

The contribution of an Intergenerational Program to build bridges between school and community and to promote old people's well-being and mutual learning

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The intergenerational program presented here is a part of a major research, which includes several projects developed in the north of Portugal. The challenges of aging societies and the need to create strong and effective bonds of solidarity between generations lead us to develop an intergenerational program between a school (students (N=25 from seventh grade) and a nursing home (N=15). We wish to register on Lifelong Education issue, for the reason that school is the main field where the changes of attitudes can be reality, namely myths and stereotypes to old people. The aims of this study were: i) encourage the educational community to the practice a new (way) of citizenship; ii) Develop relationships between a group of students from the Matosinhos' school grouping¹, and old people living in the Sant'Ana's nursing home² enhancing thus the intergenerational networks and iii) Promote an active aging by sharing and valuing the generational knowledge. The encounters, twice a week, on Civic Education class embraced an encouragement to mutual learning based on the different subjects. The elders refer the importance of maintaining contact and dialogue with the youth and the opportunity of learning. The students refer the occasion of teaching different subjects to the elders and stimulation of solidarity bonds and great harmony. Teachers said that the greatest impact was in writing, with the development of various types of texts, in pairs or in groups. Seniors and juniors did their best so that their meetings were fruitful and fulfilled its main goal: mutual learning.

Key-Words: Intergenerational Education, Lifelong Education, Solidarity, Mutual Learning

¹ Agrupamento de Escolas de Matosinhos

² Lar de Sant'Ana em Matosinhos

Introduction

The development of modern societies made the longevity increase either for men and women, although in different rhythms. We still acknowledge that longevity continues to grow. *“In 2005, about 21% of the population in the developed countries was aged 60 years or over. The proportion is projected to rise to 32% in 2050. In the developing countries, only 8% of the population was aged 60 years or over in 2005 but this share is expected to reach nearly 20% by 2050 (...)”* (Vos, Ocampo & Cortez, 2008).

In Portugal the aging rate increased in the last decade. The number of old people per 100 young persons grew to 102 in 2000 and to 120 in 2010.³ More than ever, young people all over the world find themselves surrounded by older adults. Children of the 21th century have the possibility to live longer, and will expected spend more years in old age than in youth.

Ten years ago, in Madrid, the United Nations adopted a Plan for Action on Aging (MIPAA). This year, all members of European Union are celebrating the European Year of Active Ageing and Solidarity Between Generations which the main goal is to fight social exclusion among old people by encouraging them to participate actively in their communities at local and regional level.

By making a little chronological history review we can see that in the 80's of the last century were the beginning of the discussion of the subject of global aging population was aroused, as well as the first time clear guidelines were created according to this matter. Simultaneously, United Nations and researchers became aware of the importance to involve the elderly throughout the aging process by a more active participation in the process of making decisions towards this issue. In the First world Assembly of Ageing (WHO, 1982) they found a fertile ground to germinate guiding principles for building an inclusive society and thus a society for all ages.

This Assembly spread energetic and productive seeds to give birth to a new consciousness and more congruent attitudes with the rights and the dignity of each person, specially the elderly. Concepts such as autonomy, participation, equity and dignity were particularly emphasized in the First Assembly and later reiterated in the Second Assembly on Aging in Madrid (WHO, 2002). This last Assembly allowed nations to overlook the aging process in a different way. Therefore it insisted that the elderly must have the right to age in healthy environments. Additionally, WHO make aware of ageist attitudes are prevalent throughout society and also, to the frail relationships between youth and older people.

The definition of intergenerational presented by the EU is the one we support: *“Intergenerational solidarity refers to the mutual support and cooperation between different age groups in order to achieve a society where people of all ages have a role to play in line with their needs and capacities, and can benefit from their community's economic and social progress on an equal basis”* (EU, Age Platform Europe, 2012).

