

Engaging the Local Community in the Exploration of Cultural Heritage in Primary Education

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Abstract

When addressing cultural heritage in early education, it is imperative to closely examine the relationship between the content of cultural heritage itself, human understanding, and perception of cultural heritage. Cultural heritage must be introduced to students from a very early age. Kindergartens and elementary schools are responsible for acquainting students with cultural heritage and teaching them to appreciate the heritage of our ancestors through various didactic approaches. The primary objective of the research presented in this study was to investigate how the local environment is integrated into the teaching of cultural heritage and determine the opinion of the elderly about the teaching and learning of cultural heritage content in primary schools and the level of their involvement in passing it on to younger generations. The study involved 130 participants from the older generation, with an average age of 73 years, ranging from the youngest participant at 62 to the oldest at 96. Data collection was carried out using a questionnaire. The findings reveal that most older generation participants believe that teaching cultural heritage content to students and integrating this content into the teaching at elementary schools in Slovenia is insufficient. Members of the older generation believe that elementary school students enjoy learning about cultural heritage and that promoting children's awareness of cultural heritage is essential. The results also show that most older people in local communities do not cooperate with schools and kindergartens. However, those who do participate do so through workshops and various presentations.

Keywords

Culture, Heritage, Students, School, Didactics

1. Introduction

Cultural heritage plays a significant role in shaping an individual's identity, as the elements of cultural heritage are reflected in the personality and uniqueness of each individual (Bogataj, 1992; Bogataj et al., 2005). Cultural heritage is divided into tangible and intangible heritage; together as a whole, they represent the treasury of our existence (Humer, 1989). The Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage states that States Parties must raise awareness of cultural and natural heritage through educational programs. They must educate them about the content, respect, significance and protection of heritage (Petrič, 2000: p. 60). By educating individuals about the content, respect, significance, and protection of heritage, the Convention encourages responsible guardianship of these treasures for current and future generations. This educational aspect plays a vital role in fulfilling the Convention's mission of safeguarding the world's cultural and natural heritage. Children must establish a personal connection with the content of cultural heritage to comprehend its significance, recognize the need for preservation, and, ultimately, develop a desire to preserve it.

The Primary Education Act sets out the aims of education. Among them are several objectives relating to cultural heritage content. These objectives are:

- Education for sustainable development and for active participation in a democratic society, which includes a deeper knowledge of and responsible attitude towards oneself, one's health, other people, one's own and other cultures, the natural and social environment, and future generations.
- Developing awareness of national belonging and national identity, knowledge of the history of Slovenians, their cultural and natural heritage, and promoting civic responsibility.
- Education for common cultural and civilizational values rooted in the European tradition (Primary School Act, 2023).

The objective of developing national identity, strengthening national consciousness, knowledge of the history of Slovenians and cultural and natural heritage is most closely linked to cultural heritage content. It is very important for children to be in contact with cultural heritage from a very early age and to develop their national consciousness and identity.

At the primary education level, cultural heritage content is covered most directly in environmental and social studies subjects. Teaching cultural heritage content should aim to give students as active a role as possible. Experiential learning is more successful than traditional learning, and knowledge is more durable and stronger (Marentič Požarnik, 2018). Teachers can integrate experiential learning into the classroom in a multitude of ways. Students make sense of their experiences and gain new knowledge (Marentič Požarnik, Šarić, & Šteh, 2019). In active learning, the teacher uses methods in which the learners play the primary role. They are actively involved in learning, and teachers avoid passive listening to students when using these strategies. Learners become responsible

for their learning as they play a more significant role. Research has found that students feel more comfortable in the classroom when the teacher uses active teaching methods (Moliner & Alegre, 2020).

It is essential for students to learn about the cultural heritage content in their local environment or in their immediate surroundings through observation and research (Kolar et al., 2011). The involvement of parents or persons with a knowledge of the local heritage can also be a form of community engagement. In the subsequent section of this paper, we explore the potential for collaboration between the local community and educational institutions, highlighting its significance in educating students about cultural heritage.

