InterGenNS: Understanding Intergenerational Initiatives in the North Shore, British Columbia

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Introduction

This community engaged research project, InterGenNS Project, aims to assess current intergenerational initiatives in the North Shore of Metro Vancouver, and identify challenges and opportunities associated with these initiatives. This project has been undertaken as there is significant interest about intergenerational programs and initiatives in various community organizations and community members in the North Shore. A local steering committee was formed that includes multiple organizations providing or supporting intergenerational activities. The members of the steering committee identified the need to enhance awareness and investigate the current state of intergenerational programs in the North Shore community. Moreover, the InterGenNS steering committee has a diverse list of representatives from a larger community group consisting of 20+ organizations, which includes North Shore Community Resource Society, HollyBurn Family Services Society, Silver Harbour Seniors' Activity Centre, North Vancouver Library (also representing the libraries from the District of North Vancouver and the District of West Vancouver), Canadian Federation of University Women - North Shore Branch, and British Columbia Council for Families. This project's findings can contribute to development of resource and support for existing intergenerational initiatives and potentially stimulate and generate new ones. The goal of such initiatives are reducing social isolation and loneliness, enhancing social capital, community capacity, cultural connectedness, social awareness, and social cohesion among various population groups in the North Shore community.

The North Shore is essentially experienced as an island, as its geography is unique with two bridges for entry and exit from the core Vancouver Metro area. This geographical context has contributed to the community in being naturally close-knit and well-connected. However, the elevations in the natural landscape of the locale pose challenges for mobility, especially for older

adults. Nonetheless, there is a high concentration of older adult residents in the North Shore. In 2016, there were 35,385 people over the age of 65, or almost 20 percent of the population of the three North Shore municipalities demonstrating a large older adult population in this area (Coates, 2020).

Methods

Data Collection

The InterGenNS steering committee identified 10 individuals representing multiple intergenerational initiatives in the North Shore as potential study participants to be interviewed. We aimed to conduct 6-8 interviews from the larger list generated as part of contingency planning. The members of the steering committee have existing relationships with the identified contacts, who have previous, existing, or planned involvement in intergenerational initiatives. The research assistant (graduate student in the SFU Department of Gerontology) in this project and the steering committee representative developed a recruitment message to be sent out by email to the contacts. The message included the goals and objectives of the InterGenNS Project and a description of the interview process. The steering committee representative sent out this initial email to the targeted individuals and those expressing interest were connected to the research assistant to schedule an interview.

Seven interviews were conducted with a total of 8 participants as one of the interviews consisted of two participants. A diverse set of organizations were included that represented the variation in the North Shore population groups. The individuals who participated in the semi-structured interviews represented the following groups: (1) North Shore Community Resources Society, (2), Parkgate Community Services Society, (3) Hollyburn Family Services, (4) Capilano

University, (5) North Shore Neighbourhood House, (6) North Shore Public Libraries, (7) and Squamish Nation.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom virtual platform, audio recorded using two separate recording devices, and were approximately 45-90 minutes in length. All participants had their cameras and audio settings on; therefore, allowing the interviewer to identify nonverbal and verbal expressions of the participants adding to the richness of the data collected. The research assistant conducted the interviews with all participants. An interview guide was developed by the SFU Research Team and the InterGenNS steering committee. The steering committee provided guidance and feedback in development of the interview guide, which included twelve questions that were neutral, open-ended, singular, and clear, aligning with Patton's (2015) recommendations. The list of questions served as a guide, as it is important to explore unexpected and novel topics that may arise during the interview allowing flexibility (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). This was especially important for this project, as each program representative had unique perspectives and experiences; therefore, tailoring questions responsive to their experiences and organizations was essential to gain a richer understanding.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process of this study was informed by a constructivist grounded theory approach in which data collection and analysis are flexible, and which includes a reflexive meaning making process between the participants and the researcher (Charmaz, 2014). The audio recordings of the interviews were listened to by the research assistant for identification of salient issues, which were selectively transcribed and analyzed thematically. Therefore, the themes identified are analytical and interpretive contributing to a higher level of conceptualization of the findings. In addition, memos were used during the data analysis process to achieve a more robust

analysis. Five themes were identified: *type of intergenerational activity, participant populations, impact of initiative, challenges organizations face, and opportunities for growth*. These themes are presented below.

