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Promoting Sustainable Communities Through Intergenerational Practice

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Abstract

Intergenerational learning is an important part of lifelong learning. It fosters reciprocal learning relationships between people of all ages, promoting a greater understanding between generations. This article explores the nature of intergenerational practice and its place in social policy developments, particularly those around ‘social cohesion’ and ‘sustainable communities’. This theme is developed by examining: first, the literature on intergenerational practice; second, its potential benefits; third, the potential of intergenerational practice for neighbourhood renewal and regeneration; and fourth, examples of intergenerational practice at the community level. The article concludes by discussing implications of the findings for policy, practice and research.

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1. Introduction

It has been argued that changes within European society such as demographic transitions, economic restructuring, shifting social norms and improved technological innovation have led to generations frequently becoming segregated from one another (Hatton-Yeo & Ohsako, 2000; Izuhara, 2010). One consequence of these changes has been that naturally occurring opportunities for interaction between the generations are not as prevalent in contemporary society as once was the case. However, as pressures on public resources continue to rise, European policy-makers are increasingly looking to intergenerational programming as a way of bridging the generational divide and building more cohesive communities (Melville & Bernard, 2011). A number of initiatives have contributed to burgeoning interest in this topic. These include: first, the European Year of Older People and Solidarity between Generations in 1993; second, the World Assembly on Ageing (UN, 2002) and related initiatives around a ‘Society for All Ages’; and third, the establishment of the annual European Day of Intergenerational Solidarity on 29 April (Sedmak & Parent, 2008). The branding of 2012 as the European year of ‘Active Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity’ (EY, 2012) further emphasised the importance of enhancing solidarity between generations. In this context, the development of intergenerational practice has emerged as a mechanism for

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strengthening generational proximity, improving understanding and communication, and fostering a commitment to reciprocity and solidarity (Hatton-Yeo & Batty, 2011)

Most research, discussion and policies have tended to emphasise and, arguably, overemphasise the economic dimension of intergenerational exchange. This is largely driven by concerns about future imbalances in the labour force (i.e. too few younger cohorts) and the financial sustainability of public welfare systems (Walker & Maltby, 2012; Zaidi, Gasior, & Manchin, 2012). Underlying both of these are worries about the ‘burden’ that older people are said to represent to the economy, and specifically, the working population. The notion of ‘intergenerational solidarity’, in this context, focuses primarily on younger workers paying taxes to support older people’s pension benefits and healthcare costs (OECD, 2011). However, solidarity and the creation of links between generations should not be seen in strict financial terms. The intergenerational contract also includes an ethical dimension that represents the social cohesion of societies, achieved by ensuring security for all citizens – not only those able to make a financial contribution (Walker, 2010). While it makes economic sense to adjust to the demographic realities of an ageing society, a one-dimensional interpretation of intergenerational relationships will undermine efforts to maintain solidarity between generations (Sanchez et al., 2008, pp. 112–113). Zaidi, Gasior and Manchin (2012) therefore raise the concept of ‘social sustainability’ as a way to rethink welfare systems. The authors place intergenerational relationships and cooperation at the heart of any such system if it is to be successful. Thus it is argued that intergenerational relationships need to be broadly characterised in terms of formal and informal systems, practices and understandings that enable generations to engage in a collaborative fashion to provide mutual benefits. Such a model resonates with much of the current debate around the need to promote social cohesion. Intergenerational relationships can be identified as one of the networks that can tie communities together (Hatton-Yeo & Batty, 2011; Sanchez et al., 2008) because of their potential for building bridges across generations.

Against this background, this article aims to explore the nature of intergenerational practice (IP) and its place in social policy developments, especially those around ‘social cohesion’ and developing ‘sustainable communities’. This theme is developed by examining: first, the literature on IP; second its potential benefits; third, the potential of IP for neighbourhood renewal and regeneration; and fourth, examples of IP at the community level.

2. Defining intergenerational practice

The concept IP has been defined in a variety of ways. Three aspects, however, are found as the common denominators (Sanchez et al., 2008): first, people from different generations (in the sense of subjects from different periods and ages) participate in an IP; second, participation in an IP involves activities aimed at goals which are beneficial for everyone (and hence to the community in which they live); and third, as a result, participants maintain relations based on sharing. IP is used in many forms to achieve practical results in situations relevant to the particular needs of communities. It aims to bring people together in purposeful, beneficial activities, and builds on the positive resources that different generations have to offer each other and those around them (Beth Johnson Foundation, 2001). Bernard (2006) suggests that IPs can be grouped according to the social issues they address: *intergenerational learning practice*, which might, for example, aim to improve educational outcomes in young people; *care and support initiatives*, designed to support older people with specific physical or mental health needs; and *community-based programmes*, addressing such issues as neighbourhood regeneration or social exclusion. The types of activity involved can be wide-ranging, encompassing shared learning and mentoring activities, performance activities such as theatre, and initiatives that connect local schools to the community, or strengthen cooperation between nursery schools and care homes (Bernard, 2006; Springate, Atkinson, & Martin, 2008).

