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Learning Neighbourhoods: intergenerational learning, exchange and respectful community building

Séamus Ó Tuama

13.1 Introduction

The Cork City (Ireland) Learning Neighbourhoods project was developed under the umbrella of Cork as a UNESCO Learning City. In 2014, Cork City Council formally adopted the UNESCO Beijing Declaration. In 2015, the city council signed a memorandum of understanding with University College Cork, Cork Institute of Technology and Cork Education and Training Board to jointly advance the UNESCO Declaration on Building Learning Cities. Cork City received a UNESCO Learning City Award at the second UNESCO International Conference on Learning Cities in Mexico City in 2015, it hosted the third conference in 2017, in April 2025 Cork received a second UNESCO Learning City Award, becoming the first city to receive two awards.

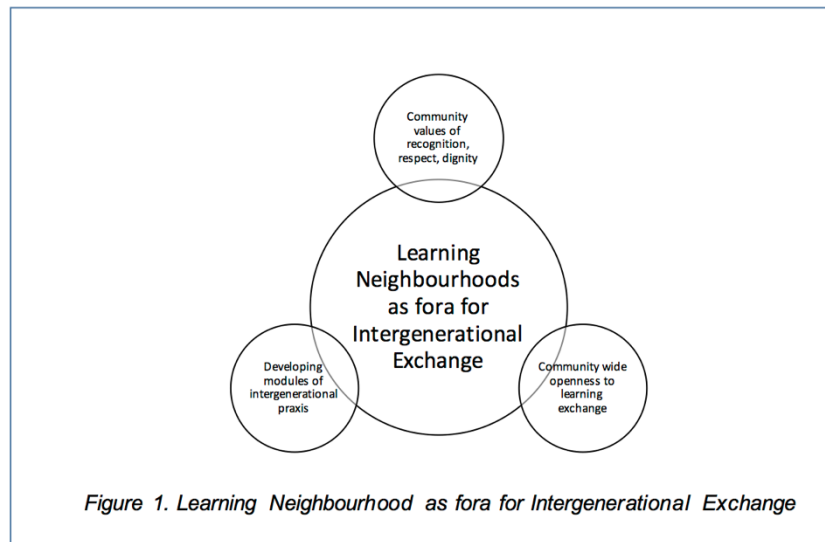
Cork City Learning Neighbourhoods began in September 2015, operating in two pilot neighbourhoods, this has been extended to six in two additional phases. The Cork team defines a Learning Neighbourhood as “an area that is constantly strengthening its practice in learning, providing a diversity of learning opportunities for the whole population through partnership and collaboration” (Ó Tuama & O’Sullivan, 2015, p. 3). The seven learning neighbourhoods currently operating under the Cork City UNESCO Learning City project are Ballyphehane, Knocknaheeny, Togher, Mayfield, The Glen, South Parish and Mahon. The concept was inspired by Peter Kearns of the PASCAL International Observatory.

From its inception, Learning Neighbourhoods has been recognised as a model to be replicated in other neighbourhoods and in other cities. The Centre for Adult Continuing Education (ACE) within University College Cork offered a home for the project, but it is a fully collaborative entity shared by the neighbourhoods (including all their stakeholders and denizens), with each of the original Learning City memorandum of understanding signatories supporting it. Denizen is used here in the sense of ‘an inhabitant or occupant’ (Concise Oxford English Dictionary, 2011). In simple terms being a denizen is not dependent upon the legal and domiciliary status of an individual. The concept ‘occupant’ is meant to be as inclusive as possible, encapsulating permanent, transitory, habitual, intermittent residents and those who are not resident in the area, but for instance spend time in the neighbourhood because they use services, volunteer or work there.

Learning Neighbourhoods offer a potential local level model to generate sustainable, flourishing, inclusive, learning environments. They are premised on an ‘indispensable link between learning and community’ (Ó Tuama, 2020, p. 56). They adopt a culture of intergenerational exchange, to encourage all community members to self-identify less according to age stratification and lean more towards seeing themselves as neighbours, who share a common physical space, and that through a focus on learning can better create prospects for themselves and their neighbours (Fig. 13.1).

Learning Neighborhoods

The concept Learning Neighbourhood is premised on the idea of a relatively small area whose borders are generally understood, though with a certain fuzziness as they invariably blend into other neighbourhoods. In Cork City, the concept of neighbourhoods does not have a strong institutional basis. It is more about identity, locality and a sense of membership on the basis of presence, rather than a legal or residential status. From that perspective, the word denizen has been introduced to signify all people connected to the neighbourhoods (O’Sullivan, Ó Tuama, & Kenny, 2017).



A denizen is not necessarily a citizen. A denizen can be homeless, live in an institutional residence, a private home, attend school, work or use services in the area, be a regular visitor or have been associated with or lived in the area in the past. What all denizens have in common is an identification with the neighbourhood, which assumes a sense of belonging and mutual recognition of all neighbours. Mutual recognition and respect are essential for full participation in society (Ó Tuama, 2005, p. 31). Those at the margins are especially vulnerable to less than adequate levels of both recognition and respect.

