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Advancing intergenerational learning: Identifying challenges and opportunities for older adults

Integrated case study report

Education 2030

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Foreword

Intergenerational experiences are important to the health and well-being of both older and younger generations. Higher education institutions are well positioned to play a vital role in supporting intergenerational learning (IL) programmes, offered in a variety of settings, that can engage a broad range of community partners and bring together individuals across the generations.

This research report presents five case studies from three UNESCO regions (Europe and North America, Africa, and Asia and the Pacific), highlighting different strategies for designing IL programmes and illustrating the varied policy and implementation dimensions within which global IL programmes operate. The case studies were developed as part of Study 2 of the larger UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning research project entitled *Higher Education Institutions – Responses to the Learning Needs of Ageing Societies*. Using an explorative multiple case study approach, the goal of Study 2 was to examine the dynamics and potential of IL as a means of fostering a culture of lifelong learning. The value of IL is assessed, along with ways in which it can advance age-friendly learning environments and combat ageism. In addition, insights are provided on generational learning motivations and barriers to IL programming. Finally, a set of evidence-based guidelines is offered to inform future IL programme efforts.

The outcomes and recommendations presented in this report constitute a valuable resource for educators, policy-makers and community leaders. The long-term success of IL will depend on continued advocacy, research and investment in programmes that bring generations together in meaningful ways. Ultimately, the integration of IL into education systems worldwide will be critical for addressing the challenges of an ageing population, maximizing intergenerational opportunities, and cultivating greater social cohesion.

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The research project comprises three thematic studies, focusing respectively on: Reskilling and upskilling; intergenerational learning; and digital learning for older adults.

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For the sake of brevity, we have used IL and LLL for intergenerational learning and lifelong learning respectively throughout the text of this report.

1. Introduction

Following the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) research project entitled *Higher Education Institutions – Responses to the Learning Needs of Ageing Societies* conducted from 2020 to 2021, an extensive follow-up research initiative was undertaken between 2023 to 2025 to gain further in-depth knowledge on three distinctive thematic areas focusing on older people's learning, specifically:

- Study 1: Implementing effective reskilling and upskilling learning programmes for older adults
- Study 2: Implementing effective intergenerational learning (IL) strategies and activities for older adults
- Study 3: Bridging the grey digital divide: Enhancing information and communication technologies learning for older adults.

The present Study 2 uses an explorative multiple case study approach to examine how diverse IL programmes across the globe have brought younger and older learners together in productive, transformative ways.

Context

Population ageing is a global phenomenon, with people over 65 years old comprising the world's fastest-growing age group. As a result, the proportion of the world population aged 65 and above is expected to rise from 10 per cent in 2022 to 16 per cent in 2050 (UN DESA, 2022). Most countries are experiencing population ageing, albeit at varying rates in different regions (UN DESA, 2019). Considering this irreversible shift towards an older population, it will be important for societies to support older individuals in being healthy, active and engaged in public life. However, all too often the population ageing trend is presented in a negative light and associated with challenges for the economic system, while neglecting the rich opportunities based on reciprocal learning between generations (Slowey and Reyes, 2021).

Intergenerational interactions are recognized as important factors in the health and well-being of both older and younger generations (Zhong *et al*., 2020). The need to invest in fostering intergenerational connections for the benefit of people of all ages has recently been emphasized by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021). It is important to note that intergenerational learning is not intended to supersede or abolish age-segregated learning, but rather to take adult and continuing learning in new directions, and expand the opportunities it provides for personal growth as well as professional development (Findsen and Formosa, 2011). IL can take place in a variety of social settings and through different activities or projects, which can help to strengthen social capital and bonds, creating social cohesion in communities. It works well to combat ageist stereotypes and to encourage solidarity across age groups, breaking down barriers and working towards an age-inclusive, intergenerational world.

Both older and younger groups have resources that are valued, including expertise, skills and experience. Through IL, they can share their knowledge and worth with each other. Both groups can be marginalised in decision-making and have more in common than they realise. In this context, IL can strengthen communities to become more age-integrated by breaking down barriers between learners of all ages and challenging stereotypes held by one age group toward another to promote understanding, respect and trust.

There is a large body of literature on IL, its theoretical foundations, policy environments, strategies and activities, as well as its advantages and challenges (see, for example, Findsen and Formosa, 2011; Kaplan *et al*., 2016; Montepare, 2019; Slowey and Reyes, 2021; Whitbourne and Montepare, 2017). The present study builds on previous research and takes a global perspective, presenting a comprehensive overview of the dimensions of IL drawing on experience across three UNESCO regions. It first traces the origin and evolution of IL, defines the main concepts and outlines relevant theories. It further describes how different generations are identified, and summarizes the motivations of older and younger adults to participate in IL, as well as the potential barriers. This is followed by five case studies describing national policy environments in relation to IL, with implementation examples from the UNESCO regions. The study concludes with a synthesis of findings for supporting the development of IL programmes, drawing on the good practices revealed in the case studies.

The rationale for intergenerational learning

Theorizing intergenerational learning as a generational catalyst

Intergenerational learning is underpinned by several theoretical frameworks for understanding how learning occurs and its impact on individuals and communities. Among the most relevant is social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), which states that individuals can learn through observation and imitation, acquiring behaviours and attitudes of another generation. Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) is also relevant, bringing into focus cultural context and cognitive development as socially mediated processes. Other theories include cultural-historical activity theory (Engeström,1987), highlighting the importance of shared activities and practices in passing cultural knowledge, and experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), which views learning as a cycle consisting of experience, reflective observation, conceptualization and practical experimentation.

The rationale for certain types of IL is also well-aligned with Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory, one of the dominant teaching paradigms discussed in relation to adult education (Mezirow and Taylor, 2009). Transformative learning may be defined as 'learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change' (Mezirow, 2009). It embraces Habermas' 1981 theory of communicative action, which argues that individuals aim to achieve mutual understanding in communication via consensus, free discursive argument and autonomous willed enactment, rather than strategically pursuing their own discourse (Habermas, 2015). Initially conceptualized in the context of adult higher education, transformative learning has since expanded to various educational settings. In his later work, Mezirow outlines several conditions under which individuals can freely participate in discourse which reflect 'democratic ideals such as self-respect, respect for others, acceptance of the common good, and willingness to be open and engage diversity', in addition to a reasonable amount of personal security, health and education (Mezirow, 2009).

Based on empirical findings, Corrigan *et al.* (2013) argue that a university-based intergenerational learning programme demonstrated multiple benefits, and proved to be a useful strategy for both transformative learning as theorized by Mezirow (1991) and social learning described by Bandura (1977), where different generations learn from one another through observation, imitation and modelling. The programme also fostered 'significant learning opportunities and a transformation in attitudes and understanding between generations' by creating 'dialogical spaces where older and younger adults can meet together' (Corrigan *et al.*, 2013, p. 119).

The study also highlights the ability of IL to foster intergenerational and intercultural solidarity, which have important social capital implications for public life and policy. The study therefore advocates for all higher education institutions to consider intergenerational programmes 'not only as a service to older people but as a valuable learning experience for students' (*ibid*., p. 131). Moreover, programmes may engage students from broad age groups, as they may engage age-diverse older people.

Sharing intellectual and experiential knowledge

Intergenerational dialogue is an important part of LLL for several reasons. A recurring theme refers to the potential of younger and older people to learn from each other by sharing intellectual or experiential knowledge (Strom and Strom, 1995; McClusky, 1990). According to Corrigan (2021), both younger and older participants often acknowledge how little they know about each other and how many similarities different generations can have. Corrigan explains that this is particularly evident in their understanding of social justice and the need to make the world a more just place for all. This is supported by Schuller (2021, p. 28), who argues that education can be 'a powerful vehicle for improving intergenerational understanding, as well as raising difficult questions about different generations' access to resources and support'.

Corrigan further explains that many older participants acknowledge that learning in collaboration with younger people is 'beyond accreditation and degrees' and argues for more teaching and learning spaces where older and younger generations can meet in their community, in schools and colleges and in tertiary education (*ibid*.). At the same time, in the context of higher education, Corrigan *et al*. (2013) note that the outcomes for the younger participants in IL are underexplored. As demonstrated in the Intergenerational Learning Project, students 'gained knowledge, competences and skills which contributed to both their personal and professional development' (*ibid*., p. 118).

Social and psychosocial benefits

The social and psychosocial benefits of IL include: acceptance of people from other age groups; reducing distrust and anger; better understanding, care and cooperation between generations; higher life satisfaction among older participants; and more constructive attitudes towards older generations among younger participants (Findsen and Formosa, 2011; Hatton-Yeo and Ohsako, 2001; Manheimer, 1997), as well as emancipatory benefits such as empowerment (MacCallum *et al.*, 2006). A systematic review of the literature by Zhong *et al*. (2020) found a positive impact of non-family intergenerational interactions on health-related outcomes of older adults such as 'physical health, psychosocial health (e.g. reduced depression), cognitive function, social relationships, and well-being/quality of life'. Engagement in IL activities was

also linked with increased physical and social activities. A review of the psychosocial effects of IL on primary school children and older adults found that the majority of studies highlighted improvements in attitudes, well-being, happiness and other social and psychological aspects (Tsiloni *et al*., 2023).

Krzeczkowska *et al.* (2021) observed reliable benefits of IL across multiple studies for anxiety, generativity, cross-age attitudes and physical activity. In the context of higher education, IL can be beneficial when older adults share their personal or professional knowledge and experience with students (Corrigan, 2021). For older adults, IL provides benefits such as keeping the mind active, remaining socially engaged, feeling valued and experiencing the enjoyment of meeting and engaging with younger people (*ibid*.). According to Corrigan (*ibid*.), older generations represent a valuable resource for the education system, while participation in IL can in turn support older people in remaining healthy and active.

The role of IL in combatting ageism

As recognized by WHO member states in the *Global strategy and action plan on ageing and health*, ageism is a major barrier to enacting effective policies and facilitating healthy ageing, as reflected in the *Decade of Healthy Ageing: 2021–2030* platform (WHO, 2017; 2021). Ageism arises when 'age is used to categorize and divide people in ways that lead to harm, disadvantage and injustice and erode solidarity across generations' (WHO, 2021, p. xv). According to the WHO 2021 report, ageism is prevalent in many institutions and sectors of society, including healthcare, the workplace, the media, and the legal system. Ageism can act as a barrier to the enjoyment of human rights such as older individuals' right to health, access to justice, and unbiased treatment in legal proceedings (Doron *et al*., 2018). In the workplace, ageism can result in discriminatory hiring practices or limited career progression opportunities (Doron *et al*., 2018). Media might further perpetuate negative age stereotypes which shape public perceptions (Rozanova, 2010). These ageist practices highlight the need to combat ageism from an international human rights law perspective. According to Doron *et al*., (2018), the starting point can arguably be the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 (UN General Assembly, 1948).

One distinct benefit of intergenerational programmes is their potential to combat ageism and prejudice. Various studies have shown that intergenerational programmes can raise awareness about old age (Pstross *et al*., 2016) and build positive age perceptions (Corrigan *et al*., 2013; Funderburk *et al*., 2006; Pstross *et al*., 2016; Naar, 2019). After graduation, students in most disciplines will be working in the context of an ageing society, and higher education can play an important role in preparing them as they make career choices and enter an age-diverse workforce with a positive outlook on age (Luz and Baldwin, 2019).

Indeed, a meta-analytic review examining non-familial IL programmes found a significant association with improved youth attitudes toward older adults and a significant reduction in depressive symptoms, increased generativity, quality of life and physical health (Petersen, 2023, p. 175). Similar results were achieved in a review by Burnes *et al.* (2019) where intergenerational interventions had a significant effect on attitudes and knowledge, including misconceptions about the ageing process. Where interventions combined intergenerational contact with education, the effect on attitudes was the largest (*ibid*.). Levy's (2018) Positive Education about Aging and Contact Experiences model also makes the case for combining positive intergenerational contact with education that dispels negative and inaccurate images of older adulthood, as an effective strategy for disrupting ageism. Moreover, an analysis of intergenerational interventions that incorporate these factors showed a significant decrease in ageist attitudes toward older adults (Apriceno and Levy, 2023).

Consistent with these observed benefits, WHO (2021, p. xvi) maintains that intergenerational contact is one of the main factors that can reduce the risk of perpetrating ageism against both younger and older people. Thus, three strategies should be prioritized: (1) Enacting policies and laws; (2) implementing educational activities; and (3) intergenerational contact interventions (*ibid*.). Where these strategies have not been implemented before, they should be adapted, tested and scaled up, once they have been shown to work in the new context, in order to make a difference at the population level (*ibid*.).

Ageism can also influence how statistical data are gathered and can thus, in turn, affect future policy, including education policy. Furthermore, many official statistics and studies of skills are lacking data on older generations, and particularly on those above the age of 65 (e.g. PIAAC study, see OECD, 2019). With many countries recognizing shifting age demographics, this requires updating (Slowey and Zubrzycki, 2020).

The intersection of intergenerational contacts and educational interventions

According to Findsen (2021), learning through interactions of individuals from different generations is consistent with a LLL perspective promulgated by most governments, and can occur in informal and non-formal contexts. While the terminology may be used interchangeably in some academic contexts, 'intergenerational learning' is often distinct from 'intergenerational education', which consists of planned learning with explicit curriculum, instruction and learning outcomes (Findsen, 2021). Furthermore, education is usually tightly structured, often hierarchical, usually provided by the state or organizations (which may be public or private), and more commonly attracts funding support (Findsen and Formosa, 2016). While the debate between the terms intergenerational 'learning' and 'education' is ongoing, with 'learning' generally considered

to encompass a broader scope, the term 'education' is used in many contexts in the higher education literature.

In LLL discourse, 'learning' has become the preferred term as it 'emphasizes the role of the learners themselves rather than the providers' (Jamieson, 2007, p. 364). Jamieson notes that the stress on the needs of learners can be viewed as progress, albeit with an associated danger of 'transferring the responsibility for learning from governments to individuals' (*ibid*.). Referring to the advantages of transformational learning described in the following sections, learning may also be understood as 'the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience to guide future action' (Mezirow, 2009).

Within the LLL paradigm, Findsen and Formosa summarize the objectives of IL practice, which should:

- Ensure that material, resources and learning space are shared and exchanged by the learners of different generations;
- Mobilize educational resources towards which local community and adult education centres collaborate for mutual benefit;
- Help older adults who are at risk of being excluded from society to achieve a sense of self-worth through volunteering;
- Provide pupils with adult role models who offer academic, social and emotional support;
- Accelerate the acquisition of life skills by young learners through their interaction with older adults who are skilful helpers in dealing with personal, social, intellectual and occupational knowledge;
- Encourage both the young and the old to learn about ageing and human developmental issues, to become more aware of and sensitive to pertinent economic, social, political and cultural issues of human ageing. (Findsen and Formosa, 2021, p. 173).

Furthermore, research findings identify three ideal-typical learning scenarios of how different generations are brought together for joint learning in institutional educational work (Ioannidou, 2021). This includes: (1) Family-oriented arrangements, with a focus on the learning process between children and older people in the sense of a genealogical concept of generation. An example of such programmes is shared reading and storytelling, which supports the literacy skills of younger children and brings a sense of being valued to older generations (Corrigan, 2021); (2) community-based learning arrangements where a cross-generational issue of local importance is discussed from a variety of generational perspectives; and (3) in difference-oriented learning arrangements with a focus on didactically enabling experiences of difference and alterity, where the topics of events are used to bring generation-specific perspectives through reflection exercises (Seibert and Seidel, 1990, in Ioannidou, 2021).

Intergenerational learning: Origins, main discourses and theories

Evolution of intergenerational learning

While the origins of IL are rooted in historical and cultural traditions of various national contexts, Findsen and Formosa (2011) identify three phases in the development of intentional programmes. Initially emerging in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, early programmes were a reaction to the increasing social divide between generations in industrial societies, exacerbated by factors such as population ageing, the coming of late modern societies with more flexible lifestyles, weakening family structures leading to a growth of single households, and social isolation of older people. This resulted in the emergence of practices ranging from learning programmes to social services.

Findsen and Formosa (*ibid*., p. 172) identify the next phase as the period between the 1970s and the late 1980s, also in the North American context, where intergenerational programmes were intended to resolve cultural, social and economic needs. Examples of target populations were 'vulnerable youngsters and socially excluded older persons' with a lack of family support systems and welfare. The third phase is attributed to the emergence of such programmes in Europe in the early 1990s as part of a 'society for all ages' approach promulgated by international and European policy. Intergenerational programmes in this context can be aimed at 'integration of migrants, political issues related to inclusion, the new roles to be played by older persons, and the crisis affecting the traditional family solidarity models' (*ibid*.).

In the current context of global population ageing, IL has the potential to address key strands of LLL – through mentorship in the workplace, community projects and other engagements – with higher education leading such efforts, either through formal classroom learning or various joint community experiences (Findsen, 2020; Slowey, 2015).

Exploring the concept of intergenerational learning

Findsen (2021) summarizes the concept of IL as one that 'usually entails learning through interactions of individuals and groups from different generations' (p. 19). Individuals or groups can interact with others from a different generation in a variety of ways through direct and indirect contact (Drury *et al*., 2017). However, as IL is premised on an intergenerational exchange, several generations of learners studying together may fall short of a meaningful experience (Schmidt-Hertha, 2014; Watts 2017). IL can occur in a variety of settings, but is most commonly found in programmes intended to bring together younger and older generations in shared meaningful activities (Brown and Ohsako, 2003). These may include activities in which:

- At least two non-adjacent generations learn about each other (ageing issues, experiences, values, aspirations);
- Two different generations learn about the world, people or historical and social events relevant to them; and
- Two different age groups share learning experiences and training activities designed to develop academic knowledge and skills and prepare their social service skills (Brown and Ohsako, 2003 in Findsen and Formosa, 2021, p. 173).

According to Findsen and Formosa (2011), while all intergenerational programmes have the ability to enhance learning, certain initiatives make learning objectives core to their purpose and aims, as reflected in the following conceptualization of IL:

> *Intergenerational learning arises from activities which purposely involve two or more generations with the aim of generating additional or different benefits to those arising from single-generation activities. It generates learning outcomes, but these may or may not be the primary focus of the activity. It involves different generations learning from each other and/or learning together with a tutor or facilitator.* (Thomas, 2009, p. 5)

IL can similarly be understood through social constructivism as described by Vygotsky (1978), where individuals learn from others and are active participants in the creation of their own knowledge. Vygotsky argued that all cognitive functions originate in social interactions where every conversation or encounter between two or more people represents an opportunity to obtain new knowledge or expand present knowledge.

Current discourses around intergenerational interactions and learning

Children's acquisition of literacy, life skills and values is often linked to their parents through household practices such as storytelling, housework and other activities (Reyes, 2021). Intergenerational contact between grandparents and grandchildren also holds developmental value. According to Drury *et al*. (2017), increased longevity has resulted in more young people who have living grandparents than ever before. Research with over 1,100 Belgian children found that children with 'good' and 'very good' quality of contact with grandparents correlated with more favourable feelings towards older people, particularly where contacts were frequent (Flamion *et al*., 2019).

However, living arrangements vary markedly across the world, influenced by social and cultural norms and economic conditions (UN, 2019). For example, in Afghanistan and Pakistan over 90 per cent of people aged 65 and over co-reside with their children, while in Estonia and Finland, 37 per cent and 36 per cent respectively of older persons live alone (*ibid*., p. 1). Furthermore, 'skipped-generation households' consisting of grandchildren left in the care of grandparents are common in sub-Saharan Africa, Central America and the Caribbean, due to migration of parents, high AIDS-related adult mortality, or prevalence of civil conflict or war (UN, 2019, p. 4).

