Memories, a bridge towards intergenerational learning!

Adriana Osoian\textsuperscript{a*}

\textsuperscript{a}Romanian Institute for Adult Education of Timisoara, Bogdanestiilor Street, no. 32 A, Timisoara, 300389, Romania

Abstract

Aged people are a very heterogeneous group because of their learning interests and their educational background. At this age, seniors are still willing to learn and moreover eager to transmit whatever their memory collected. Their motivation for learning relates both with their educational background and with the possibilities they have in the community to be active and useful. Therefore the activities offered to the seniors by various stakeholders from the community must meet their needs and expectations by providing them professional teachers and a wide range of innovative activities. The sharing of memories could be a contact and dialogue starting point and could also help seniors to step forward from isolation in order to become actively involved in a European society. The qualitative research carried out within the SEMBET project framework reveals the common ways seniors from rural and urban area are actively involved in the community and also the ways in which intergenerational learning is happening in both living areas.

In a society that sees an increasing number of elder people and at the same time a widening gap between generations, the risk to lose the family and local memories should be prevented. This survey is the starting point for the creation of a new work methodology for Sharing European Memories BETween Generations (SEMBET).

© 2014 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

Keywords: active aging; intergenerational learning; community identity; social memory.

1. Introduction

One of the significant transformations being experienced in European societies is the ageing population (EAGLE Final Report, 2012). The baby-boomers retire and the working age population of Europe begins to shrink, the number of people of prime working age (20-59) will fall every year over the coming decades. Together, longevity growth and transition into retirement of the baby-boomers will far-reaching economic and budgetary consequences in the EU, reducing the economic growth potential and exercising pressure on public finances (2012, \textit{WHITE PAPER: An agenda for Adequate, Safe and Sustainable Pensions}). As the life expectancy rises, different generations must live and work together. Generational conflict and disconnection are concerned not only with economic and social parameters but also with matters of culture and attitude (EAGLE Final Report, 2012). Older and younger

* Corresponding author. Tel +40256 592960; fax: +40356 816532.
E-mail address: adriana.osoian@irea.uvt.ro
generations are becoming increasingly disconnected due to: the changing family patterns, the breakdown of traditional community structures, age segregating activities and living arrangements, and policy interventions or services that target only specific groups (Springate, Atkinson, & Martin, 2008).

Efforts in order to avoid the conflict between generations by developing intergenerational practices are enhanced across Europe. UK and Germany are two countries that understood well the necessity of intergenerational activities and developed policies and services in this respect. Intergenerational practice is not so obvious within the policy agendas in Romania (EAGLE Final Report, 2012).

1.1. Intergenerational Learning(IL) and Intergenerational Practices(IP)

When we talk about generation, we categorize people according to age, according to different positions within a family (grandparents, parents, children) or different cultural/historical background (Pinto, T., A., 2011). Nevertheless intergenerational relationships have changed, especially in families. Each generation tends to spend their leisure time in age-segregated spaces that are often not readily accessible to the other generation (EMIL, 2013, European Year 2012 Round table events: Final report). Intergenerational practice (IP) is incorporating activities that involve different groups of participants, different types of settings, varied activities and with a wide range of aims (Springate, I., Atkinson, M., Martin K., 2008).

Bet Johnson Foundation states that “Intergenerational practice aims to bring people together in purposeful, mutually beneficial activities, which promote greater understanding and respect between generations and contribute to building more cohesive communities” (NIACE, 2009). A distinction needs to be made between intergenerational activity and intergenerational learning (IL). Intergenerational learning is “the way that people of all ages can learn together and from each other. IL is an important part of Lifelong Learning, where the generations work together to gain skills, values and knowledge. Beyond the transfer of knowledge, IL fosters reciprocal cohesion in our aging societies. IL is one way of addressing the significant demographic change we are experiencing across Europe and is a way of enhancing intergenerational solidarity through intergenerational practice (IP)” (EMIL, 2012, Concept paper: Intergenerational Learning and Lifelong Learning). Lifelong Learning among seniors requires professional teachers who have up-to date gerontological knowledge and positive attitudes towards ageing and aged people. In an aging society, institutions that teach seniors need to address courses to a target group that is not aiming to get a degree or to improve their career opportunities. They must therefore apply different methodologies and also create specially designed courses, activities and materials. Aged people even in high age without disease-based cognitive disorders have no other barriers for learning except their own motivation. Therefore a variety of educational activities to meet their needs and expectations of aged people must be offered. Aged people are the most heterogeneous group of people who want tailor made activities. They come from different social and political backgrounds. They are individuals with personalities, educational background, life histories, interests, hobbies and with a wide range of life experiences. Furthermore, aged people increasingly have multicultural backgrounds. Educational institutions need to be able to offer a wide range of course, seminars, excursions and different kind of physical and psychosocial activities in order to meet the needs of the seniors. We must bear in mind that ageism in our societies affects aged people and causes barriers to participating in educational activities (Escuder-Mollon, Cabedo, 2013, pp. 57-58). Many documents of the EU institutions acknowledge (directly or indirectly) that we need to foster the learning between generations but this kind of activity requires professionals who develop intergenerational activities (Pinto, 2013).