The literature is replete with examples and discussions on how marginalised people very often receive lower levels of service, recognition and rights, as well as feelings of not being included, some examples of which are discussed here. This can include young people and older people as discussed later in the paper, but it also includes those marginalised by virtue of their identity like refugees and ethnic minorities, which raises challenges for neighbourhoods. Conway’s (2004) discussion on issues relating to an explicit disrespect of Irish Travellers, a group that has struggled for recognition and respect and only had its status as an ethnic minority recognised in 2017 (Dáil Éireann Debates, 2017), is interesting here. In an official report Travellers were exhorted “to respect the interests and sensitivities of settled people” (Conway, 2004, p. 67), with no acknowledgement of the necessity for reciprocity. In the same vein, Ramirez and Matthews (2008) talk about respect for young immigrants in Canada, giving an example from a project where a young man recounted how “he had not been spoken to before with respect” (p. 86). This is further iterated by Gilbert

(2002) who highlights the emergence of discrimination from law and policies that ostensibly apply equally to all but “has a disproportionate impact on one part of society” (p. 747).

Intergenerational engagement creates respect and recognition links that benefit the entire neighbourhoods (see discussion below) and serve as a model for engagement in contexts from the local to the global. All community members benefit from participation in education, adults, including older adults, benefit in terms of their own health, wellbeing and happiness. Field (2009) states that the community impact of adult education is largely under counted. He lists among the individual and collective benefits as ‘self-efficacy, autonomy, social competences, health maintenance, civic engagement, community resilience and a sense of agency or control over one’s own life’ (Field, 2009, pp. 20–21). An inclusive, intergenerational learning paradigm benefits both individuals in later life and older adults as a community within a neighbourhood. A good illustration of this are the sets of benefits that emerge from creating participative networks of weak social ties, which are discussed below in relation to two specific initiatives in Cork Learning Neighbourhoods. Bolstering weak social ties not only enable opportunities for mutual learning and mutual recognition across all neighbourhood groups, they also promote cross-neighbourhood wellbeing.

Sandstrom and Dunn (2014) look at the potential of weak ties, the typical social ties associated with neighbourhood exchange, including intergenerational exchange, as promoters of wellbeing. They point out “the diversity of one’s social network has been identified as a protective factor against disease development and mortality across a broad range of illnesses” (p. 920). They also stress that “a diverse social portfolio might make people less vulnerable” and bring additional value by extending potential for companionship (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014, p. 920). A critical aspect of their study is about what they describe as “the pruning of weak ties,” and they point out that for younger adults, this is likely caused by “people under-estimating the benefits of weak ties” (p. 92). They suggest that further research is necessary to test whether this is an even more pronounced trend among older adults, which would impact negatively on their overall wellbeing.

The sorts of engagements fostered within learning neighbourhoods are precisely about enhancing weak social ties. Sandstrom and Dunn (2014) strongly suggest that this may in fact be a mutually reinforcing process where the more interactions one has in weak social tie networks may “result in people feeling better, but it is also possible that feeling better causes people to interact with more weak ties” (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014, p. 919). This virtuous circle represents a key assumption underpinning the two neighbourhood projects discussed here. It is assumed that both younger and older people are enriched through intergenerational exchange in terms of wellness, companionship, respect, recognition, and extended weak social ties. The indications from these two, albeit very small projects, are that these individual and wider neighbourhood dividends are generated.

13.2 Context

The Ballyphehane neighbourhood has a higher than average age profile, compared to the overall Irish population. It has close to a quarter of its population over 60 years, against 21%

for Cork City and 18% for Ireland as a whole (Census, 2016). This neighbourhood has been impacted by long-term socio-economic and educational disadvantage. A report in 2005 highlighted that half its residents' formal education had ended at the age of 16 or under (Edwards & Linehan, 2005). However, there are high levels of community activity in the neighbourhoods and the Learning Neighbourhoods project has been very vibrant. In terms of intergenerational exchange, it has some innovative activities, two of which are the Ballyphehane/ Togher Community Arts & Crafts Initiative (BTCACI) and Touching Tales.

BTACI had been involved in a project with second level school students (teenage girls) that had a primary focus of passing on traditional skills like stitching but, in reality, it evolved into much deeper relationships with two-way learning and mutual recognition being central to the process. The iteration of this project discussed here involved members of BTACI working with Transition Year (<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Curriculum-and-Syllabus/Transition-Year-/>) students in Presentation Secondary School, a guest artist and the class art teacher. The project had been about developing the creative, artistic skills of the students, using fabrics (mentored by BACI) and clay (mentored by the visiting artist) on a reflective learning journey, rather than being focused on finished artefacts. This was facilitated by the class art teacher.

