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"It's a Win-Win Situation" – Intergenerational Learning in Preschool and Elder Care Settings: An Irish Perspective

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“It’s a Win-Win Situation” – Intergenerational Learning in Preschool and Elder Care Settings: An Irish Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the level and sustainability of intergenerational practice in early years and elder care settings in Ireland. The paper is based on a small-scale research study involving interviews with staff in five organizations and builds on findings from previous research conducted for the TOY project (<http://www.toyproject.net>). The paper examines the pedagogies involved as well as the community context of intergenerational practice in early years and elder care settings. The findings highlight that sustainable intergenerational practice is facilitated by strong pedagogies that support active and relational learning across the life course and by being embedded in robust community networks.

KEYWORDS: [Intergenerational practice](#), [early years education](#), [elder care](#), [pedagogy](#), [sustainability](#)

Introduction

Ireland is generally regarded as a country that has retained a strong sense of community. In the OECD Better Life Index, (OECD, 2015), Ireland ranked consistently highly in social connections compared with other countries. In a world that appears to put increasing value on expertise and specialist knowledge over traditional forms of knowledge or wisdom, the process of becoming a more integrated human being requires knowledge that is created by all generations. Intergenerational (IG) practice offers the possibility of more balanced learning by drawing on the learning resources that are available in everyday life. In relation to children, Taylor refers to this pedagogy as creating “relational” and “collective” dispositions in children (Taylor, 2013).

IG practice as planned intervention is relatively new in Ireland, although it is well established in Northern Ireland. IG activity in Ireland, first mapped in a 2012 study by Finn and Scharf, revealed widespread interest in IG practice among a range of sectors including education, the arts, and community (Finn & Scharf, 2012). However, the participating age groups were mainly senior primary school children and teenagers and young children were largely absent from planned IG work. At European level, IG learning involving young children and older people was a relatively unexplored area of IG

In this article



was undertaken as part of the TOY project 2012–2014. The TOY project, funded under the EC
 rning Programme. focused on IG learning among children under 9 and older adults (55+). Ireland.

along with seven other European countries, participated in this research project (<http://www.toyproject.net>). The authors of this paper were participants in the TOY project, and the small-scale study reported here is a follow-up to the TOY project to develop further knowledge in the Irish context.

This paper examines the question of the level and sustainability of IG practice in early years and elder care settings in Ireland. The focus was on investigating aspects of the pedagogy that underpins IG practices and the types of community networks that support IG learning in both early years and elder care settings.

Because IG practice is a multidisciplinary and multisectoral activity, and occurs in a particular cultural, institutional, and policy context, and usually on a small scale, it is difficult to accumulate research knowledge. Furthermore, the theoretical basis for IG work is eclectic (Kuehne & Melville, [2014](#)), making it difficult to offer a theoretical framework for describing and understanding what the results represent. Opportunities to share learning and develop IG practice in Ireland are also limited by the absence of one dedicated and lead organization in this area. In the UK and Northern Ireland, the Beth Johnson Foundation and Linking Generations Northern Ireland have been involved in advocacy and research on IG practice for many decades and have contributed significantly to practice and policy development in both the UK and at a European level.

The study involved revisiting two community-based organizations working with older people that we had examined in the TOY project to see if, and how, IG practice had developed there. We also examined a network of recent IG projects involving cooperation among three services in a rural town: one early years setting and two elder care settings. The findings are discussed in the light of the TOY study and emerging theoretical perspectives on IG learning.

Literature review

While conceptual tools have been developed over several decades that have proved useful in mapping, informing, and guiding IG practice, a broader theoretical base for understanding IG practice has been slower to develop. Kaplan's model (Kaplan, [2002](#)) conceptualizes strength and degree of IG practice along a continuum of seven levels, from one-off, more superficial contact between young and old, to ongoing IG programs of relationship building when IG practice becomes more embedded in the community and becomes a way of life (Beth Johnson Foundation, [2011](#)). The European Network for Intergenerational Learning (ENIL) report suggests five distinct yet overlapping principles of IG practice: friendly and informal encounters; transfer of experiences, knowledge, know-how, and memories; mutual creations (artistic, cultural, and other); and active solidarity toward those in difficulty, "living together" (sharing space and facilities) (ENIL [2012](#), 15).