2. Cooperation between Educational Institutions and the Local Environment

Most schools have established links with parents and other people in the community, as well as with the local community itself. They can get involved with the school in different ways, through open days, field trips, local events (clean-ups, events, etc.), research projects or by coming to the primary school to present themselves as people with specific skills. Students may also visit them or see typical buildings, facilities, equipment, etc. with particular skills as members of the older generation (Paren, 2005: pp. 20-21).

Students discover the broader world beyond the classroom through engagement with the local environment, individuals, parents, and grandparents. They learn about different professions' environmental features and, as a result, develop their belonging to the local community. Through getting to know individuals, they get in touch with the social environment and with nature. When connecting with the local community, the main objective is to compare the culture of the past and the present, to learn about the cultural heritage of minorities and to pass on cultural traditions between generations. Students and their families are actively involved in the cultural activities of their home town and try to learn as much as possible about their cultural environment (Devjak, Berčnik, & Ivančič Fajfar, 2011).

Recently, there has been an increase in intergenerational programs, which provide an excellent opportunity for different generations to work together, interact and exchange knowledge or experience through specific activities. These programs involve participants from at least two different generations. Various activities are organized around a specific theme. Knowledge is transferred from one generation to the other in the implementation of the activities. Children and older generation members acquire or build on their knowledge in this way. As an example, in Slovenia, since 2014, the project called "Simbioza Giba" has been an annual nationwide campaign combining the ideas of intergenerational cooperation, volunteering and physical exercise-movement. The basic idea of the project is to offer suitable physical exercise or activities for all generations, from -9 months to 100+ years, and a key feature of the organised free recreational and

sport activities is that they are based on intergenerational cooperation and socialising, as well as on volunteering. Another project that is about to start is called “Simbioza skupnosti” and is open kindergartens, libraries, associations, retirement homes and other organisations that can carry out various intergenerational activities in their local environment (Simbioza med generacijami, 2023).

Research has shown that this form of participation has many advantages, promoting lifelong learning and the cooperation or integration of the younger and older generations. Older people have seen improvements in their health and well-being as a result of participating in cognitive and physical activities. For the younger ones, positive changes were observed in behavior, values, personal qualities and self-confidence. For both groups, communication with the second-age generation improved (Clements-Cortés, 2019).

3. Methodology

3.1. Purpose of the Study

The aim of our research was to investigate how the local environment is integrated into the teaching of cultural heritage and to determine the opinion of the elderly about the teaching and learning of cultural heritage content in primary schools and the degree of their involvement in passing it on to younger generations.

The main research questions were:

How do members of the older generation interpret the phrase cultural heritage?

What does cultural heritage mean to members of the older generation?

What do older generation members think about transmitting cultural heritage content to students in primary schools?

Do older generations pass on cultural heritage to their descendants?

Do members of the older generation cooperate with any primary schools or other associations and in what ways?

Do members of the older generation think that teachers like to teach cultural heritage?

Do older generation members think students like learning about our cultural heritage?

Do members of the older generation think it is necessary to promote children’s awareness of cultural heritage?

3.2. Research Method

As a basic research method, we used descriptive and non-experimental method of pedagogical research.

3.3. Research Sample

The survey included a random sample of members of the older generation in Slovenia. The sample included 130 members of the older generation, with an av-

erage age of 73 years, the youngest age of 62, and the oldest age of 96. Most of the respondents live in rural areas (72.31%). Only 27.69% of respondents come from urban areas. Most of the respondents have completed secondary, vocational, or higher education (48.46%). 36.15% of the respondents have completed primary school, 12.31% have a university degree and 3.08% have not completed primary school.

3.4. Instrument

We collected the data with a questionnaire. The anonymous questionnaire consists of 15 questions and is structured in two parts. The first part covers general data (age, educational attainment, occupation, statistical region and living environment), and the second part relates to the involvement of older generations in transmitting cultural heritage to younger generations. The second part of the questionnaire consists of ten questions: four are open-ended and five are alternative questions, one is multiple choice.

