

Elder lifelong learning, intergenerational solidarity and positive youth development: the case of Hong Kong

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Abstract

Elder lifelong learning has been promoted worldwide under different modes for upgrading quality of life of elders and actualizing successful aging. With multiple objectives, some modes of the elder lifelong learning program attempt to simultaneously address the social issues of age-segregation and negative perceptions of older people by adopting an intergenerational approach. Such an approach links the two non-biological generations – the young and the old – together purposefully for nurturing intergenerational solidarity and integration. Although program evaluation studies demonstrate the positive impacts and effects of an intergenerational approach on older people, its impact on young people is not well-researched. This paper explores intergenerational solidarity generated from the intergenerational-mode elder lifelong learning program in Hong Kong and argues how it contributes to positive youth development.

Keywords: elder lifelong learning; intergenerational program; intergenerational solidarity; positive youth development.

Introduction

Elder lifelong learning has been pervasively promoted, especially in the past two decades. Having been put into widespread practice in many countries, it takes many forms under different names in different contexts such as adult

continuing education (school-based or distance learning), University of the Third Age (the British community-based self-help model and the traditional French model), Institutes for Learning in Retirement, Elderhostel, open university, elderly education center (1, 2) and intergenerational education program (3). No matter what form it takes, its common overall objective is to upgrade the well-being and quality of life of elders. Its underlying goals include addressing the social issues of age-segregation, negative perceptions of older people and intergenerational conflict between the young and the old. Evaluation studies demonstrated the effectiveness of this type of learning programs in helping mix the senior students and the young students together, fostering young students' positive attitudes toward older people (4) and seniors' favorable attitudes toward the young, as well as increasing the young's interest in the gerontological field as a career choice (5). Similarly, the Elder Academy of Hong Kong (EA), which is a government-launched program, bears the objective of promoting intergenerational solidarity through incorporating elder lifelong learning with intergenerational integration between two non-kinship generations.

The implementation mode of EA is, in fact, one type of intergenerational programs linking the youth (students of primary and secondary school) and the elder (aged 55 and above) together through a series of purposive interactions with reciprocal benefits. Numerous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of this intergenerational approach in tackling the human and social needs in many countries (6). Most of these studies documented the outcome data (i.e., number of participants, nature and frequency of the activities) and end result of the program (i.e., attitudes change, care provided, knowledge and skills increased). But surprisingly, very few have looked into the older-younger solidarity which is the crucial component as well as significant outcome indicator of the intergenerational interactions contributing to the positive experiences gained by both parties. Obviously, it will be a good attempt, using the EA as an example, to explore how intergenerational solidarity (IS) generated from the intergenerational program is conducive to the achievement of positive youth development.

Elder lifelong learning in Hong Kong

In facing the challenge of the aging population, the World Health Organization (7) suggested an active aging approach to achieve the vision of providing the elder a positive experience of longer life through optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security. Having studied the overseas

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experience, the Hong Kong Special Administration Region Government and the Elderly Commission jointly launched a school-based Pilot Elder Learning Scheme, named Elder Academy in 2007, as a means to materialize active aging (8). Upon positive feedback from the stakeholders and participants, the scheme was further allocated \$10 million in the 2009/2010 government budget for setting up an Elder Academy Development Foundation to cater for increasing demand and sustainable development (9). In addition to the seven local tertiary institutes joining the scheme, there are 98 EAs (as at November 2009) established in primary and secondary schools widespread over all the 18 districts in Hong Kong (9). Of these 98 EAs, almost all of them have the following characteristics related to intergenerational interactions:

- With the operational mode emphasized on district-based, school-based, intergenerational integration and cross-sectional collaboration, EA is set up by a primary or secondary school in alliance with a district elderly service unit.
- As one of the objectives is to promote integration between the elder and the young, school students are encouraged to participate in the activities or courses which have direct communication and interaction with the elder. Most commonly, these activities are regarded as one of the school "service-learning" projects in which the participating students, as volunteers, act as tutors or teaching assistants providing support and guidance to the elder participants in computer courses. An award presentation officiating by government officials is held annually to recognize the contributions of the student participants.
- To further encourage intergenerational integration, an extra \$20,000 is offered to each EA which will organize intergenerational activities, for subsidizing financially needy elders and students (10).