The second programme implemented is Touching Tales. This is a concept developed by an artist at Crawford College of Art and Design (<http://crawford.cit.ie/>), who has a particular interest in the potential of art in community based intergenerational exchange. She ran a project in the Ballyphehane Day Care Centre, working with an invited artist and the staff of the centre. The project, jointly supported by a Cork City Council Arts Grant and funding from the Health Services Executive, used art as a means to explore relationship building between older adults and teenagers. The project had clear social, learning and intergenerational objectives. It set out to “stimulate the inter-generational groups to enjoy and respect each other,” which addressed recognition, mutual learning and enjoyment (Newman, 2017, p. 4). In addition to other objectives, it sought to harness “the power of art and creativity to inspire social change” and to get “participants to celebrate their humanity” (Newman, 2017, p. 4). There was also a neighbourhood goal “to create a relationship between the generations that would continue after the project finished” (Newman, 2017, p. 2). The project included both boys and girls in Transition Year, pairing a student with an older person through an initial interaction to test their mutual compatibility.

13.3 Community Benefits of Intergenerational Exchange

Bottery (2016) makes the obvious, but often forgotten, point that intergenerational learning has been part of how humans pass on “facts, skills, attitudes, and values” for the millennia (p. 9). Intergenerational learning is an inherent part of families of every conceivable type, part of community life, and part of formal education systems from kindergartens to daycare centres for older people and a myriad of other contexts. The changing nature of family and society in developed countries poses new types of challenges and opportunities in terms of intergenerational exchange. An excellent overview of the many dimensions of emerging trends for intergenerational learning is captured in a special issue of Journal of Social Issues,

63(4). In the concluding remarks to this special issue Costanzo and Hoy (2007) suggest the combined contributions “serve to instantiate the elderly as a generation among other generations—a coequal partner in the social exchanges that comprise an interconnected, well-functioning society” (p. 901). If contexts for intergenerational learning vary, so do experiences.

In their study Kump and Jelenc Krašovec (2014) find a marked difference between people’s experience of informal and formal intergenerational learning. Respondents reported that intergenerational learning has a positive feature at family level, but that at community level “there is almost no intergenerational cooperation and learning” (p. 174). In general, the middle generations have significantly more opportunities to engage with the bookend generations (which of course constitutes intergenerational exchange), but the real challenge is to enable multigenerational exchange. This theme was raised by Kofi Annan, at the close of his term as Secretary General of the United Nations, where he articulated his vision for a more holistic integrated society:

A society of all ages is multi-generational. It is not fragmented, with youth, adults and older persons going their separate ways. Rather, it is age-inclusive, with different generations recognising—and acting upon—their commonality of interest (Annan, Postscript, 2003, p. 189)

Defining intergenerational learning, or perhaps intergenerational exchange, will always be subject to many qualifications. For the purposes of this chapter, it will primarily refer to the facilitation of reciprocal exchange between younger generations (up to the end of the teenage years) and older people, primarily adults in their sixties and beyond. If a neighbourhood can incorporate this type of exchange more extensively, then it de facto creates an environment tending towards one of multigenerational exchange as the bookend generations not only engage with each other, but those engagements bleed into the middle generations, through existing familial, community and professional exchanges.

Intergenerational exchange is not specifically highlighted in the definition of Learning Neighbourhoods; nonetheless it is a central plank of the approach. It is an important aspect of learning neighbourhoods in practice, but in the main it is implicit rather than explicit. Newman and Hatton-Yeo (2008) outline five points that make intergenerational learning critical in the contemporary era. First is the necessity to see older people “as learning resources and as assets to their communities;” secondly, to keep older people “engaged longer” both in economic and social support roles; thirdly, “as mentors to transmit knowledge and provide additional resources to educational systems;” fourthly, to “ground the future in a sense of the past,” and lastly, as catalysts to build “communities that have high social capital” (p. 38). Their message is that intergenerational exchange is not merely a frill but an essential ingredient in building sustainable futures.

In line with Newman and Hatton-Yeo’s (2008) discussion, it is useful to add two closely connected societal level perspectives. Firstly, humans are social beings, and engaging across generations is essential to the creation of a society that is not fragmented into competing

interests, nor one where closed views are being reinforced in generational, locational or online silos (echoing the ideas of Kofi Annan). From a community perspective Merriam and Kee (2014) point to the clear advantages of lifelong learning as a catalyst for ensuring all community members are “healthy, actively engaged, and contributing to, rather than deleting community resources” (p. 136). They point out that several countries have active policies to encourage engagement in education citing Japan and China as two examples. They don’t include the European Union, but it too set a target for 2020, where “an average of at least 15% of adults should participate in lifelong learning” (European Council, 2009, p. 7), where the word adult is clarified in a footnote as 25–64 years of age.