Such grandparent-grandchildren relationships represent informal intergenerational interactions. Findsen and Formosa (2011) argue that family is the primary location for IL, with two-way knowledge and skills exchanges. However, in complex modern societies, IL is no longer a knowledge exchange within the family alone and increasingly occurs outside of the family (Hatton-Yeo and Newman, 2008). IL therefore is viewed as a paradigm created by the demands of contemporary society (*ibid*.). Intergenerational interventions which are intentional in nature can include:

- School-based programmes, which are among the most common direct intergenerational contact activities. These might involve older people meeting with students once a week for an hour or two, for instance, to share stories, paint together or share recipes and cook together;
- Educational programmes such as those hosted by schools and colleges in which younger and older learners enrol in classes, skill-building programmes, or service-related activities around issues of mutual interest;
- Face-to-face interaction, which can occur in various contexts, such as older and younger people playing games, gardening, making art or engaging in music therapy together or teaching each other;
- Younger people visiting nursing homes or doing service learning with older people;
- Older people conducting extended interviews or holding discussions with younger people or vice versa;
- Older and younger people living together, sometimes referred to as home-sharing;
- Intergenerational friendships and contact between grandparents and grandchildren (adapted from WHO, 2021, pp. 126–127).

Advancing intergenerational learning: Identifying challenges and opportunities

Defining older and younger populations and generational boundaries

WHO defines intergenerational contact activities and interventions as those 'aiming to foster interaction and contact between people of different generations or age groups, often to reduce ageism' (WHO, 2021, p. 165).

The terminology is important when discussing the issues relating to intergenerational interactions. International organizations such as WHO define an 'older person' as 'a person whose age has passed the median life expectancy at birth', while a 'younger person' is 'a person who is younger than the median life expectancy at birth' (WHO, 2021, pp. 165;167). Thus, in WHO's *Global Report on Ageing*, persons above the age of 50 are considered older persons, and those younger than the age of 50 are defined as younger people *(ibid.)*. This is consistent with the definitions of an older adult in the academic literature on LLL. Withnall's (2010) idea that learning of older adults applies to people aged 50 and over has been adopted by various studies on ageing. Many studies on IL also identify 'older adults' as those aged 50 or over (Zhong *et al.*, 2020). While defining older adults as aged 50+ may be constraining, it is widely accepted in many national contexts, especially in Asia.

The idea of IL can be associated with different generational concepts. In the pedagogical context of Schleiermacher in the first half of the nineteenth century, the transfer of knowledge, language, culture and values from older to younger generations is understood as the core purpose of pedagogical action (Friesen, 2017), seeing the teaching-learning relationship as unidirectional (Ioannidou, 2021). Another concept refers to genealogical understanding of generations focused on generational succession and promotes a hierarchical view of generations differentiated by functions. In this sense, IL refers to 'enabling a coming generation to take over tasks and functions in a community' (Ioannidou, 2021, p. 12). While this understanding of a generation is still present in many IL programmes, the scientific discourse has moved on to adopt Mannheim's (1952) socio-historical concept defining 'generation' not by a birth year, but rather by those sharing history and a set of experiences as part of their formation, and actively recognizing these experiences (Knight, 2009). From this standpoint, IL is focused on equal dialogue of different generational perspectives (rather than different life phases), aimed at learning about and understanding the other generation as 'the highest form of intergenerational learning' (Ioannidou, 2021, p. 12). However, the need to recognize the contribution of younger generations in this exchange, such as in the use of information and communication technologies, has been emphasized in the literature (Corrigan, 2021; Findsen and Formosa, 2011). Along similar lines, for some research purposes generational analysis often relies on an understanding of generations as a 'group of people born around the same time and raised around the same place', also defined as 'birth cohort' (CGK, n.d.).

Motivations of older adults to participate in intergenerational learning

The 'motivation to connect' was cited among the main influences in several studies. According to Kim and Merriam (2004), social contact and interaction appeared to be the second most influential motivator following cognitive interest. One of the three motivations of older learners in Lakin *et al.*'s (2008) study in the United States was the aspiration to facilitate connections with other people or one's own communities. Among the positive aspects of a higher education experience, it was mentioned that it brings 'different communities together' as well as 'entities of the culture that don't get to be heard' and the opportunity to make friends and have fun while learning with peers. Furthermore, older adults have also enjoyed the mentoring role as part of their IL in higher education (*ibid.*, p. 9). The motivation to meet new people was also cited in the studies from the United Kingdom and Japan (Jamieson, 2007; Nakajima, 2020).

Among the studies on adult development relevant to understanding the motivations of older adults, research by Erikson, Erikson and Kivnick (1994) describes the importance of the 'generativity concept' (a concern for future generations and seeking meaning) in later adulthood. This is also supported in a German study by Lang and Carstensen (2002, p. 125) who refer to socio-emotional selectivity theory of a 'future time perspective' and suggest that older participants as a group 'perceived their future time as more limited' and prioritized two types of emotionally meaningful goals typically associated with short-term benefits – 'generativity goals', and those relating to 'regulation of emotions' (seeking meaningful experiences).

Generativity also emerges as a motivator in a study by Lin (2011), with participants expressing their desire to serve others, provide mentoring and pass the knowledge to younger generations. In other research, older adults in traditional higher education settings with highly structured courses reported forming connections with younger students as an important factor in participation (Mulenga and Liang, 2008). Thus, a sense of generativity boosts the popularity of intergenerational learning among older adults.

Challenges to older adults' participation in intergenerational learning

Despite the importance of IL activities, access to them can be limited, especially for older adults who may face barriers such as logistical constraints, accessibility of institutions, and limited access to information. Additionally, many activities may fail to address the unique needs of older adults, such as flexible learning schedules and personalized instruction. Ultimately, ensuring the accessibility and inclusivity of IL activities will require a concerted effort on the part of providers, educators, community partners and policy-makers, while ensuring learners have a central voice throughout the process.

Among the barriers to greater implementation of IL is a lack of coherent policy and recognition of its potential, possibly resulting from its lack of visibility as a subset of LLL (Findsen, 2021). While the concept has also been aligned to adult education, in New Zealand for example 'it remains virtually unfunded' (*ibid*.). Ageism in the wider society and in education circles constitutes another underlying barrier *(ibid*.).

Lessons learned in facilitating intergenerational learning

The international discourse on intergenerational learning

It has been recognized that policy on IL was facilitated with the United Nations' drive to establish a global 'society for all ages' and a long-term strategy on ageing (Findsen and Formosa, 2011; UN, 2000). The *Political Declaration and Madrid International Action Plan on Ageing* (UN, 2002) also urged governments to foster intergenerational relations, facilitate intergenerational community groups and encourage construction of homes for intergenerational co-existence. UNESCO promotes LLL, and IL is often included in its initiatives and recommendations, which influence policies in different countries.

Generally, national strategies for LLL form the basis for many intergenerational opportunities in various contexts. However, while social policies on LLL and active ageing are more apparent on government websites, IL is 'less visible as an intended outcome' (Findsen, 2021, p. 19). This point is taken up by Corrigan (2021) who argues that government policy on promoting and disseminating the wider practice of IL in communities, schools and third-level colleges is largely missing – an issue that 'needs to be urgently addressed' (*ibid*.). While each country's unique circumstances will vary, IL policies often involve collaboration between ministries, higher education institutions, NGOs and local authorities. Government ministries related to education and social welfare can play a part in developing policies on IL.

Literature highlights the historical, age-segregated structure of higher education, with the traditional focus on younger students who are rarely exposed to information on ageing or opportunities to interact with older adults. This can result in slow changes in university systems towards the needs of individuals of all ages (Montepare, 2019; Whitbourne & Montepare, 2017). IL and participation in community engagement projects, as well as initiatives building on existing networks of higher education institutions, are poised to provide ample LLL opportunities for older adults.

One of the Ten Principles for an Age-Friendly University that were developed jointly by the researchers, adult learners and community advocates for older adults, urges the promotion of 'intergenerational learning to facilitate the reciprocal sharing of expertise between learners of all ages' (DCU, n.d.). IL fits perfectly in the wider context of institutions becoming more age-friendly and supporting LLL. The value of intergenerational exchange is also recognized in the broader Age Inclusivity Domains of Higher Education model, which advocates for bringing older and younger individuals together in the classroom and beyond in higher education contexts (Whitbourne *et al*., 2024).

According to Corrigan (2021), criteria that apply to good practice in intergenerational programmes include good organization and the involvement of older and younger participants in design, development and implementation. Furthermore, projects that are integrated on a regular basis in earlier school or higher education curriculum/activities, and are of interest to the community, were found to be more likely to succeed. Partnerships with organizations that represent positive ageing and the needs of older people with local schools and campuses were also more likely to succeed. Findsen and Formosa (2011) also advocate for the inclusion of key decision-makers and prospective participants in IL activities from the very beginning, meeting with community and agency leaders and clearly outlining the goals and objectives of the programme to collaborating partners. According to Thomas (2009), initial preparation work with each age group can facilitate transparency, help answer questions and set expectations. Importantly for wide-ranging and sustainable impact, IL projects should align with broader strategies, whether organizational, community, regional or national (Findsen and Formosa, 2011).

A guide to good practice in IL was one of the outputs of the European Approaches to Inter-Generational Lifelong Learning in Europe project (Hatton-Yeo, 2008) concluding that IL requires careful planning in design, development and implementation. More specifically, Findsen and Formosa (2011) draw attention to the following processes as part of IL projects lifecycle: positioning and project identification; planning; recruitment of partners, staff

and participants; implementation and management; monitoring and evaluation; and organizational learning. In line with project management good practice (see PMI, 2021), Thomas (2009) adds the need for risk analysis and management, and for communications management.

Drury *et al.* (2017) note significant advantages to adopting well-designed practice and policy to support intergenerational contact. In educational settings, promoting age-diverse learning can 'extend working lives, and facilitate older people's ability to perform optimally as well as having associated benefits for younger people's attitudes to and planning for ageing'.

On the other hand, approaches that do not work include projects that patronize or do not value the opinions of younger or older people, and projects that lack funding as this negatively impacts their sustainability (Drury *et al.*, 2017; Corrigan, 2021, p. 16).

Intergenerational learning as a generational catalyst

Intergenerational contact strategies are largely based on intergroup contact theory, which has been extensively tested with various groups, including people of different age groups (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006; 2008). It is one of the theories underlying effective anti-ageism strategies, with robust research evidence supporting its effectiveness (WHO, 2021).

Intergroup contact typically reduces intergroup prejudice under certain optimal contact conditions (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). Such optimal conditions have been defined earlier by social psychologist Gordon Allport (1954) in relation to racial prejudice, and entail four key conditions for successful personal contact situations between members of different groups:

- Equal status between the two groups when neither group is seen as superior (Drury *et al.*, 2017);
- Both groups working towards common goal (e.g. in the educational context, learning a skill);
- Intergroup cooperation; and
- Support from an established authority (e.g. institutional support in the educational context).

Pettigrew and Tropp (2008) later found that while such conditions appear to be best conceptualized as a bundle rather than independent factors, the key mediators through which prejudice in intergroup contact was reduced involved decreasing anxiety about intergroup interaction, increasing empathy and perspective taking, as well as, to a lesser extent, enhancing knowledge about the outgroup (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2008). According to Drury *et al.* (2017), sharing personal information (such as stories) between members of different groups also facilitates a reduction in intergroup anxiety and creates opportunities for empathic understanding between groups (p. 18).

Among the factors that could affect how people see one another in intergenerational interactions, Drury *et al.* (2017) outline three factors:

- The settings or cues in situations which can intentionally or inadvertently trigger people's awareness of their own and others' age.
- Whether steps are taken to acknowledge actively the presence of both older and younger age groups and to highlight explicitly what each group has to offer.
- Explicitly or indirectly drawing people's attention to shared group memberships that cue a common identity (adapted from Drury *et al.*, 2017, p. 17).

Jarrott and colleagues' (2021) scoping review of evidence-based practices that drive successful intergenerational exchange similarly demonstrates the importance of: creating meaningful roles that allow younger and older individuals to use their talents and interests; conveying equal group status by communicating that each age group has something to offer and gain from the interaction; giving individuals time to share information, explore ideas and solve problems; and building in opportunities for individuals to develop social connections, friendship and empathy by talking about their backgrounds, personal experiences and interests and challenges.

Multigenerational teams in the modern workplace

The workplace is a vital arena for IL, where employees of different ages can exchange knowledge, skills and experiences leading to increased productivity, job satisfaction and organizational resilience (Ropes, 2013). Examples include apprenticeships where knowledge or skills are passed from experienced to new workers, mentorship programmes aimed at sustaining social capital, or communities of practice where formal and informal culture is shared through IL (Findsen, 2021). However, ageism and misconceptions about older workers are still prevalent in many work contexts (Slowey and Zubrzycki, 2018). An important policy issue concerns a persistent but incorrect linear view of life's journey. While many countries have raised the pension age, many still have a mandatory retirement age, despite the fact that many people will have to or choose to work past the traditional age of retirement, with implications for LLL strategies (*ibid.*). In this regard, UNECE (2012) recommends 'establishing flexible retirement arrangements, by forming a working environment that is adapted to the needs of all generations, through continuous education and training, as well as by promoting positive images of older employees and anti-discrimination policies', and notes that 'older persons can integrate better socially when they find structures for volunteering, for instance in intergenerational settings' (p. 2).

An AARP report, *Disrupting Aging in the Workplace: Profiles in Intergenerational Diversity Leadership* (Trawinski, 2016), presents case studies of leading employers' programmes

and practices that address age diversity and the intergenerational workforce. Examples from these case studies with intergenerational focus have demonstrated the following benefits for the workplace:

- Raising awareness of intergenerational differences enhances understanding and leads to better-functioning teams. Companies can raise awareness through such methods as videos, training programmes, events and employee resource groups focused on intergenerational issues (Huntington Ingalls Industries, UnitedHealth Group, PNC, AT&T).
- Cross-generational mentoring programmes help facilitate knowledge transfer, a critical need for many companies (Huntington Ingalls Industries, PNC, AT&T). (Adapted from Trawinski, 2016, pp. 5–6)

This is further supported by an NHS (2013) study finding 'some evidence that different generations have different attitudes, expectations and orientations to work. However, there are grounds for concluding that, while generational differences may be present, this is outweighed by the degree of commonality and similarity between the generations' (p. 53). The study also found that 'multigenerational teams that are composed of a mix of older and younger people have greater strengths than single age teams' but need to be managed more carefully (*ibid.*). This finding is further supported in a Wegge *et al.* (2008) study which found that age diversity correlated positively with performance in 'groups solving complex decision-making tasks' (p. 1301). A largescale German study found that 'in establishments that apply mixed-age working teams the productivity contributions of old and of young employees are significantly higher than in establishments without this measure' which, according to the authors, 'might be an indication of important complementarity effects between age groups' (Göbel and Zwick, 2010).

Of relevance for IL, it has been shown that older employees' migration to mentoring roles can enhance their self-esteem and provide opportunities for 'recognising the experience and skills', and also to yield positive benefits for the younger workers (*ibid*., p. 53). In the area of nursing, 'older employee mentoring has been shown to reduce the incidence of errors among inexperienced nurses by nearly 50 per cent, leading to shorter hospital stays for patients' (*ibid*., p. 53). The authors note that efforts such as the transfer of knowledge between different age groups and sharing tasks according to the specific strengths of different age groups are more important than potential communication problems and challenges that come from different attitudes and aspirations (*ibid*., p. 14).

The present study

Background and justification

The present study is dedicated to exploring the topic of implementing effective intergenerational learning strategies and activities for older adults, using an explorative multiple case study approach. This study aims to move away from the common approach in the literature, which often emphasizes the challenges posed by ageing populations. Instead, it adopts a constructive perspective, exploring the benefits of IL for various generations. Additionally, it shifts the focus from specific age groups to a broader perspective, examining the opportunities IL presents across different generations.

IL can take place in a variety of social settings and through different activities which can help to strengthen social capital and bonds, creating social cohesion in our communities (Findsen and Formosa, 2011). It works well to combat ageism (targeted towards both younger and older individuals) and encourages solidarity across the life cycle, breaking down barriers and working towards an intergenerational world. At the same time, certain logistical and attitudinal barriers may present challenges for IL undertakings.

Against this background, the present study aims to provide examples of evidence-based good practices in IL, with a view to assisting policy-makers, educators and community members who are seeking to develop and implement effective IL programmes. To accomplish this, the study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What national and local policies/strategies exist to support IL for older adults? To what extent do they affect the implementation of IL activities for older adults?
2. How do institutions and organizations design and implement IL activities for older adult learners aged 50 or more, and how are younger learners addressed/affected?

The complete list of questions guiding this research is presented in *Annex 1*.

Research design and methodology

An initial literature review explored the role of IL within the framework of the concept of LLL, examining concepts, terminology and definitions, and taking stock of approaches to IL, including practical examples from different regions of the world, comprising different types of providers and education systems. The review informed the study questions and methodology. An explorative multiple case study approach was used to examine the diversity across five case studies spanning three UNESCO regions, while also showcasing good practices. The design

allowed for highlighting the unique manifestations of IL across different regions of the world. Rather than seeking commonalities or differences, the focus is on understanding the richness and complexity of each case individually, contributing to a holistic appreciation of IL in its global diversity.

The main factor for selecting cases was the extent to which the activities were designed to include older and younger generations and support their access to quality learning opportunities. The selection of cases also accounted for regional balance, with case studies chosen from three UNESCO regions. *Table 1* summarizes the regions and institutions involved.

Each case study was developed based on: primary and secondary data generated using a short questionnaire on the institutional/organizational profile; reviewing documents and relevant literature; and interviews with representatives of the institution or organization and older adult and younger learners.

UIL research consultants collected and analysed documents and relevant literature for each case study. Data were gathered on national, provincial and local policies, strategies and funding schemes that support institutions and organizations in addressing the needs of ageing societies. Additionally, the consultants reviewed institutional strategies for serving older

TABLE 1 Institutions involved by region

UNESCO region	Country	Name of the institution / organization	Case study title
Africa	KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province of South Africa	The Family Literacy Project. Project's organizational reach stretches across 15 villages and rural towns, such as Himeville, Bulwer, Centocow and Mzimkulu in the southern Drakensberg and KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province	The Family Literacy Project: A South African case study
Asia and the Pacific	China	The Seniors University of China Zhejiang Branch's Zhuantang Street Community School	The Shangsi Bamboo Horse Dance Programme: A case study of intergenerational learning at the Zhuantang Street Community School in China
Europe and North America	Ireland	Ballyphehane/Togher Community Development Project	The Ballyphenane/Togher Arts and Crafts Initiative: A case study of intergenerational learning in Cork, Ireland
Europe and North America	Germany	The Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany	Intergenerational Service Learning Project 'Ehrenamt ist Mainz': A case study of intergenerational learning at the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany
Europe and North America	United States	Sages and Seekers. Originated as an after-school service-learning project at a high school in Massachusetts, further expanded upon its re-location to California	Sages and Seekers: An Exemplary Intergenerational Learning Programme in the United States

adults, annual reports, project plans and evaluations, curricula, programme and workshop records and other related documents. Each case was analysed, taking into consideration policies and strategies that support inclusive education and learning for older adults, census data about targeted demographic groups aged 50 and above, project plans and reports indicating needs, challenges and achievements within communities, as well as other pertinent documentation related to the case study.

