

# The State of Our Art: Intergenerational Program Research and Evaluation: Part One

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**ABSTRACT.** In this two-part paper, the author examines intergenerational program research and evaluation based on a framework derived from a collaborative UNESCO (2000)-sponsored review of the intergenerational program field. In Part One, conceptual foundations for intergenerational programming are considered, taking into account theories that focus on individuals and groups within interactive contexts, those that focus primarily on individual development, and conceptually based program evaluations. In Part Two, appearing in the next issue of this journal, effects of intergenerational program participation are described, with emphasis on program activities and various program contexts. Challenges and questions emerging from the literature are presented, identifying the need for a greater use of theory in research, more cross cultural research, expanded outcomes, and solutions to some of the methodological challenges in intergenerational program research and evaluation. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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### INTRODUCTION

Compared to the rapidly growing number and variety of intergenerational programs in communities internationally, the number of documented evaluation and research studies is not keeping pace (Kuehne, 1996; 1999). Thus, the intergenerational program literature generally reveals few evaluation and research studies overall; internationally, the numbers are even smaller.

Kuehne and Kaplan (2001) suggest that the scarce intergenerational program evaluation and research literature should not surprise us. First, intergenerational programs typically begin with small numbers of participants, which makes statistical analysis difficult at best. The community-based nature of many intergenerational programs often results in research and evaluation studies that are descriptive, or limited in the controls they offer when compared with more traditional “experimental” and “control” group, or pre- and post-test designs. Often, they report results based on anecdotal information (gathered from some but not necessarily all participants) without a clear conceptual framework and using a variety of methods that range from very informal to quite systematic. The result of such studies is that the findings are necessarily tentative, the conclusions are weakly supported, and the recommendations to practitioners, other researchers and policy makers are equivocal. Traditional, peer-reviewed journals have typically not published studies with such characteristics, especially in an emerging field; thus, the literature has been limited.

Yet, research and evaluation studies do exist, and they reflect a variety of research approaches, conceptual frameworks, and methods. These studies warrant thorough examination so that intergenerational programmers, researchers and evaluators, policy makers, funders, and participants can learn from one another, and the field can benefit from the “collected wisdom” of its contributors.

It is not the focus of this paper to define evaluation and research per se; readers are referred elsewhere for this discussion (e.g., Cook & Campbell, 1979; Kuehne, 1996). Rather, the following criteria were used for considering the evaluation and research studies examined for this paper:

- Systematic documentation of program design and implementation;
- Data collection from participants and relevant others;
- Clear and replicable analyses of data; and
- Conceptual framework substantiating the question of interest, program design and study findings.

While few of the studies referenced in this paper meet all of these criteria, papers were considered if they met some of the criteria and the author believed that they would contribute to an enhanced understanding of intergenerational

programs, either in a specific area or overall. As regards the style of this paper more generally, readers should be aware that space does not permit an exhaustive review of the literature. Rather, recently published examples of the literature are emphasized throughout in support of the author's views.

### ***FRAMEWORK FOR CONSIDERING INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAM RESEARCH AND EVALUATION***

In any examination of the literature, a framework for considering papers is either explicit or implied. In this examination, the framework used clearly flows from several of the recommendations presented by Bostrum, Hatton-Yeo, Ohsako and Sawano (2000) in their assessment of intergenerational programs in ten countries. These authors, part of a UNESCO-sponsored collaboration, posit that in the intergenerational program literature:

- well developed, well researched conceptual and theoretical frameworks supporting intergenerational programs are needed;
- more attention should be given to describing the results of intergenerational programs, and such results are especially needed internationally; and
- a critical, research-based assessment of cultural issues associated with the adoption of intergenerational program models internationally is required.

In this paper, we turn our attention first to the conceptual and theoretical perspectives brought to intergenerational programs and used to understand and defend their purposes. In Part Two of the paper that follows in the next issue of this journal, we consider what is known about the effects of intergenerational program participation from two vantage points: the activities that comprise intergenerational programs and the many contexts for intergenerational programming, including international settings. We also consider several challenges for intergenerational program researchers and evaluators that emerge from the literature considered.

