Intergeneration learning as a dialog in overcoming loneliness of older adults

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Abstract

Increasing life expectancy and inclusion of older people in care system changes the intergenerational communication. Various professionals such as social workers and caregivers take care of older people needs. Little attention is paid to intergenerational learning and education in social care organizations despite it may help to overcome feeling of loneliness among older people. Loneliness is a negative emotion associated with a perceived gap between existing relationships and desired ones. It is widely recognized as one among the most significant and entrenched issues facing our aging society. The effect of loneliness is harmful to health and increases the risk of disability. Intergenerational links have been identified as an important issue in elderly care. Educational activities for the elderly are offered in various social care institutions in Lithuania. The research data reveal several predominant topics that would be relevant to older learners, such as loneliness, activity of older people, and communication.

L'aumento dell'aspettativa di vita e l'inserimento degli anziani nel sistema di assistenza modificano la comunicazione tra le generazioni. Diversi professionisti, come assistenti sociali e caregivers, si occupano dei bisogni degli anziani. Nelle organizzazioni di assistenza sociale si presta meno attenzione all'apprendimento intergenerazionale e alle diverse attività educative, anche se ciò può aiutare a superare il senso di solitudine degli anziani. La solitudine è un'emozione negativa associata al divario percepito tra le relazioni esistenti e quelle desiderate. È ampiamente riconosciuta come uno dei problemi più significativi e radicati della nostra società che invecchia. L'effetto della solitudine è dannoso per la salute e aumenta il rischio di disabilità. I legami intergenerazionali sono stati identificati come un aspetto importante nell'assistenza agli anziani. Le attività educative per gli anziani sono offerte in diverse istituzioni di assistenza sociale in Lituania. I dati della ricerca rivelano alcuni temi

dominanti che possono essere rilevanti per i discenti anziani, tra i quali solitudine, attività degli anziani, e attivazione della comunicazione.

Keywords: : intergenerational dialog; intergenerational learning; older adults; loneliness; educational activities

Parole chiave: dialogo intergenerazionale; apprendimento intergenerazionale; adulti anziani; solitudine; attività educative

1. Introduction

Lithuania, as most of EU countries, has an aging population. At the beginning of 2020, there were 556.4 thousand older adults (aged 65 and older), or 19.9 per cent of the total resident population. Compared to the beginning of 2019, the number of older adults increased by 1.5 per cent (Official statistics portal, 2020).

In Lithuania's ageing society, loneliness and social isolation among older people are becoming increasingly important. Older people are often reluctant to acknowledge these life situations, as various studies show (Bagdonas et al., 2017; Mikulioniene et al., 2018) that older people associate loneliness and social isolation with failure in life and self-devaluation as individuals. Preventing social isolation and strengthening social inclusion of older people through continuous learning could significantly improve their quality of life. Learning is necessary for all generations, and, as Strom & Strom (2015) point out, it may help older adults to stay connected to their families and communities. Various aspects of intergenerational learning are analysed by different scientists. Much attention is paid to various types of intergenerational programs and activities for young people and older adults (Andreoletti & Howard, 2018; Ehlman et al., 2014), shared-site intergenerational programs (Doll & Bolender, 2010; Jarrott & Smith, 2010), and lifelong learning programs for seniors (Au et al. 2015; Hanks & Icenogle, 2001). Some attention is paid to investigate the benefits of this program for the children and older adult and its application in healthcare systems. (Zahra & Hossein, 2017) or impact of intergenerational programming for older adult participants (Lee et al., 2020). There is less attention paid to intergenerational learning in organizations. The study of Sing et al. (2021) indicates the need to have a more curated intervention to promote knowledge sharing in modern organizations. In 1980, the term 'lifelong education' was replaced by the term 'lifelong learning'. Intergenerational learning became an actual political agenda in many countries concerning family life, adult education and workplace (Boström, 2014). Longer life expectancy and the growing number of older people who need care cause changes in family life and intergenerational contacts. Various professionals place great emphasis on changing needs of the older generation, especially in social care system (Lymbery, 2005; McDonald, 2010).

