STRENGTHENING GENERATIONAL COHESION IN AN AGEING SOCIETY. EVIDENCE OF IMPACT FROM AN INTERGENERATIONAL MODEL INTERVENTION[1]

DANIEL ARPINTE, Research Institute for Quality of Life, Romania

ABSTRACT: *The current demographic decline in Romania, with a fast change of the demographic structure characterised by a rapid aging of the population and increasing dependency ratios, among other structural societal changes, contribute to the fragmentation of intergenerational interactions which severely undermines the wellbeing of older adults and their relationships with younger generations. The article examines the benefits of a structured intergenerational intervention model through the evaluation of The Generations Centres Program (GCP), implemented by The Margareta of Romania Royal Foundation (MRRF) that provides support (funds, expertise) to local and regional organisations to implement various intergenerational activities within their services for vulnerable children and adolescence, in different social services settings, in majority licenced day care centres. The evaluation, grounded on a mixed-methods approach, including surveys (93 seniors, 38 organizational representatives), interviews and focus groups, as well as analysis of secondary data, provides robust evidence regarding the effectiveness of the intergenerational model in addressing the needs of vulnerable children and seniors. For seniors, volunteering fosters increased self-esteem (79% report higher life satisfaction), reduced social isolation (17% mention new social connections), and the rediscovery of personal purpose after retirement, outcomes consistent with international research on the protective effects of intergenerational engagement against loneliness and depression (Pinquart and Sörensen, 2001). For the beneficiary children, predominantly from disadvantaged families, the program contributes to improvements in both educational outcomes (academic performance, basic skills) and socio-emotional development (empathy, patience, social skills). The reciprocal nature of these benefits confirms the authenticity of the intergenerational exchange model. The evaluation demonstrates that strategically designed intergenerational activities offer effective, sustainable solutions to contemporary demographic challenges, generating measurable value for both age cohorts while fostering more inclusive and cohesive communities (Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008).*

Key words: *ageing; demographic challenges; intergenerational interventions.*

Introduction

Romania is experiencing a dramatic demographic decline, doubled by a significant increase of older people proportion in the total population, a trend that cannot be easily reversed (Ghe ău, 2024). Although Romanian public policies have gradually included specific initiatives related to the elderly population, the overall effort still lags far behind demographic trends, while frequent changes in public policy priorities continue to negatively impact the well-being of older people. Similar conditions led to the initiation of early intergenerational projects in the 1960s, which emerged in response to the growing proportion of older adults and to their segregation resulting from the decline in frequency and quality of intergenerational interactions (Newman, 1989). The popularity of intergenerational projects grew in the following decades (Kuehne, 2012), becoming an important pillar of community interventions targeting older people. Thus, intergenerational projects were initiated concurrently with a series of major societal changes that structurally affected intergenerational relationships, previously achieved mainly at the level of the extended family.

Romania is among the countries with the fastest demographic decline, implicitly facing a fast increase in the proportion of the elderly population, while the response of the specific public policies is still hesitant and insufficient. Besides, the policies related to the elderly still slowly adopts innovative, although effective, intervention models such as the intergenerational

one while the feasibility of existent models is still insufficiently documented. In this context, the GCP evaluation aims to identify the outcomes and impact of intergenerational interventions, not an easy task given the specific nature of intergenerational activities. An analysis of previous systematic evaluations showed that impact studies for intergenerational projects and activities reveal generally positive effects, although they do not agree on main types of impact and benefits on engaging in such initiatives. In fact, the variety of the intergenerational projects and context in which they are delivered seems to be the main reasons making difficult to find relevant common effects, an aspect that has also been confirmed by the results of the current evaluation. The projects funded under the GCP are characterised by the integration of activities into existing services, which have naturally transformed into intergenerational activities. Most of these projects were initiated in day centres for children, with the funded organisations gradually expanding their activities and senior volunteer base. The analysis of intergenerational projects reveals a diversity of approaches, but also common themes related to structure, activities and evolution. Many projects started organically, evolving from existing services and adapting to the needs of children and volunteers, while others were designed from the outset with a clearer structure. Thus, the benefits and impact on those involved in intergenerational interactions differ from one organisation to another.

The evaluation started from the common definitions of intergenerational activities, with intergenerational interaction being defined as "structured or unstructured interaction between seniors and younger generations that contributes to reducing the social isolation of seniors, but also benefits the children and young people involved" (Peters et al., 2021). Another widely accepted definition is that of the International Consortium for Intergenerational Practice (ICIP) which describes the intergenerational programs as "social vehicles that create purposeful and ongoing exchange of resources and learning among older and younger generations". Based on the essential characteristics of these two definitions, I used as working definition for the GCP evaluation "the set of formal, non-formal or informal activities carried out with the voluntary participation of participants from different generations, developed in relation to a series of their priority needs and with a positive impact at the individual and societal level."

Methodology

The evaluation methodology was developed based on OECD-DAC criteria, focusing on the relevance of the GCP objectives in relation to the needs of the communities, integration with other similar initiatives, achievement of the proposed results, efficiency of resource use, sustainability of results as well as the programme's potential to provide scalable intervention models were addressed. The evaluation used a mixed methodological approach which allowed the correlation of relevant quantitative data with qualitative data illustrating the subjective dimension of the transformations generated (sense of belonging, development of social skills, quality of intergenerational relationships), providing a more nuanced perspective on social impact.

