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Cover Page Footnote

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The impact of inter-generational projects on the younger person's view of older people

Ian McNamara

Intergenerational projects and activities have become popular among both youth and senior citizen groups across Ireland. These programmes fill a variety of personal and societal needs as our society becomes increasingly age-segregated. This study examined the impact of intergenerational projects on a group of six girls aged 15 to 16 living in the west of Ireland. It explores preconceptions and changes in views towards older people, as well as personal impacts. All participants were members of a local youth group and had taken part in two intergenerational projects at a local nursing home. The first project involved working with residents to prepare pieces of art for an art exhibition. For the second project the youths discussed hopes and wishes with the residents and from these interactions and in conjunction with the residents, they created wishes for the nursing home Christmas tree. Twenty nursing home residents between the ages of 60 and 99 took part. A focus group was the chosen method of data collection. The main finding was that by taking part in the programme young people's opinions of older people changed from negative to more positive ones.

Literature Review

Intergenerational projects that bring the older and younger generations together have become increasingly popular in Ireland. As reported in an initial overview (Finn & Scharf, 2012) the type of intergenerational projects vary from art and craft to storytelling, to mentoring, with some projects involving only a few people and others engaging with several hundred. It is generally accepted that intergenerational contact is beneficial to all involved (Aday, Aday, Arnold, & Bendix, 1996; Kaplan, 1997; Meshel & McGlynn, 2004). While international research has shown that if children have negative attitudes and stereotypes towards older people intergenerational projects can influence change (Meshel & McGlynn, 2004) there is a lack of research conducted in Ireland. This research sought to assess the impact of intergenerational programmes on six girls aged 15 to 16 years. Contact was with residents in a nursing home with varying degrees of disability, both physically and cognitively.

The contact hypothesis

Allport (1954) developed what became known as *The Contact Hypothesis*, which proposed that contact with individual members of an out- group, could lead to a more positive attitude towards an out- group, as long as both groups are of equal status and that contact is of a cooperative nature. Wittig and Grant-Thompson (1998), while accepting the contact hypothesis, believed that it required additional qualifications, and investigated five contact conditions shown to be related to increased positive attitudes. However Schwartz and Simmons (2001) reduced the contact condition back to one single condition known as contact quality or contact favourability. They suggested that if the contact with an out-group was perceived to be favourable it would then result in a more positive attitude towards that out-group. They examined this in the context of attitudes of young people towards the elderly.

In this study sixty-two undergraduate students completed a single questionnaire that measured contact frequency, contact quality and attitudes towards older persons. The results confirmed their hypothesis. Participants' self-reported quality of contact with older people was significantly related to their attitudes towards older people while frequency of contact had no impact (Schwartz & Simmons, 2001). However the only information on the contact group is that they were all elderly. It could be that the majority of favourable contacts were with well old people and the perceived unfavourable contacts were with unwell older people, or even older people in residential care. However it does show the link between contact quality and changing attitudes.

The quality of contact was also an important factor for Chase (2011) in research where the impact of an intergenerational e-mail pal project on the attitudes of college students toward older adults was examined. This study involved 28 college students (aged 19 to 24 years) being paired with older people (aged 65 to 85 years) for an e-mail pal programme. A similar control group of students was chosen. In a pre-test analysis of attitudes towards older people, there was no significant difference between the attitudes of the two groups. Findings showed that the contact group scored, showed significantly more positive attitudes towards older adults following the e-mail project. Six e-mails, one a week, were sent by each participant. Although the duration of the project was short, a relationship developed between the young and older person, with communication becoming more personal and open. This supports the findings of Schwartz and Simmons (2001) that quality rather than frequency of experiences leads to more positive attitudes. Caution must be taken when generalising the results of this study as the numbers are small and the old people who took part were all

computer literate and able to email, something that may not be representative of a cross section of elderly people.

Meshel and McGlynn (2004) examined the impact of intergenerational contact on the attitudes of adolescents (aged between 11 and -13 years) towards older people. The study also examined the stereotypes the younger people had of the older people. Attitude and stereotype measures were used. The principles of the contact hypothesis were implemented by adopting reciprocally enjoyable and intimate activities (e.g. music, painting, hobby sharing and a talent show). The study found that the attitudes of those participants who were in the contact group relative to those in a control group improved from pre-test to post-test, although the change was not statistically significant.

