



# Creating Meaningful Interactions for Young Children, Older Friends, and Nursery School Practitioners within an Intergenerational Project

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## Abstract

Intergenerational practice, where children and older adults come together for shared activities, has grown in popularity in many Western countries. However, research about intergenerational practice, particularly in the UK, is limited. This paper reports on the findings from an exploratory case study about a small intergenerational project between a maintained nursery school and a residential care home for older adults with dementia in the South-East of England. The methodology was informed by a narrative dialogic approach drawing on the work of Bakhtin. Data was collected using naturalistic observations of children's weekly visits to the care home and qualitative interviews with nursery school practitioners. The analysis explores how meaningful interactions were created between the children, the older adults, and the nursery school practitioners. Our findings suggest that singing, unstructured moments, continuity, context (open spaces/flexible sessions), and objects contribute to meaningful interactions between young children and older adults. The ability to be flexible and "go with the moment" were identified as key skills for practitioners supporting children and older adults. We conclude that intergenerational projects afford benefits not just for children and older adults, but also for practitioners in the form of "emotional rewards". The importance of re-establishing intergenerational practice is recognised, as well as the ways in which barriers created by social distancing might safely be addressed through the use of outdoor spaces and digital technologies.

**Keywords** Intergenerational practice · Nursery school · Early childhood · Older people · Young children · Nursery school practitioners

## Introduction

Intergenerational practice is a way of addressing divisions between the generations and creating positive relationships between young and old (Springate et al., 2008). This paper reports on findings from a small exploratory case study about an intergenerational project between a nursery school and a residential care home for older adults with dementia in the South-East of England. The study uses a qualitative narrative dialogic approach drawing on the work of Bakhtin (1984) to explore how intergenerational practice can support meaningful interactions between young children, older adults, and nursery school practitioners.

## Literature Review

### Changes in life expectancy

Although life expectancy varies globally across different countries and circumstances, on average people are living longer, with an expectation that this trend is likely to continue. World Health Organisation [WHO] (2019) reports that between 2000 and 2019 there has been a global increase in life expectancy of more than 6 years from 66.8 years to 73.4 years. In the UK it is projected that there will be an additional 7.5 million people aged 65 years and over in 50 years time, with children born in 2018 expected to live into their late 80s or early 90s (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2019, 2021a). Although longevity has increased globally, this has not kept pace with healthy longevity with 5% of the world's elderly population affected by dementia (WHO, 2017). In the UK 7% of people over the age of 65 and 17% over the age of 80 are affected by dementia with

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many experiencing increased loneliness and social isolation (Alzheimer's Society, 2021; Sutin et al., 2018). Mixing between generations outside of family groups has decreased over time and led to increases in intergenerational misunderstanding, loneliness, and a lack of trust (Burke, 2020).

At the other end of the life course, 92–95% of all 3- and 4-year-olds in England spend significant amounts of time in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings (Department for Education [DfE], 2019). An impact for children who experience extended hours in ECEC settings is the reduced amount of time they spend with older family members such as, grandparents (Holmes, 2009). In addition, many live in a society which is more mobile and move away from their families making close relationships with older families members more difficult because of geographical distance (Crawford, 2015). More recently COVID-19 and the impact of social distancing has created additional barriers for the mixing of generations, resulting from increased health risks for those in older age categories (Gov.UK, 2021). In the UK emerging research suggests that social isolation due to the closure of ECEC settings and schools during the pandemic has had a negative impact on children's social and emotional well-being (Egan, et al., 2021). In summary the pandemic has exacerbated segregation between young and old and made it increasingly challenging to bring these age groups together.

### Supporting intergenerational relationships

McGuire's (2017) analysis of research suggests that people who have positive attitudes towards aging are likely to live longer and lead more healthy lives whilst those who hold negative beliefs about aging are likely to experience the opposite. Educators are well placed to help develop healthy perspectives on aging in young children and support positive relationships across the generations (Crawford, 2015). One way of achieving this is through establishing co-located intergenerational projects where early years settings pair with residential care homes for older people, providing opportunities for developing ongoing connections and relationships. Crawford (2015) argues that such projects support understandings about aging.