The evaluation was based both on qualitative and quantitative data. The quantitative component included two online surveys, for seniors and staff of the funded organisations. The online senior survey had 93 respondents out of a total of 135 active senior volunteering in GCP -funded projects. Conducted over one month from late March 2025, it collected data on volunteer profiles (age, education, volunteering duration) and addressed topics such as perceptions, motivations, satisfaction, and personal benefits related to volunteering. The online survey for staff of funded organisations received 38 responses from 15 active organisations; only one did not participate. Data collection lasted one month, coinciding with the seniors' survey. Most respondents were project coordinators (16), social educators (9), and social workers (5). Regarding intergenerational project experience, 8 had up to 3 years, 16 had 3-5 years, and 14 had more than 5 year experience. An additional survey of previous GCP -funded organisation staff yielded just 6 responses and was excluded due to low participation.

Secondary data was systematised from Royal Foundation databases, providing information on seniors and organisations. Two databases were compiled: the " MRRF seniors database," based on assessment questionnaires from 130 seniors, which includes data on their profiles, volunteering perceptions, involvement, motivation, and impact;

and a second database with key profile indicators for funded organisations - such as legal status, service coverage, staffing, and income-from funding applications and contracts.

The qualitative component included individual and group interviews with staff from funded organizations, seniors, and focus groups with participating children. With staff (13 respondents) was discussed how intergenerational activities began, their formats, changes over time, collaboration with other institutions, perceptions of successful children's activities, and strategies for optimizing and sustaining the project. The seniors (28) were interviewed about their motivations, satisfaction, and relationships with children and staff, using individual or group formats based on their availability. A flexible format was preferred for the seniors, with individual group interviews, depending on their availability and the schedule of activities for seniors and children on the day of the visit. Children's focus groups (39 respondents) addressed intergenerational relationships and the integration of project benefits into school or daily life. Additional evaluation insights came from observations made during visits to the six organizations and the Royal Foundation Generations Centre.

These data were triangulated, while the longitudinal perspective, covering a period of ten years (2015-2024), allowed for the identification of sustainability factors and relevant trends.

The evaluation has inherent limitations such as measuring long-term impact and comparing diverse organisational approaches. Nevertheless, the robust mixed-methodology and triangulation of data sources have enabled the identification of key factors influencing sustainability and the evolution of intergenerational practices at the organisational level.

Results

Profile of funded organisations

GCP, with a total budget of 1.478.000 euro, has funded during the last 10 years 42 centres in 16 counties plus Bucharest, with three counties (Mure , Alba and Cluj) receiving more than half of the total grants awarded (Fig. 1).

More than half of the organisations funded by the GCP were established before 2001 and typically operate at the local or county level; only 6 out of 36 offer services in multiple counties. Most of these organisations are running with small teams, with just 10 out of 36 employing more than ten people. Volunteer working for these organisations also differs greatly: two groups maintain large volunteer bases, five reported between 40 and 50 volunteers, and the rest have no more than 15 to 20 volunteers each.
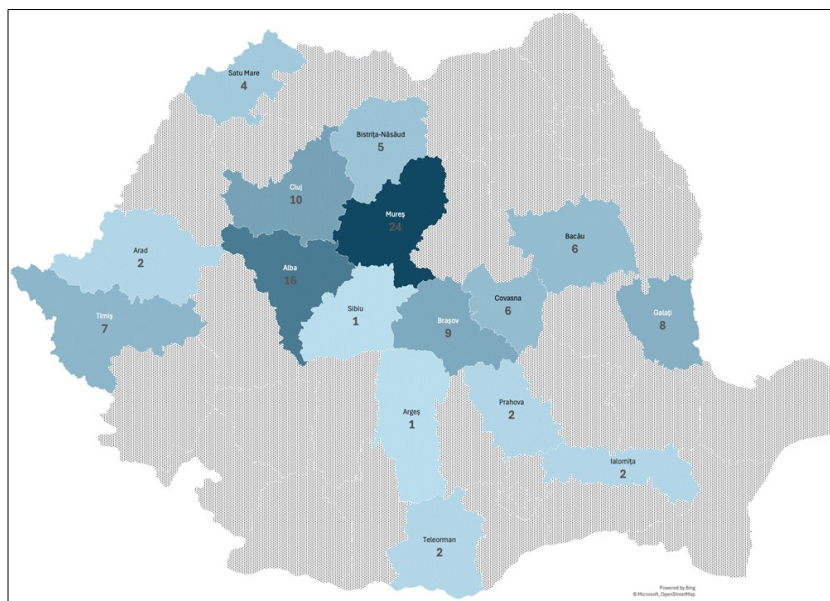

Fig. 1. Distribution of grants for the period 2015-2025 at national level
(Source: MRRF)

The organisations participating in the programme receive funding from a range of sources, including local grants, corporate or NGO partnerships, community donations, and some contributions from foreign donors. The Royal Foundation's annual grant via the GCP has played a key role in building a stable selection of intergenerational activities within day centres. However, securing long-term sustainability remains a persistent challenge. Many NGOs must continually seek ways to function with limited resources, and small organisations, in particular, are vulnerable to sudden funding losses. A shortage of financial support - even if only temporary - can severely restrict the services that these organisations can offer. The organisations working in rural areas face additional hurdles, such as the difficulty of recruiting volunteers due to a limited pool of seniors potentially willing for volunteering, while the organisations implementing the projects in urban areas may have better access to resources, although there are limitations here too. The availability of suitable premises for running programmes is a recurring challenge, with bureaucratic barriers and financial constraints affecting the availability of suitable premises for activities. Despite these difficulties, which are inherent in small organisations such as most of those funded by the GCP, the results achieved are remarkable. The funded organisations are very well anchored in local networks, most of them having strong relationships with local public institutions or other NGOs, as well as with schools. However, even organisations with a good record of previous collaboration with public institutions or authorities, especially schools and The General Directorates of Social Assistance and Child Protection, acknowledge the existence of limitations in terms of formal partnerships, particularly with the public sector. Frequent changes in the priorities of public institutions that make decisions in the field of social services or provide funding affect the continuity and consistency of intergenerational projects, at best temporarily.

