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Intergenerational learning as a pedagogical strategy in early childhood education services: perspectives from an Irish study

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the concept, role and potential of intergenerational learning (IGL) as a pedagogical strategy in five Irish early childhood education (ECE) services, through exploring the perspectives on IGL of educators (5), children (70) and their parents (43). Informed by socio-cultural theories of learning and aligned to key principles of IGL, a qualitative methodological approach was adopted. Data was gathered using semi-structured interviews with educators, 'draw and talk' strategies with children and informal written feedback with parents. Key findings demonstrated that children's happiness, socio-emotional competences and executive functions, all key elements of successful learning and living, were strongly supported through IGL, reinforcing its potential as a relational pedagogy (Papatheodorou, T., and J. Moyles. 2009. *Learning Together in the Early Years: Exploring Relational Pedagogy*. London: Routledge.). Additionally, IGL created rich opportunities for children's participation and contribution as citizens in communities, underscoring the potential of IGL as a strong and transformative pedagogical strategy (Sánchez, M., J. Sáez, P. Díaz, and M. Campillo. 2018. "Intergenerational Education in Spanish Primary Schools: Making the Policy Case." *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships* 16 (1-2): 166–183.) for Irish ECE services.

KEYWORDS

Intergenerational learning; relational pedagogy; children's participation; intentional teaching; reimagining ECE services

Introduction

The concept of intergenerational learning (IGL) is as old as humankind, predating any type of formal education and typically involving the informal transmission of knowledge, skills and values in multigenerational families as part of daily living (Jessel 2009; Watts 2017). The introduction of formal schooling and the separation of family life and work life led to the decline of this traditional form of IGL. Over time, ideas about learning and education adapted to these changes until learning, at least in the public arena, began to be associated with formal educational institutions and only for children and young people (Hager and Halliday 2007). It was not until the late twentieth century that interest in planned, extra-familial intergenerational practice

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emerged (Bottery 2016), broadly understood as 'the way people of all ages can learn together and from each other' (ENIL 2012, 4). Planned, extra-familial IGL builds on key elements of traditional forms of IGL, particularly the importance of relationships and informal contexts of everyday life for learning and the contributions of wide-ranging social groups outside the family to the learning and development of children and adults (Kaplan 2002; Sánchez et al. 2018). The main agents of planned IGL are people who are not trained, paid or acknowledged as teachers (Boström 2003) and the learning space is the place where those people interact, typically through informal encounters in local communities (ENIL 2012). IGL places equal emphasis on learning together, learning from each other and learning about each other in real life contexts (Schmidt-Hertha, Krašovec, and Formosa 2014). Importantly, in the process IGL creates possibilities for increased solidarity between generations, as well as mutual enrichment and benefits to individuals and communities (Cabanillas 2011; Newman and Hatton-Yeo 2008; UNESCO 2000).

However, despite the emphasis in IGL on learning, the primary focus of IGL policy and practice since its emergence in the late twentieth century has been on its potential to address societal changes and challenges (TOY 2013). These include ageing populations, increasing segregation of generations due to urbanisation, migration and family change, social isolation and, to a lesser extent, individuals' right to lifelong learning (Cortellesi and Kernan 2016; Kaplan et al. 2020).

More recently, a growing interest internationally in IGL as a pedagogical strategy has begun to emerge (Sánchez et al. 2018), with some agreement in the literature that IGL as a learning approach includes the following key ideas: it facilitates socially-constructed learning through collaborative relationships in authentic cultural contexts; it promotes positive views of the strong capacity of people of all ages to participate in their own learning; it mobilises the resources of the community to enrich the learning of young and old and it operationalises principles of lifelong and lifewide learning (Hatton-Yeo 2015; Jarrott and Smith 2011; Kaplan and Sánchez 2014; Kump and Krašovec 2014; Sánchez et al. 2018; VanderVen 2011).

Crucially, in this study, these understandings of IGL bring to life key concepts of contemporary thinking on young children's learning and development. These concepts are encapsulated in Bruner's (1996, 84) broad definition of human learning as 'participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative and given over to constructing meanings rather than receiving them'. More recently, key principles of a quality framework for ECE services proposed by the European Commission strongly resonate with IGL policy and practice. The framework foregrounds ideas of the child as co-creator of knowledge with people of all ages, as well as the importance of providing a social, cultural and physical space in preparing children for life and citizenship in society (European Commission, 2014). The importance of socio-emotional learning and the role ECE services play in supporting individuals to learn to live together in heterogeneous societies further resonate with IGL principles and with recommendations for high quality ECE systems (European Council 2019).