3.5. Data Collection and Analysis

The data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed by using the SPSS statistics program. For data processing, we used basic descriptive statistics and frequency distribution. The results of the questionnaire were statistically processed using IBM SPSS. Descriptive variables are represented by frequencies (f) and frequency shares ($f\%$), and numerical variables by means, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum values. Differences between age categories, educational levels and living environments in attitudes towards cultural heritage were calculated using a two-tailed chi-square test (if expected frequencies were more significant than 5) or Fisher's exact test (if expected frequencies were less than 5) at a statistical significance level of 5%.

4. Results with Discussion

The results are presented and interpreted in the form of research questions.

4.1. How Do Members of the Older Generation Interpret the Phrase Cultural Heritage?

In the research, we were first interested in how members of the older generation interpret the phrase cultural heritage. The results show that the majority of respondents (42.31%) interpret the phrase cultural heritage as referring to material things, monuments and buildings from the past, i.e. referring to tangible cultural heritage. 25.38% of respondents from the older generation classify the phrase cultural heritage as referring to old customs, traditions, holidays and events from the past, which represent intangible cultural heritage. The lowest percentage of respondents, 13.85%, interprets the phrase cultural heritage as a homeland and a way of life. Humer (1989) points out that when people mention cultural heritage, they forget about intangible cultural heritage. Most people think first of tangible

or material heritage, as it is closer to them and easier to imagine. In our research, it also turned out that most respondents explained the phrase cultural heritage as something material.

4.2. What Does Cultural Heritage Mean to Members of the Older Generation?

We wanted to know what cultural heritage means to the older generation.

As we can see in **Table 1** for the majority of the older generation surveyed, 39.23% to be precise, cultural heritage means value, preservation and patriotic awareness on a personal level. This was followed by the answer that the mention of the phrase cultural heritage makes them think of their ancestors (23.85%). 21.54% also recall their youth and events from their childhood. Only three respondents answered that it meant nothing to them. Bogataj (1992: p. 44) mentions three concepts of cultural heritage in his writings. Among them, identity is a quality by which cultural heritage helps us to form a personal and national identity and promotes patriotic consciousness. It can be concluded that it is because of this characteristic that cultural heritage is most important to the respondents as a reinforcement of patriotic consciousness and as a value of which they are proud.

4.3. What Do Older Generation Members Think about Transmitting Cultural Heritage Content to Students in Primary Schools?

In the research, we wanted to know what the older generation thinks about the transmission of cultural heritage content to students in primary schools. We wanted to know whether there is enough, little or not enough of this transmission to the younger generations. We then looked for differences in the answers of members of the older generation according to age, education and living environment.

Results show that most respondents (56.92%) think there is not enough transmission of cultural heritage content to younger generations in primary schools. 33.08% of respondents think that there is enough such transmission. In

Table 1. Numbers (f) and structural percentages (f %) of respondents' answers on the personal meaning of cultural heritage.

The personal meaning of cultural heritage	f	f (%)
Remembering our ancestors	31	23.85%
Remembrance of personal youth	28	21.54%
Value, preservation, and patriotic consciousness	51	39.23%
A lot	13	10.00%
Nothing	3	2.31%
Our legacy	4	3.08%
Total	130	100.00%

their study, Jančič and Hus (2018) conclude that there is not enough teaching and integration of cultural heritage in social studies. The results show that the proportions of respondents' answers on the transmission of cultural heritage content to pupils in primary schools, according to their living environment, the age of the respondents and their educational background, are not statistically significantly different from each other.

4.4. Do Older Generations Pass on Cultural Heritage to Their Descendants?

We wanted to know whether members of the older generation are passing on their cultural heritage to their descendants. We looked for differences in the answers of members of the older generation according to age, education and living environment.

Results in **Table 2** show that most of the older generation surveyed, 96.92% to be precise, pass on their cultural heritage to their descendants. Only four respondents answered that they do not pass on cultural heritage to their descendants.

4.5. Do Members of the Older Generation Cooperate with Any Primary Schools or Other Associations, and in What Ways?

In the research, we were interested in whether older generation members are involved in any heritage-related activities with their primary school or other associations. We also looked for differences in the answers of the older generation to the question on participation according to age, education and living environment.