The senior volunteers involved in intergenerational activities

Most seniors currently active in intergenerational projects were purposely recruited, most of the organisations starting with a small number of senior volunteers, a core group that formed an important basis for attracting new volunteers in sufficient numbers to implement intergenerational projects.

Almost two-thirds of seniors have been involved in intergenerational projects for up to five years, but the MRRF's senior database provides a more detailed picture, showing that approximately half of seniors have been participating in intergenerational projects for up to three years, and are therefore at the beginning of their volunteering journey, with a quarter of volunteers having significant experience of up to 10 years, which shows both a recent recruitment effort and evidence of long-term loyalty. The average length of participation is approximately 5 years, with a median of 3 years, indicating a moderate dispersion of the duration of volunteer participation. Many of the volunteers have previous experience working with children, which they use to connect with participants and create meaningful learning experiences.

Women predominate among senior volunteers (72%), contrary to survey data representative of the entire population, which shows small differences in participation in volunteer activities based on gender (University of Bucharest, 2024), but given that social services sector is largely feminised might explain this significant gender unbalance.

Table 1. Highest level of education achieved by senior volunteers

	Male		Female	
	No	**%**	**No**	**%**
Primary/secondary school	3	8	10	11
Vocational school	8	22	17	18
High school	4	11	24	25
Post-secondary school	3	8	10	11
University	12	34	28	30
Postgraduate studies	6	17	5	5
Total	36	100	94	100

Source: MRRF seniors database

By their last level of education, almost two-thirds of volunteers have vocational, secondary and post-secondary education, with a significant difference depending on gender, as men with university and postgraduate education have a higher proportion than women (Tab. 1).

Almost one-third of seniors are aged up to 65 years, with another third aged between 65 and 69, which coincides with data from recent studies (Ghen a et al., 2023) showing higher participation among seniors who are close to retirement age. However, organisations funded under the GCP confirm their mission to provide an inclusive framework for seniors by supporting the participation of a significant number of seniors over the age of 70.

Volunteers have a wide range of professional experiences. Although manual occupations and professions dominate, a significant proportion of seniors are former educators, teachers or secondary school teachers who taught physics, chemistry, history or philosophy (Tab. 2).

Some seniors had long careers, with up to 40 years of professional experience. There are senior volunteers who had worked as physicists, seamstresses, military personnel, museum directors, painters, scientific researchers, laboratory chemists, mechanics, carpenters, cooks, transport operators, and jewellery makers, all of whom put their professional experience to excellent use in their activities with children. Despite the variety of occupations and professions, life experience is the common element among seniors and is considered the most valuable asset, allowing them to connect with children through stories, lessons, and a positive attitude.

The initial recruitment of senior volunteers often involved leveraging existing personal networks and community connections. Approximately 75% of active volunteers were recruited mainly through personal contacts, which highlights the importance of social connections and relational capital in attracting new volunteers. In implementing the first intergenerational projects, some organisations began by contacting the parents of children already involved in intergenerational projects or their relatives and friends. This approach proved to be extremely effective, especially in small towns or in rural area where social networks are more extensive and cohesive. Only 20% were recruited through public advertisements (traditional or online media), while the recommendations from other volunteers, pensioners' clubs or churches had a lesser impact. Some organisations held open days to invite seniors to visit their centres and learn about their activities, allowing them to express their interest in participating in the project or just in specific activities tailored to their skills and preferences.

Table 2. Last profession/occupation of senior volunteers

	Male		Female	
	No	%	No	%
Worker/technician/commercial worker/cook	14	39	36	39
Engineer	5	13	6	6
Police officer/military personnel	4	11	-	-
Administrative staff/civil servant/accountant	3	8	13	14
Visual artist	3	8	1	1
Teacher	2	6	24	26
Lawyer	1	3	-	-
Priest	1	3	-	-
Researcher	1	3	1	1
Director	1	3	1	1
Veterinarian	1	3	-	-
Nurse/medical assistant	-	-	5	5
Psychologist	-	-	2	2
IT specialist	-	-	1	1
Pharmacist	-	-	1	1
Housekeeper	-	-	2	2
Security guard	-	-	1	1
Total	36	100	94	100

Source: MRRF senior database

Recruiting senior volunteers also brought challenges, especially in large cities or less socially cohesive areas, a difficulty that has become more pronounced in recent years. Several representatives of the organisations in the programme noted that recruiting senior volunteers is becoming more difficult compared to previous years, especially compared to the pre-pandemic period (2017-2019), with seniors showing reluctance to get involved in activities beyond their daily routine. Another reason may be the exhaustion of the potential of social networks used for recruiting volunteers, which is more likely where the selection pool is very limited.