The research consultants carried out virtual semi-structured interviews, guided by a detailed interview schedule they developed. This schedule was informed by the conceptual framework provided by UIL and tailored to the specific context of each institution and demographic. For interviews conducted in languages other than English, interpreters were engaged to ensure accuracy in communication and understanding.

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2. Republic of Ireland

The Ballyphenane/Togher arts and crafts initiative: A case study of intergenerational learning in Cork, Ireland

Elaine Desmond

Introduction

While LLL can occur in age-segregated contexts, the concept of IL recognizes that there are specific benefits to adults and younger people learning together. Moreover, arts participation has recognized well-being benefits for older adults (Bungay and Clift, 2010; Clift, 2012; Dadswell *et al.*, 2020). When it involves an intergenerational aspect, these benefits are extended across generations (Adams *et al*., 2023; Burke *et al*., 2021; Coholic, 2011). For example, Adams *et al.* (2023, p. 2) note that 'young peoples' arts participation is associated with "strong social and emotional skills, including better peer interaction and self-confidence"' and that for older people '"positive cognitive, mood and quality of life outcomes" are associated with participation in the arts' (*ibid.*).

This case study describes the Ballyphenane/Togher Arts and Crafts Initiative (BTACI), an award-winning group of approximately 45 to 60 women between 50 and 90 plus years of age who volunteer in local schools, hold crochet and knitting classes, and work with artists and schoolchildren on specific intergenerational projects. As the experience of the BTACI explored here highlights, 'intergenerational learning is not only a transfer of knowledge but also a process of interacting and understanding each other' (Lyu *et al.*, 2020, p. 850).

This case study further illustrates the value of intergenerational arts activities and the vital role that schools, community development support and local authorities play in supporting this activity as part of promoting community cohesion and intergenerational understanding. It demonstrates the need for government policy to promote a more structured, coordinated approach to integrating IL within mainstream education. This would allow the benefits of multi-generational learning to be more fully developed, and the significant contribution of the growing numbers of Ireland's older population to be harnessed.

National context

According to the 2022 Census, Ireland has a population of 5.14 million people, exceeding 5 million for the first time in 171 years (Pope and Murphy, 2023). Ireland's population is not only growing but also ageing. The population of those aged 65 and over in 2022 was 806,300 or 15.1 per cent of the population (Clark, 2024). This number is projected to double by 2051 (Pepper, 2022). However, these growing numbers of older adults are often negatively portrayed in the Irish media as a future burden in terms of healthcare and pension costs, rather than as the significant resource which they represent.

Ireland has a strong tradition of LLL. The first Age-Friendly University (AFU) was developed and piloted at Dublin City University between 2008 and 2012 (Pstross *et al.*, 2017, p. 165; Talmage *et al.*, 2016, p. 541). This expanded through ongoing collaboration with Strathclyde University in the UK and Arizona State University in the USA (Talmage *et al*., 2016, p. 541). Cork, where this case study is located, was presented with a UNESCO Learning City Award in 2015, and University College Cork established the first formal adult education department in Ireland in 1946 (McCarthy, 2023, p. 1).

Despite the focus on LLL, Gallagher and Fitzpatrick (2019) note that IL 'as a societal resource is neither acknowledged nor promoted in Irish society' (Gallagher and Fitzpatrick, 2019). This is despite work in other Irish communities. For example, Age Action, Ireland's leading advocacy NGO for older adults, sought to map intergenerational projects in a nationwide *Generations Together* report in 2012 (updated in 2015). The report highlighted 28 intergenerational projects around the country, one of which, a Living Scenes arts project with the National University of Galway, had a waiting list of 50 secondary schools (p. 38). The idea that LLL, which embraces IL, would require structural and organizational changes within the Irish education system was recognised as far back as 2000, in a government White Paper on adult education. This paper noted the segregation at secondary schools between adult education evening classes and the mainstream education of 12–19-year-olds, arguing:

> *The challenge of a lifelong learning focus… is of a more profound structural and organisational nature. The adoption of such a focus would seek for far closer integration and mutuality between two previously discrete sectors, with much greater intergenerational mix, not just in day provision but in night provision also.* (Department of Education and Science, 2000)

Greater involvement by the government in developing policy around the structural and organizational changes required to more fully integrate IL into the mainstream educational structure is long overdue. Slowey *et al*. (2021, p. 17) observe that '[w]hat is missing from the current educational climate is government policy to promote and disseminate the wider practice of intergenerational learning in communities, in schools and in third level colleges. This needs to be urgently addressed'.

Ballyphehane is a suburb in the south of Cork in southern Ireland, with a population of 1,400 people, a quarter of whom are over the age of 60. Ballyphehane faces significant socioeconomic disadvantage with 28 per cent of its population having no education beyond primary school (O'Sullivan and Kenny, 2017). An area with a strong community ethos, in 2015–2016 it was selected as part of a pilot learning neighbourhoods project for Cork's UNESCO Learning Cities Initiative (O' Sullivan and Kenny, 2017, p. 4) and received an IPB Pride of Place award in 2024.

Institutional context

Group origins and supports

The BTACI group was formed in 1994 as part of a wider Ballyphehane/Togher Community Development Project (CDP). Co-founder Nancy Falvey, interviewed for this case study, grew up in Cork, and has spent a lifetime learning about arts and crafts. She returned to study for a diploma in Social Studies at University College Cork at age 43, along with several other women from the BTACI group also who undertook this diploma. In 1994, she was a member of the Irish Countrywomen's Association (ICA), a group which supports LLL through offering training in, and seeking to preserve, Ireland's long tradition of arts and crafts (Irish Countrywomen's Association, 2024). Her work for BTACI began at that time, when asked by a community worker in the Southern Health Board to start the group. Along with the two other co-founders, Nancy agreed to run a crochet class on a volunteer basis, assisted by the Coordinator of the Ballyphehane/Togher CDP.

In 1994, the group comprised four or five members, and three tutors. As of 2024, the group operates four classes per week. Classes run each year with a break during the summer months. While the precise number of members is difficult to calculate, given their fluctuating nature and the group's informal approach, estimates suggest there are approximately 45 to 60 participants per week. Classes are run by six lead tutors who are former group members who have undertaken tutor training and are paid by the Education and Training Board (ETB). The help of tutors from other groups may also be enlisted, depending upon the project involved.

The group benefits from its links to the Tory Top Library and the Ballyphehane Community Centre, both of which provide spaces where the women can meet, as well as offering information and practical supports. The Cork ETB, the City Council, the Health Service Executive and local artists have all been pivotal in developing ideas and accessing funding to promote the group's innovative work. BTACI has also established strong links with the local college of further education, and some members have accessed and completed accredited Further Education and Training Awards (FETAC) level courses, or continued their learning with University College Cork and the Cork Institute of Technology. The group's work has been exhibited in arts venues and libraries throughout the city. Members of the group also designed the nationwide FETAC qualification for crochet. In 2017, BTACI was awarded the Outstanding Volunteers' Award at the National Volunteer Awards (Sheridan, 2017).

BTACI's creations have received considerable acclaim. For example, they were featured on the Rose of Tralee, an international festival held in Ireland and the British Academy of Film and Television Arts Awards.

Implementation and impact

Lifelong and intergenerational learning

The IL and LLL which takes place within the group is not simply about arts and crafts. Most of the women have been together for years and have helped each other through the loss of loved ones, health problems and other major life events. During the interview, co-founder Nancy noted how the group helped her cope with loneliness following the loss of her husband. Moreover, she claims there is an 'epidemic of loneliness' in society and that some members rely on the group for social interaction. She also observed that '[i]t's like a joy when you see someone learning something that you know. It keeps you alive and interested'.

The group's longest-serving member died in her eighties and several members are in their nineties. These older women are brought to the class by other group members. There are also members in their forties and fifties, some of whom, as Nancy stated, 'come and learn and then they go off and do something else'. The group has members with Alzheimer's disease, attendees from the local adult day centre who come with their caregivers, younger women from a foundation which

offers support for those with intellectual disabilities, and members with mental health issues. Group members have also worked on projects with the blind.

Members are involved in a diverse range of arts and crafts from crochet, knitting, weaving, dressmaking, lacemaking, embroidery, felting and fabric design to ceramics, patchwork, jewellery-making and flower arranging. They also regularly take part in workshops with artists on projects such as print fabric work, sashiko stitching and glass torso lamp making. Several have obtained the FETAC qualification in crochet developed by the group. The group's intergenerational projects, funded primarily by ETB and BTACI, have been varied and included hand stitching, textile art, silk painting, Christmas crafts, mixed media and more. Many outcomes of the projects have been exhibited internationally and several have won awards including the Artist in Context award from Cork City Council's Arts Office.

This broad skill base means that ideas are shared and skills cross over, contributing to the group's innovation and versatility.

Since 2009, BTACI has been working with local primary school children (aged between 4 and 12) on sewing and crochet classes. The group was initially approached by the Home School Community Liaison Officer and a few of the women volunteered, but difficulties soon became apparent. In particular, not enough time was allocated in school for the activities. The women now also work with local secondary school pupils (aged between 12 and 18), teaching children and their parents or guardians to crochet, knit and sew as part of an extra-curricular Club Ceoil (Irish traditional culture group). Projects with the secondary school have included working with 38 transition year students (aged 15 to 16) and the Tory Top Library in crafting Christmas gifts for house-bound residents in the area in 2022. In an interview, Nancy expressed the value of passing on cultural traditions to children, as well as the reciprocal nature of the relationship between older and younger participants, as 'older people can learn so much from the children and the connection with children'. Technology is used occasionally (e.g. YouTube videos illustrating particular stitches or skills), with younger participants helping to manage it.

The wider community development project and the ETB are crucial in supporting these projects and the group's links to the schools. For example, the intergenerational projects have included Wired (2009) where the group worked with girls from the Ballyphehane Secondary School to use knitting, crochet and wire techniques to create jewellery, and a Palm of Your Hand project (2010) where primary school children worked with older adults in a daycare centre to create artwork using crotchet and lace-making. Echoes of Timeless Skills (2012) saw 12 of the women working with local schools and colleges, involving a total of 102 participants, to produce three pieces of artwork entitled *Unravelling*. These symbolized the importance of the knitter in unravelling skills to be passed to the next generation.

Nancy emphasized that the time spent with the children and teenagers was not simply about passing on arts and crafts skills, but also forming social connections; moreover, the skills, the artifacts produced and the social relationships endured beyond the duration of the programme. The lasting impact of the programme on young participants' aspirations was, according to the co-founder, one of the programme's goals. For example, a 2016 costume-making project called *Dress up to Learn* helped primary school children stitch uniforms for the occupations they wished to become. As another example of the programme's lasting impact, one of the children who worked with the group reached the final of Junior Junk Kouture, a nationally televised fashion competition, with a piece of clothing made from crochet and plastic bags.

Alongside the BTACI programme, support from the schools was essential in making these intergenerational projects a success. Calling attention to this needed partnership, Nancy expressed a hope that '[t]he government should really see the kind of work that's happening here and in communities around the world, around our country. What it's doing for older people. And not just for older people, but for younger people as well'.

Learner perspectives

Two of the group's members, Bernice Jones and Eilish McCarthy, were interviewed to discuss their involvement and their work on the intergenerational projects, and both shared positive experiences. Bernice had been involved with the group for 20 years, having originally joined to accompany her mother, whose nurse had recommended the group following a period of ill health and the loss of the participant's father. Eilish had been a member for 11 years and viewed the group as 'my downtime, my relaxing time. When I come out of there, I feel much better able to cope with what's facing me'.

Bernice, who had a history of continuing education through adulthood, commented on the value of the LLL aspects of the programme, as the group supported the development of new skills, such as design, textile and crochet. Both women highlighted their appreciation of skill-sharing, which is central to the group's ethos, as women trade knowledge and inspire one another. As Eilish described it, 'I just felt every time I went there, I learned something'. Additionally, Bernice observed that the group's broad skill base and access to artists and workshops enhance creativity, such as combining one craft with another.

Beyond skills development, both participants noted the social benefits of the programme, which Bernice described as a 'warm and welcoming' place where

participants 'can leave… troubles behind, help out, and have a laugh'. Both women note how the group helped them through stressors in their lives, such as the loss of parents. When her father developed Alzheimer's, Eilish appreciated the support she received from the group, which included members who had experienced similar situations. When asked about ageism within the group, Bernice perceived that it 'doesn't really exist'.

The value of intergenerational learning

Both members commented on the benefits of IL. Eilish highlighted how, given the value she got from her relationship with her own grandmother, she felt it was important to spend time with children who may be missing this intergenerational interaction in their own lives: 'I'd like to give that to somebody if I could. I think some kids won't have it. It's not just the skill of knitting. There's the conversation. My grandmother gave me the best advice anyone ever gave me'.

Echoing similar sentiments from other interviews, Bernice highlighted that the group's work with children is about more than simply passing on skills in arts and crafts:

> *It's about the communication. It's about making a connection. It's about listening to the children and the children listening to you. I think that's invaluable. And that's a skill that's often missed in the busyness of doing the lessons and homework.*

Eilish observed a reduced interaction with older adults for children in contemporary Irish society, and felt this generation gap would become even more pronounced through the global migration of people to and from Ireland, many of whom would live at a geographic distance from older relatives. She believed that the group bridged this generation gap by providing younger people with meaningful opportunities to interact with adults.

This perception was shared by Bernice, who described her sense that 'having an adult give their time to you... is a precious thing to a child'. Often, the IL projects were made memorable by selecting traditional arts and crafts projects relevant to the age group they are working with. A hand-stitching project in 2017, for instance, allowed 11- to 12-year-old children to stitch photocopied images of favourite icons, such as Taylor Swift. According to participants, this time was reciprocally meaningful to older adults, who benefit from the enhanced well-being that comes to the group from their work with the children. Bernice characterized her sense of the value gained from spending time sharing with children; 'what you come out with at the end has nothing to do with monetary value. It's a wellbeing thing. You feel better in yourself for doing it'.

Bernice also reiterated the co-founder's emphasis of the value placed on IL by the schools, and the impact that this has on group members' well-being. She noted that, on the one hand, school administrators and teachers need to share and express a value in the IL project in order for the partnership to work successfully. On the other hand, group members also had to value and respect the pacing and interests that benefit children, while respecting the role of teachers.

Barriers and challenges

Participants noted several barriers and challenges to programme success. Accessing funding for intergenerational projects was identified as an issue. As financial support is unpredictable, more could be achieved with more structured funding.

Within school contexts, several challenges were observed by participants. Health and safety in schools can be a significant issue, such as the use of sharp tools needed for fibre crafts. This makes it vital to work with teachers, who have ultimate responsibility for what happens in the classroom. Finding time in the school schedule also presents a challenge, as IL programming has been built around the school's existing curriculum and policies. A particularly challenging policy problem involves the legal vetting process to work with schoolchildren, which is a lengthy process that participants feel could be expedited with more government support. Participants also observed that coordination is needed across many existing art groups in order to better harness and recognize the benefits of IL.

Both women interviewed indicated a need for increased coordination, promotion and government support in Ireland generally, and in Cork specifically, so that IL's potential can be fully realized. Both cited key benefits they felt the government could better recognize, including the increase of individual learning support and arts education for children. As Bernice argued:

> *I think there should be a facility for all schools to have older people to come in and share [arts and crafts] skills because not everyone is academic. Some of these kids go through school feeling they're not good enough. And some of them are absolutely outstanding. They're artistic and they just don't get the same opportunities.*

Conclusion

The BTACI case study explored the innovation and value of the arts-based intergenerational work conducted by a volunteer group for almost two decades. It demonstrates the reciprocal nature of the benefits of IL highlighted in the literature (Heffernan *et al.*, 2021, p. 504; Ihara *et al.*, 2024, p. 2). Benefits are not simply about passing on traditional skills, they are also about the sense of well-being and connection generated by the activities and the connection made across the generations.

There is also a significant contribution to family and community cohesion, given that classes involve children and their parents or guardians. The impact on the children is evident from their memories of both the projects and long-standing recognition of the women. These broader cohesion benefits of IL are noted by Knight (2012, p. 311) who argues that '[t]he threat of increasing intergenerational tensions, community breakdown, fear of crime, rising levels of loneliness and prejudice towards young and old are just some of the problems on which intergenerational work can have a transformative impact'.

The women in the BTACI group highlight that, to be successful, opportunities for IL in schools require organization, coordination and personnel who understand their value. Heffernan *et al.* (2021, p. 512) also note the need for greater planning, recommending that educational institutions need to 'develop a vision for what they want IL to look like.' This is also highlighted by Slowey *et al.* (2021, p. 16) who note:

> *[p]rojects that have a school or college or community interest in having them developed and… integrated on a regular basis in the school or college curriculum and activities are more likely to succeed than projects that do not have this interest or engagement.*

As the women of the BTACI group emphasize, the role of teachers is crucial. Heffernan *et al.* (2021, p. 502) note that '[c]lasses with an intergenerational component require teachers to understand the unique role they play in fostering IL in a multigenerational class'. Kirsnan *et al.* (2023, p. 374) observe that this unique role can involve teachers as facilitators who take 'a more active role in: (1) initiating engagement between the children and older persons; (2) providing moral support to participants; (3) demonstrating expected behaviours during the sessions and; (4) re-focusing attention back to the sessions when participants [get] distracted'.

The changes required to properly support IL clearly require the development of government policy which recognizes the value of intergenerational learning within mainstream education, and coordinates and supports work which is already ongoing in the area, as well as allocating funding to develop it more systematically. This is also asserted by Lyu *et al.* (2020, p. 852) who argue that 'governments should regard IL as an important part of school, community, senior and family education – and make policies to promote it'.

The BTACI group has benefitted from a strong local network to continue to deliver innovative intergenerational projects over many years. The spirit of volunteerism, drive and ethos of skill-sharing shown by the women also illustrates how older adults 'continue to show a strong commitment to the promotion and development of future generations, by acting as grandparents, mentors or advisers' (Villar *et al.*, 2023, p. 1863). The growing older population in Ireland, and in societies worldwide, is a significant resource, with skills and knowledge they have to pass on which are of benefit to well-being, understanding and familial and community cohesion. This case study shows just how vital it is that government becomes involved in promoting IL so that the rich contribution of these growing numbers of older adults can be fully realised to the benefit of children and societies – not just in Ireland, but worldwide.

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3. United States of America

Sages and Seekers: An exemplary intergenerational learning programme in the United States

Lindsey Beagley

Introduction

There is unprecedented age diversity in the United States of America such that six generations can be present in the same communities (Rimel, 2018, p. 1). However, structural age-segregation gives rise to ageism which affects both younger and older persons (Marchiondo *et al.*, 2016), prevents connection across age differences, and worsens social isolation and loneliness (Hagestad and Uhlenberg, 2005). IL can help to address this through learning-centred engagement among generations including learning from each other, learning together, learning about each other, and project-oriented learning (Schmidt-Hertha *et al.*, 2014).

