Northumbria Research Link

Let's go on an adventure…Embracing and Implementing intergenerational learning.

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Introduction

Intergenerational practice is growing in popularity worldwide. There are a number of reasons for the development of this including societal changes, perceived ageism and increasing lifespan, as reported by Vanderven (2011) and Yasunaga et al. (2016), among others. In recent years, the benefits of such practice, together with learning opportunities, are emerging from related research, along with areas of caution.

You may have seen some of the high profile examples such as Channel 4's programme about the Old People's Home for four-year-olds where young nursery children met older adults in a retirement village (University of Bath, 2017), or the Maori 'Language nest' model for reviving dying languages in New Zealand (Living the Language, 2014) where parents and children worked with community elders to learn the dying language of their culture. Or, you may already have experienced aspects of intergenerational activity through your training and experience and may be drawn to participate in such activity over the coming months. While it is clear there are potential benefits, you must also be careful not to be drawn into fads or 'half-hearted attempts at pedagogy' (Webster, 2019, p.23).

Drawing upon the field of psychology, where learning is accepted as social and cultural, can explain why this is something to consider in your practice. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory demonstrated that learning grows from experience with others and that children (and adults) develop within a 'social matrix' (Gray and MacBlain, 2015, p.93). In this guided learning, both parties are active participants in the learning process, which involves observation, collaboration and social interaction (Shaffer, 2008, p.90). Given that Vygotsky argued strongly how children's learning is enhanced through interaction with a knowledgeable other, and that the direction of the interaction does not matter (Tudge and Winterhoff, 1993), it is reasonable to suggest that interactions may inspire learning across generations and may include adults learning from a knowledgeable child.

In addition to discussing intergenerational research and sharing examples of implementation of intergenerational practice, this chapter draws upon the findings of a participatory action research project, conducted by a university lecturer and early childhood practitioners working as co-researchers, which brought older adults and young children together in an urban forest school environment (Heslop, 2019). This research was novel in that it identified the interests of older adults and linked it to usual pre-school practice rather than the researchers determining the activity. This approach led to motivation, challenge and learning for all parties including the practitioners. The research determined how young children and older adults interacted, how knowledge was exchanged between the participants and benefits for all. The chapter continues by defining intergenerational practice and recognising the relevance to teachers and early years practitioners.

What is Intergenerational Practice and why is it relevant to teachers?

Intergenerational practice focuses on reengaging the generations (Vieira and Sousa, 2016). It may involve adjacent or non-adjacent generations and may be familial or non-familial and involve two or more generations.

Although individuals have learned from previous generations within families and in community groups for many years, with changes in society families do not necessarily live in close proximity to, or have availability of, their relatives. While some children will have loving and accessible grandparents or older adults in their community or beyond, others will not. For example, some grandparents are working longer and living more independent lives while others may only be able contact their grandchildren by phone or Skype (Kelly, 2011), if at all.

Rosebrook (2002) cautioned of the potential stratification of society and what this could mean. One example of this could be where children are aligned with similarly aged children in nursery and school, rarely mixing with others outside their age group. Growing up in a society with only their own age group could have a potentially profound effect on children, with limited opportunities to learn from others and may also create the development of ageism as they do not understand age diversity. Furthermore, identifying the isolation experienced by some older adults and recognising the negative attitudes towards other generations, early advocates of bringing generations together, such as Rosebrook (2002), set out to counter these issues. This has led to the growth of a number of organisations which aim to reconnect the generations (Beth Johnson Foundation, 2011, Generations United, 2019; Generations Working Together, 2019).

The earliest intergenerational interventions and research highlighted potential benefits of intergenerational practice such as well-being for older adults (Park, 2014) and empathy (Femia et al., 2008). These early programmes usually involved sedentary activities with the elderly in care homes, possibly reflecting general cultural expectation about the age and physical ability of the older adult participants in those interventions and as well as ease of arranging an activity in limited space. Examples of such activities include adults sharing their experiences or stories with young children (Pasupathi et al., 2002; Gigliotti et al., 2005) or young children performing for and interacting socially with the elderly (Morita and Kobayashi, 2013). However, reciprocity was often noted to be lacking (Knight et al., 2014) as the main focus was upon one age group over another.