While Kaplan's model and the ENIL principles provided useful frameworks for the TOY project, we sought to locate our follow-up study in theoretical ideas that would help us to better understand the pedagogical principles and community context of IG practice we observed in an Irish context. Kuehne and Melville's ([2014](#)) review of theories used in research on IG practice proved fruitful. We drew largely on the following five perspectives to develop our research aims and interpret our findings¹: contact theory; situated learning; Vygotskian theory; social capital theory; and social organization/community capacity framework (Kuehne & Melville, [2014](#)). *Contact theory* posits the development of positive change in perceptions and attitudes in IG settings and programs. *Situated learning theory* highlights the powerful and mutual learning that can occur between children and elders and can be linked with *Vygotskian theory*, which highlights the social context of learning and the importance of relationships in mediating learning, particularly a supportive, tutor-like relationship. *Social capital theory* draws strongly from Boström's ([2003](#)) work and highlights the possibilities through "social grandparent" programs of creating a social environment suitable for lifelong learning. *Social organization perspective/community capacity framework* focuses on the building of reciprocal relationships of trust and connectedness resulting in talent and resources being pooled. We will now investigate how these key concepts are relevant to IG practice in the early years and the elder care sectors.

Opportunities for developing relationships and positive views of difference

The primary goals of IG practice have been to build and develop relationships and reduce the separation between generations. IG practice aims both to enrich relationships generally and to counteract negative stereotypes (Pinazo-Hernandis, [2011](#)). In relation to IG practice involving younger children, one of the most effective ways of building relationships is through shared activities. Spending time in each other's company doing simple activities and having fun is the focus of many successful IG projects.

Through case studies and pilot actions the TOY project highlighted the benefits of joint participation in creative, nature, and heritage/cultural activities. Benefits reported included development of new relationships between young and old generating respect and reducing stereotyping; enhanced well-being and validation; new learning on the part of both groups; increased opportunity to participate more actively in the community; improved social ties in neighborhoods and communities; and reawakened interest in culture and history http://www.toyproject.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/TOY-Pilot-Actions_summary-24-Nov-14.pdf

One of the Irish case studies included in the TOY project, "If you were in my shoes," was an IG and socially inclusive demonstration project designed to connect people through a felt-making craft project. The aims were to enhance social relationships, to improve health and well-being using creative projects, and to celebrate creativity in all ages. The evaluation of the case study concluded that the project created specific and broad social empathy across groups and different life situations that challenged stereotyped views of "the other." Moreover, the quality of the relationships that developed among and between the generations was a particular strength of this project: "They [children and older people] got to know each other ... really sweet and lovely relationships ... the children brought a different dynamic, they were less reluctant, fun, they were all used to making, they brought a lovely innocence, vitality ... they said funny things" (participant) (<http://mcauleyplace.ie/facilities/arts-centre/arts-culture-centre-projects/if-you-were-in-my-shoes/>).

Nurturing relationships developed organically during the 6-month project evidenced by extended conversations, sharing of happy memories as well as painful experiences, and satisfaction in creating something, which appealed to all generations. Bronfenbrenner sees such relationships as essential for a sustainable and humane society where children "have learned the sensitivities, motivations and skills involved in assisting and caring for other human beings" (Bronfenbrenner, [1979](#), p. 53).

The social context of learning

IG practice supports theories of active and meaningful learning where learning is a reciprocal and collaborative process with adults and children influencing the direction, timing, and outcome of the investigation (Dewey, [1966](#); Vygotsky, [1978](#)). Lave and Wenger consider the contexts in which learning takes place, highlighting situated learning and communities of practice with new learners joining as apprentice learners (Lave & Wenger, [1991](#)). In relation to older people with dementia, the quality of relationships that can develop between them and young children has been well documented (see, e.g., Gigliotti, Morris, Smock, Jarrott, & Graham, [2005](#)).

In the early years sector, Kernan and van Oudenhoven refer to the golden triangle of informal, nonformal, and formal approaches that characterize lifewide education (Kernan & Van Oudenhoven, [2010](#)). Lifewide learning for young and old is operationalized in IG practice, highlighting the fact that learning can take place across the full range of life experiences at any stage of life and can be facilitated by "people who are not trained, paid or acknowledged as teachers" (Boström, [2003](#), p. 5).

