

Research articles

Intergenerational education at the Universidade da Maturidade: conceptual underpinnings and developmental outcomes for older adults and young children

Educação Intergeracional na Universidade da Maturidade: o que é e quais seus benefícios para o desenvolvimento de pessoas idosas e crianças

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Abstract

The Universidade da Maturidade (UMA) in Tocantins State, Northern Brazil, operates as an outreach program of the Federal University of Tocantins (UFT). This study examined how UMA fosters intergenerational education by creating opportunities for different generations to interact and enabling older adults to share their life experiences. A mixed-methods design was employed, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques within a phenomenological framework. Findings indicate that intergenerational education serves as an effective approach for promoting lifelong learning, beginning in early childhood education, through meaningful integration of diverse age groups within educational settings. The conclusions offer insights into intergenerational education in contemporary society, highlighting the competencies and values that UMA has nurtured among both children and older adults. This research is particularly timely given ongoing social and demographic shifts, including population aging and the continued evolution of intergenerational educational practices.

Keywords: Intergenerational education; knowledge exchange; Universidade da Maturidade; lifelong learning.

Resumo

A Universidade da Maturidade (UMA) no Estado do Tocantins, Região Norte do Brasil, é um programa de extensão da Universidade Federal do Tocantins (UFT). O objetivo é compreender como a UMA promove a Educação Intergeracional, ao reunir diversas gerações e permitir que pessoas idosas compartilhem experiências. A abordagem metodológica é mista, com técnicas qualitativas e quantitativas e métodos fenomenológicos. Os resultados mostram que a Educação Intergeracional é uma estratégia eficaz de promoção da Educação ao Longo da Vida, desde a Educação Infantil, com descrições da integração de diferentes faixas etárias no processo educacional. As conclusões envolvem as reflexões de Educação Intergeracional em tempos contemporâneos, ao compartilhar as competências e valores que a UMA alcançou com crianças e pessoas idosas. De modo que o trabalho é relevante no contexto de mudanças sociais e demográficas, como o envelhecimento populacional e a constante evolução de práticas educacionais intergeracionais.

Palavras-chave: Educação Intergeracional; saberes; Universidade da Maturidade; educação ao longo da vida.

INTRODUCTION

In Northern Brazil, specifically in Tocantins State, a distinctive educational initiative known as the Universidade da Maturidade (UMA) marked its eighteenth year of operation in 2024. As an

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outreach program of the Federal University of Tocantins (UFT), UMA has gained recognition as a Social Technology for its role in facilitating knowledge sharing with the broader community (Santana et al., 2020). Intergenerational education lies at the heart of this initiative, with activities and programs that bring together diverse generations alongside older adults enrolled in the Political Social Educator of Human Aging course, creating rich opportunities for exchanging knowledge, skills, and lived experiences (Osório; Silva Neto, 2021).

This study seeks to illuminate how this educational approach empowers older adults to learn, grow, and share knowledge, competencies, skills, attitudes, and values through educational practices involving cross-generational contact, while undergoing personal transformation through their relationships with others. This topic has taken on increasing significance amid rapid social and demographic change, as population aging and the erosion of family and community ties pose challenges worldwide (Osório; Silva Neto, 2021; Villas-Boas et al., 2016).

Beyond Villas-Boas et al. (2016), numerous international scholars have identified the conditions necessary for intergenerational processes to unfold effectively, incorporating spaces that nurture individual growth across cultural, social, and cognitive dimensions. Building on Palmeirão's (2008) emphasis on intergenerational interaction for fostering mutual understanding and cultivating values such as respect and solidarity, UMA/UFT exemplifies how a university setting can fulfill its institutional mission by facilitating intergenerational knowledge exchange.

The primary aim is to understand how an initiative with eighteen years of experience in the Amazon region can help reduce prejudice and stereotypes about aging while fostering mutual learning that benefits people of all ages (Osório; Silva Neto, 2021). This aligns with what Villas-Boas et al. (2016) describe as connective pathways—enabling people from different generations to come together around shared activities. Intergenerational education thus emerges as a powerful tool for strengthening social bonds and promoting inclusion, particularly in societies experiencing pronounced population aging, a demographic trend clearly evident in Tocantins State (Perisse; Marli, 2020).

