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Research

Australian Perspectives: Community Building Through Intergenerational Exchange Programs

DR. JUDITH MACCALLUM, DR. DAVID PALMER,
DR. PETER WRIGHT, DR. WENDY CUMMING-POTVIN,
MIRIAM BROOKER, and CAMERON TERO
Murdoch University, Perth, Australia

This paper explores the concept of intergenerational exchange as a vehicle for community building in Australia. Drawing on document analysis, focus groups, and in-depth study of four intergenerational programs, the research examines the benefits and constraints of intergenerational exchange and the relationship between intergenerational programs and their potential to foster resilience, enhance social connection, and build individual and community capacity. Findings reveal that in intended and unanticipated ways, young and older Australians benefit from intergenerational exchange. The multidimensional nature of intergenerational exchange promotes broad social networks and a means for developing substantive relationships between the young and other community members.

KEYWORDS *intergenerational, Australia, resilience, community*

We acknowledge and thank the participants and coordinators of the programs examined as case studies for their enthusiasm for the research and their willingness to share their experiences with us. The research was commissioned and funded by the Australian government through the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme (NYARS). The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the NYARS Steering Committee; the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA); or individual Australian Government, State or Territory Ministers, or Departments responsible for Youth Affairs. Writing about the Yiriman case study was done in collaboration with John Watson, Anthony Watson, Peter Ljubic, Hugh Wallace-Smith, and Mel Johnson.

Address correspondence to Dr. Judith MacCallum, School of Education, Murdoch University, Murdoch, Western Australia, 6150. E-mail: J.MacCallum@murdoch.edu.au.

BACKGROUND

Intergenerational practice has emerged as one approach bringing young people into closer contact with others in their community. This paper reports on the recent “Community Building through Intergenerational Exchange Programs” research project that explores the concept of intergenerational practice as a vehicle for community building in Australia and sets out a range of insights gained. This project is the first research in Australia in this area and adds significantly to the literature about intergenerational practice.

Over the past decade in Australia, initiatives designed to support young people’s engagement and civic involvement have grown in popularity. This process is coincident with an increased emphasis, especially in policy literature, on communitarian aspirations such as building community, promoting civics, and encouraging social capital (Bessant, 1997; Botsman & Latham, 2001; Brennan, 1998; Harris, 1999). In this new policy environment, young people’s social needs and problems are largely viewed as a reflection of their declining levels of inclusion in civic life, a loss of community connectivity, and a growing distance between generations. According to the advocates of this style of social policy, society’s social fabric has dissipated, community participation has decreased, and different generations have increasingly disengaged from one another.

The literature on intergenerational practice reveals a number of important social and economic shifts that have contributed to decreasing contact between generations. In Australia, economic changeover the past 30 years has seen industry restructuring, globalization of fiscal control, and decline in the agricultural sector, leading to high youth unemployment, reforms in work practices, and uncertain employment. Socially, the structure and form of families has changed (Mackay, 2007), and more children experience separation and poverty (Bessant, Sercombe & Watts, 1998). There is a perception that “community” has become increasingly fragmented, with a breakdown of voluntary involvement, reciprocity, and trust (Putnam, 2000).

At the same time, many communities are becoming increasingly age-segregated with older groups, families, young people, and children no longer living in close proximity. Children and young people attend age-segregated schools, adults are spending less time with young people in work environments, and seniors are increasingly moving to housing settings with only other seniors as neighbors. Many young people have become disaffected from their communities and alienated from older generations (Arfin, 2004), and, conjointly, older people are increasingly alienated from their families and other community contacts, locked away from public involvement, and living in fear of violence and exploitation (Kaplan, Henkin & Kusano, 2002; Newman, Ward, Smith, Wilson, & McCrea, 1997).

The international literature reveals key elements that define intergenerational practice. According to the International Consortium for Intergenerational

Programmes, established in 1999, intergenerational practice is best understood as “social vehicles that create purposeful and ongoing exchange of resources and learning among older and younger generations” (Kaplan et al., 2002, p. xi). In a similar fashion, the U.S. National Council on Aging (NCA) describes intergenerational programs as those interventions that aim to “increase cooperation, interaction, or exchange between any two generations” through the “sharing of skills, knowledge, or experience between old and young” (cited in Duggar, 1993, p. 5). Likewise, Angelis (1992) defines intergenerational programs as “activities that bring old and young together for their mutual benefit” (cited in Barton, 1999, p. 625).

