



Developing Intergenerational Learning Programs Between Older Adults and Young Children: Insights from John Dewey's Educational Philosophy

Yi-Huang Shih

Center of Teacher Education, Minghsin University of Science and Technology, Hsinchu, Taiwan

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Published Online: 28 June 2025	The accelerating global trends of population aging and declining birth rates have deepened the generational divide, leading to a fragmentation of intergenerational relationships. As traditional family and community networks continue to weaken, interactions between older adults and young children have diminished, adversely impacting cultural transmission and social cohesion. Intergenerational Learning (IGL) offers a promising pedagogical approach to fostering mutual development and enhancing social connectedness across generations. Grounded in John Dewey's educational philosophy, the following implications can be drawn for the design of intergenerational learning programs between older adults and young children: (1) the themes should be grounded in the shared interests of older adults and young children; (2) the curriculum should be closely connected to the lived experiences of both generations; and (3) the program should aim to foster the development of thinking abilities in both older adults and young children.
Corresponding Author: Yi-Huang Shih	
KEYWORDS: Intergenerational Learning, Older Adults, Young Children	

1. INTRODUCTION

Countries and regions in East Asia including South Korea, Macao, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China have the lowest fertility rates and the highest life expectancy in the world. Low fertility and population aging have emerged as critical demographic challenges confronting many countries worldwide. These shifts not only reshape labor markets and constrain economic growth but also exert profound influence on family dynamics, educational systems, and the provision of social care. In light of these transformations, there is an urgent need to reconceptualize intergenerational relationships and explore innovative strategies that foster meaningful engagement across age groups. Among such approaches,

intergenerational learning (IGL) has gained increasing attention as a promising framework for promoting mutual understanding, emotional connection, and collaborative development between younger and older generations in response to the complex demands of demographic change. Furthermore, experts from the United Nations highlight that the global population is aging, and the number and proportion of the aging population is increasing in every country in the world. In addition, amid global demographic shifts marked by population aging and declining birth rates, opportunities for meaningful intergenerational interaction have significantly diminished. Traditional networks of emotional support and cultural transmission—once nurtured through extended families and

community life—are increasingly weakened by institutionalized care models and age-segregated educational system. This disruption in intergenerational connectivity reduces older adults’ capacity to pass down cultural heritage and life wisdom, while also depriving young children of the chance to engage with older generations outside their immediate families. The erosion of these everyday intergenerational encounters not only threatens the emotional fabric of social cohesion but also endangers the continuity of intangible cultural knowledge systems. In response, Intergenerational Learning (IGL) has emerged as a pedagogical model rooted in reciprocal exchange and mutual development. Grounded in Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of learning and Dewey’s philosophy of experiential education, IGL fosters dialogical learning environments in which older adults contribute personal narratives, historical memory, and cultural insight, while children offer imaginative play, curiosity, and emotional vitality (Dewey, 1938; Gao et al., 2023; Harper, 2006; Kaplan, 2002; Murray et al, 2025; Sánchez et al., 2020; shih, 2022, 2024b; Vygotsky, 1978; Yeung & Lee, 2022). Grounded in John Dewey’s educational philosophy, this paper examines the design of intergenerational education models that promote reciprocal learning, enrich the educational experiences of both older adults and young children, and support the transmission of life wisdom and cultural heritage.

2. APPLYING DEWEY’S EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY TO THE DESIGN OF INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING BETWEEN OLDER ADULTS AND YOUNG CHILDREN

2.1 The themes of intergenerational learning program design should focus on the interests of both older adults and young children

In the design of intergenerational learning programs, the role of learner interest—long emphasized in progressive education—should not be overlooked. John Dewey, one of the most influential thinkers in modern educational theory, asserted that education must be grounded in the learner’s interests. He argued that learning is not merely the passive reception of information, but rather an active, experiential process driven by

personal engagement and perceived value. As Dewey (1969) noted, interest is the spark that ignites learning; without it, learners are unlikely to find purpose or energy in their educational activities. This view is echoed by other educational theorists, who maintain that meaningful learning can only occur when the learner feels a sense of relevance and intrinsic motivation (Dworkin, 1959; Fishman, 1998; Mayer, 1950). This principle has clear implications for the development of intergenerational learning programs that seek to connect older adults and young children. While much attention is often given to designing child-centered curricula, the engagement of older adults is equally vital. Older adults bring with them rich life experiences, cultural knowledge, and emotional depth, but their participation cannot be assumed—it must be cultivated through respect for their interests and a recognition of their role as active co-learners. Without addressing the intrinsic motivations and interests of older participants, programs risk becoming one-sided, reinforcing hierarchical structures rather than fostering mutual exchange. Therefore, a successful intergenerational curriculum must be co-constructed, based on the intersecting interests, needs, and capacities of both age groups. When both children and older adults find genuine meaning in their shared activities, intergenerational learning becomes not only possible but transformative, strengthening social cohesion and promoting lifelong learning across the lifespan.

2.2 Intergenerational curriculum design should be grounded in the lived experiences of older adults and young children

In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey explores the nature of experience, arguing that understanding experience requires attention to both its active and passive dimensions. On the active side, experience involves “trying”—a term closely associated with experimentation—while on the passive side, it entails “undergoing.” When we act upon something or engage in action with something, we undergo an experience. Dewey considers experience a dynamic and intentional process. When viewed holistically, experience inherently moves toward meaning-making. Each successive experience or activity thus possesses educational significance (Dewey, 1966). From an educational perspective, this implies that the “reorganization”

and “transformation” of lived experience of students must actively move toward educationally meaningful directions. Such processes inherently involve change, development, and progress—that is, the creation of value. For Dewey, education is akin to growth; it is the process of self-renewal through the continuous reconstruction and transformation of experience, enabling individuals to acquire deeper educational insight. Accordingly, the design of intergenerational learning curricula should involve the selection, creation, and organization of learning experiences that are intimately connected to the everyday lives of both older adults and young children. These experiences should be structured in ways that allow both generations to actively reconstruct and transform their experiences toward educationally meaningful directions. Furthermore, when learning experiences are grounded in the lived realities of older adults and young children, they foster a stronger sense of connection to their life-worlds. This connection, in turn, enhances motivation and engagement, facilitating more authentic and meaningful learning for both groups.

