

Sharing Language And Historical Memory: An Intergenerational Educational Experience

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Abstract

Bridging generations can be a powerful and meaningful two-way educational process. Intergenerational learning experiences have different positive impacts and outcomes in both the young and senior learners, through the exchange of competencies and knowledge. They are also an educational experience that enables the realisation of different paradigms of values, which nurture the broadening of learners' mindset. Intergenerational learning configures itself as a relevant tool for historical education, as young students benefit from the seniors' lifetime experience of historical events and contexts, which may be explained and testified first-hand with a positive spillover to young children's learning process.

This paper aims to share an intergeneration learning experience that brought an English as Additional Language class from middle school students together with seniors aged 65 to 94 years old, over the period of eight weekly sessions in a Portuguese international school context, under the principle objective of developing English language knowledge and skills in the elder participants and, contrariwise, to foster children's perception on the value of life experience to their own world view, historical knowledge, memory and socialisation. Each session was assessed by the children, seniors, teacher-facilitator and observer, from which data was gathered via pre, post and weekly questionnaires which asserted a mutual meaningful learning impact on both younger and older participants.

Keywords: Intergenerational education, Language skills, Historical education, Memory

1. Introduction

Intergenerational education presents itself, with increasing acuity, as an effective learning methodology to bridge the gap between generations, providing a pedagogical environment for the exchange of experiences, knowledge and values between children and seniors (Courtin & Knapp, 2017), but all learners. Intergenerational pedagogical programmes “are a form of social intervention, whose key element is intergenerational education, a non-formal and informal pedagogical approach that connects different generations around daily themes, facilitating the transfer and exchange of knowledge, skills, abilities and resources, allowing different generations to experience both similarities and differences by learning not only about others but also about themselves” (Orte Socias et al [coord.], 2018, p. 6). In other words, they have the purpose of establishing and strengthening meaningful channels and times of encounter between the younger and the older, which configure themselves as challenging contexts and inducers of learning for all.

In this learning experiment, the unusual classmates, to each other, created an immediate awareness of difference, which despite the initial uneasiness in the personal and pedagogical relation, it would soon be surpassed and resulting in a motivational peer-to-peer learning. The paper addresses the experience and the findings of a group that took part in the Erasmus+ programme sponsored intergenerational education project, “SACHI2 – Sharing Childhood”. Its implementation spanned over a period of 8 weeks, contemplating a weekly scheduled, in person lesson on school premises, which implied the elderly participants to go to school, in what meant a disruption to their established routines, what will have a positive impact on the nurturing of a mindset for learning. The implementation of the experiment included 17 children, aged 11 and 12 years old, and the mentioned elderly, four of them aged 65 to 94 years old, sharing a classroom at CLIP – Oporto International School. As a private school, it benefits from complete pedagogical autonomy, adopting an English-medium instruction to a community of +1200 students, congregating over 50 nationalities within its student body. Given this context, school offers a programme of English as an Additional Language to students being introduced to the language. This was the framework which reunited children and seniors, in a year 6 class, grouped in teams of 3/4 children and 1 senior, which remained unaltered throughout the project.

The main research objectives encompassed the contribution to the increase of interactions and positive attitudes between children and elder citizens (over 50 years old), the strengthening the acquisition of basic linguistic knowledge and collaborative work skills (on the seniors, and on both sides, respectively), the promotion of historical education via oral history where past events and contexts could be addressed, and some even explained first-hand by the senior participants (on the children's side), raising awareness on different paradigms of values given the generation gap (both younger and older learners), fostering intergenerational collaborative practices within educational environments (all students and teachers), and, lastly, promoting active aging strategies for seniors (EC, 2012).

2. Method

The method applied considered a pre-implementation questionnaire, to both children and elderly students, that aimed at gathering data on children-elderly and elderly-children relations, perceived stereotypes (Ginschel & Schlüter, 2020), key expectations, behaviours, amongst other features. Both student and senior pre-implementation questionnaires targeted the same aims, but with adapted questioning: the main enquiry, on the children's perspective, was aiming at knowing if the participants had grandparents/grandsons, how many of them, how could they describe their relationship with them, main perceptions on aging/elderly life, common activities between children and elderly such as school work. On the seniors' side, the questioning focused more on how people become when they age, who they relate with children and which activities might they be doing with them.