Drury et al.'s (2017) review of intergenerational projects found the following key to determining positive outcomes: an equal status between the age groups (e.g., joint activities which are appropriate for both age groups); the opportunity to build meaningful relationships through close contact; and frequent and regular contact. Overall, building friendships was found to be the most effective type of contact. Integral to building meaningful connections is the role of the facilitator. Heydon (2007) established that paying attention to both age groups; modelling co-operative behaviour;

treating every participant as important are important skills for facilitators and helps to build meaningful relationships between generations.

Intergenerational activities require careful consideration to ensure that they have positive outcomes for both children and older adults. DeVore et al. (2016) in their review of intergenerational projects discovered that both structured and unstructured activities are beneficial if they are designed to meet the needs of both groups. Structured activities are pre-planned, focused on a particular activity, such as singing and art; and bring children and adults together at a specific time. For example, in an exploratory case study, Heydon et al. (2018) examined how structured singing activities benefitted participants taking part in an arts-based intergenerational project. Their results indicated that when combined with other modes such as images and gesture, singing is a powerful way for pre-school children and older adults to share and gain new knowledge, make emotional connections, build relationships, and provide "continuity between [the] past, present and future" (Heydon et al., 2018, p. 132). Unstructured activities are "organic" and arise from "free flowing emergent approaches" which are based on the interests of the children and older adults (DeVore et al., 2016, p. 220). Heydon (2007, p. 59) found that taking a collaborative approach where both young children and older adults are encouraged to work co-productively and "problem solve together" with unstructured art activities also nurtures interactions and deepens relationships.

### The benefits and challenges of intergenerational practice

A body of evidence is emerging which suggests that there are strong benefits across the generations for those who take part in intergenerational practice. For older adults, these include: enhanced well-being (Springate et al., 2008); increased social interaction and engagement (Di Bona et al., 2017); improved sense of purpose, confidence, self-worth and acceptance (Cortellesi & Kernan, 2016); and cognitive benefits, such as stimulated memory (Gerritzen et al., 2019). The majority of research which has investigated the benefits of intergenerational practice for children has largely focused on how engagement with older adults reduces negative attitudes towards aging and increases awareness of age-related conditions such as dementia (Di Bona et al., 2017). Emerging intergenerational research which has explored broader outcomes for children suggests that positive benefits also include: the creation of friendships and enjoyment (Springate et al., 2008); increased empathy (Gigliotti et al., 2005); enhanced communication skills and self-esteem (Springate et al., 2008). However, research which has focused on young

children and their interactions with older adults within co-located intergenerational programmes is limited.

Despite the potential for IG projects to support successful outcomes, they are not without their challenges and do not always yield positive results. Gigliotti et al. (2005) found in their intergenerational study with older adults with dementia and preschool children that logistical issues were sometimes an issue, for example, ensuring consistency of attendance. Some of the adults' unique characteristics also presented a challenge and required facilitators who were skilled and able to facilitate participation. In addition, Crawford (2015) found that if children were unprepared, they could find interactions with older adults challenging particularly if they are frail or have significant dementia which may have a negative impact on children's attitudes towards aging. A key problem in establishing and learning from the drawbacks and challenges of intergenerational practice, is the tendency for research papers to only report the benefits (Jarrott, 2011). Therefore, it is important that when evaluating an intergenerational programme that both are considered. This study contributes to the limited research about intergenerational practice for young children and how meaningful interactions were created between pre-school children, older adults, and nursery school practitioners.

## Overview of the theoretical framework

Our research was small scale, explorative, and qualitative. We employed a dialogic narrative methodological approach which investigates how interactions are produced and performed (Riessman, 2008). This approach is developed from Bakhtin's (1984) concept of dialogism and informed our understanding of how meaningful interactions were created between the children, their "older friends" and the practitioners. Bakhtin (1984, p. 293) argues that the essence of life and living is dialogism:

Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth.