The finding of a non- significant improvement in attitude is in contrast with the findings of Cummings, Williams and Ellis (2003), who found a significant improvement in attitude with the contact group. A noticeable difference however in the research is that the contact group of Meshel and McGlynn (2004) came from the general population of school age children, while Cummings et al. (2003) confined their research to at risk children in the 4th grade. They found that when older people were integrated into a school based curricular activity; it had a significant effect on the children's attitudes towards older people and on the children's school behaviour. This highlights the importance of studying the impact on different types of contact groups.

Community element

Many of the intergenerational programmes have a community element to them. Alcock, Camic, Barker, Haridi and Raven (2011) examined intergenerational practice in the community by means of a focused ethnographic evaluation. Eighteen young people (under 16 years) and 13 elderly adults from an inner-city community took part in an intergenerational photography programme. The study looked at how the intergenerational programme was experienced by the participants at a community level and the role of photography in facilitating change in the relationship between the different generations. Data from field notes and focus groups were analysed using thematic analysis. It was found that participants became aware of use of age group stereotypes and, as a result of the programme, they changed their views of older people. Co-operation between the generations occurred more regularly and more easily as the project progressed, and this led to reported positive changes. An issue that should be considered with community initiatives such as this one is that the

participants choose to participate in the study, so there may be a difference in initial viewpoints between those who choose to participate and those who choose not to.

Willingness to participate

The willingness to participate may be influenced by anxiety or outcome expectancies of the younger person, based on previous intergenerational contact. These issues were examined by Hutchison, Fox, Laas, Matharu, and Urzi (2010), in a study that looked at the relationship between young people's previous experiences of contact with older people and their willingness to engage in future contact with older people. Sixty-one students were invited to take part in a study on ageing and older people. Participation involved the completion of a questionnaire. Answers to the questionnaire were scored, and the relationship between the variables was compared, using regression analysis. The analysis confirmed that positive intergenerational contact was related to less negative outcome expectancies regarding interactions with older people. It was also found that intergenerational contact was linked to less negative outcome expectancies with regard to contact with older people. Research conducted on inter-generational contact has shown to create a more positive and less stereotypical view of older people the older people involved in the studies reviewed were generally well. In comparison to this the current study explored the impact of contact with a group of older people living in a residential home with varying degrees of physical and cognitive decline.

Research Design

At a meeting of Comhra na nÓg youth group the aims of this research were explained. Potential participants were told that participation would involve taking part in a focus group. What a focus group is was also explained. Volunteers were then sought from the group with the eligibility criterion of having taken part in two intergenerational projects in the nursing home in conjunction with Comhra na nÓg. Being involved in two intergenerational projects meant that the young people had spent 30 hours interacting with up to twenty residents between the ages of 60 and 99 years. While the projects themselves were not designed with research in mind, they were designed to ensure quality contact. This was achieved by the use of art and crafts which all participants enjoyed. Also the intergenerational contact was in a group situation. The first project involved creating art with residents for an art exhibition. In the second project the young people discussed hopes, and wishes with the residents and from

these interactions in conjunction with the residents they created decorations with wishes written on them to hang on the nursing home's Christmas tree.

Participants

Six young people, all female, and aged between and all between the ages of 15 and 16 years volunteered to take part in the focus group. All were given consent forms to be read and signed by themselves and their parents. Due to age of the participants it was decided that data collection would use a focus group as they could reflect and express their opinions in the company of their peers.

Data collection and analysis

While most studies reviewed examined very specific changes and used specific measurement tools, the current study was more open and encouraged participants to provide feedback on the projects as well as discuss the impact their participation had on them in their own words.

A focus group was identified as the most appropriate method of data collection as it generates discussion and debate among participants. Focus groups are especially effective in researching the perspectives of children as it encourages them to give their opinion when they hear others do so and the comments of one child jog the memory of others (Greene & Hogan, 2005). It also facilitates obtaining a group opinion which is relevant in this particular study, as the participants took part in the projects as part of a group. The group effect encourages participants to talk and others memories and opinions are stimulated in the course of the focus group discussion. Being among their peers the young people were more willing to express their viewpoints than being in a one to one situation with an adult. The focus group was held in the activity room in the nursing home where the intergenerational programmes had taken place so the participants were familiar and comfortable with their surroundings. Before starting the focus group the participants were shown pictures that were taken during the projects to remind them of the experience. This also served as an ice breaker.

