Older adults' and young educators' experiences and perceptions of Intergenerational Learning (IGL) in non-formal education: A case study from the Adult Education Centres in Cyprus

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Abstract

The paper explores the experiences and perceptions of older adults and their young educators regarding Intergenerational Learning (IGL) in the course of a non-formal adult education programme in Cyprus. It aims to identify the forms that IGL takes in the programme as well as any possible components of the programme that foster IGL. The research was located in the Adult Education Centres (AECs), a non-formal adult education programme, offered in the Republic of Cyprus. It is based on a qualitative research design and adopts a bottom-up approach, as it gives voice to older adults and their educators and makes meaning out of their IGL experiences. The results of the study present the different forms that IGL take in the programme under three different axes: the cognitive, the social and the psychological. They view IGL as a multilevel mutual beneficial form of learning for both the older adults and their younger educators. They also highlight the necessity of a learner-centered and cooperative learning approach for fostering IGL.

L'articolo esplora le esperienze e le percezioni degli anziani e dei loro giovani educatori in merito all'apprendimento intergenerazionale (IGL) nel corso di un programma di educazione non formale per adulti a Cipro. L'articolo ha lo scopo di identificare le forme che IGL assume nel programma, nonché eventuali componenti del programma che promuovono IGL. La ricerca si è svolta nei Centri per l'educazione degli adulti (AECs), un programma di educazione non formale per adulti offerto nella Repubblica di Cipro. Lo studio si basa su un progetto di ricerca qualitativa e adotta un approccio dal basso verso l'alto, poiché dà voce agli anziani e ai loro educatori e dà significato alle loro esperienze IGL. I risultati dello studio indicano che l'IGL è percepito come una forma di apprendimento reciprocamente vantaggiosa a livello multivariato sia per gli anziani che per i loro educatori. Le diverse forme che l'IGL può assumere in un programma non formale per età miste sono state discusse su tre livelli, vale a dire quello cognitivo, quello sociale e quello psicologico. Inoltre, lo studio ha rivelato che una metodologia di apprendimento focalizzata sullo studente è importante per promuovere l'IGL.

Keywords: intergenerational learning; non-formal education; older adults; younger educators; adult education centres.

Parole chiave: apprendimento intergenerazionale; educazione informale; anziani; giovani educatori; centri per l'educazione degli adulti.

1. Introduction

In the coming decades, the aging of the population that all European countries – including the Republic of Cyprus – are experiencing, will significantly transform the current structure of our society. The aging trend in the Republic of Cyprus may be explained by two main demographic factors (UNESCO, 2021). The first one is the significant increase in longevity. Official statistics reveal that life expectancy at birth, which is estimated at 84.3 years, is considered as one of the highest in Europe, above the average of 81.3 years (Eurostat, 2020). Older people are living longer than previously, as a result of an efficient health and social welfare systems and of the improvement of life quality (UNESCO, 2021). The second factor is the long-term decrease in fertility levels. In 2019 the total fertility rate was estimated at 1.33 per woman, which is below the European average of 1.53 (Eurostat, 2020). The data also indicate that the fertility rate recorded is lower than 2.10, which represents the necessary rate for replacing the population (Republic of Cyprus, 2016). Therefore, according to Eurostat (2020), it is expected that in the island of Cyprus the share of older people aged 65 years or above, will increase remarkably by 2050 and will equate to approximately more than one-fifth of the total population.

The demographic phenomenon of ageing has raised serious concerns on the rapidly growing age gap between generations. According to Bottery (2016, p.16), Intergenerational Learning (IGL) is "a highly important strategic response to ageing population concerns". Hence, IGL becomes increasingly important in the context of this aging trend since it has a vital role "on the sustenance, creation, and expression of relations between generations" (Mannion, 2016, p. 6). In fact, the concept receives a significant attention of educational policies across Europe, as it brings numerous benefits for both generations (Bjursell, 2015; Mannion, 2016). In particular, IGL is emerging as a means of enhancing the learning and development of older adults, while contributing to the learning of younger generations (Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008). Furthermore, the growing interest on IGL, is reflected in the Council's Resolution on the new European agenda for adult learning 2021-2030, in which IGL for the 65+ age group has been prioritized and argued to be "beneficial in promoting wellbeing as well as active, autonomous and healthy ageing" (European Union, 2021, p.8).