However, IGL is neither reflected in well-regarded ECE curricula internationally, nor in Irish curricular and quality frameworks (CECDE 2006; NCCA 2009), despite its common aspirations with ECE. This raises the question if, and how, IGL could extend and enrich learning opportunities and add value to the traditional pedagogical

strategies offered in ECE services (Cartmel et al. 2018; McAlister, Briner, and Maggi 2019). Importantly, IGL offers the possibility of developing educational spaces that are broader and more inclusive than those currently available, capitalising on the life experiences and richness of mixed age groups in community spaces in the process of which, IGL could be reframed as a potential new model in education (Cabanillas 2011).

This study (Fitzpatrick 2021) grew out of the researcher's participation in a larger European study of IGL forming part of the Together Old and Young (TOY) project. The TOY project consortium comprised members from seven EU countries, who undertook research on IGL policy and practice between young children and older adults (2012-2014) and delivered a pilot online training course for those involved in IGL (2016-2018) www.toyproject.net.

Specific research questions addressed in this article are: What are the views of childhood and learning among a sample of educators undertaking IGL in Irish ECE services? What are the educators' experiences and views of IGL undertaken in their ECE services? The full study reporting on children's and parents' perspectives as well as the IGL implementation process, including interactions between children and older adults can be accessed at https://arrow.tudublin.ie/appadoc/106.

Theoretical framework

Socio-cultural theories of learning, which contend that development and learning are embedded in the context of social relationships in children's social and cultural contexts (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Rogoff 1990), served as the theoretical framework for the study. Socio-cultural theories of learning are strongly reflected in contemporary ECE pedagogy, both in Irish (NCCA 2009) and international (European Commission, 2014) contexts. Drawing on the social constructionist understanding of learning and development, the concepts deemed most useful in exploring the research questions included: the central role of relationships in learning and development; learning as a participatory, collaborative process (Lave and Wenger 1991; Rogoff 2003); the key role of the educator in supporting children's learning (Smith 1996); the community as a locus for learning and development (Nimmo 2008; Rogoff 2003) and children as active, agentic citizens in all aspects of their lives and learning (Alanen 2014) (see Figure 1 on page 4). These concepts resonate powerfully with key characteristics of IGL outlined above (Cartmel et al. 2018; Sánchez et al. 2018).

Methodology

A qualitative research design was adopted, reflecting the social constructionist paradigm in which the study was positioned. This facilitated a focus on the unique insider perspectives of the adult and child participants, giving them voice and encouraging reflection as they attributed meaning to their experiences (Lapan, Quartaroli, and Riemer 2012). A collaborative approach to data-gathering with children was a key element of the research design and contributed significantly to the authenticity of the study. The researcher collaborated with educators to agree guidelines that directed the data-gathering process with children, following which