Results show that most respondents from the older generation (77.69%) do not cooperate with primary schools or associations concerning the transmission of cultural heritage. This result surprised us, as we thought the cooperation between schools, associations and members of the older generation was better and more numerous. Paren (2005) stresses the importance of the local environment working with schools and members of the younger generations in different ways. People with specific skills can share or pass on their knowledge, experiences, and memories to younger generations, who in this way, can better understand and appreciate the legacy of our ancestors. The results show that there is scope for promoting and improving this situation.

The results show that the age category and the participation of older generation members are not statistically significantly related to the mode of transmission

Table 2. Numbers (f) and structural percentages (f %) of respondents' answers on the transmission of cultural heritage to descendants.

Passing on cultural heritage to descendants	f	f (%)
Yes	126	96.92%
No	4	3.08%
Total	130	100.00%

of cultural heritage ($p = 0.503$). The results also show that the living environment and the participation of the older generation in associations and schools are not statistically significantly related ($p = 0.650$).

Table 3 shows the relationship between education and the participation of older generation members with primary schools and associations to transmit cultural heritage.

The results in **Table 3** show that education and participation of the older generation are statistically significantly correlated ($p = 0.010$). A higher proportion of respondents with university education (56.25%) participate in primary schools and associations and thus transmit cultural heritage to a greater extent than less educated respondents. We believe this is because the more educated are more easily and fearlessly in contact with various institutions, as they have had to deal with them several times during their education. We also believe that one of the obstacles for the less educated is the transmission of information through speech, as they often have problems with expression. *Clements-Cortés (2019)* mentions the positive effects of intergenerational cooperation for all participants, for members of the younger and older generations. We therefore believe that such forms of collaboration should be encouraged. Based on the results, we see open opportunities for cooperation with members of the older generation who have less education. In this case, we believe it is important for teachers, head teachers and students to reach out to them and invite them to participate.

Additionally, we were interested in how members of the older generation work with primary schools or associations and which institutions they are more likely to work with. Only those respondents who answered the previous question that they are involved in transmitting cultural heritage answered this question.

Table 3. Numbers (f), structural percentages (f %) and Fisher's exact test results of respondents' involvement with a primary school or other association, by educational background.

		Participation of the older generation in the transmission of cultural heritage		Total	Fisher exact	p	
		Yes	No				
		f					
Level of education	Unfinished primary school	f	1	3	4		
		f (%)	25.00%	75.00%	100.00%		
	Primary school	f	8	39	47		
		f (%)	17.02%	82.98%	100.00%		
	Technical secondary, vocational or higher education	f	11	52	63	10.615	0.010
		f (%)	17.46%	82.54%	100.00%		
	University degree	f	9	7	16		
		f (%)	56.25%	43.75%	100.00%		
	Total	f	29	101	130		
		f (%)	22.3%	77.7%	100.00%		

They could indicate more than one type of cooperation. The results show that the majority of the older generation surveyed, 44.19% to be precise, work with primary schools. They return to primary schools mainly as retired teachers and lead various workshops and presentations of their home town. There were also some responses from war veterans, who tell primary school pupils about their life in their youth. 25.58% of them work with various associations. The respondents mentioned mainly the farmers' association, the beekeepers' association, the cultural association, the drama association and the firefighters' association. The lowest number of respondents is involved in with museums and secondary schools. We believe this is because the most significant emphasis on cultural heritage content is placed on younger children, in kindergarten and especially in primary schools. We believe that there are many associations in Slovenia whose members are members of the older generation and that cultural heritage content is particularly well covered and presented in these associations.

4.6. Do Members of the Older Generation Think That Teachers Like to Teach Cultural Heritage?

Most of the older generation surveyed, 85.38% to be precise, think that teachers like teaching cultural heritage content in primary schools, while 19 respondents think that teachers do not like teaching this content. [Borić and Hus \(2017\)](#) found in their study that most teachers in Slovenian and Croatian education systems like teaching cultural heritage content in primary schools, especially teachers with more years of experience. Compared to our survey results, we can conclude that cultural heritage content is popular among teachers.

