hope that this book will be just one tool in combating ageism for the growing older adult population. By highlighting a positive outlook on older adults, their capabilities, and behaviors, we can positively improve their everyday lives and lived experiences. My project can also be used to inform further research.

Furthermore, I wanted to briefly mention the discussion findings from my focus group. One major area of discussion was the importance the participants placed on physical and cognitive activity. Whether this looked like organizing events, exercising at the senior center, walking, or talking with friends, each participant mentioned this as something they wanted younger generations to know, and as activities that they enjoy regularly. Transportation was another key discussion point as their particular senior center offered transportation to and from the center, as well as to doctor’s appointments, grocery stores, and any area the older adults needed access to. Many participants also stressed the importance of community engagement and social connections in their lives, the senior center being a major source of this connection. Some of the activities the older adults mentioned and that are depicted in *Take a Closer Look* include: dinner parties, teaching yoga, line dancing, volunteering at schools and churches, gardening, and driving the senior center bus. I also included some quotes below that highlight these parts of the focus group:

“…I have friends like that. And dinner parties about once a month for eight people. We have a lot of conversations…[it] keeps our mind active by making the meals…setting the table and cleaning the house.”
“... Yeah, or like when I first came here. They assumed that I couldn't move very well, and I teach yoga. I move really well. Yeah, I just can't see... and I can't drive, and I don't know what I [would] do without the transportation that they are [SIC] here... I'd be at home being very depressed and very bored. Look what these people offer... and I haven't been here more than three weeks... is generous warmth.”

“And they called the Senior Center and found out that they would pick me up and take me home because I don't have a car. And would also take me shopping and to doctors' appointment(s) and I started working out at home and eating better, so I'm much healthier than I've ever been in my life.”

VI. Implications for Future Research

The hope is for this project to lead to intergenerational interaction as adults or older adults read the story to children. I have a few recommendations if someone were to recreate this process of making a children’s book or if I had more time and resources to do so myself. First, I would conduct the focus group at multiple senior centers in various areas, as opposed to just one. I had planned to conduct the same focus group in participation with the senior center Wood County Committee on Aging in Bowling Green, OH, and received IRB approval, however, time did not permit this addition. This may improve the book's external validity and ensure it is more representative of the general population. I may also recommend using a professional illustrator to add more detail to the story’s imagery, though in my situation learning the skills of sketching and digital design added to the interdisciplinary aspect of my project. I would also suggest reading the book to groups of children to analyze the effectiveness of the book in combating ageism and
instilling a positive perspective on older adults. Perhaps this could be done using valid pre- and post-test surveys.
References