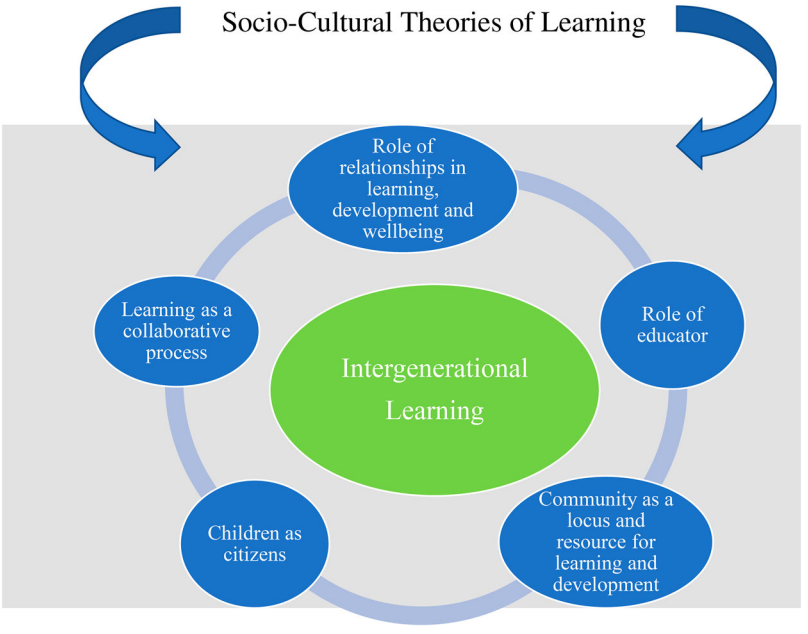

Figure 1. Concepts underpinning IGL as a pedagogical strategy in ECE services.

educators gathered data with children over time in their natural environments without the researcher being present in the ECE service. All the educators participating in the study regularly engaged in co-constructing knowledge with children and were experienced in listening to, clarifying, interpreting and documenting children's views and experiences.

The study sample comprised five educators who had completed the TOY pilot training programme and were implementing IGL in their ECE services, 70 children (aged 3 - 5 years) attending those services and 43 parents of those children.

Data was collected over a nine-month period in 2019, beginning with two semi-structured interviews with educators. The first interview focused on educators' constructions of childhood, their views on learning and the role of the ECE service. The second interview focused specifically on educators' views and experiences of IGL and was carried out 4–5 months later to maximise educators' experiences of IGL. This was followed by data-gathering with children and parents over a 4-month period. Data was gathered from parents through informal written feedback. Two main strategies were used to gather data with children: 'draw and talk' (Clark 2017; Einarsdottir, Dockett, and Perry 2009; Lipponen et al. 2016) and 'talking and listening' (Broström 2012; Clark and Moss 2011), both of which were already being used by children and educators in all the ECE services. Educators documented and collated children's drawings, conversations and observations in notebooks provided by the researcher, an example of which can be seen in Figure 2:

Figure 2. Example of 'Draw and Talk' strategy.

> … our granny clapping when we were dancing … first I was shy and didn't want to dance coz all the nannies were watching but then I wasn't shy anymore, so I danced … (Child A, aged 5).

Thematic analysis, a strategy that facilitates a bottom-up analytical process and allows for new and unexpected meanings to be identified, was adopted to analyse the IGL experiences of educators, children and parents (Braun and Clarke 2014; Nowell et al. 2017).

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval granted by Technological University Dublin Ethics Committee. https://www.tudublin.ie/media/website/research/postgraduate-research/graduate-research-school/documents/TU-Dublin-Code-of-Conduct-for-Research.pdf combined with the ethical framework of the Irish government for undertaking research with children (DCYA 2012) informed decision-making throughout the study.

Limitations of study

The study has limitations in terms of generalisation and scope. As the research involved a small, self-selected, motivated and highly-trained sample of educators who had completed IGL training and had chosen to introduce IGL in their ECE service, a relatively positive view of IGL might have been expected. Additionally, the study presents a snapshot of IGL in a relatively short timeframe and therefore does not reflect how perspectives on the IGL experiences may change positively or negatively for all participants over time. Importantly, the views of the older adults, who are key stakeholders in IGL, were not a focus of this study.

Overview of IGL experiences undertaken in the ECE services

Each of the five ECE services had developed IGL experiences with services for older adults (generally serving adults 65 years+), including nursing homes (care homes),

day-care services and independent living centres, resulting in children interacting with adults of varied ages, abilities and life experiences from backgrounds that were diverse socially, culturally and geographically. A wide range of IGL experiences were implemented, with conversation, music, singing, arts and crafts, and eating together being the most frequently cited. The regularity of children's IGL experiences ranged from weekly, fortnightly, monthly to once or twice per school term.

Key findings and discussion

IGL relationships play a positive role in children's wellbeing and learning

A main study finding was the educative value of the individualised, attuned, and affectionate relationships that developed between children and older adults and this was identified by all educators to be central to the value of the IGL experiences for children. The nurturing relationships were deemed important by educators for the significant role they played in supporting all aspects of children's wellbeing and learning. Significantly, these nurturing relationships resonated with the crucial role that responsive relationships play in the development of proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner and Evans 2000; Tudge et al. 2021) and executive functions (Whitebread and Coltman 2011) in children's holistic development. Educators identified children feeling loved and cared for in their engagement with older adults as a core strength of IGL, reflecting educators' belief in the inextricable link between children's emotional, social and cognitive development in what could be termed a nurturing or relational pedagogy (Hayes 2013; Papatheodorou and Moyles 2009):

> … [for children in the service] to be happy … that is one of the most important things … (Educator E).

