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What do older people learn from young people? Intergenerational learning in 'day centre' community settings in Malta

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ABSTRACT
This study analyses what motivates older people to attend 'day centres' in Malta and what they believe that they derive from young people who carry out their placements at these day 'centres' These young people, who are aged 16–17, attend a vocational college in Malta and are studying health and social care. The study is based on a qualitative approach and employs the usage of focus groups. The main findings are that the elderly see the students as helping them on an emotional level by giving them encouragement, and on a practical level, by offering them insights that help them in modern-day life.

Introduction

As the Maltese population ages, and service providers face tighter financial and economic constraints, providing quality care for older people becomes an increasingly imminent concern. This paper is focused on older people who attend day centres. These centres offer people, who are usually of pensionable age, the possibility of participating in supervised meaningful activities during the mornings and early afternoons. The centres are located in various towns and villages around Malta. The first day centre was set up in Żejtun in the 1980s. Żejtun is a village which is located in the south of Malta. Since then, another 21 day centres have been set up and opened. In 2013, approximately 1500 people attended the day centres (Times of Malta, 2013). Malta is a centrally positioned island in the Mediterranean Sea. It lies 80 kms to the south of Italy. It is to the east of Tunisia and to the north of Libya.

This article focuses on Malta for a number of reasons, each of which is of a wide social (and sociological) interest. Primarily, older people on the island are provided with increased opportunities for social participation, particularly by the government. These include third-age and fourth-age programs. They also comprise continuing education programmes. Secondly, from 2015 onwards, the required age for which older people could qualify for the statutory state pension was raised to 65. This implies that, apart from the government implementing cost-cutting measures by issuing pensions later on in people's lives, it is likely that, on some level, there is a societal acceptance that people are also 'growing old' later. Thirdly, family structures on the island are still, in many cases, tight-knit, implying

that older people can remain active by engaging in such tasks as looking after their grand children. Fourthly, the government has invested heavily in the provision of home-based and community care. It offers a 'meals on wheels service' and domiciliary care services to older people who live in the community. This enables them to remain living in their homes for a longer time than had these services been unavailable to them. Enabling older people to remain in their homes is a more economically viable alternative for the government than is assigning them to residential care.

Day centres are not particular to Malta, even though those abroad are not run on the same lines, since they need to be culturally responsive to their attendees and thereby organize different activities for them. Within a Maltese context, the activities that are offered at the day centres include: tombola; dancing, singing and keep-fit sessions (which are adapted to the abilities of the attendees); and organized 'talks' (or lectures) on such subjects of interest as 'personal care and hygiene', 'money management' and 'coming to terms with personal losses'. The day centres also organize outings and fun days on a once to twice monthly basis. The attendees are charged a nominal fee in order to pay for activities that run at a cost to the day centres. Other than this, these centres are run (and paid for) by the Maltese government. All the services that they run at the day centres are consequently offered free of charge to attendees.

In the Nordic countries, day centres are of one two types, either medical day centres or community-based day centres (Samuelsson, Malmberg, & Hansson, 1998). The medical day centres offer rehabilitative programmes to elderly people who live at home but need attention due to an illness or injury. In Malta, rehabilitation of this sort is offered at hospitals and specialized clinics. The social day centres are by far more similar to those in Malta. They share in common that they are a social service that is offered to older people who are living at home and aim to provide attendees with a safe and supportive group environment for some hours of the day. The cardinal difference is that while, in the Nordic countries, social workers assess all elderly people in the different municipalities so as to ensure that they are able to meet their needs on a twice yearly basis, and can be referred to the day centres as a measure that follows on from those assessments (Jarden & Jarden, 2002), it transpires (as the participants revealed to me during this study), that most older people in Malta go on the recommendation of friends or relatives.

In Malta, the day centres are seen as a way to respond to the social and leisure needs of older people. They also serve to offer a form of 'respite' service to the people who take care of older relatives at home (usually the adult children). Younger family members can 'leave' them at the centres with their mind at rest that they will be well cared for by the staff members (and also the other older people) present. In all settings that cater for older people, a positive atmosphere is cardinal. This is because it further contributes to the effective running of these settings and enables them to reach their goals to assist older people to remain as functional as possible (Anderson & Dabelko-Schoeny, 2010; Borglin, Edberg, & Hallberg, 2005; Boulton-Lewis, Buys, & Lovie-Kitchin, 2006; Field & Canning, 2014; Galambos, Zlotnik, Bern-Klug, & Zimmerman, 2009; Formosa, 2009; Findsen & Formosa, 2011; Zemaitaityte, 2014).

Even in a small country like Malta, access and use of the day centres may be impeded by location. If older people consider the day centres to be too far away from their homes, they may be put off from attending, particularly if they do not have relatives who give them a lift by car. (Some day centres have overcome this obstacle by organizing a minivan transport

service, at least for some days a week). Others may be put off from attending since they put up social barriers, creating these barriers with their own minds. This happens whenever people believe that the day centres are frequented by people who have a lower standard of education than they do. This is particularly since the day centres are not restrictive on the basis of class and adopt an open door policy (Findsen & Formosa, 2011). This is in contrast to the University of the Third Age (U3A).

