

INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING AS A TOOL FOR ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION AND SUSTAINABLE LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION

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Abstract

This paper analyses the potential of intergenerational learning (IL) as a specific tool in the field of environmental education and sustainable landscape conservation. The theoretical framework of the article responds to current demographic changes and the weakening of traditional bonds, which require new models of experience-sharing. The paper synthesises findings obtained from the analysis of 20 case studies from the Czech Republic and Slovakia (e.g. the MENDELU Intergenerational University or the Three-Generation Nature School in Prievaly), which were identified as part of the 'Intergenerational STEAM University' project.

The results show that environmental programmes taking place in authentic settings (arboreta, school forests, wetlands) effectively link scientific knowledge with the historical memory of the landscape. Intergenerational interaction in these "living classrooms" leads to a strengthening of environmental responsibility among the younger generation, whilst simultaneously reducing the social isolation of older people by restoring their role as bearers of traditional knowledge. The article concludes that the integration of intergenerational dialogue into public recreation activities represents a sustainable model of environmental education that contributes to social cohesion and more sensitive care for the landscape heritage.

Key words: intergenerational learning, environmental education, landscape conservation, social cohesion, sustainable development

Introduction

Contemporary society is undergoing profound demographic, social and cultural transformations that are fundamentally altering the ways in which different generations meet and interact. A key factor is the demographic ageing of the population, with the number of older people beginning to exceed that of younger members of the population for the first time in history (Newman & Hatton – Yeo, 2008). This trend is accompanied by changes in family structures, increasing geographical mobility and the weakening of traditional intergenerational ties, which previously enabled the natural transfer of experience and values within the family and local community (Kamanová et al., 2026). As a result of these changes, there is an urgent need to create new opportunities for intergenerational dialogue and the mutual sharing of knowledge.

In this context, intergenerational learning appears to be a strategic tool for social cohesion and sustainable development (Sánchez, 2006). The academic literature defines it as a specific learning process that arises as a result of interaction between people belonging to different generations, whereby generational differences (different experiences, perspectives and life paths) serve as the very source of learning (Rabušicová, Kamanová & Pevná, 2011; Rabušicová et al., 2016). Unlike a mere intergenerational encounter, intergenerational learning is a planned process based on reciprocity, meaningful cooperation and shared reflection (Waight & Waight, 2025; Kamanová et al., 2026).

The significant potential of intergenerational learning is particularly evident in the field of environmental education and landscape conservation. Authentic natural environments, such as botanical gardens, arboreta or school forests, create a natural space for intergenerational interaction, where theoretical knowledge is linked with practical experience. Programmes such as the 'MENDELU Intergenerational University' or the 'Three-Generation Nature School' demonstrate that nature can serve as a shared 'classroom' in which the older generation passes on knowledge about landscape cycles, plant cultivation or the historical memory of a place, whilst the younger generation brings new energy, curiosity and modern technological skills.

This synergistic relationship not only leads to the development of participants' individual skills but also has broader community impacts. It contributes to reducing age-related stereotypes, strengthens environmental responsibility and builds a connection to the locality through an understanding of the continuity of landscape development. The aim of this article is to demonstrate, based on an analysis of

selected programmes from the Czech Republic and Slovakia, that linking public recreation with intergenerational education represents a sustainable model of landscape stewardship that respects the needs of all generations whilst protecting natural heritage for the future

Materials and methods

This article is based on data and methodological approaches gathered as part of the international project 'Intergenerational STEAM University' (supported by the Erasmus+ programme), the results of which were published in 2026. The aim of the methodological approach was to identify, analyse and synthesise models of good practice in the field of intergenerational education in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The analysis was based on secondary research (desk research), which was conducted simultaneously in both countries. Existing initiatives were identified using keywords (e.g. 'intergenerational course', 'intergenerational dialogue', 'intergenerational relationships'). The final analysis included only those activities in which intergenerational learning was specifically planned and structured as an educational environment, rather than merely as a chance encounter between different age groups. A total of 137 intergenerational programmes were identified in this way (87 in the Czech Republic and 50 in Slovakia).