Findings

Type of Intergenerational Activity

A variety of intergenerational initiatives was discussed with the study participants. The intergenerational initiatives' main foci are: living conditions, literacy opportunities (reading and writing), arts-based activities (singing, music, and poetry), technology programming, academic support programming, all age volunteering, agricultural learning, advisory committee, service learning opportunities, cultural traditions, and support for daily and seasonal tasks. All intergenerational initiatives were based on the ability and capacity of the relevant age group of the program participants. Although there is a wide variety of intergenerational initiatives operating at multiple levels, they aim to create bi-directional mentorships and meaningful relationships to improve the intergenerational program participants' quality of life. For example, an interview participant noted:

> "I asked the students straight out in the choir 'Why are you coming here? Are you coming here to suck up to your teacher and get a better grade, like is this a volunteer position you take because you wanna get a better role or part in your other 5 choirs?'. They said, 'No. My grandma had dementia and there was nothing like this for her. And these people are cool and were learning from each other'."

There seemed to be conflicting views between the importance of purposeful programming and organic programming among the community partners. Purposeful programming provides an opportunity to generate intergenerational relationships in a more organized fashion between the members in the community, and without them, it is unlikely that

different generations will have much reason to interact. However, it is important to note that intergenerational programs have a start and an end, they require funding, and struggle maintaining sustainability. Therefore, it is important to create a supportive intergenerational environment in a wider social context by looking at programming, events, and spontaneous opportunities. The study participants explained that even if intergenerational connections are organic, it is imperative that they are recognized, supported, and encouraged. Purposeful programming with an intergenerational lens provides a unique vehicle to create an age-friendly intergenerational community that is organic. One interviewee described this issue as follows:

> "When I think about intergenerational opportunities. I don't think about an event. Yes, we had this choir concert, but the process getting to that was as important or more important than the event itself. Having and event or having a program to me doesn't sound um, it doesn't give credence to the long-lasting impact. A program is a 10-week program, that is not what we are wanting to create. The goal is not a program. The goal is community not a program. The pathway is intergenerational, the tool are multiple events, programs, or opportunities to foster an intergenerational community."

Participants identified that intergenerational connections can manifest in a variety of settings in the North Shore. Common spaces where initiatives took place included community centres, virtually, organization building/space, recreation centres, senior centres, care facilities, churches, and even outdoors. Being immersed in the outdoors can be considered a unique opportunity for intergenerational initiatives. Since the start of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, more programs have switched to being virtually available which is a new medium for interaction that is being utilized. The library community has a unique term -- "outside the library walls", which includes outdoors, off-site, and virtual opportunities for programming.

The physical setting of a program can actively foster interactions among generations. The characteristics of the built environment of the program venue can directly affect how the individuals effectively and meaningfully interact with one another. The built environmental

quality and the functions of the setting can facilitate interaction among those who are in that location. For example, one participant explained that the building that she works in is intergenerational itself because it was intentionally created so different generations would cross paths with one another providing a unique opportunity to create connections within the space. This study participant mentioned:

> "Our building is unique as it was built intergenerationally. The flow of people through the building to do the things that they want to do automatically leads to different individuals from different generation interacting and crossing paths just because of the architecture."

Participant Populations

All community partners aimed to target younger and older age groups for the intergenerational initiatives. However, some of the programs were mutigenerational including very young ages, adults, and older adults. In addition, the younger age groups encompassed infants, toddlers, children, youth, young adults, and parents. Interestingly, for a particular program, the older group were teens as they were assisting children with their homework and reading comprehension. Therefore, intergenerational programs do not always include older adults. The intergenerational activities included both familial and non-familial connections.

All study participants identified that their programs and services were a good representation of the North Shore community. However, certain groups were identified as over- and underrepresented. For instance, fathers, males, individuals with poor mobility, non-English speaking individuals, new residents, and First Nation groups were underrepresented. On the other hand, women were the most overrepresented group. Most of the programs that were discussed aim to reach vulnerable populations such as those residing in long term care, those with dementia, First Nations, the oldest old adults, low socioeconomic status, which is pivotal in

intergenerational program opportunities as these were limitations within the current literature

identified by Patille and Chaudhury (2020). Here is an excerpt from an interview regarding this

issue.