1.2. Intergenerational learning through memory sharing

Another effort of the EU community is to foster a “European historical memory”, by constructing a collective memory as an expression of a collective identity. Collective memory is understood as a representation of the past shared by a group or community (Kansteiner, 2002). Collective memories foster and define group identities, they answer to the group where they have come from, who they are and how they should act in the present and future (Gillis, 1994). “Collective identity is a shared pool of information stored in individual memories of a group” (EU, DG for internal policies, 2013).
Historical memory is “the memory of the aggregate memories, conscious or not of an experience that was lived through and/or transformed into myth by a living body, of whose identity the sentiment of the past forms an integral part. (…) it incorporates a distinct degree of subjectivism, given that the choice of how to remember the past necessarily involves value judgments” (EU, DG for internal policies, 2013). Collective or social memory is “connected with the common history of a specific group of people”, while individual memory is “relating with the history of an individual person or family” (EU, DG for internal policies, 2013). A distinction must be made between memory and history which are not synonymous. Memory is a phenomenon which is very much contemporary while history belongs to the past. As Maurice Halbwachs said, memory is heterogeneous and specific, collective and individual in one moment (EC, 2012, Memory and Identity. An overview). Memory is a crucial component in creating and maintaining individual and community identity and because of this, capturing and sharing social memory through intergenerational communication can be a new way of enriching both of the EU aims: to foster the learning and solidarity between generations but this kind of activity requires professionals who develop intergenerational activities and to foster a “European historical memory”, by constructing a collective memory as an expression of a collective identity.

The sharing of memories and reflections on the daily life experienced by the older European people represents the starting point to create an European common historical memory and to bring generations together in an act of learning. The joint elaboration of a methodology and the outcomes of the SEMBET project, will foster the sense of collective identity in the context of the diversity and wealth of culture in Europe in each generations involved. The SEMBET project aims to enable seniors, adults and young people to exchange opinions on the past, to learn from history and to build for the future. The preservation of memory will foster debate and reflection related to the events that divided European people, but at the same time allowing elder and adult people to move beyond the past and to build a European citizenship based on democracy, mutual understanding and intercultural dialog. While preserving the memory of its past, elder and adult people are encouraged to reflect and debate on what took place during the past and on the origin of EU integration processes, promoting their full participation in the construction of an ever closer Europe based on common values, history and culture.

Disagreements over how to remember the past is nearly a universal phenomenon. Usually, schools and museums play the most important role in shaping collective memory because they are often the first places where children learn about important historical events. Most students go through school believing that their textbooks are facts and, thus, they are reluctant to dispute the ideas that they read on the page. Sometimes, students simply learn that there is one version of history, and it is fact, so it needs not be questioned. The intergenerational learning can be the way for stimulating critical thinking and interest of the young generations in the past and value the seniors experience and knowledge and help them to regain a status in the society, preventing them from isolation.

With the above context detailed, European Commission states as priority to adapt the existing curricula and didactics by moving attention away from national to European and global approaches to history, and allowing young Europeans to form self-critical historical awareness through open and discursive teaching formats and provide tailor made teacher training which fits these needs. EU supports national efforts of the Member States to do a “reworking of the past” in this respect (EU, DG for internal policies, 2013).

Within this development framework, the SEMBET project aims at retrieving and to sharing a European historical memory through the testimony of seniors who have experienced firsthand these events. In this project approach, seniors will transmit a memory of a daily life, which otherwise would be permanently lost. The focus will be not only on the war, but rather on memories of life. The project will recover memories about years that usually aren’t remembered or are more shaded in the history books, because they are less strong then big historical events. Starting from the individual memories, the project will rise to the level of the memory of an entire community, a world that will emerge from the collection of individual memories, by investigating various aspects like: the house, the transition from few tools to technology boom, the world of school, work, love life etc. The idea behind the project is to trace the continuity of memory as a community development, leading up to today.

The project brings to the forefront a new approach on how to make both adults and young adults aware of the importance of the past for understanding the present, and promotes their participation in the learning process through a new methodology. In order to design such a methodology, teams from 5 participating countries – Italy, Poland, Romania, Slovenia and Spain – have carried out research, data collection and analysis in their countries and provided an image on the current situation in relation to intergenerational projects, the seniors’ needs and
expectations (EC, 2013, SEMBET: Transnational report). Further on in this article I will present the findings of this research activity carried on in Romania (EC, 2013, Romanian National report).