In the Republic of Cyprus, there is still lack of empirical research and of educational initiatives regarding IGL. This is not surprising since there is no specific legislative or policy framework for providing educational opportunities to adults in general (Author). In the absence of research in the field, the study presented constitutes the first endeavour to explore IGL in a Cypriot non-formal educational context. It is also an important attempt to enhance, at a macro-level, the awareness of the political-educational stakeholders, in creating a coherent policy framework for the promotion of IGL.

In particular, the main aims guiding the study are the following:

1) To unveil the experiences of older adults and their younger educators regarding IGL in a non-formal adult education programme, the AECs in Cyprus.

2) To identify the forms that IGL takes in the programme.

3) To explore any possible components of the programme that foster IGL.

In what follows, the context of the empirical study is briefly presented. Then, the theoretical framework of the study is described. In this, three dimensions of learning are identified: the cognitive, the social and the psychological, which are used as a guiding heuristic in the research. Subsequently, the methodology adopted is presented followed by the research findings, the data discussion, and the concluding remarks.

2. Context

This study took place in the context of the Cypriot educational system, in which the available adult education structures and programmes are significantly limited and fragmented (Gravani & Ioannidou, 2016). In particular, the research is located in the Adult Education Centres (AECs), which are the main providers of non-formal adult education in Cyprus. AECs come under the Directorate of Primary Education of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, and Youth (MoECSY). According to MoECSY, (2020, p. 11) their primary objective is: "the general development of each adult's personality as well as the social, financial, and cultural development of citizens and society in general".

AECs operate in urban and rural areas using the infrastructures of Primary and Secondary schools or other public buildings (Gravani & Ioannidou, 2016). They offer a variety of interdisciplinary courses, which are categorized as follows: foreign languages (e.g. English, Arabic, Bulgarian, French, German); theoretical subjects (e.g. A tour to Cyprus, Literature, Psychology); and practical subjects (e.g. Dances, Painting, Wood sculpture Computers)[1].

This research focuses on one of the four AECs operating in the island, situated in the semi-rural Famagusta area. Despite the fact that ACEs are a mixed-age program – since they are attended by people of all ages - they are not designed as IGL environments. According to the latest official statistics of MoECSY during the academic year 2019-2020, the participation rate was over 22,200 adults. In particular, 81.54% of the participants were young adults (18 to 64 years) and 18.46% were older adults (65 years and above) (MoECSY, 2020). Most of the courses are delivered by young secondary school teachers and unemployed graduates who hold a diploma relevant to the course they teach. Some of the practical courses are delivered by young individuals with specialist knowledge in the related field (Gravani & Ioannidou, 2016).

For the purposes of the specific study, only older adults and their young educators were used to investigate the phenomenon of IGL, due to the lack of availability on behalf of the younger adults who attended also the programme; hence this part of the population did not participate in the programme. This is of course a limitation of the present research, but also it leaves space for a further exploration in the context of the AECs to initiate a future research in which IGL will be explored based on the experiences and perceptions of all three populations involved in the teaching and learning process in the AECs.

3. Literature review

The paper is grounded in two basic concepts: 'older adult' and 'intergenerational learning'. The term 'older adult' has been used differently depending on the social and historical meaning of specific geographical contexts (Findsen & Formosa, 2012). Every society is based on its own set of social rules and cultural norms that reflect a specific social position and way of life for each individual (Giddens, 1991). In the context of the present study, older adults are defined as "people, whatever their chronological age, who are post-work and post-family, in the sense that they are less or no longer involved in an occupational career or with the major responsibilities for raising a family" (Findsen & Formosa, 2012). However, the chronological criterion for the above definition is the age of 65 years and above, which has been set as the retirement age in Cyprus (European Commission, 2018). People over the age of 75 are considered as people of the fourth age (Findsen & Formosa, 2012).

Concerning IGL, the concept has been for centuries closely associated with the informal "systematic transfer of knowledge, skills, competences, norms and values between generations", within families and is "as old as mankind" (Hoff, 2007, p. 126). More recently, as a result of demographic aging, the literature has shifted to a new extra-familial IGL paradigm (Yembuu, 2021). This suggest that IGL may occur in a wide range of "non-formal

and informal learning contexts" outside of the family circle (Findsen & Formosa, 2012, p.183). As Geeraerts et al., (2018) point out, the existence of multiple generations within a setting provides the opportunity for IGL to take place. Therefore, younger and older generations learn together "in primary schools, higher education, and community settings" (Findsen & Formosa, 2012, p.183).

