Intergenerational learning - Between difficulties and benefits[1]

Aleksandra Pejatović

University of Belgrade, Serbia

Kristina Pekeč

University of Belgrade, Serbia

kristina.pekec@gmail.com

Edisa Kecap

University of Belgrade, Serbia

edisa_kecap@yahoo.com

Abstract:
The empirical research, part of whose results are presented and analysed in this paper, was initiated in order to examine a set of specific characteristics of intergenerational learning in organised educational activities, primarily intended for adults. The research sample included 52 institutions and organisations operating in the field of adult education in Serbia. The data, among other things, show that it is not a rare case that in some educational groups there is an extremely large intergenerational range between participatns, which brings about a great diversity among participants, expressed in different ways, which is also the cause of difficulties in work, but also a source of numerous benefits for participants, teachers, development of a specific programme and for different aspects of work of the institution. The distinct generational range does not have a larger expected impact on planning, programming and implementation of an educational activity. Therefore we think that in our research results we have found the confirmation of our basic research assumption that in the cases examined intergenerational learning occurs randomly and sporadically. Based on the research results, the starting point for the improvement of multigenerational teaching and learning processes is first of all to be found in the stated difficulties and benefits associated with multigenerational learning, because they actually indicate the needs that have to be taken into account when designing and implementing educational activities intended for members of several generations.

Key words: intergenerational learning; adult education; educational activities; "generational range"

Introduction

Intergenerational cooperation in various fields of life, including education, is supported in the Republic of Serbia by some of the national strategic documents, and in the first place by the ''National Strategy on Ageing 2006-2015''. The main aim of the Strategy already expresses the intention to, by establishing the integrated and coordinated policy, strive to create a society ''for all life ages'' (''National Strategy on Ageing..., 2006: p. 1). Furthermore, promoting ''intergenerational and intragenerational transfer; solidarity and dialogue'' is quoted as one of the fundamental priniciples on which the Strategy is based (Ibidem). Among the strategic courses we find ''Encouraging lifelong education'' (Ibidem, p. 23).

With a distinct commitment in the Strategy to put (adult) education, from the young to the old, into a multifold function of improving the quality of life of the old, an unambigous attitude was expressed regarding the insight into the existing situation in adult education practice which indicated that a significant progress was rather not made in exercising the life-long learning conception, as well as neglection of the fact that this concept cannot be achieved without senior people education. It is stated that ''the education system is not designed to offer senior people programmes which are consistent with their educational needs and therefore participaton of senior people in different forms of adult education is almost negligible'' (Ibidem). From the above stated we could conclude that in 2006 a mismatch was identified between the educational needs of older generations and the existing educational provision.

In the same year, as support to overcoming the indicated mismatch, comes one of the four objectives of the ''Strategy of Adult Education Development in the Republic of Serbia'' (2006), which is focussed on the ''development of various programme options and upgrading of the availability of adult education'' (''Strategy of Adult Education...'', 2006: p. 7).

The extracts specified indicate that on the level of the national strategic documents there is support to involvement of members of all generations in various programmes and organisational forms of education. However, from committment, through providing conditions for implementation, to the implementation itself of the proclaimed, there is an abundance of prerequisites.

Some examples of good practice of intergenerational learning in Serbia we are familiar with were primarily developed as project activities. On this occasion we are going to mention only the universities for third age, "Family Club" and "School for Parents" (Medić, S, 1990; Orlović, V, Pejatović, A, and associates, 1998; Medić, S, Matejić-Đuričić, Z, Vlaović Vasiljević, D. 1997). All the mentioned forms and programmes represent absolute support to the thesis that organised opportunities for intergenerational learning have to be very carefully planned, programmed, implemented and continuously evaluated.

Based on the knowledge of the existing practice in the field of nonformal adult education in the country in question, the authors of this paper have the impression, and a research

hypothesis at the same time, that, in addition to the fact that, on one hand, there are not too many planned opportunities for intergenerational learning, on the other hand, when they happen, they happen randomly and sporadically.