### ***THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR INTERGENERATIONAL PROGRAMMING***

The international intergenerational community has, more than once, called for conceptually or theoretically based research into intergenerational pro-

grams (e.g., Bostrum et al., 2000; VanderVen, 1999). The need for such research is not purely academic, nor is the scholarly community the sole or even primary beneficiary of such work. Rather, as Granville (2002) explains in her review of “intergenerational practice (IP)” in the United Kingdom, “Without further research and evaluation it is not possible to build a conceptual framework that explains in a rigorous fashion whether IP achieves what it claims and if so, why” (p. 1). Kuehne (2001) and Granville agree that one of the benefits of conceptual research in this area is that it will help explain the ways in which intergenerational programs operate differently from and potentially more effectively than other social programs or community initiatives—an important consideration to practitioners, students, researchers, policy makers and funders interested in supporting programs in this field.

Over the past five years, the intergenerational program research literature has reported more theoretically driven studies than were evident earlier in the decade. The theories described in the intergenerational and related literatures can be loosely categorized into those focused more on individuals and groups within interactive contexts and those focused more exclusively on individual development. A third area of increasing publication is that of conceptually based program evaluations.

### *Individuals and Groups within Interactive Contexts*

Ballantyne and Connell (1998) argue that a *dynamic interactional theory* is helpful when considering the effects of intergenerational environmental education programs in schools. This theory of human development posits that individuals develop each day while in constant, reciprocal interaction with the environments in which they find themselves. The researchers advancing this theory clearly believe that development is a dynamic, reciprocal process, involving psychological and sociological factors. Further, accounting for these factors is seen as essential to understanding relationships, including intergenerational ones, in families, communities and societies (e.g., Bengston, 1989; Garbarino & Gaboury, 1992; Hagestad, 1984; Lerner, 1978). The authors conclude that the dynamic interactional theory provides a good framework for understanding how young people can play a direct role in changing the environmental beliefs and behaviours of older adults. The potential for this theory to be tested in other intergenerational program areas is substantial.

An analytic approach focused on interactions between teachers and students in classroom setting was posited by Flanders (1970). The “*Interaction Analysis*” instrument includes a sophisticated method of behaviour coding and interaction analysis for the purpose of understanding the causes and effects of individual verbal classroom behaviours within the learning process (e.g.,

Amidon & Hough, 1967). Over the past thirty years, intergenerational program researchers and programmers have taken Flanders' interpretive model and instrument and modified them to focus on classroom interactions between older adults and children (e.g., Newman & Onawola, 1985). The resulting Elder-Child Interaction Analysis (ECIA) now includes both verbal and non-verbal interaction styles between school-based intergenerational program participants (e.g., Newman, Morris, & Streetman, 1999). The extent to which this measure is potentially useful in intergenerational program settings outside traditional school classrooms remains to be seen: Future research and evaluation studies could help to answer this question while refining the underlying conceptual model.

*Social identity theory* (e.g., Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) considers personal and social identities as central to the way we view ourselves and others. Personal identity refers to the way we see ourselves as compared with others in our own social group; for example, a woman among women. Social identity is the result of comparisons between social groups in our society—for example, between younger persons and older persons. These comparisons are based, in part, on our own views of the relevant social groups, views portrayed by the media, and through variously held societal stereotypes. In Western societies, Giles (1991) has argued that it is not uncommon for younger aged persons to enjoy more positive social identities, while older persons possess more negative social identities. This is important to those interested in intergenerational programs for at least the following reason:

When age categories are situationally salient, as they unavoidably are in most intergenerational contact programs, self- and other-stereotyping can take place. Hence, communicating with another as a more or less typical member of an age group will render the exchange being based on stereotypes rather than on discrete and fine-tuned individual qualities. (Abrams & Giles, 1999, p. 213)

We must remember that it is human nature to categorize others into groups as a way to process complex information. Further, we can expect to simplify our attitudes toward others by viewing them as more alike than different (e.g., preschoolers are all the same), and as more different from ourselves than they really are (e.g., adolescents and older adults have nothing in common).