This investigation explores the impacts of intergenerational education within the UMA/UFT context using a mixed-methods design that integrates qualitative and quantitative techniques in line with Marconi and Lakatos (2017), complemented by content analysis following Bardin (2011) and phenomenological methods (Merleau-Ponty, 2018). These methodological choices ensured that participants' subjective experiences were captured throughout the 2022-2024 study period.

Our findings reveal how intergenerational education can serve as a pedagogical strategy that advances popular education along pathways of lifelong learning (Gadotti, 2016), beginning with early childhood education (Brasil, 2018). The approach strengthens intergenerational bonds while contributing to the construction of a more cohesive and equitable society. This university-based initiative has garnered international recognition as a model for integrating diverse age groups within educational processes, creating opportunities for mutual development and cross-cultural understanding among people of different ages.

METHOD

A phenomenological approach was adopted to understand the lived experiences of UMA/UFT participants, with particular attention to how they experience and make sense of intergenerational education as a process of knowledge exchange across generations. This approach aimed to capture firsthand accounts from UMA students—older adults—as well as participants from other generations, ranging from children to young people and adults involved in projects utilizing Social Technology across early childhood, elementary, secondary, and higher education settings. The investigation explored the essence of intergenerational relationships and their influence on participants' perceptions and attitudes (Martins; Bicudo, 1989).

Phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 2018) was selected to examine how participants make meaning of their interactions with other generations, providing access to their subjective perceptions and experiences of intergenerational education. The sample comprised sixty-four

participants spanning different generations, recruited through convenience sampling to ensure diversity of profiles. Data were gathered during intergenerational activities conducted over three years (2022-2024), with weekly sessions including conversation circles, hands-on workshops, and collaborative projects held at UMA/UFT spaces on the Palmas Campus in the state capital.

Data collection involved interviews designed to elicit participants' subjective experiences and perceptions of intergenerational relationships, exploring the feelings and reflections that emerged from these exchanges (Martins; Bicudo, 1989). Interviews were conducted in an open-ended format, allowing participants to freely share their perceptions of their experiences. Field notes provided qualitative data documenting learning outcomes before and after each activity.

Data analysis drew on two complementary approaches. First, Giorgi's (1997) method ensured rigor in interpreting qualitative data while seeking the essence of participants' lived experiences—moving from careful reading of participant accounts to developing a descriptive structure presented in tables and discussions grounded in established theory (Marconi; Lakatos, 2017). Concurrently, following Bardin (2011), qualitative data were organized into key themes, enabling validation and methodological triangulation by comparing findings with existing theories to ensure consistency and provide a robust, nuanced understanding of intergenerational education at UMA/UFT.

RESULTS

Intergenerational education is an educational model that brings together diverse age groups in learning and social activities, enriching educational experiences, strengthening bonds among individuals of different ages, and promoting cross-generational interaction toward building more cohesive and supportive communities (Palmeirão, 2008; Villas-Boas et al., 2016; Osório; Silva Neto, 2021). Building on this theoretical foundation, it is essential to consider the contributions of intergenerational education in creating opportunities for children, adolescents, young people, adults, and older adults to share knowledge and experiences.

Among these challenges, Palmeirão (2008, p. 24-25) identifies attitudinal change as paramount:

The central challenge remains attitudinal change, requiring a decisive break from prejudiced views of older people and clarification of their place in society [...] Current generations clearly do not always benefit from targeted, effective intergenerational education strategies [...] The emergence of a 'world-society' calls for a new mindset and, above all, a civic and solidarity-based culture in which life practices follow diversified paths aligned with ideals of responsible autonomy and citizenship.

In line with Villas-Boas et al. (2016) conceptualization of intergenerational education, UMA/UFT has implemented practices that help bridge generational divides. Participants reported that different life perspectives were valued and understood during the exchanges facilitated by this Social Technology. Despite obstacles that Palmeirão (2008) identifies as potential barriers, participant accounts indicate that meaningful learning occurred through intergenerational knowledge exchange. As illustrated in Figure 1, findings reveal enhanced understanding of the needs and challenges faced by each age group, fostering empathy and solidarity among participants.