Intergenerational program (IP) and intergenerational education program (IEP)

IPs, as Ventura-Merkel and Lidoff (11) stated, are the activities that "increase cooperation, interaction or exchange between any two generations" and "involve sharing of skills, knowledge or experience between old and young" (p. 2). It originates from the 1960s Foster Grandparent Program in which the low income older people provided service to the children of mental and/or physical disabilities, youth-victim of abused, neglected or juvenile offenders (12, 13). Generating from this and other similar programs implemented thereafter, the model for IPs embraced what Larkin and Newman (12) highlighted as "systematically planned ongoing and mutually satisfying interactions between younger and older generations" (p. 7) was developed. In recent years, it has grown rapidly and pervasively in terms of number of initiatives in both Eastern and Western countries.

IPs involve interactions across generations of all age groups. Among different combinations, the elder-children and elder-adolescent are most common. Usually, the elder means those aged 55 and above, whereas the children and adolescent are aged between 6 and 18 studying Primary One to

Secondary Six. Our discussion in this paper also centers on this combination of non-consecutive generations.

IPs take many forms with wide variations on nature mainly reflected in their stipulated central objectives. Among all, IPs with community services and education in nature are most popular. Kaplan (14) called the former the "intergenerational community services program" as it is to "engage citizens in activities and projects" that meet the community needs (p. 212). Likewise, Manheimer (3) defined the IEP as those with "education" as the central objective bringing the old and the young together "to learn from and with one another". This type of program, which strongly emphasizes the transfer or cultivation of knowledge and skills, provides a platform for participants of different generations to "exchange knowledge and experience, and to benefit from different perspectives on time and history". In addition, it is also a co-learning process as both age groups can learn about oneself, about the lives of the counterparts, and gain insight from the process of exchange (p. 80).

According to the above classifications, the EA is a type of classroom-based IEP. Practically, there are four main types of roles taken by the participants: (a) elder participants as the helpers or tutors while young participants are the "students"; (b) young participants as tutors or teachers while the elder are the "students"; (c) both elder and young participants are the "students" with the third party as the teachers; and (d) both elder and young participants are the teachers with the third party (for example, mentally handicapped children or nursing home residents) as the "students". Therefore, those EAs taken place in primary and secondary schools are of type (b), whereas the elder participants attending classes in the tertiary institutes are of type (c).

As much as the definitions of the IP, as stated above, provide a brief and general picture of what the IP is, there are many crucial elements that have not been pointed out. There are other well-known researchers who have contributed their thoughts to the IP. Newman (15) highlighted the IP as activities linking non-biological older and younger individuals in interactions, encouraging cross-generational bonding, promoting cultural exchange and providing positive support systems that help maintain well-being and security. Newman and Smith (16) emphasized it as activities providing "systematic and deliberate interaction between persons...of different generations purposefully collaborate to support and nurture each other" (p. 3). Cited in Newman and Hatton-Yeo (17), the National Council on Aging (1981) suggested it as "planned ongoing activities that purposefully bring together different generations to share experiences that are mutually beneficial...involve interactions that promote social growth and learning between the young and the old" (p. 32). Jarrott and Bruno (18) described it as activities fostering "positive contact and decrease social distance between generations" (p. 240). Finally, Peacock and Talley (19) viewed it as activities promoting "the interaction of all age groups, infants to elderly, in a variety of situations at a level that provides close communication, sharing of feelings and ideas, and cooperative activity in meaningful tasks" (p. 13).

Cited in the book by Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) “War of all against all” from the year 1651, Roberts and colleagues (20) explained that the word “solidarity” had been “used to describe the ‘glue’, which overcomes the centripetal tendencies of human self-interest” (p. 12). Humans are communal creatures requiring group living. Within the community, members need to cohere together to share responsibilities, form unity and solidarity for the common interests and survival. The ties among the members facilitate forming of strict and formal identification leading to their willingness to provide various types of mutual support, assistance and cooperation reciprocally (21) in the process of solidarity building. These are the feelings of “we” and the cohesiveness that drive all the members in the group or community for collective good which can affect an individual’s social and psychological well-being. Therefore, solidarity as described by Roberts et al. (20) is the “engine driving the pursuit of the common good” in the community that forms the basis for social order (p. 12). Reciprocity and mutual trust which are the basic and integral features of social capital (22) can then be further consolidated.