The facilitator, who is a staff member in the nursing home, had a list of prepared questions in order to keep the conversation moving, but remained open to examine any topics participants introduced. Negative comments regarding older people were introduced in order to provoke a response from the participants at the end of the discussion.

The focus group was recorded on video with an audio back up which was then transcribed verbatim. The transcript of the focus group was analysed and different themes were identified and further examined.

Ethical considerations

While it was the Comhra na nÓg group leaders who decided that the group as a whole would participate in the intergenerational projects individual members had the option to opt out before or during the projects, without such action impacting on their membership of the youth group. Ethical procedures for research with human participants were conformed to at all times, in conducting this research. All participants, as well as their parents or guardian, were required to read and sign a consent form. The consent form contained the title of the study, an invitation to take part, details about the purpose of the study and why the person had been chosen to take part, what taking part involved, the option to withdraw and how the information would be treated. Prior to the focus group all participants were reminded of the importance of confidentiality regarding the group discussion. The video and audio recordings were encrypted and stored in a safe and once transcription was complete the video was deleted while the audio recordings remains stored in a safe. All participants' names as well as the names of residents mentioned have been changed to ensure anonymity. At the end of the focus group participants were given the opportunity to discuss any issues that they wished to.

Findings

Perceptions of older people and anticipations

In the course of the focus group a number of themes were evident such as the negative and stereotyped perceptions the young people had, regarding old people. They said that they had believed that old people would just sit in the one place, experiencing only emotions of anger and sadness:

I used to think they were all, depressed.

I thought they would be all cranky and sad.

As well as cranky and sad, other words that were used to describe their preconceived opinions included mean, judgmental and sleepy. The most common description was sad. The

young people were of the opinion that, older people had no quality of life, that they never did anything besides watch television; they never enjoyed themselves and had no sense of humour:

[...]sitting in the same room watching TV.

The young people also had some preconceived ideas about the older people's opinions of them and the projects and felt that the older people would not understand them:

I thought they wouldn't like us.

When I first came I thought they would not like [...] not want us to come, or they would be rushing us to go.

They were also nervous and shy at the beginning of the project:

I didn't want to do it at first but then when I started doing it I was like Oh, this is fun I don't mind anymore.

Like at first we were Oh ya we're coming here ya know, but like the next week it was like ya it's okay.

Enjoyment and relationships

Another theme that was identified was the mutual enjoyment of the experience. The projects agreed with the principles of the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) and also supported the view of Schwartz and Simmons (2001) that higher-quality experiences with older people rather than high frequency of contact led to more positive attitudes among young people:

When we were painting, like, they enjoyed it and we enjoyed it too.

Like I hadn't imagined that we would enjoy the exact same thing.

We made stuff and had a good time.

The quality of the contact was evident in the relationship that had grown between the two groups. Even though the focus group was four months after the last contact, the young people could remember the names of the residents, as well as conversations they had with them.

[...] they made me feel welcome.

Ann goes to me when we were painting, wouldn't you love to go for a dance now.

[...] and Mary, she wants to have drama and things.

It was also clear that the relationship between the groups was something that developed over the period of the projects:

You just walk in and you go how ya Mary?

It became easier to talk to them as you kinda got to know them better.

Changing viewpoints

During the focus group discussion many of the young people indicated that their opinions of older people had changed, it is clear that the projects had a positive effect on the young people's opinions towards older people in general, as well as impacting on their understanding of older people in residential care;

They're friendlier than I thought.

They're happy. They're actually happy and say some jokes.

They can actually do something.

Like you can still have fun when you're old, even though people say you can't. Really you actually can.

Like I never imagined that when I'm old I would be like able to paint and things. I did not imagine that at all.

I just thought I'd be sitting down.

A more positive opinion of older people was evident in the participants' responses:

It changed my views on old people and that you should respect them more. You should try talking to them more and see what they are like.

A girl who admitted that previously she would have pushed past old people on the street or told them to move said:

I learn to have respect. I learn to have patience.

It was clear that the positive change was in both opinion and action:

I notice older people more than I did before, like I see them now.

Like if an old person gets on the bus I will stand up for them.