While, in theory, the U3A also operates an open door policy, in effect, it tends to draw in people who have acquired a certain standard of formal education (Formosa, 2012). This is particularly since the U3A is based on offering study-units or 'lectures' on a variety of subjects. These include such topics as classical and operatic music appreciation, democracy and human rights, and political philosophy, even though the topics of the lectures tend to change from one academic year to the next. Usually, each study unit consists of eight two hour lectures, and some courses are repeated throughout the academic year. Since a good number of study units, at the U3A, take place in English, usually, people who cannot speak English would not attend for them. Only a handful of the study units that are offered at the U3A take place in Maltese.

Even though Malta is bilingual, and both Maltese and English are widely spoken on the island, some Maltese people only speak English with great difficulty, almost as if it is a foreign language. This inability to speak English can be traced to historical events dating back to the last century. Formosa (2012) explains that it was only after immediately after WWII, in 1946, that the school leaving age was raised to 14+. This implies that opportunities for Maltese speaking people to learn English were heavily restricted at the time. (Of historical note is that in 1946, Malta was a British colony. The island was eventually granted independence from the British in 1964). English was—and still is—used prominently in Malta in both official circles and in higher and further education. For instance, until the present day, most lectures at the University of Malta are conducted in English and not in Maltese. This implies that people who do not speak English well would be impeded from experiencing much upward socio-economic mobility. Likewise, at MCAST, all students are required to submit assessable work ('assignments') to their lecturers in English.

Before 1946, only a primary level of schooling was compulsory (Formosa, 2012). In due course, the school leaving age in Malta was raised to 16+. This was in the 1970s. The last census that was undertaken, in Malta, in 2005, revealed that age and educational status is negatively correlated. Sixty-five per cent of persons in the 60+ cohort only have a primary level of education or less. Eighty per cent of them have not acquired any educational qualifications. Overall, some 17% of persons aged 60+ are illiterate (National Statistics Office [NSO], 2007).

Having said this, people from a middle-class background do not necessarily shun the day centres (Findsen & Formosa, 2011). This is because some attend these centres regularly. It is also technically possible that older people attend both the U3A and the day centres. In effect, they intersperse their attendance at the day centres with lectures at the U3A, or else attend the lectures that are offered at the U3A in the evening, thereby being enabled to attend the day centres in the morning. Only a few people from a middle-class background attend the day centres, though. It is likely that these people go there because they are aware of the benefits that they can derive from attending, particularly on a psycho-social level. If they had to stay home, particularly if they live on their own, or if they do not get on too

well with family members, they would not benefit from the companionship of the other attendees at the day centres, which could offer them psychological relief.

Indeed, it would be unhealthy, for society at large, if the day centres and the U3A were to replicate one another. This is because different strata of society have different needs. As Formosa (2005) points out, people from a working-class background (as opposed to a middle-class one) may not want (or be able to) browse the internet, read newspapers, and, possibly, use the phone. If they are seen as not taking part in these activities, working-class people may be wrongly assumed to be excluding themselves from middle-class settings. In reality, it will be the settings that are excluding them by not being attuned to their particular cultural capital. Through excluding them in this way, the settings would, thereby reinforce wider systems of societal power relations based on domination and hierarchy. Social classes distinguish themselves through people's different 'tastes', and, therefore, through their different daily practices, preferences, and choices (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986; Gaventa, 2003).

Each day centre has a staff complement of around four care workers. Of particular interest is that these care workers are all female. The absence of male care workers reflects wider cultural norms and can be explained by referring to Lacan's concept of a master signifier. First of all, applying Lacan's reasoning, society believes that only females can be care workers because they have a natural inclination to nurture others. Secondly, this is the point when the master narrative is created, it is believed that the ability to nurture others in a feminine way is a prerequisite to taking up a job as a care worker. As Kunze (2007) explains, the master signifier 'works by creating a logical lock or knot that, though fundamentally irrational, resists refutation. This lock is created in two steps. First, there is a 'summing up' or condensing of some series or set of conditions; then, the term becomes the cause of that set of conditions. By being both a cause and an effect, the master signifier becomes impermeable to critical objection.' (p. 54). Another illustration of the master signifier relates to times gone by. Since buses were large and somewhat difficult to drive, bus drivers in Malta were, in a manner likely to be consistent with the logic prevalent at the time, all males. Then, even though with technological innovations, electric steering, and so on, they became distinctly easier to drive, for quite some time afterwards, bus driver jobs were restricted to males only since being male was seen as a prerequisite to being a bus driver. It is likely that as MCAST furthers its operations, social change will come about, since some young men, even though they are very few in number, study health and social care. Also, around two years ago, possibly for the first time in Maltese history, a male graduate, from MCAST, started working as a kindergarten teacher. This is traditionally a job reserved for females.