The concept of solidarity has come to be influential in studying social relationships with the foremost writings of Emile Durkheim. His classical thesis on mechanical and organic solidarity provides clear distinction on different degrees of human bonds under the impact of the industrial revolution on European society (20). Later work on theory development emerges seeking to account for the formulation of conceptual framework and construct of intergenerational solidarity. Extensive efforts have been made further on studying family solidarity which is related to family resilience in facing crisis and external force. Upon numerous empirical and clinical studies, six dimensions of family solidarity are constructed: associational solidarity, affectual solidarity, consensual solidarity, functional solidarity, normative solidarity and structure solidarity (20, 23, 24).

Intergenerational solidarity exists at three levels. According to the two levels of intergenerational solidarity of Hammarström (25), the family solidarity is the micro-social architecture of the intergenerational bond tying up the parents and their children together, whereas the societal solidarity is the macro-social architecture of the relations between cohort-based generations aggregated in the community. Then, the non-kinship intergenerational solidarity can be regarded as the meso-social architecture between the older and the younger members in the IP. It is the level positioned in between the family and the society.

For years, a huge amount of studies have been conducted in attempting to conceptualize and operationalize intergenerational solidarity so as to construct useful measurement tools. Yet, the majority of these studies are on intergenerational solidarity in family relations and there is little on non-kinship relations. Taking a recent study conducted in Hong Kong as an example, all the projects selected for evaluation in this study are under a social-capital-building fund characterizing with the features of having interactions between biologically and non-biologically linked children, adult and older people (21). Using the six-dimension model of McChesney and

Bengtson (24) as the theoretical base, this study only focused on functional solidarity of which eight key domains were derived from the in-depth interviews and field observations. However, it will be worthy to know whether there is any difference among the findings, and/or the domains identified if all the participants are biologically linked, non-biologically linked or mixed.

Research on intergenerational programs and intergenerational solidarity

Modernization and the never-ending changing society contribute to restructuring of our social, economic and family systems. Age segregation in the community becomes so serious that it profoundly affects people’s interpersonal relationships and communication, especially between the young and the old generations. Under such contexts, IPs, as described by Larkin and Newman (12), have evolved as the “vehicle to effectively connect older and younger generations by providing them with opportunities to develop meaningful and productive relationships” (p. 7). More recently, this type of programs has extended to tackle a wide range of social problems or needs (12, 26, 27) covering various fields and service recipients regarding child care (28), youth with behavioral or emotional problems (29), underachieving students, juvenile delinquents (30, 31), socially isolated elders (32), elders with dementia (33), attitude changes toward aging and older people (4, 34, 35).

The extended conventional functions have created a great challenge for many policymakers and researchers who are attracted and spurred to find out what the best and effective model of IP is and what factors will contribute to successful outcomes. Hence, there are large amounts of projects and research coming forth over the past three decades. Unfortunately, little has been done to research the older-younger relationships in which intergenerational solidarity is the crucial component, and its effects contributing to the outcomes. For young people, it is important if they can also have positive developmental growth from the program that can strengthen their adaptive capacity, resilience for crisis solution and stress coping. It is unfortunate that very few IPs and studies have been targeted to systematically identify the possible correlates and synergistic effects contributing to positive youth development with relevant theoretical backup.

Intergenerational program, intergenerational solidarity and positive youth development

Increases in both the number and the degree of seriousness of youth problems arouses great alarm and pressing demand not only on how to treat the problems but also on how to prevent them before they turn into social crisis. With a view to helping the youth fight against a myriad of challenges and adversities in their developmental path, governments and policymakers are using a positive youth development perspective to understand the youth’s developmental needs and to promote positive