In the contemporary literature, the existence of different definitions of IGL reveals the lack of clarity regarding the term. As Hollingshead et al. (2014, p. 24) argue, "there is little precise language on the meaning, methods, and goals" of IGL. A clear definition is provided by the European Network for IGL (ENIL), which sees IGL as an integral part of lifelong learning, where "the generations work together to gain skills, values and knowledge" (ENIL, 2012, p.4). On that basis, Schmidt-Hertha (2014, p. 150-151), highlights the following principles as the main features of IGL: firstly, IGL "allows for learning about one's own generation and about others"; secondly, IGL "has to be seen as reciprocal"; thirdly, in the context of IGL "combining learning processes with commitment and aims beyond the learning itself seems to motivate participants in a particular way".

Siebert and Seidel (1990) refer to the three forms of learning emerged between two generations, namely: learning from each other, learning together, and learning about each other. However, the learning outcomes that derive from IGL, may not constitute the primary purpose of the activity. From this, it becomes palpable that the concept of IGL, as an interactive process, can take different forms. The form it takes in each case is reflected in the multiple benefits that arise for the generations involved in the learning event (Findsen & Formosa, 2012; Kaplan & Sánchez, 2014; Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008).

4. Research framework

As previously mentioned, IGL, as an integral part of lifelong learning, is difficult to pin down conceptually alike any form of learning. The concept of learning should be understood in a broader sense, as covering multiple processes beyond the traditional cognitive aspect. Learning as a triadic concept that overcomes the traditional views of the term is proposed by many scholars including Hodkinson et al., (2007), Illeris (2018), Merrill (2001). The significance of this approach is that learning is seen in a holistic way through three main aspects, namely the cognitive, the social and the psychological. As can be seen in Figure 1 below, these three aspects of learning do not have clear boundaries but they overlap. In the context of this research, a hybrid model is constructed based on these three pillars of learning, the purpose being to act as a heuristic guiding the research process exploring IGL. Each pillar is based on theories emerging from the fields of education, sociology, and psychology respectively. In what follows the pillars are presented.
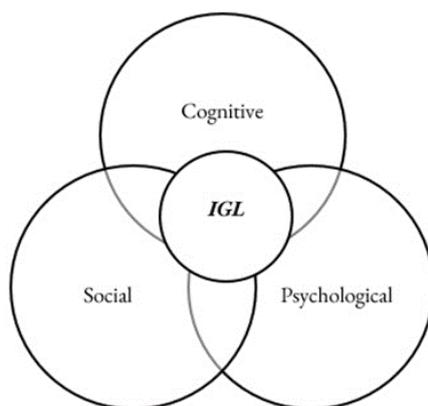

Figure 1. Research framework.

4.1 Education

According to neo-Piagetian theorists, learning and development are not distinguishable. As Piaget originally argued, they are synonymous. More specifically, learning involves complex changes in the cognitive structure of the individual, ultimately leading to cognitive development (Feldman, 2019; Knight & Sutton, 2004). At the same time, neo-Piagetians believe that experience is important for the cognitive development, which does not stop at adolescence, as Piaget argues, but continues after the end of adulthood (Feldman, 2019; Knight & Sutton, 2004). Indeed, older people possess an accumulated wealth of experience and wisdom (Jarvis, 2012).

The most traditional conceptualization of learning is that of the knowledge or skills that build understanding and student's ability (Illeris, 2003). On the one hand, this knowledge and skills are related to the topic and the content of the learning intervention (Illeris, 2003, 2017). On the other hand, according to Illeris (2017), beyond the traditional cognitive dimension of learning, there is also the new concept of abilities. The new concept of abilities captures the diversity of learning and refers to abilities such as: understanding, meaning, abilities to face practical challenges of life, the development of functionality in each life context. Also, it includes new life attitudes and behaviours.

4.2 Sociology

From the sociological perspective, the study is based on the ideas of Community of Practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 2020; Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2020), social capital and *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1986). According to Wenger & Wenger-Trayner (2020), learning as a social practice can be viewed as the result of the relationship of human beings with the world. Particularly, this form of relationship is derived from the fact that people share a concern or a passion for something they do or learn. This group of people is called a CoP and they constantly interact with each other in order to deepen their knowledge about the common topic they are interested in, using their previous related experiences and knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 2020; Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2020). In parallel, as Boström (2009) points out, social capital is emerging in IGL contexts, where groups of different generations are working together toward a common goal. Bourdieu & Wacquant define social capital as "more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (p. 119). As a result of these interactions, people may experience the transformation of their *habitus*. Swartz (1998, p. 103) argues that *habitus* "generates perceptions, aspirations, and practices that correspond to the structuring properties of earlier socialisation." Therefore, individuals as social beings act and exist within the social world, which is a valuable resource for the formation of their identity (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2020).