In terms of physical layout, most of the day centres are comprised of a hall or place where a comfortable seating arrangement for the older people is laid out, a kitchen area (usually overlooking a yard) and toilets that are purposely fitted with the necessary aids to enable older people with specific geriatric needs to maintain their independence and privacy. In the kitchen area, light snacks are prepared for the attendees. They are also served tea and coffee, at various intervals, when they are at the day centre. All the day centres are wheelchair accessible (Figures 1 and 2).

Of particular significance is the open plan layout that they all the day centres adopt, since this reflects a particular outlook to day centre attendees. Using a metaphor from military terminology, when, in incursions, all walls, fences and other forms of physical boundaries are demolished, this process is referred to as the smoothing out of space. If the space is not smoothed out, it is referred to as space that is striated. In a striated space, walls, fences

Kitchen

Meeting Place

WC

Staff Toilet

Crafts Area

Office

Store

Entrance
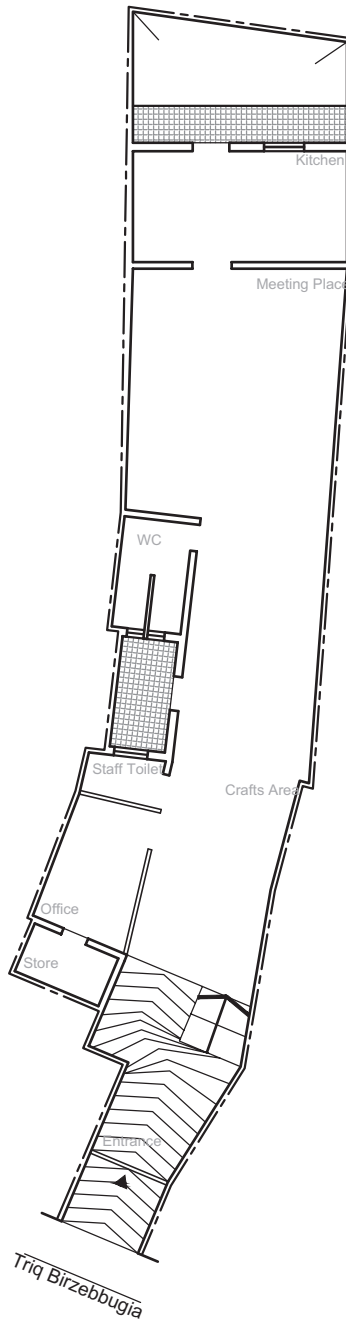
Triq Birzebbugia

Birzebbugia Day Centre

Figure 1. Layout of a day centre. The day centre depicted is the Birzebbugia Day Centre which is located in the south of Malta.

Figure 2. Some of the crafts on display at a day centre. These crafts were 'produced' by the day centre attendees.

and other structures like ditches and fences serve to obstruct military personnel from moving freely from one space to another, even though it also provides them with a form of cover (Kunze, 2007). The day centres are planned in such a way that divisions have been 'smoothed out'. These divisions, on the one hand, are the walls and other boundaries that separate rooms from one another. On another level, they are the social boundaries between people. It is the attendees' subjective presence that is given importance. All the attendees can readily see who is present and can also easily make out who did not turn up, (they have no 'cover' and 'cannot hide'). This gives them the power of knowing and the self-confidence that comes with that knowing. The metalanguage employed in the architecture is thereby one that promotes togetherness and mutuality amongst the day centre attendees and not one that promotes divisions.

The research question

The research question that is presented in this study is: *what do older people learn from the students, who are on placement, as part of their course of studies, at the day centres, which they (the older people) attend regularly?* The focus of the study is on identifying and discussing the learning/educational implications (as opposed to 'care' implications) of attending a day centre. It would be erroneous to believe that the research question simply concentrates on the learning that the older people derive when attending the day centres. This is because it also explores the systemic interaction between the older people and the younger people. Each learns from the other.

This systemic approach to the research is unlike that contained in studies which focus exclusively on student achievement, including those which appraise the student learning that takes place during placements, or those that assess whether college courses equip students

for the exigencies of the modern day labour force (see, for instance, Davis et al., 2007; Gordon, McGeoch, & Stewart, 2009). While various studies focus on the investigation of educational theory, policy, research and practice from a variety of disciplinary perspectives (Spiteri, 2008), in my capacity as the researcher undertaking this study, I desired to use my experience of visiting and assessing students when they were on placement (which was part of my work at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology, MCAST), to understand more how the placements influenced people's lives.

MCAST is a vocational college. It is the largest one of its kind in Malta. It offers courses from a basic (school leaving) level (level I) to undergraduate degree level (level VI). The majority of its students are aged between 16 and 24. When carrying out fieldwork for this study, I used to lecture (in Health and Social Care) at MCAST. MCAST offers training to prepare students to work as health carers or social carers, or else to prepare them to take up employment in other related professions. All students who undertake courses in Health and Social Care at MCAST are obliged to attend practical placements. The students who undertake their placements at the day centres are those following a foundation level course (level II). They attend for a four week 'block' placement. Even though they are in their first or second year of studies in Health and Social Care (depending on whether they started their studies at level I or level II), they are expected to be self-reflective and to think critically and creatively about how their interventions have an impact on the day centre attendees. They are obliged to maintain a log-book containing their daily observations and reflections throughout their placement, and this is an important component of their assessment. In other higher level courses, students are sometimes required to combine 'block placements' with other assignments and activities, including the job shadowing of personnel occupying senior occupational positions, in the health and social care field, and the undertaking of project work.