Drawing on the National Education Guidelines and Bases Law (Brasil, 1996) as a framework for organizing Brazilian education in accordance with Federal Constitution principles, findings in this publication were organized based on observations from projects involving relationships between young children and older adults at UMA/UFT. Specifically, this analysis draws on interactions and play designed for early childhood education—the first stage of basic education—and lifelong learning processes within popular education as outlined by Gadotti (2016).

Consistent with current legislation and UMA/UFT's historical trajectory, it bears noting that:

Lifelong learning should not be confused with adult education, as the 'lifelong' principle itself indicates that education occurs at all ages, not solely in adulthood. Moreover,

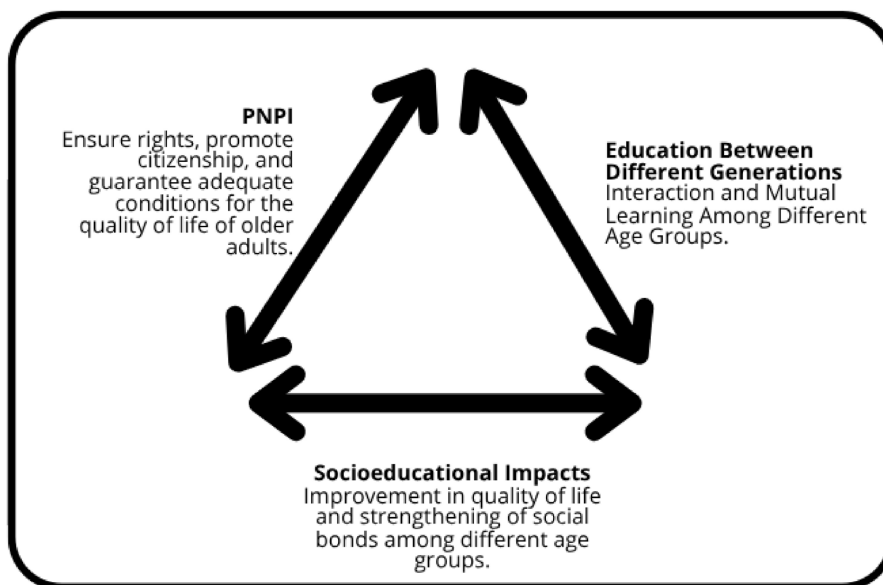


Figure 1. Socio-educational Impacts of Intergenerational Education in Light of the National Policy for Older Adults.

Source: Brasil (2022). Figure by Osório and Oliveira (2024).

since lifelong learning takes place in both formal and informal settings, reducing this concept to formal education would strip it of one of its greatest strengths. Lifelong learning should therefore not be equated with formal education (Gadotti, 2016, p. 3).

Furthermore, intergenerational interaction positively shapes how each group perceives the other, helping to reduce prejudices and stereotypes that warrant attention from the earliest years of schooling and throughout life. Freire (1967) argues that by cultivating an environment of mutual learning and respect, education can break down barriers and promote the freedom that knowledge affords through a more harmonious understanding of the world. Achieving this requires embracing the legal frameworks that guide what Brazilian education should offer as direct benefits to learners.

The participants in this study were characterized by age diversity and intentional engagement in meaningful intergenerational encounters at the Universidade da Maturidade in Palmas, Tocantins. The initiative brought together 15 older adults aged 62 to 75 and 32 children aged 4 to 5, creating a pluralistic, dialogic, and inclusive educational environment. This age composition enabled the circulation of knowledge, life experiences, and mutual learning while challenging age-segregated educational models and reaffirming education as a continuous, relational process across the lifespan—a perspective aligned with understanding generation as a dynamic, historically situated social position (Britto da Motta, 2010).

The older adult group consisted primarily of retirees: six from the public sector and seven from private industry. One participant remained in informal employment, while another worked as a homemaker. In terms of educational background, two held university degrees, ten had completed secondary education, and three had not finished elementary school. These trajectories reflect diverse professional, family, community, and cultural histories that, as Britto da Motta (2010) argues, demonstrate that generational identity extends beyond chronological age to encompass relationships of belonging, social recognition, and historically constructed positions.

The children's group, comprising boys and girls from municipal public early childhood programs, found valuable learning opportunities through their interactions with older adults, mediated by attentive listening, curiosity, and the formation of emotional bonds. As Britto da Motta (2010) observes, intergenerational relationships are shaped by both affection and power dynamics; when experienced in educational contexts, they can cultivate solidarity. From this standpoint, intergenerational relationships contribute to children's social, emotional, and cognitive development by fostering respect for differences, appreciation of others' experiences,

and a broader understanding of the life course, thereby strengthening education rooted in dialogue, affection, and holistic development from early childhood.