This case study explores an IL programme in the United States called Sages and Seekers (S&S) based in Los Angeles, California, that aims to reduce ageism and increase mutual empathy between younger and older people (Sages and Seekers, n.d.). The programme was selected because it has been identified as exemplary by Generations United, a national advocacy organization which is the leading authority on IL in the United States. In 2016, Generations United recognized S&S as a Program of Distinction for its achievement in meeting 'a higher standard of innovation, leadership, and/or develop greater confidence in programme sustainability and capacity to achieve targeted outcomes' (Generations United Program of Distinction, 2016; Generations United, n.d.). Launched in 2009, S&S has been tested and refined over a 15-year period across multiple geographic locations as well as in online contexts. Operationally and programmatically, it follows Jarrot *et al.*'s (2021) evidence-based practices for quality intergenerational work, including the incorporation of friendship, the establishment of a curated environment, trained facilitators, a focus on empathy and cooperation, meaningful roles assigned to participants, structured time and scheduling, built-in flexibility, endorsement from authority, mindful use of technology, and equal status of both generations (p. 290).

S&S's eight-week IL curriculum has been further tested and validated for effectiveness by researchers at the University of Southern California, who examined the extent to which it promoted purpose and 'transcendent thinking' among youth (Riveros *et al.*, 2023, p. 849). This type of thinking is a form of abstract meaning-making that involves 'connecting concrete daily experiences, emotions and learnings with systems-level beliefs and values-based interpretations that lift up the underlying significance or broader lesson' (*ibid.*). With a sample of 141 adolescent participants and a similar number of older adults from the same low-income urban communities in the Los Angeles area, the study results suggest that the programme achieved its goals of enabling the emotional connections and reflection space required for the youth to develop transcendent thinking skills, which increased a sense of purpose at the completion of the programme (Riveros *et al.*, 2023, p. 858). The researchers also found that older participants spontaneously reported more positive sentiments toward young people (*ibid.*, p. 858).

To better understand the S&S programme design and its success, interviews were conducted in 2024 with Elly Katz, the programme's founder and Executive Director; Mark, an older participant (a 'Sage'); and Ava, a younger participant (a 'Seeker'), both of whom participated in the programme several times. Additionally, an interview was conducted with a Generations United administrator, to gather insights about the national policy and funding landscape for IL programmes across the United States and to frame this case study within this broader context.

National context

Ageism and social isolation in the United States

Structural age segregation in the United States is often attributed to rapid industrialization during the twentieth century which emphasized the use of a three-stage life course model that divides people in communities by age and role in society, such as participation in school or the labour force (Hagestad and Uhlenberg, 2005, p. 345; Nelson, 2005, p. 208). Today, approximately four million American households report living in age-restricted neighbourhoods limited to those 55 or older, while an additional six million reside in 'naturally occurring retirement communities', traditional neighbourhoods which, while not specifically designed for older adults, tend to attract more older adults than younger residents (Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, 2023, p. 7).

These societal trends have been increasingly institutionalized through the planning and design of systems, policy and infrastructure, thereby increasing ageism, perpetuating social norms centred on age,

and creating barriers for organic cross-generational exposure and connection (Hagestad and Uhlenberg, 2005, pp. 347–348). In 2020, the American Psychological Association released a Resolution on Ageism statement describing the deleterious impacts ageism has on the wellbeing of older Americans. It also recognizes age as a risk factor for discrimination, calls for more aging education for health and mental health clinicians, and promotes a more productive public narrative about aging in popular culture (*ibid,* pp. 1–3). Furthermore, in 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General declared loneliness and isolation a public health crisis, particularly among young people between the ages of 15-24 (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023, p. 13), citing harmful effects akin to smoking (*ibid*., p. 24). However, while the advisory calls for healing through social connection and community, no commensurate federal funding has been made available to overcome systemic and structural barriers to foster connection and community (CBS News, 2023).

Funding and policy: Barriers and solutions to advancing intergenerational learning

While there are some funding streams and policies which may indirectly impact the likelihood or success of IL programmes, there are no national policies which explicitly mandate IL in the United States, nor any dedicated federal funding streams to facilitate it. As such, the expansion of IL requires a complex blend of funding from private philanthropy, federal, state and community-based grants, and revenue generating strategies such as fee-for-service models (Generations United and The Eisner Foundation, 2019, p. 3). Private philanthropic funding explicitly for intergenerational work is particularly scarce and may be limited to specific geographic locations (*ibid*., p. 4). Federal funding streams are often age-siloed and restrict their use for multiple age groups (*ibid*., p 3). The defining language, eligibility criteria and reporting requirements can present a prohibitive and daunting puzzle for practitioners wishing to use these resources to initiate or expand IL programmes (Steinig, personal interview, August 2024).

Advocacy efforts have achieved some success in negotiating for more flexible language and criteria, to reduce the barriers age-siloed organizations often experience when attempting to include other age groups in their programming. There is a growing movement of funders working to educate policymakers and activate changes to facilitate better coordination of funding, and to ensure funding constraints do not further segregate people of different ages (Paris, 2024). For example, the Supporting Older Americans Act of 2020 establishes a wide range of services to help older adults to age in place (i.e. to remain in their own homes and communities). These included provisions for intergenerational initiatives such as improved interagency coordination to support age-friendly communities, and the expansion of an existing grant to promote multigenerational collaboration aimed at reducing social isolation among older and younger persons, increasing reciprocity and promoting LLL. However, no new or separate funding was made available to stimulate these initiatives (Generations United, 2020). A notable exception is the AmeriCorps Seniors Foster Grandparent Program which allocates federal grants to programmes which engage older adult volunteers to tutor and mentor children and youth in schools, childcare facilities, drug treatment centres, and correctional institutions (AmeriCorps, n.d.).

One strategy to fund IL programmes is to activate projects or spaces which do not focus on age, and intentionally unite generations in these spaces, for example by infusing IL programming within libraries or hospitals. Other funding streams from community or corporate grants may not specify age criteria, but are intended to achieve measurable outcomes in broader areas such as education or community health, for which IL can be deployed as the evidenced-based intervention strategy instead of the primary objective (Generations United and The Eisner Foundation, 2019, p. 4).

Resistance to making policies more flexible may be due, at least in part, to an inherent ignorance or acceptance of structural age segregation in the US. Sheri Steinig, Director of Strategic Initiatives and Communications at Generations United, described a general lack of understanding of the mutual benefits and multiplier effects of IL for both younger and older people, as well as for the broader community:

> *We often find [the policy-makers] have to experience intergenerational learning and see it in action. It's kind of a light bulb moment. They were imagining it being more like a service project they did when they were kids where they went and visited an assisted living community and sang carols. When they see IL, they realize that this is very different.*

Paradoxically, the evidence in support of IL is so compelling that it can cause complacency, with policy-makers assuming communities are already sufficiently incentivized to engage across generations organically to reap those benefits. Sheri said the risk of amplifying the benefits of IL is that 'they won't fund these programmes because they think it should be something people are already doing'. In essence, because the value of IL programming is clear and intuitive, it may fall short of being considered an innovative, disruptive, or novel project worthy of dedicated resources. In addition to educating policy-makers about positive outcomes associated with IL and the need for funding to overcoming structural barriers to IL, Generations United and The Eisner Foundation (2019) recommend focusing proposals on the cost-saving opportunities and economies of scale that can be achieved for priority areas

by employing IL programming that uses shared sites (*ibid*., p. 5). Jarrott *et al.*, (2008) outlines these economies of scale associated with sharing facility and staffing for similar activities (p. 4).

Implementation and impact

Sages and Seekers: An exemplary intergenerational programme in the US

S&S deploys an eight-week IL programme designed to increase empathy and reduce ageism by uniting older adults ('Sages') and youth ('Seekers') in authentic conversation and intergenerational community building (Sages and Seekers, n.d.). Founder Elly Katz describes her original motivation to address an 'empathy deficit' in the United States and the marginalization of younger and older adults. The overarching goal is to 'bring them together to discover who they are. Older adults are trying to reinvent themselves, and teens and young adults are also trying to figure out who they are and how they fit into the world and find their purpose'. The programme's name suggests that older adults have the knowledge and wisdom while the youth are seeking the information, but S&S promotes reciprocal teaching and learning of both participants. Additionally, the programme has overcome place-based barriers by offering an effective online modality.

Launched in 2009, S&S originated as an after-school service-learning project at a high school in Massachusetts, which quickly grew to four pilot schools in the area. In 2013, the programme expanded to its first university when Brandeis University adopted the methodology in their existing LLL programme. By 2014, the programme had enrolled more than 1,200 youth and older adults, and further expanded upon its re-location to California, on the opposite side of the country. A partnership with the University of Southern California Rossier School of Education laid a research foundation for the effectiveness of the programme through two separately funded impact evaluations. The COVID-19 pandemic inspired the programme's transition to an online modality and it now operates worldwide, leveraging local partnerships to recruit participants from 'Canada to Columbia, offering multi-cultural and generational connection to strengthen the bonds of humanity' (Sages and Seekers, n.d.). To further expand the geographic reach of the in-person eight-week programme, S&S licensed the curriculum in a manual which can be made available for purchase for a fee. In addition to the manual, consultation sessions on the planning and implementation are provided by S&S staff to support the implementation of the programme in any context, which is critical to the successful implementation of intergenerational programmes (Pstross *et al.*, 2017). Elly confirmed that S&S is privately funded through philanthropic grants and has persisted for long enough to benefit from continuous reflexiveness and iteration which have refined the programme design over time.

Programme design

The S&S signature eight-week curriculum is offered both online and in-person to mixed groups of youth ages 15–24, and older adults over the age of 60. When the programme is offered in person, community sites such as schools, universities, senior centres or libraries host and support the programme by providing venue space and recruiting participants. Facilitators are trained to guide the programme, which serves to standardize the curriculum across contexts (Katz, personal interview, August 14, 2024). Each 75-minute weekly session provides opportunities for discussion in a group and in a one-on-one setting to encourage both generations to get to know each other.

The first two sessions are dedicated to acknowledging and addressing common assumptions and age-related stereotypes through facilitated group discussion, followed by a 'speed dating' activity which gives each Seeker the opportunity to select a preferred Sage. Both Mark and Ava indicated that the speed dating exercise gave them an overall sense of curiosity and confidence about all the participants from the other generation, and the connectedness they found with their match was not an anomaly but rather something that could be achieved with other people from that generation as well.

Ava explained that her approach to this speed dating process was to 'look for someone who I could giggle with, which sounds ridiculous, but I think laughter is a very easy place to find comfort'.

Weeks three to five are dedicated to one-on-one semi-structured conversations between the intergenerational pairs, guided by optional discussion prompts on broad topics such as happiness, curiosity, belonging, or honesty. Ava describes two very different relationships with Sages from her initial experience in the S&S programme and following a national civil rights incident:

> At first, I wanted to treat Marilyn like a grandparent. Over time, she became my friend and a confidant, and someone I could laugh and cry with. I had a different relationship with Mark. We were very philosophical. He had experienced a lot of this growing up around the civil rights movement and as a black man in America. So, a lot of our conversation was centered around unbuilding and rebuilding our concept of race, age, gender perceptions of the world together.

The final two weeks are dedicated to hearing the Seekers present a 750-word reflection on what they learned from their Sage, as well as a facilitated group debrief about the experience. While there is reciprocal learning throughout the programme, this final stage involves the Seekers expressing a tribute or sentiment of appreciation to their Sages. Ava felt that there is an opportunity for Sages to likewise share their appreciation and reflections to the Seekers. The Executive Director notes that, after every programme, participants are asked to complete an anonymous optional survey. Programme graduates may re-enrol in the programme to participate again or support the programme in other ways, such as contributing their time and skills to operations and recruiting efforts.

Recruitment of participants

As successful as IL programmes can be, recruitment can become challenging. Partner sites may view it through a risk management lens in which the potential risks of the programme outweigh the perceived benefits. These challenges were addressed by S&S as follows. Elly recounted, 'I can't tell you how many emails we send and get no responses – for a free evidence-based intergenerational program. I can't get a school to listen to me. What they can't see is what this does for the students'. Similarly, when trying to engage organizations serving older adults, she reported their expressed concern for their safety as a vulnerable population, including concerns raised by a retirement community director about the potential for identity theft. Sheri echoed these remarks, describing how organizations often fail to engage in minimal problem solving to mitigate identified risks to reap the benefits of the programme: 'They are worried the kids will be bringing in germs instead of just ensuring everyone is going to be washing hands to prevent the spread of germs. Or if we need to mask, we'll mask'.

There was some consensus that younger participants appear to be more challenging to recruit for IL programmes. Mark, Elly and Sheri also commented that young people are more opportunistic with their limited time, choosing activities which bear credit toward their educational and career milestones. Ava explained that Seekers face a social stigma when participating in a programme like S&S. She reports that:

> *Peers will ask, why would you interact with older adults when you could talk to your grandparents? Or, what is the purpose of that? It's obvious what the purpose is once you come into contact with them, but that contact isn't streamlined or normalized. You don't come unless you have a friend who reaches out to you.*

Both Elly and Mark concurred that the most effective way to recruit young participants is by word-of-mouth referral through peers who had either completed the programme or intended to participate. Therefore, S&S implemented an Ambassador Leadership position at each school, to promote the programme and their experience among classmates and peers (Katz, 2024). Both Sages and Seekers can become volunteer ambassadors by promoting the programme for two to three hours per month (Sages and Seekers, n.d.).

One consideration for recruitment efforts is the language and messaging used to recruit. Ava observed that the phrase '"sages and seekers" feels less professional and more nurturing environment than mentor and mentee'. Mark noted that this language choice may appeal to some who seek social and emotional connection, while it may intimidate others who do not wish to be vulnerable, particularly with people of different generations. He shared his view that it's important older participants are prepared for the experience of reciprocal learning because some 'think they're supposed to be the one giving advice and guiding this young person, or they can't let their preconceived perceptions get out of the way to learn'.

Elly reported that it can be challenging to recruit participants from diverse communities due to a variety of barriers, such as transportation and technology. For the virtual programme modality, for example, she noted that technology is a barrier for many Sages and that it has been effective to use an online application to confirm the requisite internet connectivity and skills necessary to participate fully in the programme without disruption. She indicated that some pre-programme coaching can be provided, but the ability to use technology needs to be largely self-directed.

One of the strengths of the programme appears to be its commitment to embracing diverse participants and perspectives, avoiding the over-curation of the cohorts. For example, it does not offer single-identity intergenerational groups (e.g. Black males, LGBTQUIA+, etc.). Elly explains:

> *For our online programs, I don't even know what part of the country or school they're from, so we don't get an idea of who's coming in. We could have participants from Colombia and Mexico with participants from the United States. So, it's cross cultural as well as intergenerational.*

Modifications to the programme design

Other versions of the eight-week programme include a pop-up workshop, which accelerates and condenses the programme to be delivered in a two-hour or two-day workshop, and a modification that involves a focus on cross-generational problem solving around specific social issues, such as climate change or homelessness. In response to the demand for continuing connection

and community among the older participants, S&S hosts regularly-scheduled and volunteer-supported Sage Salons which allow sages to remain engaged with one another after completing the programme (Sages & Seekers, n.d.).

Learner perspectives

To date, S&S has reached 6,000 younger and older participants, 46 per cent of whom are biracial and people of colour, across six countries (Sages and Seekers, n.d.).

Consistent with MacCallum *et al.*'s (2006) findings, interviewees concurred that the programme makes them feel valued and empowered. Ava expressed that 'unless you are in your working years, you feel a sense of invisibility in larger public spaces. Between the ages of 25–60 is when your voice matters'. She indicated that to connect people outside of that window of perceived credibility is to connect people who understand what it feels like to be marginalized and dismissed. Mark reported that it helped him realize his own self-worth by recalling the individuals and experiences that made him who he is, and that he has valuable wisdom to share:

> *Ava was my motivation to write my first book. In our conversations, we talked about who we are, why we are the way we are, where we're going, and what we'd like to do. Ava was really into social justice, and it was when all the George Floyd stuff was going on, and we just connected. She wanted to know about my history growing up during the civil rights movement. It just made me think, okay, maybe I do have a story to tell.*

When asked about the programme's overall impact, both Ava and Mark described a sense of deepened empathy. Mark described overcoming what he referred to as 'adolescent amnesia,' or the forgetting of what it is like to be young, which leaves older people susceptible to stereotypical views of younger people. Ava likewise described being able to more easily access an alternative point of view:

> *Intergenerational programming gave me a lens to look at things. Sometimes it's as specific as, what would Mark think of this? Other times, it's as broad as, is that accessible to someone who's 70? I have these relationships with people I can now rely on and reflect on. It's also taught me to have better conversations with people who are coming from a different framing.*

Across two distinct cohort experiences with different Sages, Ava indicated that her primary takeaway is the ability to project a future view of herself as a learner, running against stereotypical beliefs about age and learning:

> *There is a narrative of wiseness that comes with age that's almost counterintuitive to learning. I think it comes with judgement toward older adults [when they are in a learning environment]. The assumption is that they don't need help because they're an adult. There is an assumption that learning is for younger people. Learning is change. Being able to learn is being able to change, and change is the ability to survive and thrive.*

Ava observed that the S&S programme established norms that valued the voices of younger and older participants who have a desire to be heard because they otherwise feel invisible in larger public spaces. In her conversations with Sages, Ava felt that all voices mattered and were valued.

Opportunities for improvement

The S&S programme is widely regarded to be a model IL programme, with a well-tested approach and proven results, in its aim to unite generations for mutual benefit. Yet, opportunities for improvements were noted throughout the interviews that could inform future programme enhancements.

In its current format, Seekers are expected to deliver a presentation at the conclusion of the programme to memorialize their learnings and make a tribute to their Sages. Given the insight from the interviews that Seekers also feel invisible and wish for their voices to be heard and respected, one improvement is for the Sages to also share their reflections and learnings in a tribute to the Seekers at the completion of the programme.

Another strategy is to explore methods to facilitate the transition between the intergenerational community formed during the programme and the real world. Ava expressed a frustration that the introduction to intergenerational communication is not followed up by strategies or opportunities to extend it. She describes feelings of invisibility and irrelevance re-emerging after the conclusion of the programme, with some uncertainty about whether (or how) to stay in contact with fellow participants, or how to forge new intergenerational relationships outside of the programme.

Finally, one strategy for increasing representation from lower-income participants from isolated communities is to offer reimbursements or stipends for participation (McBride *et al.*, 2011, p. 856). Katz indicated that Generations United has seen a growing number of IL programmes that are issuing transportation vouchers or gift cards to increase diversity and offset the opportunity costs of participating for those who are coming from isolated communities or who have financial barriers.

Conclusion

As the US population continues to age and longevity increases, the importance of fostering meaningful intergenerational connections becomes ever more critical. Programmes like S&S offer a promising model for building more age-integrated communities and promoting mutual understanding and respect across generations. However, IL initiatives in the United States face significant challenges due to structural age segregation evident in various aspects of American society, from age-restricted housing to age-specific social services and healthcare systems. Despite recognition of the harmful effects of age-related social isolation and discrimination, there is a notable lack of federal mandates or dedicated funding streams to advance IL programmes.

S&S and similar IL initiatives face ongoing challenges, including recruitment difficulties, perceived risks by potential host organizations, and socioeconomic barriers to participation. Despite these obstacles, research has shown that programmes such as S&S can promote 'transcendent thinking' (Riveros *et al.*, 2023, p. 858) in youth, fostering a sense of purpose and improving intergenerational understanding.

The case study of S&S highlights the potential of well-designed IL programmes to address ageism and social isolation. It also underscores the need for greater awareness of structural age segregation and its negative impacts. To fully realize the benefits of IL, there is a clear need for more flexible funding policies, dedicated resources and broader recognition of IL as a valuable strategy for addressing social isolation and ageism in the United States.

