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# Intergenerational learning among primary and lower secondary schools<sup>1</sup>

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#### **Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to identify on which topics intergenerational learning takes place among primary and lower secondary school teachers of different generations. If intergenerational learning is present among colleagues, the content of this learning will be specified. For this purpose, in 2013-2014 school year, in the district of İzmit in the province of Kocaeli two primary and two lower secondary schools where different generations work together were, therefore, selected and 39 teachers of three different generations in these schools were interviewed. Semi-structured interview technique was used during these face-to- face interviews. Data of the study, which was designed using phenomenological pattern, was analyzed with descriptive analysis method. The results indicated that younger teachers learn about topics such as classroom management and handling problems with parents from the experiences of their older colleagues. On the other hand, older teachers learn about the new teaching methods and techniques, teaching materials and the use of technical equipments from their younger colleagues. It was clearly seen that intergenerational learning proceed more functionally at schools where collaboration and knowledge-sharing are important values; where there aren't any prejudices against age and where there are individuals who are open for development.

Keywords: Intergenerational learning, Primary School, Lower Secondary School, Teacher.

#### 1. Introduction

Globally, as people live longer and have better health condition in older ages than previous generations, it has been observed that there is a rise in the proportion of people of different generations work together in the workforce. In Turkish Language Institution's Dictionary (1992, p. 937) "generation" is defined as "a group of individuals forming age sets of 25-30 years", "a body of people who were born approximately in the same years, have experienced the same conditions

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of that time, accordingly have shared similar difficulties and fates, have been supposed to have similar duties." "Cohort theory, which discusses the differences between generations, posits that people growing up at the same time have similar life experiences, which in turn shape their behavior, their attitudes, their values and their opinions" (Ropes, 2013). "Such groups are not only distinguishable on the grounds of age, but collectively exhibit distinctive sets of beliefs and values" (McGuire, By ve Hutchings, 2007). Employees belonging to a similar generation group can be seen as an subgroup with similar tendencies. This assumption is also taken as the starting point of the differences in attitudes and behaviours of employees with different age and experience. "In organisations cohort theory is useful because it considers that different aspects of age and experience influence an employee's attitudes and behaviors in certain ways" (Ropes, 2011b).

There are four generations represented in the literature. Some generational characteristics of each of the four generations currently active in organizations are shown in Table 1. Although some of the social experiences of generations don't represent example of Turkey, general characteristics, values, attitudes towards work/work-related values, working styles and learning characteristics can also be generalizable for the employees in our country.

As average life-expectancy and age of retirement rises, the age diversity in the workforce has also dramatically risen over the past decades. Within this context, in official schools under the rule of MEB (National Education Ministry) teachers of different generations work together. However, in working life there exist prejudices such as one can face with difficulties in educating older generations, they are tend to get sick more often and they have a high risk of having accidents (Memduhoğlu, 2008). In the report by World Bank (2003) the older workers were counted as a disadvantaged group in the sense that they have low attainment to access learning because of the prejudices against them such as they can no longer learn new things or they are unwilling to learn.

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**Table** 1. Generations and some of their characteristics

