

ROMA PEOPLE IN INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING – EMERGING APPROACH TO LEARNING

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Abstract: Intergenerational learning brings many benefits to individuals and society. It is based on mutual learning amongst generations with learning outcomes for each participant. Lifelong learning is challenged as a concept as it should be able to deal with diversity, marginalization and variety of social contexts while trying to promote inclusion and equity in societies. The article discusses intergenerational learning as a concept developing the educational potential of an adult, described as the ability of an individual to develop their personal attributes, to overcome problematic situations and to reach his/her objectives by andragogical intervention. Taking into consideration the Roma people, as one of the most marginalized ethnic groups (minority) in Slovakia, the following research question is raised: How can intergenerational learning, so widely beneficial, develop the educational potential of adult Roma?

Roma families are of open communication amongst family members, they often live more generations together in common household and thus potentially open to intergenerational learning. The research had a qualitative design that included individual interviews and focus groups conducted with Roma parents and teachers (37 interviewees overall), which was then evaluated by thematic content analysis. It should be noted that only preliminary findings are presented in this article. The results showed that amongst parents, the future education of their children was of greater value than the education they originally achieved. Their future is significantly linked to children's development, which clearly represent a source of joy and happiness in their life. It was common for parents to prioritize the education and future of their children over their own. However, there were cases identified in which parents agreed they had learned something from their children: use of internet, social media and new technologies. Intergenerational learning clearly exists within Roma families, but is widely unintentional. Those families in which its use was intentional (stimulated by external intervention), the effect on children as well as Roma parents was beneficial. Common learning – mothers with children – occurs very naturally and can be structured, content based and intergenerational. Educational institutions such as schools can be highly effective facilitators of this process.

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Introduction

Lifelong learning is a postmodern concept, which emphasises education as an investment to the future. It builds on the principle that a learner should have the ability to adapt to the dynamics of society, trends, development of new technologies, as well as be flexible and reflective with an ultimate aim to be economically effective. Lifelong learning – as an educational concept – is challenging for andragogy, due to the fact that it has to be able to deal with diversity, inequalities and various social contexts of its clients – adult learners.

One of the biggest challenges currently in adult education in Slovakia is the inclusion of marginalised groups, such as the Roma, into mainstream formal education but also to lifelong learning – further education, non-formal and informal learning. Generally, the participation of adults in lifelong learning (aged 25-64) in Slovakia is weak (2,9%) compared to the EU average (10,8%) (EU, 2017). Therefore, andragogy requires innovative approaches to adult education, which are based on learners needs and are responsive to the particular social environment of an individual. The search for approaches based on social constructivism and empowerment has led to increasingly favour the concept of intergenerational learning as an option to engage Roma people in learning together with their children.

Intergenerational learning as a learning partnership of generations presents “an intentional activity, whose ultimate aim is to trigger relations (the closest as possible), of what is supposed to occur naturally” (Pinto, 2011, p. 6). Intergenerational learning, understood as mutually beneficial process of the exchange of information, attitudes and values among generations, helps to develop both, the individual and the community. The distinctive implication is its focus on learning participants from various generations (Rabušicová et al, 2011). The act of learning and interaction is crucial component of intergenerational learning, thus its stimulation is of centre of the interest for an adult educator. If one thinks of intergenerational learning as stimulated andragogical intervention, the need to also consider the relationship between the learning of the adult and the intervention of an adult educator (andragogue) becomes apparent. Andragogy defines learning as the “ability of an individual to productively create or change ideas, habits, behaviours, abilities and skills” (Beneš, 2014, p. 18).

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Andragogy emphasises the adult learner's own activity, whereas learning is seen as a continual, lifelong process. Therefore, the aim of andragogical intervention is:

- To transform the life problems of an individual and society to problems solvable by learning;
- To develop ways of communication that support learning and to focus on the relationship between topics and learning;
- To search for forms and methods allowing stimulated learning of an adult (Beneš, p. 17-19).

Based on the research of interactions between adult educators and participants of intergenerational learning, authors Franz and Scheunpflug identified three andragogical models of intergenerational learning: as a support of family learning; as a link of different generations by generative themes, meaning specific themes that are important to a group; and as a guided exploration of difference (otherness). Andragogical intervention is described by the authors as follows: "adult educators arrange intergenerational learning by providing an open learning space, setting the topic, and focusing on the cooperation between generations" (Franz, Scheunpflug, 2016, p. 34). To sum up, intergenerational learning can be stimulated by andragogical intervention, which brings topics into the social environment with the aim to support learning of participating generations. This form of learning yields beneficial outcomes for each participating generation (Coull, 2011).