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4. South Africa

The Family Literacy Project: A South African case study

Crain Soudien

Introduction

This case study describes the work of the Family Literacy Project (FLP), an IL project established in 2000 in the Underberg region of north-west KwaZulu-Natal Province. The FLP came into being in response to the reading challenges of both children and adults. An assessment of the reading levels of 52,000 Grade 3 learners carried out by the Department of Education in 2001 produced mean scores below 50 per cent for the cohort (Govender, 2020, p. 5). For adults, the 1985 Census reported that the proportion of people in the country with an education beyond Grade 5 was 53.5 per cent (National Education Policy Investigation, 1992, p. 7). These levels improved after 1994 when South Africa emerged out of Apartheid, but continued to be low. In 2019, 4.4 million adults were classified as being illiterate, with rates among men standing at 11.6 per cent and 12.5 per cent for women (Khuluvhe, 2022, p. 2). The founder of FLP, Ms Snoekie Desmond, who was working in the Early Childhood Development (ECD) field, came to the realization that there was a relationship between the low literacy levels of children and adults. It was out of this that the FLP developed its distinctive approach to IL.

For this case study, five interviews were conducted. Pierre is the director of the project, and Jill has been involved since the beginning, especially facilitating storytelling. She also does evaluation and monitoring of the project. Phumy began as a learner in the FLP but soon became a facilitator and office manager at the FLP office in Underberg. Ntombi is a 53-year-old unemployed woman who has been learning with the project for 12 years. Gracia is a 64-year-old woman who has been learning with the project for 15 years. The interviews were conducted online in August 2024.

National context

The dawn of democracy in South Africa brought with it great hope for improving the provision of education for both children and adults. This hope was articulated through several policy interventions. The first, and in some ways most significant, was the country's Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996, p. 14), which stipulated: 'Everyone has the right… to a basic education, including adult basic education'. Notable among the complementary interventions which followed in the wake of the Constitution were the National Qualifications Framework in 1995, the South African Schools Act and the Higher Education Act in 1996 and 1997 respectively, the Policy Document on Adult Basic Education and Training in 2003, and the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training in 2013 (see Department of Education, 2003; DoHET, 2013).

Two observations need to be made about these policy interventions. First, far-sighted as they were, the South African government and the education community has struggled to implement them (see inter alia, Aitchison, 2003 and 2018; Walters and Watters, 2000; Umalusi, 2008; DoHET, 2011; Lolwana, Rabe and Madiba, 2018). Secondly, while the policies, as Phumy indicated, sought to engender LLL, they did not either explicitly or implicitly have IL as an objective. IL, as an approach, emerged out of the practical efforts of the FLP. The failure to have a clear set of policy directives has had marked effects in a range of adult education-related contexts, from the world of work to personal well-being (see Isdale, Reddy and Winnaar, 2018; Moore and Price, 2023).

Institutional context

The mission of the FLP evolved from a focus on helping adults to obtain formal qualifications, to becoming an IL organization. The process of helping adults to write examinations for adult learning certificates revealed that there were bigger issues to be addressed. Through discussion and engagement with each other, members of the FLP Adult Groups realized how much they needed each other for moral support, and came to the understanding that, more than qualifications, programmes were needed that gave them dignity and standing in the community (Belete *et al*., 2022).

The context for the development of this ethos is important to understand. The FLP's organizational reach stretches across 15 villages and rural towns, such as Himeville, Bulwer, Centocow and Mzimkulu in the southern Drakensberg and KwaZulu-Natal. The rural towns comprise mainly of low-cost housing developments. Pierre reminds us that '[a]ll of [their] learners are basically living below the breadline… [they] have got a lot of kids that are living with caregivers, aunts, uncles, grans, etc, and in need of intervention in terms of their education'. It was an assessment of this basic social reality, conducted in the late 1990s, which influenced the approach

developed by the FLP. The assessment concluded that the children who were part of the ECD conditional grant sites had not necessarily progressed markedly better than children who were not receiving grants. This led to further investigations in which parents were asked how they could support the reading development of their children. It soon became apparent that parents themselves were struggling with reading and writing, and that they themselves needed intervention. Pierre elaborated:

> *So, parents and care-givers at the time, because many of the kids were not necessarily with parents, due to migrant labour and the parents working away from home or teenage pregnancy and kids being dropped off with aunts and grans etc, and it was also at the sort of the height of HIV Aids crisis, so we realized that we needed to intervene with parents.*

To intervene, the developers of the programme realized that they needed the active participation of the adults themselves, leading to the establishment of reading groups for adults.

Initially, the establishment of the groups was incentivized. Groups that had reached a certain level of 'maturity' were trained to visit neighbours where there were vulnerable children. The visits earned the group members a small stipend or a food parcel. This led to an important organic development in the way the organization came to work. Supportive of their physical well-being as the incentives were, people also began to see that it was more than their personal well-being that was at issue in these visits. They began, as a result, to take personal initiative around a range of community-building activities. The groups understood that their activity was essential for the development of the children. They also recognized the need for independence. An important example of this, explained Jill, was the establishment of entrepreneurial activities and savings clubs, as most participants are unemployed and live in rural areas.

It was not long before adults became interested in storytelling and other activities, especially early literacy. The website of the Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband (DVV, n.d., paragraph 8) explained what ensued in consequence:

> *… activities were designed to help adults as well as children develop skills such as matching, letter recognition, sequencing and interpreting pictures. Parents made books, cutting out pictures from magazines. Working in pairs, they practised how best to use these with their children, asking questions and modelling how to handle the book.*

In 2013, a new training and resource centre was built in the Underberg with funding from the national lottery. This became the base for the organization. Critically, the project has also become involved in the Road to Reading Map campaigns and has established nine libraries in the communities.

Implementation and impact

The FLP project arose in response to challenges children were experiencing in learning to read and write. The early approach distilled in the project grew out of the commitment to work with the community to determine its needs and how it would address them.

Programme design

With the benefit of funding, the project was able to conduct an appraisal of its emerging intergenerational approach. Key to the programme was involving the members of the reading groups. The principle used in the consultations was to focus on issues that were of concern to the communities. For this, the FLP used a Learning Unit in an ECD programme entitled Reflect. Central to this unit was the opportunity provided to participants to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their programmes. This approach was then applied in engagement with the communities.

In consultation with community members, it was concluded that each group should have a local community member who would be trained as an adult literacy facilitator. The FLP facilitators, Jill explained, came from the communities in which they worked: 'The older people in the community know who they are and where they (should) meet'.

Training was essential for the development of the project. Central to this training was instilling in the facilitators the need to focus on useful knowledge in their workshops – the developmental resources with which they could build skills that were helpful for their wellbeing. As the DVV website (n.d., paragraph 19) explains, these skills included, for example, 'walking your child to crèche (child protection unit), and starting an income generation project (crime and poverty unit)'. A critical point about these interventions was their attentiveness to issues of language. Programmes organized around a topic were first mediated in Zulu, the dominant language of the area, and then in English.

The practical process of putting the programmes in place required that the organization build a working culture that involved many engagements and meetings. Pierre explained that their staff, a total of 20 people, attend monthly meetings and quarterly training sessions. In addition, 'trickle-down' training opportunities were put in place, as members trained as FLP facilitators, in turn, train adult community participants in the programme. As Jill states:

> *for the most part [we design our own courses], unless we bring in an expert like a food gardening expert who taught us to grow food, vegetables in tyres… then we'll bring them in for a workshop, and a few of us will attend the workshop and then we'll teach the rest. So, we definitely love to bring in experts. It's always refreshing actually. But for the most part we designed our own… over many years of research, specially that home visiting.*

Approaches and materials were developed internally. Through discussion and assessing the felt needs of members, the senior facilitators would agree on new programmes to be launched, and staff members would then write the curriculum for a unit of the programme in collaborative workshops.

The organization also used curricula developed by other organizations and, as a result, developed many partnerships over the years. One example, provided by Jill, involved experts from the national Department of Health, who assisted with evaluating the programme to ensure outcomes for participants. In another example, Food for Life – a campaign to create a hunger-free South Africa – provided information to the programme about gardening in tyres.

In Khulisa Abantwana, the programme's home visiting project, opportunities for learning, and appropriate monitoring involving sensitive forms of assessment, were provided at several different levels. These involved the following:

1. The facilitators were trained at the FLP base by the senior staff or a visiting expert.
2. The facilitators went back to their communities and trained their Adult Group members.
3. The Adult Group members would choose two or three neighbours where there were vulnerable children and would visit them on a regular basis, sharing knowledge and skills that they had learnt in their groups and demonstrating the skills as they played with the toddlers in the home.
4. During the week the householder/carer implemented what she had learnt and played with/read to/stimulated the toddlers.

Learner perspectives

Research and monitoring played an important part in the development of the organization, while external assessment was acknowledged as providing an independent view of what the organization was doing.

This practice of reflecting on their own progress and staying in touch with other organizations and what they were doing gave the members of FLP a good sense of the contributions they were making at both the individual and collective level. The key members understood the difference that their interventions were making in the lives of members. They understood that these interventions were not enough to change material circumstances entirely, but provided opportunities for important capacity development to take place. Ntombi made the following observation about her experience: 'I enjoy what I'm doing, as it gives me more skills and knowledge. I'm working in a supportive atmosphere where I have access to many facilities, and I am getting help where I need it. We respect each other and everyone is welcome'.

Gracia explained that participants met monthly and otherwise kept in touch via email and social media. She says, 'it starts from the families where grandparents share their knowledge with the children, and it goes out to the people in the community'.

Indirect engagement, which took many forms, was valuable too. What participants described as 'fun activities' included times when, at community events such as Youth Day and Library Day, the older members of the community were drawn in and given a chance to perform or dance or otherwise participate.

In some ways, more important than the number of people receiving counselling was the impact of the programme intervention, as Jill puts it, on the 'number of families who experienced healed relationships during the counselling process'. The strategic importance of meeting the learning needs of older adults through IL was substantial. Phumy claimed it enhanced teaching practices, enriched research, and contributed to societal well-being. She also noted: 'By embracing IL, institutions can foster inclusive educational environments, drive innovative research, and address critical social challenges, ultimately benefiting learners of all ages and the broader community'.

Significant to the FLP's activities was their community and intergenerational impact for everybody, mitigating some of the challenges that the fast-paced and individualistic culture of modernity had brought into families' lives. As Jill said: 'Very often it is not their own kids (to whom older people read), it's grandchildren or great grandchildren, but we ensure that they are involved'. This involvement was both direct and indirect. The direct examples were central to the core activities of the FLP. As Jill explained when asked if FLP is age-friendly:

> *Our favourite event is to get one older person to sit down with one or two younger people, not necessarily in their family, you know, just other children, and read to them. And on occasions we've had them tell their life stories to the children as well. So, and I think any little thing that you do to foster interaction between the generations just grows respect, because… both sides, older and younger, realize some of the challenges that the other age group has to face and cope with.*

Pierre, reflecting on the main impact of the project, said:

> *[W]e get kids to read stories, but we also get older people to tell old folktales and community stories. Some of them recite poetry and some of them speak about their learning. This definitely has created an interest and given them a profile in the communities, a profile where they are respected for the knowledge that they carry.*

Challenges and potential solutions

The challenges to the work of the FLP are similar to those faced by many organizations – keeping the interest of participants, maintaining regular attendance and, critically, finding the funding to keep the organization going. The organizers of FLP knew that locating the project in an underdeveloped rural area was always going to be a difficulty. At times, the challenges of being located in a rural community, such as a bridge that often washes out, prevented class attendance.

Despite the structural realities associated with poverty, the organization sought to improvise with cell-phone technology. All the interviewees referred to network problems in the rural areas. Participating households each had access to at least one smartphone, which allowed the programme to use a data plan and WhatsApp to communicate with parents. These communications included activity suggestions for caregivers to implement with children.

These victories notwithstanding, the organizers had to work hard to keep their spirits up. Jill said explicitly: '[We're] not really sure how much longer we'll be able to carry on as a result of the post-COVID hiatus in terms of funding'. With efforts to secure funding from various government bodies, including the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture and the Department of Education, remaining unsuccessful, FLP is 'exceptionally reliant on a very, very small portion of funders'.

The approach the organization was taking was, according to Pierre, to liaise, network, keep contacts as open as they could and 'collaborate as much as possible with various NGOs and, obviously, all the local civil service organizations that are operational in [their] districts'. Through this, they tried hard to share resources and provide support to others reaching out to the programme.

The impact of the programme was generally positive across a range of facets of people's everyday life experiences, including ways that older adults could meet and 'compete in various disciplines', according to Pierre. Significantly, the impact of the project brought creative expression to the everyday lives of members. The practice of storytelling, for example, was particularly generative and stimulated people's imaginations. In one case, participants completed a 'story quilt' with patches made and embroidered by individual women as representations of their own experiences.

Conclusion

The FLP, though successful, has faced multiple difficulties, particularly lack of funding. This limitation required organizers to cut back on courses and meetings. They have also come to the realization that the organization needed to change. Even so, the organization's multigenerational approach had produced what all agreed were more empowered and more confident human beings. Pierre cited the important benefit of helping older women gain respect in their communities, such that FLP participants become sought after when community problems arise.

As Pierre also explained, through the FLP people were deliberately empowered to take active roles in society. The emphasis on 'useful knowledge' in the literacy programmes produced people with clear and unique problem-solving skills. FLP's track record, he further observed, is 'one of reliability, one of commitment, one of ensuring that we are there for the schools, for the kids, for the communities, ensuring that we are there to attempt to improve socio-economic conditions'.

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5. Germany

Intergenerational service learning project 'Ehrenamt ist Mainz': A case study of intergenerational learning at the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz

Beate Hörr and Agathe Kapche Fotso

Introduction

Intergenerational service-learning (ISL) is a specific approach within IL that highlights the contributions of older adults and promotes meaningful engagement between generations (Almela *et al*., 2022, p. 20). Personal relationships formed through such activities as mentioned by Almela et al. (*ibid*, p. 21) help students overcome stereotypes about ageing, while older adults gain valuable insights into younger generations. By sharing life experiences, older individuals guide students in appreciating pivotal life events (Moinolmolki and Broughton, 2020). Moreover, reducing these stereotypes fosters skills such as empathy, communication and understanding aging issues, ultimately promoting positive age attitudes (Roodin *et al*., 2013). These findings underscore the importance of promoting ISL activities at universities, especially as service-focused efforts in and of themselves can add value to these outcomes.

The Lifelong Learning Centre (ZWW) at Johannes Gutenberg University (JGU), lecturers from Faculty 02 (Institute for Educational Science), and external partners play pivotal roles in the establishment and success of the project. This case underscores the importance of ISL initiatives within university settings and highlights the contributions of the ZWW, Faculty 02 lecturers and external collaborators in fostering and promoting IL in higher education. Furthermore, this programme supports the need for a more structured and coordinated approach by the government to integrate IL into university curricula. Such efforts would allow the benefits of IL to be fully realized and systematically developed, particularly in response to the needs of Germany's growing older population.

National context

Germany, the most populous EU member state with over 84.4 million inhabitants, faces a rapidly ageing population. This demographic shift, along with declining birth rates, significantly impacts labour market dynamics. The retirement of the Baby Boomer generation, combined with technological changes, intensifies the challenges in the workforce, prompting national initiatives to address these issues through continuing education (Moinolmolki and Broughton, 2020).

Academic programmes for older adults, which began in the 1970s, initially aimed to make higher education more accessible (Hörr, 2012, p. 154). German universities have increasingly embraced continuing education for older adults, recognizing its value for lifelong learning and intergenerational knowledge exchange. This educational pathway has grown from a niche to a recognized university function, albeit still limited in scope, accounting for only 3 per cent of non-formal programmes in 2022 (BMBF, 2022, p. 64). According to Hörr, programmes tailored for older learners, such as University of the Third Age and Senior Studies, facilitate research-based learning led by academic staff, allowing older adults to engage with contemporary academic research (*ibid*., p. 154). By offering courses both exclusively for older adults and as open guest programmes, universities foster an environment where older and younger learners can interact, enriching both personal and academic growth.

In Germany, intergenerational activities generally take place in residences where younger and older adults learn from each other. For example, intergenerational projects led by health and social enterprise Diakoneo foster meaningful connections between children and older adults, through shared activities like singing, storytelling, music and creative projects. These professionally coordinated encounters build mutual understanding, respect and joy while reducing stereotypes. Children benefit from learning empathy, social skills and an appreciation for aging, while older adults find renewed purpose, emotional connection and cognitive stimulation.

For example, the Centre for Lifelong Learning (ZAWIW) at Ulm University plays a vital role in intergenerational education, running various collaborative projects like the Ulmer Learning Network and the Three-generation University. The Dialogue of Generations project office, active from 1997 to 2013, provided essential support and networking for nationwide intergenerational initiatives, while now aiming to restructure into a nonprofit organization. These German projects, according to Franz, exemplify a commitment to enhancing intergenerational engagement, with an emphasis on practical collaboration and shared learning experiences across Europe (Eranz, 2014, p. 35–36).

ISL at German universities, when available, generally takes place outside the campus. For example, at EBS University, service-learning projects are integrated into the students' curriculum and are not subject-specific. The courses take

place under the direction and planning of a teacher and the respective project partners. There is a portfolio of partner institutions and projects that students can join. The projects mainly take place in homes designed for older adults and multi-generation houses, for example the smartphone workshop for older adults in the multigenerational house.

The ISL case was analysed through interviews conducted online in 2024 with Kim Deutsch, a lecturer at Faculty 02, Lisa Harder, the current head of the 50 Plus programme and a master's student, and two 50 Plus students, Johannes and Natela.

Institutional context

JGU, through its ZWW, demonstrates how higher education institutions can strategically respond to the challenges posed by an ageing population. Founded in 1477 and re-established in 1946, JGU has a long-standing commitment to education, research, and civic engagement. As a public institution, JGU has expanded its mission beyond traditional teaching and research to embrace academic continuing education as a core responsibility. For over 50 years, ZWW has played a pivotal role in this mission by offering various programmes tailored to the educational needs of older adults. The adult learners involved in the ISL project along with regular master's students of the corresponding faculty were and are still part of the Studieren 50 Plus programme, which offers educational opportunities for people aged 50 and above. The programme experienced significant growth in 2023 with 3,186 enrolments, up from 2,531 in 2022, but still below the pre-pandemic level of 3,969 in 2019.

ZWW background

ZWW is a central institution dedicated to promoting lifelong learning, alongside the university's core responsibilities of teaching and research. The demographic strategy of Rhineland-Palatinate where the JGU and ZWW are located, titled Zusammenland Rheinland-Pfalz – Gut für Generationen, emphasizes the importance of intergenerational cohesion (MASTD 2023) and advocates for LLL as a key component in addressing the societal impacts of an ageing population by fostering older adults' engagement in education and civic activities.

ZWW provides a range of educational opportunities, including Certificate of Advanced Studies programmes, seminars, professional development for teachers, 50 Plus and Guest Auditing Programmes. Established over 50 years ago, ZWW continues to thrive, hosting more than 360 seminars and conferences annually. These events attract over 7,000 participants and involve 180 professionals, including professors and scientists. These offerings are designed to meet the growing demand for continuing education, particularly among working academics, by delivering knowledge that reflects the latest research in a practical context. The ZWW also advises individuals, university departments and external organizations on developing and implementing educational programmes, and provides guidance on financial support options.