Methodological research framework

By analysing several definitions of intergenerational learning, we decided to take the one given by the European Map of Intergenerational Learning (EMIL, 2012), given that it seemed the most appropriate to our understanding of intergenerational learning. According to the understanding of EMIL intergenerational learning represents "a way that people of all ages can learn together and from each other...", it is "an important part of life-long learning, where the generations work together to gain skills, values and knowledge. Beyond the transfer of knowlege, intergenerational knowlegde fosters reciprocal learning relationships between different generations and helps to develop social capital and social cohesion in our ageing societies" (Ibidem). By choosing this definition we wanted to emphasise that we put intergenerational learning into the context of life-long learning, that it implies both learning together and learning from each other, through established specific relationships between members of different generations.

We started and implemented our empirical research in order to examine a certain set of basic characteristics of intergenerational learning in organised educational activities. The characteristics covered can be classified into four categories: 1) generational affiliation of participants in educational programmes – the most common generations of participants; ages of the youngest and the oldest participants; generation range of participants; educational programmes involving the youngest/oldest participants and programmes with the largest generational ranges; 2) share of large generational ranges in planning and implementation etc; 3) representation of programmes organised to bring together several generations; 4) difficulties in working with educational groups with larger generational ranges; benefits from intergenerational learning for: participants, teachers, programme and institution; etc.

For the sake of data collection we developed a questionnare with closed and open-ended questions, divided into four thematic parts of the questionnaire.

The research sample included 52 institutions and organisations dealing with (adult) education from the whole territory of Serbia. The following institutions/organisations are among them: private schools (15), citizens' associations and NGOs (13), state institutions (13), private companies (8) and Workers'/ People's/Open universities (3).

Analysis of research results

While considering the data on participation of different age categories in organised educational activities, it is easy to notice that, when it comes to nonformal education, the most represented participants are those from 21 to 40 years of age. They are followed by the youngest categories of participants (from 11 to 20 years of age, and under the age of 10). A clearly seen trend indicates that the older the participants are, the lesser their participation in educational programmes is. The highlighted turning point is the age of 45.

The finding that adds a certain dose of optimism is that when the average rankings for participants aged 61 and over are looked at, it can be seen that even the oldest category of participants is still present to a certain number in educational activities.

When the programmes attended by the youngest and the oldest participants are looked at (Table 1) it can be seen that, despite certain similarities and opportunities to participate in the same programmes, there are still differences which are not at all small.

Table 1: Rankings of the programmes with the youngest and the oldest participants

Programmes involving the youngest participants:			Programmes involving the oldest participants:		
R.	The programmes	f	R.	The programmes	f
1.	Foreign languages	19	1.	Vocational training	14
2.	Art programmes	10	2.	Foreign languages	13
3-4.	Vocational training	9	3.	Computer training	12
3-4.	Health and sports programmes	9	4.	Different organisational forms	7
5.	Programmes intended for specific target groups	8	5-6.	Recreation programmes	6
6.	Different organisational forms	7	5-6.	Issues related to specific target groups	6
7.	Environment protection	5	7.	Art programmes	5
8-9.	Computer training	3	8.	University for Third Age	4
8-9.	Pedagogical topics	3	9-11.	Old crafts	3
10-12.	Volunteering and solidarity	2	9-11.	Prevention programmes	3
10-12.	Pre-school programme	2	9-11.	Pedagogical topics	3
10-12.	No programme with very young participants	2			

The differences in programmes in which the youngest and the oldest participants take part can be followed at two levels. The first refers to the type of programme. So, the youngest participants are the most numerous in foreign language learning programmes and in arts programmes, whereas vocational training courses come third. Older participants are mostly seen in vocational training, then in foreign language programmes and computer training (this type of the programme comes only 8th, that is, 9th in the ranking of programmes attended by the youngest participants), while arts programmes come only seventh (for older participants). The ranking of programmes involving older participants includes programmes of universities for third age and old crafts, which do not appear on the ranking of programmes for young participants.

