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INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPE

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BOOK REVIEW

Schmidt-Hertha, B., Jelenc Krašovec S. & Formosa, M. (Eds). (2014)
Learning Across Generations in Europe: Contemporary Issues in Older Adult Education.
Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Judging by publication and educational activity, there seems to be a growing awareness among researchers, politicians, and employers of the benefits of intergenerational learning for personal growth, increasing or maintaining social capital, and building social cohesion. The collective monograph *Learning Across Generations in Europe: Contemporary Issues in Older Adult Education* provides a rich survey of the phenomena of learning across generations in all of the aforementioned aspects.

The main aim of the book is to map adult education and learning in different contexts and environments, providing information on intergenerational learning, the roles of individual generations in this process, and the profile of a learning adult. The editors have endeavoured to present a portfolio of theoretical approaches and current empirical studies linked with political strategies, including examples of good practice concerning learning for adults throughout life and in different social environments.

The publication comprises three main sections: “Theory and Policy Issues,” “Participation and Programmes,” and “Intergenerational Learning.” The conception of a *portfolio* rather than a comprehensive perspective of intergenerational learning is evident from the fact that most authors offer in their chapters a brief insight into the concept of intergenerational learning, accentuating the lack of homogeneous terminology in this field. Bernhard Schmidt-Hertha (Chapter 12) ascribes this situation to the insufficient theoretical grounding of the concept and to the fact that the term is used rather loosely in research, practice, and political context. Despite this theoretical deficit, Schmidt-Hertha suggests that intergenerational learning

should be understood in its political aspect as a means of compensating for the widening gap among individual generations in different realms of life and also as a means of allowing for the innovative ideas of the youngest generation to be intertwined with the life experiences of the oldest generation. This approach seems to prevail in the book, as most of the chapters more or less touch upon the question of how we are bridging the gap, or how we could be bridging it.

In this respect, highlighting the issue of intergenerational learning in community learning and volunteering is, in our opinion, of particular significance. The book offers a view of two levels of community development in connection with intergenerational learning. The first level is represented by communities oriented toward purely practical activity and informal learning. The primary objective of these communities is to bring together people of different generations who work together on something, a process that naturally leads to intergenerational learning. Examples of this practice include the community gardens and urban parks discussed by Barry J. Hake (Chapter 13) and men's sheds, community centres bringing together men of different generations living in remote areas. The way these communities operate and their benefits are described by Barry Golding (Chapter 3). The second level is, according to Sonja Kump and Sabina Jelenc Krašovec (Chapter 14), represented by thematically diverse educational programmes and courses provided by community-based organizations. This type of learning interaction enables different age groups to have their interests and needs fulfilled in a relevant way. However, as the authors point out, several obstacles have been encountered: stereotypes about individual generations, lack of necessary cooperation, issues with motivation, and insufficient funding.

Małgorzata Malec-Rawiński (Chapter 11) deals with the phenomenon of volunteering during the senior years, focusing on an empirical study from Poland. The author argues that senior citizens in general are interested in participating in volunteer activities, but their participation is limited by their lack of information about the possibilities of engaging in these activities. Malec-Rawiński therefore recommends raising the awareness of older people about the opportunities available to them, as volunteering by older people has benefits for both sides – the senior citizens as well as society at large. According to Irena Žemaihaitytė (Chapter 15), who mapped this area in Lithuania, intergenerational learning gives older adults the chance to pass on their life experience, professional knowledge, and skills. The author sees engaging in volunteer work by older people as contributing to the development of civic society, fighting against discrimination and the formation of stereotypes.

Since older people in particular are exposed to such risks as social exclusion or loss of employment due to insufficient knowledge and skills, Marvin Formosa (Chapter 2) emphasizes the importance of lifelong learning, especially for senior citizens. He argues that it is a well-established fact today that education substantially contributes to succeeding in the objective of enhancing the quality of life in old age. Nonetheless, the rate of participation in educational activities is rather low among senior citizens. This may be, among other factors, due to the poor availability and limited range of courses for this age group. Veronika Thalhammer (Chapter 5) identifies e-learning as a possible resolution of some of the barriers (issues with poor availability of courses and limited mobility of participants) preventing senior citizens from participating in education.

In connection with the concept of well-being, Ann Kristin Boström (Chapter 16) emphasizes the impact of intergenerational learning on social capital, substantiating her claims with empirical evidence. It is argued that it is beyond any doubt that intergenerational learning has a positive effect on the quality of life of an individual, in particular through maintaining and developing social relationships. Esmeraldina Veloso and Paula Guimarães (Chapter 4), who are concerned with senior education, argue that these efforts should be aimed not only at individual development and enhancing the quality of life of an individual by way of adapting to contemporary society, but should also promote their active contribution to social change. However, Georgios Zafiris (Chapter 10) presents a somewhat sceptical view in this respect. In his opinion, senior citizens are an age group that is seriously threatened by social exclusion. Therefore, he suggests that it is not appropriate to set high goals, but rather to come up with clearly defined sub-steps that may lead to improving the position of senior citizens in society. This process should be ideally adopted at a Europe-wide level.

Obviously, the topics that we mention in this review do not represent an exhaustive list of all that the publication has to offer readers. We may conclude by saying that the book provides autonomous evidence that the topic of intergenerational learning is truly alive in contemporary Europe and manifests itself through diverse paths, often “from the bottom up.” We appreciate this testimony as the greatest contribution of the book. On the other hand, as far as broader conceptual recommendations are concerned, there are a few instances of a utopian tone to be found among the authors, such as when Alfredo Alfageme (Chapter 6) proposes a “temporary exit from employment” in order to achieve self-realisation in the sphere outside work (family, hobbies, further education, volunteering) as a concept that would support lifelong learning and at the same time fight against social inequality. In contrast, the book also offers an entirely rational view, such as when Dominique Kern (Chapter 7) draws attention to the fact that the very basis for research into

intergenerational learning is finding answers to such elementary questions as: Who is learning?; What is the target group learning?; and How is the target group learning?

We live on an ageing continent, as illustrated by this book that promises to deal with learning “across generations” and comes to terms mainly with the learning of older people. However, this is not to say that this sphere does not deserve the attention. The opposite is true: when reading the book, we come to realize the scope of research topics that need to be covered so that the bridging of the proclaimed gap can draw on reliable data. We believe that the book itself contributes to bridging the gap by giving examples of good practice as well as by opening further areas for examination and innovation.

The book is freely available at https://www.sensepublishers.com/media/2164-learning-across-generations-in-europe_%28Complimentary_Copy%29.pdf.

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