The goal of the article is to analyse intergenerational learning in dealing with loneliness through social care and lifelong learning process. Informal and nonformal or intergenerational learning is a tool to enhance the intergenerational dialog. Both of them are relevant for older adults' population. It happens via everyday routine and educational activities which are organised by social workers and/or other formal caregivers.

2. Loneliness in old age as a social phenomenon

Old age is primarily understood as a biological individual aging and impaired functional capacity of the body. Although it is often thought that old people have a negative view of old age, the results of research shows that negative stereotypes about aging are attributed to both young and middle-aged and older people (Luo, 2012). Stereotypes about aging are gaining ground still in childhood and intensifies throughout life (Marques et al. 2014). Attitudes of the Lithuanian population towards the elderly are from respect for the elderly to discrimination, for example that the right of pensioners to work should be restricted (Mikulionienė, 2003a; Mikulionienė, 2003b). There are negative stereotypes of old age in Lithuanian society regarding functional abilities and psychological characteristics (that old people are in poor health, often sick, lost sexuality, thinking and moving slowly, feel lonely, are conservative, does not innovate) (Mikulionienė,1996). Older people are often seen as a homogeneous group, attributed to supposedly universal traits and characteristics. Grey hair, wrinkles, belonging to the retirement class create the impression that the elderly are very similar to each other. There is also believe that as people get older, they usually become irritable and angry. Research data of 2016 Lithuanian

population psychological well-being survey shows that 60 year and older respondents were less likely to feel happy, were more depressed, in a bad mood, had no one to talk to (Bagdonas et al., 2017). Maslenikova and Bulotaitė (2013) propose to differentiate emotional experiences in old age. They find that as living at home older people experience more positive emotions than those in care facilities older residents. A person prone to neuroticism life and satisfaction with it in old age will be very different from life of an emotionally stable personality under constant other circumstances (Bagdonas et al., 2017). However, research shows that the personal factor is very important when using self-assessment methods to assess life satisfaction or its aspects, subjective quality of life, psychological well-being and personal factors can be far stronger than economic, social, or even health factors (Bagdonas et al., 2013).

In the aging Lithuanian society, the aspects of the loneliness and social isolation of older people are becoming more and more relevant. Although often older people are reluctant to acknowledge these complexities of life. As various studies show (Mikulionienė, 2003a; Mikulionienė et al., 2018) older people associate loneliness and social isolation with a failed life and their worthlessness as a person. Therefore, often instead of tackling these problems, they do not share them with friends or loved ones. Focusing on preventing the social isolation of older people and measures to strengthen social inclusion, through educational activities, would not only prolong life but also significantly improve their quality of life. The Covid-19 pandemic clearly showed the need to pay more attention to the issue. Older people were increasingly isolated. Those in care facilities were secluded for their own protection, others had little contact with friends and family or lived entirely on their own. People caring for older people were often overwhelmed by the many safety precautions and challenges in their own daily lives.

3. The social worker as an organizer of educational activities

There is need of care of older people which can be provided by various professionals by state and other institutions or informal care. Established centres of care for older people created new job positions for the young and middle-age generation (Diaz, 2012). Intergenerational contact, by contrast, involves people of different ages sharing space and time without necessarily being involved in exchange, and where this exchange does occur, it is by chance and not continued (Castro et al., 2014). Intergenerational contact is established as the main issue providing care for older adults. Development of science reduce the necessity of younger generation to learn from older adults, the importance of their knowledge and experience us a result is underestimate (Hazan, 1994; Bengston et al., 2005; Achenbaum, 2005). Professionals are implementing care of older people through developing an intergenerational harmony to reduce any kind of exclusion such as loneliness, etc. (Mali, 2014).