This can be extended with reference to the key argument raised by Bottery (2016) that “intergenerational issues are as much about wider macro-concerns of sustainability and equity towards future generations” (p. 13). Bottery (2016) rightly points to the significant dividend that intergenerational exchange can deliver in helping us address the many global and intergenerational challenges we face today. Further, he points out that much of the focus on intergenerational exchange has been largely confined to interpersonal exchange.

The community and societal intergenerational exchanges, envisaged in Learning Neighbourhoods that are part of a learning city agenda, are communal rather than interpersonal and have a local to global focus. The Cork Call to Action for Learning Cities (2017), which was the agreed action from the UNESCO 3rd Learning Cities Conference, makes these points explicit: “to come together in partnership to promote lifelong learning at local level in order to ensure that all generations are involved in the process” (Point 18, p. 2) and “build mindful learning cultures in our cities that foster global consciousness and citizenship” (Point 6, p. 1).

Definitions of intergenerational learning can be problematic, so it is important to corral what is being discussed here, primarily what I have described as bookend generations. In this context, there are a number of useful definitions we can call upon. Hatton-Yeo (2007) defines intergenerational programmes as ones with “purposeful and ongoing exchange of resources and learning among older and younger generations for individual and social benefits” (p. 2). The definition of intergenerational learning provided by Kump and Jelenc Krašovec (2014) focuses on “activities that intentionally link various generations with the goal of sharing their experience and achieving mutual benefits” (p. 170), which is very close to Hatton-Yeo’s (2007) definition.

Both definitions highlight some of the key objectives of learning neighbourhoods. A learning neighbourhood attempts to generate synergies between all learners and learning activities in the area. Drawing a definition from the European Eagle project, Bottery (2016) provides a community oriented definition of intergenerational exchange, which is “purposeful, mutually beneficial activities which promote greater understanding and respect between generations and may contribute to building more cohesive communities” (p. 10). To respect Costanzo and Hoy’s (2007) identification of the elderly as a coequal generation requires cognizance of some particular needs of that generation, which Xaverius and Mathews (2004) explore.

Xaverius and Mathews (2004) give a brief resume of some important studies that indicate the social and psychological benefits for older people from engagements with children. Among the positive outcomes identified in the literature they review are “increases in life satisfaction,” “improved health,” “increased happiness,” and “improved quality of life” (Xaverius & Mathews, 2004, p. 54). While the Xaverius and Mathews (2004) study indicates that, in immediate terms, older people seem to gain more from intergenerational exchanges with children than vice versa, there are strong indications that children and young people gain long-term benefits.

Intergenerational exchange is also an element in creating positive experiences for children and young people that can have long-term individual and community benefits. In fact, several studies point to the fact that positive childhood experiences can have enduring effects in later life. A study by Ali et al. (2018) suggest that adults supported “altruistic behaviour developed among individuals during their childhood has a positive effect on knowledge sharing behaviour in their later professional life” (p. 291). Kosterman et al. (2011) further suggest that positive childhood experiences help mitigate adolescent substance abuse and “promote healthy, engaged, and productive functioning into young adulthood” (p. 185). In the same vein, Ringsmose and Kragh-Müller (2013) associate democratic citizenship with positive “childhood experiences, such as mutual respect, acknowledging relationships between adults and children” (p. 232).

The benefits of positive experiences even extend to health as Slopen et al. (2017) find “that positive childhood experiences are associated with ideal cardiovascular health in midlife” and propose that greater attention needs to be placed on the benefits of positive childhood experiences (p. 76). This trend continues into adolescence as demonstrated by Stiglbauer et al. (2013) who speak of “an upward spiral of positive school experiences and happiness over time” (p. 239), key factors in creating a conducive environment are “relatedness, competence, and autonomy” (p. 232), all three of which are enabled by the intergenerational exchange projects discussed here. In their study of the neighbourhood of Las Remudas in Gran Canaria, Callado and Cía (2017) reach the similar conclusion that coordinated “socio-educational, participatory, intersectorial” interventions have significant impacts in redirecting young people’s trajectories away from lives of “dysfunctionality and precariousness” (Callado & Cía, 2017, p. 320).

The longer-term impacts of experience in adolescence is confirmed by Kansky et al. (2016) who state that “our results indicate that early affect may be predictive of positive life outcomes a decade later” (p. 2016). The common thread in all of these studies is the impact of the relationships that young people experience, including those with adults. Learning Neighbourhoods aim at creating positive intergenerational learning oriented exchanges that help create positive and mutually beneficial social environments for all ages.

13.4 Mutual Recognition: The Core of a Learning Neighbourhood

For the purpose of this chapter, we are placing a recognition lens on intergenerational learning, to explore how a learning neighbourhood can foster a positive culture of recognition, particularly for younger and older neighbours. Mutual recognition “is the essential building block of human society;” it is not only the glue of sociability that makes society possible, acknowledging the innate humanness and worth of each individual, but it is also a mirror through which we learn to know ourselves and develop and maintain our self-concept (Ó Tuama, 2009, p. 148). Recognition is “the legitimate claim to respect” that Kant (1996) holds we reciprocally owe to each other (p. 209). Mutual recognition is in all our interactions with other human beings, right from birth to the end of our lives. It is never fixed or permanent but is constantly in transition.

