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Intergenerational Contact Zones

A Compendium of Applications

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PennState Extension

Intergenerational Reading Rooms: Lessons Learned from The Intergenerational Schools

How can schools become vibrant intergenerational settings? To explore this question, we focus on the Intergenerational Reading Room (IRR) component of The Intergenerational Schools (TIS) model established in Cleveland, Ohio.

Introduction

Everywhere in the world, schools are clear examples of spaces for intergenerational engagement. The fact that formal education is typically organized in facilities where teachers and students (not to mention children's parents) from different generations meet and interact every day under one roof may lead to a belief that the intergenerational nature of the school system can be taken for granted. However, the fact that schools congregate different generations only makes them multi-generational spaces, not inter-generational zones. Here we examine how schools can enhance their intergenerational profile. In this paper, we do so through presenting Intergenerational Reading Rooms (IRR) as approached by The Intergenerational Schools (TIS), in Cleveland, Ohio. IRR are featured as a case of an Intergenerational Contact Zone (ICZ) in Elementary (K-8) schools.

The concept of ICZ refers to the many dimensions of spaces that serve as "focal points for older adults and younger generations to meet, interact, build trust and friendships, and work together to address issues of local concern" (Kaplan & Hoffman, 2015). In the particular case of IRR, the main concern is how 5-12 year old children learn, particularly with regard to their development to become lifelong readers: "We don't want to just teach you to read, we want to teach you to be a reader," says Cathy Whitehouse, Chief Educator at TIS. In this paper we argue that school IRR planned through an ICZ lens are opportunities to raise awareness of how educational spaces can simultaneously function to enhance intergenerational relationships.



"Can I just sit by your side and read with you?" [Photo: Dr. Cathy Whitehouse, TIS founder and Chief Educator]

Connecting generations of readers

The *Intergenerational Schools* see themselves as communities of lifelong learners: "TIS was founded on the belief that adults and children - of all ages, mixed together, embracing the life cycle - could help each other learn about important values, academics, and 'real stuff.'" (Learning Network Associates, 2009). However, more than just another school devoted to education and learning, TIS considers itself the seed of an intergenerational wisdom center, i.e. a space and community within which generational knowledge, experience, and engagement are able to flow and cross in all directions, both through planned activities and spontaneous and flexible meetings.

According to its founders, at TIS "no other pursuit receives as much attention as reading. Reading is ubiquitous." To this purpose, TIS develops multiple strategies, one of which is the Reading Mentor Program. Through this program over 70 volunteer adult/senior reading mentors commit to at least 2 hours per week with students "for one-on-one reading, sharing stories and building relationships." (TIS, 2015). In the 2013/14 academic year reading mentors spent over 4,000 volunteer hours with students.

"She just needed someone to talk to ... that day we didn't read." - Elizabeth LeVert, senior reading mentor (Learning Network Associates, 2009)

Who are these mentors? They are mostly retired local citizens age 60 and over, "representing a variety of cultural and professional backgrounds from Civil Rights activists to retired FBI agents" (TIS, 2015). What do these mentors actually do? They do not "teach" students to read but they listen to them read, and read to them. Most importantly, they discuss the stories together sharing and comparing perspectives. When does this reading mentoring happen? During class time.

Finally, where does the reading take place? Typically in quiet sitting areas located in the school hallways. These areas are TIS's *Intergenerational Reading Rooms*, the ICZ we would like to focus on.

IRR at TIS

TIS has had two principle homes during its 15 year existence, both old repurposed hospitals. The first was a multi-building merchant marine hospital where the school was eventually located in the main building that was shaped like an anchor. This unusual fluke and shank, spindly structure was a challenge for both classroom size and creating intergenerational spaces. TIS' current home is a boxed-like wing of a more traditionally shaped hospital that was completely gutted and allowed designing classrooms and special spaces for reading and story sharing from the building shell on out.

Regarding IRR the focus on the space was to create niches close to the classrooms so that students and mentors could move back and forth efficiently. Because of the large number of intergenerational pairs doing various kinds of activities the space was designed with comfortable chairs and tables to allow both reading and, as needed, writing and other activities. Moveable panels in some niches allowed subdividing the space. The space has good natural light and is wheel-chair accessible for older mentors with mobility and/or visual challenges. Direct face-to-face interaction minimized hearing impairments. Policies throughout the school including the intergenerational niches encourage quiet, respectful forms of communication. Some IRR spaces contain school mementos like school team trophies but in general decoration was kept to a minimum to avoid distraction.

Spatial dimensions of IRR

IRR are designed to look and function as "living rooms" or "family rooms" rather than as traditional "class rooms". Much attention is paid to the choice of furniture so that there is adequate support for seniors who might have more difficulty getting up and down (firm cushions and arm rests, for example). The spaces are intended to mimic the intimacy of reading together at home, while also meeting the requirements for student safety. Toward that end, the activities must be fully visible at all times, while simultaneously affording opportunities for one-to-one conversation and connection.

Reading mentors (and all mentors) receive training so that they understand what is and isn't part of their role. The goal is to create an equal relationship where the child is a partner. It is this relationship that determines how the reading session will go. The students generally choose the books for their session, and self-determine whether they will read to the mentor or have the mentor read to them. Mentors are highly encouraged to have rich discussions during the session, usually in response to the ideas contained in the reading material. The mentors' role is NOT to teach reading, but instead to instill a love of books.

In respect of mentors' varying physical capabilities, the spaces are handicapped accessible and assistance is available as needed from staff. IRR spaces are located adjacent to areas that are quite active during the school day, yet, they also provide a reasonable level of quiet so that mentors can hear the children even if they have mild hearing loss. Mentors with mild to moderate cognitive or memory difficulties can be accommodated in most cases, although sometimes such mentors are accompanied by an aide or family member.

Principles and practical tips

Drawing upon experiences tied to planning and implementing IRR at TIS, we present a few principles and practical tips for consideration when developing school-based IRR sites:

- Convenient location in areas that are clean, tidy, uncluttered, and homey.
- Components that facilitate and favor interaction, such as choice of sitting arrangements, inviting comfortable furniture, and adequate lighting.
- Availability of books for reading.
- Flexibility for multiple uses - reading, writing, chess, knitting: remember that while reading is the main purpose of IRR, sometimes formal and informal activities and encounters other than those around reading may nurture the intergenerational contact involved.



Figure 1: Flexibility in furniture layout.

- Handicapped accessible.
- Visible location so that IRR can be sort of "lighthouses" exemplifying intergenerational interaction publicly.
- Shared rules for usage.
- Careful scheduling so as to coordinate with literacy instruction: in-classroom activity and activities at IRR must be attuned.

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