Social identity theory suggests, however, that in order to avoid stereotypical behaviour among intergenerational program participants, it is important to focus less on the age differential between participants (and thus, stereotypes) and more on the individual qualities of participants, regardless of their group differences (age). This theory seems especially appropriate for intergenerational

programs that are based primarily on the mutual interests of participants, such as neighbourhood development initiatives, and might encourage other programmers to reconsider primarily age-based program designs that do not focus on individual participants' qualities and interests.

A link can be made between the social identity theory and *realistic intergroup conflict theory* (Sherif, 1961). According to this theory, when two or more groups have opposing goals, negative attitudes and conflict between groups and their members will develop. Dunham and Bengston (1986) have long suggested that the Western notion of children striving for autonomy combined with a perceived competition for scarce public resources may lead to conflicts between age groups in society. Sherif argues that developing a common goal between and among groups is the way to reduce and avoid such conflict. By working together toward a common goal, and uncovering the individual qualities of previously "unknown" others, the attitudes of group members toward one another are also more likely to improve. This point provides a connection to the social identity theory. Interestingly, the example of the neighbourhood-building initiative also applies here in that, to the extent that community groups rise above their apparent differences to work together on common challenges in their neighbourhood, attitudes toward others and conflicts otherwise experienced may dissipate in favour of cooperation toward a mutually beneficial end (e.g., reduced crime). We have seen recent examples of intergenerational programs in The Netherlands that appear to be congruent with if not based on this conceptual approach (Penninx, 1999).

The *mentoring* literature reveals that supportive relationships involving adults and youth can have positive effects on child and adolescent outcomes such as school attendance and performance, self concept, parental relationships, and substance abuse (e.g., Freedman, 1999; McPartland & Nettles, 1991; Rhodes, Grossman & Resch, 2000; Taylor, LoSciuto, Fox, Hilbert, & Sonkowsky, 1999). Recently, however, Rhodes et al. discovered that mentoring experiences and adolescents' global self worth and school grades, for example, were *indirectly* rather than *directly* related, mediated through adolescents' improved relationships with parents and competence at school. The role of both family and community members in mentoring program effectiveness is evident in the theories underlying mentoring relationships. For example, *attachment theory* (e.g., Ainsworth, 1989) acknowledges parent surrogates with whom children may become attached, and who may play an important role in their lives, especially when relationships with parents do not provide security. *Social network theory* (e.g., Zippay, 1995) emphasizes the benefits to youth of a large and diverse social network as opposed to a small and intimate one. According to this theory, broad social networks provide access to resources that can help young people to 'get ahead' through ideas, skills, approaches, and

goals that they would not otherwise discover. *Contextually based social-learning theory* (e.g., Blechman, 1992) emphasizes the importance of mentors being ‘biculturally competent’—that is, competent in both the culture within individual families and in the larger community of which they are a part. Mentors with these skills are able to assist children, youth, and their families to value their cultural origins while accepting the potential advantages of the larger culture.

Intergenerational mentoring programs are growing based on a small and relatively compelling literature. Yet, the integrated relationships between mentors, parents and family members, and the child or youth at the centre of the intervention are not well described in the intergenerational program literature. These relationships are complex, to be sure, yet both theory and empirical results have shown us that in order for mentoring programs to have the results we ultimately desire, intergenerational programmers and researchers may need to increasingly consider parental relationships as the link between interventions and outcomes.

Environmental or ecological psychologists have focused on settings and their interrelationship with individual and group behaviours. For example, Kulikowich and Young (2001) describe *ecological psychology* as focused on persons existing in an ‘environmental niche’ that is the result of a person’s capabilities to act in certain ways (effectivities) and the characteristics of the physical and social environment that provide possibilities for action (affordances). Like ecological theories of human development originally posited by Bronfenbrenner (1979), and the *dynamic interactional theory* described earlier in this section, researchers using this theory focus on the interaction between person and environment, rather than one or the other exclusively.