The level II placements have three main aims. Primarily, they offer students an opportunity to be given on-hands training in care work with older people (on which they are assessed). This enables them to foster empathy and understanding as well as to develop a caring disposition which is rooted in interpersonal sensitivity (Chung, 2010; Cornwell, 2012; Dunworth & Kirwan, 2012; Firth-Cozens & Cornwell, 2009; Lawrence & Banerjee, 2010). Secondly, they offer students an opportunity to become more aware of broader societal concerns. For instance, since older women in Malta are less likely to hold educational qualifications and receive an occupational pension (Troisi & Formosa, 2006), the students can witness first-hand the disparity associated with a society that has been traditionally 'malestreamed' (Formosa, 2012, p. 122). Thirdly, they offer students a tangible opportunity to consider taking up employment in the gerontology care sector, after completing their studies at MCAST.

When considering the day centres as a possible locus of research, I took in consideration the following tenets. Each are applicable to older people almost universally. Yet, to date, they have not been researched in the light of the intergenerational learning that comes about at the day centres when MCAST students carry out their placements in these settings.

(1) Older service-users desire to counter loneliness (Tiikkainen & Heikkinen, 2005). Numerous studies point out that older people can easily become socially isolated due to experiences that are commonly associated with ageing such as loss of family and friends, decreased mobility and income, reduced health, and, in some cases,

lack of access to intergenerational relationships with other family members; all of which leave them at risk to the onset of depression (Cacioppo, Hughes, Waite, Hawkley, & Thisted, 2006; Victor et al., 2002). Research from the English longitudinal study of ageing brings to light the need that older people have to form part of groups and social communities that they consider meaningful. The day centres help them to fulfil the need to interact with others. This is because the day centres offer them the opportunity to interact with the other older people who attend, the MCAST students, and the carers. The students further enable them to derive enjoyment from attending the day centres by animating certain activities. They also validate the attendees by getting to know them individually.

(2) Older people desire consolation when life seems to present its toughest moments (Findlay, 2003; Wurm, Tomasik, & Tesch-Römer, 2008). These could be the death of a spouse, or long-term partner, or the need to go into residential care. Older people could also face declining physical or mental health. The students bring in a youthful dimension to the attendees' experience at the day centres, evidencing to them that they have not been isolated by Malta's younger generation.

(3) Older people desire to be in control of their own lives (Banks, Breeze, Lessof, & Nazroo, 2006; Stewart, Chipperfield, Perry, & Weiner, 2013). The day centres are contexts that promote a type of learning. The attendees have the opportunity to listen to guest speakers who speak about topics of interest. They also have the possibility to learn from one another by exchanging views. The students can further consolidate these ongoing interactions by simply joining in.

(4) Older people desire to remain active (Heylen, 2010). Naturally, so as to be active within community settings, it may be unnecessary for older people to engage in goal-oriented activities in the manner that younger people do. Rather, what is essential is that they derive satisfaction from what they do. Possible tasks include voluntary work within their localities, child-minding for close relatives and the assisting of younger relatives in jobs that are not too physically or mentally demanding for them. Through adopting an encouraging attitude, the students can encourage the attendees to be more resilient. They would do this by promoting a 'you can do it' attitude.

The research method adopted

The research undertaken uses a qualitative, phenomenological approach. This has been based on collecting and interpreting 'non-numerical data … in order to provide rich descriptions and possible explanations of people's meaning-making—how they make sense of the world and how they experience particular events' (Lyons & Coyle, 2007, p. 11). Phenomenological approaches give research participants the opportunity to describe how they feel about happenings in their lives, how they perceive them, and how they see them as influencing them in any decisions that they take (Smith, 2004, 2008; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

The data collection involved extrapolating data from the students' record of work (logbook) once the placement had been completed. It also involved the use of focus groups with some of the day centres' attendees. Roughly 200 people participated in the study. For practical reasons, four day centres were selected (out of the twenty-two in Malta). This

implied that a convenience sample was employed in the study. Rather than trying to increase on the number of day centres that could feature in the study, I purposefully focused on extracting quality and in-depth data from the participants in the day centres that I selected. I chose the centres from the north, south, east and west parts of Malta. This was so as not to limit the transparency of the study by enrolling a research sample from a certain part of the island only. Four focus groups were carried out, one in each centre. An approximately equal number of participants participated in each of these focus groups.

One or two days before I conducted the focus groups, I paid the day centres 'a visit' so as to introduce myself to the attendees. I informed them that I would be carrying out a study and presented them with an overview of its underlying rationale. During my 'visit,' I also told the attendees that if there was anyone among them who did not want to participate in the study, they were not obliged to do so.

