

Intergenerational Education:  
The significance of 'reciprocity' and 'place'

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### Abstract

In this article, the case is made for greater clarity in the definition of intergenerational practice and intergenerational education. Theoretically, the effects of all-age reciprocity and the significance of attending to 'place' are explored. Taken together, they help point to what is distinctive about the scope and purpose of intergenerational education. The author argues that any intergenerational practice must always involve an educative element that is focused, at least in part, on the on-going reciprocal production of new relations between generations through the way challenges are purposefully responded to in some specific place.

*Key Words: Intergenerational practice, intergenerational education, reciprocity, reciprocal, learning, place, relations.*

## **Introduction**

The article sets out to discern the purposes and scope of *intergenerational education*.

This work is important because this is an identifiable a gap in the literature in the field to date which has largely failed to take education as a key concern. After considering the existing literature and its lacunae, I consider the importance of the concept of all-age reciprocity – a now widely accepted principle for intergenerational practice. Firstly, (after Sánchez et al., 2007), I will identify that intergenerational practice is always an emplaced activity that advances a society for all ages through increasing reciprocal communication and exchanges of many kinds between people from any two generations for the benefit of individuals, communities, and places. Taking the arguments around reciprocity and place further, the following definition will be offered: *Intergenerational education (a) involves people from two or more generations participating in a common practice that happens in some place, (b) involves different interests across the generations and can be employed to address the betterment of individual, community and ecological wellbeing through tackling some 'problem' or challenge, (c) requires a willingness to reciprocally communicate across generational divides (through activities involving consensus, conflict or cooperation) with the hope of generating and sharing new intergenerational meanings, practices and places that are to some degree, held in common, and (d) requires a willingness to be responsive to places, and each other in an ongoing manner.* Alongside this, I will argue that *the overarching purpose of intergenerational education is to improve intergenerational relations in ways that assist in the flourishing of*

*communities and places, local and beyond.*

### **Theorising Intergenerational Practice: Beyond Descriptions and Outcomes**

Commentators agree that the growth and development of the intergenerational field requires greater attention to be paid to definitions of and for practice. Springate, Atkinson and Martin (2008) note that there is a need for greater clarity around the definition of intergenerational practice. They have also noted international differences in emphases, with the UK field focusing more on school and community sites and less on older adults compared to the USA. On the ground, the project-based approaches of practitioners and communities have been *described* quite well, for example, as “vehicles for the purposeful and ongoing exchange of resources and learning among older and younger generations for individual and social benefits” (Hatton-Yeo, 2006, p. 2). Kaplan (2002) has also usefully *described* possible scenarios for intergenerational practice, while others have devised useful typologies for possible scenarios (for example, Brown & Ohsako, 2003). However, with no agreed definition (beyond description and typologies of practice), there is a lack of clarity. This is a problem because it means we cannot discern easily what is distinctive about intergenerational practice or its derivative, intergenerational education.

Another approach has been to look at naming the wide array of *outcomes* that accrue to participants from intergenerational practices (see Springate et al., 2008; Martin, Springate & Atkinson, 2010). Readers of this journal will be familiar with many of the espoused outcomes for intergenerational practice, including those related to health, wellbeing and social inclusion or social cohesion, urban renewal or regeneration,

participation of older people or children or their active citizenship. Useful as they are, these outcomes do not serve as distinguishing *purposes* for intergenerational practice since, as outcomes, they may accrue to solely one generation and may accrue or not accrue in different contexts. Also, these outcomes may be distinctively influenced by participants' age, class, income, gender in various ways and not be generalizable.

Given this state of affairs, it appears we need a more nuanced approach saying what is distinctive about intergenerational practice and, by implication, intergenerational education. A number of strands of literature can help us conceive of intergenerational education as more than a reiteration of claims about outcomes or the transfer of skills, money, or ideas (for example, Hoff, 2007) and takes account of new ideas about education as a multigenerational social practice across the lifecourse that is located in a wide variety of places.