Various levels of interaction in intergenerational practice are outlined by Whitehouse, Bendezu, Fallcreek, and Whitehouse (2000), ranging from organizations having activities for young and old in the same premises, to partial interaction with small levels of contact, to young and old learning together, with outcomes being negotiated and shared. Similarly, Manheimer (1997, p. 81) observes a range of interactions from “doing for” (young people undertaking service related activities for old people) to “learning with” projects involving collaboration and instruction by older people in educational and artistic endeavors.

In particular, intergenerational programs attempt to reduce many of the physical and social barriers between seniors, children, and young people. As Granville (2002) highlights, intergenerational practice brings together “two generations who have become separated from each other through changes in social structures, and enable the strengths of each age group to enhance the life experiences of the other” (p. 24).

Common to most intergenerational programs is the notion that lack of engagement between young people and older people is problematic, whether in terms of an individual’s personal development or in the successful functioning of society at large. There is little empirical support for either view, and such problems are presumed rather than investigated as research matters in themselves. However, those advocating intergenerational practice see it as one means to combat a range of social problems afflicting both young and old. In most instances, those advocating intergenerational practice see it as a way to encourage meaningful and productive “engagement” between the young and old in order to improve and enhance their quality of life.

Many benefits for both older and younger people have been reported in the international literature. These include development of new relationships, new social networks, more positive perceptions of other generations (Ellis, 2000; Granville, 2000; Meshel & McGlynn, 2004), learning new skills and knowledge, validation of the knowledge and contribution of older adults (Granville, 2000), and improved academic outcomes and confidence in young people (Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 1995).

Intergenerational work potentially offers communities a range of benefits that establish closer ties between those who are otherwise distant and

disassociated. It can help to promote work between different community groups, break down stereotypes about the young and old, and revitalize traditional cultural practices. In addition, by working together, young people and seniors can build social cohesion, pooling resources to help respond to others' needs. Kaplan (2004) highlights these benefits:

At the root of these intergenerational programs, priorities, and practices is a firm belief that we are better off—as individuals, families, communities, and as a society—when there are abundant opportunities for young people and older adults to come together to interact, educate, support, and provide care for one another. (p. 6)

This research project aims to identify a definition of intergenerational exchange and relevant associated concepts while exploring the benefits and constraints related to intergenerational programs. In addition, the project seeks to identify, analyze, and discuss factors that constitute good practices as well as explore the relationship between intergenerational programs and their potential to foster resilience, enhance social connection, and build individual and community capacity.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology focuses on intergenerational exchange in the context of activities within organized programs rather than examining informal activities involving different generations. Important issues in methodology include aiming to achieve access and equity in generating data in the research (Bessant et al., 1998), genuinely engaging the target groups of young people and older people in the research (Patton, 2002), and taking account of the variety and uniqueness of different programs and the diverse groups of people involved.

To achieve the research objectives, a combination of qualitative methods has been adopted in a process of inquiry involving five components: (1) consulting with National Youth Affairs Research Scheme (NYARS) and obtaining ethical clearance; (2) reviewing intergenerational literature; (3) conducting focus groups and interviews with a range of participants including experts, practitioners, academics, and young and older people involved in intergenerational programs; (4) visiting selected field sites; and (5) analyzing data and drawing conclusions. These components have been revised periodically an iterative and reflective process. The inquiry focuses on several broad questions: What is intergenerational exchange? Why do it? What are the ingredients for success? What are the barriers to success? Drawing on the review of literature, the research plan and preliminary results from focus groups and interviews, these broad questions have been elaborated with subquestions.

A purposive sampling technique called “snowballing” has been used to initially identify expert participants (Sercombe, Omaji, Drew, Cooper, & Love, 2002). The snowball commenced with a diverse group of original informants from key national and state organizations, independent academics, and young people. The members of this group were asked to each name five people whom they considered to be experts in the field. The named experts were also asked to identify five experts in the field. Once several hundred names were generated, individuals who were mentioned frequently and represented a range of sectors were selected for expert focus groups. Initially, the research team identified 120 programs across Australia, which fell within the field of intergenerational practice. Four case study sites were chosen for closer examination in consultation with NYARS. Sixty-one people participated in focus groups and interviews.