IG practice embodies a number of key elements in contemporary early childhood pedagogy including active learning, the importance of relationships in learning, learning as a collaborative process, and holistic learning. Sociocultural theories have been influential in guiding the early childhood profession toward a more relational and community-focused approach to children's learning and development (Anning, Cullen, & Fleer, [2004](#); Bruner, [1996](#); Rogoff, [1990](#);

Vygotsky, [1978](#)).

A pedagogy of relationships, as developed by Malaguzzi (Reggio Emilia, Italy), sees the child as active, competent, and visible, and the adult as a resource and guide to the child (Cagliari et al., [2016](#)). There is also increasing recognition within the early years sector of the agency of young children (James, Jenks, & Prout, [1998](#)). Learning about difference in environments that actively promote respectful views of themselves and others is an empowering experience for young children (Derman-Sparks & Olsen Edwards, [2010](#)) and is also a key theme in early education.

Older people as lifelong learners, a key principle in IG practice, reflects Erikson's life span approach to human development through which adults continue to learn in nonformal and informal environments with equal emphasis on learning together, learning from each other, and learning about each other (Erikson, [1980](#)). There is growing appreciation of the experiential learning that occurs through participation in leisure and social activities, which provide opportunities for older people to contribute from their own resources of knowledge and skill (MacKean & Abbott-Chapman, [2011](#)). The participation of older people in volunteering and the social relationships involved in learning are being increasingly recognized in Irish contexts (Carragher & Golding, [2015](#); Gallagher, [2016](#)). While peer learning is facilitated through initiatives such as U3A, ² opportunities for older people to contribute their knowledge and life wisdom to younger generations are less common.

A regulatory framework for inspection and quality standards in residential elder care settings requires a focus on "person-centered care" and greater attention to purposive activities (HIQA, [2009](#)). However, institutionalized settings for older people typically offer more passive forms of recreation with little emphasis on lifelong learning and developmental opportunities (Gallagher & Edmondson, [2015](#); Theurer et al., [2015](#)). More recently elder care settings are drawing on the resources of all stakeholders, recognizing the contributions of staff, volunteers, key assets in surrounding communities, and particularly older people themselves (Gallagher & Edmondson, [2015](#)). Lifelong learning can help to lessen a distinction between third- and fourth-age elders, ³ which can disempower the oldest-old especially those in institutional centers.

Valuable social roles, expanding networks, and increasing community capacity

IG practice offers the possibility to build more cohesive communities in community and educational contexts through creating bridging social capital. Walsh, Titterington, Mc Carthy, and Murphy ([2012](#)) concluded that older people bring life skills and experience and young people bring innovative thinking to IG work. The contribution of older people as a "strong social model" for other generations reflects the idea of the "social grandparent" where older people, when given the opportunity, can contribute their skills and life wisdom to younger generations (Boström, [2003](#)).

While congregated settings for same-age groups of young children and older people limit their opportunities to participate in their communities, IG practice helps to counteract this. Social capital gains accumulate when people are linked in with wider networks that offer opportunities for reciprocal relationships and learning. Creating nonfamilial relationships between older and younger people involves opening up community and institutional spaces to a range of age groups.

The value of IG practice as an approach to increase community capacity has been recognized in the Irish youth work sector (Walsh, Titterington, McCarthy & Murphy, [2012](#)). Strengths-based approaches and creating common goals have been found to facilitate mutual trusting IG relationships (Boström, [2003](#); Jarrott & Smith, [2011](#)).

While there are very few shared IG sites in Ireland, the TOY project and this follow-up study demonstrated the possibilities of networking among groups in the locality "on your own doorstep."

To what extent is it possible to create ongoing IG learning opportunities for all ages that link organizational cultures and pedagogical practices with wider communities? We hoped that we would find in the organizations and practices we

investigated clues that would point to the sustainability of IG initiatives.

Methodology

Aims and objectives of study

The aim of this study is to explore the pedagogies underpinning IG practice and the types of community networks that support IG learning in both early years and elder care settings with a view to exploring approaches to develop practice and policy in this area. We wished to explore the types and levels of IG practice in five settings from the perspectives of senior staff.