This teaching and learning intergenerational experiment spanned over 8 thematic sessions, developing a focused approach: week on week, this new class would come together to address the following matters: after the introductory session, the topics were, idols and role models, neighbourhood/hometown, school: then and now, favourite games, celebrations, family, and a final celebration and assessment of the project. Each of the topics drove what would often become a bilingual session that would motivate an intergenerational dialogue, where the children tried to teach some of the key vocabulary on the matter to the elderly in their team. The delivery of each session would indeed

imply a cooperative learning approach, where motivation to learn was expected to spur from the interdependence created amongst the intergenerational team members, that needed to communicate, listen and support each other mutually (Le et al., 2018; Gull & Shehzad, 2015; Ibrahim et al., 2015). The implementation of this methodology was ever so challenged given the language barrier on the senior students' side but also from non-Portuguese nor English speaking children:

“I don't like the group because they speak Portuguese.” (Student 7, session assessment data)

On the other side of the age range, the perception was the opposite, as seniors expressed their wish that the sessions could include more communication in Portuguese by the teacher and colleagues. (Senior 3, session assessment data)¹

A session assessment was collected, where each participant (the children, the elderly, the teacher and the observer) would evaluate the work and learning dynamics developed each session. Focusing on the main actors of this learning experience, on one hand, the students had to assess if they had done small homework tasks, if they understood the content of the session, if it was enjoyed, if he/she participated, if paying attention, if the group activity was enjoyable, and if there was time to accomplish the tasks; the assessment sheet also contemplated a ‘what did you enjoy the most / the least in the session’ questions. On the other hand, from the senior's perspective, their assessment implied a more comprehensive approach, as they were asked to feedback on how they saw the children's engagement in the activities, if length and topic were appropriate, if the intergenerational teamwork was successful, how was the involvement with a foreign language, new technologies, and about the active listening capabilities on both sides. These questionnaires also included a ‘what did you enjoy the most / the least in the session’ set of questions, as well as a possible mention to any difficulty or challenge that the session could have posed to them, plus any other comment they might wish to express aiming at improving these intergenerational sessions.

The project's first thematic session addressed the participants' idols and role models. This topic was ideal as to generating key words that could be more easily understood and pronounced by the elderly students. In turn, the discussion

¹ Translated from Portuguese, as the elderly participants were not able to answer in English.

and oral exploration of the class' answers led by the teacher immediately created a historical education opportunity as the elderly presented names largely unknown to their young counterparts: the seniors presented their idols to the teammates, who discovered historical figures such as Nelson Mandela, which was followed by a moment of questions and answers in their common language, where there was one. From the younger side, current singers and footballers' names were put forward, which still allowed for some common ground regarding the latter. The elderly participants signalled what was probably the most significant age gap between the distinct participants, the culture:

“The big difference between the juniors and seniors' idols.” (Senior 3, session assessment data)

“Acknowledgment that idols are chosen according to the generational preoccupations.” (Senior 4, session assessment data)

Indeed, one of the most meaningful takeaways from this particular session was the seniors explaining to the young students what an idol meant to them (Teacher, session assessment data), through which a clear culture gap was asserted, that might have been emphasised by the children's diverse cultural identities and nationalities in the class, contrasting with the homogenous sociocultural profile of the seniors. The age gap often conveys a far apart set of values (Fung et al, 2016) as seniors tend to have a well-established code of ethics, whereas the younger are building their personality and very exposed to different stimuli.

The session targeting the topic of 'school: now and then' was one of the most meaningful regarding intergenerational interchange: the setting for the lesson implied requesting the elderly to bring any materials that they might have kept from their child or adolescent time in school. They actively engaged in this preparation and, in the lesson, it was possible to have varied resources as old primary school textbooks, and feather quills and ink. On an empirical evaluation, this lesson was profoundly significant: the young learners were flabbergasted by the never-seen writing and studying instruments, which led to a torrent of questions to their elderly teammate within the group; on the seniors' side, they have experienced empowerment while explaining and demonstrating what they learnt and how they studied. At the end of the implementation, this was one of the most notable experiences commented by the participants, when inquired on what they most enjoyed:

“To know about ‘then’ school.” (Student 6, session assessment data)

“I liked [the] most hearing about their schools and what they used to write.” (Student 8, session assessment data)

“I liked to write with pen (old pen).” (Students 9, session assessment data)

“I like [the] most [to] speak about the differences of the school in the past and the school now.” (Student 15, session assessment data)

From the seniors’ perspective, their perception matched their younger colleagues’:

“The general interest of all participants in the session’s topic.” (Senior 3, session assessment data)

“The enthusiastic way that the young people discovered the old pens.” (Senior 4, session assessment data)