4.3 Psychology

From the psychological angle, the research adopts the idea of 'generativity' as a useful lens to understand the complexity of the psychological aspect of the phenomenon of IGL. Generativity is a central concept in Erikson's lifespan developmental theory (Erikson, 2014). According to Erikson's epigenetic scheme, human life includes eight stages of development. In later life, human beings struggle to overcome the phase of despair and enter the stage of integrity. According to Ehlman et al., (2014, p. 42) integrity is defined as "integration and acceptance of the life one has led" and despair is identified with "the negative element that arises when an individual is unable to accept the failures and disappointments of life".

The development of generativity is considered as a key component for the individual to pass from the phase of despair to integrity. The term of generativity is defined "as cultivating strength in the next generation" (Erikson

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1970-2221/15929

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& Erikson, 1997, p. 67). In other words, is identified as an orientation towards the concern and care of future generations. At the same time, it is seen as a way for an older human being to leave a legacy of the self (Pratt, 2013). Engaging in productive and meaningful activities in later life contributes to the development of generativity (Ehlman et al., 2014). Pratt (2013) comments that IGL is vital for encouraging generativity in both older and young adults.

Based on all the above, the research questions guiding the study are the following:

1)   What are the experiences of older adults and their younger educators regarding IGL, in the AECs?
2)   What forms does IGL take within AECs?
3)   What are the particular elements of the AECs that foster IGL?

5. Methodology

The present study adopted a qualitative research design, which is considered as the most appropriate for giving voice to the experiences and perceptions of the older adults and their educators regarding IGL. Qualitative research focuses on understanding how the participants interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences at a particular point in time and in a specific context (Merriam, 2015, p.6).

Particularly, the study followed a multi-methodological approach, using hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 1990), in the research design phase, setting the research questions and developing the research tools, as well as Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006), in the phase of data analysis. Bricolage research, as conceptualized by Denzin & Lincoln (1999, p.6), suggests the combination of multiple methodological practices that add "rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth".

5.1 Research strategy

A case study approach, as a "small-scale and focused" (Tight, 2017, p.8) research strategy was adopted in the research. Case study is a transparadigmatic and transdisciplinary heuristic (VanWynsberghe & Khan 2007, p. 80), that refers to an in-depth examination of a social phenomenon within its natural context (Bassey 2009). The case study seemed to be the ideal approach since it focuses on the phenomenon under study, IGL, in a non-formal education context. As can be seen from Figure 2, older adults' and their educators' experiences of IGL in AECs-one of the most significant non-formal education programme in Cyprus- were investigated. The particular focus was on one Adult Education Centre in a specific geographical area, the region of Famagusta. In this, three sub-cases- the theoretical courses, the foreign language courses and the practical courses- were considered as the vehicle for providing an in-depth understanding and rich description of the participants' experiences, views, and opinions of the phenomenon under study.
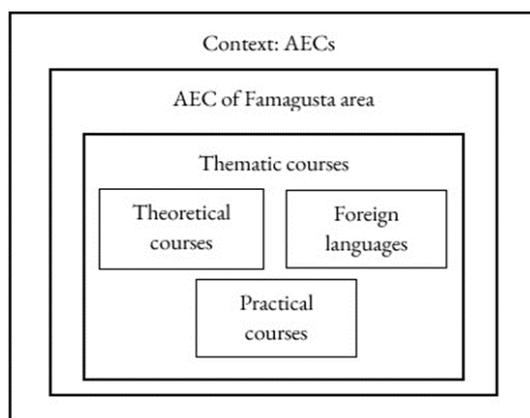
Figure 2. Research strategy.

5.2 Research tools and data collection

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used for data collection, bringing in the heart of the research, participants language, as well as ensuring a rich understanding of the phenomenon under study (Mason, 2002). Heidegger (1953) characterizes language as the 'house of being', since it leads human beings to reflect on their existence in the world and make sense of their experiences. Similarly, Van Manen (1990, p.38), points out that human beings can "recall and reflect on experiences thanks to language".

Overall, eighteen (18) interviews were conducted with older learners and their educators over a two-month period (November-December 2020). Purposeful random sampling was applied to select the participants in the study (Patton, 2015). Twelve (12) older learners – aged from 65 to 75 years old - were selected, six men and six women, four (4) from each of the three thematic courses. Six (6) adult educators – aged from 30 to 55 years old - were also interviewed, three men and three women, two (2) from each of the three selected thematic courses to achieve an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Participants were interviewed separately via telephone or teleconference - due to the restriction measures of COVID-19 - at a time that was most convenient for them. Each of the interviews lasted 1 to 1.5 hours.