Generation name/trait	Year of birth	Important social experiences	General Characteristics/ values	Attitude towards work/work-related values	Working style	Learning Characteristics
Still Generation	1925-45	• Great Depression; • WW II.	• conformist; • mature; • conscientious; • thrifty; • loyal.	<ul> <li>obedient to management;</li> <li>loyalty (to institution and customers);</li> <li>security (stability);</li> <li>'work before everything'.</li> </ul>	adaptive;     hard-working.	traditional, skill-based training;     low learning-goal orientation.
Baby boomers	1946-64	<ul> <li>Kennedy and M.L. King; assassinations;</li> <li>moon landing;</li> <li>Vietnam War;</li> <li>1960s social revolution.</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>idealist;</li> <li>optimistic;</li> <li>creative;</li> <li>tolerant;</li> <li>value freedom;</li> <li>self-fulfilment important.</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>lifetime employment;</li> <li>high org. commitment;</li> <li>workaholism;</li> <li>criticism;</li> <li>innovativeness;</li> <li>advancement;</li> <li>materialism.</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>being in charge;</li> <li>team-orientation;</li> <li>attentive to hierarchy.</li> </ul>	low learning-goal orientation;     improving skill sets through off-the-job training;     traditional educational interventions.
Generation X	1965-80	<ul><li>aids epidemic;</li><li>oil crisis;</li><li>Cold War;</li><li>CNN;</li><li>MTV.</li></ul>	<ul> <li>individualistic;</li> <li>sceptical;</li> <li>non-conforming;</li> <li>flexible;</li> <li>controlling;</li> <li>pragmatic;</li> <li>informal.</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>'work is to be endured, not enjoyed';</li> <li>low org. commitment;</li> <li>free agency;</li> <li>entrepreneurship;</li> <li>materialism;</li> <li>life-work balance.</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>individualistic;</li> <li>not attentive to hierarchy;</li> <li>collaboration;</li> <li>human relations.</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>high learning-goal orientation;</li> <li>situated learning;</li> <li>lifelong learning.</li> </ul>
Generation Y (Millenials)	1981- 2001	<ul> <li>Internet;</li> <li>fall of the Iron Curtain;</li> <li>9/11; terrorism;</li> <li>new technologies;</li> <li>information society.</li> </ul>	confident;     demanding;     collectivistic;     moralistic.	<ul> <li>passion;</li> <li>work that has meaning;</li> <li>security (not stability);</li> <li>loyalty to work, not to organisation;</li> <li>willingness to work;</li> <li>life-work balance.</li> </ul>	• team-oriented; • flexibility and autonomy in task achievement; • integrated free/work times.	<ul> <li>collaborative;</li> <li>visual;</li> <li>non-traditional;</li> <li>experiential;</li> <li>collective reflection;</li> <li>self-development.</li> </ul>

Resource: Ropes, D.& Ypsilanti, A. (2012). Factors influencing intergenerational learning: Towards a framework for organizations to ensure successful learning in older employees. Working and Aginng: The benefits of investing on aging workforce. A Cedefop publication, 280-308. Luxemburg: Publications Office of the European Union

However, "it is not only the prejudices against the elderly that make integration of the generations difficult, but also the adults' perception of the young people as egocentric, lazy, problem-ridden and problem-causing" (Reingard Spannring University Innsbruck, 2008).

On the other hand, different age groups also have different characteristics. "While the ageing sector of the workforce is highly experienced, work-oriented and stable in employment, younger employees are increasingly mobile, exhibit less organizational commitment, but are entrepreneurial and technologically literate. In contrast to the social communitarian outlook of ageing workers, young workers are fuelled by a propensity towards self-fulfilment and the pre-eminence of the self. These differences in approaches and attitudes to work may result in intergenerational conflict that comprises organisational performance" (Reingard Spannring University Innsbruck, 2008). These differences between energetic and less experinced younger generations and highly experinced older generations must be evaluated and managed in a way that complete each other by developing policies for organisational contunity and productivity (Memduhoğlu, 2008). Thus, there are lots of things which different generations learn from each other. Ropes ve Ypsilanti (2012) stated that intergenerational learning (IGL) is useful for both younger and older employees and also for the whole organisation.

Ropes (2011b) described IGL, at the most basic level, as "a learning process that takes place between two groups of people distinguished by the generation to which they belong." Newman ans Hatton-Yeo (2008) laid emphasis on the "reciprocity" in IGL, which refers to exchange of knowledge and skills across generations. In order to remain competitive, organisations need to improve themselves and develop their capacity. There are different ways to be chosen to achieve this goal and one of these ways is through learning (Ropes, 2011a). He emphasizes that in organisational learning and building capacity the individual is regarded as the main catalyst and at this point he adds that organisations can develop their capacity by using the relationships between older and younger individuals.