May (2016) succinctly sums up, with reference to George Herbert Mead, the centrality of recognition to the human condition that “we are inherently relational beings: we gain a sense of self in relationships with and in relation to other people” (p. 751). She offers a significant understanding of recognition in terms of personal impact, group impact and also how we might perceive the other. In a neighbourhood context, these resonate extensively, in particular, shared geographical space, accent, identification with a local community are important, but a person can live in an area without belonging.

This can be through personal choice. It can also be through modes of misrecognition, including what May (2016) describes as “invisible strangers,” those that are excluded from full group inclusion. For a Learning Neighbourhood, this poses a complicated challenge. On one hand, encouraging positive recognition for individuals and groups, while respecting both individual autonomy to remain outside of a group(s) and the right of groups to be different, can be a delicate balancing act. Using the term neighbourhood rather than community is an important aspect of what a Learning Neighbourhood is. It is not about conflating identity with locality, it is about acknowledging shared spaces and shared interests, as well as maintaining the importance of diversity, both individually and for groups.

In elaborating on the concepts of recognition and respect, Honneth (2002) uses “the young Hegel’s model of recognition” (p. 500) elaborating this as “three modes of recognition—love, rights and solidarity” (p. 501). Contextualized in this fashion, we can see that it impacts individuals at the most intimate level (love), on their experience of living in community with others (solidarity) and in their autonomy as actors with agency, obligations and entitlements as well as legal standing (rights). Furthermore, Honneth (2002) says a person can only be free “in the full sense of the word” when they experience recognition that coincides with how they rationally conceive themselves (p. 509).

Learning Neighbourhoods are premised on the notion of participation by all denizens, since it is an action-based concept in the sense that it presumes that neighbours contribute to as well as benefitting from the Learning Neighbourhood. Mutual recognition is key to this as it assumes that all denizens share reciprocal relationships. This clearly has impacts for individuals, groups and classifications of people.

Where recognition resides in a learning neighbourhood (and indeed the whole of society) is perfectly captured by McCarthy (1990). Starting from the individual, “personal identity is from the start interwoven with relations of mutual recognition,” but there is also the community context of “reciprocal vulnerability that calls for guarantees of mutual consideration to preserve both the integrity of individuals and the web of interpersonal relations in which they form and maintain their identities” (McCarthy, 1990, p. x). In resisting words like community to describe what a learning neighbourhood attempts to achieve, the proponents of the project are driving at ensuring inclusivity and respect for all individuals and groups. McCarthy (1990) nails this mission by drawing out the communicative and reciprocal quiddity of recognition: “it is precisely notions of fairness, impartiality, respect for the integrity and dignity of the individual”(p. xii, f/n 12) that enable open, free, tolerant and learning neighbourhoods.

Recognition impacts both individuals and groups, intergenerational exchange ameliorates misrecognition across generations, which is demonstrated at neighbourhood level in the two projects discussed here. A number of other studies highlight negative outcomes related to misrecognition, Kallio (2017) looks at how it inhibits the formation of fully functioning political subjects; Barber et al. (2012) look at parental disrespect for adolescent children as a contributor to depression and anti-social behaviour; Pritchard-Jones (2017) looks at its impact on self-image and autonomy among older people and Wiles et al. (2017) look at the link between older people and place, which underlines why neighbourhood level recognition can have a double positive, reinforcing both individuals’ sense of self and their sense of being part of a place to which they have an affective relationship.

Kallio (2017) unearths some interesting contrasts in how young people encounter “different dimensions of recognition, including inconsiderate nonrecognition, unintentional misrecognition and purposive disrecognition, in contrast with active positive recognition” (p. 100). She makes the point that “it is social life, unfolding as a polis that enables and conditions subject formation and people’s activities, that shapes human beings into political subjects” (Kallio, 2017, p. 101). The key point here is that her idea of political is about “subject formation” and to “develop interests in some-things and engage in political thought, claims-making and action” (Kallio, 2017, p. 89). It is really about the potential to be an active, engaged, socially aware ‘neighbour’ we might say. Her study looks at this from the perspective of younger people in intergenerational encounters. Similar experiences can be encountered by older people in their interactions with younger people.

In line with this, Barber et al. (2012) discuss the concept of disrespect in relation to parental interactions with their adolescent children. Though they use different terminology, recognition is the fundamental core of the controlling intrusive interactions by parents through reports of “disrespecting integrity and individuality of children” by the adolescent subjects (Barber et al., 2012, p. 275). The young people in their study had “an awareness of self that they sensed could be disrespected or intruded upon” (Barber et al., 2012, p. 278). They made statements identifying examples of disrespect and the vast majority had a clear understanding of what could constitute disrespect (Barber et al., 2012).