Since the focus groups were scheduled to be conducted at the day centres, I wanted to make it possible for attendees who desired to opt out of participating to still come to the day centre on the day when the focus groups were being carried out. Consequently, I made it clear to them, that they had alternatives to not turning up for the whole day. They could attend the day centre when the focus group would have finished (I also gave them a rough idea of the time when this would happen), they could remain in the kitchen area, while the focus group was taking place (thereby staying clear of the focus group), or they could stay on for the focus group without intervening.

I moderated the focus groups myself. This was in order to have consistency and thereby reduce biases. Research that I conducted previously (Spiteri, 2008, 2013) has shown that researcher involvement that is common across the board contributes to the validity of a study. It also places researchers in a centralized position to capture 'something of the "essence" of the phenomenon of interest' (Langdridge & Hagger-Johnson, 2009, p. 402; Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011). Since the focus group participants were Maltese speaking, I moderated the focus groups in Maltese. There were more women than men present. This is likely to reflect trends seen in the day centres overall. There is roughly a ratio of two women to every man attending. Their ages range between those in their early 60s and those in their late 80s. The majority, however, are in the 60–75 age group.

It was impractical for me, as a researcher, to ask the focus group attendees for their written consent, in order for the study to be consonant with standard research practices, particularly since the care workers informed me that some attendees did not know how to read or write. I thereby reminded the attendees that those who did not want to stay on for the group were not obliged to do so. However, nobody left. Having said this, on each occasion, roughly only around half of those present spoke out, even though the percentage of people who participated actively varied between the groups. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact reason why they did not speak out loud. Possible reasons are that some may have felt inhibited to 'address' a group of people. Others may have not felt the necessity to intervene because they agreed with everything stated. Some may have had speech and hearing difficulties. Others may have been on medication that made them feel drowsy. However, this must not be taken to imply that all the people who remained silent did not participate in the research at all. Sometimes, some nodded their heads congenially when somebody raised a particular point. In so doing, they thereby showed that they approved of what was being said. At one time, they all broke out into applause when one of the participants praised the

care workers, presumably to show that they appreciated the efforts that they, as attendees, put into the work that the care workers did.

So as to ensure that I was empathic to the focus group attendees, I needed to be adequately aware of my personal understanding, opinions and experiences throughout the research process. I fully understood that, if the research that I was undertaking was to offer an accurate account of the participants' lived experience, I needed to identify and hold in abeyance any preconceived opinions (Langdridge & Hagger-Johnson, 2009). Consequently, I could not afford to become so subsumed in the realities that were articulated by the participants that I failed to appreciate and 'understand where the description of experience ends and where the interpretation of the participant starts' (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006, p. 113).

During the focus groups, I intervened as little as possible. This was to enable the meaning to emerge from the data. I thereby used a participant-centred rather than a researcher-centred approach. In illustration of this, had I to present the participants with a structured questionnaire, where they would have had to simply answer the questions I asked, there would have been little space for them to make their personal voice heard (Kisely & Kendall, 2011). In contrast, during the focus groups, participants were significantly freer to 'speak their minds'. The characteristic subjective nature of each of the focus groups, implied, however, that I had to be careful to avoid manipulating the study unintentionally. This would have happened, for instance, had I unknowingly pressurized the participants to respond in one way rather than another. So as to be able to focus on the participants' perspectives exclusively, I asked the day centre staff not to intervene in the focus-groups.

Recording of the interactions that took place during the focus groups was done using a tape-recorder. Out of ethical concern, I requested the permission of the participants to use the tape-recorder prior to starting the focus groups. I also placed the tape-recorder in a prominent position, high up on a table. This was done to 'remind' the participants that recording was ongoing. I explained that the tapes would be destroyed, once the transcription process was completed.

In my research, I adhered to many of the recommendations of Lyons and Coyle (2007). Following their suggestions, I started out by reading the transcripts several times over. During the initial readings, I examined the data holistically. More specifically, I aimed to understand what the participants believed that they had learnt from the students in a wide sense. I then translated the transcriptions into English. During subsequent readings, I wrote down notes and memos in order to explore possible underlying meanings of the data provided. In the final readings, I viewed the text, as far as possible, from the participants' perspectives, also employing the insights I had derived from my previous readings (of the transcripts), referring again to the Maltese text, alongside the translated one, so as to ensure that my understanding was accurate. Once this 'reading stage' was completed, I proceeded to discern which themes were the most central to the participants. Three such themes were elicited. They are presented as the subtitles in the findings and analysis section below.