In spite of the inherent language and age gaps, as lessons progressed, the uneasiness gave way to curiosity from both parties which, in turn, fostered longer and friendlier conversations, connected to the lesson topic of the day. It was possible to realize that as bonds were being established between the elderly and the children, the learning was becoming increasingly effective and meaningful, and enabling more complex levels of understanding. Translating this reality, the children became more aware of the elderly insight and knowledge, especially directed at historical events they were studying in their history curriculum, such as the Portuguese dictatorship and the democratic revolution of 1974; conversely, the seniors were being taught by their young colleagues and developing their English vocabulary by learning words related to their own previous explanation of the historical issue to the children:

“I like to teach old people, so I also learn a little bit.” (Student 9, session assessment data)

And, matching this, a senior noted the,

“young people’s availability to motivate.” (Senior 4, session assessment data)

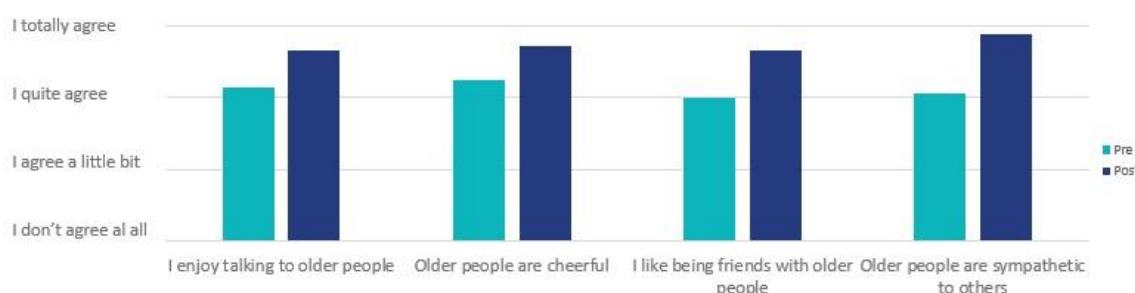
Therefore, it was possible to identify an immediate and increasing transferability and application of the knowledge (Murphy, 2012) and skills across generations, learning together.

After the implementation of the project was concluded, all participants took a final questionnaire. To enable validity, the same questionnaire was answered by an identically aged children control group, and by non-participant elderly. In order to consolidate the set of results, a qualitative analysis through the focus group scope (Williams & Katz, 2001) was applied.

3. Results and Discussion

As a result of the 8 sessions of intergenerational contact and learning, children's perceptions of elder people changed: the starting point of the school's students was already positive concerning their interaction with elderly people, as 75% of the children stated that their relation with them was "very good" (Dias, 2018, p. 15). However, after the implementation, there was a clear strengthening in children's engagement towards the elder classmates, either it be addressing a senior, being friends with them; there was also a clarification of their perception regarding attitudes and mindset of the elderly, as seen in the figure 1.

Figure 1: Children's perceptions of elderly people



Source: Pre and post implementation questionnaires. (Pereira, et al., 2018)

From the learning standpoint, its effectiveness could be measured by the transformation that it might induce in the learners and in their behaviour patterns. Materialising this assertion was an initiative taken by one of the participating seniors (the oldest one): ensuing the first session, a 94-year old student realised the need and decided to buy a Portuguese-English dictionary to better try to bridge the gap between his younger peers and, thus, to be able to

better engage in the lessons' dynamics. This behaviour is a testimony that this pedagogical experiment was able to induce new behaviours leading to change through a mesurable learning curve.

After the experiment was concluded, it was possible to verify that the senior students had, indeed, learnt some English vocabulary as a result of the lessons and their practice together with the younger peers:

“I liked the English learning method; the student is supported by a solid methodology. There is still the possibility of the student to interact with the teacher.” (Senior 1, session assessment data)

Still, 3 out of the 4 senior participants indicated that language was the strongest barrier to their progression. However, one of the answers testified the materialisation of the intergenerational experience and objectives of this programme, especially collaborative work; when inquired if they felt difficulties:

“Yes, some difficulties lessened by my ‘condisciple’ Pedro.” (Senior 1, session assessment data)

One of the research objectives concerned the increase of interactions and the fostering of positive attitudes between the two-apart age groups: a common feedback from the seniors in several sessions was an acknowledgement to the support and comradeship felt from the young students' side:

“Interaction and help from the students.” (Senior 3, session assessment data).

