

Shining Stars amidst Dark Clouds: Enhancing Positive Aging through a European Project

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Abstract

Statistics show a generalized aging in population for the most industrialized countries. Absence of policies on aging, like in Portugal, change in the household composition, negative stereotypes of the old conveyed by the media, the post-modern individualism and consumer mentality contribute to marginalize the elders who are considered a burden to society, relegating them to isolation that often causes depression and makes them reluctant to leave home and engage in learning activities to improve their wellbeing.

This article aims to present results of a European funded project (Grundtvig Learning Partnerships) – *Food for Body, Mind and Spirit: Gathering Europe around the Table* – in which a group of about twenty people, mostly aged seventy-five and over, in a Catholic Parish in Lisbon, Portugal, was involved. Food was used as a catalyst to promote healthy aging and lifestyle, to encourage peer learning, as well as intergenerational and intercultural interaction. Findings suggest that the project motivated older people for self-realization by empowering them; enhanced their self-esteem and self confidence, fostered better nutritional habits, as well as greater willingness to engage in physical activities.

The project further improved intergenerational communication within the elders' families. Additionally, interactions between different groups in our organization that took place to develop the project objectives and activities contributed to an increased awareness that commonalities among people from different cultures, traditions and religions surpass differences, through understanding and respect for the other.

Keywords: positive aging; intergenerational communication; healthy nutrition; cultural and religious diversity

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Introduction

In the general context of Europe, like in most developed countries in the world, population is aging and the older population is itself aging (United Nations, 2013). Specifically in Europe, people live longer and healthier, population aged 80 years or over – “the oldest old” is itself aging, the number and proportion of centenarians (people aged 100 years or more) is growing even faster, and the older population is predominantly female, while fertility rates are below replacement levels (European Commission, 2014). In Portugal, population aged 65 and over represent about 19% of the total population, and the group aged 69 and over has increased by 26% (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, Statistics Portugal, 2014).

Portugal has the fourth highest percentage of elderly people in the European Union. In fact, young population under 15 years old represent 14.9%, compared to 19.2% of elderly – aged 65 and over (Manuel dos Santos Foundation, 2014). Moreover, there has been a great change in household composition: families are no longer inclusive, 60% of the elderly live alone or solely with their spouse, Lisbon and the Alentejo regions being those with the highest proportion of older people living alone (idem). Most elderly in the country have low pensions and studies show that socio-economic disadvantage is a social risk for depression in later life (Blazer & Hybels, 2011; Berman & Furst, 2011).

As Olshanky (2012) remarks, a significant percentage of the older population is physically and mentally healthy, wanting to work and to be engaged in every aspect of society. Nevertheless, negative stereotypes conveyed by the media and marketing – news, television, film and advertising – with their obsession for eternal youth and physical beauty, portray aging as decline and of diminished value, emphasize the “burdens” of growing old, use negative language about aging, and depict the elderly as foolish or inept (Milner et al, 20012).

Thus, aging is not viewed as a progressive process, but as something that “attacks us” when we are around seventy-five, and “the general population stereotypes older people as handicapped, limited in what they can do, rigid in their thinking, and expensive because of high health-care cost” (Hennezel, 2011: 113). Post-modern individualism, with its focus on individual self-realization and fulfillment of individual desires, excluding alterity, demonstrating indifference to common good, and denying the need to consider the future (Lipovetsky, 1989) has contributed to the present state of affairs. Pulcine (2013) also refers to the consumerist transformation of mass society that creates false needs and a sense of fragmentation and discontinuity in families. As a result, elderly people feel unwanted and socially excluded, and often internalize those stereotypes against themselves, with negative consequences on their self esteem and self confidence.