5.3 Data analysis

The process of analysis was based on the principles of Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) analysis. The goal of CGT analysis is to "approach the truth in an inductive way through the eyes of the participant" (Clarke, 2019, p.6). Auerbach & Silverstein (2003, p. 32) describe the analytical process as a feeling of being 'adrift in a sea of data'. For this reason, the first stage of the analysis is related to the display of data. Initially, this involved indexing participants' responses under the questions asked during semi-structured interviews. In the second place, a table was created with the participants' profile.

The next formal stage of analysis included initial and focused coding. During initial coding, the transcribed data were analysed line-by-line gerunds which helped the researchers retain proximity with the participants' narratives (Charmaz, 2006). 'In vivo' codes were used, where the exact words of informants were utilized as a code. While engaging focused coding, through a process that is well known as 'constant comparative method', initial codes were replaced with fewer but more focused codes (Charmaz, 2017). In this process, analytical memos were used as a powerful reflection tool, writing about the codes, emerging categories, connections between these

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categories (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). The final categories are presented in the subsequent section along with the relevant quotes.

6. Results

6.1 AECs as an intergenerational learning space

The analysis revealed that AECs operate as an IGL space. The intergenerational nature of AECs can be easily recognised since older adults and their younger educators - belonging to different generations - meet and interact in multiple levels, in an informal way that is happening naturally. The participants of the study, perceived AECs as a meaningful learning setting, which fosters IGL. IGL is described by older learners and younger educators, as a mutual learning process, which can take various forms. All forms of IGL seem to be beneficial for both generations, on multiple levels. These will be discussed in what follows under the three main categories emerging from the heuristic model guiding the research, namely: the cognitive, the social and the psychological.

6.2 The cognitive aspect of IGL

New knowledge and skills

Research data highlighted the cognitive form that IGL takes in the AECs. All the older interviewees (n=11), with one exception, argued that an intergenerational exchange of knowledge takes place across diverse generations, older adults and their younger educators, in the programme, in an informal way. Also, four (n=4) out of the six educators shared similar views. The Centres are presented as a source of multiple knowledge, for both generations, with the older adults arguing that they share their prior knowledge and skills with their younger educators. The following statement, illustrates the above:

> "The younger (educators) wants to hear us talking during the classes. Indeed, from older adults, you can learn a lot by talking to them. [...] All of us (older learners), it's clear that we have many experiences. So adult educators, ask us when they need information related to the course and they expect us to intervene in the lessons, when it's necessary." (Older adult 11)

Apart from the course related knowledge and skills, two (n=2) of the older learners, one male and one female, commented that their participation in the Centres leads to the transfer of life-related skills and wisdom knowledge from the older adults to the younger educators. The following representative response from a male learner attending the foreign language course indicates this:

> "Young (educators) ask me various things. Tips for life. They ask me for advice of a financial or social nature. They feel that they have someone close to them from whom they can learn and draw wisdom." (Older adult 1)

Similarly, adult educators in the study argued that throughout the programme were involved in an IGL process since they have learnt from the older adults and the later have learnt from them. Characteristic is the following quote from a female adult educator teaching art craft to old women. She pointed out:

> "There (in the AEC), 'grandmas' talk with the us (the educators) and they give us advise about life. But we also advise them. I mean we share with them new views about life. When they listen to the educators, they learn things that they didn't imagine." (Adult educator 4)

Also, a male educator, teaching woodcarving, described IGL as a reciprocal process across the two generations. He noted:

> "We are all learners in these courses. The older learners learn from younger educators, but several times younger educators also learn from the older adults." (Adult educator 3)

Changing attitude towards younger generation
The study revealed that the IGL process in which both older learners and their educators were involved in the course of the programme had a positive impact on both sides. Particularly, six (n=6) out of the twelve older adults interviewed argued that they have experienced IGL that has been beneficial towards changing old stereotypes and attitudes towards younger generations. They reported an openness to younger educators. The latter from their side identified common ground with older adults. The following quotes from a male older adult attending Russian language classes and a female adult learner attending a theoretical course are indicative of the above:

> "I have overcome various prejudices. The courses positively helped me to get rid of some negative stereotypes I had towards young people. This happened through the contact with young educators. I'm now more open to them [...]. My opinion about them has totally changed..." (Older adult 1)