The pleasure derived from the relationships between children and older adults articulated by children themselves and confirmed by educators and parents was deemed to be similar to the positive role of the grandparent/grandchild relationship (Geraghty, Gray, and Ralph 2015). It also resonated with the concept of the social grandparent[1] relationship and its wide-ranging benefits (Boström 2003; Fattore and Mason 2017). Characteristics of these relationships reported by educators included the ready availability, enthusiasm, individualised attention and affectionate nature of the interactions in the unhurried environments of the older adults' services, in contrast to the busier world of the ECE services. Interestingly, educators reported that the relationships experienced by children participating in the IGL experiences were qualitatively different to all other relationships children experienced in their ECE services:

> … everybody is happy to see each other … they [the children] sit on their [older adults'] laps, there's high fives given, there's hugs given … so definitely there's a lovely relationship between them … (Educator C).

While emphasising the intrinsic value of nurturing relationships to children, educators also emphasised their belief and trust in the instrumental role these relationships

[1]Older people contributing their skills and life wisdom to younger generations to whom they are not related (Gallagher and Fitzpatrick 2018).

played in all aspects of children's learning, reflecting well-established theories of children's learning and development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998; NSCDC 2011; Shonkoff and Phillips 2000):

> … the learning takes place because of the engagement between children and older adults … because the activity … we could do it here [in the ECE service] … definitely it's the engagement … (Educator E).

In reflecting on the learning processes to which children had access through the IGL experiences, educators described how children and older adults learnt together, from each other and about each other in wide-ranging, real-life social and cultural contexts (ENIL 2012). This finding reflected not only the educators' belief in learning as a relational, open-ended process but also that relationships with older adults in ordinary life contexts constituted rich learning environments for children (Sánchez et al. 2018):

> … it's organic and it's just more natural and mutual … it's not a directed kind of learning … (Educator E).

This finding reflected educators' trust in IGL relationships and processes as the key drivers in supporting children as powerful learners. Such an emphasis on relationships rather than specific educational goals reflected the principle that relationships and learning coincide, as learning is socially situated and mediated through relationships (Degotardi, Page, and White 2017; Hedges and Cooper 2018):

> … I think if you try to over orchestrate it or direct it, you'll stifle it … for learning to happen it has to be a little bit free … the older people they're not here to be in a role of teaching … it's about allowing it to evolve … just through the interactions … and I think that's really the best way … (Educator D).

Educators reported that the IGL relationships enriched children's social and emotional development, including through supporting their sense of identity and belonging, self-esteem and social skills:

> … when we drive past the nursing home, she [child] tells whoever is in the car about visiting the old people … 'it's my nursing home' … (Parent A).

> … they [older adults] like playing with me … (Child E).

> … they [children] know how to deal with people who may have had a stroke and have a speech problem … and they know to listen a little bit carefully … (Educator C).

The positive affirmation children experienced through their relationships with older adults was perceived by educators to encourage them to participate with enthusiasm (Bessell 2017). Children's keen observations and alertness in the supportive climate afforded by the IGL experiences encouraged children's curiosity, exploration and construction of new knowledge (Rogoff 2012), key elements of positive learning dispositions (Carr and Lee 2012):

> … somebody [older adult] said something about 'during the war' so the children were asking [about the war] … we wouldn't really talk about that in Montessori … and that emerged in our curriculum because the next day they wanted to know about the war … (Educator C).

Thus, the relatively complex dispositional milieu of the older adult environments played a key role in extending children's capacity as capable learners (Bronfenbrenner 2005; Trevarthen 2012). A concrete example of Bronfenbrenner's theory that the nature and quality of the interactions available to children should increase in complexity and should be in environments that invite exploration and challenge (Bronfenbrenner 2005; Hayes, O'Toole, and Halpenny 2017) is reflected in the puzzling experience of one child:

> … one of the residents said 'oh, I need to go to the toilet' to the nurse and one of the children said … 'does she have to ask to go to the toilet?' … so I had to explain … 'well, actually she finds it difficult to walk to the toilet so she needs a bit of help' … (Educator E).