The objectives of the study were to

1. ascertain the type and level of the IG work undertaken in the organizations involving young children and older people;
2. investigate the participants' experiences of IG practice in their organizations and their understanding of its place and value in their work;
3. understand the perspectives of the participants on the benefits of IG practice;
4. investigate enabling and constraining factors in IG practice; and
5. explore useful conceptual and theoretical approaches to IG work in Ireland.

Methods

The *design* of the study was qualitative in nature and involved semistructured interviews with six participants in five organizations. ⁴

The *sample* was purposely selected based on their senior position and oversight of IG activities in their organizations. Five participants were in senior positions while one was a general staff member.

Three of the organizations were located in or near a small rural town (population 5,000): a small private preschool for children aged 3–5 years; a day care center, offering social care supports for older people; and a private residential center for older people including those with dementia. The location of these services in the same rural town provided an opportunity to examine geographic community networks and to triangulate findings from these interviews. The other two organizations investigated were a national advocacy organization for older people and a community housing project for older people in a large rural town (population 20,000).

The organizations, participants, and the locations of the IG work undertaken are presented in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Overview of organizations, participants, and locations.



CSV Display Table

Each participant was asked about the IG practices in their organizations: their perceptions of the benefits for participants and the place and value of IG work in their services, their views on IG work involving different age groups, their perception of the enabling and constraining factors in developing IG work including continuity and discontinuity, the impact of regulatory frameworks, and their aspirations in relation to future IG work.

The *data collection* took place in February 2016. Each interview lasted from 40 to 60 minutes and was audio recorded. *Ethical approval* for the research study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the Dublin Institute of Technology. Informed consent was obtained from the participants, and their permission was given to quote them directly or refer to their experiences.

The interviews were analyzed through *thematic analysis* of categories within the data based on the main topics covered in the interviews and additional themes that emerged. Conceptual development of categories occurred through integration of interview data with themes that arose from the literature. Themes were synthesized, compared and contrasted, and differences in views and emphases were noted among the participants.

Findings

Type and level of the IG work undertaken

Older people in a range of different living situations were involved in IG work; these included older people living in the community, attending a day center, living in supported housing, and/or living in a residential center. The children who participated in IG activities ranged in age from 3 to 16 years and were attending preschool, primary school, or second-level school. The IG activities involved not just interactions between the children and older people but also staff and parents.

Activities varied in frequency and duration from once-off activities to regular or seasonal events and ongoing IG activities. The main activities involved visiting each other's settings to engage in a range of planned activities. These included storytelling, singing, flower arranging, planting, arts and crafts, parties, and conversation. Seasonal IG activities involved children from the preschools, primary and second-level schools performing carols at Christmas in the residential home and an Easter celebration in the day center. All the IG activities resulted in opening up age-segregated and institutional environments of preschool, day care, and residential care normally inhabited by either young or old.

One project involving storytelling and making a quilt, and while a once-off activity, generated learning and understanding that went beyond friendly and informal contacts and involved two additional ENIL principles: "knowledge, know-how and memories" as well as "mutual creations" (ENIL, [ENIL 2012](#)). Three older people from the day care center visited the preschool a number of times and shared stories of their childhood about how they liked to play, chores they had to do, and what they liked to eat. With assistance from a local craftsman the children and older people created a quilt together depicting childhood then and now. The quilt was given as a gift by the preschool to the day center where it is now on display.

A multigenerational choir was initiated by the preschool composed of children from the preschool, primary school, second-level school, and parents and older people from both the day center and residential centers with an age range of 1–90 years. The aim of the choir was to facilitate a positive multigenerational experience as much as to offer a choral experience. The choir practiced in the primary school and performed at two functions: anniversary celebration of the local community center and the visit of a religious dignitary to the town.

Other ongoing IG programs developed by the national advocacy organization enabled older adults to share their knowledge and skills with children and others in the community and involved contacts with schools and a local hospital. These IG initiatives included Trauma Teddies, ⁵ The Way We Were, ⁶ and Fáilte Isteach. ⁷ These essentially facilitated older adults to be teachers in nonformal educational and community contexts and as one volunteer commented: "Just because I have reached 65 does not mean my brain has switched off" (Carl).