Intergenerational learning is configured as a social process sustaining a variety of relationships (Baschiera, 2015). Thus, we inevitably need to touch upon the issue of the formation of an adult person and education as a social construct, which is defined as "a learning occasion to increase the quantity and quality of the social relationships of the elderly and to mitigate the risks of isolation and marginalisation, improving their communication across different generations" (Ibid, p. 4). The formation of an adult person is understood as "a framework of formative (preferably self-formative) influences and activities, which create and develop personal attributes" (Pavlov, 2015, s. 14). , Formation, resp. self-formation can also be referred to as the potential of a (adult) person. Pavlov and Schubert define openness (potential) for development of personal attributes of an adult person as docility. "Docility is a goal seeking ability of adult person to learn (in a wider perspective) to influence one's own life via self-formation, education and self-education. Docility is a precondition and a hidden potential of adult person for actual and perspective changes of his/her personality" (2016, p. 27).

Accordingly, it is possible to intentionally empower the use of an individual's own potential by formation and education; crucial are the dispositions, preconditions, abilities and capabilities of the adult. The concept of empowerment is linked to the implementation of such conditions and processes that lead learners to work towards reaching their objectives and to overcome problematic situations (Baschiera, 2015). Educational potential of an adult can be described as the ability of a learner to develop one's personal attributes, to overcome problematic situations and to reach his/her objectives. Targeted empowerment of adults to use their own educational potential is an andragogical challenge.

Literature review

One of the particular fields of interests in our andragogical research is of intergenerational learning in a family; how this influences diverse socio-educational aspects of life of not only adult individuals but that of younger generations, which means the development of social and cultural capital, empowering the attitudes towards lifelong learning, development of social cohesion and inclusion. One of the most informative research of intergenerational learning in this area is led by Prof. Milada Rabušicová at the Masaryk University in Brno, who together with her team examines contents and opportunities of non-formal and informal learning in families and in various social environments. In Slovakia, intergenerational learning is included in the subject of research in social andragogy (Határ 2006, Jedličková, 2017). Furthermore, the subject of intergenerational solidarity (Balogová, Žumárová, 2010) or geragogy, is in the context of cooperative learning between seniors and children and also includes "intergenerational education" (Lenhardtová et al, 2016).

The research project EAGLE (European Approaches to Inter-Generational Lifelong Learning) (Fisher, 2008) is a considerably relevant source of research in intergenerational learning, whose primary objective is to provide deeper insight on the potential and limits of intergenerational learning. It explores existing policies, empirical knowledge and developed models of good practice, with the aim to formulate recommendations for policy and practice of intergenerational learning.

As a subject of research, a case study taking an example of a Roma family as an open structure for family learning strategies is presented (Skjerdal, 2011). It describes the engagement of all family members through the development of specific skills (functional literacy in writing, reading, language understanding, digital skills, basic computer skills, punctuation and orthography) in school environment with population of Roma in Norway.

One of the most important research outcomes observed with improving literacy in Roma families is the influence of the more senior members. The higher extent of respect towards elderly people in the majority of Roma households has a potentially significant impact on the effectiveness of intergenerational learning (Kovacs et al, 2015).

Data and methodology

For empirical assessment of intergenerational learning implementation within the context of adult lifelong learning in the social environment of Roma families, we chose a qualitative research design. As the research conception, we have suggested a thematic content analysis design. The measure of analysis is the intergenerational learning in respective Roma family. The research goal is to determine intergenerational learning in terms of the educational potential of adult individuals in the social environment of their corresponding family. The focus of our interest is how intergenerational learning develops the educational potential of an adult Roma as well as what other factors support or limit intergenerational learning in a Roma family.

Research questions are based on specific research objectives:

Q1: What is the character of intergenerational learning in Roma family?

Q2: What are the conditions that support or limit intergenerational learning in Roma family?

Q3: What various benefits and limits of intergenerational learning are identified by adult Roma within the context of their own educational potential?

With regard to existing research and literature resources, which refer to many benefits of intergenerational learning brought to individuals as well as the level of community and society, we assume that intergenerational learning – as observed in Roma families – produces benefits for each generation participating (Skjerdal, 2011; Kovacs et al, 2015). We expect that within the social environment of a Roma family, the adult members exchange content and information in common intergenerational learning with their children (Rabušicová et al, 2011). This can become evident in the form of learning outcomes for each generation engaged. One of these outcomes is the development of an adult's own educational potential. We presume that intergenerational learning promotes several benefits for adult Roma; particularly it strengthens social capital (Boström, 2014), aids in using their potential to develop personal attributes, to overcome problematic situations and to achieve their objectives. We also expect existence of various barriers linked to the culture of a pro-learning family (Rabušicová et al, 2011) such as external barriers, which prevent implementation of intergenerational learning and limit the educational potential of adult Roma.