Pritchard-Jones (2017) presents a typical negative recognition of the older person as one “who lacks the ability to act autonomously; who is entirely dependent on others” (p. 78). She makes the point that “autonomy requires positive relationships of recognition on both a micro (individual) and macro (societal) level” (Pritchard-Jones, 2017, p. 76). A sense of belonging, having social connections, and being recognised, are implicit elements of learning neighbourhoods, for all denizens, including older people. Looking at the lived experience of older people, Wiles et al. (2017) explore the “affective, positive bonds between individuals and their homes, neighbourhoods, and communities’ which ‘are associated with increased autonomy and independence” (p. 28). They point out that “connectedness (e.g. involvement) is likely to be just as important” (Wiles et al., 2017, p. 28). In the next section, I will look at two intergenerational projects that enhance the sense of connectedness by participants, which include older people attending Day Care, active retired people, teenagers and younger children in the Ballyphehane Learning Neighbourhood.

13.5 Two Examples of Community Connectedness

13.5.1 Ballyphehane/Togher Community Arts & Crafts Initiative (BTACI)

The Site: Ballyphehane/Togher Community Arts & Crafts Initiative (BTACI) worked in cooperation with Presentation Secondary School, Ballyphehane. BTACI in a very active intergenerational exchange. A core group of four leading women from this group were interviewed about their work with school children in the Ballyphehane Learning Neighbourhood. The BTACI members fit in the age category often described as the third age. Radtke et al. (2016) describe third age women in their study “as physically capable, wise, deserving of societal support, and adapting if not transcending the aging process” (Radtke et al., 2016, p. 99). This description perfectly captures the BTACI group. The women in the group explicitly acknowledge that their own personal learning journeys are intergenerational. The founding members formed the group and developed their own expertise through informal and formal learning as adult learners.

The Process: BTACI actively engaged in transferring arts and crafts related knowledge and skills to a younger generation, through a series of engagements with school children from a local convent high school. This engagement continued for a number of years. In the academic year 2017–2018, they worked with the Transition Year art class, in which the students, the BTACI members, a visiting artist and the school’s art teacher worked together to explore creativity and design using both fabrics and clay. Two group interviews were conducted by the author, one with the BTACI and the other with the Transition Year students, to get their respective impressions of this intergenerational exchange initiative. All respondents quoted in this paper have been given pseudonyms: BTACI (Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy); Ballyphehane Secondary School students (Emily, Irene, Nellie and Henrietta).

Emergent Themes: The BTACI members articulated the wider social impact of their engagement, as well as acknowledging they too learn directly and indirectly from working with younger people. The group members expressed both a very strong sense of their own

personal learning journeys and the importance of a supportive community context for lifelong learning, which they used as a resource to guide the schoolgirls to follow their own dreams. They could identify key moments of change, challenges they and other learners faced, progress that they themselves have made and the personal growth they experienced through learning. They were animated by a desire to open learning opportunities for others and to share their experience as older learners with young people in their community.

One member, Jo, describes her own reluctance to join an organised class. Once she joined, everything changed; “we were really nurtured”. She highlights how her tentative beginnings resolved into active engagement and positive change in her life, “I mean, it’s gone back a long way, but we have learned so much” (Jo). Jo could specifically pinpoint a Damascene starting point to a day organised by the Irish Country Women’s Association (ICA): “That was like an awakening... ‘I’m going to have some of this’ and we did” (Jo). Meg highlighted the power of discovering something that “you’re good at, that you can get better at, and that this is accessible to you... this is what raises your confidence.” She directly related her own finding of confidence to the Transition Year project, where she feels their engagement with the schoolgirls was able to “raise their confidence because that’s what’s needed more” (Meg).

Using their own life stories and the lack of opportunities they experienced, they were conscious that the girls they engaged with had similar challenges in shaping their futures. They describe the norm for their generation as early school leaving, the necessity to get a job and only much later having a chance to return to education. They were very focused on getting the girls to identify and maximize their talents. They spoke about one girl whose singing talent they recognised and encouraged and then saw her achieve success. These same sentiments are mirrored in the Transition Year group interview.

The intergenerational aspect of this project has many dimensions. For example, Beth joined on the encouragement of her mother who came to classes through the support of the public health system. Her mother had an episode of poor health and only agreed to return to the class if Beth would accompany her. Beth reflected out loud:

I didn’t realize, okay, what a gift my mother was giving me, okay, or what these women gave me. Because that opened up huge growth and development within myself as well. And I am a better person today because of that.