This focus on older adults' perceptions of their interactions with early childhood settings represents an initial step toward strengthening intergenerational education across age groups—from relationships between infants and grandparents to young children in the first stage of basic education (Brasil, 1996). As outlined in Figure 2, UMA/UFT promotes such integration from the earliest years, positioning itself as an educational model that helps build a more cohesive, supportive, and inclusive community where each member, regardless of age, takes an active role in fostering social cohesion.

Perisse and Marli (2020) document the growth of population aging, with increasing numbers of older adults interacting more frequently with younger generations. This engagement extends beyond the household to public educational settings such as daycare centers which, according to Oliveira (1992), emerged as childcare sites in response to industrialization, particularly as more women entered the workforce.

Regarding this development, Oliveira (1992, p. 18) explains:

Factory owners, seeking to weaken workers' movements, began offering certain social benefits and new forms of worker discipline. They sought to control workers' behavior both inside and outside the factory. To this end, they established worker housing, sports clubs, and daycare centers and nursery schools for workers' children. Factory owners came to see childcare provision as advantageous, reasoning that more satisfied working mothers would be more productive.

In Palmas, the daycare centers described by Oliveira (1992) are now designated Early Childhood Education Centers, reflecting the legislative emphasis on "caring and educating" as inseparable elements of pedagogical practice that promotes child development. As policy documents state, this represents "[...] the beginning and foundation of the educational process. Entering daycare or preschool typically marks children's first separation from family bonds as they join a structured socialization environment" (Brasil, 2018, p. 36).

In addressing the challenges facing intergenerational education and its contribution to education that genuinely supports development and learning, UMA/UFT demonstrates how principles established in the early school years can be woven together with other life stages through learning experiences that foster holistic individual growth. Participant accounts reveal how learning rights—including playing, socializing, and exploring—form the bedrock of comprehensive education while nurturing cognitive and socio-emotional competencies that are valued today and will accompany individuals throughout their educational journey.

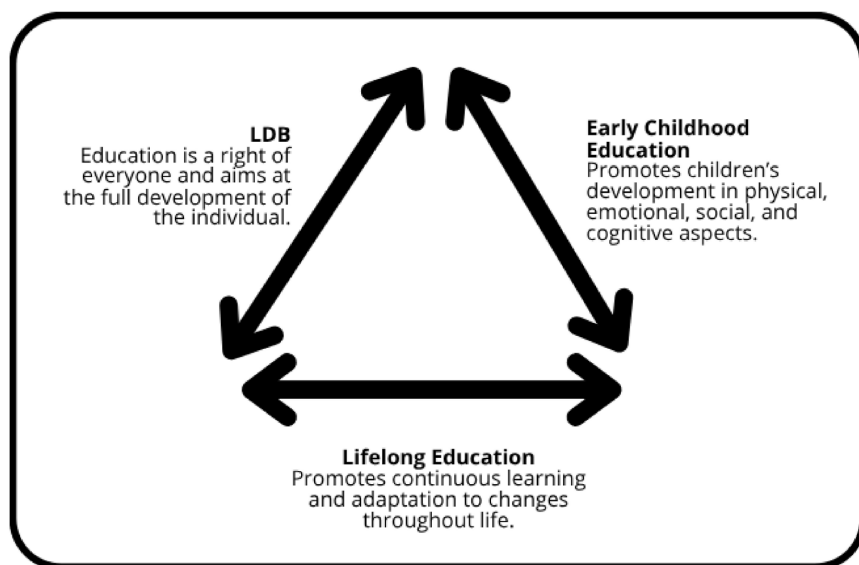


Figure 2. Conceptual Links among Early Childhood Education, Lifelong Learning, and the LDB.

Source: Brasil (2018) and Gadotti (2016). Figure by Osório and Oliveira (2024).