"Age diversity" should be part of an organization's definition for diversity" (Orzea ve Bratianu, 2012). Because IGL, which is based on age diversity, has work related, social and personal benefits (European Commission, 2012). For example, older individuals can find the opportunity to manage their life as active and independent individuals by acquiring skills (especially ICT skills) from younger generations through IGL. After the learning process younger and older generations will not only feel valued, accepted and respected but also enhance their knowledge and skills (Newman and Hatton-Yeo, 2008). IGL leads to a reduction of negative stereotypes between the generations, which in turn lead to better mutual understanding and positive attitudes towards others (Kerka, 2003). Thus, "as a result of better mutual understanding, participants are less afraid of and

intimidated by the other generation. They feel greater empathy towards each other and a greater willingness to interact and form social relationships" (European Commission, 2012).

According to European Commission (2012), while for older people, IGL in the workplace has provided increased motivation for staying in a job, taking up training and obtaining new skills; for young people the benefits are learning skills on-the-job and gaining a greater commitment to their work. Loss of knowledge, which becomes a problem when older employees retire, can be prevented by transferring vocational competences from older employees to younger ones. "From a knowledge management perspective, it is crucial for organisations to develop ways in which organisational knowledge, located in the minds of older workers, is transferred and subsequently retained for reuse" (Ropes, 2011a). Because there is a risk that the skills and knowledge of older workers are lost in many ways when they retire. "In particular, tacit knowledge tends to be lost for the company, younger workers do not benefit from such skills for their career development and the motivational and productive benefits of IGL in organisations are not exploited" (Reingard Spannring University Innsbruck, 2008). IGL in organisations is focused on improving organisational capacity, either by raising the knowledge and skill levels of employees, stimulating new knowledge building, or by improving organizational processes (Ropes, 2013).

It is inevitable that individuals from different generations work together in organisations, so sharing knowledge, skill and values will be a significant issue for organisations to function efficiently. MEB (National Education Ministry) statistics indicate that % 35,6 of the teachers are under 30 years old; % 33 of them are between 30-39; % 22,9 of them are between 40-49 and % 8,5 of them are 50 years old and over (www.kamudan.com). In school organisations, where knowledge is a vital issue, IGL has a significant role as it will provide the suitable environment for teachers of different generations to work together in harmony and share their knowledge and experiences. "Organisations must therefore seek to optimise the talents of all age groups, reconciling differences in the workplace, educating and developing employees to utilise this diversity for individual and organisational advantage, and creating new organisational cultures that value, and optimise, generational diversity" (McGuire et al., 2007). In our schools, where different generations work together, if this fact turns into an advantage, both the capacity of the schools as an organisation and social capital at schools will be developed.

#### 1. 1. The purpose of this study

The purpose of this study is to determine whether intergenerational learning take place among elementary school teachers of different generations or not. If there is intergenerational learning among colleagues, the content of this learning will be identified.

# 2. Methodology

This study was conducted in "phenomenology" pattern, which is one of the qualitative study patterns. The study group was formed by 39 teachers working at two primary and two lower secondary schools in 2013-2014 school year in the district of İzmit, in the province of Kocaeli. These four schools were selected with purposive / purposeful sampling method as teaching staff of varying ages was a necessary criterion. 39 teachers working at these 4 schools selected were interviewed face-to-face. 19 of these interviwees are class teachers and 20 of them are specialist subject teachers. 19 of these interviwees are male and 20 of them are female.

Semi-structured interview technique was used in order to gather data. At the beginning of the interview the teachers were informed about generations and IGL. After that, there were two research questions posed as follows: "What do you learn professionally from your colleagues of a different generation?" and "What do your colleagues of a different generation learn from you? Data of the study was analyzed with "descriptive analysis" method, which is one of the qualitative research analysis techniques.