2.3 Intergenerational curriculum design should focus on enhancing the thinking abilities of older adults and young children

John Dewey asserted that “thinking is a tool employed by individuals in adapting to actual life situations”—in other words, human beings think in order to live. He emphasized that life is characterized by continuous change, such that the problems of tomorrow inevitably differ from those of today. This perspective underscores the dynamic and problem-laden nature of lived experience, wherein individuals are constantly required to respond to new and evolving challenges. For Dewey, the significance of thinking emerges only when it is situated within and applied to concrete life contexts; it is through such application that thought becomes meaningful and transformative (Mayer, 1950). Hence, when designing intergenerational learning curricula, it is important not only to emphasize emotional connection and the sharing of life experiences but also to actively promote the development of thinking abilities among participants. For young children, the curriculum should encourage exploration, questioning, and

expression, thereby cultivating critical and creative thinking. For instance, activities such as story reconstruction, role-playing, and problem-based learning can guide children to approach issues from multiple perspectives, enhancing their cognitive flexibility and logical reasoning. For older adults, engaging in knowledge sharing, life storytelling, and intergenerational dialogue can stimulate cognitive vitality, support lifelong learning, and help delay cognitive decline while maintaining mental well-being. Moreover, through mutual inspiration and learning in collaborative processes, intergenerational participants can engage in co-construction of knowledge, creating a more reflective and dialogical learning environment. Drawing on John Dewey’s emphasis on “education as life itself” and “reflective thinking,” intergenerational learning should be viewed as an organic space for practicing thought, where both the young and the elderly continue to construct knowledge, develop thinking abilities, and enhance their autonomy and agency as learners through authentic interactions.

3. CONCLUSION

Through the decades, Dewey’s focus increasingly shifted toward the importance of learning to think critically, including interrogating existing social structures and dynamics. John Dewey formulated his educational ideas more than 100 years ago, and they retain great historical and philosophical interest today (Shih, 2024a; Waks, 2018). This paper draws on John Dewey’s philosophy of education as a theoretical foundation to examine how his core ideas can inform the design and implementation of educational programs involving both older adults and young children. Dewey’s emphasis on experiential learning, the cultivation of interest, and the development of reflective thinking provides valuable insights for creating meaningful intergenerational learning experiences. Such programs not only enrich the educational journeys of both age groups but also facilitate the transmission of life wisdom and cultural heritage across generations. Based on Dewey’s educational philosophy, the following implications can be identified for the design of intergenerational learning programs: (1) the themes should be grounded in the shared interests of

older adults and young children; (2) the curriculum should be closely connected to the lived experiences of both generations; and (3) the program should aim to foster the development of thinking abilities in both older adults and young children.

REFERENCES

1. Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. Macmillan.
2. Dewey, J. (1966). *Democracy and education*. The Free Press.
3. Dewey, J. (1969). *Interest and effort in education*. Cedric Chivers Ltd.
4. Dworkin, M. S. (1959). *Dewey on education*. Teachers College, Columbia University.
5. Fishman, S. (1998). Nested dualisms underlying Dewey’s student-curriculum: integration. In S. M. Fishman & L. McCarthy (Eds.), *John Dewey and the challenge of classroom practice*(pp.29-45). Teachers College, Columbia University.
6. Gao, W., Chen, Y., Xu, S., Lyulyov, O., & Pimonenko, T. (2023). The role of population aging in high-quality economic development: Mediating role of technological innovation. *SAGE Open*, 13(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231202385> (Original work published 2023)
7. Harper, S. (2006). *Ageing societies: Myths, challenges and opportunities*. Routledge.
8. Kaplan, M. S. (2002). Intergenerational programs in schools: Considerations of form and function. *International Review of Education / Internationale Zeitschrift Für Erziehungswissenschaft / Revue Internationale de l’Education*, 48(5), 305–334. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3445459>
9. Mayer, A. E. (1950). *The development of education in the twentieth century*. Englewood Cliffs.
10. Murray, L., Church, A., Young, S., Liu, S., Eadie, P., & Page, J. (2025). What is the evidence of young children’s learning in intergenerational programs? A scoping review of the literature. *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15350770.2025.2515034>
11. Shih, Y. H. (2022). Methods for successful aging: An aesthetics-oriented perspective derived from Richard Shusterman’s somaesthetics. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19, no. 18: 11404.
12. Shih, Y. H. (2024a). Learning for democracy: Some inspiration from John Dewey’s idea of democracy. *Frontiers in Political Science*. 6:1429685. doi: 10.3389/fpos.2024.1429685
13. Shih, Y. H. (2024b). Developing arts-oriented intergenerational learning programs between older 3 adults and young children. *Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology*, 8(6), 6917–6925.
14. Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
15. Waks, L. J. (2018). Thinking in Dewey’s experimentalist education: The contribution of the internet and digital tools. *ECNU Review of Education*, 1(2), 1-22 <https://doi.org/10.30926/ecnuroe2018010201> (Original work published 2018)
16. Yeung, W. J., & Lee, Y. J. (2022). Aging in East Asia: New findings on retirement, health, and well-Being. *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, 77(3), 589–591, <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbab055>