The 50 Plus programme at ZWW is designed for older adults seeking to engage with academic topics, explore current research findings and discuss issues with like-minded peers, after their professional, career or family responsibilities. This structured programme, managed by ZWW in collaboration with various university faculties and institutions, offers academic guidance and the opportunity to earn a certificate, with over 70 courses (in person and online) spanning five key areas that include practical components such as museum visits, environmental excursions and hands-on workshops: Arts and Humanities; History and Culture; Social Sciences and Sports; Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics; Environmental Sciences; and Languages. Feedback within the 50 Plus programme is collected immediately after each course, allowing students to share their insights on potential improvements. Additionally, students are encouraged to complete an online evaluation form titled Veranstaltungsbewertung (50+). Based on this feedback from students, ZWW initiated intergenerational programmes, with the ISL programme being the first of its kind launched in the 2019/2020 semester.

Implementation and impact

Description of the ISL project 'Ehrenamt ist Mainz'

This innovative initiative targeted two core demographics: master's students in Educational Sciences and older learners in the 50 Plus programme. The project fostered intergenerational collaboration, combining theoretical learning with practical application in the realm of civic engagement. The seminar was planned as a regular semester course with 10–12 sessions. It was not an official part of the curriculum but instead is offered as both seminars ('theory-practice') and project-based modules, with the ISL falling into the master's internship module.

The seminar structure was planned to balance participation from both groups, including approximately 15 master's students and 15 older learners. Because the seminar was new, it required a preparation phase so that faculty and ZWW staff could plan topics that would be appropriate for both demographics. Other decisions during this phase included selection of theories to cover and guest lecturers. This phase lasted six months, with regular meetings between the ZWW and Faculty 02. This step is important to make sure that ISL programmes promote intergenerational understanding

and intergenerational connectedness between younger students and older adults (Almela *et al*., 2023, p. 19). The collaboration also helped to ensure that the programme had a balance of academic rigor and practical application.

Additional measures were implemented to accommodate the unique needs of older participants and ensure inclusivity, such as technology instructions, arranging of email access and ensuring communication via telephone when necessary. Each seminar followed a 'theory-practice' format, blending foundational knowledge with hands-on experience. In the initial phase, participants explored key theoretical concepts, such as:

- The principles of service learning and its relevance in higher education.
- Definitions and frameworks of volunteerism and civic engagement.
- Intergenerational learning as a tool for societal impact.
- Case studies and data on volunteering in Germany.

These topics were introduced through lectures, facilitated discussions and guest presentations from experts who provided insights into the practical applications of service learning in academic and professional contexts. The inclusion of digital tools, such as a Moodle platform, enabled asynchronous collaboration, resource sharing and reflective dialogue beyond the classroom. One innovative feature is that the seminar is free of charge for older learners. This aligns with recommendations from BAGSO (2023, p. 8), which emphasize prioritizing social inclusion and support for vulnerable groups.

Seminar objectives

The primary aim of the ISL seminar was to address challenges posed by demographic changes, such as an ageing population and increasing social fragmentation. Specifically, the objectives sought to prepare participants to think and act across generational boundaries, leveraging diverse life experiences to foster mutual understanding and societal contribution. The facilitators also recognized and addressed the differing motivations of participants. The master's students attended as part of their specialization in Adult Education and Media Education, but older learners joined out of personal interest and a desire to remain active in their communities. As a result, the 50 Plus students differed in motivation from traditional students, for whom participation was mandatory.

The ISL seminar provided master's students with opportunities to reflect on their professional roles in civic engagement, develop career-relevant competencies, and understand the societal impact of IL on the one hand. For older learners, the focus was on exchanging experiences with younger participants, reflecting on the value of their volunteerism, and applying their expertise to collaborative community projects.

During the seminar, a reciprocal dynamic emerged, where younger students admired the older adults' dedication, while older adults gained from the energy and perspectives of their counterparts. This aligns with Almela *et al*. (2023, p. 18), who highlight the role of intergenerational service learning in fostering civic engagement, social responsibility and mutual understanding.

Pedagogy and core elements of the design

The pedagogical framework was crafted to ensure a seamless integration of theory and practice, emphasizing collaboration and civic responsibility. The design process was rooted in adult education theories and principles of lifelong learning, and include these core elements:

1. **Interdisciplinary collaboration:** The seminars leveraged expertise from both educational sciences and geragogy, creating a model adaptable to diverse fields of study.

2. **Community integration:** Partnerships with local nonprofits and volunteer organizations enriched the practical experiences of participants, making their learning directly relevant to societal needs. Experts from the fields of civic engagement and service learning shared real-world insights. Interactive sessions helped participants develop key competencies in communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. These included presentations made by representatives of the Senior Expert Service and from 'DigiBos' (digital ambassadors), a now-permanent service that facilitates digital literacy development for older adults in the Mainz area. The ambassadors have indeed been very active in this field, helping older learners in matters such as how to access digital materials.

3. **Reflective practice:** Participants maintained learning journals and engaged in structured reflection sessions, which were facilitated by seminar leaders and incorporated into group discussions. For example, participants were asked about encounters with hierarchy and power in their school or career experiences. These then became the basis for reflective questions along with integration of material from academic texts. This exercise allowed individuals to learn about each other when life experiences of one generation are part of the learning process. After the open discussions rounds, participants were not put in pairs or small groups until they felt comfortable. Once groups were formed, facilitators made sure that each group had members from multiple generations. One example of a discussion topic, as shared by Kim Deutsch in his interview, was the similarities and differences between older and younger generations in perceptions of the value of work.

Both sets of stakeholders identified advantages of the seminar, such as the fact that older learners benefited from interacting with younger students. Biographical learning was a new experience for many older participants. Older learners often came from educational backgrounds focused more on consuming knowledge passively; the seminar offered a new and valuable experience of self-directed learning. For younger students, one major advantage was gaining new perspectives on their careers, emphasizing that decisions aren't always final and that career paths often change.

Although both sets of stakeholders highlighted numerous advantages, they also acknowledged several challenges. One master's student mentioned that, while older learners were often eager to participate in discussions, it was difficult to keep the younger individuals actively involved, as they often felt overshadowed by the older group's experience. For the instructor, the main challenge was structural, as team teaching requires more time for planning, coordination and delivery. Team teaching also provides unique challenges given the ways in which universities provide workload credit. As a result, systemic constraints can make it difficult to maintain this approach.

Learners' perspectives

Natela was 70 years old and had joined the 50 Plus programme in 2019. After retiring, she sought meaningful engagement and joined the ISL project to become active in volunteer work. Natela especially valued the intergenerational exchange and the opportunity to share her experiences with younger students. She explained, 'I was supposed to retire. But I didn't want to… So, I came here again and looked for a way to get involved in volunteer work'.

Johannes was 68 years old at the time of the interview and was part of the 50 Plus programme since 2016. Johannes provided positive feedback regarding the organization of the intergenerational seminar, highlighting its balanced structure combining theoretical input with practical group work. He appreciated the diverse contributions from guest speakers, stating, 'I found these lectures overall to be positive because they covered various aspects and different areas'. Additionally, he found the mixed group dynamics beneficial. Communication with instructors was also a strong point for him, and he appreciated having multiple avenues through which he could reach out for help. Other than some minor logistical issues, his feedback indicates that the course was well-organized, with a focus on diverse learning methods and effective communication.

For both learners, knowledge transfer was a very important point. They emphasized the opportunity to pass on life and professional experiences to younger generations, allowing for a meaningful exchange of knowledge. Johannes, for example, appreciated that the programme allowed him to share his own life and professional experience. He highlighted several advantages of participating, particularly regarding the positive learning environment and community engagement, and indicated that the opportunity to contribute to social causes was significant for him.

Natela saw much value in the group work, as it allowed her to share her experiences with younger students and also to learn from them, even though she recognized that older and younger students often approached the discussion differently. Other positive features she noted included the opportunity to work with younger people, the blend of theoretical knowledge and practical application, and the value of the varied backgrounds of the participants.

Like Johannes, Natela found communication with the facilitators to be another strong point for her, finding instructors' approachability helped her learn. While she acknowledged some minor challenges, such as scheduling conflicts, she concluded, 'Overall, the seminar was a valuable experience that brought me new insights and connections'. Her feedback reflects a strong appreciation for the seminar's structure, the collaborative environment and the effective communication throughout the course.

Lisa, who had participated as a regular master's student, also shared some positive experiences in an interview. She felt she gained significant personal benefits from the seminar, which contributed to her self-esteem, confidence and interpersonal skills. Engaging with older participants enhanced her communication skills and allowed her to relate better to her own grandmother; further, she learned about the challenges faced by members of the older generation. Through these intergenerational interactions, Lisa developed a deeper understanding and appreciation of the perspectives of older generations, fostering empathy and respect. Additionally, she learned valuable conflict resolution strategies, noting that older individuals were 'very calm and they don't panic' in critical situations, which she found insightful for her personal relationships. Ultimately, these experiences enriched her ability to connect meaningfully with family members.

Challenges and barriers

The ISL seminar, despite the positive appreciation of both stakeholders and students, faced several challenges. At a practical level, there were instances when room arrangements caused delays or the equipment was unreliable. But at a more substantive level, generational differences such as the social behaviours of younger participants or ways of approaching problems could lead to misunderstanding and communication challenges. The varying levels of motivation and engagement could impact group dynamics, due to the fact that the master's students were receiving credit while the older adults could appear to be taking the course 'just for pleasure', as

Lisa noted. These reflections underline the complexities of intergenerational seminars, emphasizing the need for structured approaches to address logistical, technical and interpersonal challenges.

Conclusion

The case study explores the implementation and benefits of an intergenerational seminar on service-learning and highlights how such programmes can foster intergenerational understanding and connectedness between younger students and older adults. This personal and meaningful relationship formed during intergenerational courses in higher education allows both generations to benefit, enhancing their social interactions and mutual respect.

This engagement naturally leads to increased empathy from both generations. As life expectancy rises in Germany, society is transitioning into an era characterized by 'long life'. This shift is not merely quantitative; it is also qualitative, as today's retirees are healthier, more educated, and possess greater financial and time resources compared to previous generations (Franz, 2014, p. 16). Such dynamics create opportunities for younger and older individuals to learn from each other, fostering a deeper understanding of the challenges and experiences faced by each generation.

To ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of IL it is recommended that these initiatives be integrated into the academic curriculum. This integration is vital for effective outreach and community engagement, which are essential for the programme's continuity and success (BAGSO, 2023). By embedding IL into formal education, universities can strengthen community connections and collaborations, enhancing the overall impact of these programmes.

Moreover, the need for comprehensive training for educators to manage intergenerational activities is critical. Training is an important component of IL, as well-prepared facilitators can better navigate the unique challenges of intergenerational dynamics, ensuring a more enriching experience for all participants.

Finally, the implications of government involvement in developing policies to implement IL effectively cannot be overstated. Currently, such initiatives are often limited to residential settings in Germany. As Ludescher *et al*. (2016, p. 16) argue, expanding initiatives that put different generations together – like, for example, ISL at university – will facilitate regular interactions between younger and older students, helping to reduce age-related stereotypes and promoting social integration and the development of stronger social networks. This holistic approach can significantly enhance the intergenerational fabric of Germany.

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6. China

The Shangsi Bamboo Horse Dance programme: A case study of intergenerational learning at the Zhuantang Street Community School in China

Tanya Zubrzycki

Introduction

IL in the People's Republic of China is an emerging model that brings older and younger generations together in collaborative environments to promote mutual growth, cultural exchange and community engagement. These programmes help bridge the digital divide and strengthen social cohesion by creating spaces where different generations can share knowledge and support one another (Li *et al*., 2020). Filial piety, a core Confucian value, underpins IL in China by promoting respect and duty across generations, fostering the exchange of knowledge, traditions and life experiences (Wang and Hu, 2021).

China has the largest older population in the world, with the proportion of older persons projected to increase significantly to around 25 per cent by 2050 (The Lancet, 2016). A range of China's recent policies was aimed at meeting the challenges and leveraging the opportunities brought by a rapidly ageing population. Key initiatives such as the Outline of Healthy China 2030 and the Development Plan for Elderly Education (2016–2020) encourage collaboration between educational institutions and community groups, ensuring broader engagement with older adults (Li, 2020).

This case study explores the Shangsi Bamboo Horse Dance Course offered by the Seniors University of China Zhejiang Branch's Zhuantang Street Community School. It illustrates how IL can create opportunities to preserve intangible cultural heritage while fostering meaningful connections across generations, ultimately enhancing social cohesion and a sense of shared identity. The discussion of the implementation and impact of the programme was informed by Ms Xianrui Fan, Vice President of the Open University of China (the Seniors University of China); Ms Xiao Jiang, President of Hangzhou West Lake District Community College, affiliated with the Seniors University of China Zhejiang Branch, as the leader of the Shangsi Bamboo Horse Dance programme; as well as two learners from the programme – Ms Ping Chen (57 years old) who participated in the programme after retiring and Ms Yichi Liu (19 years old). All interviews were carried out online in November 2024.

National context

China has a long history of enhancing education for its older population, with policies dating back to 1996 ensuring the right to education for all (UIL, 2019). This includes national policies relating to LLL and ensuring that older adults have equal access to educational resources and services (Qiu and Wang, 2024). Among the key policy documents is the *Development Plan for Elderly Education (2016–2020)*, comprising supply-based instruments (investment and resource allocation), environment-based instruments (strategy, goals, management), and demand-based instruments (government purchase of services, industry-driven, value-leading and honour-driven) (Qiu and Wang, 2024, p. 2). To promote effective ageing policies and programs, the 2016 Columbia-Fudan Global Summit on Aging & Health advocated for the creation of the 'third demographic dividend' concept (The Lancet, 2016). This concept focuses on leveraging the social capital of older adults to foster stronger, wealthier societies while supporting the success of younger generations and enhancing care for older people – the principles aligned with IL. Other relevant initiatives include the 2020 National Health Commission's *Notice on carrying out the establishment of demonstration national age-friendly community* and the Ministry of Education's 2020 *Comprehensive Reform Plan of the Open University of China* (Qiu and Wang, 2024).

As noted by Ms Xianrui Fan, recent national strategies aim to integrate IL into the LLL system, with a focus on both younger and older generations. Furthermore, according to Ms Xiao Jiang, the comprehensive reform plan of the Open University of China and recent policy initiatives associated with ageing support intergenerational education. Ms Jiang also highlighted various LLL policies and strategies at the provincial, city, and community levels, where IL is promoted as a project for public well-being. One interesting local government initiative is the establishment of LLL centres within 15 minutes of home for members of the public.

By 2016, all provinces had adopted plans to support older adult education (Ma and Ye, 2018). Universities and community-based schools for older adults have made significant progress in community education and the integration of information technologies. The growing value placed on IL reflects a broader societal shift, driven by government policies, collaboration across sectors and

active social participation (*ibid.*). Local governments also provide funding and support to establish partnerships between schools and relevant organizations, contributing to the accessibility and effectiveness of these initiatives (Li, 2020).

In 2019, the *Fourth Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* issued by UNESCO highlighted China's efforts to strengthen the education of older adults and enhance their learning, health and well-being (Xinhua, 2019). According to the report, China spent more than 4 per cent of its education budget on adult learning and education, and was one of 13 countries to identify older adults as a target group, based on data submitted by 159 UNESCO member states (UIL, 2019, p. 139). By the end of 2019, a network of 76,000 universities (schools) catered to the needs of older adults, spanning various types and levels, with 10.9 million students (Qiu and Wang, 2024, p. 1). The effectiveness of the LLL strategy is evidenced in a 2020 survey conducted by *China Youth Daily* where 97 per cent of respondents recognised the value of LLL, with 97.6 per cent affirming its importance for personal growth (State Council Gazette, 2021). Participants cited benefits such as enhancing opportunities for self-improvement, improving workplace competence and helping students stay aligned with current developments.

In 2021, the *Opinions on Further Strengthening the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage*, issued by the Chinese Government, highlighted that the content of intangible cultural heritage will be integrated throughout national education, related extensive social practice and research activities will be widely carried out, and a number of national intangible cultural heritage education practice bases will be built (State Council Gazette, 2021).

According to a scoping review on IL in urban China by Yuan and Wu (2021), filial piety plays a vital role in the development of IL by fostering respect and a sense of duty between generations. These values encourage intergenerational exchanges fostering the exchange of knowledge, traditions, and life experiences. Recent literature has emphasized the emerging nature of IL outside of the household context (Li, Kaplan and Thang, 2020; Yuan and Wu, 2021), which underscores the importance of the Shangsi Bamboo Horse Dance case study.

Institutional context

In response to policies addressing the ageing population, the Open University of China (OUC) established the Elderly College in 2015, followed by the establishment of the Seniors University of China (SUC) in 2023. According to Ms Xianrui Fan, community schools act as extended classes for OUC, operating through two-way interactions where selected courses can be promoted within the broader Open University system. There is a formal link between the community school and the Open University, with university teachers also teaching in the community school. The Community School conducts research to understand the learning content interests of different generations.

Within this framework, the Zhuantang Street Community School, which is part of the SUC Zhejiang Branch, organized the Shangsi Bamboo Horse Dance course in the Shangsi area of Hangzhou. With a significant ageing population, Zhuantang serves as a hub where IL initiatives support the preservation of traditional culture while fostering social cohesion (SUC, 2024). Zhuantang Street Community School was established in September 2019 and is committed to providing diverse courses and learning opportunities for local residents. The online and offline courses are promoted through the Community School platform which serves a district of 1.9 million people. The school covers an area of 2,100 square metres with three ordinary classrooms, four special classrooms and one lecture hall. Zhuantang Street Community School offers more than 40 classes, including calligraphy, painting, vocal music, dance, recitation, photography, cucurbit flute, fashion shows and other popular courses. Shangsi Bamboo Horse Dance, as one of these classes, not only preserves local traditions, but also provides a platform for community engagement and cultural transmission across different age groups.

Most courses have no age limit, except for those held at night, to ensure the safety of older participants. Over 10 per cent of classes in the community school have an intergenerational component, including activities like yoga, dancing and photography, as well as grandparents and grandchildren learning painting together, or the participation of three generations in dragon boat activities. Some activities are related to festivals, with various shows to demonstrate the learning results.

Implementation and impact

Design and reach

Shangsi Bamboo Horse Dance is a traditional folk dance with a long history in the Shangsi area, reflecting the rich local folk culture. The Bamboo Horse Dance Performance Team consists of 24 actors in the performance team who take turns to sing various operas, such as the traditional drama *The Legend of the White Snake* or the folk tunes of the Zhuantang Town. The actors dress up with bamboo horses in their arms. Shangsi Bamboo Horse Dance integrates artistry, appreciation, technology and fitness and has received a deep public appreciation, becoming a tourist attraction for visitors wishing to experience traditional culture.

The IL programme for the Shangsi Bamboo Horse Dance was launched by Zhuantang Street Community School in September 2023, with support from the Xinxiangxian Friendship Association in Zhuantang Street. Most of the

Zhuantang Street Community School participants are aged 60 or above, and students from Hangzhou West Lake Vocational High School are between 15 and 25 years old.

The programme includes three main stages: intergenerational knowledge learning, intergenerational dance learning and intergenerational performance.

The first stage, **intergenerational knowledge** learning, places the emphasis on knowledge transmission and interaction between younger and older learners carried out in the form of lectures, theme sharing and exchange meetings, focusing on the understanding of Chinese traditional culture. The lectures mainly focus on the origin, development and manifestations of Bamboo Horse Dance in different regions. The teachers use a range of instructional materials including video, picture display and on-site explanation, to provide a comprehensive and vivid understanding of Bamboo Horse Dance as folk art, its historical background and cultural heritage.