Another important issue is the intergenerational meetings or encounters on the educational field. The school had the mission to promote de beginning of a multidimensional social process beyond the transmission of knowledge. According to Gilbert & Richetts (2008) says *“aside from intergenerational contact within the family, many children do not interact regularly with older adults. This has led to a call for increased contact between the generations which, as established by scholars, can dispel myths and stereotypes, promote positive attitudes, and help children learn about age*

³ Census 2011.

diversity” (Aday, Aday, Arnold & Bendix, 1996; Aday et al., 1991; Carstensen, Mason & Caldwell, 1982; Fillmer, 1984; Chamberlain et al., 1994, p. 572).

Interaction with older adults through oriented programs with specific goals and in controlled settings turns up to be most productive in changing attitudes when compared with age-oriented debate or learning new information’s about older adults.

Therefore our intergenerational program “*Short Stories, Great Memories*” (SSGM) wants to activate participation in the perspective of Social Education under the aegis of Social Pedagogy science. So, “*in Social Education, an intergenerational relationship allows both groups to learn from the experience of others*” (Moreno & Izeta, 2007: 95). Intergenerational education provides us with the essential tools for the old people to feel members of a society and/or a community, that is to say, the elderly need to feel they still have a lot to give and the right to receive much more.

Emergence of the concept of intergenerational in the policy framework

The term intergenerational solidarity appeared within the international policy frameworks in the middle 90’s. Indeed, the first mention of intergenerational solidarity was made in Copenhagen (1995) when they prepared the International Year of Older People (IYOP). The concept of “*Multigenerational Relationships*” and a society for all generations and all ages has prepared all of us to the upcoming challenges and opportunities of the next decades. Promoting a society for all generations was a strong and an important step to face the human aging. “*A society for all ages would additionally enable the generations to invest in one another and share in the fruits of that investment, guided by the twin principles of reciprocity and equity*” (WHO, 1995). Later on, in Madrid (2002) for Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA), the governments and non-governmental associations registered the importance of the values of solidarity, confidence and dignity as well as defined a plan of action to promote the intergenerational education. In the same year in Berlin (2002) Regional Implementation Strategy (RIS) mentioned the importance to reinforce the intergenerational education.

Five years later in León (2007) for a review of the MIPAA/RIS the WHO insisted in the need of encouraging the social cohesion through actions and programmes of intergenerational education: “*We are committed to promoting intergenerational solidarity as one of the important pillars of social cohesion and of civil society*”. *We encourage initiatives that raise public awareness of the potential of young people and of older persons and that promote the understanding of ageing and intergenerational solidarity*” (UNECE 2007, p. 4).

United Nations as well as European Commission have done a numerous of communications to alert society and the governments to the needs of implementing an intergenerational solidarity policy.

2012 European Year of Active Ageing and Intergenerational Solidarity bring to the main stage the significance, the importance and the benefits of an intergenerational society, namely a society for all ages. In a world where most of the time young people and old people do not easily agree on what is best for society, scholar’s alerts for the need to stimulate the intergenerational dialogue. Under this perspective we defend the imperative to create a room for intergenerational dialogue and to exchange ideas and ways to move on with altogether.

Programmes of Intergenerational Education

When we look for the concept of intergenerational used in literature we see the variability of its use. Most of the time, the term is used to portray the relationships between grandparents and grandchildren and/or parents and children, usually call multigenerational relationship. Furthermore the conception of intergenerational is addressed to some studies with university students and old people (Hernandez & Gonzalez, 2008).

We support a broader concept of intergenerational, the one which includes networks of solidarity and sociability alternatives that go beyond the primary interpersonal relationships, namely, between relatives and neighbours. We consider that a pedagogical intent in intergenerational relations is an asset to the promotion of an inclusive society. Additionally we wish to register on lifelong education issue, for the reason that school is the main field where the changes of attitudes can be reality.