### **All-age Reciprocity**

On the one hand, given the increase in the numbers of older adults in developed country populations, it is perhaps no surprise then that studies of intergenerational practices tend to be found in departments specialising in ageing, in journals focusing on gerontology, and research on adults and older adults (Hatton-Yeo, 2006). Also noticeable, is that early approaches to intergenerational practice focused on *one-way* exchanges and outcomes, for example, efforts to get adults to educate the young, or, getting the young to support, serve or assist older members of society. Now, most commentators recognise the importance of more *reciprocal* inputs and outputs of programmes (Kaplan, 2002) involving all ages and two-way exchanges, perhaps more especially in intergenerational

shared sites which are places where young and old receive services at the same time and place (Jarrott, Gigliotti, & Smock, 2006; see also the special issue of this journal on the topic of shared sites, 2011).

VanderVen (1999, 2004) argues for a similar reciprocity but does so theoretically. She critiques the existing theoretical resource base by showing how 'phase' or stage theorists (such as Erikson) are likely to be too linear, and culturally biased. Instead, she argues for an approach where intergenerational practice is more dynamic (non-linear), recursive, constructivist, socially situated and informed by post-modern theories of power and other social identifiers such as gender. She argues that this approach would also imply that intergenerational programmers should allow for greater *all age participation* in program design, implementation and evaluation with reciprocal inputs and effects.

In tandem, in intergenerational policy statements and in the field of practice we can too see a more reciprocal, relational and multigenerational approach. In part, this is due to calls for us all to realise a 'society for all ages' (Sánchez et al., 2007). The following definition for intergenerational *practice* argues cogently for all age reciprocity as a distinguishing feature (though limits participant groups to two generations when it could easily be multigenerational):

Activities or programmes that increase cooperation, interaction and exchange between people from any two generations. They share their knowledge and resources and provide mutual support in relations benefiting not only individuals but their community. These programs provide opportunities for people, families and communities to enjoy and benefit from a *society for all ages*. (Generations United,

undated). (Sánchez et al., 2007, 35, italics in original)

Drawing on Sánchez et al. and VanderVen (above), I wish to show that multigenerational reciprocity is a key construct for understanding intergenerational practice but I also will show that it can help us name the scope and purposes of intergenerational education. Explicit in Sánchez's definition above is that intergenerational practice involves purposefully moving towards the creation of a society for all ages: this provides a distinctive purpose for intergenerational education when compared to other forms of civic engagement and multi-age education. The notion of intergenerational solidarity (Jarrott, 2007), closely aligned to the idea of a 'society for all ages', is seen to be made up of positive intergenerational sentiment, shared values, intergenerational contact and a commitment to civic roles and obligations (Bengston, Rosenthal & Burton, 1990). Importantly, the goal of the creation of a society for all ages requires multigenerational inputs and outputs: the reciprocal participation of some kind by more than one generation in programming and, through this process, the creation of new improved ways of being in relationship by these participants across generational divides. Without this reciprocal participation as a process and improved relations as a purpose, an intergenerational programme could be the same as any form of community activism or formal provision involving more than one age group.

In educational research too, we can find support for taking all-age reciprocity as a key driver for understanding contemporary educational practice. Hodkinson, Biesta, & James (2008) remind us that the workplace, family, the school, community-based organizations and other contexts are already providing sites for intergenerational learning

of many kinds when education is viewed socio-culturally. In much sociological research, despite generational markers and cohorts being identifiable, generational effects had in the past been often overlooked in favour of foci such as gender, class and race. Field, Lynch & Malcolm (2008) have made some headway in understanding learning socio-culturally across the lifecourse. They have shown that learning is truly lifelong and lifewide. The presence of older adults in greater number, the changing nature of identities and the blurring of boundaries between generations mean there is potentially a more reciprocal relation between the generations (Jessel, 2009), though in practice there is also evidence of less contact between older and younger people with increasing generational niching as the norm (MacCallum, Palmer, Wright, Cumming-Potvin, Northcote, Brooker & Tero, 2006).