## 3. Findings and Comment

# 3. 1. Topics of IGL at school according to participants born in Generation Y

What do members of Generation Y learn from older generations?: Teachers born in Generation Y stated that from their older colleagues, they mostly learn about "getting to know students/ how to approach students/ behaviours of students (f:4), preparing documents (yearly plans, reports, etc.) (f:4), regulations / formal school work (f:4), communication with parents (f:3), classroom management (f:2), getting familiar with the school culture (f:2), teaching methods and techniques (f:2), communication with the school principle (f:1), evaluation of examinations (f:1), crisis management (f:1), problem solving (f:1)". Here are some opinions of the participants on this question:

"Older generations teach us about behaviours of students, communication with parents, paper work and communication with the school principle. And I can say that this kind of learning is all unplanned." (Y1,27,F,4,S). "I learn a lot from teachers, who are older and more experienced than me about crisis management and parent-teacher communication." (Y3,28,M,7,C). "... Generally, I learn a lot from the experiences of teachers, who are older and more experienced than me, when I have questions about what I am supposed to deal with difficult students and classroom management." (Y4,27,F,2,S). "There are lots of things I learn from older generations, in particular, about getting familiar with the school culture, legislations and paper work..." (Y5,26,F,5,C). "... I can learn from experienced colleagues about classroom management, communication with parents,

evaluation of examinations, official procedures, teaching techniques."(Y12,31,F,1,S). "I learn mostly about functioning of school organisation and regulations from older generations so that I can improve myself as a teacher, I believe."(Y6,29,M,8,S).

What do members of Generation Y teach older generations?: Teachers born in Generation Y teach older generations primarily about "new technologies / ICT (f:4); then, in order, how to approach students (f:3), new teaching techniques (f:1), developing teaching materials (f:1), activity-based learning (f:1) and problem solving (f:1). Here are some opinions of the participants on this question:

"... There are some situations where they (older generations) learn about new teaching techniques and how to approach students from me. Besides, most frequently they learn about using technical equipment." (Y1,27,F,4,S). "... Older generations learn a lot about using technical equipment since they lack some latest technical skills (Y2,25,M,1,S)"... Since there is a rapid change in technology, our older colleagues learn more about technological stuff from us." (Y3,28,M,7,C). "I observe that older generations learn a lot from younger generations about activity-based learning, developing teaching materials and how to approach difficult students." (Y6,29,M,8,S)

### 3. 2. Topics of IGL at school according to participants born in Generation X

What do members of Generation X learn from older and younger generations?: Teachers born in Generation X acquire knowledge and skills from Generation Yers primarily about "new technologies / ICT (f:7) then, in order, new teaching techniques and methods (f:6), developing materials (f:3), preparing classroom activities (f:1), planning social activities (f:1), measurement and evaluation (f:1) and how to approach students (f:1). On the other hand; Generation Xers,through their relationships with Baby Boomers, gain knowledge skills and values about teaching techniques and methods (f:2), topics related to their subject specialism (f:2), how to approach students (f:1), preparing classroom activities (f:1), planning social activities (f:1) and values of patience and tolerance (f:1). Here are some opinions of the participants on this question:

"I learn both from my younger and more experienced colleagues about preparing classroom activities and planning social activities." (X1,41,F,20,C). "There is frequent transfer of knowledge on preparing classroom activities between me and my collegues. In particular, it is quite beneficial for me to make use of the experiences of my older colleagues when I teach first graders." (X2,43,F,21,C). "... I think an individual should better him/herself continuously because there is a rapid change around us. Therefore, I learn new skills on the area of technology with the help of young colleagues." (X10,43,M,21,C). "When it comes to values like tolerance and patience, I've always taken older generation as an example for myself. On the other hand, I learn to use new

technology efficiently and new teaching techniques and methods from younger colleagues."(X11,40,F,19,S). "While we benefit from older generation's professional experiences, we learn from teachers of Generation Y about using ICT and new teaching techniques."(X14,42,M,16,S).