Selection and analysis of case studies: 20 examples of good practice (10 from each country) were selected from the identified database using a purposive sampling method. The selection criteria were diversity in terms of objectives, type of organisation and content, to ensure the representativeness of various contexts of intergenerational learning. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with the implementers of these programmes directly within the authentic environment of their organisations.

For the purposes of this article on environmental education, programmes taking place in natural environments or thematically focused on landscape conservation were identified from the sample of 20 case studies and subjected to an in-depth comparative analysis. Specifically, these were:

- The MENDELU Intergenerational University, utilising facilities such as the Křtiny Field School, arboreta and themed gardens.
- The Three-Generation Nature School in Prievaly, focused on biodiversity observation and wetland conservation.
- Connecting Generations in Harmony, working with the concept of herb gardens.

In assessing the impacts of these programmes, MacCallum's (2006) typology of benefits was used, which distinguishes between individual, relational and community outcomes.

Results

An analysis of 20 selected examples of good practice from the Czech Republic and Slovakia showed that intergenerational learning (IL) in natural environments generates specific benefits at the individual, relational and community levels. Environmentally focused programmes utilise authentic settings such as arboreta, school forests, botanical gardens and wetlands, which serve as 'living classrooms'.

Programmes such as the MENDELU Intergenerational University (CZ) demonstrate the effectiveness of experiential learning in the field. During field exercises in arboreta (e.g. Křtiny, Řícmanice), participants learn together about the life cycle of plants, the cultivation of medicinal herbs or the rearing of farm animals. The results suggest that the younger generation gains a deeper insight into ecosystem processes through practical observation, rather than solely from textbooks. Through mentoring and the sharing of experience, older people strengthen their sense of usefulness and their own competence. In the Three-Generation Nature School programme in Prievaly (SK), there is effective sharing of knowledge on biodiversity (ornithology, mycology) and ecological innovations, such as home composting. A significant outcome of intergenerational environmental activities is the renewal of a relationship with the local landscape through shared memory. In the '**Stories of Our Neighbours**' project (CZ) and in the programmes in Prievaly (SK), older people reflect on how the character of the landscape has changed over time.

Sharing stories about what the landscape used to look like (e.g. the location of nests, original wetlands) helps build a connection to the place and a sense of local identity among the younger generation. Programmes such as 'Connecting Generations in Harmony' (SK) use the creation of herb gardens in raised beds to develop seniors' fine motor skills and provide practical education on beekeeping.

Analysis confirms that intergenerational learning in nature reduces age-related stereotypes. In programmes taking place in the authentic setting of school forest enterprises (e.g. ŠLP Křtiny), a transformation of attitudes occurs. Children begin to value the life experiences of older people, whilst older people are surprised by the children's energy and technological proficiency. Joint care for natural elements (e.g. planting herbs, tending gardens) leads to a strengthening of environmental

responsibility and social inclusion. The implementation of programmes in informal outdoor settings (e.g. the Intergenerational Camp in the Vysočina Region) reduces communication barriers and creates space for an equal partnership between generations.

To summarise the results, it can be stated that linking public recreation with intergenerational education creates a sustainable model of environmental education that harnesses the synergy between the historical experience of the older generation and the active approach of young people.

Discussion

The results of the analysis of environmentally focused programmes in the Czech Republic and Slovakia confirm that intergenerational learning represents a significant yet, in the field of landscape conservation, hitherto underappreciated tool. A key finding is that authentic natural environments (botanical gardens, arboreta, wetlands) do not merely serve as a passive backdrop, but as an active 'third educator' that facilitates the breaking down of communication barriers and fosters natural reciprocity.

In line with the theory of intergenerational learning, it appears that environmental education within an intergenerational group transcends the limitations of formal schooling by linking **instrumental content** (knowledge of flora and fauna) with broader themes such as respect for traditions, the historical memory of a place, and environmental responsibility. Programmes such as the 'Three-Generation Nature School' or the 'MENDELU Intergenerational University' demonstrate that collaborative learning in the field leads to a deeper sense of belonging to the landscape, which is a fundamental prerequisite for its sustainable conservation.