What policies have been implemented to face this demographic challenge? Despite the “action plan for healthy aging in Europe, 2012-2020” that the World Health Organization - WHO (2012) presented to politicians, civil society, communities, families and individuals, policies directed to population aging have primarily been of an economicist nature, or even absent. In Portugal, although the National Health Service still provides affordable and good quality health services, austerity measures, due to the economic crisis since 2008, have led to deterioration; between 2011 and

2014, total public spending within the health sector decreased by 676 million Euros (Global Age Watch, 2014). Furthermore, there is no national policy on aging (idem). Likewise, educational policies in Portugal have not considered education for third age citizens, i.e. those who still have functional capacity (Gonçalves, 2014), who differ from the fourth age, a term used for those after 75 (Jarvis, 2001) or when the older person ceases to be independent (Jarvis, 2007). Baltes & Smith (2003) situate the fourth age in the mid-eighties and beyond, when individuals begin to experience decline in vision, hearing, strength, functional capacity and cognition.

Volunteering experience in this project leads us to conclude, with Jarvis (2001 and 2007) that this age group needs “learning therapists” who help them learn. Furthermore, we agree that “postponing the implementation of healthy aging policies in a period of economic austerity may prove more costly in the long term and can be counter-productive to the sustainability of welfare policies” (WHO, 2012: 7).

We believe that there is an urgent need to improve the lives of these elderly, especially the 75 and over, to (re) integrate and help them regain their status and raise their self-esteem. This can be done by building networks of support to provide educational activities in order to extend their autonomy, by enhancing their self-esteem and self-confidence, helping them to have healthy lifestyles so that they can live in their own homes as long as possible. Support should also be provided to families that chose to keep their elderly at home.

In fact, other than being a right, these supports turn out to be economic gains, because they keep the elderly more active, happier and away from hospitals, health care centers and nursing homes. We believe that the solution is not the massive creation of nursing homes. Indeed, in our country there has been a proliferation of illegal nursing homes lacking specialized workers or adequate space (Global Age Watch Index, 2014), with the regrettable consequences reported in the media. Moreover, there is evidence that in their own homes, people age better and more slowly than those in such institutions, where the incidence of depression is high (Jarvis, 2001; Martins, 2006; Vaz & Gaspar, 2011).

As a result of the present economic crisis, new forms of solidarity and engagement have emerged in Portugal, where there has been a significant percentage of people that volunteer their time to help the most disadvantaged, namely the elderly, between 2008 and 2013 (OECD, 2014). Such is the case of the author of this paper, who has been working with a group aged mostly seventy-five and over in a Parish of Lisbon for more than three years. As a researcher in education and development, she started by assessing the needs of the group, through action research (Somekh, 2006; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), which is appropriate for this context where specific knowledge is required for a specific problem in a specific situation, without the concern of results generalization.

The aim was to understand the personal and social learning needs of these persons so that they could become more autonomous, happier and mutually supportive. After the first year of work, the opportunity to join a European financed project (Grundtvig Learning Partnerships, 2012-1-PL1-GRU06-279473) that involved both trainers and learners mobility to each partners’ country, proved to be a booster for the objectives pursued, as it will be described in the next sections.

The project – Food for Body, Mind and Spirit: Gathering Europe around the Table

1. Local and partners' context

The Saint John of God Parish is an urban community, located in a Lisbon area which was expanding in the 1950s. It started with a young population of higher middle urban culture that is now aging, although, lately, young couples and families have come to live here. Because of the growing number of elderly who feel lonely, the Parish provides informal learning led by volunteers, where a group of about 20 elderly people, mostly 75 and over women (widows in general), regularly meet in the Parish premises. Many suffer from social isolation, and some were at risk of depression when they joined the group.

Six other organizations from Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Turkey, and the UK had similar challenges related to elderly (one with immigrant women) in their communities. They reported the lower income of the elderly, often resulting in poor health and wellbeing, loneliness – the elderly feeling unwanted and socially excluded; low self esteem; few opportunities for self-expression; few opportunities to exercise physically, mentally and spiritually; often victims of ageism, in short, being voiceless. Because of the above reasons, partners felt a need to (re)integrate these older people, helping them regain their status and raise their self-esteem and self-confidence.