The research is realized in the social context of Roma families, whose children attend selected kindergardens in three localities of Eastern Slovakia. During the school year these kindergardens run a program of social and financial education for children, which is part of a formal school educational program for pre-primary education. A system of activities called "family activities" is included in this program. This presents a model of intergenerational learning that is intentionally stimulated by the school (kindergarden) with the aim to develop a strong level of cooperation between the school and the family as well as support parents to learn together with their children at home. Family activity is an exercise and assignment that is a part of the school (kindergarden) curriculum that the child's family is asked to complete at home together with their child. Upon completion, the child or the family are required to return the assignment back to school, where the teacher subsequently provides feedback about the task. Andragogical intervention, as creating conditions for learning opportunities and providing learning themes, is – in this case – the assignment of a family activity, which children together with their family constitute as a form of "homework". The entire process of a family activity – the task completion by the child in cooperation with their family – is understood as intergenerational learning. The intervention of an andragogue is hypothetical in our case. The teacher plays the role of a pedagogue by creating learning opportunities and providing learning themes for family activities, hence substitutes the function of the andragogue too. Key categories of empirical research are:

- a) **typology of intergenerational learning** between parents and children which takes place in a Roma family, and
- b) **educational potential of an adult** (or respective family member) who is engaged in intergenerational learning and who attributes certain relevance to it (from the personal development perspective, ability to overcome problematic situations and achieving goals).

Within these key categories we aim to define those which are relevant to benefits – supportive conditions – and barriers – limiting conditions – of intergenerational learning.

The data collected from individual cases were based on semi-structured and group interviews with two types of interviewees – Roma parents and teachers. An individual case is grouped as a parent or parental couple, who is engaged in intergenerational learning (family activity) together with their child or children. Selection of cases was intentional and available. Intentional selection was represented by a parent engaged in an existing program of intergenerational learning, which was focused on strengthening family activities between parents and children in selected schools (kindergardens and primary schools) in Slovakia.

Table 1: Example of intergenerational learning program

The program of intergenerational learning in kindergardens through family activities is called Aflatoun – social and financial education. It has been implemented in 5 kindergardens with a high percentage of Roma children in Eastern Slovakia since the academic year of 2015/2016. A number of kindergardens engaged increased gradually, including primary schools. Aflatoun is an international program focused on personal development, social and financial education of children. The goal of the program is to help children realize that the world can be changed through education. The curriculum for kindergarden emphasises cooperation with the family as it is basically the first place where children learn and influentially form their abilities, attitudes and behaviours. At this age, parents are role models and co-teachers for their children. Therefore, the program emphasises family activities and active engagement of families.

Source: Author

Available selection was represented by a parent who was willing to participate in interview and cooperate in the research. In a school a teacher plays the role of the facilitator of intergenerational learning. Thus, the second type of interviewee was represented by this teacher, whose purpose is to support the triangulation of research data.

The research sample was represented by 25 adult Roma from 3 localities and 4 teachers of kindergarden and primary school. 8 cases were interviewed in a pilot sample. An adult representative identified as “Roma parent” for the research purposes was understood as a family member who was:

- a parent of a child/children;
- a family relative of a child/children living in common household or considers themselves as a family relative;
- a relative or someone in a similar family relationship together with a child/children, not living in common household, but realizing family activities together with the child and family.

Lower age limit representing the generation of adults was 16 year old, meant as the age of compulsory education completion (compulsory school attendance). Upper age limit was not stated.

A “teacher” for research purposes was understood as a kindergarden or primary school teacher in the selected locality, who coordinated the program of intergenerational learning „Aflatoun“, facilitated family activities with children and parents (families) and maintained contact throughout data collection with the participating parents. In the following text, we primarily paid attention to research question Q3.

Results and discussion

To sum up, a total of 37 participants were interviewed. According to the pilot interviews (8), we had identified a positive effect of being involved in intergenerational learning. This was evaluated as „positive impacts on learning for the participating children, as well as on their parents“ (Ďuríková, Vaněk, 2016 in Vančíková et al, 2017, p. 85). For parents, the future education of their children had „a greater value than the education they originally achieved“ (Ibid, p. 85). This aspect was further researched as educational potential influenced by intergenerational learning in a family.

We noticed a significant amount of attention being paid to the children, in particular their future and wellbeing, while interviewing each individual case. The image of wellbeing is linked to education, employment and a better housing. Mothers are actively oriented around their child; children are the focus of their family and social life. Their own future is linked to their children; hence they emphasise the importance of joy, a satisfied atmosphere and happiness, as it has a significant impact on joy and happiness in their own lives.