Opportunities created for children to deal with unfamiliar experiences were highly valued by educators who were particularly attuned to what might be worrying or confusing experiences and they provided considerable support to children in understanding and responding in these contexts:

> … one of the ladies when she holds the children's hands … she won't let go … so the children are giving her a wave instead of holding her hand, or they'll know that if they do hold hands that they can call one of us to come over and help the situation … (Educator E).

Educators believed that helping children deal with challenging IGL experiences in a supportive environment offered valuable learning opportunities that would not arise nor could be offered in the typical experiences of the ECE service. Such challenges supported children in the development of critical life skills, including resilience and capacity for persistence with problem-solving (Denham and Brown 2010; McLaughlin, Aspden, and McLachlan 2015), key characteristics of flourishing (Gaffney 2011).

The real-life contexts afforded by the IGL experiences were also valued by educators as opportunities for authentic collaborative learning, with children taking on the roles of both learners and teachers, reflecting Rogoff's (2014) ideas of 'learning by observing and pitching in' to community activities:

> … making the rice crispies [cakes] … we [educators] actually completely stepped away as childcare practitioners and let the children and the older people manage … opening the packets … one holding the bowl … the bingo game … having to match, listen, ask someone else 'did you hear that?' … those kinds of things are very important … (Educator R).

The positive role of the nurturing relationships between children and older adults highlights an issue fundamental to children's learning and development and their overall flourishing – children feeling loved and cared for – but rarely addressed in discourse or research (Dalli 2008), and which is closely aligned to what could be termed 'professional love' (Page 2018). In this study, educators demonstrated their expertise in meeting children's need for love and affection, while building a strong pedagogy on the basis of IGL relationships.

IGL as a vehicle to enhance children's participation in communities

The strength of IGL as a vehicle for enhancing children's participation as citizens in communities was a key study finding. Importantly, educators firmly believed that children

were fully-fledged citizens with a right to participate not only within but also beyond the ECE service, and that educators should act as brokers in promoting children's participation in the community. In supporting children's participation and right to be embedded in the community (Bessell 2017; Fleer 2003) through IGL, educators emphasised two key features: the usefulness of adopting a relational perspective on participation in the context of young children's lives and the crucial importance of children's social contexts in affecting their participation:

> … there is no point in putting them in this little place [the ECE service] and wrapping them in bubble wrap when the world is bigger than just here … (Educator M).

> … nobody ever thinks of offering [children] one [a role in the community] … (Educator D).

In supporting children to engage with a broad range of people and experiences in real life contexts through IGL, educators believed they played a key role in extending children's experiences of citizenship as they learned to participate effectively beyond the ECE service in community contexts (Bae 2010; Percy-Smith and Thomas 2010). In this belief, educators demonstrated contemporary understandings of children's participation, which emphasise participation as ways of being, relating and acting in everyday life (Mannion 2010), as well as the more typical focus on the discursive, individualistic and decision-making processes of participation (Wyness 2013):

> … they are interested in being involved in the community because … they are now telling us what they want to do … (Educator C).

Drawing on educators' views of participation as social, informal and community-focused (Horgan et al. 2017), they described how children not only brought joy to the older adults by their presence but contributed to the lives of older adults through sharing time, energy, space and experiences. These included singing, dancing, arts activities, games, birthday celebrations and, over time, particular activities that children thought the older adults might enjoy when they were together, such as visits by the older adults to their ECE services and joint outings in the community.

Educators highlighted how non-judgemental and caring children were in supporting older adults in practical ways such as listening carefully, helping them physically and sometimes anticipating their needs. The meaningful social roles created through the IGL experiences enhanced children's views of themselves as active, contributing citizens (Hart 1997), contributors of social capital to the community, while also promoting positive views of the competence of children in the wider community (Nimmo 2008):

> … they [children] help residents into their seats … [or] go over to them and say, 'do you want to link my arm?' … and they'll walk with the walker with them … (Educator C).

> … they [children] don't make assumptions … they just accept everybody for who they are … they just think … 'my friend' … that is it … it doesn't matter how old the friend is … (Educator M).

