

Are We Listening to Elders? Intergenerational Wisdom as a Protective Factor Against Bullying in Diverse Academic Spaces

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Bullying remains one of the most persistent challenges in educational and academic environments, exerting a wide-ranging impact on students' psychological well-being, physical health, and academic achievement. Among international and multicultural student populations, the risk is even more pronounced, as experiences of cultural difference, language barriers, and social exclusion often intersect to heighten vulnerability. Much of the existing research on bullying focuses on peer-to-peer interventions, resilience training, and institutional anti-bullying policies. While valuable, these approaches tend to overlook an underutilized protective factor: the role of older generations, whose accumulated wisdom and life experience can serve as powerful resources for younger individuals navigating adversity.

This study explores the concept of intergenerational wisdom as a protective factor against bullying, situating the discussion within gerontological frameworks of active aging, generativity, and resilience.

From a gerontological perspective, older adults embody accumulated forms of experiential knowledge, emotional regulation, and conflict resolution skills derived from diverse life trajectories. Erikson's theory of psychosocial development underscores generativity, the drive to guide younger generations, as a key developmental task in later life. Similarly, Baltes and Staudinger's (2000) model of wisdom conceptualizes it as an "expert knowledge system concerning the fundamental pragmatics of life" (Baltes and Staudinger, (2000:122) emphasizing judgment, tolerance, and empathy. When embedded in structured intergenerational programs, this form of wisdom has the potential to buffer young people against the psychosocial harms of bullying.

Recent empirical evidence supports this claim. For example, intergenerational reminiscence programs have demonstrated significant improvements in empathy and perspective-taking among

younger participants, while simultaneously reducing loneliness and enhancing life satisfaction among elders. Reverse mentoring initiatives, such as “the Cyber Seniors” model, have shown measurable reductions in ageist stereotypes, while fostering self-efficacy in both age groups. Community-based reminiscing projects, where adolescents engage in structured storytelling sessions with older adults, report outcomes such as increased resilience, identity anchoring, and improved conflict-resolution skills. Collectively, these findings indicate that intergenerational contact contributes not only to healthier aging but also to stronger social integration for younger participants.

Bullying, particularly in multicultural academic spaces, is often linked to processes of “othering,” where differences in race, culture, language, or age become stigmatized. Intergenerational wisdom offers a corrective lens: by normalizing diversity through lived narratives, it situates difference as a source of knowledge rather than exclusion. Elders often embody histories of adaptation, migration, or resilience in the face of discrimination, providing students with tangible strategies for coping with adversity. Such exchanges align with Allport’s contact hypothesis, which asserts that sustained interaction under conditions of equality reduces prejudice. In this case, equality of exchange, students offering technological skills while elders share life wisdom, creates a balanced, reciprocal model of learning that fosters respect and inclusion.

The protective value of intergenerational wisdom operates across three main mechanisms:

Cognitive: Older adults offer interpretive frameworks and reflective narratives that help younger students reframe negative experiences such as bullying.

Emotional: The emotional regulation strategies demonstrated by elders promote calm, resilience, and tolerance in stressful situations.

Social: Intergenerational engagement enhances students’ sense of belonging, mitigating isolation and social fragmentation often associated with bullying.

This paper contributes to the growing body of gerontology - informed interventions by highlighting the role of intergenerational engagement in higher education. It proposes an integrative model in which intergenerational wisdom functions not only as a protective factor for young students but also as a contributor to active and meaningful aging for older adults. The model emphasizes reciprocity: students gain coping mechanisms and resilience, while elders achieve

generativity and social connectedness. In multicultural academic spaces, where generational, cultural, and linguistic diversity converge, this dynamic holds particular promise.

By reframing elders as active contributors to academic life, rather than passive recipients of care, we challenge ageist assumptions and expand the conversation on bullying prevention. This approach underscores the value of embedding intergenerational programming, such as storytelling workshops, mentoring circles, and shared cultural projects, into the fabric of universities and educational institutions. For educators, policymakers, and social workers, integrating gerontology into bullying prevention strategies provides a novel pathway toward more inclusive, resilient, and connected learning environments.

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