

My Grandfriend – A Pilot Intergenerational Programme In A Nursing Home

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INTRODUCTION

- The problem of loneliness in nursing homes (NH) has been well-documented both abroad, and in Singapore.^{1,2} Almost 60% of elderly residing within local NHs had expressed a sense of loneliness.³
- Successful ageing in Singapore necessitates that the younger generation to uncover the needs of the elderly in an intimate way, to view them as an asset, and subsequently, find their own unique supporting role.
- There is a national call for efforts to facilitate intergenerational (IG) exchange, with documented benefits to not only the elderly (such as improved cognitive and physical functions), but also to their young buddy (improved behavioural and literacy skills).⁴

“My Grandfriend” Programme

- “My Grandfriend” is a pilot 3D2N stay-in educational IG programme. Each participant was paired with an elderly buddy (“grandfriend”), and lived in a NH for the duration of the programme.
- Experiential learning included (1) Leisure and meal time activities with elderly in their wards; (2) Life in the wards: Eating, Living, and Sleeping through lens of elderly; (3) Sharing sessions by regular volunteers and healthcare professionals; (4) Site visits to day care centres, operational departments within NH and (5) Lectures and discussions to explore and consolidate students’ learnings

Objectives of programme

- The programme aimed to be a platform for participants to: (1) Interact and discover legacies from a grandfriend; (2) Experience a unique, first-hand experience of life within a NH ward; (3) Understand ageing-related challenges and opportunities in the local context; (4) Appreciate the healthcare and logistical operations of a NH and (5) Discover roles of supporting facilities (Day-care centres, Active Ageing Hub)

OBJECTIVES OF EVALUATION

The purpose of the evaluation is to assess the relevance and experience of the participants with the programme.

METHODS

- Nine student participants aged between 17 to 22 participated in this programme.
- Pre- and post-programme questionnaires were administered to all 9 student participants. General acceptability and experience during programme, barriers and facilitators for IG interaction, learning points, and suggestions were elicited.
- Attitudes towards seniors was measured using the semantic scale developed by Rosencraz and McNevin, 1969.⁵ This scale measured three dimensions which included (1) Instrumental - Ineffective; (2) Autonomous - Dependent and (3) Personal Acceptability - Unacceptability dimensions. A lower score indicates a more favourable attitude.
- Qualitative data was analyzed using inductive analysis for theme identification while descriptive analysis was performed for quantitative data.

RESULTS

- Seven out of the nine participants had no previous volunteering experiences with elderly. After the programme, however, all participants indicated that they would be willing to participate in similar IG programmes in the future.
- The evaluation indicated that the overall experience that the young participants had with this programme was positive. The programme was reported to provide students with content knowledge that helped students better understand the needs and physical challenges faced by elderly, provided them with opportunities to interact with elderly in a safe space, and facilitated a shift towards a more positive perception of the elderly.
- Though some respondents reported that challenges faced during the programme prevented a quality interaction with elderly, all participants reported an increased levels of confidence in communicating with the elderly.

Findings from the post-programme survey

- Seven participants reported the experience was pleasant (n=5) / very pleasant (n=2).
- All participants reported an **improved understanding about physiological challenges** faced by an elderly in his/her daily life.

“I now know a lot more about the illnesses and conditions that elderly experience and I feel this would be useful to me in determining how I interact with other elderly and my grandparents as well”

- P08, male, 18 years old

- Despite the short duration of the camp, it was noteworthy that a significant change was observed in the personal acceptability-unacceptability dimension of the “Attitudes towards seniors” scale (P=0.019), indicating a favourable change in attitude towards the elderly.

Table 1. Semantic scales measuring attitudes towards the elderly

Dimensions	Pre	Post	P-value
Instrumental – Ineffective	40.1 ± 7.1	37.9 ± 7.0	0.090
Autonomous – Dependent	34.6 ± 4.6	34.2 ± 5.9	0.843
Personal Acceptability – Unacceptability	44.6 ± 2.3	40.2 ± 5.9	0.019*

* Lower score indicates a more favorable attitude.

- One of the participants also reported a **change in the perception** towards the elderly.
“Before this camp, I always had a bit of a negative impression of elderly people especially those residing in NHs, thinking that they were all cranky and unfriendly. However after interacting with the elderly throughout the camp ... I have come to understand and become more open minded towards my interactions with the elderly.”
- P06, female, 17 years old

- The main barriers to interact with the elderly included **language barrier and lack of common topics** to share.

“Sometimes, communication was difficult due to language barriers especially if they could only speak in dialect.”

- P02, female, 17 years old

“I didn’t know what to talk about after I finished asking them the basic questions about themselves (e.g. their family, their hobbies) and it became kind of awkward.”

- P03, female, 17 years old

- Despite these barriers, all participants reported an increase in **confidence level to interact** with older persons at the end of the programme.

“Being more comfortable and braver in interacting with the elderly and not being afraid to initiate conversations with the elderly even with language barriers.”

- P01, female, 18 years old

“I used to have my own perceptions about them and was hesitant to take the initiative to volunteer where elderly was involved. However, after being placed in an environment where I have to interact with them, I have gained more confidence and can foresee myself doing more in this sector.”

- P03, female, 17 years old

DISCUSSION

- Overall, the responses received revealed that this programme provided a good opportunity for IG contact, improved content knowledge to facilitate understanding of issues relating to ageing, and developed students’ appreciation of the various roles within the healthcare sector to support healthy ageing among seniors.
- These positive findings could relate to the career orientation of participants, where eight out of nine reported an interest to pursue a healthcare-related career in the future.
- Though students reported a general increase in confidence to interact with elderly, more needs to be done to build trust between the generations, so that both parties would be more willing and able to open up, listen and share stories with one another. This programme also revealed that some younger generation lack the language abilities and skill-set to communicate effectively with elderly who only understand dialects, or were less responsive to strangers or prompts. Students also agreed that future programmes should include facilitators who could better guide students to care for or interact with the elderly more effectively.
- Improvements to the content and operational aspects of the programme include increasing one-on-one interaction time with their grandfriends, indicating that participants were keen to build a stronger bond with the elderly and were interested to understand more about the lives and stories of their elderly buddies. In terms of the delivery of content, participants indicated that more interactive lectures and discussion sessions would facilitate their learning more effectively, compared to a purely didactic method of content delivery. This also showed the willingness of students to be engaged in the issues, challenges and opportunities surrounding the concept of ageing.

CONCLUSION

Enhancing intergenerational bonding through experiential learning in a local nursing home was found to have beneficial outcomes on both the younger and older generations, in terms of communication, shifts in perceptions, and facilitate the understanding of needs of both parties. Some challenges to a quality interaction identified, to be addressed in future camps, include the lack of confidence in the young to initiate conversations, trust to establish common interests or new knowledge about one another, as well as language abilities. Findings have identified gaps in the needs and expectations of students participants in areas relating to: the type and duration of IG activities, content and focus of lectures, discussion and departmental visits. These insights are critical in providing guidance for refining and improving on similar programmes in future, and provides a model for adoption in other aged care facilities in Singapore.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

- The authors would like to thank Kwong Wai Shiu Hospital (KWSH) for their collaboration in making this pilot programme possible. The authors would also like to thank Prof Fong Ngan Phoon for his guidance.

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