In 2000, UNESCO brought together leading representatives from ten countries from around the world to discuss IP and related programmes. Although there was a wide variety of programmes, participants agreed with the following definition: ‘IPs are vehicles for the purposeful and *ongoing exchange of resources and learning* among older and younger generations’ (Hatton-Yeo & Ohsako, 2000, emphasis added). When people from different generations learn together, there is an interactive exchange of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values (Boström,

2003). IP therefore provides a framework for the development of a coherent approach to lifelong learning that is firmly rooted in community education. It recognises that learning is a process that occurs across the life-course, that people may have different needs and interests at different stages of their lives and brings out the potential for shared learning and relationships across generations (Hatton-Yeo & Batty, 2011; Hatton-Yeo & Ohsako, 2000). The key to the term *intergenerational*, therefore lies, not in the *generational* but in the *inter* – the existence of the *between* in *relationships* between people (Sanchez et al., 2008). This suggests a shift from the one-way traditional teaching pedagogy (the young learning from the old) to IP based upon reciprocal relationships between different generations (Baily, 2009). There are many different settings in which this can be achieved, including schools and educational institutions, voluntary and community groups, and through local government (MacCallum & Palmer, 2006).

3. The potential outcomes of intergenerational practice

3.1. Potential impact of intergenerational practice on the participants

While there is a large number of IPs of different types and sizes now operating worldwide, the amount of documented assessments and evaluation studies that extend beyond providing descriptions of individual programmes is relatively small (Granville, 2002; Hatton-Yeo, 2010). Nevertheless, there are some notable exceptions. An analysis of 120 programmes in Australia (MacCallum & Palmer, 2006; MacCallum et al., 2010) demonstrates that when people become involved in an *effective IP* a number of benefits accrue, meeting a range of instrumental, social and emotional needs. Several factors, however, need to be in place before their potential can be fully achieved. The authors suggest that effective IPs display four key features: first, they provide opportunities for the development of relationships between generations; second, they have access to a range of support mechanisms (e.g. organisational support, community support); third, they provide opportunities for generations to do a range of things together; and fourth, they take account of programme-specific issues, such as gender, culture and language. Intergenerational programmes that meet these criteria have the potential to produce benefits for participants (MacCallum & Palmer, 2006) similar to those recorded by Springate et al. (2008) and Hatton-Yeo and Batty (2011). For older people, these range from individual level (increased activity and mobility improvements, ability to cope with vulnerabilities, renewed sense of worth) to relational (making friends with young people, a sense of reduced isolation) and community level (reintegration, skill sharing, volunteering). For young people, benefits noted included: enhanced sense of social responsibility; increased self-esteem; better school results; access to adults at difficult times; less involvement in offending and drug use; improved school attendance and greater personal resilience (Hatton-Yeo & Batty, 2011; MacCallum & Palmer, 2006; MacCallum et al., 2010; Springate et al., 2008).

3.2. Potential impact of intergenerational practice on the community setting

The literature suggests that the outcomes of IP for individuals can also have an impact at community level (Hatton-Yeo & Batty, 2011; Springate et al., 2008). As MacCallum and Palmer (2006, p. 89) explain: ‘benefits to individuals often flow into their communities: their families, their schools, their groups, their neighbourhoods and their supporting organisations’. For example, IPs have been developed to preserve local history, to promote recycling and other environmental preservation activities or to reduce crime (Sanchez et al., 2008). In their literature review of IP in the UK, Springate et al. (2008) highlight several potential outcomes for the wider community. These include: the potential to address other community-related policy areas (e.g. fear of crime, community safety, social exclusion and environmental regeneration); the diversification of volunteering with the potential of older people contributing positively to their community; and educational institutions becoming more involved in their communities, as they start to utilise the skills of the wider community to help to achieve educational objectives. However, while it is clear from the abovementioned literature review and policy documents that intergenerational programmes and services are now well established, the nature and potential of IP for the development of sustainable communities has been less well explored. Following this, the discussion now turns the spotlight on intergenerational activities at the community, public space and neighbourhood level.