Recruiting senior volunteers has proven difficult due to their lack of previous experience working with disadvantaged children. The involvement in volunteer activities in intergenerational projects is highly conditioned by a specific profile of the senior. The volunteers must be open-minded, patient and they must prove a genuine desire to work with children and demonstrate adaptability in working with vulnerable children. However, senior volunteers often encountered initial difficulties in managing relationships with children, with most succeeding and some even successfully coordinating large groups.

The dominant motivation for volunteering is the desire to work with children and contribute to their well-being (2/3 of all senior volunteers), followed at a distance by arguments regarding the social utility or personal benefits of volunteering (maintaining vitality, expanding one's social circle, spending time in an enjoyable way) (Tab.3).

This distribution of reasons suggests a predominant orientation towards the needs of others and towards maintaining an active social role, traits specific to intergenerational volunteering, reasons that are more common among senior women than among senior men. There are also significant differences depending on the level of education, with seniors who last attended high school or university being the most likely to consider the joy of working with children as their main reason. Some seniors, particularly those whose own children had moved away, found volunteering to be a way to fill their need for connection and purpose. There are also particular situations, such as that of a senior who mentioned that he sought a form of voluntary involvement after suffering a personal loss. Discussions with volunteers in intergenerational projects revealed valuable personal experiences of seniors, with their unique motivations and experiences, the role of volunteering being essential in maintaining physical and mental health, especially for those who have experienced loss or face loneliness. Some explicitly wanted to give something back to the community, feeling "privileged" and wanting to contribute without financial reward. One senior, after considering that he had achieved his personal and family goals, felt the need to do "something for the community", considering it a different kind of mission from his professional one. A former teacher missed interacting with students and wanted to continue his educational work. One senior found out about the opportunity through a teacher acquaintance, and another simply found out that there was a place where she could help and feel useful. The transition was different for

Table 3. Main reasons for seniors to engage in volunteering (multiple answers)

	No	%
I like to help	45	31
I enjoy working with children	43	29
I enjoy passing on what I know	21	14
My work is useful to society	15	11
Volunteering keeps me active	7	5
I feel useful	6	4
It brings me joy	4	3
Fills my free time	3	2
Volunteering gives me the opportunity to meet new people	2	1
Total	146	100

Source: MRRF senior database

everyone: some needed a few months after retirement to adjust and made the transition gradually, while others got involved in volunteering without a significant break from the end of their professional life.

The benefits experienced by senior volunteers are manifold. Personal satisfaction, strengthening social connections, intellectual stimulation and appreciation of the positive impact on children were consistently mentioned. Some volunteers also highlighted the relationship between volunteering and maintaining physical and mental health, especially for those who have gone through periods of loss or experienced loneliness. Seniors' perceptions of the benefits of participating in volunteer activities show a wider range of positive effects at the personal level compared to the reasons for participating. Participation has positive effects on well-being but also reflects the value attributable to prosocial and altruistic behaviour (Tab. 4).

Children – context, profile and needs

The children benefiting from intergenerational projects come mainly from disadvantaged and vulnerable families facing multiple difficulties. Socio-economic disadvantage is recurrent, with children often coming from low-income families, marginalised communities and families affected by unemployment or precarious employment. A significant proportion of children come from single-parent families or have parents who have gone abroad to work and are raised by their grandparents.

The educational problems faced by children are a major concern for most organisations in the programme. The high dropout rate was mentioned by most of the specialists interviewed, indicating a systemic problem. Many children face significant deficits in basic skills such as reading and arithmetic or have significant gaps in basic knowledge. Often, these children have not attended preschool, a disadvantage that is visible

Table 4. Benefits of involvement in volunteer activities as perceived by seniors (multiple responses)

	No	%
Increased life satisfaction/sense of fulfilment	44	36
It gave me the satisfaction of helping others	32	26
It helped me connect with others / not feel lonely anymore	22	17
It gave me a purpose in life / made me feel useful	14	11
It gave me the opportunity to understand children better	12	10
It kept me active	11	9
It helped me develop personally	7	6
I developed my communication skills	4	3
It made me feel appreciated	4	3

Source: MRRF senior database

In addition, 17% of participants reported that they benefited from new connections with other, thus they are feeling less isolated, which is essential for social integration and cohesion, as older people are more at risk of marginalisation and isolation (S. Lee, 2021) , while participation in voluntary activities counteracts these negative effects (S. Lee, 2023) .

Other notable benefits include rediscovering a personal purpose (11%) and the opportunity to better understand younger generations (10%), which can help strengthen intergenerational relationships. Physical activity and personal development are also present, albeit to a lesser extent (less than 9%).

in contrast to children who have attended kindergarten. The lack of parental support with homework or the lack of interest of parents in the education of children who come to the centres of the organisations in the programme were frequently mentioned in discussions with the staff involved.

Beyond academic difficulties, children constantly face emotional and behavioural challenges. These include emotional deficits caused by a lack of early support, behavioural problems, communication difficulties or aggression. Lack of family support, including emotional neglect, contributes significantly to these problems.

The low level of education of some parents further exacerbates the challenges faced by children. These problems are most visible when children joining the first time the project activities, some being overly emotional or noisy, "restless," but also withdrawn. Children from these families face considerable learning gaps, which requires a substantial effort to remedy.