Criteria for selecting case studies include diversity in representation, such as urban, remote, school, and community settings and a range of Australian states. The sites differ in type, geography, and intent; one focused on Indigenous people, another in a particularly multicultural context, and another related specifically to schools. All projects involved both male and female participants. Providing data on best practice models and illustrating intended as well as unanticipated outcomes, all four case studies demonstrate potential application beyond their specific context and are revealing of established and evolving practice.

Data analysis focuses on identifying emergent themes and commonalities and differences associated with intergenerational practice and the perspectives of different informants. Detailed analyses of the case studies enable the key features of good practices in intergenerational exchange programs to be enunciated and critiqued. In addition, the research team interrogates the relationships between the identified good practice models and the potential of each to understand, foster, and develop community building, particularly the relationship to key concepts such as resilience, social connection and cohesion, community, and individual capacity.

Brief descriptions of the case study projects are presented followed by a discussion of the conceptualization and benefits of intergenerational exchange in the Australian context based on the findings of the study. The paper concludes with the implications for community building and individual resilience. The full research report is available at: http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/youth/programmes_funding/nyars/.

CASE STUDIES

The Bankstown Oral History Project

Bankstown Youth Development Service (BYDS), located in the inner western suburbs of Sydney, ran three oral history projects in Bankstown between

1990 and 2002. Each involved high school students interviewing people from other generations, most of whom they had never before met. Students were recruited from local schools then trained in interview and transcription skills. Individual students or pairs of students were matched to a local person recruited from local senior citizens clubs and ethnic respite centers (including Polish, Vietnamese, Greek, Italian, and Chinese groups). The students conducted interviews that touched on different aspects of the person's life, and the stories were written up by the students and published by BYDS. Each publication was launched at a public function that was attended by participants, other community members, and visitors. The essence of the oral history projects philosophy is captured by the arts officer's description: "Everyone has a story to tell. Everyone has moments in their lives that are of interest to other people and usually more profound than they give themselves credit for" (Carroll, 2001, p. 5).

The project makes a valuable contribution to community building through the interaction between students when preparing for interviews and the engagement between community members of different generations through the interviews. Stereotypes are broken down, neighbors and family members make new or renewed contact, and the stories of participants are shared in publications, theater, and community functions.

Radio Holiday by Big hART

Radio Holiday, a project of community-based arts organization Big hART, operates in North Western Tasmania with local colleges, the council, and other referring agencies to involve severely disadvantaged young people in a project that encourages creative and meaningful dialogue between local young people and older people in the coastal "shack communities" of the region. Young people were recruited to inquire into the disappearing coastal communities and trained and mentored in interview skills, use of recording equipment, and art-based processes to collect the stories of older community members. The stories and locations were used as a basis for the development of performance, film, visual art, and a series of radio plays that were broadcast through ABC radio. In addition, a performance tour was developed and performed for the "Ten Days on the Island" Arts Festival and the benefit of the shack communities involved. This tour was built around a series of 1960s and 1970s caravans that contained the artwork, poems, photographs, and narratives of participants in the projects, with each caravan an "installation" representing one shack community. The project gave these young people the opportunity to participate in events that otherwise would not have been available to them, develop new skills, and be recognized and affirmed.

A major feature of Radio Holiday is the changing perceptions of different generations. A young participant vividly describes this reframing of views:

[W]hen we went to the shack communities most of the interviews we did were with older people who had lived there their whole lives and stuff. And getting their stories and interacting with them all of the time and finding out how great old people can be, 'cause it's something I hadn't considered before. And that they can be fun and interesting and you can learn lots.

The benefits of the project include capacity building within communities to design and develop future projects to address relevant community issues. This legacy will provide opportunities for young people to learn technical, cultural, and social skills, experiment with different modes of learning, and develop intergenerational understanding.

The Yiriman Project

The Yiriman Project began because Aboriginal elders in the West Kimberley, a remote region of Western Australia, were worrying for their young people, particularly those who were harming themselves with drugs and alcohol and getting in trouble with the law. Following long established traditions they set up an organization that would help take young people, elders, and other members of the community on trips to country. According to those involved, they needed to turn to the old people for their wisdom and return to country to help build stories, strength, and resilience in young people.