There are other perspectives that support this argument of multigenerational reciprocity as a key purpose for intergenerational education. Researchers in childhood sociologies and in human geography (Vanderbeck, 2007) have used generational ordering (Alanen, 2001) and concepts such as generation, lifecourse and intergenerationality, and age-related intersectionality (Hopkins & Pain, 2007) in theoretical and empirical research. Intersectional explanations of exclusion look to explore how categories of discrimination (race, gender, class as well as age) interact with each other on many levels, often at the same time. Hopkins and Pain (2007) suggest we take an intersectional and relational approach to researching multiple age groups/generations. The foundation for their argument is that people's identities are produced through the intersection (or interaction) of identifiers including age, but also race, class, and gender for example. Pain (2005) reminds us that young people are embedded in intergenerational relations:



Relations within one space (for example the home) also affect expectations, behaviour and relations within another (for example local public spaces).

Intergenerational relations, then, form part of our identity or social make-up (and are an aspect which has been underplayed until recently).

(Pain, 2005, p. 10)

Thus far, we have applied reciprocal (as well as relational and intersectional) understandings of intergenerational practice to argue that intergenerational education will viably take reciprocal participation as a distinctive process and improved relations among the generations as a key purpose. Understanding intergenerational practice as an intersecting aspect of identity formation suggests we need to consider more widely the many locations and contexts for intergenerational practice. To do this we will next explore the significance of 'place' for intergenerational education.

### **Place as a Player**

The locations for intergenerational learning and education need to be disclosed and understood for us to fully appreciate their role. As we have seen, formally delivered intergenerational education and non-formal intergenerational learning are best seen as a lifewide and lifelong. International commentators now question the presumption that it is solely individuals that engage in learning in formal ways in schools and universities. Instead a future is envisioned where the social everyday places in which we live (including homes, workplaces, museums, on-line environments, for example) are recognized for their educative power across generational divides (Facer & Sandford,

2010; Harper, 2009).

Empirical work linking intergenerational education or learning and 'place' is sparse but interesting. Some useful work, linking intergenerational practice and environmental education, has been provided by Kaplan, Liu, & Steinig (2005). Payne (2010) has looked at how the household functions as an intimate intergenerational site forging opportunities for counter-cultural ethical environmental practices in everyday routines (such as recycling). Mannion, Adey & Lynch (2010) studied examples of school-linked, place-based intergenerational practice. Mannion and Adey (2010) argue that place-based education itself is a reciprocal intergenerational practice requiring the on-going production of new relations between adult and young people through place-change processes. The corollary view, offered in this article, also holds: that intergenerational education is always a situated or emplaced activity, and therefore offers the potential to be for improved ecological or social justice (though it may not necessarily result in this). Building our arguments thus far we can say *intergenerational practice is an emplaced activity that advances a society for all ages through increasing reciprocal communication and exchanges of many kinds between people from any two generations for the benefit of individuals, communities, and places.*

Theoretical support for the need to recognize the importance of place can be found in the writings of geographers and spatial theorists. The position often put forward is simple yet far-reaching in terms of its consequences: interpersonal relations are always located in a place. Massey (cited here in Mannion, 2009) explains this well:

It is important here to reflect on what notions of space I am working with. A less fixed view of space (Massey, 1994, 2005) suggests that it is more than a backdrop

or a container for the action. Instead, spaces are *part of* the action, and very consequential in the forms of behaviour they afford and the emergence of the identities that inhabit them. Within this view, the self and space are intertwined in a co-emergent process. (Mannion, 2009, p. 333)

Massey (2004) invites us to see the changes in people and places as a linked two-way process. Places offer people pre-given, material, contextual opportunities or conditions within which some forms practice are possible and others are not. By this view, social relations are seen as being constituted through person-place enactments. As people engage in the world, the places they inhabit will also change, hence creating an on-going connectivity between people and their contexts. By this view, place-change and intergenerational practice jointly emerge; put simply, all intergenerational relations are always given expression in times and places.

Following Massey (2005), place itself needs to be seen as a relational process, produced via interactions (material and non-material – for example, social, cultural, economic) that are always local-yet-global. Here, place is more like a pattern of criss-crossed flows and disconnections rather than a static unconnected site. This theoretical position allows us to expand our view of what counts as intergenerational practice and education: an elder working on a community garden, or, a pupil turning off unnecessary lights in a teacher's classroom can be seen as practices that produce different kinds of places *and* produce new expressions of intergenerational relations.