New and heightened risks for children are arising compared to the past. Bullying and the risk of addictive substance use are more prevalent and dangerous now (Cosma et al., 2024; Save the Children Romania, 2024) with an increasing incidence among younger generation. At the same time, there is a visible increase on number of children with special educational needs, including ADHD, a phenomenon that was less noticeable in the past. However, the most frequently mentioned challenge is the addiction to digital devices, which sometimes makes it difficult to engage children in activities.

Intergenerational projects-types of activities and forms of support for children

Intergenerational funded projects use diverse interventions to meet the complex needs of both children and seniors. Activities include skills workshops, educational support, and personalised emotional assistance, tailored by centre and child requirements. The main objective is to foster a supportive environment for children's educational and socio-emotional growth, particularly focusing on those from disadvantaged backgrounds facing issues such as single-parent families or financial hardship. These projects provide an informal learning environment where children acquire social behaviours and life skills that are not usually taught at school or at home. The volunteers are positive role models, demonstrating appropriate behaviours, such as table manners, which children internalise. This practical learning through observation, which is rarely addressed in school, includes basic social norms and communication in various situations.

The educational approach in intergenerational projects emphasises a combination of theoretical instruction and practical application, with individualised attention tailored to children's different learning speeds. The projects include a wide range of workshops, which have expanded over time, alongside remedial and school preparation activities. Examples include gardening, traditional crafts, cooking and playing music. The workshops are structured around specific themes ensuring continuity and skill development. They are often divided into different sections or activities, with children participating on a rotational basis to ensure that everyone is involved in as many different activities as possible.

A significant activity offered is homework assistance, either for remedial schooling or exam preparation, provided mainly by seniors who have been teachers. This support extends to specialised help for children who have difficulties with key competencies such as reading and writing or performing arithmetic operations, even for secondary school children who have fallen behind in their studies. Most of the time, these activities are also carried out with the help of volunteers who have no previous experience in teaching, but who are well recognised for the quality of the results they achieve with the children. There is also a focus on effective communication and practical learning to supplement theory-based education. Activities include age-appropriate science labs and, for older students, hands-on projects with electrical circuits such as repurposing LED Christmas lights. Overall, children are highly engaged and enthusiastic about these practical experiences.

Reading circles, run by volunteers aiming at making reading consistent and appealing for children who may lose confidence due to distractions or time constraints at school. Students often read aloud in small groups while others summarize, fostering active listening and comprehension.

The thematic diversity of the workshops (ranging from dance, theatre and gardening to tourist orientation and road safety education) demonstrates adaptability and openness to experimentation. The seniors capitalise on both their professional expertise and life experience, contributing to the cohesion of children's groups, the personal development of beneficiaries, and the strengthening of community spirit.

The most popular activities are creative ones (38%), followed by helping children with schoolwork and tutoring (29%) and cooking workshops (25%). This shows a focus on both passing on knowledge and experience and facilitating social interactions and personal development. Creative workshops (painting, art, crafts) attract the largest number of senior volunteers, highlighting their desire to harness

their creativity and share personal passions with other members of the community. School preparation, tutoring and mentoring activities (approximately 39% combined) reflect the involvement of seniors in supporting the education of the younger generation, contributing to reducing inequality in access to educational resources (Tab. 5).

experimenting various forms of support or involvement with children, as is the case with E., a volunteer for almost 3 years at the time of the interview, who mainly offers tutoring sessions in mathematics and physics, using practical experiments and real-world examples to help children understand scientific principles, but also organises various workshops and activities, such

Table 5. Activities in which seniors are involved in intergenerational projects (multiple answers)

Workshop	No	%
Creative workshops	35	38
School preparation/tutoring for children	27	29
Cooking workshops	23	25
Technology workshops / workshops for developing manual skills	18	19
Life skills development workshops	18	19
Environmental education workshops	14	15
Reading workshops	14	15
Skills development workshops	12	13
Recreational activities / general themed workshops	11	12
Mentoring	9	10
Physical education activities	5	5
Gardening	5	5
Financial education workshops	3	3
Tourist orientation workshops	3	3
Foreign language workshops	3	3
Education for health, nutrition and healthy lifestyle	3	3
Dance, theatre, music and art	3	3
Road safety education	1	1
Good manners and ethics club	1	1

Source: Senior survey (N=93)

A central aspect of intergenerational projects is the personalised support offered to children. This supportive environment helps children, especially those from difficult backgrounds, to develop empathy and a sense of belonging.

The projects actively respond to the diverse needs of children, including those in care homes or children with special needs. The focus is on facilitating integration and understanding diversity, helping children overcome aggressive tendencies and develop empathy. Working with children, especially those in care or with special needs, presents significant emotional and practical difficulties, but these are handled excellently by senior volunteers.

Even though most volunteers prefer or are encouraged to adopt a specialised involvement in a particular type of activity or a limited set of activities, through the thematic organisation of workshops, there are also volunteers

as arts and crafts, flower planting and a literature circle to encourage children to read more. E. demonstrates creativity in finding solutions to various inherent constraints (lack of adequate space for organising activities, limited resources, etc.). This type of approach is not characteristic of most volunteers, but where it does occur, it is immediately noticeable and appreciated for the effects it has on the beneficiary children.