The literature review we have made focus only in the concept described before. Since the early 70's of the last century we have seen an amazing development of intergenerational education (Ames & Yount, 1994; Sáez Carreras, 2002). The scientific community developed a great number of programmes for better understanding of the benefits of intergenerational relationships (Ballantyne, Connell & Fien 1998; Klein, Council & McGuire 2005; Marx, Hubbard, Cohen-Mansfield, Dakheel-Ali & Khin Thein, 2005; McGuire & Mefford, 2007; Middlecamp & Gross, 2002; Palmeirão, 2007; Sáez Carreras, 2002).

Further researches support the need for aging education to begin in early childhood in order to end with aging stereotypes and to promote positive attitudes towards the elderly. In an attempt to bring the generations together, educators and gerontologists have created courses, workshops, and a variety of service-learning opportunities for face-to-face interaction. (Bales, Eklund & Siffin 2000; Brandão, Smith, Sperb & Parente, 2005; Piquart, Wenzel & Sorensen, 2000; Kessler & Staudinger 2007 in Palmeirão, 2007, p. 98-112).

Accordingly, Klein, Council & McGuire (2005) in a longitudinal study defended that in adolescence it was more difficult to change negative attitudes towards old people. They alert to the lack of initiatives that are happening with aging education in nursing homes, schools and communities in the USA. We think that the same is happening in Europe. The interactions between youth and the elderly are still a reality restricted to a small number of situations. However, all signs are positive and the measured results show us a growing effort of international policies. That is one of the reasons why we developed intergenerational programs with teenagers more than with children.

In 2007, the same authors initiated and developed a program in nursery schools that would help to create a generation of americans who value older adults, have positive attitudes about aging, and who plan a successful and healthy aging for them. This type of intervention fosters each teenager to face the aging process in a positive way.

We can't change children's attitudes without changing the textbooks where they learn (Chin-Shan Huang, 2011; Palmeirão, 2007). Additionally some studies refer to the importance of intergenerational service-learning where students can be encouraged to learn from old adults. This leads young learners to have better results in school and to establish a deep relationship with their partners as well as have positive attitudes about aging (Zuccherro, 2011).

Similar studies focus their goals in the pursuing of e-learning (Chase, 2001; Hegeman, Roodin, Gilliland & Ó'Flathabháin, 2010) and furthermore intergenerational

relationships allow that both, young and old, learn together and share their knowledge and their life experiences.

Moreover some researchers defend that face to face interaction between a young and an old person hasn't got so many benefits. Chase (2011) refers in an investigation: “(Cohen, Hatchett, & Eastridge, 2006) reports that there are many barriers to face-to-face intergenerational experiences, including transportation challenges for the students, anxiety for both parties, and lack of scheduling flexibility”.

There are also a large number of benefits for old people as well. Research demonstrates that when elderly people are involved in volunteering activities, it fosters social networks, increases self esteem, and decreases depression (Grimm, Spring, & Dietz, 2007; Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Rosenberg & Letrero, 2006; Rozario, 2007; Swinson, 2006, in Hegeman et al., 2010).

Subsequently another benefit to old people taken from the volunteering activities was the decrease of the generation gap and also the opportunity for seniors to share their life experiences and points of view in a society for all ages.

The aims of this study were: i) Encourage the educational community to practise a new way of citizenship; ii) Develop relationships between a group of students from the Matosinhos' school grouping⁴, and old people living in the Sant'Ana's nursing home⁵ enhancing thus the intergenerational networks and iii) Promote an active aging by sharing and valuing the generational knowledge.

METHOD

(In)Direct Participants

Globally, eighty persons participated in the program. There were 25 students (N=25) in the junior group: 13 girls and 12 boys, all were twelve years old, in the seventh grade. In the senior group, there were 15 (N=15) old adults 60 - 94 years. Most of them had the fourth grade of schooling, four were illiterate, three had the third grade, two had the second grade, one had the sixth grade and one had an accountant technical course.

The group control was another class of the seventh grade with 24 students (N=24), 15 girls and 9 boys, all were twelve years old.