> Interviewer: "Why did you decide to look at new mothers and older adults in care
> facilities?"
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> Participant: "Because of the isolation component. So, when moms are home on mat
> leave, with their babies, they can feel quite isolated. And the seniors in the care homes
> feel isolated, they don't always have their familiar visiting them for sure, a lot of times
> they are by themselves or do not really have anybody. There is isolation between these
> two groups and there are life changes. Connecting them makes a lot of sense. The parent
> is looking for something to connect them with the community, while a lot of the parents
> do not have their parents or grandparents around. A lot of people don't have that, they
> live far away or whatever it is. So, when you connect these two folks together it just
> made a lot of sense, they both kind of need each other. Parent needs that, seniors need
> them, it makes so much sense to connect the two together."

Impact of Initiatives

Intergenerational initiatives provide a unique opportunity to bring generations together,

develop relationships with one another and have the potential to change preconceived

perspectives or stereotypical views. These initiatives foster younger and older groups to interact

and share opinions, stories, and experiences which may counter ageism and stereotypes. In fact,

the First Nations communities have been closely connecting generations for many years and this

culture of transference is foundational to the development of many intergenerational initiatives in

such communities. Teachings, lessons, awareness, oral history, and the passing down of cultural

knowledge and traditions enables generations to connect with one another. Nonetheless, this

cultural norm is also relevant for broader communities, as elders can share their life experiences

and lessons to younger generations, so they are better equipped in dealing with issues and

decisions in their own lives. Also, the impact of intergenerational activities is potentially not only

for the short-term, but also in the longer term supported by the formed relationships, perspectives gained, and knowledge acquired. An effective intergenerational program may demonstrate to a child who does not have any grandparents that older adults have a wealth of knowledge and understanding of various topics. In turn, an older adult might realize the interests and challenges of younger people after being part of an intergenerational initiative. These lessons and changes in perspectives can sustain with them for the rest of their lives, and passed on to generations through teaching, parenting or familial values. One study participant eloquently described:

> "For example, a statement by a senior saying oh our youth are all entitled, and they don't work very hard. Or a young person sees someone with grey hair who is confused, and they think they are a waste of space. Those kinds of things are pretty much eliminated when you provide exposure and the opportunity for interaction to produce a relationship between generations. When I see one of our members who participated in the choir concert, like on stage with, like 600-700 people in an audience and he walks off the stage and he's like 'WE GOT A STANDING O!' And the youth are high fiving him and celebrating, he is smiling. That is real. That's not just a moment, it's a moment that actually lasts for much longer than just a moment. But you don't get an opportunity to have that moment and that lasting moment if you don't provide an opportunity to see what people are able to do. Instead of just seeing the news that says kids are lazy or whatever people see and hear. You undermine those messages by providing real opportunities. The ripple effects on the youth forever like that is what changes the world."

The impact of intergenerational activities can potentially go beyond the immediate program participant and serve as the vehicle that provides an opportunity to create an age-friendly and intergenerationally welcoming community. The initiatives may benefit the participants by focusing on purposeful activities that create value and meaning as they focus on ability instead of disability. Therefore, intergenerational initiatives have the potential to provide positive impact well beyond the participant level. Here is an excerpt highlighting this aspect.

> Participant: "I see parents of day care kids who are picking up their kids form daycare and, one of their kids are waving at one of our members and the parents are like who are

you waving at? And the kids starts to go on and on about Bob and how they met and what he likes. These programs provide the opportunity to form connections like this and create a discussion between generations to close a gap that exists between them"

The community partners identified aspects that enhanced the impact of initiatives.