What do members of Generation X teach older and younger generations? There is also a knowledge and skill transfer from the teachers born in Generation X to Generation Yers. This transfer mainly takes place on topics as follows, "classroom management (f:2), how to approach students (f:2), measurement and evaluation (f:2), regulations (f:2), teaching techniques and methods (f:2), communication with the school management (f:1), attitudes and behaviours affecting social life (f:1)." According to participants's opinions transfer from Generation Xers to Baby Boomers is relatively limited. The topics of learning are "how to approach students (f:1) and topics related to their subject specialism (f:1)" Here are some opinions of the participants on this question:

"In our school there are newcomers and trainee teachers and we share our knowledge with them especially to solve their problems with classroom management and how to approach difficult students." (X9,38,F,15,S). "My colleagues of younger generations consult me about classroom management, communication with the school management and regulations related to our job." (X10,43,M,21,S)

# 3. 3. Topics of IGL at school according to participants of Baby Boom Generation

What do Baby Boomers learn from younger generations?: Baby Boomers learn about "new technologies / ICT /using technical equipment" (f:11) from younger generations in the first place. Then, through IGL, they learn about these topics, in order, "preparing classroom activities (f:2), developing teaching materials (f:2), modern teaching methods and techniques (f:2), presenting new material (f:2), planning social activities (f:1), tolerance as a value (f:1), measurement and evaluation (f:1). Here are some opinions of the participants on this question:

"There exists a learning between generations about using computer programmes." (BB1,50,M,28,C). "Two learnt lots of things about using ICT from younger generations and I'm still learning. For example; at first I couldn't use a computer but thanks to my younger colleagues now I can do my job on computer on my own. Besides; I've learnt that success doesn't only come with being too disciplined observing my younger colleagues' tolerant teaching." (BB2,58,M,39,C). "I usually learn new things from young teachers while planning social activities and classroom activities. And I must mention knowledge transfer from younger colleagues on the area of technology." (BB4,59,F,39,C). "Technology develops rapidly and we get help from our young friends to learn to use technical equipment like printer, scanner, projector, etc.efficiently. Or we try

to learn about new ways to present new materials to our students since our younger friends' knowledge is fresher." (BB5,52,F,22,C). "Yes, I sometimes learn from my younger colleagues' fresh knowledge about presenting new materials, teaching methods and techniques, ICT, measurement and evaluation." (BB11,55,M,30,C). "We benefit from younger generations' skills about preparing classroom activities and teaching materials and using ICT in the classroom." (B6,63,M,41,C)

What do Baby Boomers teach older generations?: Teachers born in Baby Boom Generation teach younger generations primarily about "getting to know students/ how to approach students/ behaviours of students" (f:5). Then comes other topics as follows: "communication with parents (f:2), preparing classroom activities (f:2), presenting new material (f:2), values (f:2), project and performance tasks (f:2), classroom management (f:2), planning social activities (f:1), developing teaching materials (f:1), communication with school management (f:1)." Here are some opinions of the participants on this question:

"... Our younger colleagues benefit from our vocatiobal experience. We emphasize the importance of patience in communication with students when they consult us." (BB2,58,M,39,C). "Young teachers usually ask for our opinions about communication with students and social problems of the students and benefit from our experiences." (BB4,59,F,39,C). "When our young colleagues have some problems with difficult students and parents or teaching new topics in the class, they consult us. They want to learn how we solve problems and how we bring out best behaviours." (BB5,52,F,22,C). "Younger teachers learn from us what they are supposed to do when they have problems with students, parents or school management." (BB8,59,M,33,S). "... I suppose that they (younger generations) acquire values related with social life and organisation" (BB10,60,M,34,S). "Younger teachers consult us on how to deal with students' problem causing behaviours." (BB11,55,M,30,C).

#### 4. Discussion

In school environments, where sharing and cooperation are common values, positive personal relationships exist and there are no prejudices against age, IGL flourishes as it helps teachers improve as individuals. It can be stated that teachers of all three generations feel the need to be a part of knowledge exchange process since they sometimes feel vocationally incompetent and want to acquire new knowledge and skills. As a result of these exchanges, they reciprocatively affect each other.

The Good Working Life project in Denmark included mentoring which enabled young teachers to learn from older teachers' experience of classroom management and tackling family problems while older teachers learnt about new subject material and teaching aids (European Commission,

2012). The results of this research similarly indicate that teachers of younger generations learn from older teachers' experience when theoretical knowledge (about everyday school work, classroom management, relationships with parents) which they gained at university isn't sufficient at work.