Beth further shared how conversations at an informal level often lead to younger people sharing some of their life experiences. Some of the examples of what the younger women shared is not deeply personal, like that their mothers were having a new baby, or they were going on a holiday, but it indicates a level of mutual trust akin to what might be expected between a young person and a grandparent. The dynamic of the interaction is very interesting. While the older women saw the skills they were passing on as part of the community’s heritage, they were equally conscious of other dimensions of the intergenerational exchange and welcomed opportunities to engage with the students on everyday concerns. They explicitly also acknowledged reciprocal learning, like the case of

Amy who shared candidly that “oh, we learned as well, yeah...we did, yeah.” Some learning is not about changing practice but discovering new insights about people of a different generation. In the Transition Year interview the students spoke about discovering that the two generations had very different experiences of using smartphones, the younger people using them primarily as ways to engage socially, while the older women used them less for social engagement and more for internet searches. It was an insightful discovery in that they acknowledged neither group essentially changed their usage of the phones, but they discovered something about how they had different experiences of virtual mobile spaces.

The BTACI group highlighted another such liminal space in an impromptu performances by the girls: “They would be singing or somebody else then would want to tell you a story about something that happened in class or whatever. And they were like, “We’re willing to share” (Beth). She explained that their relationship was not one of *locus parentis*, so “you can be more compassionate and more understanding to them. You can have a softer approach” (Beth).

Evidence of the mutually safe environment created by BTACI is indicated through the young people’s confidence to go off message vis-à-vis the ostensible purpose of the classes. On one occasion the schoolgirls gave an impromptu performance from *The Sound of Music*. This had a positive impact for both generations, the younger ones being able to show another line of talent and the older ones feeling a sort of grandparental pride.

Meg emphasised how that intergenerational exchange created a sort of surrogate grandparent for the school girls. She said, “they hear you... you encourage. I think that’s a big thing with intergeneration because a lot of them don’t have their nans around” (Meg). Similarly, Beth talked about families being busy and that: “There’s a lot of interaction between the children and us, really, that, I suppose, would otherwise happen at home. Or that doesn’t happen at home” (Beth). In the Transition Year group interview these perceptions were also echoed by the teenagers.

Recognition was one of the themes raised in the Transition Year group interview. Emily reflected on how important the act of being listened to by the older women was: “To have someone else that’s not your teacher or family, someone that you don’t know personally listen to you, it’s nice” (Emily). Nellie expanded this, referring to being spoken to ‘like a normal person’ (Nellie), which she contrasted with how a teacher might speak to them.

The Transition Year students also identified episodes of mutual recognition with the BTACI women. For instance, the students talked about how the older women had few opportunities and options when they were teenagers. Nellie said: “They never had that opportunity to do a programme like we did. Theirs is just to learn and then get a job, but ours is more to try to see the bigger opportunities.” They identified significant cultural differences for instance in terms of articulating one’s own preferences “a lot of things in school that we take for granted that we say that we don’t want” (Nellie). They acknowledged that their whole life experiences had been significantly different. Emily captured the much

more constrained circumstances that the older women faced, at more or less the same age they were at the time of the interview: “they all stopped school a lot younger than we did. And they usually didn’t go on in further education, and they had families younger, and started to work” (Emily). These responses were typical of the kinds of recognition realizations that the younger women had.

Through these acts of recognition, the student participants not only acknowledged the different societal shifts that had occurred in their neighbourhoods, but they also acknowledged the older women as holders of authentic teenage experiences which, though different to their own, still were ones they could identify with and learn from. The students also identified acts of recognition by the older women, which they appreciated. This was articulated particularly around stress. At one point in the interview, two students interacted on this theme. Henrietta shared: “I think they were surprised that teenagers can get so stressed in school.” Emily said: “Yeah, they were surprised, but at the same time, they kind of remembered what it was like being a teenager in Ballyphehane.” These comments indicate levels of mutual recognition. The older women identifying with the kinds of stress the younger women experience and through that process unpacking memories of similar experiences in their own teenage years.

At a neighbourhood level, the BTACI group members and the school children frequently encountered each other in places like the supermarket, on the bus, the city centre or other public spaces. In these circumstances, they normally recognised each other and engaged at some level. For Jo the interactions in these neutral public spaces “tell you how close they get to you when you are walking around.” There was positive recognition too, an example being the group getting privileged places at a school show in the front row with the nuns: “We’re upfront and they’re all waving, and they’re all smiling at you” (Meg).

The group interview indicated a strong sense of what Granovetter (1983) calls “cognitive flexibility” in BTACI. The group’s modus operandi and impact within the learning neighbourhood was significant, as they actively exhibited “a habit of mind that permits one to assess the needs, motives, and actions of a great variety of different people simultaneously” (Granovetter, 1983, p. 205). Even in their own specialist fields the group members could acknowledge learning from the young girls. “There was one little girl... sewed like I couldn’t sew. And you would be in awe” (Meg).