2. Research methodology

The survey aimed at identifying how the seniors both from urban and rural areas live and spend their time and was guided by the following objectives: to identify the local context of each participating country, in terms of where the seniors live and spend their time, to analyze the projects/experiences, realized/implemented/developed in each participating country in the last 5 years, at European, national and local level related to the transmission of the community memory, to identify problems, difficulties and positive aspects of mentioned projects developed at local level, to learn about needs and expectations of local sector stakeholders, in particular local authorities, social operators, to identify good and pilot experiences. The sample of this survey was represented by the seniors born between 1920 - 1960, who are living both in urban and rural area and the local stakeholders: cultural managers and representative of the local administration from Timișoara. The research had a qualitative approach and followed two directions:

A desk research aimed at collecting and presenting similar initiatives regarding intergenerational learning and memory collection.

A field research carried out in order to identify how seniors live and spend their time, what are their needs and expectations. The tools used were the questionnaire with open questions and the interview. The numbers of the questionnaires accomplished in Romania were: 15 in the rural area and 22 in the urban area. For the local representatives of the city cultural institutions and the representative of the local administration interviews were taken with the same purpose.

2.1. Seniors life and intergenerational practices in Romania

The qualitative research carried out within SEMBET project by IREA, brought to light characteristics of the reality in which elders are living and spend their time.

2.1.1. Local context

In Romania the number of initiatives and projects dedicated to improving the life of seniors both living in rural and urban areas is not in balance. The contrast between urban and rural areas is quite stark. In the urban areas the intergenerational practices cover many activities domain: mentoring, community and service, creative arts, history, environmental education etc. While the intergenerational dialog is much encouraged by a range of intergenerational projects in the urban areas, the seniors who live in the rural areas are dissatisfied with the few opportunities they have to get in contact with the young generations. These opportunities are provided by the household activities, religious/traditional events or the activity of raising children. The research shows that seniors from the urban area have a more intense and divers activity in the local community, while the seniors from the rural areas engage most of the time in household activities (71,4%) and raising children. The elders who live in the city get involve in many projects, have a rich cultural life, they socialize a lot and they have initiatives and ideas for the community development. 63,6% of them are using their energy and ideas in volunteer activities and 55,6% enjoy cultural activities, and they participate in learning activities.

Both groups of seniors are very interested in participating in different activities and those who have been actively involved in vary projects/activities, talk about them with enthusiasm and joy. The reasons some seniors mentioned for not wanting to participate included old age and illness and the fear that old people would not be respected by the young people and would not consider their knowledge and experience useful. Another reason, is the relatively low awareness rate of intergenerational projects, many of the seniors though enthusiast in participation in such projects and be in contact with the young generations, are not aware of the existence of such projects. The seniors from rural areas expressed their dissatisfaction with the current lack of such projects and the lack of initiative from the village Cultural Houses. The Romanian research report shows that there are more young people involved in different activities and initiatives in the urban area, whereas in the rural areas the younger and the older generations’ common activities are limited to the family context.
Another finding is that, some of seniors have a negative perception regarding the involvement of the young people in the community development and their interest in the memories of the past or history of the community or the region (63,2% seniors from urban area believe that the young people are not involved in the community development, 56,5% seniors from rural area believe that young people are not interested in the local/family history). Interesting is that seniors, both from rural and urban area, believe that youth is much interested in present and future, while past and history are not so interesting for them. In seniors opinion this is a consequence of the instability of the present and the lack of perspectives in the future for the further generations.

All in all, the seniors are very interested in participating in projects along with the young people because they want to share affection and knowledge with them, though they believe their advices are no more valuable in the youth perception.

