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INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNITY LEARNING, EDUCATION AND COOPERATION

Abstract. *This paper has its roots in the theoretical defi-nition of the term community education and its role at encouraging intergenerational learning and educa-tion.[1] The paradigms of intergenerational learning are changing due to the demographic, social and economic changes. Alongside the traditional exchange of knowl-edge and experience within families, it is now spread-ing into community learning, which means that it is still taking place between generations, but outside of the family circle. On the basis of these premises we fol-lowed the thesis that cooperation between various age groups depends on how their position is perceived, their social identities and willingness for mutual coopera-tion, as well as on certain external factors that encour-age and direct the cooperation. We wished to know to what extent was this reciprocity established, how do the interviewees experience it and what are they willing to contribute in order to achieve greater intergeneration solidarity. We evaluated our hypotheses by using the case study method.*
Keywords: *community education, social learning, inter-generational learning, youth, the elderly*

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Introduction

The current demographic trends that change the relations between gen-erations and consequentially influence various fields in the social, economi-cal, cultural and political life, dictate the need for stronger intergenerational

ties and a reduction in age segregation. This was also pointed out by the experts from international organisations (United Nations, 2007; European Commission, 2005), who introduced the concept of a *society for* all ages. The emphasis lies on the importance of stronger intergenerational solidarity that can be achieved through encouraging a 'reciprocal, fruitful exchange between the generations, which is focused on the elderly as important social sources' (United Nations, 2007: 2). The development in the direction of a *society for all ages* assumes policies and practices that would strengthen the individual's life-long development as well as the development of families, neighbourhoods, communities and institutions. Even though the number of various intergenerational programmes has lately been on the rise, experts warn that merely intergenerational programmes cannot bring the necessary changes to the norms, points of view, institutions and practices that would bring us closer to a *society for all ages*. The welfare of all generations within the community can be improved only through coordinated endeavours of all sectors: social, economic and cultural (Henkin, 2007: 148). Instead of a holistic treatment of the inhabitants of a certain community (regardless of their life period) we are currently witnessing a fragmented treatment of the special interests and individual target groups, and this is the cause of the main problem. The concept of the *community for all ages* is represented by a planned network of social relations, formal and informal activities and services, all of which are aimed at supporting the welfare of people in all of their life phases. The implementation of such communities should start from the belief that the aging population opens new opportunities for numerous people who otherwise think and function differently, but are united in the common goal of benefiting the community and its human and natural resources. As the model of the *community for all ages* assumes that the opinions and operations of individuals and organisations in neighbourhoods and communities will change, the starting point for a successful implementation lies in community education and intergenerational learning. So far Slovenia has not performed any research as regards the inclination of the various generations to be included in such forms of learning and education on the local level. We tried to fill this gap with a qualitative approach that was based on the following assumptions:

– Activities aimed at encouraging intergenerational cooperation are taking place in most housing communities;
– Each age group has its own view as regards the importance and role of intergenerational cooperation and learning;
– Intergenerational cooperation and learning is hindered by the various interests and goals expressed by the individual age groups; stereotypes and age segregation exist due to the differences in experiencing social identities;

– Additional encouragement (local/community initiative, organisation) and knowledge would be necessary in order to improve intergenerational cooperation;

Our theses were verified through case studies. In-depth interviews were used to verify the opinions of the three generations as regards community activities, intergenerational cooperation, intergenerational learning and the social identity of the various age groups.

Community education

In his famous work 'The Meaning of Adult Education' Eduard Lindeman (Stewart, 1987) wrote about community education[2] already at the beginning of the 20th century. He understood adult education as a field of personal growth that takes place due to interpersonal contacts within the community. The collective strength – collectivism – represents the route to the transformation of society and represents a point at which personal growth is transformed into the growth and transition of society. Individuals should use discussion groups to obtain the necessary communication skills, become aware of the situation they are in and adopt new decisions.

Community education has a relatively long and fruitful tradition (from F. J. Manley in USA, H. Morris in United Kingdom, socio-cultural animation in France, the period of reading clubs and enlightenment associations in Slovenia to contemporary government and local policies of community education in various countries around the world). Community education has changed since its beginnings and it has different goals, forms and target groups in different countries (Kump and Majerhold, 2009). Community education comes to the forefront especially during poor economic situations, for it has always endeavoured for positive social changes, within the frame of which the members of the community would grow personally, as well as improve their lives and (ethical and democratic) interpersonal relations. As it evolves from the interests of the local community and the individual, community education has to adapt to the new needs as well as the current socio-economic situations in which the individuals find themselves; this means that conditions and ties that will enable the transfer of knowledge and experience between establishments and sectors that are not used to cooperating should be created. Community education usually takes place in the form of informal education and is often carried out through civil society organisations.