4. Intergenerational practice for sustainable development: A missed opportunity?

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of involving young and older people in local regeneration initiatives and the development of sustainable communities. This has been supported by evidence showing that: first, neighbourhoods are especially important for older people (Phillipson, 2007) and children (De Visscher & Bouverne-De Bie, 2008); second, both groups tend to have poorer access to resources and services (Pain, 2005); and third, the consequences of neighbourhood deprivation or ‘place poverty’ encroach deeply on the lives of both groups (Pain, 2005; Scharf, Phillipson, & Smith, 2003). At the same time, research suggests that young and older people are more likely than other groups to lack access to decision-making channels, and also to lack political representation and to participate less in public life (Pain, 2005). For example, a study in England (Holland, Clark, Katz, & Peace, 2007) has shown that the predominant use of public spaces in urban areas is by adults, particularly those of ‘working age’ with a noticeable absence of both children and older people at specific times and places. Public spaces constructed and furnished for adult purposes tend not to accommodate the needs of young and older people and they are therefore particularly likely to feel ‘out of place’ in their community.

Following the above, the so-called ‘paradox of neighbourhood participation’ (Buffel, Verte, De Donder et al., 2012) applies especially well to older and younger age groups, i.e. they tend to spend a lot of time in their neighbourhood (*being part of the city*), but are often among the last to be engaged when it comes to decision-making processes within their neighbourhood (*taking part in the city*). The concept of ‘institutional ageism’ is relevant here, suggesting that both age groups tend to be excluded from aspects of society and the structures which govern it (Pain, 2005). For instance, Simpson (2010) criticised ageist stereotypes in the construction of neighbourhood renewal policies in the UK, as older people were mentioned only as service ‘recipients’, ‘victims’ or as people who needed to be ‘cared for’ rather than as ‘active participants’ who can help to transform the communities in which they live. Similarly, strong critiques have been made of the way ‘youth’ has been portrayed only in problematic terms in community safety and urban regeneration policies (Pain, 2005). Such studies show that ageism can act as a significant barrier to the participation of all community members in neighbourhood renewal strategies.

In response to the above, there has been a marked growth in interest in *IP* as a *community development approach* in Europe, as it closely matches key policy priorities around social inclusion and cohesion, particularly in areas where intergenerational conflicts can be especially intense such as deprived urban neighbourhoods (Pain, 2005). Community development, in this context, is essentially about ‘building active and sustainable communities based on social justice and mutual respect’ and about ‘changing power structures to remove barriers that prevent people from participating in the issues which affect their lives’ (Hatton-Yeo & Watkins, 2004, p. 7). Similarly, in the US, there has been a growing interest in strengthening resident involvement (across all age groups) in environmental management and decision-making. Preliminary research suggests that ‘environmental volunteering’ as a form of civic engagement in environmental policy and planning may have particular health and social benefits for young and older people. Furthermore, it can also potentially improve the environmental quality by strengthening the participation of different stakeholders and resident groups (Bushway, Dickinson, Stedman, Wagenet, & Weinstein, 2011; Pillemer, Wells, Wagenet, Meador, & Parise, 2011). Such objectives resonate with much of the current debate around what has been termed ‘age-friendly communities’. This notion arose from policy initiatives launched by the World Health Organization (WHO), and refers to the idea of developing supportive urban communities for people as they age. ‘Age-friendly communities’ have been defined as encouraging ‘active ageing by optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age’ (WHO, 2007, p. 12). The WHO (2002) stressed that the notion of ‘active’ refers to the idea that people should be able to continue to participate in social, cultural, spiritual, economic and civic matters – no matter what age or stage of life. Thus, involving both young and older in the development and maintenance of ‘age-friendly’ communities represents a crucial goal for social policy (European Commission, 2012; WHO, 2007). Achieving this, however, will require a radical shift from producing environments *for* people to developing neighbourhoods *with* and *by* different age groups. The next section will examine two projects from different countries that highlight the potential value of such an approach. Both initiatives were explicitly branded as intergenerational programmes.

5. Involving young and older people in developing age-friendly communities

In Germany, the Federal Government established the urban development programme ‘Innovations for Appropriate Urban Neighbourhoods for Families and the Elderly’ (IFAS) (Ammann & Heckenroth, 2012). The project’s main purpose is to transform neighbourhoods into places that can meet changing demographic, social and cultural needs, and where all generations can live alongside one another. Emphasis is placed on improving community facilities, open spaces and meeting places, as well as on promoting interaction between youth and elders. The programme highlights the potential of intergenerational relations for developing innovative strategies to physical and social regeneration at the neighbourhood level. Both young and older people are encouraged to become actively involved in shaping their housing and living environments. Municipalities, local administrations, neighbourhood associations and urban designers are called on to support residents’ engagement, and to build upon the individual assets and social competences of all age groups. The project now operates in a wide range of cities covering a broad array of neighbourhood types. Consequently, a variety of outcomes have been reported, including the initiation of building projects involving participants of all ages, the engagement of volunteers in community centres, the initiation of midday activities in schools and the involvement of young and older people in the design of open spaces. The research project shows that a diverse and sophisticated supply of different types of accommodation, quality public space and community services that meet people’s needs as they age, provide the basis for attractive, liveable and age-friendly urban districts (Ammann & Heckenroth, 2012).