Purposeful interaction and personal contact among generations provide more opportunities for meaningful and lasting relationships to form. It is important that organizations welcome and consider ongoing improvements and expansions instead of getting comfortable in their routines and not prioritizing innovation as this may translate into individuals slipping through the cracks. Moreover, applying an intergenerational approach to social programming and initiatives in the community, as much as possible, uniquely fosters an intergenerational community as the age groups are not viewed in silos. Therefore, an intergenerational approach supports continuity across all age groups and provides a deeper connection in the community and among organizations. Member-driven programs provide a unique opportunity for generations to interact, innovate, and come together. Creating programs that are led by participants where staff and volunteers have a more supportive role creates valuable and purposeful bonds between generations. As one participant pointed out:

> "Something that I think we have done really well that is not necessarily program specific, is looking through an intergenerational lens. So, we look at why at the childcare do you only have child information if the whole family is dropping off? Why don't you have mutigenerational seniors' programs, bus trips? That kind of thing. So, we are really focused on that! Instead of here's a program and get a bunch of teenagers to sit with seniors we want to foster an intergenerational environment that is valuable."

Challenges

Community organizations identified several challenges that impact intergenerational initiatives. The study participants identified limited time, resources and capacity, which in turn limits their ability to expand and improve current intergenerational activities and programming

as challenges. Additionally, program evaluation was identified as extremely important issue; however, poor evaluation skills, tools, and resources prevent robust evaluation of current intergenerational programs and initiatives. Moreover, the sustainability and expansion of intergenerational initiatives were identified as a challenge due to inadequate long-term funding. The location of the North Shore poses unique challenge as 15% of the North Shore population does not have access to WiFi, making it difficult to promote and increase awareness of opportunities in a digital format. The location of a few intergenerational programs and initiatives also pose mobility issues due to the nature of the landscape. Two interview excerpts addressing this issue are noted here.

> "There is interested in evaluations there just needs to be a push, it is on the radar. There needs to be kinda like a cheerleader for evaluation for it to happen because a lot of staff they don't have the skills or haven't done it before or they are waiting for some to kinda give them the evaluation and go and do it. So, I think that it defiantly needs a cheerleader."

> "We collect some data, but I'd like to be able to do a depression scale with families and caregivers and our members there are many things I'd like to measure. Because I know the impact, I know the impact on our families who stand at the door begging that we stay open and doing whatever we need to do, I see our member who comes on Thursday being less depressed than she is on Tuesday because the time is too long between sessions because she has forgotten that this is part of her routine. We want to improve this but need support to do so."

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted the in-person programs in the North Shore, especially intergenerational initiatives. In fact, most of the intergenerational programming has completely stopped or moved to a virtual platform and/or has reduced in capacity. Language barriers have also been identified as a challenge by community organizations. Awareness is lacking about available training opportunities for staff and volunteers who are involved in intergenerational initiatives. It is important to mention that as coaching is ongoing, learning

through experience, and reflecting before and after initiatives is also required. Therefore, it is important that intergenerational training opportunities include ongoing application and situational components as this creates a unique opportunity to utilize the knowledge in a practical sense after training takes place. The strategic plan and the goals of upper management of the related organizations impact the creation and implementation of intergenerational initiatives. Therefore, it is important that the potential impact and importance of intergenerational opportunities are discussed at this level as well. This issue illustrated by three participants.

> "I think there are other things we could do to build intergenerational connections; I think we haven't put as much energy into the intergenerational component recently just because of COVID."

> "There is probably a gap there about learning specifically about specific needs and challenges pertaining to age groups. We probably should have training for volunteers and staff for learning differences among ages. I understand the importance as it comes up at conferences, but no action is taken afterwards."

> "I can refer [staff or volunteers] to a bunch of resources, we have a library. I personally am a big believer in just in time learning. So, I believe in the model of coaching and support. Volunteers and staff must be open to having a conversation about going about situations in multiple ways and learning from them… [I] teach people in a different way about ability and disability, focusing on ability primarily. What we know about them and what they like, who they are, and that's how we are going to interact with them, as a person."

Opportunities for Growth

All community partners shared their views on opportunities for growth and expansion pertaining to intergenerational initiatives. Technology was a focal point of intergenerational program generation and implementation between youth and older adults to bridge the digital divide and provide opportunities for older adults to feel more comfortable with technology, while interacting with other generations. This oftentimes linked to the current COVID-19 pandemic as many families and friends are connecting virtually; therefore, intergenerational technology-based

programs can bring loved ones closer together during challenging times by actively improving quality of life.