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2 *Informal education prevails in community education; even though it is an organised, intentional and planned activity it does not lead to certified education results.*

Intergenerational learning is usually tightly linked to learning within the environment in which the individuals live. In the case of community education the understanding of the community is the closest to that of Loughran (2003: 89) who sees the community as a social unit defined by physical and social boarders. In some communities these boarders are rigid, in others more fluid and open. For some people and groups the communities are inclusive, for others exclusive. Findeisen (1996: 29) is of the opinion that the community is defined by the common needs and interests of its members for it is the needs and interests that bring them together. Such interests might include: common tradition, cultural heritage, common identity, belonging and loyalty to an environment, social ties within the neighbourhood or town, solidarity help, endeavouring for joint political power, joint operation for changes, etc.

In relation to community education Tett differs between three concepts, all of which are linked to the community, i.e.: space, interest and function (Tett, 2006: 12). The most common understanding of the community is linked to the geographical definition. The community that is defined with its interest is applied to a group of people with common goals or interests; these interests can be linked to membership in a certain organisation (e.g. voluntary organisation). Often the community interests cover the same grounds as the geographically defined community. The interest in the community also includes interest in social networks; this is mainly related to nature and the quality of the individual's networks and the influence of these networks on the participation in education and the results of learning. The third community type that Tett links to its function is applied to the practice of community education; professional groups and community representatives who are included into community education (e.g. parents and children as well as various experts such as teachers, social and health workers, etc.) become active participants in community schools.

According to Jane Thompson (2002: 11–13) community education encourages 'community revitalisation' by:
– helping to build on what people already know from their own experience and add new knowledge and skills that can significantly improve their lives;
– enabling the creation of knowledge and experience with which the ideas are carried into practice; merging 'problems', 'ideas' and 'understanding' with 'practical solutions';
– building bridges between people in divided communities and helping strengthen the often poor solidarity;
– overcoming loneliness and alienation; especially if it is focused on team work and collective activities;

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– creating conditions for practical teaching of skills that encourage employment and improve self-confidence;
– helping build confidence of the individuals and encourage a better understanding of different opinions.

Brookfield states that the 'the ultimate goal of community education is the development of self-guiding, self directing communities which are able to identify and satisfy the needs of all their community members through the co-ordination, co-operation, and collaboration of all community resources' (Brookfield, 1983: 67); on the other hand Jarvis defines community education as oriented into action and development. Thus community education also includes the encouragement of positive social changes, at which one has to respect and take into account the structural and ideological view of the local community and state policies, which either include the need for social changes or wish to preserve a status quo within the community and neighbourhood (Jarvis, 1985: 158).

Community education erases the boarders between the more traditional possibilities of education that take place in formal education institutions and the possibilities of informal education in voluntary associations and study groups; it takes place at various locations and in various forms (English, 2005: 131). Community education activities consist of various education practices and intentions that emerge from various traditions, including educating the elderly, educating for democracy, youth work and community cooperation.

Theoretical starting points of intergenerational education and learning

Intergenerational debates often emerge from two theoretical perspectives, i.e. the theory of realistic conflicts and the theory of social identity. Sherif (1966) based his theory of realistic conflicts on the thesis that conflicts between groups are based on the competition between the groups. Conflicts emerge between the groups if the groups have contradicting goals, or when the achievement of the goals of two or more groups exclude each other. Through studying the interactions between groups Sherif ascertained that the conflicts can be reduced or even avoided if the groups have a common goal. The opinions and beliefs of the members of a certain group towards other groups will most likely improve if all of them will endeavour for a common goal, for this will reveal the previously 'unknown' qualities of the others, which will in turn lead towards cooperation and harmony between the groups. These conclusions are in concordance with the starting points of the intergenerational programmes in which various age

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groups cooperate in order to find solutions to the common problems in their neighbourhoods and attempt to fulfil the common goals.

The idea of the theory of realistic conflicts was expanded with the theory of social identity. This theory was oriented into contents (perceptions, thoughts, revelations, etc.) that emerge due to life in a group, as a consequence of the interactions and communication. The author of the theory of social identity was Tajfel (1978, 1981), who took as a starting point the studies of divisions between groups. In the most commonly quoted work Tajfel and Turner (1986) presented the integral theory of conflicts between groups. The theory of social identity arises from the personal and social identity; the personal identity is linked to the way in which we perceive ourselves in comparison to others within a certain group (e.g. an individual in comparison to other peers), while the social identity is the result of the comparisons between various groups within society (e.g. between the young and elderly). These comparisons emerge from our perceptions of relevant social groups, views that are portrayed by the media as well as from various social stereotypes. Abrams and Giles (1999: 213) have drawn attention to the problem of communication in intergenerational programmes. This problem emerges due to the stereotypes (between the members of the various age groups) and because the qualities of the individual are not taken into account.