> "I really liked the educator; she was a philologist. I didn't believe that young educators could have so much knowledge. They respected us. I was fascinated by young educators! Now we have a new educator. He is also young. I really like him!" (Older adult 5)

It becomes palpable from the above that the older adults gained a greater appreciation for younger generations – through the interaction with young educators - and a deeper understanding of them. They expressed feelings of admiration for young educator's qualifications. In the same vein, three (n=3) out of the six educators, reported that they were surprised by the way that older people had challenged their negative thoughts and disposition towards younger generations. As one male educator from a theoretical course commented:

> "They're tough people; they're coming from a rural society. They have faced lots of difficulties in their life, regardless of their social status now ... So they weren't pen towards us when they first met us ... But after a while this has changed." (Adult educator A)

Similarly, a female adult educator, teaching paining, noted:

> "The more they know us, the more they change believes towards us. They don't fear us anymore. They speak freely. They feel comfortable." (Adult educator D)

In the aforementioned extracts, the educators describe a significant change in the way that they (the new generation) are perceived by the older adults in the course of the programme. Based on this, the adult educator above justifies older adults' prejudice towards the younger generation in the light of their social and cultural background – they come from a rural community, he commented. However, both educators come into an agreement that the process of IGL encourages older learners to overcome those prejudices.

Changing attitude towards teaching and learning
Another central theme that emerged from the data was the change of attitude towards teaching and learning on behalf of the older adults. In the study, the latter reflected a disposition towards a more teacher-centered approach to teaching and learning; a model that was dominant in their education since their early school years. In this, a top-down approach is used from the teacher to the learner, with the former as being the authority and the provider of knowledge and the latter as being the consumer. The above becomes palpable in the following quotes, from interviews with a young male educator and a male older learner attending painting classes respectively:

> "They think that I know everything just because I'm the teacher…I often try to explain them that being a teacher doesn't mean that you know everything and that you are there to transfer your knowledge to them." (Adult educator C)

> "When everyone is sitting in place in the classroom, the main central person is the teacher. Our eyes and ears are open to get his knowledge and wisdom." (Older adult 11)

Although the above words emphasize the teacher-centered approach, five (n=5) out of the twelve older adults in the study commented that they started to shift their perceptions of teaching and learning in the course of the sessions with the educators. They argued that they became familiar with a more learner-centered approach, as a result of the intergenerational exchanges during the sessions in the AECs. Two (n=2) out of the six educators also confirmed the above. The following quotes from interviews with two male older learners, both attending theoretical courses (Russian language and Tour to Cyprus respectively) are illustrative of the above:

> "In contrast to our previous schools, in the AECs, our educators are young, younger than us. They've got the age of our children, maybe even our grandchildren. Therefore, in this context, we don't fear the teachers, but we love them more than we should. They're young with master's and doctorate degrees and they place us in the Centre of the teaching process, something new to us". (Older adult 1)

> "We love and respect our educators, as they love and respect us. When you're interested in something, the other person appreciates it. I also appreciate it. We engage in dialogue with them and feel valued. It's something different than the teachers we had in high school." (Older adult 12)

6.3 The social aspect of IGL

New social networks

A common theme throughout the study was the establishment of new social intergenerational networks in the course of the sessions between the two generations, older learners and younger educators. All the older participants (n=11), with one exception, claimed that IGL gave them the opportunity to widen their social networks. Educators, four (n=4) out of the six, shared similar experiences and they seemed to enjoy this significant social benefit of IGL. A female educator from a practical course stated: "Older people have formed friendships with us; there is a social interaction amongst us".

Several participants described the new social networks by highlighting specific learning activities that took place within the courses. The following statement of a male older learner, attending a practical course, is representative of this belief. He argued: "…While engaging with our work, we talk with our younger educators. Our hands hold the tools and paint while the tongue is free to speak."

However, all the older participants identified that social networking with their younger educators did not continue outside the AECs. They also argued that they did not expect the creation of long-lasting friendships with them. The above can be seen in the following statements:

> "When we meet outside the school, we might talk a little bit. But we have no closed relations, such as visiting each other's houses. No. That's not my character." (Older learner 10)

> "We have very good relations with them…Of course there's an age difference. In the best-case scenario, age difference between us is fifteen years. But I don't mind. We've got very good relations. We laugh, we joke and have good time in class. Look, everyone has his own issues … Therefore, we don't meet outside." (Older learner 1)

Older learners have maintained the established relationships with younger educators in the form of exchanging messages on special occasions, such as birthdays. At the same time, some others mentioned the establishment of communication groups on the Internet. For instance, a male learner commented:

> "We have created beautiful relationships with our educators. Especially with the last educator we have a special relationship. She's an extremely well-educated girl. Now that the course ended, we continue to talk through social media. This makes me happy. I like this." (Older learner 11)

A female educator teaching foreign languages described the friendly relationship she developed with an older female adult. She commented on the interest she expressed for the older learner through constant communication with her.