The social context of learning

The importance of relationships being embedded in the learning process was emphasized by staff in the preschool and day center. Aoife believed the IG work undertaken facilitated the possibility of forming relationships with a wider community, unlike previous “community” work where the preschool children “would spend days in the community but we weren’t forming relationships ... not just a tour down the town or pop into the library ... this is really what community is about, it’s by interacting with everybody in the community.” She believed that relationships were developed through working on joint activities, sharing experiences of past times, and celebrating together.

The children and older people were active agents in the planning and reviewing of each of the IG experiences, thereby creating opportunities for deep learning and engagement. The preschool children were consulted, given a voice, and supported in making choices: “We asked them what they felt ... so they came up with the whole plan ... different events such as planting plants, doing art work, having a party ... they insisted on having a party ... and doing some exercises” (Aoife).

Likewise, the older adults were actively involved in learning through the use of learning circles, a practice in the residential center, where they identified interests and made plans that resulted in ideas for work with children and teenagers and included gardening, flower arranging, and art activities.

Participants’ experiences of IG practice in their organizations and their understanding of its place and value in their work

All participants had positive experiences of IG work and each articulated a clear understanding of the purposes of IG learning. All spoke passionately about the philosophy and possibilities of IG work.

The preschool manager viewed IG projects as “an intervention for learning” that is “unique and gives a purpose” ... “You are opening a whole new learning environment to them [the children]” (Aoife). Inviting older persons to visit offered further learning opportunities: “We weren’t exactly sure what we were going to do ... and that is how our curriculum is ... an emergent curriculum” (Aoife). She instanced the storytelling/quilt project as an example of an emergent curriculum that involved learning for both young and old.

Fiona believed that people with dementia could teach something of value to children and young people (a hitherto undeveloped area of Irish IG practice) and that reciprocal learning occurred through interactions: “Like we are just a nursing home that people can come in to – that’s not visiting as such – they [residents] have an awful lot to offer youngsters” (Fiona).

Mary and Carl highlighted the work of each of their organizations in facilitating older people to share knowledge and skills with younger people. Older people experienced a sense of self-worth and satisfaction from IG interactions and opportunities to contribute to the lives of others. Younger people were said to benefit from conversation with older people and from developing and expressing empathy with them. Referring to the Trauma Teddies project, Carl said: “Chatting while they are knitting has to be of benefit to children.”

Expanding social networks and providing opportunity for social participation and valuable social roles

Participants from the advocacy organization and community housing project favored multigenerational programs rather than IG programs, and broad social engagement in the community rather than specific institutional links, for example, with preschools. Mary invoked the UN Principles for Older Persons,⁸ which state that older people should have access to educational, cultural, and spiritual resources in society and they should have opportunities to share their skills with the next generation. Carl saw IG learning as desirable in itself, and more importantly, as a by-product of broadening the social participation of older people.

In the residential center, the result of efforts to create “that connection with the community” was that “we’ve gone from a place that was task-oriented that is now about a village ... it’s great for them and everdav there’s something happening.

it's always a busy spot" (Clare).

IG practice was seen as intrinsic to the entire philosophy of the community housing project: "That was the cornerstone of starting this development which was to keep the generations interacting together" (Mary). While individual IG projects in the center were important, Mary emphasized that IG interaction happens "organically" every day in the center: "It's what we do." A similar philosophy was evident in the advocacy organization: "One of our philosophies is to make older people visible in the community and to ensure that an older person has a part to play in society" (Carl).

Mary spoke about the impact of the IG project, "If you were in my shoes" (p. 7), in terms of community development. She said the staff could see the "connections that were being made between the young and the older generations ... it rippled out and other people got the vibrations of that" (Mary). This project was ambitious in its aim to be inclusive of different social groups as well as different age groups; it was designed to open up the place "relationally and socially to the community" (Mary).

Another interesting pilot program involved older people in the residential center acting as tutors to teach English to migrant staff in the center: "We have two retired teachers aged 89 and 87 and it's a fantastic idea ... it gave meaning and structure to their day ... it also broke down the carer/caree role" (Clare).

In relation to the conversational English-language teaching program, Fáilte Isteach, its uniqueness was said to be the contribution of older people to a societal issue, that of integrating migrants in their new communities and being "a really strong social model for the other generations" (Carl). He saw societal benefits in combatting racism, especially if "your granny or grandad is out teaching English to migrants ..." (Carl). A volunteer on this program was reported as saying: "I get more back than I can ever put in." Henry summed up the benefits of such programs: "It's a win-win situation."