Intergenerational education can be defined as cooperation and interaction among generations sharing of experiences, knowledge and value for increasing self-esteem and self-realization (Sáez, 2002). Newman & Hatton-Yeo (2008, p. 32) underline that "intergenerational learning could arise in any range of contexts in which young people and elderly people come together in a shared activity". Intergenerational learning promotes greater understanding and respect between generations and helps generations to cooperate, develop skills, acquire knowledge, and create values (Luka & Niedritis, 2012). It is an important part of lifelong learning. Retirees learning needs are the least well defined (Luka & Niedritis, 2012). Older adults need education opportunities that equip them to cope with social and technological change (Strom & Strom, 2015; Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008)

The educational activities for older people in Lithuania are offered in different social care institutions. In the Social Directory of Services (2006) these activities are classified as services for developing and maintaining social skills of older adults. Their goal is to preserve and restore independence of older adults in carrying out a diverse

range of functions essential for daily life (seeking help, adapting to new situations, participating in social life, establishing, and maintaining relationships with relatives, etc.) and/or organizing their employment. The service consists of in-formation and counselling, the development and maintenance of daily living skills and the development of work skills (Socialinių paslaugų katalogas, 2006).

Social workers and formal caregivers employed at old people's care houses and day care centres recognize that the key goals of their organisations increasingly tend to see activating their inmates through educational activities apart from provision of social and health care, which, undoubtedly, constitutes substantial part of their work. Today Lithuanian social workers provide divers social services to older people. Researchers (Zemaitaityte & Petrauskiene, 2016; Leliugienė et al., 2013; Leliugienė, 2003) identify the roles of social workers in gerontology in organising social and education activities: assessor's role, to identify the inclinations, needs and interests of older people; the role of organiser of educational activities, to propose various educational activities and organise leisure time; and the role of empowerment, to help older adults to remain active and continuously learning.

4. Methodology

In order to analyse intergenerational learning as a dialog in overcoming loneliness qualitative research was carried out. Focus group interview was chosen as a data collection method.

The purposeful sampling was used to select the participants. This is a technique for selecting individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2003). Research participants had to meet predefined selection criteria. Two focus groups were formed. There were two selection criteria for the first focus group: (a) to be a professional social workers or nurse (i.e., having a legally re-quired education); (b) to be employed in a care institution. The selection criterion for the second focus group was to be a teacher with experience in training professionals at care institutions. In both focus groups dominated females, almost equally divided into two age groups (see Table 1).

Table 1. The characteristics of research participants

No.	Group/Role	Gender	Age Groups
1.	Group 1/SL1	F	45-65
2.	Group 1/SD2	F	25-45
3.	Group 1/SL3	F	45-65
4.	Group 1/SD4	F	45-65
5.	Group 1/SL5	F	25-45
6.	Group 1/SD6	F	25-45
7.	Group 2/T1	F	45-65
8.	Group 2/ T2	F	25-45
9.	Group 2/ T3	M	25-45
10.	Group 2/ T4	F	45-65
11.	Group 2/ T5	F	45-65

The main question of focus interview was about research participants experience in intergenerational learning. Received data were analysed using qualitative content analysis, applying theoretical coding. It was carried out in the following stages: sequential reading of the data, identification of the primary elements, dividing the data

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into meaningful analytical units, dividing these units into subcategories, highlighting the categories, and interpreting the content data (Žydžiūnaitė & Sabaliauskas, 2017).

During the research main principles of qualitative research ethic were followed: free will of participation, anonymity was ensured, information about the research was provided before the questions that research participants could fully understand the essence and process of the research. They could refuse to participate in the research at any stage.

5. Intergeneration dialog in education and training

Learners' motivations

The research data showed that during the training it is important to consider factors such as learners' motivation for change, the age of the learners, working conditions.