The theory of social identity assumes that people categorise others into groups in order to simplify the complex information and the social environment that surrounds us. Our opinions and perception of others are simplified, which means that we group them (e.g. all young are the same) and at the same time position them in opposition to ourselves (e.g. the young and the old have nothing in common) to a greater extent than it is true. When we identify ourselves with a social group we are automatically comparing the different groups. The consequence of these comparisons influences the way we perceive ourselves as well as our reactions towards people who belong to other groups. According to Vec (2007: 80) social identity usually places the individual in relation to social categories, positions or statuses. In accordance to the theory of social identity the stereotypical age differentiation between the participants of intergenerational programmes can be avoided by emphasising the individual qualities of the participants. This is especially important because intergenerational programmes are based on the participants' shared interests, such as for instance improving the quality of life in the neighbourhood.

The social identity theory deals with the inclination people have towards forming a positive identity that emerges from their identification with various groups (such as for instance family, friends, neighbourhood, community, etc). According to this theory we achieve a positive social identity by

establishing positive differences in favour of our group, i.e. we evaluate our group more positively than other groups (Tajfel, 1981). Every group forms a positive self-image by comparing itself to some other important group. The social identity theory supposes that the relations of power are often disproportionate between the social groups and that these groups compete for position and power. In her discussion Garstka et al. (2005) added a third hypothesis to the previous two: if we begin with age categories (such as young adults, middle aged adults and older adults) we can assume that intergenerational relations include the same battle for preserving a high social status or for improving a low one. The belief that the young and the old have a lower status than middle aged adults was confirmed by the results from the research on status differences as regards power, influence, respect, health and reputation (Garstka et al., 2005: 322). The young and the old therefore feel that the power is unequally divided between the generations and they also feel that they are discriminated against due to their age when compared to middle aged adults.

The threat of intergenerational conflicts is becoming increasingly realistic in this period of an aging population and tougher economic conditions. Scholars in the field of humanities, and especially economists are drawing attention to the problem of distributing economic welfare amongst the various generations (e.g. Asheim and Tungodden, 2004; Campbell, 2009). Politicians are aware of this, thus they have (over the past few years) been busy adapting various strategies and public reports on the necessity of intergenerational cooperation and harmony. Experts see the solution to this threat of intergenerational intolerance and egoism of the individual generations in the development of intergenerational community programmes in which the stress would be placed on educational contents.

Changing the paradigm of intergenerational learning

Over centuries intergenerational learning within families represented occasional transfer of knowledge, skills, competencies, norms and values between generations. In this text we use the term learning, for with intergenerational learning we are dealing with occasional learning (e.g. learning through discussions or activities that take place in communities or associations), which is not an organised activity. In some cases it may be carried out in the form of informal intergenerational education, which means that it is an intentional and planned activity, which does not lead to formally verified education results. In such learning the grandparents share their wisdom and experience with the younger family members. The elderly are respected due to their preservation of values, culture and uniqueness of the family (Hoff, 2007). In the contemporary society intergenerational learning does

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not take place merely within families, but often also in the broader social environment. Individual authors (e.g. Newman and Hatton-Yeo, 2008) draw attention to the appearance of a new, non-family paradigm of intergenerational learning, which is a consequence of the demographic, social and economic changes. The spatial separation of the nuclear family from its expanded counterpart results in fewer opportunities for intergenerational learning and support, and this makes the young and old increasingly vulnerable. An increasing number of young have rare contacts with the older members of their families, who could – with their experience and wisdom – offer support at their growing up and learning. Due to the ever rarer contacts with the younger family members the grandparents are also deprived of the direct link to the contemporary social events and new technologies as well as the vitality and the sense of belonging that they would receive from the younger family members, if they lived physically closer. Both groups are losing reliable support that can be offered by family members from the other end of the life continuum. Researchers and practitioners studying the fields of family, growing up, aging and education have ascertained that it is necessary to create opportunities for intergenerational learning that would include non-biologically linked children, youth and elderly.

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Newman and Hatton-Yeo (2008) defined intergenerational learning programmes as planned activities that intentionally link various generations with the goal of exchanging their experience and achieving mutual benefits. A similar definition is provided by the Centre for Intergenerational Practice at the Beth Johnson Fundation (Intergenerational Directory, 2008), which states that intergenerational learning includes the exchange of information, thoughts, feelings and experience between two generations that benefits all involved in the process. The goal of intergenerational learning is to connect people into intentional, reciprocally beneficiary activities that encourage the understanding and respect between generations as well as contribute to more cohesive communities. In successful intergenerational programmes the self-image of both generations improves as does the reciprocal awareness and understanding of the other generations (Hatton-Yeo, 2007). Programmes that include at least two neighbourly and family unconnected generations are beneficiary for all participants; the younger and older participants get accustomed to their new social roles, intergenerational relations develop.

Researchers have ascertained that today's generations are segregated and isolated in the spatial, emotional and cultural sense (Boström, 2002). The theories in aging emphasise the need of the elderly to be more included in society. This can include their participation in planned activities, together with others, which is also a precondition for their wellbeing. However today, when numerous authors draw attention to the lack of social capital,

we are increasingly confronted with the appearance of isolated communities, associations, settlements, in which the elderly join forces on one side of the generational spectrum while the MTV and advertising industry produce the 'youth culture' which includes younger generations on the other side of this spectrum. This results in a negative social capital between the generations.

