



Initial Needs Assessment in Intergenerational Centers. Reflections from a Spanish Case

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ABSTRACT

Initial needs assessment can be useful for obtaining information about the issues that should be addressed in newly launched intergenerational centers. However, there are few examples of how such studies should be conducted. This paper shares insights and lessons learned during a needs assessment study conducted nine months after the inauguration of an intergenerational shared site in Spain. In addition to presenting the needs identified, such as accurate and complete job descriptions, the paper offers methodological recommendations to practitioners embarking upon a similar needs study. The value of needs assessment as an educational endeavor is also highlighted.

KEYWORDS

Intergenerational center;
intergenerational shared site;
needs study; Spain

Introduction

Intergenerational approaches are usually put into practice through programs that enable people from different generational groups to interact with each other over time in a range of activities. However, another format that can be used to implement the approach is to integrate services for different generations under one roof. This is the case with intergenerational centers. According to Melville (2014), an intergenerational center may be defined as “a physical environment deliberately constructed or redeveloped to enable two or more generations to more readily interact in a location designed originally to provide a service to each group separately” (p. 295).

Starting an intergenerational center raises many questions, e.g., what intergenerational activities would be most appropriate, does the center’s staff have a commitment to the intergenerational vision, is the center’s impact also reaching families and the outside community, what strategies for ongoing improvement should be considered. All these questions and more came to the fore when a research project was undertaken to study the potentialities of a new intergenerational center located in Albolote, a 19,000-inhabitant municipality in southern Spain.

Background and rationale

The Macrosad Intergenerational Reference Center (hereinafter CINTER) is a private initiative launched by Macrosad – a social cooperative with more than 25 years of experience in the care and educational sectors – in September 2018 as a shared site combining day services for older adults – already in place – and a new nursery school for 0–3 year olds. A few months after its opening, the CINTER’s directorial staff wanted to find out what needs were being met (or not met) by the center. So they commissioned a needs assessment study (Smart, 2019). Besides wanting to learn about general needs, they were particularly interested in obtaining detailed feedback from the main stakeholders involved – older adults, children, families and professionals. Consequently, an *ad hoc* needs study was designed with the following objectives: to collect stakeholders’ impressions about the center and its intergenerational activities; to analyze how the elderly and children were actually doing at the center; to elicit from stakeholders potential avenues for improvement; and to identify training needs so that staff members might better perform their duties.

Data collection and analysis

Qualitative data was obtained through semi-structured interviews with a sample of stakeholders. A total of 42 interviews (10 users of the day services, 4 relatives of users, 13 parents of nursery school children, 15 staff members) were conducted, following four different scripts, one for each group, all of which explored the study’s objectives. Each interview lasted 20 minutes on average. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis with NVivo 12. Systematic coding was done independently by two researchers, reaching a high level of inter-rater reliability – averaged Cohen’s Kappa weighted by source: 0.83.

After data analysis, four separate reports were drawn up – one for each group of stakeholders interviewed – including a detailed narrative of the findings and a list of actions to be implemented in response to detected needs. In addition, meetings with participating practitioners and family members were arranged to discuss the study’s results.

Findings

Overall, the needs study underlined the importance of listening to the voices of all the stakeholders involved in one way or another with the new intergenerational center. It was found that all stakeholders, to different degrees, had valuable information to contribute and worthwhile suggestions for improvement. Furthermore, making them feel part of the assessment proved to be a good way to socialize them with regard to the center’s vision and mission, thus promoting their future participation and involvement.

It is generally accepted that in a good intergenerational center day-to-day activity should combine and balance both planned and spontaneous interactions (Generations United & The Eisner Foundation, 2019) on an ongoing basis. However, in this case it proved to be wrong to assume that CINTER users from different generations would demonstrate a permanent disposition to interact. Although early in the center's operations organic intergenerational encounters seemed to set the right tone for continued interest in ongoing and deeper intergenerational activities, children and older people sometimes showed signs of 'participation fatigue' and seemed little inclined to join planned interactions. It is important to be aware of this possibility at intergenerational centers.

Another key finding was that stakeholders often perceived the CINTER not as *one center* but rather as *the juxtaposition of two centers*. Why is this important? Because it may not be appropriate to study an intergenerational center's needs if the stakeholders do not envision it as *one center*. If the particular needs of each service at an intergenerational center are identified separately, it may lead to poor decisions being made, without taking into consideration the intrinsic combined approach and strategy of effective intergenerational shared sites.

Interviews with older people revealed a need for new language among stakeholders – especially among older people and their relatives – to enable them to better construct their narratives about the CINTER. For instance, older people had difficulty expressing elaborate comments about what was going on at the center and in their lives as a result of unprecedented intergenerational contact. In this regard, it may be helpful to provide stakeholders with new language elements and empower them to describe the intergenerational processes taking place at the center before plying them with a series of questions about the center's needs.

Another need clearly identified by the study had to do with diversity. Efforts should be made to ensure, to the extent possible, the diversity of the older people participating in the center's activities – i.e. increasing the involvement of older users with different cultural backgrounds. The participation of individuals with a wide range of life paths and intergenerational experiences would no doubt bring about richer interactions.