Findings and analysis

The need to be understood

Intergenerational learning can serve to counter ageism by making objective age-related information more widely available. When age is used to categorize people, this can be

distressing, particularly to older people. Ageism makes them vulnerable to discrimination (Nelson, 2002, 2005) and is a contributory factor to loneliness (Dunworth & Kirwan, 2012). Questions that are directed at older people like 'what do you expect at your age?' or statements like 'you are not getting any younger you know' are constructed on an assumption that because of their age, older people are naturally more frail, sick and forgetful than their younger counterparts. It is almost as if 'a subculture of the elderly' has been created. In effect, ageism is seen as 'negative attitudes or behaviours towards an individual solely based on that person's age' (Greenberg, Schimel, & Martens, 2002, p. 27). One of the participants in this study explained what ageism meant to her by saying that 'when you are old, people think you are good for nothing; even if you try to remain active, you find all the doors slammed shut in your face.'

The impact that ageism has on intergenerational learning is that it does not enable young and older people to build active communities or address inequalities. It shares in common with racism, sexism, and other … isms an inequitable distribution of power. In effect, in a survey that was carried out by Widrick and Raskin 2010), such terms as 'senior citizens' or 'old people' were associated with such words as 'unpleasant', 'dull', 'stingy' and 'lethargic', by the survey respondents. The adoption of such deficit-inclined perspectives (McMahon & Portelli, 2004) is likely to generate negative perceptions of ageing, even among the older people themselves, a labelling process which Stewart et al. (2013) refer to as self-directed stereotyping. Older people who have positive self-perceptions of ageing live longer than those with negative self-perceptions of ageing. This is because they have a more engaging active outlook to life (Levy, Slade, Kunkel, & Kasl, 2002). Formosa (2012) observes that with older people, a positive outlook to life is not only conducive to 'remaining active and contributing to society, as a means of accumulating the needed life-skills in later life … (but also with) delaying the clinical symptoms associated with dementia and other diseases (p. 120).'

The impact of the intergenerational learning that takes place at the day centres can thereby prove to be significant since it can imply that the older people can be more positive. Due to the personalised nature of these interactions, the students would be more inclined to dispute the stereotyped thinking that arises when expecting older people, for instance, to be lethargic. At a deeper level, these stereotypes serve to obstruct communication, since they generate the social construction of a context which is characterised by people's inability to accept the other in an uninhibited way. Zhou (2007) observes, however, that not all young people are influenced by ageism. Some may see older people as helpful, particularly if they have had older relatives, like their grandparents, looking after them when they are young (Dunne & Kettler, 2007). The converse also applies. Older people do not necessarily stereotype the younger generation, particularly if, for instance, their grandchildren visit them or, possibly live with them (even if only for some time), thereby exposing them to intergenerational relationships.

The desire for good health

Some of the younger and older participants also associate ageing with being worn-out, or experiencing dis-empowerment, increased ill health and senility. However, equating health regression and/or functioning decline with chronological age is often erroneous. Factors other than age also determine the onset and progression of chronic illnesses and failing health. These include lifestyle habits and practises, exposure to hazardous environmental

factors, past occupational risks and psychosocial influences (James, Wilson, Barnes, & Bennett, 2011). A differentiation thereby has to be made between primary aging which relates to intrinsic ageing processes, and secondary ageing that relates to illnesses and diseases contracted by older people (Hazzard, 2001). The impact that such differentiations have on intergenerational learning is seen in the different ways in which older people's health can be viewed. For instance, some students failed to distinguish between sickness and illness in their logbooks, also failing to distinguish between primary and secondary ageing. Some of the students saw sickness as something transient, others seemed to take it for granted that if older people were sick, this inferred that they had a chronic illness. However, as the placement progressed, the students adopted a more holistic perspective to their understanding of health.

Likewise, the older people also changed their attitude toward aging, something which they openly attributed to their interactions with the students. one of the older men said that 'I would like to be young again, to be healthy once more, so that I could do the things I used to'. He went on to praise the students' reassuring him with the 'you can do it' approach, noting that how this reassurance enabled him to 'feel young in a certain way'. In further explanation of this, he said that 'what is important to me is that I find people who enjoy being me with me'. The person was thereby clearly attributing importance to emotional health even though was also saying that he wanted to be 'young' and 'healthy' once more.

Other older people said that the students influenced them simply by being there for them. One participant said that 'even when they (the students) brought us tea, they brought it with a smile on their face, they were happy to be here, and, as a result we were happy to have them here. We were happy to be together'. Another pointed out that, sometimes, the help given was 'practical indeed'. She said that, whenever she asked, the students would re-explain what she had just heard 'the physiotherapist or other speaker (lecturer) saying'. This person explained that the students proved helpful by 'simply repeating what the speaker said, but slower'. This type of assistance was important to her as she did not hear clearly. She was unable to make out all that had been said. The students enabled her to follow what was going on. In a different way, another of the older people explained to me that the students offered her a sense of 'comfort', and, because of this, she could relate to other people more. She said:

> I was feeling down and the student noticed. She was comforting, she saw things in a broader way, and helped me simply by showing she was there for me. My perspective changed. I also saw the student differently. She seemed to become more adult all of a sudden, that's how I saw her, at any rate. … She reminded me of my own eldest sister when I was young. My mother died and I was the youngest. In a way, my sister was my mother to me. My sister did not only look after me but also my other six brothers and sisters. I loved them. I love them. I always will. Till today I still remain active in the parish, going to the houses of other old people, and praying with them and helping them all I can, by means of this parish group. However, I have very few friends, or people who I would call my friends, anyway. … What I see in these young people is a desire to leave their own little world and include others who are different from them in it, we, the elderly are those 'different' people. They (the students) do small things. Yet, they make a big difference to people's lives, well, to my life, certainly.