Methodology

Data collection took place within the main research project entitled 'Intergenerational solidarity'[3]. For the intent of this paper we have used in depth semi-structured interviews to gather the responses from students, their parents and grandparents as regards issues linked to community activities, intergenerational cooperation, intergenerational learning and social identity of the various age groups. The questionnaires for the individual generations differed slightly, but mainly only so that they would be understood by the elderly who were (on average) not as educated as their children and grandchildren. As regards the contents the questionnaires for students were the most demanding, while their grandparents received the least demanding ones; however they were comparable as regards the contents.

We used the ideographic approach for the individual case studies (Mesec, 1998: 44) through which we analysed the gathered qualitative data as regards the contents and tried to reveal the joint conceptual and contextual categories as well as the specific characteristics of the individual selected examples. We analysed the responses provided by the interviewees as regards the selected issues. In this analysis we searched for connections between their understandings, social identities and the influence these characteristics have on the inclusion into the local community and the willingness of an individual to partake in intergenerational cooperation and learning. At this we were aware of the specifics of the qualitative research that enables conclusions on the basis of analysing case studies (inductive reasoning), supported by appropriate theoretical assumptions (and models), but does not allow for deductive reasoning.

Pattern and data collection

The in-depth interviews were carried out by 26 andragogy students[4] between March and May 2009. The research included 26 families, and every

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[4] *These were students of the final year Andragogy studies at the Department of Pedagogy and Andragogy, Faculty of Arts, Ljubljana, who were especially trained for the interviews.*

student described his[5] family with the previously described guidelines as well as selected an appropriate line of observation (student – one parent – one grandparent from the selected parent line) with whom he conducted two in-depth interviews. In total 54 interviews were conducted, while the first generation (students) filled in the questionnaire by themselves (this ensured that all three generations in every family were included). In accordance with the instructions every student also described his family and the neighbourhood, in which the family lives (this enabled a better understanding and interpretation of the collected data).

There were large age differences within each of the generations in the sample. However, we can still treat all of the three included groups as three generations, for the term 'generation' is primarily applied to relatives, i.e. biological descendants of various ages within the same family (Alwin and McCammon, 2003: 25). In our case this of course holds true, however we have to be careful when interpreting the differences between the generations that are not linked to an individual family. The term 'generation' can also be applied to people who were born roughly at the same time and in similar historical circumstances, however in this case it is more appropriate to use the expression age group or cohort. One must keep I mind that the effect of the cohort does not always apply to the existence of generations. Due to this, our analysis of the opinions of the interviewees, that are not linked to the family situation, but represent the individual opinions as regards the situation and possibilities of the various age groups in a local environment, took into account the age differences between the interviewees.

The age of the interviewees in the 2nd generation ranged between 42 and 58 years, which means that there is an age difference of 16 years between the youngest and the oldest within the generation. Most of the 2nd generation interviewees (slightly over 50 %) completed a vocational secondary school, a slightly lower share completed comprehensive school or have a college or university degree, while a single female interviewee completed only primary school. Over 50 % of the 2nd generation interviewees live in a village environment, while a slightly lower share live in a town environment.

The youngest 3rd generation interviewee was 64 years old and the oldest was 88, which means that there is an age difference of 24 years between the two. Almost all 3rd generation interviewees live in a village environment and only two live in a town. The sample is dominated by women[6].

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[5] *For purposes of simplification we will only use the male gender.*

[6] *Females prevail amongst pedagogy and andragogy students. In their interviews they were more likely to turn to their mothers and grandmothers.*

Data analysis and interpretation

When ascertaining intergenerational solidarity, cooperation and learning we analysed the perception of reciprocity (amongst the generations) offered by a certain social environment; this was studied on the sample of variously aged interviewees who live in different environments. We assume that the possibilities for intergenerational learning (within a community) depend on the perception of the position of the various age groups, their social identity and willingness to cooperate, as well as on certain external conditions that encourage and direct their cooperation. We were interested to what extent is this reciprocity already established, how do the interviewees experience it and what are they willing to contribute in order to achieve greater intergenerational solidarity. We assume that this is the precondition for establishing a 'society for all ages' that would promote individual as well as community development, i.e. the development of families, neighbourhoods, communities and institutions.

Intergenerational cooperation within a community

Most of the older inhabitants who remember community activities in the past are of the opinion that the members of the community cooperated better in the past, for people were better informed, more connected (due to the common work), and they were also more likely to socialise outside of working hours – at home or at events.

Anton (79 years), who lives in a village, used to enjoy participating in community activities – some of which were intergenerational. He is of the opinion that one of the reasons this practice is disappearing lies in the fact that some see intergenerational activities as inappropriate.