The impact of intergenerational projects
The interviews with staff involved in projects implementation revealed a consistent and overwhelmingly positive impact of intergenerational activities on children's development. Significant improvements were noted in both academic performance and socio-emotional well-being. Numerous examples were discussed of children overcoming difficulties at school, reducing deficits and, more importantly,

beginning to develop perseverance in their schoolwork. Although the perspective of impact on school performance takes precedence, it is also clear that the socio-emotional benefits are even more profound and long-lasting. This type of impact includes increased self-esteem, confidence, emotional balance, empathy, patience, tolerance, and improved communication skills. The development of strong and supportive relationships with senior volunteers is consistently identified as a key factor in these positive changes.

However, accurately measuring the impact of intergenerational projects in a comparable way is a serious challenge. A major difficulty is identifying robust indicators to meet expectations for immediate results, even though the impact of support, particularly psychosocial assistance and personal development aid, cannot be observed immediately and sometimes the intervention can take years to show positive effects. Working with children with very different needs, with different rates of learning or assimilation of the benefits of participating in intergenerational projects makes difficult to measure progress, and especially the sustainability of the benefits they gain. There are also particular situations that involve a difficult background, such as children who have been exposed to bullying or violence or who, although very rare, have experienced substance abuse. Building an alliance with these children, creating a plan and maintaining the therapeutic process to change old patterns are crucial, and even the simple fact that a child shares their experiences is considered a success. However, one of the main outcomes of the outcomes of the intergenerational model is that children reap benefits in the form of improved school performance, optimal emotional well-being, and the development of essential social skills. In turn, seniors experience a new sense of personal purpose and fulfilment and are less at risk of loneliness. This positive cycle is central to the success of intergenerational projects.

The interviews with staff members, seniors, and children revealed countless examples of success, some in the area of academic performance, others concerning the emotional development of children or seniors, which are sometimes seen as representative of the efforts of organisations implementing intergenerational projects. Such forms of impact are noted even in activities less likely to generate emotional impact, such as the workshops focused on manual activities. For example, the volunteers involved in a series of painting, beadwork or cooking workshops reported how children who were initially disruptive and uncooperative became more attentive, responsible and eager to learn, without the activity explicitly proposing any form of emotional intervention. The volunteers also emphasised the importance of patience, understanding and providing a supportive environment for children, many of whom are already facing significant difficulties.

The impact of intergenerational projects on senior volunteers was consistently reported as positive. Significant emotional and psychological benefits have been highlighted, with senior volunteers reporting a renewed sense of purpose and fulfilment, less isolated or with an increased self-esteem.

Many senior volunteers find deep satisfaction and purpose in their work with children and teenagers. This satisfaction comes from seeing the children's progress, helping them overcome difficulties at school and witnessing their development. For some, it is a pursue of a personal goal, for others it is a way to fill the void left by retirement or to make use of their skills and passions. The volunteering activity offers an alternative to the daily routine and potential monotony of retirement, providing a sense of usefulness and involvement. They feel useful when they can solve problems or teach children new skills, such as sewing or painting.

Working with children, especially teenagers, is seen as a major challenge. There is a desire to cultivate empathy and social skills, counteracting the competitive pressures that children often face. The volunteers also recognise the importance of providing a supportive environment for children in difficulty, experiencing various forms of reward, both tangible and intangible. The direct interaction with children, seeing their happiness and receiving their affection are important emotional rewards. Beyond the emotional rewards, there are also gestures of gratitude from children and their families, often in the form of invitations to celebrations or simple visits, which reinforce the volunteers' sense of value and connection.

The responses of seniors in the online survey highlight that interaction with younger generations becomes a source of learning for them as well, as they in turn receive numerous valuable lessons,

from openness to novelty to familiarisation with technology or discovering flexibility in thinking.

The intergenerational projects promote adaptability, empathy, communication skills and well-being, helping to strengthen community spirit and develop a positive attitude towards volunteering and lifelong learning. Seniors often learn from children, gain new perspectives, rediscover simple joys and remember their own youth. Volunteering encourages them to keep up to date with the latest developments, seek additional information and prepare thoroughly for each session. Most of the responses obtained from seniors in the online survey focus on aspects related to adaptability, tolerance, and communication skills, indicating a clear orientation towards cultivating flexibility and openness to the diversity of situations and needs of children, as well as a concern for updating digital skills. although the increasing prevalence of smartphone addiction among children and young people was mentioned as an obstacle to their involvement in activities and discussions, reducing their ability to concentrate and develop meaningful relationships.

A notable proportion of the benefits relate to relationships and emotions. It is also worth noting that some volunteers see participation as an opportunity to combat loneliness or discover a *"different dimension of life"*, which shows the potential of projects to bring about significant changes in the lives of those involved. Less frequently mentioned benefits, such as *"seeing the world through their eyes", "discovering children's creativity", "not taking things too seriously" or "playing",* show the value placed on non-formal and informal learning types, based on openness, joy and curiosity. Even if these dimensions are not quantitatively central, they suggest a diversification of the volunteers' experience.

A recurring benefit is the profound sense of usefulness and purpose experienced by seniors. Many seniors say that feeling useful is the most important benefit of involvement, often mentioning that this is the essential aspect. Volunteering provides a sense of mission and personal growth, with some describing the experience as a "reset" or "reinvention" of themselves. Most of the seniors interviewed emphasised that feeling useful and contributing to society is essential, especially after retirement, when some feel that their purpose diminishes. This usefulness is often linked to a desire to give back, share knowledge and see the positive impact they have on children. Helping children is described as deeply motivating, providing a sense of continuity and purpose.