Interestingly, while it was older people in the advocacy organization who initiated Fáilte Isteach, the program has expanded nationally and other age groups have become involved as volunteer teachers. The initiative is now both multigenerational and socially inclusive.

Benefits of IG practice

The participants identified benefits for people of all ages in having the opportunity to meet and interact with groups previously unfamiliar to them. Interestingly, there were benefits reported for staff and others who were not the intended beneficiaries from opening up environments. Aoife, speaking about the IG choir initiative, explained its value for the older people: "Getting out of the routine ... they were constantly in the day centre five days a week ... and sometimes it could be depressing because people pass away and it was lovely for them to get out and do something different."

Clare and Fiona spoke about the presence of young children in the nursing home: "Seeing the picture in the faces of the residents ... [they] absolutely loved, they just loved to see the kids." This sentiment was reiterated by Aoife, who said, "When children enter into a setting they lift the atmosphere."

The participants all expressed the enjoyment and, in some cases, the joy that older people got from interacting with young children. Henry said that older people looked forward to interactions with the children; when an IG project had ended, the participants had asked him several times: "Are we going to meet any of the children again?" He pointed out that for older people who never had children, having contact with children was a positive experience. For people in the residential center who had dementia, seeing the preschool children elicited happy memories of the time when they had young children. The children had no inhibitions about playing alongside the residents. Fiona suggested that compared to other age groups "the preschoolers are twice as good because they have no inhibitions at all." Clare and Fiona from the residential center said they had received positive feedback from other staff who had children in the schools about how much the children had enjoyed the IG activities.

Reflecting on learning for older people and commenting on another IG community choir initiative hosted in the community housing project. Marv reported that some people with dementia from a local nursing home had reacquired

words of songs that they had forgotten and could actually retain new words. She said the IG projects they ran “gave proof of the value of mixing generations together” (Mary).

The benefits for self-esteem that accrued for the older people were highlighted. Feelings of achievement and purpose were identified by the manager of the day center. He spoke of their pride when they were telling the preschool children about their childhoods: in “teaching them about the past” ... “they had a huge pride in that ... it meant a lot to them” (Henry).

Children enjoyed hearing stories about the past and having the opportunity to take part in craft work. Children benefitted from the time and attention of older people. Carl cited the value to immigrant children of the presence of an older person in the absence of extended family. The participants spoke about successful Transition Year (TY)⁹ projects where respectful and authentic relationships were formed between teenagers and older people. They suggested that IG interaction can help develop empathy in children: “Kids can be giddy and all that and then an older person comes in and they change and their kindness and goodness comes out” (Carl). The staff of the residential center also reported on the qualities that children and young people displayed in their interactions with the residents. A class group of boys (aged 12 years) who baked for an Alzheimer’s Tea Day in the center sang and played musical instruments for the residents: “They were relaxed and chatted with them for nearly two hours and it was just lovely” (Clare).

The potential of IG practice to promote positive views of difference among all age groups was stressed by the participants. Children had the opportunity to get to know new people and to have “a chance to understand differences in a different way” (Aoife). Henry believed that “giving children a grounding not just in academic studies but meeting people with disabilities and older people [helps] to break down barriers.”

Mary identified the “art of conversation” as a teaching opportunity for older people and “basic life skill” for younger people who are “so influenced by social media and so engaged with their phones.” She said that many of the students who had completed their TY program in their center expressed a wish to continue their involvement through volunteering and had returned to play cards and board games with the residents.

Enabling and constraining factors

Participants identified factors that enabled and constrained IG practice in their settings. A key enabling factor was vision and leadership. The preschool manager played a pivotal role in activating IG initiatives, and her contributions were commented on spontaneously by the participants from the day and residential centers. Through her personal and professional contacts in the locality as well as the partnership she had established with parents, she made strategic contacts with like-minded people. Her active involvement throughout steered the projects to successful outcomes. However, due to the closure of her preschool six months after the interview, most of the IG initiatives involving her old preschool with the day and residential center ceased.

Geographic proximity of the preschool, day center, and residential center was a factor that facilitated IG interaction. Participants stated that effective IG practice required volunteers to help implement activities. Four of the organizations had a cohort of volunteers while the preschool enlisted the support of parents.