SIS-901-3-Anton-2009:
»In the past, we, the hunters used to go to school and show everything to the kids. And then the president said that the kids belong in schools and we belong in forests, so this put an end to it all. This is a different way of thinking. It's a pity, for it was interesting ...and in the local community sometimes, but no longer, there are no more opportunities.«

As regards the current conditions he stated the following:

»The cultural centre tries to connect. But nobody else. Maybe the choir.«

Miha (47 years), who lives in a village community of which he is not an active member, is also of the opinion that people in rural areas used to

have better cooperation in the past, and that these days it is getting poorer and poorer. He responded to the question as to whether the local community encourages the inclusion of the inhabitants into various activities and whether any intergenerational activities exist in his environment (village) with the following words:

SIS-909-2-Miha-2009:
»Not that I would know of ... Well the fire brigade, yeah sure, ... also maybe Caritas ... then there is the agricultural society...but now, for instance, the bowling club is dominated by the youngsters, in the fire brigade the youngsters prosper, ...while in this agricultural organisation the elder prosper ...«

Nika (23 years) lives in a small town and describes the possibility of intergenerational links as follows:

SIS-915-1-Nika-2009:
»In our town there is no such thing as a society that would fit the characteristics of intergenerational learning, connection, harmony, etc.«
To the question as to whether the local community encourages inclusion and cooperation of all inhabitants, the elderly as well as the younger, she responded:

»I can say that this has improved over the last years, and it is much better than it used to be. In the past the young did not care for the town they lived in ... And now they try hard to establish internet connections, improve the roads to Ljubljana and such. While the elderly are more included in the activities, these activities were not even provided a few years ago (various workshops, exhibitions, events; for instance life-long learning that is organised by the Public University, the club of rural women).Still, this is not the young and the elderly hanging out together, but the elderly together and the young together.«

Milka (86 years), who lives in a retirement home, is certain that there is no chance for any intergenerational activities to take place in their home. She says:

SIS-923-3-Milka-2009:
»No way (silence)... No, I am in a home. We are all old here.«

We can see that the members of various age groups estimate that the possibilities for intergenerational cooperation are slim in their environment.

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This holds true especially amongst the elderly, who still remember the cooperation between the generations in the past. All agree that in most cases the age groups function independently of each other.

Social identity of the various age groups

To a great extent the analysis of the interviews confirms that age is a factor in the social placement of an individual, a factor that emphasises his belonging to a specific group. The more concrete stereotypes and prejudices linked to differences between the social categories are visible within a certain society, the clearer the division between the social categories, which in turn makes the categorisation between groups greater. As ascertained by Ule (2005: 368) social categorisation emphasises the individual's belonging to a certain group. When defining the differences between the age categories social categorisation and the embedded opinion that the youth and the elderly have different interests, capabilities and characteristics is typical for Slovenia and this presents a strong divide between the two groups. This was also shown by the views expressed by our interviewees.

The fact that three generations from the same family (living in a village environment on the outskirts of Ljubljana) feel that age is an important characteristic of social categorisation confirms the hypotheses as regards the identification with a specific social group. This is shown in the small scope of generations cooperating in associations and within other possibilities provided by the local environment.

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Student Maja (23 years) is of the opinion that:

SIS-903-1-Maja-2009:
»... associations are dominated by the older generations. Rare from the young generation will opt to enter existing, traditional associations. It is possible that this is influenced by the different interests of the young. The young hang out in bars and youth centres.«

Her mother Lea (51 years) thinks similarly:

SIS-903-2-Lea-2009:
»Yes, I think that the generations are separated. The generations do not socialise or communicate enough.«

She continues:

»For instance, cooperation between the generations is encouraged in church. For other activities it depends on the individual himself.«

The opinion of grandmother Majda (80 years) confirms the previous conclusions:

SIS-903-3-Majda-2009:
»Yes, I think that the generations are divided. The youth enjoy themselves differently, they talk differently, and the elderly are interested in other things. We would have to show a greater effort, but the surroundings should also be more encouraging so that we would socialise more and so that we would find common interests … I have not yet noticed that the young and the old would be encouraged to participate in a certain common activity. Usually every activity is aimed at a certain age group.«

The grandmother ascertained that there were quite a lot of associations and clubs in the village community, for instance the pensioner's club, the fruit growing, bee keeping, and equestrian clubs, the association of farming women and girls, Association Ajda, etc. that organise lectures, trips, meetings, and some also exhibitions of their crops and products; however, there is a lack of planned activities that would bring the generations closer together.

It is interesting that the interviewees perceive social categorisation regardless of whether they live in a village, suburban or town environment. They see this as a great problem, especially because this is how stereotypes, prejudices and misunderstandings are enforced. The stereotypes are often expressed as a type of resignation, in which – due to the differences between the groups – it is almost impossible to change anything.