The second level where differences are found between the programmes involving young and the programmes involving older participants are within individual types of programmes, which have the same names but also certain differences. While young people,

for example, attend training for pilots, physical and technical security staff, modern ballet and karate, older people are more focussed on training for cooks, carpenters, yoga and chess. The differences are also seen in terms of organisational forms. Courses, seminars and workshops are usually organised for younger categories of participants. Adults use opportunities to learn via internet, camps, trips or olympics for senior people.

When we asked the representatives of the institutions and organisations to list educational programmes where the largest participants' generational range is present, in most cases they listed vocational training, then foreign language learning programmes and computer training.

The data on the size of the "generational range" between the participants in the listed programmes seem particularly surprising. The first ten places in the general rankings of the largest generational range look like this: 78, 74, 73, 72, 70, 68, 65, 63, 62 and 61 years of age. It should be mentioned that in practice, nevertheless, it happens even with the programmes with the same names, that educational groups are formed specifically to age categories in order not to have the youngest and the oldest participants in the same group. For this reason it is hard to determine accurately participants' generation range when considering one particular programme.

The generation range is even more complex when considered in the context of relation of the age of the youngest and the age of the oldest participant. Among the oldest participants, the most common ones are those aged 65 (f=10). As for the youngest participants, the most common ones are seven-year olds (f=9). The youngest participant recorded was 3 years old, whereas the oldest was 84. A very serious question is raised here: how suitable are these large generational ranges, with a huge year span so to speak, for intergenerational learning and to what extent do they hinder it?

Out of the institutions and organisations included in the research, 45 of them (87%) organise special, joint activities in which members of several generations, who otherwise attend different programmes, take part. The most commonly organised joint activities are: presentations (32), celebrations (29) and events (24), in which participants attending different educational programmes take part as participants and/or spectators. It can be noted that joint activities contain two modes of intergenerational exchange: 1) "active – active" (when the young and the old do something together; when everybody is active); 2) "presenters – audience" (when some present something, and the others are audience). Given that in our research practice we have more often come across more classical forms of activities, like presentations and celebrations, it can be said that the more dominant mode is the second one - "presenters – audience", where the room for exchange is still smaller.

Given the joint activities, 27 interviewees judged that there is exchange and that members of different generations socialise. It is interesting to point out that this exchange takes place mainly between younger adults and older adults, and very rarely between children and adults. Furthermore, 16 interviewees selected the option "sometimes there is an exchange, and sometimes there is no exchange". In only 4 cases it was observed that "there is no exchange and that members of the same generation mostly socialise among themselves". By considering the answers obtained on the intensity of exchange between generations

within joint programmes, the question arises again: how to design activities and what contents should be offered within joint programmes which can open more space for intergenerational exchange.

By a special part of the questionnaire we wanted to collect data on how participants' generational ranges, at the programmes where this range is the largest, affect planning and programming and programme implementation (Table 2).

Table 2: Rankings of the impacts of the distinct generational ranges of participants on planning, programming and implementation of the programme

Planning and programming			Implementation of the programme		
Rank	**Impacts**	**f**	**Rank**	**Impacts**	**f**
1.	No impacts	13	1.	Adjustment of the implementation pace	9
2.	Adjustment of topics, exercises, examples, tasks	9	2-4.	Selection and variation of work methods and techniques	8
3.	Joint planning	7	2-4.	No impacts	8
4.	Planning work forms	6	2-4.	Appreciation of observed behavioural characteristics of younger/older participants	8
5.	"Looking for the mean/middle"	4	5.	Inclusion of different generations has a positive impact	5
6-7.	Adjustment of the curriculum to age structure	3	6.	Adjustment of work forms	4
6-7.	Different teaching aids and materials are planned	3	7-11.	Group division by generational affiliation	3
8-10.	Difficulties in training scheduling	2	7-11.	Variations in dynamics of programme implementation	3
8-10.	A larger number of lessons for seniors	2	7-11.	Appreciation of attitudes, needs, desires	3
8-10.	Planning different work methods	2	7-11.	Impeded implementation	3