For the BTACI members, Beth felt the young people’s engagement reawakened “how to be young really... Their joy, and just the way that they’re open, and they just take everything on board...They’re willing to give anything a try” (Beth). The Transition Year students saw a similar cognitive flexibility in the BTACI women: “They’re not afraid to do something. They just do it” (Irene), and “They’re not afraid to make a mistake” (Emily).

13.5.2 Touching Tales

The Site: Another project, this one in the Day Care Centre was called Touching Tales, which is also the name of a small book published at the end of the project. It was conceived and

organised by an artist, who in this paper is given the pseudonym Francoise. She won a small Cork City Council Arts Grant and then secured matching funds from the Health Services Executive. Her project was essentially about engagement between older women and men who use two Day Care Centres, one in Ballyphehane and the other in the adjoining neighbourhood of Turners Cross, working in partnership with students in Transition Year in adjacent schools. She also called on a graphic novelist for some of the sessions.

The Project: Each of the older people was requested to bring some old photos in order to rekindle memories of their earlier lives. They would then work in collaboration with one of the students to create images based on those photos or old photos provided by the project leader. They would discuss the contents of the photo and talk about their lives then and now, including the contemporary experiences of the younger person.

Process: The students and older people mutually agreed who would work with whom, using a sort of speed-dating game where the students visited tables of older adults. Each student ultimately selected which older adult they would work with, and they then worked in pairs for the remainder of the project. Each pair worked as a partnership according to their own informal rules. "They were definitely collaborating, but not always as a totally equal partnership" (Francoise). In some pairs, the younger person was the dominant one; in others, the older adult, and in some, it was more even. They worked together once a week at the Day Care Centre on a number of mini-projects, including short graphic novel pieces, and ultimately selecting images for the project book *Touching Tales*. There was a high level of self-direction.

On the last day of the project, each pair (young person and older adult) collaborated on creating a picture of a world in which both of them could live. Some of these were included in the book. Each pair also selected an image they had jointly created over the course of the project to be included in *Touching Tales*. Each of these images, mostly related to an episode, period, image or memory of the older person is included and is jointly credited to the younger and older person.

Emergent Themes: The coordinator allowed the participants as much autonomy as possible. Like in the BTACI project, there were more personal conversations as trust developed. "Things came up, they came up in conversation and they weren't forced" (Francoise). The coordinator allowed these intergenerational engagements to follow their own trajectories. On one occasion there was a big discussion about contemporary dancing, in which boys could dance with other boys. On other occasions there were discussions around fashions, food and life for the older people in their earlier years. The coordinator noted how well the partnerships worked and commented that the younger people were very impressed with the feisty attitude of some of the older people. Over the course of the project strong bonds developed in some of the partnerships.

The project leader encouraged a culture of mutual respect and recognition. She skilfully allowed both generations to bring things to the table. For instance, many of the younger

boys had an interest in graphic novels and were keen to learn pen and ink skills from their older partners. This turned the tables in the interactions as, in general, the younger person led in terms of artistic skills. The book contains some testimonials from the younger people, which attest to an overall very positive experience in which they incidentally mention things they had learned from the older people that surprised them.

13.6 Conclusion

This paper set out to draw some learnings from Cork Learning City's Learning Neighbourhoods project, specifically seeking evidence that local level intergenerational exchange could deliver benefits for individuals and the wider community. Two particular initiatives in Ballyphehane indicate that community level intergenerational exchange has potential. However, it needs to be acknowledged that the scale of those projects make drawing wider conclusions risky. Much more extensive research would be required to establish clear trends, nonetheless both projects seem to confirm indications from the literature.

Theoretically the paper contextualized discussion around community values of recognition, respect, and dignity. Respect, dignity and recognition are the fundamental building blocks of rights-based, open, free societies. However, even the most liberal societies have lacunas in which some individuals or groups do not receive the recognition they are owed as human beings. Highlighting some of the challenges around recognition that older adults experience shines a broader light on societal values that sometimes preference individuals and/or groups on the basis of gradations of ascribed recognition and the right to dignity and respect. Addressing those issues around older people enriches our appreciation of a broader issue. Once we establish fundamental rules around recognition, we are establishing them for all humans, regardless of their status, age, gender, ethnicity, legal status, wealth, fame or any other label we wish to use.

Learning Neighbourhoods are also premised on certain values. Those are values that champion community wide openness to learning exchange. Placing an intergenerational lens to this also asks questions about recognition vis-à-vis age stratification, but it could equally be applied to any number of the criteria so often used to carve communities into classifications. Inclusiveness is a project of constant vigilance in Learning Neighbourhoods as much as in any society.

Theories around recognition can offer reasons why it is important, but it is equally important to see how that might play out in practice. The two projects examined here demonstrate very well how those two sets of values of recognition and openness to learning exchange can come together and deliver significant learning and life enhancing experiences for participants, both older and younger people. The scale of the investigation here is very small, but the indications are that Learning Neighbourhoods have potential to enhance learning exchanges and to incubate modules of praxis that have the potential for wider application.

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