> Participant: "We have now incorporated technology into the in-person program more because of how well-received the virtual program was. It also digs conversations deeper and is more interesting."

In addition, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations have been doing their best to transfer in-person programming onto online platforms, which would not have been done without the restrictions in place. Virtual programming has provided a unique opportunity to reach highly vulnerable populations, e.g., those who are homebound, have mobility issues, and have limited transportation access. Intergenerational initiatives can also take place outside of traditional indoor environments by reimaging the venue for interaction including outdoor spaces. In addition, the built environment of a setting has the potential to facilitate intergenerational interactions and relationships because of the movement of age groups in a building.

> Participant: "COVID has encouraged us to be more familiar with virtual platforms now."
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> Participant: "The silver lining to COVID is that we have created more accessible programs that are virtual for someone who may not have been able to attend that programs for instance. We are reaching people in a new way. We hope to continue virtual programs even when in-person resumes."

Creating more opportunities for training and understanding the changes that take place during the life course is of interest in the North Shore community. However, in-person and hands-on teaching should be integrated with training and learning sessions that focus on different age groups. In addition, many of the community partners are looking at creating subsidized opportunities because they want to limit the financial barrier associated with intergenerational initiatives.

The forming of partnerships has the potential to create more intergenerational initiatives in the North Shore. If intergenerational activities are not a priority for the organizations' strategic plans, it will unlikely to happen. Having community encouragement and support between organizations can create awareness and creation of more intergenerational initiatives. In addition, since there is community interest based on the formation of the InterGenNS Steering Committee, this could be a reason to expand or implement more intergenerational initiatives in the North Shore. It is important that connections be made between relevant or interested organizations' leadership and steering committee members to put intergenerational initiatives on the agenda. There needs to be increased awareness about intergenerational initiatives and community driven support to facilitate interest and implementation of opportunities in the North Shore. Since 2015, North Vancouver has been identified as an age-friendly community; however, there is little push from authorities and decision-makers to implement intergenerational initiatives.

> Participant: "Intergenerational aspects are not a driving force, we don't do things just because it intergenerational, it ends up being intergenerational and fitting within the community. We are not being asked to create intergenerational programs and it is not in the strategic plan, there needs to be institutional buy-in"

Creating an intergenerational coordinator role affiliated with the North Shore Community Resources could serve as a critical catalyst to increase awareness and partnerships pertaining to intergenerational initiatives in the North Shore. This position would actively keep intergenerational initiative on the agenda of various organizations and groups, share information, educate community about intergenerational opportunities, and bring an intergenerational lens to meetings and existing committees. Community partners noted that they do not support duplication of resources. An intergenerational coordinator would be in charge of a central resource hub, intergenerational inventory in the North Shore, and create a website and media

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content to share in the North Shore. In addition, the person in this role can work to create intergenerational opportunities for underrepresented groups such as males, advocate for intergenerational involvement through volunteering and service learning. Volunteering and service-learning opportunities provide a unique way for students to assist in grant writing, fundraising, evaluations of initiatives through volunteering, course credit, coops, or internships. This may create also partnerships between organizations and academics, which would support the needed evaluation of initiatives. The role and scope of an intergenerational coordinator was mentioned highlighted by several participants, as exemplified in the following interview excerpts.

"This is a really good way to make intergenerational initiatives sustainable as it keeps it on agenda and supports information sharing"

"Having a role like this provides a reason to put intergenerational on the agenda!"

"Having a coordinator who supports intergenerational activities when we know that they increase community would be great. They could share initiatives in the North Shore by gathering info and sending it out to others in the community."

Conclusion

This project examined the current state of intergenerational initiatives in the North Shore to aid in providing directions for future growth in this area. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with community organization representatives to capture their experiences and perspectives pertaining to intergenerational initiatives. Five major themes were identified: type of intergenerational activity, participant populations, initiative impact, challenges organizations face, opportunities for growth. The findings of this project provide a strong foundation and direction for further investigation to strengthen already existing and future intergenerational opportunities in the North Shore.

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