4.7. Do Older Generation Members Think That Students Like to Learn about Our Cultural Heritage?

Most of the older generation surveyed, 78.46% to be precise, think students like to learn about cultural heritage in primary schools. 28 of the respondents think that pupils do not like to learn about and about cultural heritage. A project from the year 2014 ([Apostolopoulou, Carvoeiras, & Klonari, 2014](#)) found that students like to learn about cultural heritage if the teacher uses an interesting and innovative approach that allows them to explore and learn independently.

4.8. Do Members of the Older Generation Think It Is Necessary to Promote Children's Awareness of Cultural Heritage?

All respondents from the older generation believe that children's awareness of cultural heritage should be promoted.

In our previous research ([Hegediš & Hus, 2021](#)), we conducted research among 395 Slovenian primary school class teachers with the purpose of evaluating teachers' attitudes towards teaching cultural heritage. The results indicate that the surveyed teachers believe promoting students' awareness of cultural heritage is necessary since this encourages students to care for and protect cultural heritage. [Bogataj \(1992\)](#) stresses the importance of raising awareness of cultural heritage

in children from an early age so that it is passed on from generation to generation. The results of our research also show that older generation members are aware of the importance of promoting awareness in children to ensure that cultural heritage will be passed on to future generations.

5. Conclusion

Cultural heritage must be introduced to students from a very early age. It is the task of kindergartens and primary schools to introduce cultural heritage to children and students and to teach them to appreciate the legacy of our ancestors through different didactic approaches (Ivon & Kuščević, 2013).

The primary purpose of our research was to determine the opinion of older people about the teaching and learning of cultural heritage content in primary schools and the degree of their involvement in passing it on to younger generations. Based on the results obtained, we came to the following conclusions:

- Members of the older generation interpret the phrase cultural heritage to mean material things, monuments and buildings from the past. They associate the term with tangible or material cultural heritage.
- On a personal level, for members of the older generation, cultural heritage means value, preservation and patriotic consciousness.
- Most older generation members feel that there is not enough transmission to students, teaching and integration of cultural heritage content in primary school lessons in Slovenia.
- Most older generation members pass on their cultural heritage to their descendants.
- Members of the older generation are mostly not involved with primary schools and associations in a way to tell/show and present something about cultural heritage through their visit/participation. Of those who do participate, a higher proportion has a university degree.
- Most of the older generation involved in heritage transfer is interested in cooperation with primary schools and associations.
- Most older generation members believe that primary school teachers like to teach cultural heritage topics.
- Members of the older generation think that pupils in primary school like to learn about cultural heritage.
- Older generation members stress the importance of promoting children's awareness of cultural heritage.

We believe there are still many opportunities for intergenerational networking, which, in our opinion, represents an essential link between members of different generations, especially in the context of cultural heritage and its transmission to the next generations to preserve it.

Below we are presenting some ideas for engaging the local community in the exploration of cultural heritage in primary school:

- Local Expert Visits: Invite local historians, artists, or experts to primary

schools for interactive sessions. They can share stories, artefacts, or artistic techniques from the community's cultural heritage.

- Heritage Walks: Organise guided heritage walks through the community, where students can learn about historical landmarks, architecture, and local traditions firsthand.
- Oral School Projects: Encourage students to interview older community members about their life experiences, traditions, and stories. These interviews can be recorded or documented and shared within the school.
- Cultural Workshops: Arrange workshops where local older artisans or performers teach traditional crafts, dances, or music to the students, allowing them to participate and create actively.
- Local Cuisine Days: Celebrate the community's culinary heritage by organising food festivals or inviting local chefs and home cooks to demonstrate traditional cooking techniques and share recipes.
- Heritage Clubs: Establish heritage clubs within schools where students can take the lead in researching, preserving, and promoting local cultural heritage.
- Collaboration with Local Organisations: Partner with local heritage organisations, community centres, and cultural institutions to access resources, expertise, and support for educational initiatives.

By implementing these ideas, teachers at primary schools can foster a deeper appreciation for the local cultural heritage while connecting students with their community's history, traditions, and the people who preserve them. This engagement enriches the educational experience and helps students develop a strong sense of identity and pride in their cultural heritage.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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