Differences in ways of relating may distinguish older people from younger people. Normally, young people seek out a relatively larger number of friends. This has perhaps become most obvious in the 'Facebook age' when young people take pride in the number of virtual friends they have. Carstensen (1992) and Carstensen, Fung, and Charles (2003) explain this 'contrast in the number of friendships' through what they call 'socioemotional selectivity theory'. This

theory maintains that people's motivation for relationships changes as people grow older. The motivation for social interaction shifts. Younger people normally create relationships that help them to satisfy instrumental goals. Older people normally create relationships that help them to meet expressive goals. These include feeling good about themselves. In terms of intergenerational learning, while the older people benefited from the practical help that the students gave them, the students benefited from understanding more the particular difficulties confronted by older people, and 'reframing' them in a non-fatalistic way. The strengths' perspective (Nissen, 2006; Roebuck, Roebuck, & Roebuck, 2011; Saleebey, 1999, 2001) that is being adopted, which emphasizes the need to focus on strengths rather than their weaknesses, is being manifested by the students' focusing on the people around them, rather than on their weakened personal attributes.

The aspiration to 'learn'

The intergenerational learning experienced by the older people was also evidenced when one of the service users noted how her interactions with the students at the day centre allowed her to 'make more sense' of the teenage members of her (extended) family, at home. She mentioned how hard it was to 'understand the technology of today's world with Facebook, Twitter, chatting and the like …' She added that she was eternally grateful to 'one of the students who had taken the initiative to bring her laptop along and explain these things' to her. She explained further that the student's explanations enabled her to relate to younger family members easier. Another mentioned that, to her, Facebook was an 'important tool'. This was because it allowed her to attract the interest of her teenage granddaughter.

Learning was not only restricted to technology, but also to other matters that are of mutual interest. One of the participants said:

> I enjoy talking to the young people since there is always something new to learn from them. I spoke to one of the students about cooking and she brought me these recipes, I tried them out with my children and grandchildren, and I came up with a few good dishes. I spoke to the student about them, and she liked it a lot. … Next time, I bake a cake using one of her recipes, I will put a piece in a plastic box, and give it to her so she can taste it.

In terms of the intergenerational learning experienced by the older people, it is clear that they did not only benefit from the students' teaching them about technologies but also by seeing the important role that technology had in their lives, and thereby being more appreciative of its influence on the lives of their own younger relatives. Linked to this is the desire of older people to involve themselves in activities that interest them, where cooking is just one example amongst many. What is important is not only the 'doing' aspect but also the 'being' aspect; it is not simply an issue of baking a cake, it is also an issue of sharing the cake with others, be it the children, grandchildren, or students. By means of the placement, the students were also exposed to situations where they could understand further the desire of older people to play an active role in their own communities, in order for them to feel validated.

The students' exposure to the particular interpretation that older people gave to the experiences described in the previous paragraph, during their placement, led them to question what they could do so as to enable older people to retain social status and opportunities for community participation (Keith et al., 1994; Moody, 2010), something they wrote about widely in their logbooks.

In fact, one of the students wrote in her logbook that:

> If I were to be asked what I learnt about older people from this placement, I would have to ask what they, the older people, learnt from us students. This is because this learning fluctuates. Sometimes older people pass on knowledge and skills, many of which have been influenced by their life experiences. Sometimes young people can offer training in such skills as computer skills. However, it is a dynamic process, sometimes you cannot say who is giving or who is receiving even if, at other times, you can. What is important is for the elderly to remain as active as possible. They have to be able to take in new information and reflect on it and then use it to help themselves. As young people, and as a part of society, we need to find the ways to make that happen.

Likewise, another of the students reported that:

> I enabled the service users to understand the information they were given. I was making it possible for them to use this information in their daily lives. More importantly, in doing so, I could engage more with what was going on at the day centres. By enabling the service users to understand things, I enabled them to build a conversation with the other old people based on what they heard. I also enabled them to build on it further. It was like when, in the lectures, we discussed constructing and deconstructing narratives. The people at the day centres had to take in information, then question it, then build on it, then question it again, and so on. In other words, by simply speaking to them in the way I did, I gave them power.

Both these students are considering the inter-generational learning that is taking place at the day centre as distanced from what Freire referred to as the banking concept of education, which he explained as follows: '… the contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified. This is the "banking" concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing … (and is characterised by a) lack of creativity, transformation and knowledge in this (at best) misguided system'. For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human' (Freire, 1970, p. 53). Through emphasizing the participants' ability to think for themselves, both of the students are focusing on their development of praxis, or rather their ability to reflect and take steps that they consider supportive, in order to help themselves to foster further growth.