The remaining participants were teachers, social educator, social worker, educational paraprofessionals, social service trainees, senior voluntaries, carers and family.

Materials and Procedures

A verbal protocol was established by the school (Matosinhos' school grouping) and the Sant'Ana nursing home. Students and old people were invited to participate in an intergenerational program. According to José Machado Pais (2006) “case-studies are worth for their uniqueness” (p. 353). Consequently, we made the option for a qualitative methodology oriented to social practice that has a transformative nature and allows us to comprehend the context and the social phenomena. Although, we used quantitative techniques of data collection, as surveys. Qualitative and quantitative thus refer, in the field of social sciences research, different looks and searches on phenomena to be studied (Aravena et al., 2006).

⁴ Agrupamento de Escolas de Matosinhos

⁵ Lar de Sant'Ana em Matosinhos

Thus the participants in the research are also active members in the program and therefore more committed to the changes we desire.

The idea came from previous works (Azevedo, 2010; Klein, Council & McGuire, 2005; Palmeirão, 2007) related to programmes of intergenerational education developed with students from educational and training courses⁶, in the first case; and with the students from the fourth grade, in the two last cases.

From the idea to practice it was a click, especially because in our recent history we have developed other intergenerational programmes⁷.

Before the contact with the elderly people the students were made written essays which theme was “Be an old person is...” and the control group did the same written essay. This written essay was a pre-test and a post-test (Table 1).

To evaluate the program we used guided interviews and a focus group for the elderly people and a survey to the young people. In the end of each session we made a plenary with the participants. Although, after some important visits or celebrations the participants gave their personal opinion fill up a small survey.

TABLE 1 – Summary of methodological features

Method	Procedures
Participant observation	Logbook
	Testimonials
	Photo report
	Focus group/ Plenary ⁸
Research and documental analysis	Literature Review Personal documents in the form of written essays
Inquiry Participants	Guided Interview
	Survey

The program was carried out twice a week from October to June, in Civic Education classes, in a total of 18 sessions. Each session had been designed for 90 minutes. The plan of actions was based on the school’s educational project and the class curriculum (Table 2).

⁶ Education Training Courses [Cursos de Educação e Formação (CEF)].

⁷ “A Help, a Smile”, (2007) in Our Lady of Lourdes School (Colégio Nossa senhora de Lourdes – Porto); “The Youth of Today (2008), “Different Experiences, a New Living” (2009), In the Course of Time (2009) and “In the Course of Life” (2010) in Grouping of Schools of Matosinhos (Agrupamento de Escolas de Matosinhos)

⁸ Beginning 11/11/2010

Record of actions

With this project we wanted to integrate the participation of juniors and seniors in the plan of actions, so it was constantly rethought and revised by all the participants without losing the main goals.

TABLE 2 – record of actions

<i>Record of actions</i>	<i>Goals</i>	<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Sessions</i>
St. Martin's feast day	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Inform and explain the St. Martin's legend- Celebrate St. Martin's day	Portuguese Subject	1
Study visit: S. Lázaro Municipal Library	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- know how a library is organised;- Read the newspaper from the birth year of each old person;- Identify the news of the day.	Portuguese Subject	1
The story of Matosinhos	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Know the social and cultural heritage of Matosinhos- Sharing experiences and feelings about the city where they live	History Portuguese	2
Play "The Boy in the Mirror"	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Identify the intergenerational relations in the play;- Develop the dramatic text	Portuguese Subject Civic Education	3
<i>Bowling</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Promote differentiated social strategies;- Increase the motivation of students with handicaps in learning and interests in education	Civic Education Physical Education	1
<i>Photo Safari</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Have a walking visit across the main streets of Matosinhos- Share feelings and select the most important places in the city for each participant	Civic Education	3

The intention was to support and strengthen the intergenerational relationships in order to intensify the nature of relations between people of different ages and/or cultures ((Brandão, Smith, Sperb & Parente, 2005; Dunham & Casadonte, 2009) and equally demystify representations, myths and prejudices about individual and social aging (Gilbert & Ricketts, 2008).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Survey analysis and the results of the written and spoken testimonies of all the participants show that the first impression was very positive. In each meeting we observed that the students were enthusiastic and expectant because they gave up their school break to arrive early in the nursing home and take the most time of those intergenerational meetings.