The destination and major activities planned are the products of a complex set of decisions contingent on who is available to travel, weather conditions, the needs of young people being chosen to participate, local community events, and when a place was last visited. The needs of country such as fire management and whether there are opportunities to travel with other groups are also considered. Of critical importance at this stage is the direction of the senior people who identify where and when to travel, who should go, and the activities to be undertaken. As part of this experience of traveling through country with their elders, young people are given opportunities to participate in a range of practical activities often associated with taking care of country and reinvigorating Aboriginal lore and culture. Activities might include land management work in protected areas, native plant harvest, collaboration with scientific research field trips, or fire management. Typically a Yiriman trip lasts between a couple of days to a couple of weeks, depending on the area being traveled and the work being undertaken and the time of the year; anywhere from between a dozen to almost a hundred people participate in the trips.

As a number of senior Yiriman people who want the best for their young people say, "Them fullas our future . . . no more carryin . . . they bin walkin' all the way." The device of walking on country has become a means through which these Indigenous young people share time with their

community, build respect for elders, maintain culture and language, learn to care for land, stay healthy, and start to take a stake in their futures. Walking on country is being used as a means to build strength in physical and symbolic ways so young people can take an active roles in leading their communities.

The School Volunteer Program

The School Volunteer Program operates in many schools throughout Western Australia and aims to promote intergenerational exchange between schoolage young people from kindergarten to Year 12 and volunteer mentors who are mainly senior citizens. The core program involves volunteer mentors interacting with students on one-on-one bases for at least 10 weeks. Training is provided for volunteer mentors in areas such as listening skills, helping children read, bullying, suicide prevention, and drug awareness. For many volunteers with little direct and recent contact with young people, the training provides valuable insights and information as well as a social avenue to exchange ideas and experiences.

Sometimes, the volunteer mentor may assist the young person with homework or teach practical skills. Meetings often simply revolve around informal conversations during which the young person and volunteer mentor share their interests and experiences. Volunteer mentors are encouraged to draw on their life experiences and demonstrate patience and empathy with the young people who may be struggling with challenging home situations. For example, in a description of his relationship with his mentor, a young primary school student writes:

Mr. Ashton comes to help me with my work and we talk about my brother Curtis because we both miss him. Mr. Ashton is a very nice and honest man. I look forward to Mr. Ashton's visits. They really brighten up my days.

Over time, the role of volunteer mentors has adapted; mentors who had originally focused on tutoring in the area of academic difficulties begin to support children more broadly in relation to issues such as self-esteem and life skills. The school mentoring program has utilized the abilities of thousands of senior and retired people to guide an equal number of students identified as "at-risk" of not coping with the demands of school.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF INTERGENERATIONAL EXCHANGE

The research evidence indicates that the idea of intergenerational practice is relatively new in Australia, but youth practice involving older adults in Australia is not new. Indeed, one could argue that initiatives designed to strengthen

relationships between young people and seniors are as old as youth work in Australia (Bessant et al., 1998), or even older in the case of Indigenous cultures, as demonstrated in the Yiriman case study.

The outcomes of intergenerational exchange are many and varied. While some outcomes are expected, others are unanticipated; some are tangible in form while others are less tangible and are interpersonal in nature. These outcomes are crucial elements in building community as they become the bonds and bridges that solidify networks and interconnections. Also, the space in which the exchange occurs is dynamic, whether in terms of physical geography or cyber or interpersonal space. Furthermore, there are instances of intergenerational exchange in Australia going back many generations. Indigenous communities that have continued to practice intergenerational exchange can model ways to engage with one another and build intercultural communities.

It is possible to develop a broad inclusive definition of intergenerational exchange that might guide its further development in Australia. Intergenerational programs involve active engagement and participation of multiple generations in activities requiring mutual exchange in a range of formal and informal spaces. Effective intergenerational exchange produces a range of tangible and intangible outcomes that can contribute to the development of both individuals and communities. This kind of intergenerational practice is additional to the development of family relationships and can involve any age group.

This study adds further components to a model of what a successful intergenerational program might look like. Successful projects develop open, tolerant, and nurturing relationships to foster reciprocity. They are also characterized by opportunities for people to do a range of activities together and for as many people as possible to have meaningful roles. An advantage is a project's capability to adjust to changing circumstances and contexts. These elements of good practice add further breadth and clarity to a model of good practice drawn from a number of sources and contexts as noted by Sánchez and colleagues (2007).

