

## Learning Together: Our Reflections on Connecting People and Practices in Intergenerational Meaning-Making Experiences

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*This article is a reflection on our experiences as researchers / research assistants in five different intergenerational settings. We envision the entangled nature of connections in intergenerational meaning making and explore this theme of connection as it occurs between people (children and elders) and across meaning-making practices. We identify three principles that support meaning making in both intergenerational and monogenerational settings.*

**Key words:** *intergenerational; literacy; literacy practices; relationships*

We began our careers teaching young children in the same small elementary school, and we recall fondly the school's tradition of inviting elders who were the children's grandparents or "grandfriends" to participate in classroom activities with our students for the day. We remember Grandfriends Day as a joyful celebration of learning that was eagerly anticipated by the school community. On this day, we strayed from our regular subject-based schedule and incorporated a variety of intergenerational activities with a focus on literacy (e.g., reading, singing, and creating art together). Though neither of us could name it at the time, these activities were opportunities for intergenerational, multimodal meaning making.

More than two decades have passed since we planned activities together for Grandfriends Day, and we are now teacher educators and educational researchers. Through

our research and practice, our understandings of literacy have broadened to include multimodal literacy, defined as processes of meaning making that can expand as people use and combine different modes and media (Walsh, 2011). Our understandings of intergenerational meaning making have also grown through our work as research assistants for Dr. Rachel Heydon on different studies of intergenerational curricula during our graduate studies<sup>1</sup>. These studies left an impact on us as educators, one that opened our eyes to new experiences, both research related and in our own practice.

In this paper, we focus our reflection on the theme of connection, for this theme recurred as we shared our experiences of intergenerational meaning making with each other. We saw relationships form as children and elders made meaning together. As intergenerational partners worked with different media, whether books, art materials, or iPads, opportunities to expand connections were realized. In this article we explore connections between people and practices in light of the literature and identify principles that can support meaning making in intergenerational and monogenerational settings.

### Intergenerational experiences

In this section, we provide an overview of the range of intergenerational experiences that form the basis of our reflection (See Table 1). We provide this context because we understand literacy as social practices that are dynamic and situated (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). We use the term *intergenerational experiences* to encompass elder-child interactions within program-type experiences that included elders and children. To situate our work within this special section on intergenerational learning, we distinguish between two types of experiences: *visiting* and *shared site*. For *visiting* experiences, elders and children travelled to intergenerational classes or an elder visited the children’s daycare. *Shared site* programs were located in facilities that were home to the elders and contained a preschool or daycare. We identify some key program features of each intergenerational experience that were uniquely designed to support meaning making and reflected the goals of the local educational partners. We offer information about the location, as well as background information about the elders and children, so that educators of young children might envision how intergenerational experiences could be adapted to support the learners in their particular contexts.

*Table 1. Overview of Intergenerational Experiences*

|   | <b>Experience Type</b>                        | <b>Location</b>              | <b>Features</b>   | <b>Child Participants</b>           | <b>Elder Participants</b>                         |
|---|---|------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|---|
| 1 | Visiting program                              | Rural Ontario, Canada        | Meaning-making opportunities through singing, art, and digital technologies | Kindergarten children (3.8–5 years) | Lived independently and travelled to the program  |
| 2 | Shared site program                           | Urban, United States         | Meaning-making opportunities through art and digital technologies           | Preschool children (4–5 years)      | Lived onsite and received assisted living support |
| 3 | Shared site program                           | Urban Ontario, Canada        | Meaning-making opportunities through art                                    | Preschool children (3–5 years)      | Lived onsite and received assisted living support |
| 4 | Elder volunteer visiting a daycare site       | Rural, New Brunswick, Canada | Shared book experience with elder conducting a weekly read aloud            | Preschool children (4 years)        | Lived independently and visited daycare           |
| 5 | Elder volunteer visiting a home-based daycare | Rural, New Brunswick, Canada | Various shared interactions   | Preschool children (4 years)        | Lived independently and visited daycare           |

*Lori’s intergenerational experiences*

I had the opportunity to participate in a rural visiting program where the kindergarten teacher facilitated the

intergenerational program with the support of the special education teacher, school principal, and research team. My role in the program was to support the educators in curriculum design and implementation and to document the intergenerational classes. My master's research documented some of the literacy learning opportunities within this program (McKee, 2013).

