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Site:
ver nondickason.com

Email:
connect@ver nondickason.com

Address:
Cape Town, South Africa

What if every school became a hub for intergenerational learning?

The Classroom as Commons: Learning Across Lifetimes

Author: Vernon Dickason

Opening Reflection

Schools are often imagined as places for the young, where children gather, teachers instruct, and futures are shaped. But what if we widened the frame? What if, by 2030, every school became a hub for intergenerational learning, where elders, parents, youth and community members came together to teach, learn and remember? In a society marked by generational trauma and resilience, this shift would be more than symbolic. It would be a return to wholeness.

The Scenario

By 2030, South Africa's Department of Basic Education, in partnership with the Department of Social Development, launches the Intergenerational Learning Initiative (ILI). Schools are reimagined as community commons, offering:

- Shared learning spaces where elders teach oral history, indigenous knowledge and life skills
- Mentorship programmes pairing retired professionals with learners and educators
- Community classrooms for adult literacy, parenting support and digital skills
- Collaborative projects where learners and elders co-create gardens, archives, and local histories

The initiative is supported by municipal funding and aligned with the National Development Plan's goals for social cohesion and lifelong learning. Pilot schools report improved learner engagement, reduced absenteeism, and stronger community ties. However, challenges arise: some educators feel overwhelmed, others struggle to integrate non-formal learning into CAPS. The initiative thrives where leadership is relational and vision is shared.

What It Reveals

This scenario reveals the power of relational pedagogy. Learning is not linear, it is layered, lived and shared. It also exposes the limitations of age-segregated schooling, where wisdom is often siloed and experience undervalued.

From a systems-thinking lens, intergenerational learning is not an add-on, it is a redesign. It invites schools to become ecosystems of belonging, not just institutions of instruction.

Why It Matters

South Africa's social fabric is frayed by generational divides, between youth and elders, tradition and technology, memory and momentum. Schools can become sites of healing, where stories are exchanged, dignity is restored, and futures are co-authored.

Philosophically, this scenario touches on Ubuntu, lifelong learning theory, and community-based education. It asks us to see education not as a stage of life, but as a way of life.

Reflective Responses

What does intergenerational learning look like in practice?

It looks like a grandmother teaching isiXhosa proverbs, a retired engineer mentoring robotics students, a learner helping elders navigate smartphones. It means learning that is reciprocal, relational and rooted.

How do we integrate intergenerational learning into formal schooling?

By creating flexible modules, recognising informal knowledge, and designing shared spaces. By valuing wisdom as much as expertise.

What risks emerge if schools remain age-exclusive?

Loss of cultural memory, weakened community ties, and missed opportunities for mentorship. Education becomes isolated, disconnected from the lives it seeks to serve.

Sidebar: Facts and Philosophy

Insights from South African Education and Social Development (2025):

- The Schooling 2030 Action Plan calls for stronger community partnerships and lifelong learning pathways

- The South Africa Yearbook highlights the role of education in building inclusive, intergenerational societies
- Intergenerational mobility studies show that educational access across generations improves social cohesion and economic resilience

“We must restore the school as a place where generations meet, not just to teach, but to remember, to imagine, and to belong.” - *Dr Mamphela Ramphele*