DISCUSSION

Several insights emerge from UMA/UFT's experience, as bringing together different ages in Social Technology activities helps foster an environment of mutual support and respect. Gadotti (2016) highlights such interaction within popular education as a catalyst for developing cooperative attitudes and values of solidarity. The theoretical and methodological foundations underpinning intergenerational education have become clearly evident through UMA/UFT's eighteen years of operation, consolidated in 2024, as the program has built a social support network that benefits all participants. As active agents—individually and collectively—younger participants bring fresh perspectives brimming with ideas, while older adults share practical wisdom in enriching exchanges that deepen bonds among those experiencing the freedom and dialogue inherent in this process (Freire, 1967).

Building on these insights, our reflection on intergenerational education examined how participants express curiosity in engaging with educational routines, nurtured through dialogue and collective participation as practiced at UMA/UFT. As Freire (1983, p. 27) observes:

Knowledge, by contrast, requires the curious presence of the subject before the world. It demands transformative action on reality. It requires constant inquiry. It involves invention and reinvention. It calls for each person's critical reflection on the very act of knowing, through which one recognizes oneself as a knower and, in doing so, grasps both the 'how' of knowing and the conditions that shape it.

Table 1 was developed to illustrate, drawing on the National Policy for Older Adults (Brasil, 2022), how UMA/UFT cultivates a sense of belonging and community identity among older adults as they acquire new knowledge. It also shows how younger participants, through intergenerational education, are encouraged to engage actively in community life, strengthening interpersonal bonds and enhancing social cohesion. Active, committed participation proves essential for building a robust, inclusive community where each generation feels valued as an integral part of the whole.

We thus underscore the importance of including older adults in these settings—a mission UMA/UFT fulfills through projects involving the city's Early Childhood Education Centers. These serve as sites of intergenerational exchange through play and interactions documented in this study, advancing our understanding of intergenerational education as a two-way exchange of knowledge and experience. This interchange creates dynamic, varied educational environments where children and older adults learn from one another (Table 2).

The National Common Curricular Base's early childhood section is thus invoked to present intergenerational education as a framework for creating learning environments that honor diverse forms of knowledge across generations. As Villas-Boas et al. (2016) note, the diversity of experiences and perspectives enriches educational processes, making them more inclusive and comprehensive—addressing Palmeirão's (2008) concern that current generations receive targeted, effective intergenerational education.

From this vantage point, Table 2 presents qualitative findings on intergenerational education at UMA/UFT through an integrated analysis linking early childhood education (Brasil, 2018) and lifelong learning (Gadotti, 2016). This interpretation highlights how principles set forth in the BNCC for early childhood education, together with interactions between children and older adults at UMA/UFT, foster competency development that shapes continuous learning across the lifespan.

Findings point to the strengthening of older adults' social agency, the appreciation of their knowledge and memories, and recognition of their social roles beyond age-based categories. For children, gains are evident in the development of respectful, empathetic attitudes and active listening skills, along with a broader understanding of the life course and learning enriched by affection and intergenerational connection, consistent with principles set out in the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC) for this developmental stage. In line with Britto da Motta (2010), these findings confirm that intergenerational relationships, when experienced in educational settings, help reframe old age as an active, meaning-generating social position, challenging stereotypes long associated with dependence and unproductivity.

Table 1. Socio-educational Impacts of UMA/UFT in Light of the National Policy for Older Adults.

Aspect	Results	Socioeducational Impacts
Promotion of knowledge and a sense of belonging and community identity	UMA/UFT promotes events and activities that celebrate the history and contributions of older adults and strengthen the sense of belonging and identity.	UMA/UFT ensures learning and strengthens older adults' self-esteem by reinforcing their connection with knowledge and the community.
Active participation in activities with younger people	The intergenerational education observed at UMA/UFT encourages younger people to engage in community activities and learn from older adults.	UMA/UFT increases the engagement of both younger people and older adults in community dynamics and promotes an enriching exchange between them.
Strengthening of social bonds and social cohesion	Intergenerational dynamics at UMA/UFT facilitate communication and mutual understanding and strengthen bonds among community members.	UMA/UFT results in a more cohesive and integrated community, where each generation learns throughout life and feels valued both individually and as part of a shared collective.
Valuing traditional knowledge	UMA/UFT promotes the exchange of knowledge between generations, valuing the traditional and cultural knowledge of older adults while also recognizing the innovations of younger generations.	UMA/UFT preserves local cultural and historical heritage, while fostering respect for and appreciation of older adults within the community.
Digital and technological inclusion of older adults	UMA/UFT offers workshops and courses that empower older adults in the use of digital technologies and other tools that facilitate their integration into the digital world.	It promotes older adults' autonomy in the use of technologies, reduces digital exclusion, and increases their social and civic participation.