More recent interventions involving 'community dwelling' (Park, 2014, p.181) adults are beginning to broaden the scope of intergenerational activity and seize opportunities which can benefit all parties. As the road to intergenerational activity and learning widens (Mannion, 2016) the intergenerational activity focus appears to now be including more diverse activity, including physical alternatives, (McConnell and Naylor, 2016, p.234). Mannion (2016, p.11) recognises that non-familial activity in relation to 'education and learning' is becoming more prevalent and demonstrates how individuals from different generations can learn from each other, both in explicit ways and through tacit knowledge. Bratianu and Orzea (2012, p.610) suggest that designing such interventions in order to 'stimulate knowledge transfer and intergenerational learning' is preferred.

Heslop's (2019) research was based upon usual pre-school practice in urban woodland. It was non-formal activity to which older adults were recruited. Heslop (2019) found that over the six weeks of her research, while children with prior relationships with older adults interacted with the volunteers more readily, *ALL* children interacted by the end of the six-week project, with learning and benefits evident for all. This indicated that for the children without such intergenerational relationships in their lives, the connections were even more pertinent. As benefits were evident for all participants, it was concluded that 'opportunities should be sought for older adults to work alongside young

children, informally, in early childhood education as there can be mutual benefits for all' (Heslop, 2019, p.170).

Now that you have been introduced to intergenerational activity, and recognise the potential for your teaching and learning context, you may wish to investigate further. Remember that, as a teacher, educator or early years practitioner you may have children in your environment who do not have the opportunity to mix with different age groups. There are some adults, who are not trained educators, who can offer learning opportunities to children. Introducing people of different ages to the children, and engaging them in activity can broaden perspectives and develop relationships. You will, however, need to consider who you may want to work with.

Who can I involve in Intergenerational Practice?

Intergenerational practice may involve parents (Duvall and Zint, 2007, Mannion, 2010) or individuals from a non-adjacent generation (Martins et al., 2019) working with children of any age. It may involve two or more generations and include practitioners and teachers. You may have some interested grandparents or family friends who could fulfil a pertinent supportive role and offer something to the learning experience. They do not need to be trained teachers as you are there in that role. What is important is that those who you welcome as volunteers are motivated by the potential activity and have an affinity with young children.

Of course, you also need an element of caution. Not all children have positive intergenerational experiences and negative discourses must be acknowledged. Mollborn et al. (2011) recognised that family values and attitudes may differ and not all intergenerational outcomes may be positive. For example, some older adults may teach undesired behaviour or language while in extreme circumstances there could be intergenerational transmission of criminal behaviour (Spapens and Moors, 2019). This should not deter you from engaging in intergenerational activity, but careful planning should be undertaken. See sections below.

Where and when can we carry out intergenerational practice?

Intergenerational practice can occur within or outside of the classroom. There are examples of children engaging with older visitors who have interests in music, poetry and puppets, amongst others and these have been carried out indoors (Kernan and Cortellesi, 2020). However, although not focusing specifically upon older adults and young children, Mannion (2012) discusses the importance of place in intergenerational activity, while linking it to learning. 'Place responsive pedagogy' (Mannion et al., 2013, p.803) requires educators to be flexible and creative and to be able to respond to the place for learning to develop. They suggested that outdoor natural places were suitable for such activity and this is a shift from the traditional view of having helpers in the classroom. It is appreciated that you will need to use your current provision and will have to be creative around this to consider where intergenerational practice can occur. Should you be fortunate enough to have an outdoor space, and older adults who are motivated by such activity, this could be the informal place for interactions and learning to occur.

