INTRODUCTION: INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING

In European societies, demographic, societal and economic change – such as the decline of extended families, longer expectancy and the ageing of the population, rural decline, urbanization, increased geographical mobility, complex transportation infrastructures, the emergence of ICTs and the internet – have contributed to different generations becoming more distanced and/or more segregated from each other. On the one hand, these forms of geographic, social and cultural separation can lead to unrealistic, sometimes negative, stereotypes between the generations and a decrease in positive social exchanges between them when there are fewer meeting-points in day-to-day life. On the other hand, the different generations may possess resources that are valuable to each other and which they can share in areas of concern directly affecting their lives. Intergenerational learning is thus perhaps one way of addressing the significant demographic changes we are experiencing in European societies and the generation gap in ‘greying’ societies. It can involve people from different generations becoming engaged in learning from each other and learning together. In this respect, intergenerational learning can make an important contribution to lifelong learning throughout individual life courses, where the generations work together in communicating and acquiring knowledge, skills, and sensitivities. Intergenerational learning can foster reciprocal learning relationships between different generations and help to develop social capital and social cohesion in ageing societies, for both the young and the old. It can become a strategy for seeking to enhance intergenerational solidarity through ‘intergenerational learning practices’.

Intergenerational learning practices can be increasingly identified in policy documents, policy-making, policies, programmes and projects at the European, national, regional and local levels. These all involve deliberate and sustained efforts to socially organize the reciprocal communication and acquisition of knowledge, skills and sensitivities between generations. This was most recently the case during the European Year 2012 which was devoted to active ageing and intergenerational solidarity. It is possible to identify three main types of intergenerational learning practices as transfer, transactional, and transformative learning. Transfer learning concerns linear communication and acquisition of knowledge, skills, and sensitivities between generations, for example when youngsters teach ICT skills to older people, and older people tell stories about their lives to kids in schools. Transactional learning involves the negotiation of...
voluntary and mutual exchange between the generations of knowledge, skills, and sensitivities through learning exchanges, voluntary associations, clubs, and churches. Transformational learning refers to the mutual development of knowledge, skills and sensitivities between the generations in self-organized learning communities based upon commonly shared problems in day-to-day life in streets, neighbourhoods, communities, action groups, and social movements. In some measure these forms of intergenerational correspond to the widely accepted distinction between formal, non-formal and informal learning. Transfer learning as intergenerational learning activities in schools can be regarded as formal learning. Transactional learning can be seen as out-of-school intergenerational learning activities in the form of non-formal learning. Finally, transformational learning understood as intergenerational learning activities in communities can be regarded as informal learning.

RESEARCH ON INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING

The frame of reference adopted here is based upon two generic documents which offer a common framework for the analysis of intergenerational learning practices (Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008; Schmidt & Tippelt, 2009).

Intergenerational Learning as ‘Family Learning’

The most longstanding focus in the research literature is concerned with the tradition of intergenerational solidarity within (extended) families, and thus with an emphasis on the context of ‘family learning’. Within this perspective, intergenerational learning between the generations is viewed, on the one hand, to a large degree in terms of the informal learning and the contribution of older family members, such as parents and grandparents, to the ‘intergenerational transmission’ of knowledge, skills and values and the learning by children and youth in formal educational settings, for example, literacy. On the other hand, research is also devoted to the informal transmission of what children learn in formal education upon the knowledge, skills, and values of the older generation, for example, in the context of environmental education. The emphasis in this kind of research is upon ‘cognitive gains’ in terms of knowledge and skills, together with ‘affective’ spill-overs, such as attitudes and values, arising from these forms of informal intergenerational transmission.

Intergenerational Service Learning

From the 1970s onwards, secondly, there has been a significant emphasis in research into the effects of intergenerational learning in terms of ‘intergenerational programmes’. These programmes are generally recognized in the research literature as ‘intergenerational service learning’ based upon intergenerational transfers of knowledge, skills and values in formal educational institutions. Much of the research on ‘intergenerational service learning’ focuses on how encounters