Analysing learners' motivation for change, data showed controversial situation. Learners view training with enthusiasm, understanding its need and benefits: *100 per cent in favour of the training (SL5); <...> always in favour of training (SL5); Training is of course necessary (SD2); In general, training is always good, it's nice (SD6); It's like the administration is trying to encourage or motivate the staff. (SD6).* On the other hand, staff can be passive and unmotivated to change and to accept innovation: *training is of course necessary, but in our institution, it is <...> a lack of motivation for the staff themselves to change. I mean, when you want to do something new with a client, with a resident, you have to accept something new yourself <...> and that's where it starts, that the employee is not inclined to change... (SD2).*

Motivation to learn can depend on age. The research data partly reinforces the stereotype that older workers are less inclined to improve their knowledge and skills, to change and innovate: *there is an age difference between workers. Well, in my case, I'm one of the younger ones, it's with older workers - not all of them, really, but it's a difficult challenge. It's hard for them to pass on the knowledge they have gained from the training and there is already something to do. And for him/her to pass on something new to the resident, that is a problem for us (SD2); Let's say a nurse's assistant, or a social worker's assistant - women who are over fifty years of age, so they are so...well, really, as my colleagues have said, they need to educate themselves, and then the other one (SD6).*

The research data showed that working conditions can reduce the motivation to learn, as other needs arise: *These days it is important for all of us to recuperate and rest from what has happened. This is what we did in February. March was easier, we were waiting for warmer weather so we could go outside. We're recovering now, so for the time being, these things have not been on our minds. And now we are just standing up, we need to recover, we need to recover, we can go on holiday, we can rest. Because if you get overworked at work, you pass it on to the residents, because they feel the strain all the time too (SD6).*

Importance of training

Research participants emphasized usefulness of training. It helps:
- to update knowledge, to communicate, it gives new ideas for practice: *you still look, and you know, but when you take part in training you update your knowledge, you communicate, you hear, you always hear something new that you can then apply in your work, in your practice ... (SL5).*
- to fulfil multiple roles: *The new knowledge gained during the training often gives us the impetus to act: and really helps us a lot and gives us some momentum for some time. Well, it's like you are pushed, and you do things, and some innovations come up, and you try to implement something at work. And then we*

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stop again, we get back on track again, and then it gets lost. Then it's back to training again, all over again. It's a bit of a boost (SD 6).

Content of training

Research data revealed the dominating topics of training which would be relevant for learners:
- Loneliness, activation and empowerment of older people: *I'm thinking now that the key underlying issue is that loneliness can be included, that activation and empowerment of individuals. So, for me here, maybe next to loneliness, <...> to involve them somewhere, to empower them - those are the main problems (SD4).*
- According to client situations, for example on suicide and suicide prevention: *And I have been in trainings there on suicide prevention. Because actually sometimes out of that despair, out of that sadness, people start to, almost, have these thoughts in their head. So, you talk, you talk, you communicate. Because it comes every day, or at least you say, "good morning, how did you sleep" and that is enough for the person (SL5).*
- About communication: *to communicate and support <...> them how to involve those seniors, how to involve them, how to do celebrations, why is it important <...> and why is it important to involve them, what are their interests (T5); we are talking about those who are lacking in communication, who would have a group like this once a week, so that they would survive from one to the next (T4)*
- Prevention measures: *but also, injury prevention, prevention of loneliness (T5).*
- Other topics: *I don't know, I don't have any special wishes for this day, for this one... Well, to tell you the truth, I don't know for today... And I don't know about special training. For us it's all right anyway, some kind of that goes not only to collect hours, but also to be interesting personally for somebody, it really goes, we pass courses now remotely, something like that. And anyway, there are no special requests. That's about it (SD6); <...> it's all good to motivate a bit, to move towards a prefect (SL1).*

