Learning Among Generations—from Intergenerational to Intergenerative

By Peter J. Whitehouse

A case study of successful intergenerational public schools in Cleveland, Ohio, and around the world.

In this case study of intergenerational public schools in Cleveland, Ohio, and beyond, we build on a theme found woven throughout this issue of *Generations*—the importance of relationships among generations. Many authors focus on pairs of generations, such as Baby Boomers and Gen X or Gen X and Y (or, Millennials). At the intergenerational schools, we are interested in spaces that take full advantage of age and generational diversity in the context of learning, i.e., age integration. The resilience, adaptability, and citizenship skills that come from education are becoming increasingly essential for all generations in today's complex and challenging world.

The modern world of work and life requires so-called twenty-first-century learning skills, including collaborative team practices, respect for diverse ideas, risk-taking and innovation, systems thinking, and ethical reflection and action. Knowledge about environmental contexts and digital technologies is key. Ultimately, our species should be on a quest for collective wisdom, and also realize the importance of play in this process.

'The modern world of work and life requires so-called twenty-first-century learning skills.'

This article uses the example of the globalization of a successful educational model, the intergenerational schools in Cleveland, to illustrate the importance of intergenerational learning for the future (Kaplan et al., 2016; Kaplan and Sánchez, 2014).

The Intergenerational Schools

The first Intergenerational School was founded in 2000 in Cleveland as a public charter elementary school (Whitehouse et al., 2000; www.tisonline.org). Its mission was and is to create a community of learners that celebrate lifelong learning and spirited citizenship. At its core was a developmentally grounded curriculum for children that emphasized the importance of

→abstract Learning that includes people of different life experiences is beneficial to people of all ages and cognitive abilities. Three public intergenerational schools in Cleveland, and now collaborative programs internationally, have been providing such opportunities in a variety of organizational and community settings. Pedagogical emphasis is placed on fostering lifelong experiential learning, sharing stories and art, building relationships, and creating spirited citizens. Intergenerativity, meaning innovating though integration and going between to go beyond, is a new word that highlights the value of diverse perspectives in addressing the huge social and ecological problems we face in the twenty-first century. **| key words**: *intergenerational, intergenerativity, schools, learning organizations, art*



experience and relationship-based learning.

Children are placed in classrooms of approximately seventeen students, based on their learning stage, and advance to the next level by demonstrating skills mastery. Each classroom may have students of different ages. The curriculum covers state standards, but inspires students to be independent learners. Students take mandated state tests, but the emphasis is on more individualized and authentic goals for learning. We know the method works—through excellent test results, great attendance records, matriculation into high-performing high schools, and national prizes (including the American Society on Aging's MindAlert Award and the Eisner Prize) and international attention.

Adults and elder volunteers come to the school for a few hours per week to contribute to the children's learning, often by sharing stories—an especially stimulating experience for both young and old. Reading mentoring was and still is The Intergenerational Schools' signature program, but math, computers, various club activities, and field trips foster diverse learning opportunities. Elders with cognitive impairment participate in all of these activities, as they are able. Special emphasis is placed on learning about the natural environment and citizen action (George, Whitehouse, and Harris, 2012).

After an initial success, we developed two more schools in Cleveland that continue the pattern of excellence. Each of the classes in all three schools spends regular time meeting with and building relationships with elders who live in long-term-care facilities. Moreover, research demonstrates the value of volunteering in the school for people with dementia who live in nursing homes (George, Whitehouse, and Whitehouse, 2011). Quantitative and qualitative reseach using a randomized control trial demonstrated improvement in quality of life for those who came to the

school compared to a group that participated in a peer group activity at the residential facility.

On the fifteenth anniversary of our first school, we launched Intergenerational Schools International to share our experiences, but also to learn from other models. We are working in Japan, India, Spain, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

No two collaborative endeavors are the same, as we learned of the major differences in public and private school systems in different countries. In India and Japan, the collaborations take the form of afterschool skill-development programs; in Spain, programs are being developed in existing schools.

Intergenerativity and Beyond

As we gained experience in our own schools and with international models, we came to appreciate that there was more to intergenerational learning models than just the participation of people of different ages and generations. These differences could come from age itself, but also from different experiences, such as individual life and historical events. For example, we found that older students in our school could serve as mentors to younger students. Not only were they closer to the material that needed to be learned, but also they were more fully versed in the culture of the school. Older children as well as elders could, for example, foster confidence-building attitudes in the younger students that would also prevent disruptive behaviors. Elders, including those with dementia, also felt a sense of usefulness and purpose.

We coined the word "intergenerativity" to capture the lessons we learned about the more general concept of learning from difference and diversity (Whitehouse et al., 2009). Generativity is a word used in gerontology, popularized by Eric Erickson's developmental stage of adulthood, where community engagement and legacy work can prevent stagnation. Generativity means a source of creative energy. But by placing the prefix "inter" in front of the word, we explored the notion of combining and synergizing different sources of generativity. These could be generations, disciplines, professions, or nations. We described the word as "innovating through integration "and as going "between to go beyond."

Co-creating and sharing narratives and art are the most powerful forms of intergenerative activity.

On the fifteenth anniversary of our first school, we turned the entire school into dance and theater stages. We collected stories from staff, students, and parents, as well as board and community members, and performed some of the stories to celebrate lifelong learning and spirited citizenship. The play, called "Moments and Memories," was produced by The Intergenerativity Project, led by Community Performance International (Geer and Wei, 2017).

Co-creating and sharing narratives and art are, for us, the most powerful forms of intergenerative activity. The Civil Rights Movement came alive for youngsters when adults shared their actual experiences in the South. We also found intergenerativity connected to an emergent academic approach called transdisciplinary (Katz and Whitehouse, 2017; Whitehouse, in press). This approach moves beyond the interdisciplinary, to explore and sometimes dissolve the boundaries between disciplines and to discover novel creative ideas. We compare this kind of intellectual process to the evolutionary energy at the boundary between ecosystems—so-called ecotomes. Adaptive changes in life forms occur most actively in these border zones. This is biological intergenerativity analogous and ultimately related to cultural intergenerativity.

Thus, in the future we see Intergenerational Schools International not only celebrat-

ing the importance of learning among the generations, but also the broader conceptions of pedagogical innovation. In this process, we want to focus on the nature of the learning organization itself. We believe that organizations evolve through different stages of development, just as human beings do. Our future will depend on innovative organizational forms of all kinds that foster generational and intergenerational intergenerativity (Geer and Wei, 2017). Such organizations will hold and ensure places for people of different ages, generations, and backgrounds and thrive from their diversity of experiences and perspectives.

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