However, any discussion of the effectiveness of these programmes must also take into account the identified risks. A common problem in practice is an imbalance of roles, where the senior is perceived merely as a 'fountain of wisdom' and the child as a 'passive listener'. For successful environmental education, it is essential that reciprocity is maintained – for example, a situation where a senior teaches a child about medicinal herbs, whilst the child helps the senior document their findings using modern technology.

Another challenge is the logistical and physical accessibility of natural sites. Whilst more demanding excursions (e.g. to wetlands) are a welcome adventure for the younger generation, they can present a barrier for older people with reduced mobility. A solution appears to be the use of accessible sites (e.g. the Křtiny Nature Education Centre) and sensitive facilitation that can adapt the pace of activities to the capabilities of both groups without separating them.

Combining recreation in the countryside with intergenerational dialogue creates 'bridges of understanding' that help resolve conflicts between the needs of different age groups of landscape users and strengthen respect for our natural heritage. Intergenerational learning in nature is not merely a 'leisure activity', but a method for building the public's relationship with the landscape.

Conclusion

Based on an analysis of programmes from the Czech Republic and Slovakia, this study has demonstrated that intergenerational learning represents a highly effective yet low-cost strategy for environmental education and sustainable landscape conservation. It appears that authentic natural environments, such as arboreta, school forests or themed gardens, do not merely serve as a passive backdrop, but as an active 'third educator' that facilitates the transfer of traditional knowledge and values.

A key finding is that intergenerational interaction within public recreation leads to a strengthening of environmental responsibility among the younger generation, whilst simultaneously reducing the social isolation of older people by restoring their role as bearers of experience and the 'memory of the landscape'. However, the success of these programmes is not automatic; it requires conscious work on objectives, sensitive facilitation and the creation of space for reciprocity, where generations learn not only 'from one another' but, above all, 'together'.

Future development should focus on more systematic links between university departments (e.g. the Křtiny Field School) and local communities in the creation of educational trails that respect the needs of all generations and foster a deeper appreciation of our natural heritage.

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Souhrn

Tento článek zkoumá potenciál mezigeneračního učení (IL) v kontextu ochrany přírody a environmentální výchovy. Mezigenerační učení je definováno jako specifický vzdělávací proces vyvolaný interakcí různých generací, přičemž generační rozmanitost – zahrnující odlišné životní zkušenosti a historické perspektivy – slouží jako primární zdroj učení. Článek shrnuje poznatky z 20 případových studií osvědčených postupů identifikovaných v České republice a na Slovensku na základě sekundárního výzkumu 137 existujících iniciativ. Výsledky naznačují, že environmentální programy mezigeneračního učení realizované v autentickém prostředí, jako jsou botanické zahrady, lesní podniky (např. Masarykův les Křtiny) a mokřady, nabízejí jedinečné přínosy na individuální, vztahové i komunitní úrovni. Konkrétně mezigenerační učení usnadňuje předávání tradičních ekologických znalostí (jako je využívání léčivých rostlin nebo historické obhospodařování krajiny) od starších lidí k mladým, zatímco mladší účastníci vnášejí energii a moderní technologické dovednosti k dokumentaci těchto poznatků. Programy jako „Mezigenerační univerzita MENDELU“ nebo „Třigenerační škola přírody v Prievalách“ dokazují, že kolektivní učení v terénu posiluje hlubší pocit sounáležitosti s krajinou a zvyšuje environmentální odpovědnost všech účastníků.

Z diskuse vyplývá, že aby byl mezigenerační dialog účinný, nesmí se omezovat pouze na pouhá mezigenerační setkání. Vyžaduje odborné vedení, které zajistí vyváženost rolí a vzájemnost a zabrání situacím, kdy jedna generace zůstává pasivním příjemcem. Kromě toho je pro zohlednění fyzických schopností jak dětí, tak seniorů zásadní přizpůsobit tempo a přístupnost aktivit v přírodě.

Závěrem lze říci, že začlenění mezigeneračního dialogu do veřejných rekreačních aktivit a osvětových programů v oblasti životního prostředí představuje udržitelný model pro rozvoj komunity a ochranu krajiny. Tím, že tyto programy podporují vzájemný respekt a sdílenou odpovědnost za životní prostředí, přispívají k budování soudržnější a odolnější společnosti, která si cení svého přírodního dědictví očima všech generací.

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