Taking a broad interpretation of dialogue, we were open to different ways that sense-making interaction and communication (such as spoken words, signs or symbols) occurred between our participants (de Vocht, 2015). We were particularly interested in the dialogic process and how meaningful interactions are co-produced in the space between the speaker and the listener (Rosen, 2015; Cohen, 2009). Volsoninov (1986, p. 103) describes this as "an electric spark that occurs when two different terminals are hooked together". The concept of a "spark" was used to examine how meanings were co-constructed between the children and the older adults.

Answerability, to both listen carefully and to respond to what the speaker is saying, is integral to Bakhtin's (1984) understanding of dialogism. De Vocht (2015, p. 317), in her research with children, describes this as "listening with all the senses beyond what is spoken". To avoid a monoglossic approach (the understanding that words or phrases only have one meaning), it was important that observations and interviews were not taken at face value but that we considered different interpretations (Kurban & Tobin, 2009). To address this, we drew on Bakhtin's (1981, p. 60) concept of heteroglossia, which recognises that language is "multivoiced" and includes many ways of speaking. Integral to this understanding is the importance of context including the setting of the interaction, identities of the speakers, and shared understandings and experiences between speaker and listener (Kurban & Tobin, 2009; Riessman, 2008). Taking a heteroglossic approach we worked together during the data analysis process to co-reflect on and co-produce multiple interpretations of the data. As Kurban & Tobin (2009, p. 27) acknowledge our intention was not to present a "correct" interpretation of the narratives we analysed but to share the "interpretations we find consistent with the text, with other evidence we have about the speakers, the local context and wider political and discursive context that surrounds them". Therefore the aim of this approach was to create new and multiple understandings of children and older adults alongside unsettling dominant discourses of childhood and older age.

## Research Design and Methods

### Context

At the time of the study the maintained nursery school and the local residential care home for older adults with dementia, had been running the intergenerational project for two years. At the beginning of Autumn term a group of six children, aged 3 years old, accompanied by staff from the nursery school, were selected to visit the care home once a week for the duration of the academic year. The same children visited each week. All were accessing government funded extended hours, spending at least 30 hours a week at the nursery school. Natalie, a teacher from the nursery school planned and led the sessions, supported by two activity leaders from the care home and two practitioners from the nursery school. None of the staff involved had received any formal training in intergenerational practice. A variety of rooms were used for the sessions, these included a small activity room, a large ground floor atrium with multiple access points, and a large quiet lounge area on the first floor. The room allocation changed from week to week depending

on which space was available. The sessions were 30 minutes long, structured, and adult led. The session started with a hello song to introduce the children and older adults. This was followed by singing activities. The children and adults were encouraged to choose the songs facilitated by a choice board, with pictures relating to the songs. The session usually ended with a drink and a biscuit for the children and a goodbye song. Although the sessions generally followed this pattern, there were times particularly towards the end of the study when these became less structured and less adult-led.

## Data collection

We conducted observations of the intergenerational sessions between November 2019 to February 2020, and completed the interviews with the nursery school staff during April and May 2020. We received ethical approval from the University of Chichester prior to commencing the research. Parents gave written consent for the children's participation and verbal consent was also gained from the children. Nursery school practitioners, care home activity leaders and the older adults [or those with a legal responsibility] also gave written consent. To protect the identity of those who took part, pseudonyms have been used and the names of settings have been anonymised.

Participants included six children, eight older adults, three nursery school practitioners, and two care home activity leaders. We planned to observe eight intergenerational sessions (one a month) starting in November 2019. However, as a result of the first COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020 and the closure of the care home to outside visitors, it was only possible to complete four of our planned observations. Observations were naturalistic, in that they were undertaken during the intergenerational sessions (Mukherji & Albon, 2015). Each observation was 30 minutes in length (the duration of the session). We were aware that our presence as researchers may have influenced the behaviour of our participants during the sessions. To minimise this, we presented ourselves as "observers as participants", joining in with the intergenerational activities when invited and taking minimal notes during the sessions (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). The children's attendance at the observed sessions was regular, with most attending all four sessions. The older adult's attendance was less consistent and ranged from 5 to 8 adults at each session.

