

# GENERATIONAL INTELLIGENCE AS AN INTEGRAL ASPECT OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE

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## Abstract

Interpersonal communication is widely recognized as an important skill for success in personal and professional settings and is listed as a core competency in many educational frameworks around the world. Interpersonal communication is also a critical skill for teachers to establish and maintain cooperative relationships. As several East Asian countries have made the transition to an aging society, intergenerational communication has become a pressing need for teachers, as many students' primary caregivers are their grandparents, which is especially the case in rural areas.

Teacher education usually emphasizes communication with students, their parents, and colleagues. However, interaction with older people is neglected. Clearly, teachers of the younger generation should have intergenerational knowledge and skills. This article reviews publications on intergenerational communication and presents an example of a communication accommodation theory to cultivate college teachers' perspectives when interacting with a heterogeneous group of people, the elderly. The results and findings of the activities shed light on the design of interpersonal communication activities in teacher education.

**Keywords:** *Generational intelligence, intergenerational communication, interpersonal communication, Communication Accommodation Theory.*

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## 1. Background

Countries worldwide are gradually moving toward aging societies. According to population statistics from EUROSTAT (2020), countries such as Germany (22%), France (20.7%), Sweden (20.1%), Italy (23.5%), and Japan (28.7%) already have an older population of over 20%. In addition, countries such as Spain (19.8%), the Netherlands (19.8%), Austria (19.2%) and Taiwan (17.7%) are experiencing rapid increases in the aging population. As the elderly population increases in various countries, it also becomes an urgent issue in education reforms. Promoting awareness and understanding of the elderly through education systems is essential.

Generational intelligence (Biggs, Haapala, & Lowenstein, 2011) refers to the ability to understand and communicate effectively with people from different generations. It involves understanding the values, beliefs, and communication styles of different generations. In teaching, generational intelligence is crucial, as it helps teachers communicate effectively with their students, colleagues, and students' parents/grandparents from different generations. Generational intelligence involving multiple generations with purposeful and progressive methods that lead to mutual learning outcomes is beneficial to all relevant generations (European Association for the Education of Adults, 2012), especially in an aging society.

The transmission of knowledge, skills, and values from one generation to another fosters reciprocal and mutual relationships through intergenerational partnerships. Intergenerational interactions have the capacity to reduce the sense of unfamiliarity the younger generation may have towards the elderly. Those who frequently interact with elderly individuals are more likely to have a positive attitude towards them. Consequently, intergenerational activities that facilitate sharing of knowledge and skills are essential in constructing a harmonious society based on respect and understanding among different generations (Wermundsen, 2007).

Interpersonal communication refers to the exchange of information between two or more individuals, usually within the same age group or social circle. It has been identified as a critical communication skill (Dede, 2010; Pearlman, 2010; Trilling & Fadel, 2009) and considered a foundational

effort of organizational success and human relations, which focused on building and maintaining relationships between individuals (Frantz & Misal, 2016).

Intergenerational communication, on the other hand, involves communication between individuals from different age groups, often with different cultural backgrounds and experiences (McCann, Giles, & Ota, 2017). Intergenerational communication is more complex and multifaceted, involving a range of factors such as language, culture, and social norms, while interpersonal communication is more focused on building and maintaining relationships between individuals (Frantz & Misal, 2016). In educational settings, intergenerational courses necessitate educators to develop skills in guiding individuals from different generations to engage in effective communication and interaction. Teachers who provide young students with an understanding of older people can help reduce ageism and stereotyping. Teachers need to have generational intelligence that goes beyond generational conflict or unity to explore intergenerational capacities. They should guide students to take a perspective from different age groups (Biggs & Lowenstein, 2011) and encourage intergenerational communication and interaction (Worthington, Nussbaum, Bergstrom, 2018).

The Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) is a multifunctional theory that focuses on the characteristics of group and interpersonal relationships, making it a cross-cultural communication theory (Gallois, O'Garra, Giles, 2005). What distinguishes CAT from other communication theories is its expanded focus, encompassing both convergence and divergence/maintenance as regulatory strategies, which lead to the production or reception of certain internal or external concepts. These strategies extend to the entire communication process within a multi-generational environment and contribute to integrating and interpreting communication situations between different generations (Coupland, Coupland, & Giles, 1991; Williams & Nussbaum, 2001).

This study explored how the researcher incorporated learners from different age groups in the class and guided intergenerational communication activities. It was found that pre-service teachers' attitudes toward the elderly changed, and their understanding and empathy toward the elderly were improved. The insights of the findings shed light on future studies of generational intelligence that pre-service teachers should have as an integral part of their interpersonal communication skills.

## **2. Methodology**

Seventeen undergrad pre-service teachers and 15 community-dwelling elderly aged 55 and above participated in the course. The course was to create opportunities for extensive dialog, mutual learning, and respect through intergenerational learning strategies to understand better one's own perceptions, emotions, and attitudes toward the elderly over the 18-week curriculum. The researcher and a trained assistant conducted classroom observations and follow-up interviews.

Mixed-age groups were formed that focused on various activity designs, including thematic discussions and on-site learning to create opportunities for intergenerational interactions and conversations. Discussion topics included social context issues, value sharing, inheritance of experiences, meaning of life, and travel learning. This allowed for communication between generations to understand the various conceptual differences and learn to understand and respect each other's points of view. By reflecting on the experience, students had the opportunity to examine their own insights, emotions, and attitudes about intergenerational communication.

## **3. Research findings**

Based on the observation and interview, the researchers found the intergenerational learning process in the course. And pre-service teachers of the young generation did cultivate generational intelligence.

While having expectations for the course, pre-service teachers may still be concerned about potential barriers with older adult learners. However, some students have realized that there are valuable insights to gain from them and have experienced the proactive and enthusiastic attitudes of the older generation surpassing their own.

The elderly students were more willing to share and tap into pre-service teachers' preference for learning. Through intergenerational interactions, young students are able to gain a wealth of implicit knowledge related to the workplace from the sharing of older adults.

Values were derived from the context of generational backgrounds. Because the impressions of older adults were mostly formed by pre-service teachers' experiences in their own families, they tended to develop preconceived stereotypes about the elderly. Some young students seemed to be struggling to perceive the older generation's early lifestyle and work experiences. However, through empathy and understanding, they could appreciate older adults' thoughts and values and construct their own

perspectives on aging individuals. Similarly, when older adult learners expressed stereotypical impressions of young people, it can easily be led to young students rekindling negative attitudes toward older individuals, especially when discussing the topics like friendship and marriage.

Through students' weekly journals, it was found that pre-service teachers realized some inherent similarities in perspectives or behaviors between elderly classmates and their own family members. Interacting with elderly students in the class also led to reflections on their own ancestral relationships and the roles and responsibilities they have not yet fulfilled as the younger generation. This process generated empathy and allowed them to perceive the values and experiences of the elderly students, thereby influencing themselves.

#### 4. Conclusion

Teachers nowadays should be aware of intergenerational desires for societal recognition and willingness to share ideas. They should fulfill the needs of cross-generational parents/grandparents in terms of conversation and interaction and appropriately guide the communication alongside the topics they are proficient in. When facing a cross-generational audience, teachers should understand the concerns and limitations of interaction with different generations, especially when they observe deviations in verbal or non-verbal expressions in cross-generational messages. They should be able to recognize the emotions in the interactions and seize appropriate opportunities to facilitate dialogue between cross-generational parties.

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