This component of the programme comprises 30-minute sessions offered once a month. Before theme sharing, one older adult learner and one younger learner are selected, with the shared theme following the content covered by the teacher. Learners are expected to explore the theme in depth, collect information, develop explanation ideas and share it with all students. Intergenerational exchange workshops are organized every two months for 50 minutes each. Teachers act as the hosts of intergenerational exchange meetings, select the topics of art exchange workshops, and guide the older and younger learners to interact with each other using questions. The older learners act as informal 'narrators' and 'consultants', share their memories and stories of the Bamboo Horse Dance, and provide younger learners with insights and experiences through their own historical events and social changes. Young learners express their knowledge and understanding of traditional culture to their older counterparts.

The second stage is **intergenerational dance learning** focused on action explanation, action training and choreography. At this stage, the students are divided into two classes, one for the older learners and one for the younger. A total of 12 class sessions were held, each lasting three hours, that included skills, movement and rhythm training, along with rehearsal time. Each class is equipped with experienced dance teachers who have graduated from the Central Academy of Drama or worked in the Art Troupe. Teachers guide the students to master the basic pace and sense of rhythm, so as to ensure that each student can experience and gradually improve their dance skills.

In order to cultivate team collaboration among the learners, cross-generational choreography is also included in this stage to stimulate the creativity and cooperation spirit. Learners of all ages are grouped together to perform Bamboo Horse Dance movements using what they have learned. They follow the traditional style of dance and also introduce modern dance elements to integrate inheritance and innovation.

The third stage is the **intergenerational performance** aimed at deepening the IL effect through artistic performances. Intergenerational dance teams participate in various performances demonstrating what they have learned to the public. Examples of performances include the performance in Citizen University Hall in the autumn of 2023; the participation in the first Good Arts Festival in West Lake District, Hangzhou in January 2024 involving 24 programme students; and the opening of the Spring Festival Gathering in West Lake District, Hangzhou in February 2024 involving 25 students.

Learners' perspectives

The younger learners' perspectives

The younger participants are drawn to the Bamboo Horse Dance for its cultural significance and as an opportunity for IL. Some feel a strong sense of duty to preserve and share Chinese cultural heritage. They appreciate the dance as a way to express their identity, enhance performance skills and build confidence through collaboration with older learners. Younger learners also value the mentorship provided by older participants, finding inspiration in their dedication, resilience and positive outlook. Additionally, students gain a deeper appreciation of their heritage, feel more connected to the older generation and are motivated by their older counterparts' enthusiasm for cultural preservation.

Ms Liu was 19 when interviewed for this study and highlighted the programme's benefits, including cultural preservation, cross-generational interaction and personal growth. Among the main motivational factors, Ms Liu mentioned the support of her family, the benefits of IL, and particularly her interest in preserving the fragile cultural heritage. When participating in the programme, she felt a mutual desire with the older generation to pass on the culture. The programme, supported by local policies and community resources, fosters a cooperative environment where participants learn from each other and their ideas are incorporated into the dance. She enjoyed the discussions about the history and significance of the Bamboo Horse Dance with cultural inheritors. When asked about the potential benefits for the younger generation, Ms Liu noted that the programme helped vocational school students become more open and confident in interacting with older classmates, minimising the gap between generations and fostering mutual respect. Among the challenges, Ms Liu noted making movements suitable for all participants, as some movements were too fast or too slow for different groups. She also emphasized the programme's flexibility, inclusivity and ongoing nature, which allows for

continuous engagement and performance opportunities. Participants can join the programme at any time and stay involved for as long as they wish.

The older learners' perspectives

For older participants, the dance provides a meaningful post-retirement activity that contributes to personal fulfilment and cultural preservation. They see themselves as role models, striving to inspire younger generations to value and protect traditional culture. Learning the dance allows older adults to remain active, form social connections and engage in LLL. Older participants emphasize the importance of passing on intangible cultural heritage and fostering a shared sense of cultural identity with their younger counterparts (SUC, 2024).

Ms Chen was 57 years old when interviewed for this study. She finds the programme meaningful due to its preservation of intangible cultural heritage, and the opportunity to learn with younger generations. The weekly classes are open to all interested individuals regardless of location, as long as they are interested and physically able to participate. Ms Chen values intergenerational interactions, particularly during 'rest times', which have improved her relationship with her teenage child. Challenges include the physical demands of dancing and the need for larger performance spaces. When asked whether the programme helps combat ageism, Ms Chen affirmed that it does, as it showcases the active engagement of older individuals in society and helps reshape the younger generations' perception of them.

Key success factors and main challenges

Among the main factors facilitating the success of the Shangsi Bamboo Horse Dance programme are government policy support at all levels and policy focus on preserving cultural heritage. Zhuantang Street Community School has also contributed significant resources to the development of the programme, and employed a professional team that considered the learning needs of different age groups and designed the programme with experienced dance teachers. The programme also benefited from continuous evaluation, allowing any needed improvements to be made in the next cycle (SUC, 2024).

The motivations outlined by participants highlight the reciprocal benefits of IL in fostering cultural continuity, mutual respect and teamwork across generations. Both Ms Liu and Ms Chen value the Shangsi Bamboo Horse Dance programme for preserving cultural heritage and fostering intergenerational connections. Ms Liu highlights the preservation of fragile cultural heritage as the main motivation, while Ms Chen emphasizes meaningful post-retirement engagement and combating ageism. Despite differing motivations, both appreciate the programme's inclusivity and flexibility. Challenges include adjusting movements for all ages (Ms Liu) and the physical demands of dancing (Ms Chen).

In terms of opportunities for improvement, Ms Chen suggested the potential benefit of having more performance opportunities and larger performance spaces. According to SUC (2024), one of the main challenges is the uncertainty of funding resources which is essential for long-term sustainability, particularly to cover the costs of the costumes and props. The programme is currently supported by the Xinxiangxian Friendship Association in Zhuantang Street and is free to learners. Second, given the popularity of the programme, the community school's current facilities are insufficient, with inadequate storage and limited classroom space. Each Shangsi Bamboo Horse Dance performance features between ten and forty dancers. Third, a larger performance stage is needed to enhance the programme's visibility and impact. Lastly, more promotional efforts are required to raise public awareness of the dance, both locally and beyond Hangzhou, to ensure its preservation and wider appreciation. This can be carried out by the relevant cultural organizations.

Conclusion

The Shangsi Bamboo Horse Dance offers important lessons for addressing demographic changes and the learning needs of older and younger generations. The motivations of participants reflect key principles of experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) emphasizing learning through experience, and sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) underscoring the importance of social interaction, culture and language in learning and understanding learning as a social mediation process. Younger participants are driven by opportunities for cultural preservation, skill development and intergenerational cooperation, while older learners seek meaningful engagement, LLL and the chance to mentor others.

The programme's structure, which promotes active participation, collaboration and reflection, underscores the value of learning through experience and social interaction. By fostering mutual respect and shared cultural responsibility, the programme exemplifies how education can bridge generational divides, enhance personal growth and contribute to the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, thus ultimately enhancing social cohesion and a sense of shared identity.

Programme evaluation should ensure the exploration of potential benefits and challenges for both older and younger participants, fostering a balanced focus across age groups. This aligns with Li, Kaplan and Thang's (2020) observation that IL often emphasizes older learners, highlighting the need for equitable engagement. Yuan and Wu (2021) further stress the importance of developing theoretical and empirical research tailored

to China's unique social, cultural and historical context, advocating for interactions that bridge the generational gap beyond familial settings.

Finally, despite the recognized value of IL, the uncertainty or lack of funding may jeopardise the viability of intergenerational programmes and their ability to reach out to socio-economic groups traditionally underrepresented in educational programmes. Establishing links with the community and enlisting the support of relevant community and cultural organizations also appear essential for the sustainability of IL programmes, and highlight the idea of the community as a shared element and guiding principle for successful implementation. In this regard, the need for a comprehensive evaluation of the intergenerational programmes on a large scale for efficacy, adequacy and value could inform future LLL policy and provision in China.

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7. Synthesis

The five case studies from Ireland, the United States, South Africa, Germany and China provide significant insights into the transformative power of IL in fostering LLL. Using an explorative multiple case approach, the case studies examined the dynamics and potential of IL programmes as a means of addressing the expanding learning needs and interests of older adults and fostering a culture of intergenerational solidarity. The IL programmes reflect diverse approaches from global UNESCO regions, highlighting different strategies for designing IL efforts and illustrating the varied policy and implementation dimensions within which global IL programmes can operate.

The case studies further highlight IL as an essential tool for bridging generational knowledge gaps and fostering mutual understanding, respect and exchange of expertise. As emphasized by WHO (2021), educational interventions that include intergenerational contact are among the most effective strategies for reducing ageism, particularly when combined with other efforts. This is important not only in combating negative stereotypes about older adults but also in addressing ageism faced by younger people. The insights drawn from these diverse international contexts underscore IL's potential for creating more inclusive, equitable and cohesive learning environments that benefit younger and older individuals in contemporary society.

The following synthesis provides an integrated summary of the implementation, impact and outcomes of the case studies, a comparison of national and institutional contexts, and an overview of how policies and partnerships shape LLL opportunities. Drawing on specific details of the case studies, the value of IL is appraised along with how it advances age-friendly learning environments and combats ageism. Following discussion regarding generational learning motivations and barriers to IL programming, suggestions are offered for how IL can also support professional development for older adults. In conclusion, a set of guidelines for developing future IL programmes is provided.

Implementation, impact and outcomes of intergenerational learning case studies

Ireland: Ballyphenane/Togher Arts and Crafts

The award-winning Ballyphenane/Togher Arts and Crafts Initiative (BTACI) in Cork, Ireland, is a community-based, volunteer-driven programme that aims to support education and community health and well-being through arts and crafts. BTACI emphasizes reciprocal IL activities, particularly through partnerships with schools. This case study emphasizes the role of IL in improving the social inclusion of older adults, helping them maintain a sense of purpose and connection to their communities. Positive IL outcomes, generated both within the membership, but especially via projects partnering with schools, include the transfer of cultural knowledge between older and younger generations, the fostering of social connections between older and younger participants, and 'bridging the generation gap' between older and younger community members. In addition, LLL outcomes for members include addressing loneliness through social connection and community belonging (with special support during periods of grief or health problems), the expansion of artistic skills through the sharing of knowledge with peers, building communication skills, and developing an enhanced sense of well-being.

United States: Sages and Seekers

In the United States, intergenerational learning programmes are often linked to educational institutions and community organizations, providing formal and informal spaces where learning occurs naturally. The case study of Sages and Seekers (S&S) reveals how schools, colleges and universities can incorporate IL into their curricula, offering students the opportunity to engage with older adults in educational settings. The case study also emphasizes the importance of fostering an environment where younger and older participants can contribute to each other's learning. By creating these shared spaces for learning, the US case study demonstrates the potential for IL to enhance academic achievement, life skills and social development for participants of all ages. At the end of the programme, younger participants write a short reflection to articulate what they have learned from their Sage partner, which is shared during an all-programme debriefing. This approach is consistent with the findings of Mezirow

(2009), who emphasizes the importance of reflective learning in transforming participants' understanding of their experiences and perspectives, a benefit that should be extended to older as well as younger learners.

South Africa: The Family Literacy Project

In South Africa, the implementation of IL programmes highlights the potential for these initiatives to address issues of social inequality, especially in communities with diverse cultural backgrounds. South Africa's history of apartheid has created significant divides between different generational and racial groups, and IL programmes serve as a platform for promoting solidarity and healing. The case study from South Africa underscores the role of IL in facilitating dialogue and understanding between generations from different socio-economic and racial backgrounds. In leveraging the benefits of IL, the Family Literacy Project not only supports the development of adult and early literacies among participants, but also contributes to social solidarity by fostering a sense of shared purpose and collaboration across generational lines.

Germany: Intergenerational Service Learning Project 'Ehrenamt ist Mainz'

The Intergenerational Service Learning (ISL) Project at the Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz demonstrates the value of IL programming for gaining new perspectives from interacting with members of other generations. Further, ISL illustrates the need for IL programmes to be flexible and responsive to the specific needs of both older and younger participants, as well as adapting intergenerational learning to different educational contexts. German research, such as Ioannidou's (2021) work, reveals that IL programmes can be structured in a variety of ways, ranging from family-oriented programmes to community-based initiatives and more complex learning frameworks in school settings. These varied structures allow for a broad range of interactions that reflect the diversity of lived experiences and cultural backgrounds of both the older and younger participants. Germany's emphasis on ensuring that IL programmes are adaptable and inclusive to participants of all backgrounds highlights how IL can be applied effectively in a variety of community settings.

China: Shangsi Bamboo Horse Dance Programme

Community-based IL programmes in China play a vital role in preserving and transmitting traditional knowledge, ensuring that younger generations gain a deeper understanding of their cultural heritage. IL initiatives like the Shangsi Bamboo Horse Dance programme facilitate intergenerational exchanges, where older adults share life experiences, skills and wisdom with younger generations, helping to bridge the gap between the past and the present. In this case study, both generational groups recognized the value of the programme for preserving cultural heritage and supporting cultural continuity, as well as fostering mutual respect and increasing cross-generational communication and confidence. The potential for IL to bridge this generational divide highlights its critical role in sustaining cultural traditions and fostering cross-generational learning.

Cross-case comparative analysis: National and local policy and institutional contexts

Taken together, the case studies demonstrate how nations worldwide are undergoing significant changes in their social structure and unprecedented age diversity. Across countries, populations are shifting from a traditional pyramid shape – with many young people and few older adults – to a more rectangular or even inverted shape, reflecting lower birth rates and longer life expectancy. This change, albeit at somewhat different rates in different countries, has wide-range implications on many fronts, especially in the realm of education, as explored in this study.

As the case studies further illustrate, the need for LLL options across countries and in local communities is increasing as older adults look toward educational institutions and communities for personal development opportunities. This is especially true as accumulating research shows how IL programmes offer individuals prospects to maintain social connections and reduce social isolation, bridge generational gaps, expand knowledge and skills, and strengthen community ties and support systems (Kaplan, *et al*., 2020). Responding to these needs and benefits, the case studies demonstrate how diverse IL efforts may be mounted. Intergenerational programmes can range from arts and cultural programmes, as seen in Ireland and China, to interactive learning and course-based programmes in the United States and German case studies. Of interest is that IL programmes benefit not only different-aged individuals but also communities more generally, as evidenced by the South African case study that reaches across a wide range of villages and rural towns to address the reading challenges of both children and adults.

The case studies also reveal considerable variability in national and local policies, support and implementation strategies around IL. Some countries, like China, have issued national policies. Others, like the United States, have not done so but do have local community and institutional efforts in motion. German universities have increasingly embraced continuing education for older adults, establishing academic programmes such as University of the Third Age and Senior Studies that include intergenerational options. With respect to institutional contexts, the IL programmes also vary in where and how they are administered and delivered,

ranging from on-campus settings to community settings. For some, like those of the German and United States case studies, programmes are offered directly through collaborations with educational institutions such as universities and secondary schools. For others, as in the Chinese case study, institutions provide support by way of connection to students and evaluation of content. Other programmes, such BTACI from the Irish case study, have close ties to the local community centre and library that provide meeting spaces as well as information and practical support. Similarly, the South African Family Literacy Project relies on community and library connections reaching across multiple villages and rural towns. Taken together, the case studies offer compelling examples of how different forms of IL programmes can be mounted across diverse national, educational and community contexts. Such examples reinforce the promise and potential of IL as a strategy for expanding opportunities for LLL.

Policy-driven support as a critical enabler: How national and local policies shape opportunities for older adults to engage in lifelong learning

Policies play a critical role in establishing a global society for all ages and a long-term strategy on maximizing the potential of ageing individuals (Findsen and Formosa, 2011; UN, 2000). Global policies therefore set the framework for governments to promote IL which can then translate to the local level. Unfortunately, this process is not uniformly implemented in actual practice, as noted by Corrigan (2021).

The case studies reinforce the importance of national policies that promote IL. The Chinese case study shows that, at one extreme, the Healthy China 2030 national strategy and the Development Plan for Elderly Education (2016–2020) lay out ways in which IL can be promoted through collaboration across educational institutions and community groups. Policies dating back to 1996 are intended to ensure the right of education for all (UIL, 2019). The remaining case studies represent varying degrees of national commitment to IL, but for the most part, this commitment is at a minimal level. The United States case study notes the lack of national policies mandating IL and dedicated funding streams. This lack of national policy puts the onus on individual communities and institutions. The Irish case study, similarly, describes a lack of governmental policy that recognizes the value of IL, not only in communities but in mainstream education. South Africa does have national policies, as reflected in the South African Schools Act and the Higher Education Act in 1996 and 1997 respectively, the Policy Document on Adult Basic Education and Training in 2003, and the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (PSET) in 2013 (see Department of Education, 2003; DoHET, 2013). However, the South African policies have not been sufficiently implemented: 'The failure to have a clear set of policy directives has had marked effects in a range of adult education-related contexts from the world of work to personal well-being' (DoHET, 2013, p. 55). Given these challenges, it is even more impressive that the programmes in each case study reflect such a remarkable degree of success. Clearly, national policies are critical, but the strong incentives that communities have to develop IL can nevertheless overcome the odds when those policies are not in place.

Role of partnerships between governments, industries and educational institutions, and collaboration between governments

As important as national policies are in promoting IL, programmes at the local level rely on partnerships among key stakeholders, ranging from private industry to educational institutions, including higher education. These may be directed toward labour force demands, or, as is consistent with principles of educational gerontology, they may be oriented toward personal development and social integration. Ideally, these partnerships develop at the inception of a project, as noted by Findsen and Formosa (2011), and include clear statements about the goals and objectives of the programme.

Each of the case studies illustrates the importance of partnerships, and each has addressed the issue from a slightly different vantage point. In the Irish case study, community partnerships were strong, ranging from Cork city authorities to local artisans and higher education institutions. The United States case study also noted collaborations with nationwide organizations and two universities. The organizers suggested the need for diverse partnerships and shared sites. Broad support from other organizations is noted also in the South African case study, which cites partnerships with 15 villages and towns served by the programme, as well as support in terms of curriculum developed by other organizations, including the national Department of Health and a programme known as Food for Life. The 50 Plus programme at Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz represents a collaboration with a variety of university faculties and institutions. As stated by one participant, an innovative feature was the decision 'to make the seminar free of charge for senior learners', encouraging broader participation. This aligns with recommendations from BAGSO (2023, p. 8), which emphasize prioritizing social inclusion and support for vulnerable groups (*ibid*., p. 71). Additionally, the German case study report notes that partnerships with local nonprofits and volunteer organizations enriched the practical experiences of participants, making their learning directly relevant to societal needs (*ibid*., p. 72). The programme featured in the Chinese case study was initiated by a community school in collaboration with a vocational high school

which, in turn, was supported by a Friendship Association. The Community School contributed significant resources to the development of the programme, and employed a professional team that considered the learning needs of different age groups. They also designed the programme with experienced dance teachers. Each case therefore illustrates the need for partnerships at varying levels, and the most successful programmes appear to benefit from diverse partnerships, including those with institutions of higher education.