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were carried out with each of the three nursery school practitioners who accompanied the children on their visits. Typical of this type of interview we had a set list of questions with the opportunity to ask further questions as appropriate (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The interviews were conducted online and ranged

between 34 and 58 min. These were digitally recorded and later fully transcribed. Further interviews were scheduled with the two activity leaders from the care home, however, due to the pressure caused by the pandemic they chose not to complete these. To supplement the notes, we took during the observations we also made additional notes after the sessions, which we refer to as observational field notes. We met together briefly after each observation to discuss our immediate thoughts about the session, these are referred to as reflective discussions and were also digitally recorded.

## Data analysis

We employed the principles of Riessman's (2008) narrative dialogic approach, which focuses on how interactions between participants are co-produced and informed, in our analytical process. We were open to heteroglossic interpretations and how new dialogic meanings were created between our participants (Bakhtin, 1981). In the initial analysis of the observations, we independently read each piece of data several times, noting where interactive engagements between the children and older friends occurred. In the next stage of the analysis, we met together to work co-productively on the analysis of each observation, investigating how narratives were dialogically produced and performed between our participants. In line with a narrative dialogical approach, we considered the context of the observations and how these contributed to creating meaningful interactions, giving particular attention to the physical environment [e.g., the room], the structure of the sessions, activities, and the use of objects and images. These considerations informed the themes presented in the analysis of the meaningful interactions for the children and older adults. For the analysis of the interviews, a slightly different process was employed. In the initial analysis of the interviews, we independently read each piece of data focusing on how meanings were created between our participants and ourselves [as interviewers]. In the co-productive stage, we met together to discuss how meanings were informed by the context of the interview, including links to societal understandings about aging. We looked for commonalities across the interviews which informed the three themes in the 'practitioners and meaning making' section of this paper.

## Findings

The analysis is organised into three sections, each section focuses on a different group of participants, the children, older adults, and nursery school practitioners. In the first two sections case descriptions are used to explore how meaningful interactions are created for the children and older adults.

The first focuses on observations of Alfie [aged 3-years-old] and Charlie [an “older friend”], and the second focuses on observations of Rose [an “older friend”]. The final section explores the experiences of the nursery school practitioners [June, Penny and Natalie], drawing on their interviews three common themes are discussed: the temporal nature of connections; emotions; and the future of the project.

### Children and meaning making – Alfie and Charlie

The children’s interactions with the “older friends” varied considerably. During the intergenerational sessions it was observed that some children had few meaningful interactions beyond the group singing. In contrast, others developed more meaningful relationships; one such example, is Alfie, a 3-year-old boy and his friendship with Charlie, an older friend. From our initial observations, it was apparent that Alfie showed a preference towards engaging with Charlie, more than other older friends. Interactions between Charlie and Alfie occurred during both structured activities, such as singing, and informal moments, such as the start and end of the sessions. The analysis highlights the importance of unscripted and unexpected moments for the development of meaningful relationship between Alfie and Charlie, as well as moments of tension and fragility.

### Singing

Singing was a medium that was accessible, familiar, and understood by both the children and the older friends and was the main structured activity observed during the sessions. This structured activity served to bring together the children and older adults into a more unified group, embarking on joint activities together, albeit supported by carers from each setting. In our first observation we observe how singing affords opportunities for Alfie and Charlie to connect:

Alfie is excited to take his turn to choose a song for the whole group to sing from the song board. He is encouraged by staff to share making a choice with an older friend. He approaches Charlie and asks him “What have we got to do?” Charlie responds by choosing a different song to Alfie. Alfie is accepting of this and chooses to sit next to Charlie rather than returning to sit with his peers [Observation 1].