2. Overall goal and specific objectives

Using food as a catalyst, the aim was to empower older people to regain their status in society and self-esteem. In order to accomplish this goal, specific objectives were pursued: we started by providing knowledge on healthy, affordable food and, at the same time, we motivated the elderly to become aware of their abilities and encouraged them to expand such abilities. The next step was to raise awareness on environment sustainability, thus making them face the present and the future, and to view themselves as persons who share responsibilities for themselves and for future generations. Since the project involved visits to every partner organization, both by learners and trainers, learning about other European cultures, traditions and religions was implemented. Another objective was to improve interaction among generations. Although for most partners the inclusion of ICT was also a specific objective, it appeared to be very difficult in our community, because our learners did not find any interest in even touching computers. However, surprisingly enough, ICT has proven to be a major trigger to foster intergenerational learning within families of the persons in our group, as it will be demonstrated in a subsequent section.

3. The approach

To reach the project goal and objectives, partners have developed relationships with other internal departments/groups within their own institutions, as well as with other local institutions. Visits to partners' institutions during the project, offered both trainers and learners opportunities to share experience, methodologies and tacit knowledge, through joint activities – workshops, seminars and lectures. Blogs created by each partner, as well as a common project site, provided means of interactive learning between partners that enabled knowledge exchange as well as dissemination

of project outcomes and the final results – an eBook and a photo exhibition under the motto “Love Food, Hate Waste”.

Learning took place mainly in informal settings and encouraged peer learning and intergenerational communication. Activities included collecting recipes, stories and legends about traditional cuisine, arts and crafts related to food and nature, recycling by re-creating – patchwork, lace and other artistic use of leftovers; reading and reciting poetry, and storytelling, among others. Since most of our elderly live alone, an expert in first aid volunteered to do a workshop for our group to learn first aid and how to prevent accidents at home. A challenge remained for volunteers/trainers in our community: how to motivate the group for physical activity, when most do not even feel good within their own body and feel its limitations as impossibilities? “Joyful fitness” (Figures 1 and 2), a dance workshop with a professional dancing company proved to be effective: after watching a professional dance performance, our elderly were invited to perform some dance steps and movements adapted to their age.



Figures1 and 2: Joyful Fitness

Monitoring and evaluation was systematically held during the whole project. After each meeting in each partner’s institution, a questionnaire, with close-ended and open-ended questions, was sent both to learners and trainers that had participated. This was followed by a quantitative and qualitative analysis that gave rise to a report that was sent to all partners, highlighting what had to be improved.

4. Outcomes and results

Evaluation in our group was implemented through participant observation, analysis of behavior change and content analysis of discourses. It showed evidence that our *elderly have become aware of their abilities and are willing to exhibit and improve them*. Findings suggest that they make healthier and affordable food choices, and demonstrate higher self-esteem and self confidence. Positive changes in behavior and attitudes have been observed. With the exception of a recently widowed woman, our learners tend to replace their black or dark clothes for lighter ones, show greater hair and body care, talk now more positively about themselves and make positive statements about themselves and the others. In addition, they take the initiative to recycle materials and not to waste food.

Peer learning in an informal context, both locally and during partners’ visits played a major role in *strengthening our learners’ self-esteem and self-confidence* because

learning with and from each other through face-to-face interactions made them aware of their skills and capabilities. Hence, they were able to organize and plan activities and work collaboratively under the trainers' subtle monitoring. They transmitted to each other their tacit knowledge which is intuitive and cannot be completely expressed either in words or in writing, that "marvelous capacity of the human mind to make sense of a lifetime's collection of experience and connect patterns from the past to the present and future (Leonard & Sensiper, 1998: 112)".

The project also fostered *intergenerational communication within families* through ICT, and this was an unexpected outcome because of our learners' lack of interest for computers and ICT in general. However, because they were willing to see their own recipes, legends and stories about food on our blog, and later in the e-Book, they requested their children and grand-children to help them in the search for material on the Internet. Thus, younger members of families started emailing the trainers/volunteers to send material from their elderly relatives to be inserted in the Portuguese blog; children of learners participating in a visit to a partner took their mothers to the airport and picked them on arrival. This process enhanced *communication between elderly families and trainers*.