In 2010, Manchester was the first UK city to be accepted into the WHO’s Global Network of Age-friendly Cities in recognition of the work carried out by the City Council to make Manchester ‘a great place to grow older’. Intergenerational working is seen as a central element of an approach that makes age-friendly cities address the needs of all generations. It was identified as a way of working in communities, but also as an approach that could be applied to planning and developing communities and services (Chandler, 2010). The Shared Places and Spaces programme underpins this initiative and explores opportunities for spaces such as parks, libraries and community centres to have a more intergenerational and/or age-friendly approach. Manchester currently has three projects exploring the concept of ‘intergenerational shared sites’. The first concerns the redevelopment of an inner-city park based on age-inclusive design principles; the second involves students from the Manchester School of Architecture who are looking at the practicalities of using shared places and spaces together with older residents; and the third explores how an existing community centre in an ethnically diverse inner-city area can be transformed into an intergenerational site (Melville & Bernard, 2011). The project findings suggest that the involvement of, and cooperation between young and older people and different stakeholders, including both formal and third sector agencies, has been an important factor in terms of establishing these initiatives. The participants reported that the projects facilitated learning opportunities and collective action as a result of knowledge sharing and the interrogation or transformation of shared places (Chandler, 2010).

6. Discussion

This article has examined the potential of intergenerational activities for encouraging cooperation between young and older people in the development of neighbourhood regeneration and renewal. It has been argued that both age groups are central to sustainable communities and the development of inclusive public spaces. Urban regeneration schemes can, for example, benefit from the experiences and attachments that young and older people bring to their communities. Yet the evidence suggests that both age groups remain among the most excluded of those living in urban communities. Moreover, as argued in this paper, despite the growth of the ‘age-friendly approach’, they rarely feature in policies aimed at regenerating localities or broader efforts aimed at promoting sustainable urban development (Pain, 2005; Simpson, 2010). Strategies aimed at developing sustainable communities will therefore require a clear assessment of the (structural) barriers and vehicles to engaging different groups in community redevelopment. At the same time, there is also a need to develop strategies targeted at different age groups with awareness, for example, of contrasting issues faced by different ethnic groups and people with

particular physical or mental health needs (Buffel, Phillipson, & Scharf, 2012). Achieving recognition of the needs of different generations within neighbourhoods, and exploiting the potential of the city for groups of whatever age, will be central to the process of making communities more ‘age-friendly’.

While the practice field has shown how intergenerational activities can bring people together in mutually beneficial ways to develop sustainable communities, policies are just beginning to recognise the potential of this approach. A number of barriers have been identified to explain the lag between practice and policy. These include: a lack of understanding what IP is (and, more specifically, what ‘intergenerational shared sites’ models involve); the lack of an evidence base regarding the effects of IP at the community level; a lack of cooperative thinking between different government departments; and the limited availability of funding for IP (Melville & Bernard, 2011). As the two projects discussed above have shown, however, social policies can promote young and older people’s participation in community redevelopment in a number of ways, notably by ensuring greater use of the different resources accompanied with urban living. This may involve a range of different interventions, such as developing access to high quality public space and supporting neighbourhood-based organisations. Another intermediation will be to create opportunities for young and older people to have a voice in political decision-making, through action groups or advisory boards which engage in different aspects of urban development.

In terms of the evidence base, our knowledge of the potential of IP for programmes concerned with neighbourhood and public space regeneration is still limited. A major challenge here concerns the monitoring and evaluation of the wider impact of intergenerational strategies on the community. This will be crucial to increase our understanding of ‘what works where’, as well as to develop further effective IPs and gain funding (Pain, 2005). ‘Without a strong evidence base’, as Melville and Bernard (2011, p. 246) argue, ‘we should not be surprised if policymakers continue to neglect incorporating an explicit intergenerational focus into public policy’. At the same time, however, it is also important to explore the developing field of IP in a wider research context beyond simply monitoring projects and programmes. There is a clear need, for example, to advance the theorization of intergenerational issues within the context of current policies and research around age-friendly and lifetime neighbourhoods. The potential of a life course perspective for understanding IP in neighbourhoods or public spaces is a vital challenge for researchers to address.

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