Spencer and Wooley (2000) argue that environmental affordances are of greatest importance to young children, who consider all settings in terms of their potential for direct interaction and engagement. Yet, children are generally excluded from the planning of community spaces, even though they “gain their personal identity through place attachment” (p. 182). These theories can inform community based intergenerational programs, particularly those that are focused at the neighbourhood level. For example, Buvik and Cold (1995) report that placing children’s needs at the foundation of a community initiative to increase the multigenerational use of schools in Norway resulted in entire community needs being more appropriately addressed.

Communication researchers have provided at least two theoretical models that can be very helpful to intergenerational program developers (Abrams & Giles, 1999). For example, the ‘*Communication Predicament of Aging*’ (CPA)—‘*Communication Enhancement of Aging*’ (CEA) theoretical model focuses on intergenerational miscommunications that often occur because of the

stereotypes older and younger persons bring with them to their interpersonal encounters (Harwood, Giles, Fox, Ryan, & Williams, 1993; Ryan, Giles, Bartolucci, & Henwood, 1986; Williams & Coupland, 1998). The model explains why these miscommunications are likely to occur and offers some direction to those wanting to improve intergenerational exchanges. Abrams and Giles (1999) rightly point out, however, that this model is not as specific or applied in its orientation as practitioners might want or need it to be. Their critique of the model is that it does not “provide communicative strategies about how to approach specific intergenerational contact nor guidelines for their application in a range of different contexts” (p. 214).

In contrast, Fox and Giles (1993) have formulated the *intergenerational contact model*: This theory is based on the concept that intergenerational exchanges are really of the ‘intergroup’ and ‘intercultural’ variety (e.g., Giles & Coupland, 1992; Hewstone & Brown, 1986), with persons from (at least) two cultural age groups communicating with one another in program settings. Specifically, this is a communication theory that focuses on how people of various ages develop attitudes toward and communicate with those in age groups other than their own. Several variables are considered important in this theory and are borrowed from cross-cultural contact frameworks (Bochner, 1982). Variables include frequency of contact, level of participant intimacy, relative status of participants, and duration of the intergenerational contact. Abrams and Giles (1999) recommend that this model be used together with a multidimensional taxonomy of intergenerational programs so that we may work toward a typology of intergenerational contacts. The taxonomy they have in mind would locate individual intergenerational programs within categories that would ultimately permit researchers and programmers to

... assess program’s parameters analytically, compare and contrast them cogently with other programs having similar and dissimilar goals, and determine which underlying structural, psychological, communicative, and other ingredients are associated with variably desired outcomes. Ultimately, such a taxonomy will provide us with a template enabling the most productive intergenerational programs to be designed. (p. 206)

Finally, Smith and Yeager (1999) describe the application of *sociocultural learning theory* (Vygotsky, 1978) to intergenerational programs in Canadian public schools. In particular, the concept of the “zone of proximal development” refers to children’s learning that occurs “under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Older adults share and model many skills and much knowledge to children and youth of all ages in school-based intergenerational programs (e.g., history, music, art); this

theory provides a framework for understanding how and why such programs may be successful in enhancing student learning in other countries as well.

### *Individual Development*

Many practitioners working with older adults in senior centers, retirement residences, nursing homes, and other settings see intergenerational programs as an opportunity for older adults to develop themselves, and to share their accumulated knowledge and care with a younger and often eager audience. For example, psychologists such as Erik Erikson (1959) have written about the important role that the concept of '*generativity*' plays in adult development. Generativity involves guiding and caring for those in the next generation, and while generativity can appear in many different forms (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1998), intergenerational programs have long been viewed from the conceptual perspective of older adults fulfilling their own developmental needs while simultaneously contributing to their environments and others' development as well (e.g., Kuehne, 1992; VanderVen, 1999).

*Activity theory* has also been applied to older adults' involvement in intergenerational programs. This theory was developed in North America and basically suggests that as aging adults lose various social roles in society, they maximize their sense of well-being, life satisfaction, and self-concept when the lost roles are replaced with new ones (e.g., Neugarten, Havighurst & Tobin, 1968). Intergenerational program participation has clearly been viewed as a potential 'new' role for older adults than can contribute toward 'successful aging' and improved well-being (e.g., Barton, 1999; Newman, Vasudev & Onawala, 1985). This theory and its assumptions support expanding intergenerational program opportunities to communities throughout North America, reaching as many older adults as possible.