The fact that the participants in the educational programme belong to different generations, as stated by 13 reprepresentatives of the institutions and organisations, has no effect on planning educational activities and programming. When it comes to the programmes with a huge and distinct generation gap, this statement seems quite surprising, since it certainly leads to the neglect of participants' characteristics, not only in terms of their age, but also in terms of their expectations and needs. It can be anticipated that in these cases intergenerational exchange – learning is left to occur spontaneously, as well as that intergenerational differences are not to be certianly put in the function of improving both teaching and learning processes.

In addition to the response that joint planning is applied and that the curriculum is adapted to participants' age structure, majority of answers, related to this phase, point to certain elements of the educational activity and programmes that are subjects to certain changes due to the distinct generational range. So they vary: topics, exercises, examples, tasks, work forms, teaching aids, teaching materials, programme timetable, number of lessons and work methods. However, none of the representatives of the institution or organisation listed more of these elements.

So, when it comes to planning and programming of educational activities with the distinct generational ranges, we were given three different variants of the answer: participation in programmes of students from several generations has no impact on planning and programming; it has an impact on individual elements of educational activities; and it has an impact, though not particularly precise, on the process of planning and programming. These findings lead us to the conclusion that in the planning and programming phase affiliation of participants to different generations is not to a larger extent taken into account.

In the implementation phase we can single out several approaches to the observed programmes and activities: the pace of work and the dynamics of the programme implementation is adjusted; appreciation of characteristics of younger/older participants; adjustment of work forms in different ways; and the absence of any adjustment of programme implementation to participants of different generations. The analysis of the results obtained imposes an impression that during the implementation itself only very modest adjustments are made, given the distinct generation range. When we relate the results obtained in the phase of planning and programming and in the phase of implementation of the educational activity we come to the conclusion that the distinct generational range does not have much share when it comes to these two phases, which can further easily lead to the state that participants of certain generations may feel inadequately in the actual educational situation.

Already presented results and published analysis are also confirmed by the interviewees' direct statements on difficulties in work with educational groups with the distinct generational range (Table 3).

Table 3: Ranking of difficulties in work with groups with distinct generational range

Ranking of difficulties in work		
Rank	**Difficulties**	**f**
1-2.	No difficulties	15
1-2.	Differences in the pace of work and mastering the learning content	15
3-5.	Different interests	7
3-5.	Relations among the participants	7
3-5.	Differences in views on life, values and attitudes	7
6.	Different experiences	6
7-8.	Different pre-knowledge	5
7-8.	Problems with concentration with seniors	5
9.	Difficulties in selecting the topics	4

Slightly less than a third of interviewees state that there are no difficulties in work with educational groups with the distinct generational range. The same number of interviewees mention the differences in the pace of work and mastering the learning content as the main difficulty. However, the most numerous are those who mention differences among participants of different generations as difficulties in work, particularly those referring to: interests, views of life, values, attitudes, experiences and pre-knowledge. It would certainly be interesting to further explore how these differences are considered and used as a factor for encouraging intergenerational learning.

We also included in the research the interviewees' opinions on benefits from intergenerational learning. The benefits were observed through four relations: benefits for participants, for teachers, for the individual programme and for the institution, that is, the organisation. The first places in the rankings of benefits for all four relations are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: The first places on the rankings of benefits from intergenerational learning