2.1.2. Projects implemented in Romania

In Romania there were developed many projects dedicated to the elderly, most of them with the focus on other subjects then memory transmission through intergenerational practices. In many IG projects, memory transmission between generations is being an implicit outcome of the IG practices. Also, some actions that address both young and elders have priority to enhance the contact between generations, while others are facilitating this contact without planning it. In these respect Răzvan Hrenovsky, the Head of Culture, Education, Youth and Sport at the Timis County Council, explain: “Our projects are addressed to all categories of age, education and civil state”. Sorin Predescu, the manager of The Department for Culture, Cults and national Heritage of Timis County, also believes that the projects carried on by its institution have as target group all generations: “…cultural activities have no age limits. The culture has the gift alleviate almost any generation austerity. There is not the place where the generations are fighting. All cultural activities encourage such contacts between generations.” Such institutions like the County Council, Cultural House of the city, the Art Museum of Timisoara, are giving the elders the opportunity to be active and express themselves, by providing them with the possibility to publish, to take part in dance or singing groups, to become mentors in learning centres from different villages or in projects organised by the Association of seniors in partnership with schools. Efforts are made to preserve, transmit and promote the traditional dances, songs, crafts as well as vernacular languages. Răzvan Hrenovsky explain why the history is so important for the individual identity and community: he considers that knowing and valuing the history is the prerequisite in a person’s education, is what offers him dignity and other’s respect, so history “is decisive in developing personality of each generation... The dignity which is conferred by culture, education and respect for the value. (...) I believe in human dignity and I know that in the immensity of a hostile or indifferent Universe the only solution for a man is to search stairs for his human making“. Another interesting idea that was highlighted in this study was that people choose what they want to remember about our history and what they want to transmit further, and because of this, the most interesting topics that bring together young and elders are the times of glory, or the modern history which is “much closer to the present days” (in the opinion of Pavel Deheleanu, the manager of the House of Culture of Timisoara) and also the lived history - Marius Cornea, the representative of the Art Museum of Timisoara explains: “the curiosity is for the recent past and the seniors have already a lived history and are egger to story. Everyone likes to put himself in the window, to share some of his experience”. In their opinion young people are presented only the good parts of the history of a region, or of a city and they are missing the holistic understanding of the historical and political events.

The projects and initiative developed in Romania usually aim to: to stimulate positive attitudes, fun and pleasure of the seniors like: Alzheimer café, dancing tea; projects that put the seniors in the mentor position- usually are involving schools partnerships: Doing2learn, Discover the Art of the museum – seniors volunteer guides, Learning centres of traditional arts and trade; projects that want to enhance in an explicit way the learning among seniors like Academy of seniors, or courses provided by the Cultural House of Timisoara carried on in the Third age University project. In order to improve the quality of seniors life and enhance the intergenerational practice, the County Council of Timis, is giving an example of good practice by struggling to open as many learning centers in the villages, were young and elders could meet with the purpose of transmitting the past knowledge, traditional crafts and old customs.
2.1.3. Needs and expectation of the stakeholders

The research outlines the main difficulties encountered by the stakeholders: lack of interest from the local authorities and the attempt of polluting original values, lack of experience of those who manage these projects. Financial difficulties are overcome in these initiatives. The interviews shows that most of the projects that are aiming to involve seniors are with minimum of founds, sometimes financial support comes through European projects, or local founds, but in the many cases the costs are about time, energy and human resources – volunteers, and though initiatives and will exists, sometimes the lake of the founds limit the activities opportunities and as well the professionalization of the staff. The stakeholders’ needs are related not only with the financial support, but also with the interest and the will of the authorities and the citizens. They are expecting to be more appreciated and to see involvement of each possibly beneficiary, while their activities do not have always immediate impact on the community development.

3. Conclusions and recommendations

While the range of projects from urban area meet the needs and interests of the seniors, there is a define disconnection between the seniors’ needs and expectations and the current realities in the context of Romania’s rural areas. The intergenerational dialog is suffering in the villages because there are just a few opportunities to approach the young to the elders. The contact of elderly from the urban area with young people it is stimulated a lot through many projects, while in the rural area, the contact it is facilitated by relations inside the family and traditional events and celebrations. Because of these disconnection between old and young and the age-segregated activities the knowledge about past is lost or not enough valuable by the young people, which are too busy with their present and their future. Young people often get in contact with seniors either through volunteer activities or cultural events, either in the position of learner, where the senior is the mentor. It is necessary that initiatives of enhancing the intergenerational practices and projects of valuing seniors’ knowledge and experience should to be very much oriented through the rural area, where elders are left behind by the society due to the village abandon of the young generations.

Also, professional teachers are required and institutions that teach seniors must address a range of learning opportunities and apply specific methodology adapted to this target group of adults. The seniors interests and needs are divers, while the aim of learning goes on two main directions: avoiding oblivion of work competences for those who are still active on the labour market or raise the quality of their life: make them regain the sense of belonging in the community and feel useful again, gain energy and positive attitudes from contact with young, be active and find joy through intergenerational activities. New and innovative ways of fostering intergenerational learning need to be developed and proposed in the community and to the interested stakeholders, in order: to enhance the contact of young with the elders on different areas of interest: history, mentoring, reading and writing, childcare, and so on; raise awareness among young people of the advantages of learning also from the elders and conversely; promote mutual respect among generations, based not only on age differences, but also for the knowledge and skills that different generations possess; prevent the isolation of the seniors in the community; fight against oblivion of the community identity.

References

Escuder-Mollon, P., Cabedo, S., 2013, Education and quality of life of senior citizens, Publisher: Universitat Jaume I