Indeed when towards the end of the focus group the facilitator made some negative comments participants' responses indicated that their stereotypes were gone and they thought about older people as individuals. The facilitator asked: if I said to you old people can't do anything for themselves, that they are a hassle and that they have nothing to offer what would you say? They considered this question without any objection and responded that it was accurate with regard to some old people and not others:

Everyone is different, like there is a lot of old people.

My Nan is nearly 70; she is still running around the kitchen.

All participants were in disagreement when the facilitator said: In general old people are cranky. They don't want to have anything to do with young people.

As mentioned above some of the girls indicated that they were shy in the beginning and afraid that they would say the wrong thing, but as the projects went on they found it easier to communicate with the older people. They also indicated that the experience would make it easier for them to communicate with older people in the future.

Long-term influence

Some research has shown that positive interaction with older people can result in an increased interest in working with older people in the future, (Scharlach, Damron-Rodriquez, Robinson & Feldman, 2000). When the study group were asked if they would like to work with older people in the future one respondent said she would, three said they wouldn't mind if it was just doing activities like we had done in the projects, and two respondents said they had no interest in working with old people.

Discussion

One thing that stands out in this study compared to the reviewed literature is the young people's perceptions of the quality of life of older people. They believed that old people were sad and had no fun. The fact that the contact group were residents of a nursing home may

have influenced this as they expressed a, strong stereotypical image of an old person in a nursing home as someone who just sat in a chair all day unable to move or communicate and in a depressed mood. However participants did mention older people in general. The word sad was used on a number of occasions. The young people also thought that the old people would be cranky, and uninterested in talking to them. Considering some of the myths and stereotypes that surround ageing it is easy to see how perceptions of poor quality of life can prevail. A literature review by the National Centre for the Protection of Older People (2009) found that some of the most commonly held stereotypes of old people were that they were sickly and weak required regular check-ups and feared death, as well as older people being perceived as sad and lonely. Cuddy, Norton and Fiske (2005) also report that in Western societies older people are negatively stereotyped as being, grouchy, irritable, weak and cognitively deficient.

The main impact of the projects on the young people was that the elderly participants were not at all like what they thought they would be. It must also be noted that the participants had very little contact with older people prior to the projects. This supports the converse of Allport's contact hypothesis, that is, a lack of contact leads to negative stereotyping.

The programmes changed the stereotypes the younger people had. They found the old people to be humorous, interested and good fun. The group's attitude as a whole toward old people became more positive, their respect for and understanding of old people increased. This is in agreement with previous research (Schwartz & Simmons, 2001; Cummings et. al., 2003; Meshel & McGlynn, 2004). In particular it concurs with the findings of Schwartz and Simmons (2001) who found that the quality of contact was related to the attitudes of younger people towards older persons. The quality of the contact in the projects was very good. They took part in something they all enjoyed doing. They had a common goal. They got to know each other and they all enjoyed themselves. Chase (2011) found that when students had an opportunity to share with an older person they were changed by the experience, their attitude toward the older people became more positive as did their enthusiasm for the project. This growth in enthusiasm was also evident in this study.

Hutchison et al. (2010) examined anxiety and outcome expectancies as issues that affect young people's willingness to engage with old people. This study found that there was a level of anxiety, prior to meeting the old people, and there was also expectancy that the older people would not be welcoming, and that they would not want to talk to them. As the projects went on, and the participants experienced positive contact, they looked forward to

coming back to the nursing home. They found communication got easier and they also indicated that they believed future interactions with older people would be easier. This was consistent with the findings of Hutchison et al. (2010), who found that positive intergenerational contact resulted in more positive outcome expectancies, less anxiety within the group, and a willingness by the younger people to engage with old people in the future.

Conclusion

It is difficult to generalise from the results of this study because of the small size of the sample, but findings do agree with those of other research. It was clear that this intergenerational project had a significantly positive influence on the young people involved. Indeed it may influence career choices for some of the participants in the future. However for the moment it has taken away some of the stereotypes previously held and leaves them with a more positive attitude towards old people. The contact was perceived as favourable by the young people and therefore can be considered quality contact. This quality contact not only resulted in a more positive attitude towards the older people but a reduction in the anxiety felt by the younger people about interacting with older people.

The field of intergenerational contact would also benefit from a longitudinal study to examine the long term influence of such projects on the younger participants. Further research is also needed in the area of quality versus quantity contact, and what constitutes quality contact as well as exploring the opinions and benefits of older people who participate in such projects.

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