The value of IGL as a strategy for children to practise citizenship and to support the development of civic behaviour (Hanmore-Cawley and Scharf 2018) reported by educators reflected their belief that citizens are not born, but are made:

> … they are the future people who are going to do the Tidy Towns[2], do the Meals on Wheels[3] … if we don't do it at this young age, it is not going to happen … (Educator C).

Educators, in promoting principles of relational pedagogies in community contexts, espoused a humanistic view of education (Delors 1996) and reflected Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 53) views of a sustainable society as one that relies on citizens who 'have learned the sensitivities, motivations and the skills involved in assisting and caring for other human beings'. Importantly, Bronfenbrenner believed a curriculum of caring should start in early childhood and continue to the end of high school (Bronfenbrenner 1985; Tudge et al. 2021).

The educator as intentional teacher

The pivotal role of the educators and their autonomy in decisions around what and how they provided for the optimal development of children in the ECE service was a central finding in the study and one that is well-established in the literature (Ang 2014; Campbell-Barr 2019; Shonkoff and Phillips 2000). However, the impact of educators' values and orientation on children's learning and wellbeing are rarely perceived as legitimate contexts for critical reflection within ECE curricula (Ang 2014) or identified as issues for research (Anders 2015; Campbell-Barr 2019).

In this study, the importance of children's happiness through feeling loved and cared for, children contributing to the lives of others and the richness of community life as a learning environment were values shared by educators and were instrumental in their decision to intentionally implement IGL. This finding, that educators' explicit and implicit socio-cultural beliefs and understandings of children and learning, impacted powerfully in guiding their work (Freire 1972), resonating with what Ang (2014, 194) refers to as the 'unofficial curriculum'.

The happiness which the IGL relationships brought to children was a driving force in educators' decision to adopt IGL as a pedagogical strategy. In calling attention to children's happiness, educators addressed not only the relationship between children's emotional security and their development as powerful learners, but also highlighted a contemporary debate on the nature of professionalism: balancing the requirements of policy and regulation with the affective and emotional elements of work with children (Osgood 2010).

Educators' commitment to the right and desire of children to be valued in communities was also a motivating factor in introducing IGL, perceived by educators to be an effective vehicle for extending children's participation beyond the ECE service. Importantly, it reflects educators' belief in the role of the community in supporting children's flourishing (Boyd 2019; Nimmo 2008):

> … I think they do [want to play a role in their community] … I think they like having that bit of responsibility … they like being part of the community … (Educator M).

> … children can give too … they're like a burst of energy to the older people … and you could see that from the older people just being so amazed about how great they are … (Educator D).

[2]Tidy Towns is a national, annual competition encouraging communities to enhance their local environment.
[3]A home delivery service of meals by volunteers to support individuals, usually older adults, to live independently.

Drawing on these values, educators demonstrated an openness, as well as vision and courage, in implementing IGL, which could be considered an atypical pedagogical strategy. Interestingly, all the educators acknowledged that, through IGL practice, they had changed their views of what constituted learning opportunities for children, reflecting their willingness to experiment and be open to innovative strategies (Moss 2014). Through their experiences of IGL, educators reported a strengthening of their belief in the value of seeking risk-rich environments beyond the ECE service (New, Mardell, and Robinson 2005), including a willingness to work with a wide age group in community contexts using a multi-disciplinary approach. In going beyond what was safe to what might be possible, educators in this study demonstrated what Moss (2009, viii) deems essential characteristics of early childhood educators, to be 'open-ended (avoiding closure), open-minded (welcoming the unexpected) and open-hearted (valuing difference)':

> … this time last year I never would have thought of a crèche visiting a day centre or a nursing home … why would you do such a thing … and now I'm asking 'why would you not do such a thing?' … (Educator R).

However, the study also highlighted an initial concern of educators about sharing their roles as educators with older adults who are not trained, paid or acknowledged as teachers, a characteristic of IGL (Boström 2003):

> … I would have been up for going out on walks and things like that … but letting other people engage with the children … for other people to take on that role as well … I think this is possibly the first time that we've done it on this kind of scale … (Educator E).