Julija (56 years), who lives on a housing estate in a larger town, ascertained the following:

SIS-905-2-Julija-2009:
»Yes, yes, yes …I think that there is currently a total division between these generations. The generations do not mix, as the younger think that the elderly have no place amongst them and the elderly think that the young do not belong amongst them. And I think that this division increases the gap between the generations, so, they are sort of getting further away from each other and in a way they unrightfully despise each other… and apart from that prejudices start forming in this way, and with years they only get larger and deeper, and with this the gap between the generations only increases. And there is nothing positive here anymore …at least I can't see anything.«

Vida (56 years), who lives in a village, also experiences the division of age groups on 'us' and 'others', and these two groups often exclude each other:

SIS-913-2-Vida-2009:
»Because society is goal oriented and is reality closed; in fact certain circles are very closed, aren't they, and they do not let it flow through, just like a cell membrane, which lets water through, but here they are in fact very closed and separated one from another ... There certainly is no dialogue between the two. The youth also doesn't show enough effort ..., they hang up posters, they inform each other with mobile phones or through computer or email, while the elderly, some of them do not know about these contemporary things.«

In order to overcome the gap between the generations and encourage community cohesion these issues will need to be tackled in a systematic and organised way, as well as supported by appropriate education and with plenty of encouragement; only then will the conditions for the transfer of knowledge and experience between individuals and groups be created.

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The reasons behind poor intergenerational cooperation

Gaja (23 years), lives in a smaller settlement near Ljubljana, and sees the society in which she lives as extremely segregated and the lives of the elderly cut off from the middle and especially the younger generation. She sees a whole myriad of reasons for this situation:

SIS-928-1-Gaja-2009:
»I see the greatest problem and limitation in the introduction of intergenerational learning programmes mainly in the different ways of thinking and communicating between the young and the old. I also see problems in the prejudices and stereotypes that the younger generation hold for the elderly and the other way round, in the lack of time the younger show, in the financial limitations, institutional obstacles, lack of trust, the medical problems of the elderly, the various levels of openness to differences or various cultures, differences in education, etc.«

As the reason for their poor participation in community activities the middle generation states their workload. Alenka (45 years), who lives in a village, explains her reasons for not participating with the following words:

SIS-928-2-Alenka-2009:

»I simply do not have the time and I also do not have neighbours with who I could hang out. I am more sociable than my neighbours (laughter).«

She responded to the question as to whether she is included into any sort of intergenerational activity as follows:

»No, not in any. I think I might participate in such things when I will be old.«

The elderly mainly state age, disinterest, alienation and sickness as the main reasons for not participating. Pavla (85 years old), who lives in a village environment, enumerates a number of reasons for her inactivity:

SIS-901-3-Pavla-2009:
»No, I am too old and I can't be interested in all this, and I am not interested in it, that is their thing and I don't understand it, and I also don't have a mobile phone. The young don't want to share with the old.«

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According to the opinions of the interviewees the reasons for poor intergenerational cooperation differ greatly. On one hand they emerge from the individual's experience of his position in the group or society and are therefore individualistic, on the other hand they are situational. They are expressed as stereotypical views on the characteristics and role of the age groups in society.

Intergenerational learning as encouragement for improved intergenerational cooperation; the necessary knowledge

Even though we assumed that the understanding of the meaning of intergenerational learning will at least to a certain extent be linked to the level of education of the interviewee, this could not be confirmed from the interviews. It seems that the deliberation as regards what we should gain from intergenerational learning depends on the perception that is a consequence of the social identity of the various age groups and their experience of the position, possibilities and obstacles they encounter.

Maja (23 years) lives in a village and considers the following knowledge as necessary in order to improve intergenerational cooperation:

SIS-903-1-Maja-2009:
»The development of social skills, communication capabilities, computer

knowledge, knowledge brought forth by the contemporary informational society (internet, telephony).«

The middle generation experiences intergenerational learning as a possibility for re-establishing solidarity and reciprocal help, as well as the reason for the weakened relations between the generations and lower tolerance.

Julija (56 years), who lives in a town, responded:

SIS-905-2-Julija-2009:
»I don't know … hmmmm. We would need our values to develop, such as understanding, patience, solidarity, being prepared to sacrifice oneself for another and especially as much love as possible.«

The elderly (third generation) understand intergenerational learning as reciprocity, reducing the differences between the generations, transferring experience and knowledge as well as a possibility for better connections between the people who live in the same community.

Emilija (82 years), who lives in a village community, imagines intergenerational learning in the following way:

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SIS-913-3-Emilija-2009:
»Additional teaching between the children and the elderly should be organised and in that group or amongst those members there should be special people who studied and would help the younger or the elderly. Some sort of a society. The contents would be educational... and they would make sure that they would learn, that there would be progress in the village or in the centre in which they live ...«

The views as regards intergenerational learning thus differ amongst the various age groups, but in general it is considered to be an advantage, for it can represent a myriad of ideas and possibilities for encouraging reciprocal cooperation between the generations.