Special attention was paid to ICT topic in training. It is stressed that there is no need to learn about ICT because older people do not use technology much: *as for the Apps, I don't know, I don't have any ideas and it is really very busy sometimes and I, for example, don't really think about any Apps. God forbid we keep up with what we are doing, with all the paperwork and with the residents, well, everything is all over the place and I don't know. Apps would probably make it difficult for me these days. I'm not talking about messenger, that standard, Skype, WhatsApp, communication, who can communicate remotely, ... There is no need for some complicated Apps these days (SD6); It's the technologies that I wouldn't go into at the first question (T5); but the elderly, they are very much opposed, in the sense that they don't want to go "no no no no, what do you want from me here, I want a simple phone with knobs on it", for example, and "to have a simple conversation" ... (SD6).* The other issue was the ethics of using technology: *I have discussed these ethical issues more with students because they are very much linked to technology, to what extent a person allows others to monitor him or her, or other people to have access to see his or her data, <...> whether or not it's ethical, and these issues have been discussed more (T4).* Research participants also mentioned that the use of technology could be very beneficial in organizing the leisure activities of older people: *why not have a digital classroom for older people (T4).*

In order to develop and implement effective education of older adults, intergenerational learning as a dialog is needed. For trainers and caregivers, it is important to find ways of recognition of loneliness.

Research data shows various possibilities of how to recognise loneliness: recognising it from emotions, from behaviour; from open or hidden expression, from mental and physical health conditions.

Research participants say that lonely people can be identified by emotions such as anger: *It's a kind of anger attacks - how to get attention by doing something wrong, just to get attention (SD2)* or sadness *I'm alone, I'm sad sometimes (T5); And you can see by the person who is sad (SL1).*

They also say that lonely people can be identified by closed behaviour: *Because, of course, there are also lonely people who are more closed, that it is a character trait, that he is so closed, that he does not speak and that he is quietly calm and quiet in that loneliness. It's a character thing, of course (SD4); Thoughtful, withdrawn or... it shows (SL1);* attention demand: *That lack of attention is expressed too much by some, I think, because of loneliness (SL1); And anyway, this is one of the symptoms where you can already tell that someone is sad or something is wrong - when they complain about their health, when there are no serious health problems. Just wanting attention (SD2).*

Loneliness can be expressed openly: *they even tell us themselves that "it's lonely here, I miss visiting relatives". It's just that they themselves are the ones who usually say it (SL1); Anyway, this is one group who say it themselves, then we try to explain why and what we can do differently (SD2)* or hidden: *That loneliness again... Let's say there's occupation going on, and there can be a lot of work going on with a person... but he may still feel lonely inside (SD2); Well, first of all, a person can be lonely, but participate in occupational activities, in that sense. His participation does not mean that he does not feel that feeling. One can be among people, but the feeling doesn't go away (SD6).*

Research participants associate loneliness with mental health problems, for example, depression: *Well, it's just that sometimes you go to a care home, and you see him sitting alone and swaying. It's already a symptom of depression (T5); I'm somehow heard from the nurses in some care homes, I don't know if it's in all of them, 80 or 70 percent of the population is on antidepressants (T3);* or the change in physical health: *I imagine that it mainly depends on the person's state of health, that loneliness (T3).*

Means of enhancing intergeneration dialog

Research data show two major means for enhancing intergeneration dialog: everyday communication and educational activities.

Importance of everyday communication is emphasised: *But what stuck out to me the most were the words of one of the students, who said: I saw really lonely seniors who need contact with others. And then I thought about my own immediate environment (T2); It's really important to communicate, to involve, and to clarify those strategies, how to involve, it's very important for the social workers and the assistants of the social worker, to see that person, to recognise the signs (T5).* Being together, everyday connectedness could also develop this dialog: *When you are obviously in contact, working, and you see that just being together is probably important (T2).* Older adults value attention from outside: *Here again, apparently some of them just have that one visiting care worker who visits them and maybe that loneliness or solitude is somehow dispelled with the provision of those services (T1).*