youth development through community-based interventions (36). According to the Grantmakers in Health (37), positive youth development is the term used to "describe a philosophy that affirms the right of all youth to be surrounded by relationships, environments, supports, and services that promote their healthy development and well-being, as well as the right to youth to contribute to society" (p. 1). In other words, positive youth development is regarded as an approach to structuring services, systems, and supports for the youth so that they can develop the needed skills and competencies for their thriving and readiness to enter adulthood and to face their ongoing challenging lives (37). Often, such an approach seeks to equip the youth with what Benson (38) called the "developmental assets" – the skills, abilities, competencies and supports – as the "particular energy to their relational and social world" (p. 37). Some sociologists and psychologists suggest strengthening adolescents' resilience through promoting the influence of protective factors and reducing the impact of risk factors (39). Protective factors, according to Hauser (40), are the "key constructs in conceptualizations of resilience" which "moderate the effects of individual vulnerabilities or environmental hazards, so that a given developmental trajectory reflects more adaptation in a given domain than would be the case if protective processes were not operating" (p. 4).

Shek (39) in his article provided detailed and affluent theories from different disciplines of researchers on the conceptual framework of positive youth development. Based on the concepts and theories of risk and protective factors, adolescent developmental assets, deficits-based and assets-based models on adolescent development, positive youth development model and ecological models, he summarized 15 constructs intrinsic to the successful positive youth development program:

- Promotion of bonding: developing participants' relationship with healthy adults and positive peers in extra-familial contexts.
- Cultivation of resilience: promoting participants' capacity for adapting changes and stress in healthy and adaptive ways.
- Promotion of social competence: training participants' interpersonal skills with opportunities for practice.
- Promotion of emotional competence: training participants' skills to recognize feelings, to show empathy, to manage own emotional impulses and to learn emotional self-management strategies.
- Promotion of cognitive competence: developing participants' cognitive abilities including problem-solving and planning.
- Promotion of behavioral competence: cultivating participants' verbal and non-verbal communication and providing reinforcement for effective behavior choices and action pattern.
- Promotion of moral competence: developing participants' sense of right and wrong and respect for rules and standards.
- Cultivation of self-determination: promoting participants' sense of autonomy, independent thinking or self-advocacy.

- Development of spirituality: helping participants develop purpose and meaning in life, hope or beliefs in a higher power.
- Development of self-efficacy: promoting participants' coping and mastery skills and changing their negative self-efficacy expectancies.
- Development of clear and positive identity: promoting participants' healthy identity formation and achievement.
- Promotion of beliefs in the future: helping the participants to develop future potential goals, choices and options.
- Provision of recognition for positive behavior: developing systems for rewarding, recognizing or reinforcing participants' positive behavior.
- Providing opportunities for prosocial involvement: designing activities for participants to make positive contribution to groups.
- Fostering prosocial norms: encouraging participants to develop clear and explicit standards for prosocial engagement.

When reviewing these constructs, some of them to a certain extent correspond with the elements found in EA as well as the dimensions of intergenerational solidarity engendered directly or indirectly from intergenerational interactions. For example, the elder participants are the good "adult" and "peer" to develop friendships and healthy relationships with the student participants at a natural educational setting outside the familial context (promotion of bonding). In performing the role of tutor (provision of opportunities for prosocial involvement), student participants learn and practise interpersonal and communication skills, such as to deliver clear tutorship skillfully to the elder participants, to ensure two-way effective communication, to think of ways to facilitate elder participants' effective learning on computer competency, and to handle their diverse views (promotion of social competence, promotion of behavioral competence). In the teaching-learning process, they may encounter frustration or emotional ups and downs in handling the elder participants' questioning, critics or slow progress (promotion of emotional competence). This is the opportunity for them to develop their capacities and competencies of problem-solving and conflict resolution (promotion of cognitive competence) (consensual solidarity). Student participants who have completed certain hours of services annually will be given an award by the official authority. Their satisfactory performance in tutorship can also gain positive appraisal from the elder participants and the school teachers. Such positive recognition not only boosts the student participants' self-confidence (development of self-efficacy) but also reinforces and strengthens their commitment to the service (provision of recognition for positive behavior) (normative solidarity) that facilitates their identification to the role as tutor (development of clear and positive identity).