OUTCOMES AND BENEFITS

The study reveals that both young and older Australians benefit greatly from projects facilitating intergenerational exchange in intended and unintended ways and in ways that contribute significantly to individual well-being and to the broader community. Briefly, intergenerational exchange programs enable different generations, especially younger and older people, to spend time with one another, break down barriers, and develop new understandings of one another. Participants are enabled to share experiences, learn new skills, and work on practical activities that contribute significantly to the

community. Through intergenerational exchange, participants, while enjoying themselves, become healthier, resilient, and more motivated. For many young people, the experiences divert them from trouble and help them find work and career opportunities. Table 1 summarizes the benefits; some are similar for older and younger people, such as increasing self-worth and learning new skills, while other benefits are unique to the different age groups.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO COMMUNITY BUILDING

In addition to examining the range of consequences of intergenerational exchange, the research explores the relationship between intergenerational programs and the potential to foster resilience, enhance social connection and interactions, and build individual and community capacity. While many policymakers and practitioners place great faith in intergenerational practice as a mechanism for achieving all manner of social and economic outcomes, there is still little evidence to confirm a causal link. In part, this lack of evidence may be because many of the perceived benefits are difficult to measure. For example, intergenerational practice is often claimed to increase social capital and decrease social exclusion, but these two concepts are hotly contested and very difficult to tie down. Results from this research suggest that many practitioners and academics are keen to find ways to bring young people and seniors together. There is also evidence of outcomes that correspond to the features recognized as important for developing individual resilience and increasing various forms of social capital.

One of the most illuminating themes to emerge is the multiple dimensions to intergenerational exchange and its multifarious effects. Intergenerational exchange happens in highly diverse settings with many different generations involved, is prompted by contrasting interests and challenges, and uses diverse methods with an assortment of practical outcomes. Good intergenerational exchange tends to encourage interdependent relationships as well as multidimensional contact across social groups, interests, and community organizations. Operating in rural and urban Australia, intergenerational exchange can include participants from diverse ages, from children through older people. Numerous institutions currently undertake this work in schools, arts practices, youth organizations, and Indigenous communities. Such initiatives are facilitating community development, including increasing school attendance, repairing physical structures, diverting people from antisocial behavior, and building respect to encourage civics. In summary, intergenerational exchange operates to encourage interpersonal connections across a broad range of contexts.

The most defining feature of intergenerational exchange illuminated by the study is that, far from being simple and one-dimensional, the phenomenon

TABLE 1 Summary of Benefits of Intergenerational Exchange Programs

Older people	Younger people	Broader community
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased self-esteem and motivation • Increased perception of self-worth • Better mood, more vitality • Increased ability to cope with physical and mental illness • Escape from isolation • Opportunities to learn • Development of skills, especially social skills, and the use of new technologies • Renewed appreciation for their past experiences • Reintegration in the family and community life • Friendships with younger people • Receipt of practical help, such as for shopping or transport • Time with young people that combats feelings of isolation • Sharing of experiences with an audience that appreciates their achievements • Respect, honor, and recognition of their contribution to the community • New learning about young people • Transmission of traditions, culture, and language • Enjoyment of physical activities • Exposure to diversity • Increased strength to cope with adversity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased sense of worth, self-esteem, and self-confidence • Less loneliness and isolation • Better health • More optimism • Access to adult support at difficult times • More positive perception of older persons • Greater awareness of the heterogeneity of older persons • More practical skills • Better school results • Better reading habits • Less involvement in violence and drug use • Strength in times of adversity • Enhanced sense of social responsibility • Increased sense of civic and community responsibility • Learning of own history and origins and the history of others • Building one's own life history • Enjoyment and fun • Gaining of respect for achievements of adults • Support for professional career development • Alternative leisure activities to cope with problems, particularly drugs, violence, and antisocial conduct 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of sense of community • Construction of a more inclusive society • Breaking down of barriers and stereotypes • Enhanced social cohesion • Strengthening of culture • Relief of parental pressure • Building of social networks • Challenging of stereotypes • Provision of civic behavior models • Building or revitalization of community and public infrastructures • Public art production • Volunteer work development • Encouragement for people to work with others in community groups • Creation of common stories • Environmental care

is complex and multifaceted; rather than leading to single effects, intergenerational exchange facilitates conditions encouraging numerous benefits for a wide range of participants. The complexity of intergenerational practice is particularly evident in relation to two elements: building relationships and networks. This research confirms that intergenerational exchange is instrumental in facilitating positive and substantial relationships between those who would otherwise not come into contact. Research participants routinely argue that successful intergenerational exchange provides a wonderful vehicle for building relationships between young people and others.