Over the past thirty years, however, evidence to support this theory has been mixed (e.g., Longino & Kart, 1982), and its cross cultural appropriateness has been challenged as well (Novak, 1988). While modern North American society may encourage, even push, older adults from long-held productive social and work-related roles, it is not clear that this assumption applies as well in other societies. Further, implicit in this theory is the notion that life satisfaction and well-being are derived from activity and work—another assumption that needs to be checked internationally before it is applied.

With regard to developmental theories appropriate to children and adolescents, many practitioners working in preschool settings, public schools, and various youth agencies believe that intergenerational programs can provide developmentally-enhancing experiences and relationships. For example, from a *cognitive constructivist theoretical perspective* (e.g., Piaget, 1952, 1977),

learners generate knowledge themselves and the role of the educator is to create an environment that maximizes learners' abilities to 'discover' or 'construct' their own understandings. There seems little question that intergenerational program environments can be ones in which children construct knowledge about a great many things, including the diverse and rich experiences and knowledge of older adult participants. This theory points to the need for such programs to provide opportunities for children and youth to discover new knowledge rather than passively receive knowledge from older adults if their development is to be enhanced. This implication has been examined by some intergenerational program developers, but is worthy of wider attention (Smith & Yeager, 1999).

These theories are merely examples of the *developmental theories* evident in the intergenerational program literature. Looking more broadly at the literature, however, the reader is referred to two recent review articles that consider in some detail various developmental theories underlying the intergenerational program field (Newman & Smith, 1997; VanderVen, 1999). Newman and Smith provide a succinct overview of several theories of child development and older adult development with particular emphasis on the linkages to intergenerational program practice. The authors propose that young and older persons have reciprocal and shared human needs that demonstrate their 'synergistic' interdependence. For example, older adults need to nurture, while children have the need to be nurtured. The authors suggest that intergenerational programs be based on developmental theories and further, that because of this conceptual rationale, practitioners can expect changes in participants' development as a result of their intergenerational involvements.

VanderVen (1999) provides a critique of the 'traditional developmental theories' as applied to the intergenerational program field and begins the dialogue on an '*intergenerational theory*.' Such a theory would fit with the extended life span that Western societies are currently experiencing, where persons are living well beyond the age ranges even contemplated by the theorists of the previous century whose concepts of aging, for example, are still cited in the intergenerational literature (e.g., Erikson). An intergenerational theory would provide for such enhanced differentiation of older adults; consider intergenerational program dyads and their interactions more fully; focus on development as a dynamic process rather than a linear one; include post-modernist concerns such as the role of power in society; and integrate principles of child development theory with life span developmental theory. This is a tall order, to be sure, but its utility is defended by VanderVen from both the intergenerational program and research points of view.

***Conceptually Based Program Evaluations***

Unfortunately, the vast majority of intergenerational program evaluation reports are atheoretical: That is, they present only the results of data collection without a conceptual or theoretical base for program design or evaluation techniques. Internationally, Hatton-Yeo, Klerq, Ohsako and Newman (2000) recently concluded that at least five countries have reported the need for increased intergenerational program evaluation that would integrate information on intergenerational program effectiveness with various participant outcomes. While not explicitly emphasized by the authors, appropriate conceptual frameworks would usefully guide such evaluation efforts.

Ellis, Small-McGinley and Hart (1998) evaluated an intergenerational mentoring program in Canada focused on enhancing literacy development among elementary school students. In an excellent example of conceptually based program evaluation, they support the program's basic premises with theoretical concepts from the mentoring and early literacy development literatures. An important feature of their paper is a section in which they identify the evaluation issues associated with mentoring programs they reviewed in the literature. For example, they point out that finding appropriate standardized measures to capture student outcomes is difficult across all the potential areas of tutoring, and they describe their evaluation approach in this context. Many intergenerational program evaluators are aware that finding recognized and respected tools to document program 'success' enhances the chances of program longevity. The conceptual framework used and discussion presented in this paper are very helpful to intergenerational program practitioners interested in developing or understanding the effects of intergenerational mentoring initiatives in various school-based domains.