Interestingly, within this perspective, intergenerational practice can include activities when only one generation is physically present at a single time. Consider the

relations that are created between generations when different age groups separately visit the same places at different times, for example, through participation in a community allotment, or participating in an a-synchronous on-line blog. In these cases, activities need not be concurrently shared to be viable intergenerational activity. The interesting finding here is that almost any place, such as a town, a park, or an on-line website, can be intergenerationally and reciprocally 'shared' with or without physical multigenerational co-presence.

These ideas speak directly to those seeking to promote a society for all ages. Taking the place-sensitive perspective I am outlining here reminds us that child–adult relations are always located in places and are expressed through practices. Mannion (2007) looked at some on-line blog entries by adults who supported the view that some places in society should be 'childfree'. This analysis has shown that generational presences but also absences (as in 'childfree zones' both on-line and in housing infrastructure) can determine how intergenerational relations get expressed in places. Mannion (2007) uses this and other empirical examples to show that *different generations reciprocally affect the places that social groups co-inhabit or inhabit separately.*

In many cases of intergenerational practice, the place itself and the place-making that gives rise to it, are more obviously the focus. Consider the creation of a local skate park. In this kind of case, young people will often need to work *with adults* to instigate changes and progress their plans. Mannion's (2005) study of school grounds developments projects and Mannion and I'Anson's (2004) study of the refurbishment of a children's arts centre have both shown that adults play an important role in gatekeeping and managing these so-called 'children spaces'. These cases show that place is an

important player, in part because of how the generations participate in gatekeeping and place-based boundaries; inclusive and exclusive intergenerational practices affect membership and presence in place, and, hence, the maintenance and changing of boundaries affects all participants' growth and learning across generational divides. Not all intergenerational boundary work results in *improved* intergenerational solidarity or enhanced community and ecological wellbeing. This is one reason why 'intergenerational shared sites' has currency (Jarrott et al., 2006) and why we need to know more about their management, enrollment and the processes that go on there.

While further empirical research would be warranted, it is likely that viewing intergenerational practice as a place-based activity will allow us to see how new relationships between the generations are produced in/through/by new and different kinds of place; this is because practices need locations for their performance, and, through these performances, relationships can be changed. If intergenerational practice sets out to reconfigure intergenerational relationships, then it must include an aim of recognizing what reciprocal intergenerational responsibilities we may have for each other, and for places. Again, this is because, (theoretically at least) we can argue that it is through these place-based approaches to changing relations that we, and our places, are reciprocally constructed.

### **Expanding the Purposes of Intergenerational Education**

So far, I have argued that we need to understand the links between processes of intergenerational *practice* and the how place allows the enactment of age-relations. I have argued that intergenerational practice is viably based on the principle of all-age

reciprocity with multi-directional inputs and outputs across generational divides. This practice and can be understood as happening in many contexts: within and outside family homes, schools, when generations are co-present and even sometimes when they are not. We have seen that 'participation' and 'place' are interconnected aspects of the practice and that intergenerational education is a key component.

I have argued that intergenerational education's purposes can, in part, be determined by considering all-age reciprocity as a necessary distinctive process and improved relations among the generations as a key purpose. The phrase 'society for all ages' and intergenerational solidarity is of course suggestive of *an educational aim to change intergenerational relations for the better in some way* (see Springate et al., 2008; Martin et al., 2010). But we need to consider *why* we might want to do this. We can not, for example, merely say that our aim should be to *generate more mutual respect between the generations* since this may be undesirable for some individual participants' wellbeing or the flourishing of community or their local places. (Consider, for example, the effect of different generations of community-based criminal gangs improving their intergenerational respect for each other and thereby sustaining community oppression).