Conclusion

Even though previous studies on students' perceptions of people who are well past retirement age indicate that, in most cases, they are seen as weak and often dependent on others, as a result of physical impediments that tend to eventually surface in their lives (Mosher-Asley & Ball, 1999; Moyle, 2003); in the current study, the participants said that they thought that the students regarded them as knowledgeable people, whose company they found enjoyable. This may partially be influenced by the older people's ability to attend the day centre independently, and their ability to carry out most activities of daily living in a functional manner. It could also have been influenced by the students' prior training at MCAST, where the importance of fundamental values in health and social care practise, including client self-determination, is emphasized considerably. Having said this, it cannot be readily disputed that recent and not so recent social changes, brought about by factors such as urbanization, the entrance of women into working life and the transition from a large family to a smaller one, often from an extended family set-up to a nuclear one, could have

led certain people to view the prospect of looking after older people, or catering for their needs, with disdain.

In effect, an interesting characteristic of this study, one that the participants have emphasized mostly, is that the students appeared to assist them by empowering them to give positive meaning to life's events, rather than telling them how to carry out instrumental tasks. The study thereby supports the idea that the quality of intergenerational contact—and not simply the amount or frequency, or even the directed purpose, of contact—is a motivational factor in encouraging older people to play an active part in their ongoing development of personal and social skills. In consolidation of this, a study by Allan and Johnson (2009) concluded that young people who interacted with older individuals several times a day, in different social or work-place contexts, held more positive attitudes toward older people than those who had little contact, or no contact at all, with them.

In exploring what this research reveals about intergenerational learning, this paper has shown that some is incidental, almost as if it is buried in the microcosm of the day centre and in the interchanges with the older generation that take place during students' placements. However, at a deeper level, for learning to take place successfully, people would need to acquire the self-efficacy to process, understand and adopt the information which is handed to them by others (Spiteri, 2014a). This can be seen when older people mention learning how to use a computer or learning new recipes; there is always something new to be learnt, and effort needs to be expended in order to learn it. The day centre thereby serves as 'a learning space.'

The learning that takes place (at the day centre) is attributable to the reciprocity between the students as service providers and the older people as service recipients since both benefit from their interactions with one another. The significance of this learning extends beyond the knowledge that the service-users could have acquired, for instance, had the 'talks' that were offered at the day centres been offered elsewhere. At the day centres, the questions asked, the discussions that took place, and even the different experiences or challenges that were referred to, all served to make the 'talks' not only more enriching but also a means for intergenerational learning to take place. The collective social interaction also generates knowledge and is an all-important aspect of learning at the day centres. Emphasis is being made on social interaction because, 'simply bringing different groups into contact with one another does not guarantee positive results. Some projects have led to the preponderance of negative outcomes-stereotypes … or biases were confirmed rather than overcome' (Fox & Giles, 1993, p. 88). Without interaction, ageism is likely to surface.

A final point on intergenerational learning that emerges from this study is the importance of older people feeling connected to the younger generation. The older people connect with younger people when they see them offering a service to others. This study shows that this also works the other way round. Service-learning, on placements, helps students connect with older people. This is readily acknowledged by students even when speaking informally among themselves (Spiteri, 2014b). This mutual learning, however, must also be seen from the perspective that the students have succeeded in generating a positive impression amongst the participants. Locating this within the overall services offered by the day centre, which are aimed at assisting older people to remain active, and to adopt a positive attitude to life, the students can thereby be seen as part of a system which is aimed at empowering older people to remain as independent and functional as possible.

A word of caution needs to be inserted here, however. This thrust toward independence can be pushed too far. This would happen when the main implication underlying the operation of the day centre makes older people 'indistinguishable from middle-aged peers … and operates within an individual pathology model that perceives older persons as deficient following their loss of familial and work responsibilities' (Formosa, 2012, p. 120). Consequently, the ideologies of the day centres would then become ageist. This paper thereby shows how important it is, particularly when considering the increasing amounts of older people worldwide, that societies devise and implement ways and means to foster cultures of inter-generational learning and, thereby, constantly increase the prospects of older people to participate actively in society. And that is the challenge.He had carried out the fieldwork relating to this article when previously employed at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST).

Notes on contributor

Dr. Damian Spiteri Ph.D. has recently commenced lecturing in mental health social work at the University of York. He has previously lectured in social work at the University of Malta (Msida, Malta), the University of Strathclyde (Glasgow, Scotland), and in health and social care at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (Paola, Malta). He has written a book on multicultural education in further and higher education settings, which is partially informed by his own personal experiences of lecturing. This book has been published by Palgrave Macmillan and is entitled "Multiculturalism, Higher Education, and Intercultural Communication." Dr. Spiteri is also the author of several papers on different aspects of social work practise and education, with a particular focus on the interaction between social structure and personal agency, as manifested in people's lives. He had carried out the fieldwork relating to this article when previously employed at the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST).

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