> "During Easter that nice lady informed me that she would have an operation. I was worried about her, so I called her. She informed me that everything went well. Also, during the Coronavirus lockdown she was alone, and I was calling her. Our relationships are friendly." (Adult educator B)

6.4 The psychological aspect of IGL

Positive feelings

The analysis highlighted that engaging in IGL activities plays an important role in increasing positive feelings amongst older adults and their educators and therefore, in enhancing their emotional wellbeing. Both generations, older adults and their younger educators, described their emotions in relation to the IGL activities that took place in the AECs. The most frequent emotions reported included: satisfaction, optimism, joy, pleasure, happiness. Specifically, five (n=5) out of the twelve older participants and three (n=3) out of the six educators claimed that they experienced positive feelings, as a result of the intergenerational contact. A female older participant, from a theoretical course, articulated: "I feel very good when I talk to our educator. She encourages me and helps me; I feel better having someone to talk to". Another female older learner, from a practical course stated:

> "I feel happy. I participate in something that helps me. I socialize by finding young, educated people (educators) to talk to, get out of the house, do something that benefits my body and spirit. So yes, I'm optimistic about life." (Older learner 8)

From the above it becomes clear that IGL had a significant impact on older adults emotional well-being since it had reduced the negative emotions connected to old age. The older learners stated that participation in non-formal education offered them the opportunity to develop intergenerational contacts with their educators, which in their turn contributed to the development of positive emotions that benefited physical and emotional health. The educators also claimed that they experienced positive emotions through the process of IGL as can be seen from the quotes below:

> "Sometimes I could see surprise on their faces, especially when they heard something new; something that they didn't know and wanted to learn more. I could see it on their faces that...they were really interested in the lesson. This made me happy." (Adult educator A)

> "I felt nice with older people. They showed me love. According to a saying: you get what you show. I had a great time with them." (Adult educator D)

Feelings of being valued, accepted, and respected

A final theme that emerged from the data is the generation of the feelings of being valued, accepted and respected. Specifically, five (n=5) out of the twelve older participants shared this view. They shared their knowledge, skills, ideas and values with the younger educators. This act of 'sharing' helped them feel that the younger generations recognized their prior knowledge, experiences and hence their value as human beings. The following older adult highlighted: "Young educators appreciated us, recognized our knowledge. That made me feel good."

A thorough look at the extract below, shows that the older adults sought attention and recognition from the educators. A female older participant stated that she was asking for confirmation for the artcrafts she was creating: "I wanted to finish something and showed it to my teacher [...] so that I could have her opinion on this." (Older learner 10)

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Furthermore, another point raised was the importance of the feeling of being useful. The concept of usefulness was again linked to the engagement with various meaningful learning and social activities. From the perspective of the older adults, assisting younger educators in various ways in the AECs is acknowledged as being mainly personal benefit, which made them feel valued. Based on this a female older learner supported: "It was good that we had younger educators and we were given the opportunity to support and advise them, as if they were our children. This made me feel valued."

Moreover, three (n=3) out of the six educators claimed that engaging in IGL activities made them feel respected and valued. This recognition they received from older trainees helped them to be more efficient in their work. Characteristic are the following words:

> "They respected us. They wanted to learn from us and saw us as being valuable teachers. When an educator feels good, he gives more." (Adult educator B)

> "Generally speaking, they told me that they would like to take my class next year as well. Sometimes, they even told me that their friends would like to participate in my class." (Adult educator A)

6.5 Elements of AECs fostering IGL

Participants in the study described the ideal conditions, which, according to their opinion, supported the powerful process of IGL within the AECs. As mentioned previously, the AECs operate as a non-formal education programme. The analysis highlighted that a flexible curriculum could be a crucial element for the intergenerational exchange of knowledge between the older adults and the younger educators. From this point of view, the educators have the opportunity to be more open and move away from a lecture-based model towards a more learner-centered model. The educator is not presented as the only source of knowledge. Older learners felt that they had the right to intervene in the learning process and share their knowledge with their educators. Thus, older learners were in the heart of the learning process as active makers of knowledge.