First, in the focus groups, when we asked students what the strengths of the (SSGM) program were they mentioned the visits that they made (moments of knowledge, stimulation of solidarity bonds and great harmony) and also the cooperation between generations as we can see in the testimonies:

“I think the project is very interesting, for me the best thing was the trip to bowling, but I also liked the others, like going to the theatre, St. Martin’s feast day and singing Christmas Carols” (Doc.22_Youth_11)

“I think the intergenerational project was well organized and planned. I think we should meet more often with the elderly. This project is an important step in our learning because we can live with people with a great life experience” (Doc.10_Youth_11)

Indeed, the testimonies of most of the old participants confirm a better relationship with juniors and between themselves. The program also had a positive impact in terms of motivation for learning.

“(...) I know I can learn from them and they can learn from me (...)” (Doc.4_Elderly_11).

“An opportunity because I love the youth ... so I don’t remind that I am old. I really enjoyed going to school. I told this to everyone ... to my grandsons, my neighbours ... always waited anxiously by Wednesdays... it was very good, very good, very, very good” (Doc.7_Elderly_11).

The teachers involved on the (SSGM) program were related to the following subjects: Portuguese, Physical Education and Civic Education. Their qualitative assessment was as follows:

“The greatest impact was in writing, with the development of various types of texts, individually, in pairs or in groups” (Doc.4_Teacher_11).

“I implemented a debate about “what is being elderly” in which most of the students proved to be very sensitive and valued a lot the experience and wisdom of the elderly participants on the program, as well as their own experience, such as the support given to their grandparents” (Doc.1_Teacher_11).

We also questioned the families. Globally, they refer the great value of the program as a form of acknowledging the importance of the elderly, the understanding of lifespan and the limits associated to old people.

“Gives young people a broader perspective of the world, promotes respect for people in this age group, gives them a space to think about old age, which otherwise wouldn’t happen” (Doc.12_Family_11).

The program has developed positive results and, above all, a more committed attitude of these students with the learning process and the community. It can also be seen, the program gained impact and sustainability to continue as a school project and thus comply with one of our goals aimed at sensitizing the school for education through action. The continued contact between young and elderly and the implementation of cooperative initiatives positively transform the social representations of aging.

The changes of social representations of the elderly in the students were evident and positive. Some students have already changed certain attitudes, especially in the mobility assistance during the visits, for example, some students pushed some old people’s wheelchairs. In the sessions they expressed the will to listen to old people’s stories and life experiences. These changes were observed by us while developing and participating in the initiatives.

However, the intergenerational relationships are still fragile and need to be strengthened and cultivated. In spite of all this, juniors and seniors did their best so that their meetings were fruitful and fulfilled its main goal: mutual learning.

For the protagonists of the program, juniors and seniors were an opportunity to put into practice ideas and purposes. The program was an effective opportunity for an active exercise of citizenship.

Conclusions

The intergenerational program (SSGM) served as a leverage to reveal the 21st century school, which must be opened to its community. However school cannot lose its main mission, namely the transmission of knowledge, and it can’t forget the positive influence that it has on creating and developing active and caring citizens.

However, one of the research limitations was the difficulty created by the variety of the subjects involved and the short period of time for the meetings (90 minutes).

A furthermore limitation with the present study relates to the behavioural intentions measure which needed a scale for measure the satisfaction rate of the old people as well as the changes in the stereotype of ageism through youth.

Future research should emphasis the issue of social cohesion that means much more than intergenerational contacts, thus relationships upcoming and that goes beyond the meetings enrolled in a script.

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