Interviews with CINTER employees highlighted the importance of all practitioners having their job description clearly formulated according to the context of an intergenerational center. It was discovered that not all staff believed they had to be involved in the implementation of intergenerational activities. Perhaps an 'intergenerational coordinator' should have been introduced when the center was founded. It would no doubt have been helpful to have someone to assist in the transition from work in traditional, mono-generational services to the kind of work called for in an intergenerational center. Careful coordination of the children's curriculum and the older adult day services was also deemed vital. In this area, the needs assessment gave rise to a specific proposal; all staff would meet periodically to get to know each other better and build a sense of belonging to

a single team responsible for one overarching center, instead of two teams with a certain degree of collaboration between them.

One of the most important and urgent needs expressed by professionals was training. They voiced a need for two different types of training:

- Cross-generation training: practitioners need to gain more expertise in the different generational groups at the center, not just the main group they are involved with every day.
- Reciprocal training: practitioners from one section (e.g., adult day services) should exchange knowledge with colleagues in the other section (e.g., nursery school).

In addition to these two modes of inter-professional training, the study identified other areas in which further training was required. These included the acquisition of specific skills – e.g., facilitation and mediation in intergenerational activities; observation techniques as a useful tool for monitoring and evaluation; ways to motivate users to be more involved – and also learning how practitioners at other intergenerational centers do their work.

In response to these findings, CINTER has introduced several new on-the-job training strategies. They are deployed during the normal work day, because time exclusively for training is scarce. For example, a simple form of ongoing training using WhatsApp has been set up: once a week a slideshow with condensed, evidence-based knowledge covering significant issues is sent to all staff members. Subjects covered include: *How can I explain to someone, in a few words, what an intergenerational center is?*; *Intergenerational learning: basic principles and practices*; and *How to modify and adapt intergenerational activities successfully?*

One issue that has been found to affect training efforts is staff turnover for new staff needs to be socialize into CINTER's culture. This problem might be addressed by setting up advanced training for staff members who already have a certain amount of experience in intergenerational work and initial training for practitioners without intergenerational expertise who join CINTER at any given time.

Another conclusion of the assessment is that close attention needs to be paid to staff ratios in order to prevent work overload and resulting burnout. Intergenerational activities organized by practitioners involved in day services for older people and those led by staff working with children should be fairly balanced.

Lessons learned

The aim of this paper is not just to present the results of the needs assessment but also to reflect on the very process undertaken, both its positive and its

negative aspects. It is our hope that some of the lessons learned will be of benefit to intergenerational practitioners around the world.

One decidedly positive aspect was that the study did not focus exclusively on needs; broader themes were also explored. The interviews began with questions about how the center had been operating since its inauguration and what kind of background, in terms of intergenerational relationships, the older people had had during their lives. By using this approach the interviews took on an educational stance that allowed interviewees to reflect on the center as a whole before being asked to describe its potential needs. Interestingly, explicit needs – e.g., “We would like to have more information about what is going to happen at the intergenerational activities” – emerged in the study less frequently than implicit ones – e.g., “Children should not interact with the same older person all the time” – .

Interviews also provided an opportunity for stakeholders to become more acquainted with CINTER’s vision and mission. It is challenging to talk about *an intergenerational center’s needs* unless you have previously understood and internalized what an intergenerational center is all about – combining different generational services into a single center. In fact, should we ever perform another needs assessment study we will begin the process by organizing a sort of open house and other similar informative events at which stakeholders can learn and be socialized about the very concept of intergenerational center.

In relation to the interviews, efforts should be made to increase the diversity of participants included in the sample. While the group of professionals was fully covered, having more interviews with relatives of the older people and more community stakeholders would have been desirable. Also, given that one characteristic of intergenerational centers is that they seek to be open to the community, it would be interesting to ask more questions about how the intergenerational activities at the center may be affecting families and the general community, not just older people and children.

Our needs study found that children’s parents, in their role as educators, were better able to describe the center’s impact on their lives than older people’s relatives, in their role as caregivers. Hence, our last recommendation would be to also hold group interviews, with both of these stakeholders together, for the mutual enrichment and education of the participants while they discuss the center’s positive and negative aspects.

To conclude, we would like to put forward a few final reflections. It is important to remember that this kind of study takes time, and that the necessary time must be taken to let initial processes develop at their own pace, to take care of details when implementing activities and to observe how the intergenerational center evolves. All of this suggests that the best time to do a needs study may not necessarily be at the beginning, when the center is inaugurated, but some time later, when stakeholders have a better grasp on the complex web of services and people comprising shared sites. Therefore, ideally, needs assessments should be performed not just

once but periodically, so as to effectively monitor how initial needs may change.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to express their gratitude to Macrosad (www.macrosad.es) for providing its complete support throughout the realization of the needs study.

Funding

Translation into English of the original Spanish manuscript of this paper has been funded by the Department of Sociology (University of Granada).

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