Several years later, I was part of a research team within an urban shared site. This site was intentionally designed to provide opportunities for intergenerational connections through its architectural design, which positioned the children's playground in a central courtyard, and through various programs that united the children and elders. My role in the program was to support the art teacher in integrating digital media (e.g., iPads and digital applications) into the art class in ways that could promote intergenerational relationships and meaning making (Heydon, McKee, & Daly, 2017).

### *Tara-Lynn's intergenerational experiences*

I had the opportunity to participate in an urban shared-site program where elders were invited to participate in weekly intergenerational art classes. The children attended daycare in a separate part of the building and walked over to meet the elders in their recreation room. My role in the program was to cofacilitate the initial cycle of art classes, with the onsite educators gradually taking over this leadership (Heydon, 2013), and to document the learning taking place.

Several years later, I joined a research team at the University of New Brunswick that was responsible for developing and implementing the province's first early years framework. Through this work, I had the opportunity to investigate two cases of intergenerational programming that promoted early literacy. The first case was weekly read-alouds at the local daycare by an elder affectionately called Granddad by community members (Scheffel, 2015). The second case focused on a collection of literacy artifacts (e.g., letters, emails, photographs) that illustrated the rich, communicative literacy experiences between the children of a home daycare and their elder neighbour.

## **Connecting through intergenerational meaning making**

To identify a focus for this paper, we shared stories of intergenerational meaning making from the experiences identified above. We recognized that although our experiences were diverse in location, people involved, and particular design, they resonated with each other as experiences focused on connecting generations and expanding meaning-making options for elders and children (e.g., Heydon, 2013). Next, we take a closer look at intergenerational meaning making and explore (1) connections between children and elders and (2) connections across meaning-making practices.

### *Connections between children and elders*

As we reflected individually and together about our intergenerational experiences, we continually returned to the importance of the relationships we observed between children and elders and the ways these relationships shaped the meaning making taking place. At times, these relationships formed and grew naturally, while at other times they were facilitated by an educator or volunteer. Lori recalls an example from the urban US experience:

Elder Jean was so focused on drawing an image of a cat that she didn't notice child Audriella copying her movements. Audriella held up her own sketch of a cat to show Jean, but Jean didn't appear to notice. A volunteer prompted, "Look! Audriella has a cat just like you!" Jean looked up and smiled.

We saw elders and children smiling and laughing while chatting and creating artifacts (e.g., digital storybooks,

works of art, letters). Within these exchanges, elders and children shared with each other about their personal interests and preferences. Across intergenerational experiences, we noticed that elders and children eagerly anticipated spending time with each other. Tara-Lynn reminisces about elder Granddad visiting a daycare site in New Brunswick:

When Granddad arrived at the daycare, the children stopped what they were doing and rushed to the entrance to share news from the past week. Stories floated across the room, reminding me of James Britton's (1970) words: "Literacy floats on a sea of talk." Granddad greeted all of the children by name even after just three visits. He noticed when someone was not feeling well or was absent. When a child arrived late, he said, "I missed you."

As we observed elders and children expressing care for each other through listening, telling stories, and creating artifacts, we recognized that the quality and depth of these intergenerational relationships were significant to the meaning making. Researchers Carson, Kobayashi, and Kuehne (2011) liken "social connections" to the "hub of a wheel" that links intergenerational learning opportunities (p. 410). Tara-Lynn recalls an example involving an elder neighbour of a home-based daycare in New Brunswick:

Intergenerational relationships grew over time through a series of written communications, including an invitation to bake Christmas cookies, followed by a letter that communicated that the elder had broken her leg, which led to another invitation to visit and add names/drawings to the elder's cast (Scheffel, 2013). Meaning-making opportunities emerged in response to a specific relationship with this elder neighbour, one that became central to this daycare's connections to the community.