In particular, the active involvement of the older learners in the learning process was carried out through dialogue, which was utilized as an IGL tool. Learners discussed and collaborated. The participants, commented that the implementation of informal collaborative learning strategies, allowed to all the older learners to interact with their educators in a productive way. As a result, these circumstances that were observed by the interviewees encouraged the older adults to participate equally, to express their opinions, prior experiences and ways of thinking. Therefore, older learners and educators were helping each other to achieve a common goal. This form of cooperative learning had a positive impact on fostering IGL. Particularly, five (n=5) out of the twelve older adults and three (n=3) out of the six adult educators supported this view. The following quotations illustrate this opposition:

> "We had benches in our courses. Two, three older people on each bench. [...] We were one body, we learnt together, educators and older adults. [...] We gave them (older adults) the right to speak, express themselves. We were equal. There is no difference between us. We were a team, trying to learn something". (Male adult educator C)

> "So we (educators) sat in a group, with older learners around a table. The nature of the course was act as a team, working around a table. We used to talk all the time with older adults." (Female adult educator D)

In the above extracts, it also becomes palpable that a democratic relationship was built between the educators and the older learners. The traditional model that assumes the educator as the authority of the classroom collapses. Everyone is equal in the learning process; there is freedom of action in the learning environment. All these mechanisms of learner-centered learning and collaborative learning create the right conditions for IGL to flourish.

7. Conlusion

The study has been an attempt to explore the abstract concept of IGL, within the context of non-formal education. It revealed that IGL, which takes place between younger educators and older learners within the AECs, involves multiple aspects. The exploration of IGL through the experiences, thoughts and feelings of the participants, has shown its critical importance for both generations involved. Although the research was a small-scale case study, it has generated theoretical and practical implications for the wider field of IGL and mainly for its non-formal form.

Particularly, the study has identified three main forms of IGL: the cognitive, social and psychological. It considers that these forms of IGL overlap and interact. The cognitive form concerns the constant exchange of content-based knowledge, skills and wisdom knowledge between both generations. Younger educators did not impose knowledge but worked together with older adults, who had rich life experiences to co-construct knowledge. In addition, IGL process encouraged older adults to reflect on their attitudes towards younger generations – and vice versa – the purpose being to overcome various prejudices.

In parallel, the research indicated that IGL as a social mechanism, contributes to the creation of social capital. According to Schuller (1997, p. 17) "social capital treats learning not as a matter of individual acquisition of skills and knowledge, but as a function of identifiable social relationships". Based on the participants' descriptions, IGL had a positive impact on the development of meaningful intergenerational relationships and the creation of new intergenerational networks. This is a very important benefit especially for older adults, who, in many cases, had limited social networks (Findsen & Formosa, 2012).

Furthermore, the psychological dimension of IGL was emphasized by the interviewees. The participants experienced positive emotions and felt valued, accepted, respected and useful. Their improved emotional wellbeing derived from the process of a reciprocal transformation. The cognitive and social interaction between the generations involved, led to the strengthening of their psychological dimension. According to Vanderven (2004, p.87), IGL is "a process of discovery and adjustment, leads to mutual change and transformation as each party discovers and learns more from the other".

The characteristics of the non-formal education program, which fostered IGL were also explored. Firstly, the partly structured curriculum gave the freedom to adult educators to engage in an intergenerational dialogue with older adults based on mutual respect and cooperation. Secondly, older learners and their educators were both collaborators and protagonist in a mutual transformative learning process that goes beyond course adaptions (Author). Through this process, the top-down relationships of the educator and the learners are transformed into a mutual cooperative relationship with the aim of co-producing knowledge (Borg, 2021). Thirdly,

dialogue as the main learning tool contributed to the rejection of the hegemonic hierarchy and therefore the educator was presented as an equal to the older learners (Freire et al., 2001).

In conclusion, IGL, as a practice with multiple perspectives, needs further investigation. In particular, it is proposed that the phenomenon must be investigated through research tools such as diaries, and observation that will allow in-depth examination. In addition, the research revealed the need to modernize multigenerational non-formal education settings as a means of empowering – cognitively, socially and psychologically – the older generations. The results also highlighted the important role of the educators in promoting IGL. Overall, the study offers useful insights to policymakers, in order to strengthen the mechanisms that promote IGL, in multigenerational education settings.

Acknowledgements

Notes

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