Often these relationships are strong, intimate, and include “vertical social bonds,” as defined by social capital theorists. These more established types of links are often associated with what Tonnies (1963) described as *Gemeinschaft*, or premodern forms of community with an emphasis on maintaining small numbers of close personal relationships, often with strong attachments to place and kin, with a fairly unitary culture and faith in traditional institutions, values, and sanctions. Some intergenerational exchange methods, such as mentoring, tend to encourage this kind of social capital formation. This kind of social cohesion is critical in building resilience in young people.

As Deveson’s (2003) review of the literature on resilience concludes, these kinds of close and personal associations between the young and older are crucial in helping both groups contend with life’s challenges. The conditions typical of one-on-one intergenerational exchange help forge stable and substantive relationships that are tremendously important in assisting people to “spring back from adversity” (Fuller, McGraw, & Goodyear, 1999, p. 159). There are strong claims that the single most important element in building resilience in young people is caring relationships with characteristics such as empathy and respect (Laursen & Birmingham, 2003; Scales & Gibbons, 1996). Intergenerational contact, which focuses on depth of relationships, can help build conditions that allow people to become more resilient in hard times.

Much intergenerational exchange also promotes a different kind of social cohesion. In addition to encouraging deep connections between individuals, the cases examined encourage contact with breadth as well as depth. This contact involves establishing “weaker” links or what the social capital theorists call horizontal social bonds. These kinds of social bonds might well be associated with what the classic sociologist Emile Durkheim (1933) calls organic solidarity or society not based on commonality but on difference and a more diverse division of labor and social connectedness. Evident in intergenerational exchange programs is the creation of opportunities to encourage more interdependent sets of relationships between diverse people across a range of settings.

This research finds that intergenerational initiatives characterized by groups of people working together or involving a broad range of people

promotes weaker but more “bridged” disparate social connections. For example, ventures such as the Big hART and Yiriman Project see value in having all participants involved in building a broad range of contacts, often for short periods of time but across a diverse set of interconnected settings. Arguably, this kind of social cohesion is critical in building networked communities.

Delanty’s (2003) review on community concludes that these weaker but diverse links between young and older people are equally crucial in helping equip young people for the future and in encouraging the conditions for civic participation. In contrast to more traditional kinds of community, these kinds of relationships are most often associated with what social capital theorists describe as bridging social capital. According to Florida (2002), modern social systems are multifaceted so that the citizen routinely needs to negotiate a social existence involving movement across multiple social connections. Consequently, both young and senior participants need increased opportunities to broaden their network systems.

The emergence of communications technology and so-called “virtual” spaces means that young people are better prepared if they have a multitude of weak or thin social connections. Researchers like Castells (1996) argue that modern social relations occur across a fluidity of networked connections and are characterized by networks of association that are more displaced and less familial. This idea is borne out during the research with considerable evidence that intergenerational initiatives build young people’s diverse social contacts; precisely what projects such as Radio Holiday, Yiriman, and the Bankstown oral history projects do best. Several “experts” speak about intergenerational exchange in terms of building bridges across gaps or divides. These bridges allow many of the programs to draw young people, seniors, and others into a rich tapestry of social relations. Creating these loose ties can have far-reaching and unintended consequences well beyond the imagination of those who carry out such work.

Fuller (2004) develops a list of factors that help parents and others promote resiliency: a family life where young people’s thoughts and opinions are listened to, encouragement to mix with adults and others that model optimism, and links with a trustworthy adult outside the family. Significantly, these features of resilient conditions for young people match up with many of the features of intergenerational exchange borne out in this research. Not only does intergenerational exchange offer the means through which substantive or deep relationships between the young and others can be established and strengthened, it has much value as a means of promoting and enriching thin but broad networks and connections. Both “bonding” and “bridging” social capital are fostered.

The research project provides valuable insights into the phenomenon of intergenerational practice in Australia. Ideas, definitions, and benefits are identified in literature and compared with the reality of Australian practice.

It is apparent that intergenerational practice provides substantial benefits to individuals and communities. While many of these benefits are unintended and extend beyond original encounters and participants, the contributions to community building are multidimensional and deeply rewarding.

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