At the same time, student participants can be moved by the elder participants' eagerness and motivation in learning in their later stage of life. By modeling and drawing inspiration from the elder participants, student participants can help make clear or think about their own purpose and meaning in life (promotion of spirituality) (functional solidarity). In the

process of interactions, the elder participants, as a source of guidance and wisdom, can share their life lessons with the student participants who are then stimulated to think about their own choice in future life (promotion of beliefs in the future) or willing to seek advice whenever in need (promotion of bonding, cultivation of resilience). Along with the successful intergenerational solidarity building, positive perceptions to each other engender the feelings of "like", mutual respect, care and empathy among them (promotion of behavioral and moral competence). Through regular and close interactions (associational solidarity) in the program, high level of intergenerational solidarity in which close and harmonious bonding (promotion of bonding) (affectional solidarity) is expected.

From the above discussion, it is without doubt that the EA with the intergenerational approach provides a useful platform for the student participants to promote and develop 15 positive development constructs through the synergistic effects attributing from the process of intergenerational solidarity building. But one should bear in mind that a high level of intergenerational solidarity is the core prerequisite for the participants to secure positive experiences and favorable outcomes in the interaction process. Programs with intergenerational contacts or interactions do not necessarily lead to promising results of high level of intergenerational solidarity. It needs to be promoted, encouraged, cultivated and sustained with support from well-designed program contents as well as conscious and rigorous implementation.

From a theoretical point of view, the IP embracing 15 constructs of positive youth development can greatly uplift positive effects on the youth. Such benefits include strengthening social skills, enhancing potential development, upgrading self-esteem, being inspired on life meaning and future goals. With both the strength-based and developmental approaches, the youth's functionally valued behaviors such as competence, confidence, character, connection, caring, compassion and contribution (39, 41) can thrive together with the ultimate goal of strengthening their resilience. The social identity theory (42), social learning theory and contact theory (43–45), Erikson's stage theory (46) of identity versus role confusion and intimacy versus isolation, and developmental systems theories (41) are some of the theories that can support this theoretical inference. Ecological models can also provide a wide perspective to study positive youth development by taking into account the interactions between the youth's personal factors and the environmental factors (39). For example, with reference to the five environmental systems (i.e., micro, meso, exo, macro and chrono) (47), school system is one of the important ecological contexts that can create positive change in students (39). Nevertheless, one needs to be very cautious that the above discussion on the possible positive effects and outcomes of the EA is a very brief hypothetic analysis pending empirical test and research evidence. Therefore, there is the urge to call for systematic and rigorous research in the areas concerned so that evidence-based practice can be ensured. Whether a model of incorporating an intergenerational approach with positive youth development constructs can be put into practice is waiting for further exploration and new initiative.

Issues to be resolved

Although the history of the IP is short, there are ample examples with multiple models, multiple combinations of participants and multiple program objectives. These can provide rich experiences and lay down the foundation for expanding the usage of positive youth development. Meanwhile, several unsolved issues warrant special attention.

Foremost, there are conceptual and theoretical issues to be resolved. According to Kuehne (48), thorough evaluations and rigorous research are few when compared with the rapid growing number and variety of IPs internationally. Unlike the concept of positive youth development, there is an absence of a clear conceptual and theoretical framework for IPs. Without a strong theoretical base to justify "what" and "why" to be provided to the participants, "how" it proceeds and "what" the expected outcomes are, program evaluation becomes less meaningful. An evidence-based practicing model is expected and should include cultural context. Moreover, there are many IPs aiming at benefiting youth developmental needs and treating the youth-at-risk or juvenile delinquent. To a certain extent, making reference to the conceptual and theoretical frameworks as well as the constructs of the positive youth development provides a clear and useful base directing the design, implementation, evaluation, maintenance and dissemination of the IPs.

Similarly, there are limited studies on non-kinship intergenerational solidarity when compared with the large number of studies on intergenerational solidarity at family and societal levels. In fact, whether the six-dimension family solidarity is also applicable for non-kinship intergenerational solidarity remains questionable. But absence of clear conceptual and theoretical frameworks makes it difficult to design appropriate program contents, set-up interactive context, understand the interpersonal dynamic and facilitate cultivation of intergenerational solidarity among the participants. Although many IPs claim to have positive benefits to both the young and the old participants, they appear to be task-orientated and implemented in a mechanical manner ignoring the conscious and purposive cultivation of intergenerational solidarity. Without "tailor-made" program contents and activities to facilitate intergenerational solidarity building, intergenerational contacts are just two groups of participants sitting together physically!