Increased knowledge about partners' countries, traditions, cultures and religions, widened horizons, enhanced acceptance of "the other" and led to *intercultural interaction*. The two main results of the project demonstrate such intercultural interaction: an e-Book with a printable version in partners' languages, providing traditional affordable, natural food recipes from different countries and ethnic groups, as well as photos of creative craft, legends and stories about food. The book is a valuable contribution for the sustainability of the project as it allows a wide range of new experiences, making new recipes from partners' countries and the desire to expand knowledge of their traditions. There was also a photo exhibition, displayed on the project website, subsequent to national photo competitions in each partner country which were open to each of the partners' communities, under the motto "love food, hate waste", and which was another trigger for increased intergenerational learning.

Social ties and networks both within the group and between other groups in our Parish, as well as interaction with our partners, opened perspectives of new projects and interchange. This fact was reported by all partners, especially from Turkey, where both trainers and learners had their first opportunity, through this project, to go abroad and make foreign friends, as well as to show their culture, religion and traditional cuisine. Visits also fostered intercultural and inter-religious interaction, examples of which are paintings with religious motifs by a Turkish trainee that evoked similar ones in the Christian tradition (e.g. angels), visits to mosques and photos of ancient versions of the Koran in Turkey, or a visit to an Evangelic church in Germany. All these have been later objects of photo observation, explanations and discussion.

Discussion of findings

As Pope Francis stated in Barcelona, 13 Jun, 2014, "by discarding children and the old, we discard the future of a people because the young will pull us strongly forward and the old will give us wisdom". Educational systems in general are concerned with education of youth and have few or no concerns at all for lifelong learning of the elderly population, those who are no longer productive. However, our results

demonstrate the need for policies directed to this population that maintain their autonomy for as long as possible, since a literature review prior to the project has shown that in their homes they are happier and healthier than in nursing homes. Because both the energy of the young and the wisdom of the old are complementary for a better life in every community, enhancing intergenerational communication is of primary significance. This was the most difficult objective to achieve in our project, even in a community like ours, where there are groups of different ages. Future similar projects should carefully plan activities to achieve this objective from the beginning. Another limitation is that although encouraging, our findings are suggestive rather than conclusive. Some are merely seeds that must be nurtured to have a long lasting effect.

We know, for example, that change in healthy nutrition is easier said than done, because change is a process. Additionally, the few women who still live with their spouses are mostly influenced by them and their choices. This requires a structured and joint intervention with National Health Care System, namely through family doctors. Last but not least, it is noteworthy to stress the relevance of systematic monitoring and evaluation throughout the whole process to withdraw adjustments to be made, strengths and weaknesses to be identified and subsequent steps to be improved accordingly.

Conclusion

Outcomes and results of this project strengthen the idea that informal learning can boost autonomy of older people, providing them with diverse learning opportunities, empowering them to help themselves and to remain engaged, at the same time combating negative stereotypes of aging that hinder relationships between generations and undermine social solidarity. Although findings cannot be generalized, we believe that this model can be replicated in other contexts, with necessary adaptations. The project helped participants to gain confidence in their capacity to learn, by listening and working alongside others, learning from mistakes, sharing their own skills and learning from others.

Activities also challenged their physical and mental abilities in a supportive atmosphere. The project fostered empowerment of the elderly, awareness of their abilities and willingness to improve them, strengthened their self-esteem and self-confidence, and enhanced intergenerational communication within families, as well as communication between families and volunteers/trainers. Furthermore, intercultural interactions were facilitated because of the possibility to visit partners, obtain knowledge about their countries and then share it in our group. Last but not least, the project reinforced and created social ties and networks, both in our community and among partners. Projects like the one that has been described can stimulate friendship and peace among people from different countries and religions, because very often intolerance and prejudice is the result of ignorance about others.

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