The importance of intergenerational learning: How intergenerational engagement fosters mutual understanding, collaboration and social cohesion

The importance of IL lies in its ability to bridge generational gaps and create a more inclusive social environment through interactions and activities that foster mutual understanding, collaboration and skill exchange, preservation of culture and values, social cohesion, and a sense of empowerment and purpose (Findsen and Formosa, 2011; Jarrott *et al*., 2021). Each case study clearly illustrates these components. For example, the reciprocal design of the United States case study emphasizes mutual understanding over the course of one-on-one, semi-structured conversations, and how effective IL encourages empathy and respect by allowing different age groups to share their individual perspectives. Through this collaborative exchange, both age groups learn to appreciate diverse experiences and viewpoints.

The South African case study outlines a prime example of cross-generational collaboration and skill exchange, whereby individuals from different cohorts (facilitators, parents, grandparents and great-grandparents) bring their unique aptitudes to the table to refine and deliver the programme. Through collaboration, the age groups learn with and from each other, fostering adaptability and growth.

The programme described in the Chinese case study demonstrates the power of IL for preserving cultural rituals and values. Designed around traditional folk dance, intergenerational teams learned about the origins, history and techniques of dance as folk art, and engaged in an intergenerational performance. Younger participants recognized the cultural significance of their experience and expressed a strong sense of duty to preserve and share Chinese cultural heritage with older participants. Likewise, the experience provided older participants with meaningful intergenerational activities that contribute to their sense of personal fulfilment and support cultural preservation.

The German case study illustrates how regular intergenerational exchange around issues of common interest is an effective strategy for breaking down age-based divisions, which in turn strengthens social ties and reduces social isolation. Older and younger adult learners participated in a seminar focused on service learning, volunteering and civic engagement, planned as a typical semester course. With an emphasis on mitigating social fragmentation and encouraging collaboration, programme organizers found that the engagement naturally led to increased empathy from both generations.

In addition, the experiences of participants documented in the Irish case study attest to the value of IL for instilling a sense of purpose and psychological well-being. Indeed, the BTACI organizers noted that the IL and LLL which takes place within and across the age groups is not simply about arts and crafts. Older women helped each other cope with life challenges, such as loneliness, illness and death. Moreover, younger people's sense of security and belonging was enhanced during the time they spent with the older women.

The findings from the case studies also emphasize the transformative potential of intergenerational learning when it is effectively implemented. According to Mezirow's (2009) concept of transformational learning, IL programmes can serve as a platform for reflection and personal growth, where both older and younger participants are encouraged to challenge preconceived notions and deepen their understanding of each other's experiences. This reflective engagement is particularly powerful in the context of IL, where the learning process is shared and can lead to profound changes in how individuals view their roles within their communities and society at large.

The importance of intergenerational learning: How intergenerational engagement advances age-friendly learning environments and combats ageism

IL programmes promote age-friendly learning environments and help combat ageist stereotypes by fostering inclusion, mutual respect and shared learning experiences, across age groups. A common finding reported in the case studies was that older and younger participants' views of individuals in the other age group were challenged, and they not only came to appreciate differences, but also to recognize similarities with different-aged individuals. This sentiment is reinforced in the learner perspectives described in the United States case study, which engaged 6,000 younger and older participants, 46 per cent of whom

were biracial and people of colour, across six countries. Consistent with the evidence-based IL strategies recommended by Jarrott *et al*. (2021), several structural and logistical features of the varied IL programmes are important components for promoting age-friendliness and disrupting ageist stereotypes. In particular, the use of inclusive design practices is key, such as those incorporated into the Shangsi Bamboo Horse Dance programme from the Chinese case study, which intentionally structure collaborative learning and cross-generational choreography activities to be accessible physically, socially and intellectually to all age groups. It is also important to devote time to planning the implementation logistics of the programme, developing a manageable schedule, and ensuring all participants know the programme goals and their roles. The South African case study further highlights the importance of trained facilitators to accommodate diverse learning needs and to encourage flexibility in teaching methods, pace and content delivery.

The direct interaction and sustained learning exchange built into IL programmes give participants time to challenge age misconceptions, and are consistent with the principles of Levy's (2018) contemporary Positive Education about Aging and Contact Experiences model, which draws on Allport's (1954) classic contact hypothesis. This sustained interaction allows younger individuals to see the vitality, experience and adaptability of older adults who in turn see the curiosity, respect and potential of younger individuals (counter to typical stereotypes). Additionally, programmes' focus on shared goals and collaborative learning nurtures empathy and personal connections, which have been shown to be central IL programme components for breaking down negative age perceptions (Jarrott *et al*., 2021). It is clear that intergenerational programmes can actively reshape how younger and older individuals view each other, at least within the time frame of their participation in a particular programme. It will be useful to explore the extent to which positive age attitudes are maintained after participation in a programme, and the extent to which continued intergenerational engagement is needed to sustain these positive views.

The dynamics of intergenerational learning: Understanding participants' unique learning motivations and programme barriers

IL programmes succeed when they account for the distinct learning motivations and barriers faced by participants from different age groups. Understanding these differences helps create more inclusive and effective learning experiences. In addition to the transformative impact on participants, the case studies also shed light on the key motivational factors that drive younger and older adults to engage in IL. For example, younger participants may seek skill development and academic advancement, as evidenced by master's level students in the German case study, who participated as part of their educational specialization and desire to develop career-relevant competencies. Younger participants may also be interested in expanding their social connections and engaging in a novel experience to satisfy their curiosity. This is shown by the experiences of programme participants in the Chinese case study, who were drawn to the opportunity to enhance their performance skills and build confidence through collaboration with older adults in a unique cultural experience.

Older adults are also motivated by the opportunity for social engagement to combat isolation and loneliness by forming new relationships. Observing an 'epidemic of loneliness' in society, women in the Irish case study reported that interactions with similar-aged peers, as well as younger individuals, provided welcome opportunities for interaction and connection. As highlighted by Erikson *et al.* (1994) and Lang and Carstensen (2002), older individuals are also often motivated to participate in learning activities that offer personal fulfilment and the opportunity to mentor younger generations. In this way, generativity is a strong motivator for older adults (Lakin *et al*., 2008; Lin, 2011) and many older participants across the case studies indicated a desire to contribute to the development and well-being of younger people, and to leave a legacy. This generative motivation was evident in the South African and United States cases where older adults served as mentors and shared their wisdom and lived experiences to help guide and encourage younger participants. The value of LLL and a desire to stay mentally and physically active can also be seen in the motivations of older participants across the cases. For some, skill development is a motivation, as noted by older participants in the German case study, who wanted to learn more about volunteerism and how they could apply their expertise to collaborative community projects.

The case studies also reveal several barriers related to implementing IL, that can range from routine individual difficulties to broader structural challenges. For example, organizers of the service-learning programme in the German case study noted how logistical problems experienced by participants, such as navigating room arrangements and problems with technical equipment in classrooms, posed difficulties for delivering effective sessions.

A larger barrier is the lack of coherent policy and formal recognition of the potential of IL, particularly at the higher education level. As Findsen (2021) notes, intergenerational learning is often viewed as a subset of lifelong learning and, as a result, it tends to lack the visibility and policy support necessary for widespread adoption. Evidence from the national contexts in the

different countries show that access to IL programmes remains limited, particularly for older adults who may face challenges such as physical accessibility and financial constraints.

All cases also highlight the ongoing and critical issue of access to funding for materials and staff, especially with respect to sustaining and expanding IL opportunities. Organizers of the programme featured in the Chinese case study further noted that the uncertainty or lack of funding can jeopardise not only the viability of IL programmes but also their ability to engage individuals from socio-economic groups traditionally underrepresented in educational programmes. Indeed, for countries such as the United States, there are no national policies that explicitly mandate IL efforts, nor any dedicated governmental funding streams to facilitate them. As a result, the implementation and expansion of IL programmes warrants alternative funding streams such as private philanthropy and community grants, or revenue generating approaches such as fee-for-service strategies.

In addition to the vital need for funding, several cases note that there is also the need for greater coordination, promotion and support from schools and the local community. For example, the Irish BTACI group members describe how there was a lack of dedicated spaces for IL programmes. In response to this place-based barrier (a physical accessibility barrier), the US Sages and Seekers programme has offered an online modality. However, this modality is not a viable option for individuals who lack access to computers, reliable internet connection, or sufficient digital literacy. Some programmes, such as those involving crafts or physical activities, cannot be translated to a virtual format. Organizers from several programmes also reported that recruiting participants from diverse communities is challenged by barriers such as transportation and financial limitations. Moreover, school schedules and competing curricular programmes can serve as barriers for recruiting younger participants. Similarly, scheduling may present a barrier for some older participants for personal and work-related reasons. One strategy suggested by Corrigan (2021) to help address logistical barriers is to involve older and younger participants in the design, development and implementation of the programmes.

Ageism can also be a barrier to IL programming, especially given that age stereotypes have become more negative over time (Ng *et al*., 2015). Age stereotypes and negative attitudes toward both older and younger individuals can lead to reluctance to participate in IL programmes. Moreover, ageist beliefs can fuel mistrust and misunderstandings between generations, making it harder to mount collaborations built on mutual respect. Age biases can also impact programme design and accessibility. For example, if organizers do not adequately consider the needs and strengths of all age groups, they may inadvertently exclude certain participants—for example, by focusing on digital undertakings that may alienate some older adults if support is not provided. Age biases may also fuel institutional resistance to supporting IL programmes if organizations assume that age groups would be better served separately, or if they undervalue the potential contributions of either older or younger participants due to ageist expectations. Similarly, ageist norms may impact the decisions of policymakers and funders to prioritize or allocate resources to intergenerational initiatives, limiting their development and sustainability.

Several strategies can help to disrupt the ageism barrier. In particular, the research of Jarrott *et al.* (2021) finds that building IL programmes around novel activities, such as those organized in the case studies, is useful as the novelty redirects attention away from individuals' concerns toward reciprocal exchange. Spreading the word about the programmes, and participants' positive experience, through both formal (e.g. media outlets) and informal (e.g. word-of-mouth) communication, can likewise reduce this barrier. The skill-based outcomes of IL programmes also may help to offset ageism, giving participants a sense of accomplishment and positive feelings toward individuals from different age groups.

Moving forward: Intergenerational learning as an opportunity for professional development for older adults

Professional development reflects the ongoing process of learning and growth that helps individuals improve their skills, knowledge and effectiveness in the workplace. It can involve both formal and informal activities and is aimed at helping workers stay current, advance in their field, or transition into new roles. With increased life and health expectancy, as adults age they are more likely to look for upskilling or reskilling opportunities over the course of their extended work lives, and IL programmes can support these work-related needs (OECD, 2020). As the case studies demonstrate, skill development is a core component of IL, and older adults can hone skills such as reading and digital literacy or learn new skills such as mentoring, facilitating, teaching and leadership by participating in IL programmes. As is also shown in the cases, engaging in IL programmes can help to combat social isolation, enhance cognitive and physical activity, and improve overall well-being, all of which are factors that support professional performance and motivation. In addition, participating in structured programmes and focused, goal-oriented activities reinforces a sense of relevance and purpose, helping older adults feel valued and more confident participating in professional settings. Positive intergenerational experiences may also shape positive age attitudes, as evidenced across the cases, which can spill over to workplace settings where

older and younger individuals interact, which in turn can support older workers' motivation and engagement (Bellotti *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, intergenerational interactions can help older workers stay adaptable in age-diverse work environments by refining their understanding of multiple perspectives, communication preferences and work styles. Finally, IL programmes are also integral to shaping the culture of LLL by reinforcing the idea that professional development is ongoing and not limited by age, which can shift perceptions and boost older adults' motivation to pursue further training or new work roles.

8. Guidelines

To make the most of ongoing and future IL, the following guidelines offer a practical approach to creating inclusive and effective programmes that bring generations together in meaningful and constructive ways.

Identify a clear programme framework that reflects the needs and strengths of different age groups, beginning with generating goals (e.g. reducing isolation, enhancing skill development, building empathy, disrupting ageism) and considering how the programme aligns with community needs and could be adapted from or integrated into existing structures to help identify community partnerships and inform sustainability efforts. All case studies clearly illustrate the importance of this basic strategy and starting point.

Garner support in the wider community with an intentional integration into existing education systems, from lower grades to higher education. Such integration can provide a programmatic structure, as evidenced by the German case study, where instructors from local universities served as facilitators and where students were recruited to participate. In addition, such integration provides a physical structure for the delivery of IL activities, as described in the Chinese case study.

Integrate IL into formal educational frameworks through the establishment of national and international policies that promote the inclusion of IL in formal education, especially at higher education level. This could include the development of standardized frameworks for IL programmes and the integration of IL concepts into curricula across age groups. In the Irish and Chinese case studies, the integration of IL into educational curricula, both in schools and universities, helped bridge generational gaps and create a shared learning space. By embedding IL into formal education, students of all ages can benefit from the reciprocal learning experiences that IL provides.

Encourage cross-sector collaboration and community partnerships through policies that incentivize collaboration among different sectors and stakeholders, including educational institutions, community organizations and local governments, to create and sustain IL programmes. These partnerships should focus on leveraging community resources, sharing good practices, and creating support networks that promote IL. The German case study emphasized the effectiveness of collaborative efforts between universities, local councils and social service providers to create inclusive IL programmes. A policy-driven approach to fostering such partnerships will strengthen community engagement and ensure the long-term success of IL initiatives.

Chart programme logistics and resource needs considering programme goals and expected outcomes, including details such as scheduling, meeting space and transportation, along with activity planning, materials procurement and staffing. As noted in the Irish case study, for older adults working with school-age children this may include vetting, background checks, and health and safety requirements. The South African case study also underscores the importance of appraising local community resources, practices and customs, especially for multi-site programmes.

Consider personal motivations, skills and expectations of older and younger participants, as well as staff, volunteers and faculty. This includes considering how to best frame the programme as a shared learning experience across generations by way of recurring interactions, skill sharing, collaboration and informal socializing. Also consider potential interpersonal dynamics and how they will be addressed. As evidenced by the different case studies, participants' motivations can differ in a variety of ways with respect to the programme focus. Similarly, different activities will tap different skills and cultivate different types of exchange.

Include evaluation strategies to assess ongoing activities and immediate outcomes, to identify challenges to be addressed in future programming, and to inform other IL programme initiatives. The present study, and the case studies assessed, reveal the value of systematic observation and personal reflection.

Provide technology-ready assessment and support to extend outreach and accessibility. Where available, digital platforms can provide effective opportunities for connecting multiple generations, especially when challenges exist with respect to transportation, meeting space, and timing concerns. The United States case study illustrates the importance of addressing technology's benefits and barriers to participation in online programmes. This merits, for instance, using a technology audit strategy with individual user assessment and pre-programme consulting to ensure technology readiness and ongoing support opportunities.

Offer incentives to develop and participate in IL efforts, first to attract local advocates and then to encourage participation. Grants to communities can help them to develop and deliver programmes. As evidenced by

the German case study, faculty may be more likely to participate in IL initiatives if their institutions recognize such engagement and time allotment as part of their academic workload. Incentives for younger and older student participation could include academic credit, service-learning experience and extra-curricular activities planned through student clubs that often receive support from their institutions. Transportation vouchers or gift cards to increase diversity and offset the opportunity costs of participating can also be effective incentives, as shown by the United States case study.

Provide staff and faculty training to ensure an understanding of roles and responsibilities, and to foster comfort in the intergenerational learning context. Staff who organize IL programmes, the facilitators (such as those who implemented the literacy methods in the South African case study) and faculty who deliver them (such as those in the German ISL seminar programme), should be trained in the dynamics and logistics of intergenerational educational exchange. Similarly, it is important that younger and older participants are well-informed about the programme's goals and expectations of them.

Promote inclusivity and accessibility in IL programmes through the development of policies that facilitate access to IL for older and younger adults, including financial support, transportation and the provision of accessible learning materials. This should also include the integration of flexible schedules and personalized instruction to accommodate the diverse needs of participants. In the South African case, accessibility barriers were highlighted, particularly for older adults in rural areas. Ensuring that IL programmes can be reached by all age groups, regardless of location or financial situation, will enhance participation and equity. The case study from China highlighted the positive impact of removing transportation barriers through the implementation of the 15-minute travel time initiative, which facilitated easier access to IL programmes.

Enhance outreach by addressing disparities in access to resources and infrastructure, particularly in underdeveloped regions like South Africa, where access to technology may be limited. Emphasis should be placed on providing alternative, non-digital methods for IL alongside efforts to improve technological infrastructure. This could include mobile learning units, community-based workshops and use of traditional communication methods to ensure inclusive participation regardless of technological constraints.

Address ageism through policy and education by developing IL programmes with an intentional focus on promoting positive attitudes and challenging stereotypes about both younger and older generations. To this end, IL initiatives should encourage open dialogue about generational diversity and reinforce the contributions of each age group to the initiative. All the case studies demonstrate the importance of reciprocal exchange for fostering more positive attitudes of different age groups towards each other.

In summary, intergenerational learning holds immense promise for fostering more inclusive, equitable and cohesive societies, with exciting new initiatives emerging on many fronts (Fideler, 2025). The case studies explored in this report demonstrate the diverse ways in which IL can be implemented to foster mutual understanding, reduce ageism and contribute to LL. To fully realize the potential of IL, education institutions and policy-makers must work together to create accessible, inclusive and well-supported learning environments. The long-term success of IL will depend on continued advocacy, research and investment in the development of programmes that bring generations together in meaningful and impactful ways, ensuring that IL becomes a central component of global education frameworks. Ultimately, the integration of IL into formal and informal education systems will be critical for addressing the challenges of an ageing population and fostering a more socially cohesive world.

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Annex

Outline: Key questions for semi-structured interviews

1. National/local context: What national and local policies/strategies exist to support IL for older adults? To what extent do they affect the implementation of IL activities for older adults?

   1.1 Do national policies/strategies on IL for older adults exist in your country? If yes, please elaborate.

   - What kind of activities are offered ('intentionally' aimed at providing IL, or IL as a 'by-product'?)
   - Who are the main providers? (Public and or private; e.g. with public funding support mechanisms. What is the level of synergy between national policies on IL and the main stakeholders involved in advancing specific policies/strategies?)

   1.2 Do local policies/strategies on population ageing determine or affect the institution's/ organization's engagement in IL for older adults?

2. Learning provision: How does your institution/ organization design and implement IL activities for older learners aged 60+? (Where applicable, explore how younger learners are addressed/affected).

   2.1 What are the target groups of these activities? (e.g. age, socio-economic background, gender, rural/urban).

   2.2 What kind of outreach strategies have been adopted for the activity? (Where can potential participants – older and younger – find information on the activity?)

   2.3 What is the funding/financing model for the activities that target older cohorts (60+) of learners (and younger people) based on? (For example, national policies/funding to support such efforts, institutional will and dedicated funds, personal funding, cost-sharing principles etc.)

   2.4 Is there specific support provided targeting older adults and younger learners in socio-economically disadvantaged groups, and/or female older adults?

   2.5 How does your institution/organization communicate its efforts to address the learning needs of older adults as well as younger learners internally and externally? How does it address common misconceptions (e.g. ageism) about older age and build awareness around the needs of older learners among people in the institution/organization but simultaneously addresses younger learners?

   2.6 What role does technology play in delivering the IL activities?

   2.7 How does your institution/organization address structural barriers to learning, e.g. cost of transportation, accessibility of physical spaces for persons with a disability, as well as general safety and comfort?

   2.8 How does your institution/organization create links with the local community and engage with external partners to address the learning needs of older adults and younger learners?

   2.9 Does your institution/organization promote IL opportunities?


4
QUALITY
EDUCATION
Sustainable
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Goals