

Non-Technical Summary: Intergenerational learning between children and grandparents in East London

SUMMARY

General aim

The study set out to investigate learning events taking place between young children and grandparents in London's East End, both in activities where older people have traditionally provided support (such as storytelling) and in the newer areas of information and communication technology where children have competences which their grandparents would like to access. This area of family learning is growing in significance as grandparents are increasingly taking on a childcare role in different extended family structures. Grandparents' own learning needs must also be taken into account in the government's lifelong learning agenda.

A survey was conducted with families at Hermitage Primary School to investigate the type and spread of learning activities in which 3-6 year old children participated with their grandparents. Video-recorded observations of typical activities, and interviews with grandparents and children, were then carried out with families from the two main linguistic groups: Sylheti/Bengali-speaking families of Bangladeshi origin, and monolingual English-speaking families.

Objectives

1. To explore the reciprocity of teaching and learning taking place between grandparents and grandchildren from different cultural backgrounds in East London
2. To investigate the further potential of intergenerational exchange
3. To consider the implications for theories of sociocultural learning
4. To investigate the particular role of the computer as a tool for intergenerational learning
5. To facilitate family involvement in children's learning, and to facilitate lifelong learning through intergenerational involvement in computer tasks

Findings and most significant achievements

Reciprocity of teaching and learning

Grandparents from both Bangladeshi and Anglo backgrounds act as a multidimensional resource for their grandchildren's learning. By engaging in a wide variety of activities with young children, ranging from storyreading to cooking, gardening and visits to the park, grandparents support the growth of children's linguistic, cultural and scientific knowledge. In return, interaction between children and grandparents stimulates learning for the older generation, for example concerning ICT and English as a second language.

The further potential of intergenerational exchange

Grandparents play a particular role in children's learning which needs to be recognised and built on by schools. Firstly, grandparents often consider themselves responsible for specific areas of learning, such as passing on linguistic and cultural knowledge. Secondly, the relationship between young children and grandparents has certain characteristics that differentiate it from the parent-child relationship or the teacher-pupil relationship, creating a context for learning which encourages risk-taking and exploration. These characteristics include:

- mutual vulnerability, leading to a greater sense of equality between adult and child
- more time available for grandparents to devote to activities with children
- a flexible approach by grandparents to children's achievement.

The ongoing, individually-tailored support offered by grandparents for children's learning is likely to become even more valuable in an era when parents are experiencing increasing pressure from work outside the home and schools are using more whole-class teaching in order to meet the demands of the curriculum.

Implications for theories of sociocultural learning

The intergenerational exchange is a syncretic process in which the knowledge of grandparents and children is combined, leading to new forms of linguistic and cultural learning. The exchange is facilitated by a two-way development of understanding, 'synergy', which has previously been noted in sibling learning relationships.

Analysis of video-recorded learning events has clarified how synergy operates, by highlighting the multimodal aspects of interaction between children and grandparents. Learning involves an interplay between the communicative modes of language, touch, gesture and gaze. Touch has emerged as a particularly significant means of communication, used by grandparents and grandchildren to build a secure and confident relationship and to negotiate kinaesthetic learning.

The role of the computer as a tool for intergenerational learning

Grandparents are often introduced to computer activities through the expertise of their grandchildren. At the same time, young children need the support of their grandparents to structure the learning event, maintain concentration and accomplish tasks relying on linguistic and cultural knowledge. The combination of input from older and younger participants enables both to profit from this powerful learning tool. Educational software or internet sites enhance the joint activities grandparents and children already do together, such as exploring the natural world, or games involving literacy or numeracy.

Facilitating family involvement in children's learning, and facilitating lifelong learning through intergenerational involvement in computer tasks

A dissemination event on 'Learning at home with grandparents' held at Hermitage Primary School enabled teachers, families and community organisations to exchange ideas on how children's home experience complements work in the classroom.

Our study has revealed interest from grandparents in using computers. Several, particularly the Bangladeshi grandparents, had their first opportunity to do so through the project. Their response indicated a potential to develop knowledge and expertise, especially if they were to have access to software or websites in their own language. Hermitage Primary School now plans to offer ICT workshops for grandparents, including tutoring and resources in Bengali.

Dissemination

As well as the feedback to users mentioned above, papers have been given at international conferences in Spain, the USA and the UK, at two ESRC seminar series (Language Brokering and Multilingual Europe), and as part of the European Framework 5 Network on Grandparenthood.

Articles will appear in local papers *East End Life* and *Tower Hamlets Recorder*, and contacts have been made with *Daily Express*, *TES* and Radio 5 Live for future features. Materials will be contributed to the Basic Skills Agency website and the TTA *Multiverse* website on diversity and achievement.

Impacts on policy and practice

Through in-service training and publications for teachers around the country and internationally, we are encouraging a perspective which sees grandparents as key partners in home-school liaison. We will also be promoting this approach via family learning networks, and emphasising the need to give grandparents access to ICT facilities, leading to positive outcomes for their own learning and that of their grandchildren. With the Ethnic Minority Achievement Service at the DfES, we will be discussing the implications for current policy programmes such as the framework for teacher training arising from the recently published DfES document *Aiming High*, and the National Primary Strategy.