In addition, there are issues on operationalization of the outcome indicators. Many researchers try to search for theories effectively applied to IPs (49, 50) or to develop evaluation instruments (51, 52). Nevertheless, lack of clear conceptual and theoretical framework on non-kinship intergenerational solidarity makes it hardly feasible at the present stage to explore and identify key domains for constructing standardized and validated measurement scales. In fact, to develop standardized measurement tools suitable for IPs of different models with different combination of participants is not an easy task. Generalizability of the findings is another important issue to be tackled. Moreover, research focus should not only be placed on the program outcomes but also on the dynamic of the dyadic interactions, nature and evolution of intergen-

erational relationships covering both the contacts within and outside the formal program time. It is also believed that the program outcomes will bring impact on the participants' daily life in other aspects. Thus, when assessing the program effects on the participants, views from their family members or relevant others could be considered (50). In the context of EA, areas for assessing the program effects on the student participants could cover their performances in school and at home. It might also include the views from their parents and school teachers. As such, it is highly recommended to use multiple methods of inquiry with mixed qualitative and quantitative data collected from all the parties concerned as far as possible. Subjective and objective data should also be included. In addition, intergenerational solidarity building is an evolving process requiring a longer period of input before it takes effect. Thus, measuring its changes and effects on the participants over time should be of longitudinal design.

Illustrated with other researchers' views on the constructs of family intergenerational solidarity, Hammarström (25) elaborated that the term solidarity indicated "an emphasis on consensus rather than conflict and ambivalence" and intergenerational solidarity mainly referred to the "positive dimensions of intergenerational relations" (p. 35). However, conflict and ambivalence are unavoidable in interpersonal relationships, no matter if they are in a family, a social group or a friendship. More important is that conflict and ambivalence do affect the level of solidarity. Additionally, effective conflict and ambivalence management involving problem-solving skills is one of the indicators of positive youth development. Therefore, to include conflict and ambivalence in assessing intergenerational solidarity is recommended. Although it will be difficult to measure empirically, using a quantitative-qualitative mixed method and triangulation of databases could shed light on these abstract concepts (53).

Finally, there are practical difficulties in several areas including: (a) balance of benefits between two age groups being served simultaneously in one program requires the organizer to be knowledgeable about the youth and the elder with expertise in IP. Yet, specialized training and resources are limited; (b) participants' readiness to develop close relationships with the counterparts; (c) lasting of relationships and the sustainability of the intergenerational solidarity between the two generations after the program is completed; (d) demand on manpower resources to closely monitor and conduct ongoing evaluation along the implementing period; (e) current knowledge and experience to employ an IP model combining elder lifelong learning and positive youth development constructs is severely limited that needs innovative advocacy and persistent pursuit.

Conclusions and future directions

IPs can not only generate possible positive outcomes to youth development but also avoid labeling effect imposed on student participants, especially for those (e.g., underachiever, youth with delinquent behavior or low self-confidence) who are reluctant and resistant to join activities. For elder participants, even some were not be very well-educated, their high

motivation to learn new knowledge demonstrates a positive model of enthusiasm in search of knowledge. It is the actualization of the Confucian educational philosophy that "learn as long as you are alive" and learning is the pathway to Sage – having moral, wisdom and intelligence. Moreover, their active participation and learning of new knowledge are the means of actualizing empowerment and strength-based development. The social ties built between the old and the young can form part of their informal supporting network in the community. The above is just a brief example and further in-depth study in this area therefore needs to be conducted, particularly as we are now facing drastic increases in the aging population.

In IPs, benefit of one age group should not be at the expense of the other age group. Therefore, it will be a great challenge for both the service provider and the researcher to work out a program which incorporates these three core components: elder lifelong learning through an intergenerational approach, intergenerational solidarity and positive youth development. But it would be valuable to explore in the hope of searching for contributing factors for an effective and successful model from which the elder, the youth and the society will all benefit. As serving the elderly is a common form of youth enhancement programs in Hong Kong (54–56), it is necessary to examine how programs attempting to promote intergenerational solidarity could promote positive youth development in the long run.

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