In viewing themselves as brokers in the contexts of children's learning, educators demonstrated their belief and confidence in intentional teaching (Kilderry 2015; Mentha, Church, and Page 2015), valued as a pedagogical strategy that simultaneously addresses the tension between adult-directed and child-directed approaches within ECE pedagogy (Edwards 2017; Epstein 2007; Siraj-Blatchford 2009).

> … it is us having to go out into the community … to see what we can find for them to do … we come in with ideas and they [the children] start throwing out ideas and we start circling what they want to do … (Educator C).

This finding is significant as research suggests a reluctance among early childhood educators to undertake intentional teaching, despite evidence stating that the most effective pedagogical practice balances child-initiated learning and intentional teaching (Siraj-Blatchford 2009).

The overwhelmingly positive views of parents in relation to IGL, a key finding of the study, was in some considerable measure due to the educators' enthusiasm and expertise in introducing and implementing IGL. Educators anticipated and addressed potential parental concerns, which included acknowledging the tension between parents prioritising academic skills over educators' emphasis on the value of positive social and emotional development; child safeguarding issues and how children with additional needs might experience IGL:

> … some of our parents really wanted the children to do academic learning … we did focus groups with them … asked them to look at Aistear [curriculum framework] … then we

> tracked them [the children] for a few months and then asked them [parents] to look at it again … and they realised that … they're learning so much … it doesn't have to be academic … (Educator R).

> … maybe they [parents] had concerns about where [the children] were going to be … were they going to be in the [bed]rooms or was it going to be an open room … they know we're taking them from one safe environment to another … (Educator M).

> … two children I brought down on their own [as part of the preparation], they had autism … I felt that was important because of the smells, the sounds … (Educator M).

Significantly, educators reported that parents' enthusiasm for IGL enhanced their services' partnership with parents, a highly valued principle and quality indicator in ECE pedagogy (CECDE 2006; Desforges and Abouchaar 2011) and one which confers considerable benefits on children's learning and development (Epstein and Sheldon 2016). Parents' satisfaction with their children's involvement in IGL reflected a strongly shared goal of parents and educators. Interestingly, some parents participated actively in the IGL experiences, while others supported educators with practice ideas.

Conclusion

Considering IGL as a pedagogical strategy raises important philosophical questions in imagining learning priorities for young children now and into the future, which may involve extending or challenging contemporary ideas of ECE practice. A humanistic rather than instrumental view of education, reflected in the lifeskills and potentialities evident in the study children's interactions with the older adults, demonstrated educators' commitment to relational pedagogy with a focus on future-building rather than future-proofing. Future-building, which challenges the dominating discourse in ECE in the Western world, in what Facer (2019) refers to as the defensive position of future-proofing children, searches for possibilities in the present by questioning what we might desire for an unknown future, arguing that education is a site for future visions (Moss 2017).

This perspective understands education in the broadest sense as fostering children's development and wellbeing and their ability to live a good life, with the goal that both the individual and society will flourish, embracing what could be considered a fundamental aspiration of education: to be transformative and lead to profound change for individuals and communities (Cabanillas 2011; Delors 1996; Freire 1972; Sanchez et al, 2018).

Importantly, IGL created opportunities for the community to contribute to the development and wellbeing of children. Through this reciprocal process, IGL created opportunities to address societal challenges, including age segregation, social isolation and lifelong learning. In opening up the spaces, physically and metaphorically, as inclusive places of encounter where children and older adults spend much time, extensive opportunities were accessed for the development of solidarity and sustainable communities. Moreover, doing so facilitated the valuable contribution ECE services can make to the realisation of the UN Sustainable Goals, including quality education and sustainable communities and cities (UN 2015). Opening up the ECE service and reimagining its role through the practice of IGL benefitted children, older adults and communities,

while also empowering educators, parents and families. IGL strengthened relationships between educators and parents and created opportunities for the development of social capital enhancing social cohesion (Watts 2017) as parents became involved in IGL and/or other community experiences. Nonetheless however, and building on the results of this exploratory study, consideration should be given to possible negative aspects of IGL by conducting research on the implementation of IGL in a broader sample of ECE services over time.

Overall, this study highlights the value of IGL as a pedagogical strategy which draws on community spaces as rich and innovative learning environments, demonstrating how IGL offers a contemporary take on a long-established belief that it takes a village to raise a child.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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