### Unstructured moments – “High-5”

As the sessions progressed, we observed that Alfie increasingly found opportunities to supplement structured activities, with his own unscripted activities. The “high-5” emerged as a weekly ritual between Alfie and Charlie at the beginning and end of each session. The game consisted

of Charlie holding up his hand for Alfie to “slap” and then Charlie taking his hand away at the last second [so Alfie misses his hand]. The game always ended with Charlie leaving his hand there for Alfie to “high-5”. Charlie and Alfie clearly enjoyed this moment of connection but there were also times when Alfie experienced disconnection and frustration during the game. The following extract illustrates the fragility of “in the moment” interactions:

Charlie – “What’s your name?” [to Alfie].

Alfie – “You know my name!” [in a weary voice].

Charlie – “Come on what’s your name?”

Alfie – “Alfie” [elongating the “Alf”].

They high five again and this time Alfie hits Charlie’s hand quite hard.

Natalie says “Do it nice and gently”.

Alfie “high-5s” Charlie again but this time more gently [Observation 3].

On this occasion Alfie’s enthusiasm and enjoyment appeared to veer into frustration [expressed by hitting Charlie’s hand too hard], perhaps explained by Alfie’s lack of understanding of the impact of dementia on memory and the reasons why Charlie is not able to remember Alfie’s name.

### Continuity – being there and not being there

Alfie’s engagement and enjoyment of each session appears to be dependent on Charlie’s attendance. During observation two, Alfie asks Charlie why he was not there the previous week. The following exchange takes place:

The Care Home Staff [rather than Charlie] explain to Alfie that Charlie had gone out for fish and chips, they discuss “lunch” and “having a pint”. [It would appear likely that due to dementia, Charlie would not be able to recall his activities the previous week]. Alfie is then asked to choose the first song from the song board but says he does not want to [Observation 2].

Alfie appears to have missed Charlie, perhaps evidenced by withdrawing from choosing the song. Despite the tension in their interaction, he continues to seek out Charlie as a partner for structured activities, such as finding a partner for singing “Row your Boat” later in the session:

Alfie closes his eyes and spins round trying to indicate he is going to choose someone randomly he still manages to “find” Charlie. Charlie and Alfie are actively “pulling” back and forth for the “Row the boat” actions [Observation 2].

Despite the tensions in their interactions the interviews with the nursery staff indicate the significance of the relationship for Alfie outside of the intergenerational sessions:

He’s always asking about Charlie, to the point that even parents have said that can they go and visit away from the school environment and we’ve kind of said “That’s not to be encouraged really” but he, every day, every morning at

breakfast he will say, “Are we going to the nursing home today?” [Interview with Penny].

Penny’s comments illustrate the significance of the relationship for Alfie which goes beyond the confines of the intergenerational sessions. Later in the interview she recalls how Alfie has also asked his parents if he could buy a present for Charlie. These comments suggest that Alfie’s parents also recognise the significance of the friendship with Charlie and how this is cognisant of a relationship he might experience with a ‘Grandfather’.

### Older friends and meaning making

In contrast to other older adults at the care home, Rose’s dementia was at an early stage and she was one of the few residents to visit the nursery school and to have an active social life outside of the care home. She was very active and engaged with the children during the intergenerational sessions. The following analysis investigates how meaning making is co-produced between Rose, the children, and the practitioners. It explores the complexity of her multiple roles and how meaning making with others is supported by the context and objects.

### Context – open spaces and flexible sessions

In our earlier visits to the care home, we observed how Rose’s opportunities for meaning making with others were limited and constrained by the structure of the sessions and the size of the room. In our first observation the older adults were wearing name badges with a picture associated with their past lives. Rose’s badge had a picture of a ‘tractor’ because she had been married to a farmer. Natalie reflects in her interview how the badges supported the children’s meaning making and understanding of the temporal nature of their older friend’s multiple identities:

Gives that visual connection to the children as well that you know they’re not just old people they used to do something [...] and I see that this older friend used to be a young person [interview with Natalie].

Despite providing the “older friends” with badges to support their engagements with children, Rose struggles to make meaningful connections. Author two reflects on what happens when Rose is asked to choose a nursery rhyme to sing:

[Rose] chose Old MacDonald’s farm and I felt a little bit sad because nobody .... she was trying say ...trying to make the connections to her own life but nobody really responded to her [Observation 1].