Learning, in terms of informal and non-formal learning, is an abstract and unknown term for the majority of interviewees; for Roma parents, learning is understood as school homework and school (formal) learning. Questions leading to self-learning and educational potential such as: “have you learned something, has it helped you to overcome any problem, has that changed you in any way while learning together with your children?” were not commonly expressed by interviewees as they rather tended to child’s progress. However, when asked if adults can learn something from children they agreed:

„Yes, why not? Surely, yes. They (children) teach us, because since we’ve attended school we forgot everything and when they brought something from school, we learned from them. “

Another type of answers reflected more on the influence on personal attributes:

“Surely, I was changed a bit... There is more responsibility because of those children. Always, when I go to bed, I think of what to do, what it will be, I think of their future...When I see my children happy, I’m happy too. I feel that happiness, when they smile I must smile too, I see that energy from them, and they give me power, energy back.”

Also, there was some reflection that came from specific problematic situations in the family:

„We were arguing (with partner) and the younger (daughter) came to him and punched him in his face saying: why are you shouting at mom, why do you want to beat her...that surprised him and me too...because he (partner) never did so“.

Parents try to be positive examples for their children and that is their motivation for intergenerational learning. Usually, the activities parents commonly do together with their children are linked to household chores (baking, cooking, housecleaning, etc.). In one case we interviewed a parent studying for a university degree with the intention to be an role model for his children. When searching for the source of their motivation – where parents take inspiration, habit, knowledge, from is when learning really becomes intergenerational – parents admitted that it was from what they had learned from their parents that they try to teach to their children now:

“We had someone from who we could learn - our parents taught us, and we want our children to know too, they should learn too.”

School is a great source for intergenerational learning. As our selection of cases was intentional – there was already cooperation established between the school and family – we clearly recognize intergenerational transfer of learning from children to parents, facilitated by the school. This learning constituted mainly knowledge: new poems, songs, exercises and words in English) that they had to learn because they were practising together with their children. Another area of knowledge identified by parents was new technologies. Parents expressed a lack of skills in using internet, social media, online and video games and identified children as possible educators for them. These can be illustrated as:

“Me, for example, I buy the tablet for my child, because we didn’t know something like that. Honestly, I must admit that I have no experience in using such a phone that my boy has. But children are opened up, they know, because they use it in school. The computers too. We didn’t have anything like this.”

We also illustrate the situation representing the moment of learning:

“He (son) taught my husband how to download the games, because he (husband) didn’t know.”

Parents referred to barriers that did not allow them to spend more time together with their children and initiate intergenerational learning. These occupy a significant portion of time and responsibility for the whole household, which otherwise need to do household chores, take care of the younger children and other (elderly) members of the family, due to the absence of partners working long-term abroad or out

of the home. On the other hand, there were also opportunities supporting intergenerational learning in these families in the form of time spent together. These included the need to engage children to commit to household chores, help them to feel satisfied and happy while completing school assignments, opportunities for spending leisure time while learning new, mostly digital skills, the presence of elderly members in the common household. It should be noted that parents seemed to be willing to spend more time with their children when they felt confident. An absence of confidence led parents to preferably stay aside not engage, hence placing significant responsibility on the child. A parent's confidence is particularly connected with the school curriculum and trends the younger generation deal with:

“They (children) have different History, Maths classes and they can search the tools on internet. They are a different generation.”

Conclusion

Marginalization comes together with social and economic exclusion. It also brings uncertainty into decision-making processes because the usual structures and relationships do not work as they do in society as a whole. The specific social context of marginalized communities of Roma clearly requires the search for variants in educational delivery that are targeted, needs-based and responsive. The paper discusses the concept of intergenerational learning in Roma families and aims to shed light on possibilities that empower Roma adults to use their educational potential via the emergence of intergenerational learning as a part of lifelong learning.

The main focus of the study was on intentional intergenerational learning stimulated by educational facilities with the aim to propose an andragogical intervention with the targeted population. Intergenerational learning in the studied Roma families occurs both naturally and in an intentionally stimulated fashion in the form of family activities. Within the context of the educational potential of adults, intergenerational learning can bring benefits such as overcoming problematic situations, achieving goals and developing personal attributes. However, these are difficult to refer to in a normative way as they are highly descriptive. Taking into consideration the various benefits that improve the limited use of the educational potential observed in the sample group, andragogical intervention should address following criteria:

- be grounded in daily routine and in problems families (mothers) deal with as intergenerational learning needs to be content-based;
- intergenerational learning needs to be structured; the communication should be based on parent – child language, their common achievements, their relationship; and be facilitated;
- having a form of learning with one another (parents and children) in order to allow intergenerational interaction.

As demonstrated in our research, the role of the school (a teacher) as facilitator of intergenerational learning could support the process and set up greater cooperation between the generations in the family. Children learning together with their parents bring new knowledge into learning and help to develop key competencies of adults (language and digital competencies). This finding challenges adult education to promote intergenerational learning and to establish professional cooperation with schools, particularly in communities, where participation in lifelong learning is weak, or absent.

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