The town’s profile on social media helped to put the IG work undertaken on a wider social and geographic map. Images of the choir’s performance at community events were posted on the town’s Web site and people as far away as Australia could see people they knew singing together – a grandmother, grandson, relative or former neighbor. The manager of the day center, Henry, expressed the multiplier effects of this: “So it starts off as a ripple and it spreads out.”

Constraints were noted by all participants. For the preschool, the national regulations imposed demanding adult-child ratios as well as risk assessment and detailed planning for every outing. Time for this level of planning was also noted as a challenge. Child protection guidelines required high levels of supervision during all visits and outings. The logistics of taking children into the community required the support of parents/carers to accompany children. The participants in

the centers for older persons did not find regulations inhibiting; however, having transport and enough volunteers to take residents out did present challenges for the residential center.

The constraint of having to fit into another organization's schedule (e.g., the day center always facilitated the school's busy schedule) was noted by a number of participants. Other challenges included staff changes that might result in losing a link in the organization or community, lack of volunteers, and additional costs for items such as materials and transport.

Discussion

The discussion will focus on the following themes that emerged from the findings: opportunities for developing relationships and positive views of difference; the social context of learning; valuable social roles; expanding networks; and increasing community capacity. These themes reflect theoretical frameworks developed by Kuehne and Melville (2014) and build on research findings from the TOY project.

There were considerable benefits for children and older people from getting out of their daily routine; a recurring idea was the extent to which young children lifted the atmosphere for older people. The findings demonstrated that children contributed by their presence, qualities, and openness to relationships and learning. Young children's developing awareness of difference, empathy, and tolerance evidenced in this study reflects ideas on developing a humane and sustainable society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The success of the various IG initiatives attested to the feasibility of bringing together age and social groups who do not normally socialize together. A community-wide multigenerational initiative like the IG choir facilitated sharing experiences, talent, and resources and resulted in networks of trust and reciprocity bringing a sense of joy, pride, and fun to the community (Kuehne & Melville, 2014). Many parents became enthusiastic about the IG work and were willing to become involved in supporting the IG activities.

The findings suggest a strong pedagogy where the relationships developed through IG practice can enrich the learning of children and older people, especially when young and old are actively involved in the planning process. The IG activities helped to make young children and older people more visible and more engaged in their communities, benefits identified in the literature and promoted in recent Irish policy. IG practice fits with national policy aims in children's, young people's, and elder care sectors. (CECDE, 2006); (DCYA, 2014; [HIQA] Health Information and Quality Authority, 2009).

The opening up of each other's settings as well as related community environments enhanced the possibilities of situated learning (Cagliari et al., 2016; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Through IG learning experiences children and older people had opportunities to participate in "real life" activities that are fundamental to meaningful learning. The preschool, day care center, and residential center all saw the value of opening up their environments to wider age groups in the community, thus echoing views in the literature about the undesirability of segregated settings (<http://www.toyproject.net>). It was noteworthy that the position of recreation coordinator in the residential center was created to cultivate and exploit social networks in the surrounding community (Fiona's position). The collaborative nature of learning was further demonstrated in the democratic process adopted by the multigenerational choir where all age groups voted on a name, logo, uniform, and repertoire for the choir.

IG practice fits with contemporary thinking on children's learning that emphasizes the culturally and socially constructed nature of learning where relationships form the bedrock of learning and development (Bruner, 1996; Cagliari et al., 2016; Derman-Sparks & Olsen Edwards, 2010). The social relationships involved in learning are increasingly being acknowledged in both care and community settings (Carragher & Golding, 2015; Gallagher, 2016). Learning as an enterprise for life for children, older people, and staff was strongly reflected in the IG work undertaken. Through these

enterprise for inter-generational, cross-generational, and cross-sectoral learning, reflected in the research and practice through strong pedagogies and approaches the likelihood of sustainability is enhanced.

Active pedagogy and involvement in the community are also reflected in recent Irish policy development in early education ([CECDE] Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, [2006](#); NCCA, [2009](#)). The national policy framework for children and young people “Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures” envisions that children and young people should be connected, respected, and contribute to their world through positive networks of friends, family, and community and should be civically engaged ([DCYA] Department of Children and Youth Affairs, [2014](#)).