Although Rose tries to make connections with her past life by choosing a song about a farm, her attempts to share her interest in farming are unnoticed by others.

The size of the room also effected the opportunity for meaningful engagements. In our later observations the use of larger rooms provided more opportunities for the older friends to make connections with the children. Our third observation took place in a large atrium on the ground floor of the care home. The easy access in and out of the room enabled Rose to join the session after it had started:

Rose suddenly interrupts the session by walking into the middle of the children and adults seated in a circle with her arms open saying [in a loud dramatic voice] ‘Hello, Auntie Rose is here!’. She approaches two of the boys and gives them a high five which the boys respond to [Observation 2].

Rose’s “grand entrance” is reminiscent of Volsoninov’s (1986) “spark”, immediately Rose makes a connection with the children by announcing her entry and high fiving the boys. In our earlier observations the children’s interactions with their older friends had been very gendered with the boys showing more interest in the male residents and the girls showing more interest in the female residents. In contrast, during this occasion the boys showed a marked interest in Rose which was sparked by her exciting entrance. Taking on the role of an exuberant ‘Aunty’ and “borrowing” the “high-5” (from Charlie and Alfie) enabled Rose to make a new and meaningful connection with the boys.

### Objects - Rose’s knitting bag

In our final observation the opportunities for Rose’s meaning making with the children are dramatically increased. Drawing on Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of heteroglossia we observe Rose’s use of “multiple voices” as she co-produces new understandings and meanings by taking on the role of leader. On this occasion the activity leaders from the care home were absent. As we sat ready for the session to begin Rose unexpectedly takes the lead and starts talking to the children about her knitting bag. Natalie supports Rose’s interactions by abandoning the structure of the session and giving Rose space to lead the session. The children are transfixed as Rose reveals the objects in her bag [her reading book; coloured balls of wool; knitting needles]. At one point Natalie notices that Rose is wearing a small, knitted bag:

Natalie: Rose has something knitted round her neck.

Rose: I knitted it – it has my mobile phone. Sometimes I forget where I put things [...] my daughter is called the same as our Queen.

Child 1: Are you the mum?

Rose: Who is the Queen? ...Is she called Queen Mary? Is she called Queen Elizabeth? Yes .... My daughter is the same as the Queen ... I can ring her on my phone [...].

[Rose mimes talking on the phone]

Rose: I say, ‘Hello Liza, how are you?’ and she says, ‘It’s snowing’, and I say ‘It’s sunny here’...and that’s just the way God made the big world.

[Rose makes a circular movement with her hands to represent the world].

Rose: Now you don’t get much snow....

Child 3: I get lots of them.

Child 1: From the sky.

Child 3: Father Christmas.

Child 2: I do [raising her hand] ... I do at my house outside.

Natalie – shall we do some singing?

[Observation 4].

Rose’s phone bag acts as a conduit for meaning making and new understandings between Rose and the children’s lived experiences. Rose’s passing reference to her memory at the beginning reminds us that she has dementia. However, Rose quickly moves on to talk about her role as a mother and her daughter who lives in Canada. The conversation with her daughter transports the children “in the moment” to the other side of the world and gives an insight into Rose’s role as a mother and her relationship with her daughter. Although Rose does not directly respond to the children’s attempts to connect with her there is a sense that as the session becomes more informal and less structured there is space for Rose and the children to co-construct new understandings of their past and present lives.

### Practitioners and meaning making

#### In the moment

The phrase “in the moment” was used several times by the practitioners during their interviews to describe the temporal nature of the connections between the “older friends”, children and themselves. It was in these “moments” that meaning making most typically occurred. Natalie and June recall the time when Maisie (an older friend), despite being in recovery from a damaged hip tries to join in marching round with the children whilst they sang the “Grand Old Duke of York”:

I think she just got really excited that we were there and certain songs must trigger something within their memories ... I guess in that moment I said, “Stand up” she thought, “Yep” [Interview with Natalie].