Rank	Benefits for participants	f	Rank	Benefits for teachers	f
1.	Exchange of experiences and knowledge	25	1.	Acquisition of new experience	9
2.	Improvement of the learning process due to the exchange	11	2-3.	Flexibility development	4
3.	Tolerance development	9	2-3.	Creativity in work	4
Rank	**Benefits for the programme**	**f**	**Rank**	**Benefits for the institution**	**f**
1.	Improvement of curriculum quality based on the acquired experiences	19	1.	Improvement of programme offer	10
2.	Exchange of experiences and ideas	6	2.	Institution (organisation) development	7
3-7.	Teaching becomes more dynamic; A possibility to apply a larger number of interesting methods and techniques of work; Active participation of participants...	2	3-5.	Improvement of interpersonal relationships on the individual and collective levels; A larger number of participants; Enrichment of experiences.	4

It is easy to notice that for all four observed relations there are very significant benefits from intergenerational learning. For the participants, given that it was stated that there is an exchange of experiences and knowledge and improvement of the learning process due to the exchange, we can say that in a significant number of cases there is intergenerational learning in its full meaning "to learn together and from each other..." (EMIL, 2012). Highlighting tolerance development indicates that when intergenerational learning occurs, it is not only the programme content that is learnt, but also that space is opened for the development of a number of other key competences. For teachers managing the intergenerational learning process is an opportunity to enrich their professional experiences, and the space is opened for fostering creativity in work and for development of key competences (as, for example, flexibility).

Benefits for the programme go down to the processes of planning and programming, based on new experiences and exchange of ideas, as well as down to the process of implementation, where the space is opened for more dynamic work, for active participation of participants and for applying certain methods and techniques of work. It it clear that one of the most frequently stated benefits for institutions and organisations – extending the programme provision - stems from all this, which brings to the development of the institution and improvement of quality of different aspects of its work (interpersonal relationships, a larger number of users, etc).

Even though in previous sections of the paper we have reported numerous difficulties associated with intergenerational learning in organised educational activities, it is easy to see that the benefits from intergenerational learning considerably exceed these difficulties and they can serve as a basis for their overcoming.

Concluding remarks

The research we have conducted certanly indicated some of the basic characteristics of intergenerational learning on the sample examined in Serbia. What seems the most important to us is that the research has shown that intergenerational learning occurs in some of the organised educational activities in which, there is a large number of participants older than 60 and 70, and even 80 years of age. However, the data analysed also supported our basic assumption that in these educational opportunities intergenerational learning often happens randomly and sporadically. In other words, it is largely not planned, and not strongly supported by the progamme design and the way of implementation. Nevertheless, both directly and indirectly observed difficulties related to intergenerational learning, as well as a series of the listed benefits for participants, teachers and for the individual programme, as well as for the entire institution and organisation dealing with (adult) education, can be viewed first and foremost in the context of improving the processes of planning, programming and implementation, in order to provide strong support to intergenerational learning. Particularly surprising are the data on the size of the generational range with participants of one programme, which amount up to 78 years. These data indicate the necessity and full complexity of organising special educational programmes for educational groups where this range is very distinct, including a series of differences among participants with which they enter the educational situation (from previous knowledge to the view of the world in terms of values).

References:

European Map of Intergenerational Learning. (2012). *What is Intergenerational Learning?*. retrived from: http://www.emil-network.eu/about/what-is-intergenerational-learning. accessed: 7. 06. 2012.

Medić, S,. (1990). *Univerzitet za treće životno doba u Beogradu*. Gerontološki zbornik. 1989. str. 53-55

Medić, S, Matejić-Đuričić, Z, Vlaović Vasiljević, D. (1997). *Škola za roditelje – Socio-edukativni program za porodicu i Priručnik za realizaciju socio-edukativnog programa*, Beograd: Institut za pedagogiju i andragogiju Filozofskog fakulteta Univerziteta u Beogradu

Orlović, V, Pejatović, A, i saradnici. (1998). *Porodični klub - vodič kroz razvoj centra za usavršavanje zajedništva*. Beograd: Andragoško društvo Srbije

Vlada Republike Srbije. (2006). *Nacionalna strategija o starenju 2006-2015*. Beograd

Vlada Republike Srbije. (2006). *Strategija razvoja obrazovanja odraslih u Republici Srbiji*. Beograd.