In this study, both children and older people were seen to play a valuable social role in their communities. For older people this was manifested in both direct and indirect transmission of knowledge and skills and also in modeling behavior, for example, through the development of positive social relationships and the art of conversation. Older people involved in IG practice were also contributing to societal issues such as teaching English to migrants.

The findings demonstrate that IG practice is intrinsically linked to the creation of social capital. Opening up “geographically and socially” to the community involves a mixture of exploiting natural social networks and a degree of social engineering. The findings of this study suggest that close geographical proximity facilitates IG practice. However, this work is a challenging and long-term process and is more likely achieved where IG practice is part of the vision and policies of the organization. Realizing the potential of IG practice requires vision, commitment, and leadership. While each organization had a different mission, all shared a commitment to lifelong learning in community contexts. This involved coming out of their “comfort zone,” identifying resources in the surrounding community, activating existing networks, and establishing new connections.

The study is limited by its small size and its focus on the perspectives of staff in selected organizations. While it involved elements of a case study, the perspectives of children and older people would have been valuable. The authors acknowledge that as participants in the TOY project this may have predisposed them to a positive perspective on IG practice.

Conclusion and recommendations

The exploratory study reported here that builds on findings from the TOY project investigated aspects of the pedagogy and community context that underpins IG practices in five Irish settings encompassing early years, elder care, and community services.

This paper has identified examples of IG practice at the higher levels of Kaplan’s model (Kaplan, [2002](#)) and incorporating most of the principles outlined in ENIL ([2012](#)). We have demonstrated that when IG practices are embedded in strong pedagogies and community contexts they have good possibilities for sustainability. The study also confirmed the value of multigenerational approaches that can promote social inclusion. At the same time we acknowledge the demands that IG practice places on all participants but in particular on managers and staff.

While IG work is compatible with curricular and/or quality standards in the early years and elder care sectors, the practice is not typically integrated nor evident in educational curricula for young children or social care services for older people in Ireland. There is no overall national policy promoting IG practice nor any one organization dedicated to developing IG practice. IG practice remains an optional extra and is typically initiated by “champions” who have a vision and commitment to fuller integration and more rounded learning for children and older people.

Arising from this study it is recommended that the philosophy and benefits of IG practice are more widely promoted among policymakers, service providers, and practitioners in both early years and elder care sectors. For the authors of this paper, the challenge as educators is to support effective and sustainable IG practice through education and training. To this end the TOY-PLUS project will build on the findings of the TOY project and develop a blended learning course on

IG practice for practitioners in early years, elder care, and community sectors (www.toyproject.net).

IG practice, which can be conceptualized as the curriculum of ordinary life, is of relevance right across the life span and is arguably most beneficial when approached multigenerationally. As the title implies, IG practice is a win-win situation for young and old and indeed for all ages.

References

Notes

1. Three other perspectives outlined by Kuehne and Melville were considered; relational theory and IG communication theory were believed to relate more to individual therapeutic change, which was not our primary focus. We also saw value in empowerment theory; however, this seemed more appropriate to IG work involving young adults.
2. University of the Third Age (U3A) refers to an educational movement based on peer learning established in France and Spain in the 1970s. U3As are learning cooperatives of older people run entirely by volunteers and are based on love of learning rather than formal accreditation (<http://www.u3a.org.uk/u3a-movement.html>).
3. Laslett's (1996) distinction between a new life course stage "the third age" – a period of personal development and contribution to society – and a fourth age characterized by decline and decrepitude can be criticized for marginalizing people in the oldest-old age group and people who are frail and in need of care supports (Gallagher, 2008).
4. A sixth participant (Fiona) who had additional knowledge of community connections was also interviewed at the request of the manager in the residential center.
5. 'Trauma Teddies' is described as a case study in the TOY project (<http://www.toyproject.net>).
6. "The way we were" is described as a case study in the TOY project (<http://www.toyproject.net>).
7. Failte Isteach is a volunteer-run English-language conversational program for immigrants into Ireland.
8. UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR), UN Principles for Older Persons, 1991.
9. Transition Year is a year in second-level school between the Junior Certificate cycle and the Leaving Certificate cycle, which is nonacademic and designed for learning outside the examination system.

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