In this example the action song enabled Maisie to get “lost in the moment” and connect with the children through participating and enjoying joint activities. Linked to the idea of the temporal nature of the interactions between the “older friends”, practitioners and children was the importance of “going with the moment”. Practitioners commented in their

interviews on the importance of being flexible and adjusting to last minute changes to the sessions or the unexpected behaviour of the some of the “older friends”. June recalls how one of the activity leaders skilfully supported an “older friend” when she unexpectedly announced she needed to go and pick up her children from school:

And then that breaks your heart because you’re thinking what are they...what’s in their head at that moment? So obviously then you leave it to the skill of the carers because they know what to say [...] they go with the moment [Interview with June].

June’s small story illustrates how the intergenerational sessions sometimes triggered memories for the older friends connected with their past lives and the skill of the care staff in supporting them “in the moment”.

### Emotions and emotional reward

Connected to the temporal nature of the interactions were the emotions and emotional rewards experienced by the practitioners. In their interviews all three practitioners talked about how they experienced a depth of emotion ranging from love to sadness. Penny describes the emotional reward she receives from participating in the project:

It’s such a lovely, worthwhile thing to do, get that real feel good feeling when you come away, have a little chuckle to yourself about things that happen [Interview with Penny].

In addition to feelings of well-being and worth, practitioners also commented on their love and connection with the older friends, for example Natalie comments:

I love Maisie she’s such a little character [Interview with Natalie].

In contrast with feelings of love, the nursery school practitioners also talked about feelings of sadness particularly in relation to “older friends” whose dementia had progressed or who became confused during the sessions. All the practitioners described feelings of deep sadness about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the stopping of the project due to the risk of infection and vulnerability of the older friends. Natalie recalls the difficult conversation she had with the care home staff:

Oh, take care...take good care’ knowing how vulnerable those residents are em and I guess .... [long pause] we’ll start again as soon as we’re able but ... I don’t know ...I’ve got no real sense when that would be because I think ...care homes really are at risk aren’t they? [Interview with Natalie]

### The future – use of outdoor spaces

Despite the challenges and major disruption to the project due to the COVID-19 pandemic all the practitioners mentioned in their interviews that they were keen to restart the

children's visits to the care home as soon as it was safe to do so. We asked the nursery school practitioners about how they thought the project could develop, a common thread across the interviews related to the use of outdoor spaces. Both Natalie and Penny talked about the proximity of the two settings [the nursery school and care home were adjacent to each other] and opportunities for meeting outdoors. Natalie and Author One talk about creating an intergenerational gate between the two settings:

Natalie: They listen over the fence ...I think I think it would be quite nice if they could come in to the garden but haven't quite figured that out yet because it's quite busy in the garden isn't it?

Author One: Yer.you almost need like a little interconnecting gate in the garden that they can come in and out of.

Natalie: 'Shall we do tea?' or the panels being taken down 'We could bake cakes and put cakes on it...brilliant' [Interview with Natalie].

Breaking down the physical barriers creates the potential for the connection between the two settings to move beyond being a "project" towards creating a more permanent and stronger relationship between the two settings.

## Discussion

Our analysis highlights how the intergenerational project supported meaningful interactions between children, older adults and nursery school practitioners. Emotional rewards, such as well-being, a sense of self-worth and positive emotions, were identified by practitioners as a particular benefit. A key factor in facilitating interactions between young children and older adults is supporting the needs of both age groups (Heydon, 2007). In the current study it was recognised that friendships between younger children and older friends can be fragile and require careful and sensitive support from practitioners. One of the key skills identified by the practitioners was "going with the moment", the ability for facilitators to be flexible and adapt quickly to the behaviours of the children and older adults. Intensive contact, either regular contact or a short period of intense contact, is also important in establishing relationships between young children and older adults (Drury et al., 2017). The findings from the current study support this research, with the regular visits from the nursery school to the care home identified as a key factor in providing opportunities for the children and older adults to build and establish meaningful relationships.