Pragmatist views on education may offer a way forward. John Dewey provides the basis for the centrality of *problems and challenges* for an educative experience, and hence for all experiences that are intergenerationally educative too. Drawing on pragmatism (Dewey, 1925; Biesta, 2008), we can argue that intergenerational education occurs when members of different generations try to cooperate, and intervene in the world responding to each other and to the places they inhabit (see also Mannion & Adey, 2011). Biesta (2008) reminds us that educative experiences require 'others' and a 'place'

wherein someone 'comes into presence'. Biesta suggests that the process of 'coming into presence' will be experienced as an interruption in the normal flow of affairs of that place. This is a view that is founded on the idea that an educative experience is about responding to others and to questions found in the world to make a difference by encountering difference:

Coming into the world is not something individuals can do on their own. This is first of all for the obvious reason that in order to come into the world, one needs a world, and this world is a world inhabited by others who are not like us. (Biesta, 2008, p. 27)

For Dewey, it is people's participation in *communication* that makes education possible. Through communication, the generations may share an activity in an interested, meaningful and purposeful way and the results may be a shared outlook for all participants. From a Deweyan perspective, "all meanings originate in social relationships, in cooperative behaviour carried out for a purpose" (Garrison, 1997, p. 307).

In intergenerational communication, generationally different parties will communicate in a relationship that creates new meanings through cooperative behavior. Dewey notes that through communication: "no person remains unchanged and has the same future efficiencies, who shares in situations made possible by communication" (1925, p. 204). By this view, in intergenerational education, members of different generations will dynamically transact with their environment, changing themselves and the environment at the same time. This idea of change and purposefulness takes us beyond the narrower view that intergenerational education is solely, or even mainly 'for' improved relations between the generations. The local problems and challenges that may

help to get different generations engaged may be very place-specific and may not be, on the face of it, related to intergenerational relations *per se* (for example, the desire for an improved school garden). As we have seen, we need some *place* for intersubjective communication and activity to happen.

The pragmatist perspective does not demand that intergenerational practice be founded upon or necessarily lead to a consensus view, merely that they share in purposeful activity and share in communication. By this view, the 'place' in which intergenerational practice occurs needs to be shared (though not necessarily through co-presence) though this place need not be seen or understood in the same way by different generations. Intergenerational education will be achieved through work that at times may be contested. Taking a pragmatist position, we can suggest that when participants from more than one generation need to be involved and contribute to some shared activity and share the consequences of these actions. Through these communications and actions, they will have the potential to recreate existing generational relations or to create new ones. But these are unpredictable and contingent outcomes that will, in part, be dependent on the participants' actions and will be affected by the task in hand and the consequences enacted in that place. Importantly, what is in fact shared is the work done to help intergenerational practice appear. Also, we should note that intergenerational programs might not start off with pre-given fixed shared ideas between the generations; the activities that ensue may be seen and understood differently by participants.

Intergenerational education will be an ongoing, unfinished businesses where experiment and experience are closely tied and are "a way of moving the relational midst of the world" (McCormack, 2010, p. 205).



## Conclusion

In this section, I summarise the arguments made above and conclude with a commentary on the purpose and scope of intergenerational education. These arguments began with the realisation of the need for a reciprocal and relational view of intergenerational practice and the need for greater attention to be paid to the role of 'place'. By this view, the relations among the generations are not just interpersonal, they are caught up in the material and cultural processes that give rise to places. The arguments seek to move the debates forward on what counts as intergenerational practice and how it needs to have an educative role.

The review of the literature on intergenerational practice has been shown to focus on *one-way* exchanges between the generations. The over-emphasis on the outcomes of intergenerational practice, while useful, has not helped us theorise any distinctive processes or purposes for intergenerational practice, nor to notice its educative role. However, as intergenerational reciprocity gains ground as a core principle and process for intergenerational practice, a distinctive purpose emerges: the need to work to change or improve relations within and between generations. Because of this, all intergenerational practice requires to have an educative goal: participants need to learn new things (in various contexts) in order to change and improve intergenerational relations. I note that this position does not seek to name how and when the criteria for judging what counts as 'improved relations' are formed. But the story of educational purpose does not end there.