While this example was emergent and responsive to the children and this specific elder, other intergenerational experiences included curricula that were intentionally designed to expand meaning-making opportunities and support intergenerational relationships (Heydon, 2013). Within these experiences, relationships grew as both a catalyst and a product of formal meaning-making activities and informal interactions (Carson et al., 2011). Lori recollects an example of the way relationships grew in the rural Ontario program:

Elder Betty was absent due to illness for the program's festive celebration, so her child partner, Koleson, joined in with another elder-child partnership and created a festive centrepiece. At the close of the class, the teacher prompted the children to give their centrepieces as gifts to the elder partners. Koleson picked up his centrepiece and walked over to his usual seat in search of his absent elder partner. Another elder noticed this and was so touched by Koleson's care for Betty that she offered to deliver the gift to Betty's home.

In revisiting these examples, we recognized that the intergenerational relationships gave life to the meaning-making practices. As the elders and children cared about and for one another and created artifacts, literacies were "imbued with the weight of relationships" (Heydon, 2013, p. 17), and meaning-making practices flourished.

#### *Connections across elders' and children's meaning-making practices*

Next, we look at elders' and children's meaning-making practices within these supportive intergenerational relationships. These meaning-making practices created space for elders and children to attempt or adapt practices, which Brian Cambourne (1988) identifies as the condition of approximation. Each partner drew from their "funds of knowledge," or resources gained outside of the intergenerational experience (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), to contribute to the meaning-making activities. At times, educators or program facilitators suggested these supports, but often elders and children spontaneously supported each other. Tara-Lynn remembers Granddad's visit to the daycare:

When Granddad was conducting a read-aloud, I was struck by the way that a young child spontaneously adjusted her position on the carpet, without interrupting Granddad, so that she could better see the illustrations of the picturebook.

Lori similarly recalls an example from rural Ontario:

As the elders and children collaborated to create digital storybooks, the elders read the textual prompts to the children and the children tapped the screen to select pictures and record audio. As elders and children took turns, they showed each other what they understood about using the app, and the elder-child duos determined how each partner could contribute to the story.

In our reflections, we noted the reciprocal support that elders and children provided for each other. As elders and children exchanged practices, they each contributed in different ways and worked as “equal partners” in meaning making (Carson et al., 2011, p. 415). Within these practices, *both* elders *and* young children were positioned as capable meaning makers, in contrast to societal views that at times position elders and young children as less capable than adults (Gamliel & Gabay, 2014). The children’s practices were valued for what they were and not positioned as steps to achieve adult forms of literacy (Gillen & Hall, 2013), and elders’ practices were viewed as relevant rather than outdated (McAdams, 1993).

As equal partners, elders and children learned *from* and *with* each other. Tara-Lynn recalls an example from the urban Ontario experience:

The “intergenerational hands” art lesson (Heydon, 2013) has left a lasting impact on me for the way the elders and children physically supported the tracing of one another’s hands. The elders took time to point out the details of their hands, from the wrinkles to the rings they were wearing. Some named the flowers in the bouquet they were tracing and listened to the children’s observations of the flowers. The children similarly helped their elder partners to add details or to draw for their elder partners as they pointed to the details they wanted to show on the paper.

The children and elders took turns guiding each other, sharing their meaning-making practices and inviting their partner’s input as they created artifacts. We observed young children learning from more experienced members of the language or culture (e.g., Gregory, Long, & Volk, 2004), such as when using print-based resources, as well as children leading the elders, in particular, when using digital resources (Carson et al., 2011). Within this exchange, new literacy practices emerged that bore traces of the children’s and elders’ literacy practices (e.g., Gregory et al., 2004).