“Engagement and support from the students.” (Senior 3, session assessment data)

“The way that team-members (children) integrated me.” (Senior 4, session assessment data)

The last implementation session suffered a venue change following a spontaneous idea proposed by the elderly, a visit to the seniors' nursing home by the young students, in order for them to get to know each other's history better. There, the last issue of the programme was addressed, the history of their family. This proposal was eagerly accepted by the year 6 students and teacher, in what became an afternoon of shared learning:

“I love to see old people's house... but these is the last time that we are together, I am so sad.” (Student 9, session assessment data)

As this session was planned for last and familiarity had become much greater between the students and the seniors, it enabled a more personal exchange, which was achieved through family photographs and objects, which the elderly used as resources to explain moments of their own personal history.

A bearing on the pedagogical effectiveness of the project was provided by the class teacher in charge of facilitating the intergenerational sessions, Dina Sameiro. The project was evaluated at the end of the implementation and the data gathered was meaningful. As the most significant takeaways, the following was signaled:

“The interaction between the children and the elderly – the straightening of the gap when children realized how interesting it could be, how much they didn’t know and how amazing / different the elderly’s experiences were. The way in which the elderly warmed up to the children and how the children grew fond of them as stereotypes started to fade.” (Class Teacher project evaluation questionnaire)

It was mensurable the deeper change in the children relating to their elderly counterparts, especially when the life experience of the latter became a weekly driving force for the sessions. On the other hand, and balancing the implementation, there were limitations which hindered deeper interactions and a more comprehensive experience: hearing limitations by the elderly, and the fact that the class was an English as an Additional Language one, combined with the international identity of some students impeded the seniors from engaging more readily in some topics, not being able to share the full scope of their experiences, which generated some frustration on both sides:

“As this was a language class, there was often a barrier which prevented the students who did not speak Portuguese from interacting as much. They definitely missed out on a lot of interesting things. In the same way, there were times when the elderly found it hard to communicate with these students and learn from them, as they were from different countries and could have shared their experiences, their relatives’ experience, etc.” (Class Teacher project evaluation questionnaire)

One of the main circumstantiated learnings from this pedagogical experience concerns time and session length. As the elderly had scarce to none English knowledge or awareness, progression was very low, which materialised the expected different paces within the class. Differentiation (Tomlinson and

Murphy, 2015) and team work dynamics become instrumental to move intergenerational experiences forward, as well as determining, very clearly, feasible outcome goals, as one of the success criteria should be the variety and richness of interactions amongst the different students and the bonds that will enable the learning at both ends:

“In terms of content, it would have worked better if there had been more time in the sense that the two different types of students worked at a completely different pace, which is obviously understandable. They were also at a different level, meaning that the elderly were beginners or false beginners and the children were more advanced.” (Class Teacher project evaluation questionnaire)

In order to accommodate this circumstance, in the last 4 sessions, the teacher-facilitator started to explain the main guidelines bilingually, both in English and Portuguese, which despite taking a longer time, it resulted in a broader and deeper understanding by the seniors, which impacted positively on class dynamics.

As an overall result, it can be sustained that relationships became the pathway towards a deeper learning (Huberman et al., 2014). As the children-elderly team grew closer, so the exchange of knowledge became more effective, adding motivation to all participants:

“Children opened up to the elderly making them feel more comfortable and less self-conscious as well. That was when learning and sharing moved on to a different level.” (Class Teacher project evaluation questionnaire)

Also, from the students’ perspective, their elderly colleagues were, indeed, what impacted them the most throughout the sessions:

“Being with José.” (Student 4, session assessment data)

“I very like to see Graça again.” (Student 5, session assessment data)

“I like to talk with Silvina.”, (Student 12, session assessment data)

“I like staying with José.”, (Student 15, session assessment data)

Adding to this was the fact that the class would regularly talk about these intergenerational lessons to their English teacher in anticipation of that week’s intergenerational session, relate learning progress or difficulties with their elderly colleagues, which supports that the personal relation enforced the

learning on the young's perspective, and also that these pedagogical experiments create a positive *momentum* for all that take part in them:

“They [students] refer to them [seniors] many times and whenever we work on something that reminds them of (...) any other elderly classmate, they share it with the class. It has also made it easier for them to relate to information they come across in textbook readings.” (Class Teacher project evaluation questionnaire)