We cannot say for all contexts what these particular learning foci are; the point

of attending to 'place' reminds us that these are locally constituted, found in some place. Indeed, this is why commentators have noted that intergenerational practice can have many and varied outcomes (for example improved health, new skills and so on). What we can say, however, is that the changes sought by all forms of intergenerational practice are effects on people's own sense of themselves as members of a generational group and effects on their views and expectations of others from other generations. Yet, what precisely it is that needs to be learned by any one person or group in a given place is only determinable by understanding their context; this is why the place-based, material and cultural location of intergenerational practice needs to be attended to.

Understanding intergenerational practice as being all-age, reciprocal and multigenerational allows us to see that there are many places where people are educated (and informally learn) about the process of changing relations within and between generations. This article argues, therefore, that the field needs to take a wider framing for intergenerational practice in order to recognize and support the many spaces and ages of participants currently engaging in intergenerational practice (and, by implication, intergenerational education). Theoretically, I have argued how place plays a role. The argument is that different generations reciprocally affect the places that social groups co-inhabit or inhabit separately. By this view, intergenerational practice is an emplaced practice that sets out to change relations, places, and identities. As the production of places and generational identifications are reciprocally linked, this position suggests that practitioners and participants need to attend to the role of place relations as much as interpersonal and intergenerational relations for their activities to be effective. As intergenerational practice is always an emplaced activity, it requires attention to be paid

to place-related outcomes too – for example, improved ecological or social justice. Goals such as these are needed since intergenerational cohesion could in some cases have quite negative consequences.

Taking our insights together, we can posit that *intergenerational education is an emplaced, lifelong, relational, reciprocal and participatory process of learning based on communications and actions designed to address problems and challenges that are found in places.*

In terms of purposes, we can suggest that *intergenerational education can be for improved intergenerational relations and be constituted through new forms of all-age reciprocity*, but it must also have an attendant normative aim: *that these changed relations assist in the flourishing of individuals, communities and places, local and beyond. Intergenerational education's overarching purpose – couched in general terms – is to improve intergenerational relations for the better of individual, community and ecological wellbeing.*

I noted other implications. If intergenerational practice requires participants to change in how they relate to others, we can say that *intergenerational education* (however formal or informal) is a *necessary* component of any such practice. This means that learning is a key element for all programming that are as yet unrealised. Bringing this and other implications to bear on what the *scope* of intergenerational education might be, the following definition is offered (though has also been, in part, empirically derived; see Mannion, Adey & Lynch, 2010):

Intergenerational *education* (a) *involves people from two or more generations participating in a common practice that happens in some place, (b) involves different*

*interests across the generations and can be employed to address the betterment of individual, community and ecological wellbeing through tackling some 'problem' or challenge, (c) requires a willingness to reciprocally communicate across generational divides (through activities involving consensus, conflict or cooperation) with the hope of generating and sharing new intergenerational meanings, practices and places that are to some degree, held in common, and (d) requires a willingness to be responsive to places, and each other in an ongoing manner.*

These ideas about intergenerational practice, and the attendant purpose and scope of intergenerational education are open to further empirical testing, theoretical challenge and debate but they may assist with the lack of clarity in the field of intergenerational practice that is fast changing. Noticing the role of 'place' will help with recognizing intergenerational practices in the everyday domains in which we find them and with figuring out how we might best research and evaluate them. Further theorizing and empirical study is now needed for a fuller exploration of the implications for formal places of education (schools, further education colleges, and universities), places of care for the elderly, places of employment, informal places of learning (for example, on-line, or in places of leisure or consumption) all of which have the ability to exclude along lines of generational difference by being age-specified in various ways.

Drawing on pragmatism, I have argued that to 'come into presence' requires place-based intergenerational action and communication. The generations, in effect need each other for their generational differences to be sustained and changed as communities seek to develop in everyday places. This is a risky practice that, at the outset, must have

somewhat unknown outcomes in order to be educative since we are pushing forward into the limit zones of what we know, and who we are becoming through experimenting with solving worldly issues and problems. New forms of intergenerational practice are needed among generationally overly-niched strangers who in fact need each other for this task, and who are likely to improve intergenerational solidarity and community cohesion along the way.

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