We also noted examples of when the learning opportunities within the intergenerational experiences were connected with learning opportunities and experiences outside the program. The intergenerational experiences functioned as a *third space*, where elders and children shared discourses and practices of school, home, and community as they created artifacts (Moje et al., 2004). At times, the curriculum intentionally created opportunities for elders and children to connect learning opportunities within the intergenerational experiences to their experiences outside of the program. Lori recalls an example from rural Ontario:

In the digital storybook activity, the children learned how to use the iPads at school, then brought them home and took photos of the special people, places, and things in their lives. The children brought the iPads to the intergenerational class and showed the elders their pictures, and the elders supported the children in using the images to create a digital storybook. As elder Martha viewed her child partner Karl’s images from home, she recognized the child’s parent as a relative, which seemed to strengthen the intergenerational relationship already forged.

Though the activity was planned to cross boundaries of school, home, and intergenerational classes, it supported the intergenerational relationships and learning in unanticipated ways. The boundaries of the program were permeable (e.g., Jewitt, 2008) and allowed for connections of practices and people.

## Discussion

Our reflections highlight examples that show the ways that intergenerational relationships were “inseparable” (McKee & Heydon, 2015, p. 237) and entangled with meaning-making practices. Figure 1 illustrates the entangled nature of connections in intergenerational meaning making as it occurs between people and across meaning-making practices. Our word cloud is constructed from keywords generated as we analyzed our ideas for this paper. These words represent what we saw, what we felt, and what we experienced in intergenerational experiences, with the size of the word indicating the words that recurred most often in our stories. The word cloud shows that the growth of these connections was not linear, or cause-and-effect processes, but was interconnected with each other and expanded in diverse ways in response to the particular setting, people involved, and program focus. Through these entangled connections, generations were united, assumptions of young children’s and elders’ capabilities were challenged, and approximations of learning were supported.



Figure 1. Entangled connections.

Our reflections also speak to the importance of intergenerational experiences for elders, young children, educators, and researchers. While we celebrate the value of intergenerational experiences, we also recognize the impact of these experiences on our practice as educators within monogenerational settings. As we consider this impact, we offer the following key principles as central to supporting meaning making in intergenerational settings and beyond:

- *Relationships are an essential, integral part of meaning-making practices.* Barton and Hamilton (2000) remind us that literacy practices are “purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices” (p. 8). As educators, we can create opportunities for our students to engage in social connections that can

support them in learning *with* and *from* others, including peers, elders, or other adults such as educators and parents (Carson et al., 2011). These connections allow for all learners to use and share meaning-making practices (Cambourne, 1998).

- *All people, regardless of age or ability, can be meaning makers.* Our experiences illustrate the ways that asset-oriented pedagogies recognize each person's funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992). As educators, we can design activities that recognize our students' capabilities and extend from our students' funds of knowledge. Within these activities, we can accept learners' approximations and convey the message that mistakes are part of learning (Cambourne, 1988).
- *Sharing practices enriches meaning making.* Moje et al.'s (2004) notion of *third space* suggests that allowing outside-of-school practices to flow into classrooms can extend meaning-making opportunities. As educators, we can build bridges for meaning makers to share practices across home, school, and community. We can invite community members (e.g., elders) into the classroom, or find intentional ways for children to share experiences and practices learned outside of the classroom. Though we recognize that learning can be supported through singular experiences (e.g., Grandfriends Day visits), we advocate for ongoing opportunities for sharing practices (e.g., Granddad coming to visit on an ongoing basis).

We view these principles as interconnected, much like the entangled nature of connections within Figure 1. The ways that these principles can come together will depend on particular contexts. With this in mind, we invite other educators, regardless of context, to consider how these principles may support learners and create spaces where meaning-making practices can be shared and enriched.

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