Ropes (2013) remarks that the senior employee in a mentoring position helps the newcommer to both develop their knowledge and skills and be socialized into the organisation ("this is how we do it around here"). Teachers born in Generation X, in particular, consult their colleagues of different generations when they want to learn more about new technologies / using new software and organising classroom activities, which will enhance their teaching. On the other hand, members of older generations expressed that they learn mostly about new technologies from their younger colleagues. Thus, through IGL they try to gain competences, which the new era demands. It is clearly seen that teachers in older generations accept their younger colleagues as a source of knowledge. Grignoli ve Di Paolo (2008) lay stress on the basis and precondition for learning through the exchange of experience -IGL processes- is the openness to accept older or younger colleagues as teachers.

Ropes (2013) defines IGL as "an interactive process that takes place between different generations resulting in the acquisition of new knowledge, skills and values." However, it is remarkable that when they think about IGL, acquiring only knowledge and skills occur to almost all the participants. Especially, younger generations didn't express any opinions about sharing values. A few of the participants of older generations mentioned about IGL resulting in acquiring values and expressed that they value this type of learning.

Regarding the opinions of teachers we come to a conclusion that IGL generally processes informally without a plan and it is not efficient enough in this sense. There are 5 teachers who say they don't have IGL in their schools and there are 12 teachers who say IGL partially exists pointing out the problems during the process. Negative qualities at workplace such as weak social ties, lack of communication, ageism, lack of trust for colleagues, resisting development and change affect IGL among colleagues and create a school atmosphere where teachers can't benefit from IGL sufficiently. It has also been derived from the opinions that especially member of Generation Y and Baby boomers know little about each other so their vocational knowledge sharing is relatively low.

Smola ve Sutton (2002) demonstrated that older employees complain about the work ethics and values of younger generations. In this research, also, older teachers have some negative opinions about their younger colleagues in terms of their point of view for education and teaching. Young teachers, on the other hand, state that they sometimes have difficulty in communicating with older their colleagues due to the fact that they have different point of views about education as a whole. Participants pointed out some obstacles against IGL, which are caused by differences related to

educational background, upbringing, social experiences. However, this kind of differences is also regarded as adventages in the sense that they can be used in organising activities at school and to solve problems at school. At this point, managing diversity gains a crucial significance. Memduhoğlu (2008) suggest that in an organisational culture, where diversity is regarded as a wealth rather than a threaten, it will be accepted that each person wins and there is no one loses due to being different. Thus, employees will learn to work togerther.

Ropes (2013) emphasizes that IGL in organisations is beneficial to both the individual and the organisation. We can expect that enhancing the individual's vocational knowledge and competences will result in improved productivity in the organisation. In the final report of European Commission (2012) it is stated that while IGL in the workplace support young people struggling to begin their careers to gain knowledge and competence, it also provides older people with the skills they lack and these skills will help to keep them at work. The results of this research also indicate that teachers find IGL beneficial for new teachers in the workforce to adapt themselves to school more quickly. On the other hand; it has been remarked by the teachers that as an outcome of IGL older teachers can acquire new ICT skills, which they can use in their classrooms to enhance teaching-learning process. And becoming more resourceful, regarding new tachnologies, they will experience less generational conflict with their students. Ropes (2013) pointed out that "reverse IGL", which means the transfer of knowledge –especially about new technologies- from younger employees to the older ones, can be found in organisational IGL.

As it is stated in the report by Reingard Spannring University Innsbruck (2008) in organisations teams consisting of members of different generations create an opportunity to utilise age diversity. Therefore, to utilise the experiences of different ages at school, age-heterogeneous teams should be built for project and commission works. At this point, school principles have an important role. School management should be careful about assigning teachers of different ages in team works while they encourage teachers supporting one another and sharing knowledge. Besides; social acitivies, where younger and older generations can get to know one another better and have closer bonds, should be organisied by school management.

Like other researches this research involves certain limitatations. Similar studies of future researchers may support this area of study with quantitative studies. The relation of IGL with other variables such as organisational climate, trust, commitment, communication, etc. can also be studied. Our study consisted of primary ans lower secondary schools. Similar researches can be conducted in different educational levels.

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