Research participants were talking about various educational activities. Organised activities are mentioned: *The other thing is, at a certain age, you've left the labour market, and where you could go out, be with people, so then those examples are probably all seniors' clubs, right? (T3); In our country, before the pandemic, it was a lot of educational activities and every month concerts, and children from kindergarten (SD2);* hobbies: *I say, "find an activity for that, or read a book, or knit, or take part in something like that". But they don't really want to do that (SL5);* engaging in new activities: *Another thing, photos are good for her all the time, we used to make albums like that, so she used to look at those albums all the time (SD5).*

6. Discussion and conclusions

The article aimed to analyse intergenerational learning in dealing with loneliness through social care and lifelong learning process.

Loneliness of older people is becoming more and more relevant in the aging Lithuanian society. Research data revealed various characteristics that can help to recognise loneliness of older adults, such as emotional and social loneliness, personal rejection, not being able to communicate as often as they wish, also seniors' individual temperament as extravert or introvert may play an important part. These findings are supported with the data from different research (Bagdonas et al., 2013; Bagdonas et al., 2017) demonstrating that older people experiencing loneliness are less likely to feel happy, more depressed, and in a bad mood. There is a correlation of loneliness with a higher risk of developing mental conditions (e.g., depression, dementia) (Ge et al., 2017). Positive emotions of those living at home are higher than those living in care facilities. Trybusińska & Saracen (2019) analysed measured loneliness of older adults living in nursing homes and found that almost every second person feels lonely.

Intergenerational learning is a tool of overcoming loneliness. During that process older adults and their caregivers acquires necessary skill for coping everyday challenges. Jurczyk-Romanowska et al.'s (2019) research shows that new skills are very important and useful for older people and motivates them to participate in ICT skills courses. this is also confirmed by our research that positive motivation increases the effectiveness of ICT skills courses. Our study showed that it is important to consider factors such as learners' motivation to change, learners' age and working conditions when developing intergenerational dialogue during communication and training. On the other hand, the research data supported the stereotype that older workers are less likely to improve their knowledge and skills, to change and innovate. Working conditions can reduce motivation to learn, as other demands arise. Data revealed dominant training themes that would be relevant to learners: loneliness, activation, and empowerment of older people; methods to activate communication and focus on mental and physical health. Some of the participants in the research noted that they doubted the relevance of ICT training, as older people have little use of technology. Digital chasm is a visible and global issue (Tomczyk et al., 2019). It is important to understand the reasons why older people find it difficult to use digital technologies and why some of them feel they cannot learn them. This understanding is essential not only to find better ways to introduce digital technologies to potential users who are currently marginalised, but also to improve the design of digital products so that they are easy to use and easy to learn, which can make them easier to adapt for all types of users (Martínez-Alcalá et al., 2018). The process of combating the digital exclusion is a phenomenon linked to the continued motivation of older people to learn throughout their lives (Carreras, 2005).

Intergenerational learning is a good way of fostering intergenerational dialog and personal development (George & Singer, 2011; Powers et al., 2013; Hanemann et al., 2017). The care center is not only a center where older people live, but also an important place for lifelong learning, where learners of different ages can share their experiences and new skills, thus creating micro-learning units (Rabušicová et al., 2015). Our findings show that intergenerational learning can be a powerful impulse not only to use new technologies, but also to protect older people from loneliness. According to researchers (Franz & Scheunpflug, 2016), intergenerational learning is an important part of the education of the older adults and community, and it is necessary to pay special attention to it at all levels, both institutional, municipal, and political. Intergenerational learning has a significant and positive impact on the development of both the young and the old and can enhance intergenerational dialog. Our research shows that intergenerational dialog can be strengthened through a variety of means, and through daily communication and educational activities. As the proportion of older people in the population continues

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to grow, intergenerational learning shows its great potential in promoting the development of a welfare society. This technological challenges and growing problems of loneliness require further research in the field of intergenerational learning ensuring a dialog between various generations.

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