Volunteering brings significant personal and social benefits. Participation in these projects encourages them to engage in new activities, to get ready and present themselves, thus stimulating a renewed sense of purpose and self-esteem. The mental stimulation is essential for maintaining cognitive health and preventing memory decline (Cattan et al., 2011; Jiang et al., 2021; Morrow-Howell et al., 2003, 2009; Wheeler et al., 1998) . Thus, volunteer work serves as a refuge from the daily routine, especially for those who had an intense professional life before retirement. In fact, these individuals also have the shortest period between retirement and involvement in volunteer work (Tab. 6).

The centres also offer a lively community, an opportunity for friendship and interaction, which is particularly valuable for seniors who might otherwise face isolation, such as those who live alone or have families far away. Beyond the emotional benefits, there are also physical

Table 6. Do you believe that your participation in this project has a positive impact on: (%)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Totally agree	NS/ NR
Mental state	1	-	3	23	73	-
Emotional state	1	-	2	28	69	
Ability to understand younger generations	2	-	2	28	68	-
Creativity	1	-	-	34	63	2
Learning capacity	1	-	2	34	63	-
Ability to adapt to new situations	1	-	2	34	63	-
Communication with others	2	-	1	34	63	-
Personal development	2	-	1	34	61	2
Physical condition (e.g. mobility)	1	1	5	37	52	4

Source: Senior survey (N=93)

benefits: activities encourage seniors to be more active, both at the centre and through organised outings. This involvement contributes to maintaining physical and psychological health, helping them to stay active and combat physical inactivity, which is associated with isolation, a major risk faced by seniors after retirement.

There is consensus among staff from funded organisations on the impact of the intergenerational activities on children, especially to children from disadvantaged backgrounds, providing forms of support that promote both academic and socio-emotional progress. Although the activities and approaches vary, the common thread is fostering a supportive and engaging environment that responds to children's needs. The interviews with staff and volunteers provide frequent examples of children who had experienced difficulties at school and who, after receiving individualised support, developed a more positive outlook, an effect that may not always be accompanied by an immediate improvement in school results. However, beyond grades, success also involves cultivating a more open attitude towards education or increasing self-confidence, without which there is a serious barrier to the functional integration of these children into the education system.

Positive behavioural changes, such as a child beginning to adhere to group rules and respect others, can be notable achievements, especially for those who entered intergenerational project activities with significant difficulties. A key aspect highlighted is the link between a child's emotional state and their academic performance. When a child is going through a period of emotional stress or has undisclosed difficulties, their school results tend to decline. In such cases, intervention must involve parents or caregivers, as simply intervening to improve school results is counterproductive when the child is emotionally vulnerable. This suggests a different order of interventions, prioritising emotional support over academic support. Furthermore, large gaps in core school subjects can make recovery impossible without a thorough understanding, which is an additional challenge to the success of the intervention.

Strengthening socio-emotional skills is a recurring theme, highlighted in almost all interviews with staff or volunteers. Improvements in self-esteem, emotional regulation, social skills and sense of belonging were frequently mentioned. The development of strong relationships between children and senior volunteers was repeatedly highlighted as a key factor among the positive outcomes. These relationships often provide the emotional support and sense of security that some children lack at home. The staff involved in intergenerational projects, as well as volunteers, provided a range of compelling anecdotal evidence, describing specific cases of children who overcame emotional challenges and developed self-confidence. One success story highlights the transformation of a beneficiary child, I., initially described as maladjusted, prone to tantrums and severe behavioural problems, to the extent that the school had recommended his transfer to a special school. He had difficulty reading, was unable to string words together into coherent structures and did not respond to simple instructions, but through dedicated intervention and individualised support, I. made remarkable progress in one year, becoming able to read independently and be "well-behaved", demonstrating that perseverance in providing adequate emotional support and the learning process can produce significant positive changes. Intergenerational projects often include children with such difficulties who, before receiving educational support, often need help with problems such as aggression, which is particularly common among children from difficult backgrounds.

The collective power of the group, the presence of seniors, and the support provided by specialists help to reduce extreme emotional fluctuations in children. The constant presence and understanding of adults helps children overcome emotional difficulties, such as shyness or impulsiveness, leading to greater ease and openness.

The role of volunteers in supporting socio-emotional development has been consistently highlighted by the staff of funded organisations. The volunteers provide emotional support, mentoring and positive adult role models, which is particularly beneficial for children who do not have stable parental figures. The strong bonds that form often lead to increased self-confidence, social skills, and emotional well-being. In most of the centres visited, there is a common atmosphere of support, similar to a family, where children feel valued and understood. Through various activities and personalised attention, the staff aims to build the

children's self-esteem and respond to their emotional needs. For many children, the centre is a vital alternative to a difficult family environment, providing a safe space with opportunities for personal development and social integration.

Improving school performance and developing key skills remain, however, the central outcomes of the intervention, and are achieved through individual academic support, such as tutoring and homework assistance, but also indirectly, through skills development workshops that stimulate cognitive skills and practical knowledge. The projects have a significant impact on the educational outcomes of children, with most of the initial beneficiaries continuing their studies at vocational schools or high schools. Cases of school dropout or non-attendance are exceptions among children attending the centres, with some cases showing remarkable results, as reported by two organisations that have succeeded in significantly reducing school dropout rates among children attending the day centres they run. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds begin to prioritise education, breaking the cycle of disadvantage in families with low levels of education. In the case of major exams such as the baccalaureate or national assessments, there are notable leaps in performance, but daily, gradual progress, is also seen as valuable. Beyond academic results, this support also contributes to the child's emotional state, making them calmer and more focused on their studies. However, it is recognised that a rapid and significant recovery in a poorly assimilated school subject is generally admitted as not realistic.