The need and willingness to be included in intergenerational activities

Regardless of the perception that connections between the generations are weak, most interviewees remained open for different relations and cooperation between the groups. The opinion that an external – community – initiative would be necessary seems to be quite common. Some link the possibilities for an improved intergenerational cooperation with learning and special knowledge, especially with organisational capabilities and special expert knowledge that the organisers of intergenerational activities should have. Most do not think in the opposite direction, i.e. that they would

themselves – with joint learning – create intergenerational ties with other age groups.

Most of the interviewees from all age groups stated that they would love to enrol into intergenerational activities if they were organised, guided and interesting; they would be ready to give their time and knowledge to such activities. This holds true for the elderly as well as the younger generation.

Emilija (82 years), who lives in a village, has no reservations as regards cooperation in intergenerational activities:

SIS-913-3-Emilija-2009:
»Of course I would! Then I would know as much as possible and I would have a better understanding of the young and I could help them with the knowledge I have.«

Sašo (46 years), who lives on a housing estate in a town, shared this opinion:

SIS-915-2-Sašo-2009:
»Why not? I am a part of a society, in which we compete with pigeons, we socialise, the young and the old, we exchange ideas, talk. Even if the clubs are different, they could sort of join forces.«

Some young have well thought out ideas as regards the concepts of intergenerational learning programmes.

Maja (23 years), lives in a village, and told us the following:

SIS-903-1-Maja-2009:
»I would do this by establishing a study group within a certain environment or community. In this group the young and the old would have the possibility to discuss various themes, social events, culture. With this they would overcome the various stereotypes, accept different culture and multiculturality ... In this way they would encourage a better understanding amongst the young and old and strengthen the infringed solidarity between these two generations.«

The following two statements also indicate that sufficient encouragement is necessary in order for intergenerational learning to change the individual and the community.

Berta (79 years), who lives in an apartment building in a town, at first stated that she was too old for intergenerational learning, but in the very same sentence she denied this:

SIS-927-3-Berta-2009:
»I think that I am a bit too old for this, but if it was organised I would certainly attend it. I would attend some sort of a conversational activity, where we would learn something new, get a new viewpoint, a new story. I would take part in this.«

Alenka (45 years), who lives in a village environment, indicated the essence of intergenerational connections with her thoughts on the importance of reciprocal learning between the various age groups:

SIS-928-2-Alenka-2009:
»It is true that the elderly socialise with the elderly, the youth with the youth. It is interesting when you see a mixed group, a group in which the individuals complement each other. They learn from one another. For me this represents that people are open. Open minded people who accept feedback from others find it easier to cooperate. Others find this a bit harder, because they think that they have to hang out only with people similar to them. I see this as a great mistake.«

We can ascertain that there is a need and willingness to participate in intergenerational learning as well as establish some sort of cooperation between all age groups, however it will be necessary to create the conditions for the creation of true possibilities for reciprocal learning.

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Conclusions

In the analysis we ascertained that the social changes that are reflected on the local level[7] influence the changes of the cohesion in all communities. It is interesting that similar conclusions have also been reached in other Slovenian research (Filipovič, Kogovšek, Hlebec, 2005; Jelenc Krašovec, Kump, 2007). The interviewees state alienation, poor informing, the disintegration of community values, opinions that are based on stereotypes and the lack of connections between the generations and age cohorts, as the consequence and reason for the perceived (and most likely also for the actual) lack of intergenerational activities in the local environment. Most of the interviewees regret the poor intergenerational cooperation, and the older inhabitants are of the opinion that cooperation was much better in the past (joint actions, socialising, reciprocal solidarity and help as well as

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[7] *At this we have in mind the employment of the farming population, migrations, changing work and employment patterns and similar.*

better communication between the young and the old)[8]. In some communities we can witness attempts of creating links amongst the generations within the frame of certain actions and social activities; however these are more solitary examples and unplanned activities. It is commonly believed that the church encourages the younger and older members of the community to partake in its activities, while other organisations and associations do not take such an active role. It seems that the level of intergenerational cooperation depends largely on the will of the individuals in associations or in the community.

The case study analysis shows that the interviewees experience old age as an important characteristic of social categorisation and exclusion. This holds true regardless of the age or living habitat (village – suburb – town) of the respondent. They all agree that the young and the old are separated as regards their social identities, they have no true connections amongst the various age groups, and the interaction between the members of the various age groups is poor.