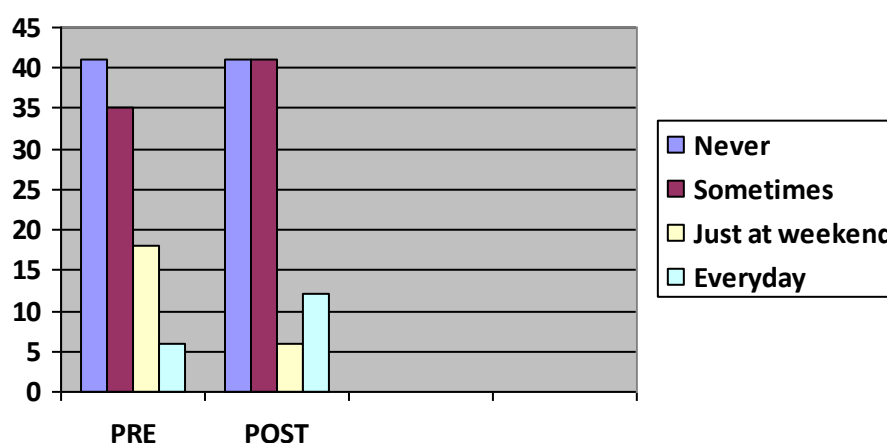
Driving learning through intergenerational education leaves a lasting input on those that experience it. As mentioned, the interrelation bonds created clearly facilitated learning on both sides, as it made it meaningful and unique. Some students expressed their feelings, either already from the start, such as Student 9, or when the implementation reached its end, which supports this interpretation:

“I like to work with old people because it's fun.” (Student 9, session assessment data)

“I was crying because it was the last lesson. If I could turn back time and we could repeat it, I would be happy.” (Student 16, session assessment data)

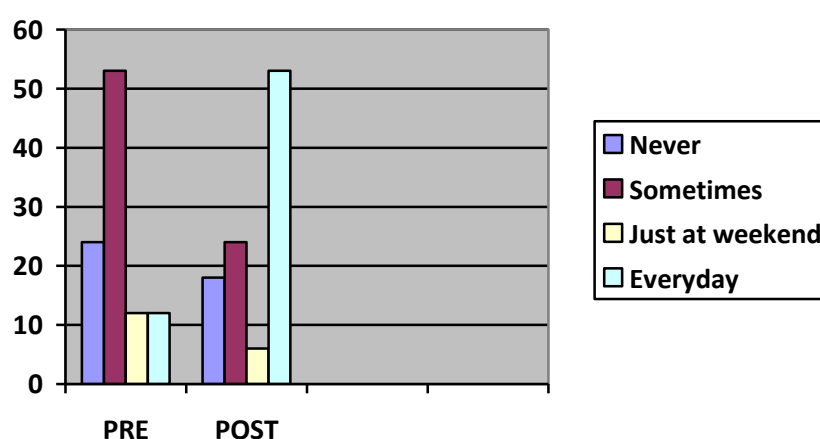
Resorting to the pre and post implementation questionnaires, it was possible to ascertain a change in the children's mindset and habits towards the elderly:

Figure 2: How often would children do homework tasks with elderly people.



Source: Pre and post implementation questionnaires.

Figure 3: How often would the children talk to the elderly people about personal/different matters.



Source: Pre and post implementation questionnaires.

Despite the challenge of evaluating intergenerational programmes, a combined interpretation of the data gathered demonstrates that the implementation of the project led children to spending more time with the elderly that were part of their social and family relations. What we can interpret as the outcome of a higher trust in the elderly capabilities after the experience in school, more children started doing their homework tasks with senior

“sometimes”, and a significant growth of from 6% to 12% evolved to ‘everyday’, which equals to 12 out of the 17 children. From the second graph, it is noticeable the growth of the percentage of children that, after the implementation, started to address personal and non-academic matters with elderly on a daily basis, which signifies a relevant shift, when compared to the initial numbers, 12% to 53% of the total participants.

4. Conclusion

Innovation in education finds a pathway through lifelong learning programmes. The social innovation that the implementation of this intergenerational experience represented was impactful, both on the school dynamics where it took place, as well as on all the parties involved in it: the children’s perception that older people were unable to learn new knowledge and development different skills was shattered by the weekly contact and evolution of the elderly regarding the English language. And the impact on the younger learners was significant as to what historical education was concerned, as their unexpected teammates taught them lived history in several lesson contexts and, thus, the elderly became looked-for lesson companions. Both age groups develop further social skills on how to deal through interaction with age and cultural gaps, as well as increased their self-confidence concerning the unexpected and strengthened their self-esteem.

The school which this paper is addressing shared that further implementation of intergenerational learning programmes could be considered, bearing in mind that such would imply a gradual adaptation of different key elements such as timetables, curricula, class alignment and teachers’ needs. Overall, an intergenerational teaching and learning methodology was implemented with promising results for English and History subjects at least, which stimulated a tangible change in the participants’ mindset and attitudes towards positive realization of aging, attained through peer interaction.

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