Beyond educational support, intergenerational projects facilitate the acquisition of practical skills. Children develop various skills, such as playing the guitar, cooking, sewing, and calligraphy - skills that are often not trained at home or at school. These activities, even if they do not seem directly related to an educational objective or a child's central concern, contribute to neuromotor development and the formation of new learning connections (Shi & Feng, 2022) . Participation in activities also creates a sense of security and predictability through structured and regular workshops, which children look forward to. Positive interactions between children and senior volunteers are a significant outcome, contributing to the development of attachment and social skills. Children participate enthusiastically,

even those without specific skills, and positive behavioural changes have been observed, especially in children from disadvantaged family backgrounds.

The effectiveness of the intergenerational model

The evaluation clearly shows that the success of intergenerational projects depends on a multifactorial approach, including diversified funding strategies, extensive local partnerships, effective volunteer recruitment strategies, and flexible project design tailored to the needs and interests of children and senior volunteers. What initially was perceived as a major methodological difficulty in identifying common elements of the projects turned out to be their major advantage, namely the ability to flexibly activate and amplify latent social resources in communities, transforming interpersonal connections into opportunities for mutual support in intergenerational intervention. The flexible design of the projects thus proves essential for adapting to rapid changes in the educational and social environment. The structure of the projects allows for the customisation of interventions according to the particularities of the children and local resources, thus managing to address the priority needs of the beneficiaries. Another advantage of most projects is their modular structure, which allows for adjustment according to the number of beneficiaries, their profile and resources. Another factor contributing to the effectiveness of the activities is the ratio between seniors and children, which is optimally ensured by minimum limits on the number of seniors involved in intergenerational projects. Contextual and community factors also appear to be very important. The communities with high social capital seem to offer a more favourable environment for the development of intergenerational initiatives, as a high pre-existing level of social cohesion facilitates the achievement of results much more quickly, allowing for more efficient use of resources and local opportunities in intergenerational activities. The existing infrastructure provided by schools, community centres and churches offers opportunities for expanding intergenerational activities. An example of good practice is the partnership between the Inocen i Foundation from Bistri a and a local high school, whose students are involved in the organisation's volunteer

activities by helping children with their homework. Young and senior volunteers thus bring complementary skills and perspectives, which optimises the results for children. Seniors offer stability, patience and life experience, while young people facilitate dynamic activities and connect more easily with the younger generations.

Therefore, the success of the intergenerational model is determined by a synergy between human resources (staff, volunteers, partners), financial resources, community involvement and the ability to adapt to the context. Intervention models that capitalise on these elements succeed in reducing educational gaps and creating stimulating contexts for children's socio-emotional development.

Conclusions

The GCP evaluation provides robust evidence of outcomes and benefits for seniors and children from vulnerable backgrounds. Seniors reported an increase in quality of life and better social participation, and children demonstrated the development of social and emotional skills through interaction with adults. The programme's effectiveness can be attributed to its flexibility, partnerships, institutional support from Royal Foundation, and diversification of local approaches. The organisations involved implemented models tailored to the particularities of the community, and collaboration with Royal Foundation contributed to professional development and the expansion of activities.

The impact on seniors is reflected in a significant improvement in their quality of life after retirement. Involvement in intergenerational projects reduces the risk of social isolation and values personal experience and social contribution. For many senior volunteers, these activities facilitate cognitive stimulation, continuous development and the strengthening of social networks. Another relevant effect is the explicit recognition of the progress made by beneficiary children and the appreciation of the expertise accumulated throughout life.

For beneficiary children, especially those from vulnerable backgrounds, GCP goes beyond the educational component, having a major socio-emotional impact. Interaction with senior adults contributes to the development of empathy, patience and social skills, with seniors becoming stable role models and positive examples, especially for children lacking adequate family support.

The organisations participating in the programme developed various intervention models, adapted to local resources and the specific needs of the communities in which they operate. This diversity, initially perceived as a difficulty in identifying common elements, proved to be one of the defining characteristics of the programme. Flexibility in implementation allowed organisations to respond to different local and y contexts, capitalising on available resources and adapting to changes in the educational and social environment.

At the same time, the evaluation highlights certain limitations that require specific solutions for the future development of the programme: high operational costs for small organisations and funding insecurity, as well as the difficulty of recruiting senior volunteers, especially in rural areas and small towns, caused by demographic and individual factors (e.g. poor health). Beneficiary children are facing new challenges, including increased dependence on technology, which requires innovative pedagogical strategies. Furthermore, the expansion of after-school services reduces the number of beneficiaries in primary education, leading to the adaptation of interventions to secondary school students.

Integrating the intergenerational model into public policy and organisational practice helps address challenges like population ageing, social polarisation, and weakening community ties. The success relies on active volunteer engagement, organisational adaptability, and strong partnerships at multiple levels. The GCP model shows that investing in intergenerational relationships strengthens social cohesion. Expanding this approach, adapted locally and supported financially, can reduce the impact of an ageing population and build solidarity in a rapid ageing society.

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