The data from the SJM 2008[9] research shows that the feeling of separation experienced by individual age groups does not necessarily mean disrespect of the various age groups or that their opinions are not taken into account, for the data indicates that most of the included respondents in Slovenia have positive feelings towards people aged 70 or more (almost 50 % of the respondents have extremely positive feelings). Approximately 80 % of the questioned believe that most people in Slovenia perceive people over 70 years of age as people who deserve respect. They consider the influence older people have on the habits and lifestyle of Slovenes as important, and most of them consider this influence good or even extremely good[10]. The fact that there are differences between the age groups is shown by the data from the European research (Flash Eurobarometer, 2009: 5) in which 69 % of the respondents in the EU stated that it is hard for the young and the old to agree as to what is good for the society[11]. In Slovenia the share of

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[8] *We can also ascertain that most of the interviewees explicitly distinguished between the role of intergenerational cooperation within the family and within the community. Most interviewees are of the opinion that intergenerational cooperation within the family is good and that they learn from each other as well as help each other. Their opinion of intergenerational learning within the community is entirely different, for most of the interviewees – regardless of age – are of the opinion that there is almost no intergenerational cooperation.*

[9] *Malnar, Brina et al. Slovene public opinion 2008/2: European social science research [data file]. Slovenia, Ljubljana: Faculty of Social Sciences, Public Opinion and Mass Communication Research Centre [preparation], 2008. Slovenia, Ljubljana: Faculty of Social Sciences, Social Science Data Archive [distribution], 2010.*

[10] *On a 10 grade scale – 1 represents extremely poor influence, 10 extremely good influence – 65% of the respondents opted for values above 5.*

[11] *Younger members (under 25) were likelier to believe that it is hard to reach concordance amongst*

respondents who agree with this statement is slightly lower (59%) (Flash Eurobarometer, 2009).

If we take into account the starting points of the theory of realistic conflicts and the theory of social identity we can assume that the success of the community intergenerational educational programmes depends on the common goal developed amongst the participants from the various age groups. This would reduce the possibility of conflicts between the participants of the various groups. Instead of the differences, the positive qualities of the individual members should be taken into account, for this would reduce the negative viewpoints and stereotypes. Most of the existing researches on the effects of intergenerational programmes focus on the study of changing the viewpoints and stereotypes. In our research we focused our attention on measuring the changes (within the community) linked to the possibility of introducing programmes that would influence the common goals (e.g. the feeling of connectedness and solidarity, if the goal of the programme is to reduce alienation and loneliness of the elderly within the neighbourhood).

Most of our respondents stated that they would be willing to enter an intergenerational activity. The responses to this question also reveal the (stereotypical) views the individuals have towards learning and education as well as their understanding of how intergenerational learning is carried out. We assume that the stereotypical understanding of learning and education is a consequence of the past (often negative) experience with education, which even today mainly takes place in educational facilities and in the form of transferring knowledge from the teacher to the pupil and is as such usually connected to memorising, grading and consequentially with the experience of success or failure. We also assume that the lack of possibilities for community education that would deal with problems found in real life (problems experienced by everybody living in a certain community) influences the misunderstanding of the meaning of intergenerational learning and leads to poorer conditions for introducing these activities.

The data from the SJM 2006[12] research shows that numerous adults in Slovenia do not link the activities that take place in community organisations with the opportunity for learning. Respondents[13] who are of the

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the young and the old. No differences were shown between the respondents who lived in a city, town or rural environment.

[12] Toš, Niko, Malnar, Brina et al. Slovene public opinion 2006/1: European social science research [data file]. Slovenia, Ljubljana: Faculty of Social Sciences, Public Opinion and Mass Communication Research Centre [preparation], 2006. Slovenia, Ljubljana: Faculty of Social Sciences, Social Science Data Archive [distribution], 2009.

[13] The research included 1476 people out of which 26% were under 30, 50% were between 30 and 60 years old and 25% were over 60. The sample was representative as regards the education levels.

opinion that they have ample opportunities for learning are less likely to be found in the village environment, however villagers are more active (in volunteer organisations as well as in offering reciprocal help) than those who live in suburbs or town communities. On the basis of this data we could conclude that other factors (such as education and age) also influence the perception of the learning opportunities. Over half of the highest educated (University degree, MA or PhD) is of the opinion that they have ample possibilities for learning, while only 2% of the respondents with unfinished primary school are of the opinion that they have an opportunity for learning new things. An above average share of the over 60s are of the opinion that they have no possibilities to learn new things[14].

Community education enables the conditions and ties for a transfer of knowledge and experience between those segments (e.g. social groups) that otherwise fail to function. This is mainly carried out in the form of informal education, often in the form of occasional learning that takes place in various civil society organisations. The most important characteristics of community learning are: a strong group identity, active participation and operating for a common good (this needs to be set as an important goal when community intergenerational education is introduced).

The qualitative data analysis shows that it will be necessary to plan the preparations for intergenerational programmes, including the education of key personnel, who will be the initiators of intergenerational cooperation in the community as well as ensure a certain level of external encouragement. This was confirmed by the common comments by the respondents that they are worried by the current alienation of the generations, for it reduces the quality of life for all members of the community. We were encouraged by the research results that have shown that most of the interviewees would be prepared to become involved in intergenerational activities and intergenerational learning programmes (with an appropriate external encouragement).

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[14] *21% of the over 61 responded that they have no opportunity whatsoever to learn new things (compared to the 5% in the age group between 46 and 60 and less than 2% amongst the under 45s) (Malnar et al. 2008).*

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