Source: Brasil (2022). Table by Osório and Oliveira (2024).

Table 2. Influence of the National Education Guidelines and Bases Law (LDB).

Aspect	Early Childhood Education	Lifelong Education
Learning rights of children and older adults	UMA/UFT promotes moments that address learning rights in Early Childhood Education, such as living together, playing, participating, and exploring.	UMA/UFT establishes a solid foundation for lifelong learning and fosters the holistic development of older adults.
Development of competencies in children and older adults	UMA/UFT focuses on the development of socioemotional and cognitive competencies from the earliest years of life.	UMA/UFT creates conditions for the development of competencies that support the formation of autonomous and critical individuals throughout life.
Inclusion and diversity of children and older adults	UMA/UFT values cultural diversity and respects the individual differences of the children who participate in its projects.	UMA/UFT respects diversity and works in ways that positively impact social interaction and inclusion throughout life.
Accessibility and adaptation for children and older adults	UMA/UFT encourages inclusive practices to ensure that children, regardless of their conditions, actively participate in activities.	UMA/UFT designs its projects with accessibility adaptations, according to the needs of older adults and other participants, to support learning throughout life.
Playful methodologies for children and older adults	UMA/UFT engages in play with children, that is, it adopts playful approaches to stimulate children's curiosity and creativity.	UMA/UFT employs active methodologies that extend into adulthood and keep older adults engaged in the process of continuous learning.

Source: Brasil (2018) and Gadotti (2016). Table by Osório and Oliveira (2024).

At the same time, challenges accompanying the development of intergenerational practices include differences in learning pace, communication styles, and expectations across generations, calling for sensitive, sustained, and carefully planned pedagogical facilitation. As Britto da Motta (2010) notes, intergenerational relationships are shaped by asymmetries and power dynamics that do not simply dissolve through proximity, requiring purposeful educational interventions to transform them into genuine experiences of exchange and solidarity. An additional institutional challenge lies in ensuring the continuity and systematization of intergenerational initiatives so that they become embedded as core practices within lifelong learning.

CONCLUSION

Intergenerational education stands out as an educational model that promotes integration and exchange across age groups, enriching learning experiences while strengthening bonds among individuals of different ages. At the Universidade da Maturidade of UFT (UMA/UFT), this approach has helped bridge generational divides and establish an environment of mutual support and respect that nurtures empathy and solidarity among participants.

The socio-educational impacts of intergenerational education are evident in participant accounts, which reveal deeper understanding of the needs and challenges faced by each age group. Data indicate that intergenerational knowledge exchange fostered greater empathy and a sense of solidarity. The study's objectives are thus met by highlighting that the primary challenge lies in shifting attitudes toward the aging population; UMA/UFT's experience shows that integrating different ages helps cultivate a culture of respect and mutual support.

Having reached its eighteenth year, UMA/UFT further demonstrates that intergenerational education strengthens social cohesion and individual recognition. Younger participants contribute fresh perspectives while older adults share practical wisdom. These perceptions underscore the importance of curiosity and critical reflection in the learning process—qualities actively promoted at UMA/UFT through its intergenerational dynamics.

The figures and tables presented illustrate how UMA/UFT, guided by the National Policy for Older Adults and the National Education Guidelines and Bases Law, fosters a sense of belonging and community identity, engages younger generations, and strengthens social cohesion. UMA/UFT's initiatives thus honor traditional knowledge, create meaningful experiences, and affirm each generation's role in building an inclusive community.

This integrated whole comprises interconnected elements—laws, principles, and practices—that, when brought together in initiatives like UMA/UFT, including the presence of older adults in Early Childhood Education Centers and the promotion of intergenerational relationships, enable the creation of educational environments that honor and integrate all stages of life. We affirm the value of intergenerational education, guided by the knowledge and expertise of UMA/UFT, which has established itself as an educational model dedicated to developing the potential, skills, and competencies of individuals across generations.

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Authors contribution

Both authors participated in all stages of the article's production and approved the final version to be published.

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