While the World Health Organisation (WHO) (2016) indicates benefits for older adults from engaging with green spaces and the outdoors, particularly for those aged over 65 (p.17), these are also significant needs for young children and encouraging older adults to spend time outdoors in green spaces offers an interesting parallel with the current emphasis on children needing to spend more time engaging in outdoor activity (Savery et al., 2016; O'Brien and Murray, 2006; O'Brien and

Murray, 2007). Ridgers et al. (2012) also advocate the free use of space and time, rejecting a timetable, which they argue can restrict children's play. Not being constrained by time, slowing down to listen and time to reflect re all key ingredients for a suitable learning environment (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2006). This mirrors Fisher's (2016) research which found that successful interactions between adults and children take place when they are in a relaxed environment where there is no agenda to follow. This has implications for our Early Years and Primary provision. Consider – where can your children experience a calm environment, with adults who are not their teacher, where they are motivated to learn?

The informal urban forest school environment in Heslop's (2019) research offered a calm, unhurried, atmosphere for intergenerational practice. The older adults were relaxed as they did not have overall responsibility for the children, yet trust developed between the young children and older adults and this trust was key for reciprocity in opportunities for learning and challenge. This research was conducted over a six-week period, with preparation time outside of that. It was not a one-off activity and this too is essential to consider when preparing for intergenerational practice. Furthermore, this timescale was also significant. The length of the activity, several hours a day over a six week period, and the commitment required were also relevant for the volunteers in this research. The volunteers were motivated to participate, but having busy lives they didn't want to sign up for a longer period. Rather than seeking volunteers for a full term or year-long project, perhaps starting with a half term commitment may be best, with the option of extending it if desired.

How can I begin to engage in Intergenerational Practice?

Interestingly, one of the barriers to intergenerational practice taking place is the fears of the practitioners. Heslop (2019) noted how practitioners worried that older adults and young children would not be able to interact with each other and that they may have to facilitate conversations. However, in practice, this did not happen. Careful planning, and an enabling environment ensured that expectations were known, no interactions were forced (Fisher, 2016), relationships developed and the trust which built between the age groups facilitated later learning. If you have read this far then you must be addressing any fears.

In nursery, school or learning environment you may be drawn to try out intergenerational practice due to its popularity, yet, caution should be heeded as you cannot bring two groups of people together, without careful planning, and expect miracles. You may have heard of local examples where groups of children visit old peoples' homes or where older people are invited in to nursery or school, yet the reasons for undertaking such activity are not always clear and preparation may not be robust, as noted by Webster (2019). One example of this occurred in a research project which focused upon older adults (Morita and Kobayashi, 2013) where the benefits were apparent for the older adults, but there was no indication of preparation of the children to engage in the research and it could be questioned whether their rights were respected.

Within Heslop's (2019) research, the children were prepared by their practitioners for meeting the volunteers, meaning that before they even met each other the children had seen photographs and knew a little background about them. The older adults too had a meeting with participants and were appropriately checked as safe adults for such activity. You would need to follow the guidance for your context before recruiting volunteers. The research showed how some older adults are motivated to participate with young children and that children can benefit from their involvement, but not all will be interested and that is fine. Also, some children may be more engaged than others and that is acceptable too. Choice is essential.

Whether your intergenerational activity may include singing, physical activity or other, the careful planning is key. Ensure that children are prepared to meet the older adults and that the adults are prepared to meet the children. It is essential not to coerce children to engage with adults as they will interact in their own time and bonds will then form (Heslop, 2019, p.171).

Conclusions

Within this chapter, we have discussed the varied nature of intergenerational practice and have considered some potential benefits for all participants. We have explored who can participate as well as preferred locations and how to begin. There is a plethora of examples (including Heslop, 2019) which indicates that investment in well-planned intergenerational practice, where older adults and young children choose to engage with each other in informal places, and develop trust, can lead to learning for all age groups.

Intergenerational activity may not always be straightforward to organise, but opportunities should be sought with people who want to engage. Not only are benefits apparent for the children and volunteers, but teachers and early years practitioners can also benefit by 'learning new perspectives, developing their reflective practice and enhancing their professionalism' (Heslop, 2019, p.172).

Final Question:

How could intergenerational practice align with your teaching and the needs of your children?

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