DeVore et al. (2016) in their review of intergenerational research found that both structured and unstructured activities support engagement between children and older adults. Overall, the research from our study supports this finding. Consistent with the research of Heydon et al. (2018) we

found that the structure of the singing activities when combined with other modes such as images and objects, was a key factor in bringing children and older adults together and enabling them to connect with each other in a shared activity. However, it was in the unstructured and 'informal' moments which happened outside of staff led activities, often at the beginning or end of a session, where meaningful interactions and building friendships between the older adults and younger children were most likely to occur. "Rituals", such as Charlie and Alfie's "high-5" game, provided a way for them to connect "in the moment" and reconnect in subsequent sessions. Providing open spaces, in both a physical sense (e.g., the size of the room) and a temporal sense (e.g., room for spontaneity with the structure of the session) was another key factor in enabling older adults and children to take more of an active part in shaping and leading interactions, as observed when Rose talked about her "knitting bag". The potential for such interactions to enrich both children's and older adults' lives through shared experiences contests a negative discourse of aging and arguably enhances children's learning, through the transference of knowledge and cultural practices [such as knitting] (Boivin, 2021). These findings have implications for both training facilitators and dissemination of good practice relating to intergenerational practice.

Perhaps the most important focus for future intergenerational research is how to safely bring young children and older people living in residential care together. During the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the risk of infection and vulnerability of older people, care homes were closed to visitors. The Alzheimer's Society (2020) reported how a lack of social contact during this time caused a deterioration in the health and well-being particularly for those with dementia. The highest incidents of death related to COVID-19 were recorded in the 75-year-old age group, potentially leaving a significant number of young children without grandparents or great grandparents (ONS, 2021b). During the first lockdown (March 2020) only 7% of those children who normally accessed formal early childhood education and care provision continued to attend settings (Pascal et al., 2020). Many parents reported a particularly negative impact on their child's social and emotional development and well-being during this time.

One way for older adults and young children to come together safely in a post pandemic context is through the use of outdoor spaces. In the current study one of the practitioners proposed the creation of an "intergenerational gate" as a way of breaking down the physical barriers between the two institutions and creating more informal opportunities for interaction. It is recognised that for many ECEC settings and residential care homes establishing an "intergenerational gate" is not a possibility, however, consideration



could be given to how outdoor spaces could be used more effectively for intergenerational practice. Arguably, digital technologies may be a more immediate and simpler solution to re-establishing intergenerational projects. Generations United (2021), a charity in the US, suggest that digital technologies are an effective and powerful medium for connecting different generations and have a range of benefits for both ages.

## Conclusions

Overall, this research highlights how intergenerational practice has the potential to create meaningful interactions between young children and older adults with dementia and create enjoyment and well-being for all those involved. At the same time, we acknowledge the limitations of a small-scale short-term study, therefore caution should be taken in generalising the findings. Despite constraints the study contributes to research about the benefits of intergenerational practice, and how informal interactions alongside structured singing activities supports friendship and meaning making between younger children and older adults. Findings ways to re-establish intergenerational practice in the UK, where children and older adults can reconnect in safe ways, is essential. Whilst beneficial for all children and older adults, this is particularly important for children who may have older relatives who died because of the pandemic and for older adults [and children] who have experienced poor mental health because of shielding and/or social isolation. Finally, further research is necessary to provide a stronger evidence base for the benefits of intergenerational practice and how to support children and adults who may find it more difficult to engage. New dialogic ways are needed to actively listen to the voices of young children and older adults in care to optimise opportunities for learning and development (Davies-Abbott et al., 2021; Murray, 2019). One way to address is taking a co-productive approach, doing research with [rather than on] children, older adults, practitioners to generate new knowledge and understandings (Clark, 2017).

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## Declarations

**Conflicts of interest/Competing interests** – there are no conflicts of interest or competing interests.

**Ethics approval** – ethical approval was gained from the University of Chichester before the research commenced.

**Consent to participate** – consent was gained from all participants.

**Consent for publication** – consent was gained from the University of Chichester and participants to publish the research.

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