Dellmann-Jenkins (1997) describes a seven-stage, senior-centered model for planning and evaluating intergenerational programs with preschool-aged children in the United States. She posits that older adults find intergenerational program participation more positive when they perceive themselves to be in meaningful and valued roles, including program planning. The model includes reference to building on the data gathered in other program evaluations, which appropriately encourages readers to learn from others' experiences. A major limitation of this model, however, is that the author confines program outcomes to variables like 'older adults' views of participation and 'children's perceptions of older people.' This model would apply more appropriately to intergenerational programs internationally if it suggested that evaluations can and should reflect outcomes as varied as the programs themselves and their contexts.

Finally, the literature regarding community development and community building is growing and the fundamental concepts and theories inherent in this literature seem to have great potential application to intergenerational programmers and researchers (e.g., Kretzman & McKnight, 1993; Spruill, Kenney & Kaplan, 2001). In particular, the concept of 'comprehensive community development' has roots in the nineteenth century settlement houses of the United States, and has resurfaced in various forms since that time. Kubisch, Weiss, Schorr, and Connell (1995) describe *comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs)* today as varied, but all with ". . . the goal of promoting positive change in individual, family, and community circumstances in disadvantaged neighborhoods by improving physical, economic, and social conditions" (p. 1). Typically, CCIs have as their objectives to change a host of elements including social supports, health care, economic development, housing, community planning, education, school reform, job training, neighbourhood security and recreation programs. To accomplish the changes desired, authority and responsibility is typically redistributed from traditional governing bodies to the neighbourhoods and communities themselves.

Intergenerational programs seem to have the qualities to be effective tools in CCIs, since they bring together diverse groups around some of the same objectives identified by CCI developers (e.g., Kuehne, 1998-99). From an evaluation point of view, however, the challenges associated with CCIs are many, and have been well articulated (Connell, Kubisch, Schorr & Weiss, 1995). Simplified here, CCIs are difficult to evaluate because of their design and the current state of available measures and methods to determine their effectiveness. Similar arguments have been made in this paper and elsewhere with regard to the intergenerational program research literature, so we are familiar with this state of affairs. Yet, the CCI literature offers some direction that intergenerational program researchers should consider.

"Theories of change" are important to CCI evaluation and include the "premises, assumptions, hypotheses, or theories that guide decisions about the overall structure and specific components of the initiative" (Kubisch et al., 1995, p. 10). Weiss (1995) argues that if CCI designers are clear about all these facets of their interventions, evaluation strategies can include tracking events related to each of these facets, and the overall evaluation could focus on the degree to which the theories actually hold up over time. Essentially, the evaluation is concerned both with progress and outcomes.

Evaluators of CCIs are partners with programmers; they work together, not sequentially, at every step of the way. The program theory is defined by all the collaborators, and the evaluator must develop tools to measure program success and secure a negotiated agreement on their appropriateness and use. There are challenges to collect and analyze both qualitative and quantitative data in

rigorous ways that accurately describe program progress and outcomes. Ultimately, the evaluation results must be scientifically credible and cost effective, or the initiatives are not continued. In my view, the entire community development literature has much to offer especially those intergenerational program developers, researchers and evaluators interested in community growth and transformation.

### SUMMARY

As we have seen in this paper, more than 15 theoretical approaches can be effectively applied to intergenerational program development, research and evaluation. This discovery may be somewhat surprising, even to those of us who have worked in this field for some time! The implication of this knowledge, however, is that we use it to improve our practice and deepen our understanding of intergenerational programs in their various settings. We can and should all play a role in developing the intergenerational program literature through diverse, theoretically based research and evaluation studies. For as we shall see in Part Two of this paper, in the subsequent issue of *JIR*, we have modest numbers of published results documenting the potential effects of intergenerational program participation, and one of the major challenges to growth and sophistication in this literature is the absence of theory in published reports.

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