

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 290 895

CE 049 566

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TITLE Selfhood and the Older Learner: The Promise of Education.
PUB DATE 22 Oct 87
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (Washington, DC, October 22, 1987).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Development; Adult Education; *Aging (Individuals); *Continuing Education; *Educational Gerontology; *Older Adults; Role of Education; *Self Actualization

ABSTRACT

Educators must create learning opportunities to stimulate older adults and allow them to develop. These educators must also operationalize self-fulfillment in adult education. Research and theory indicate that cognition is an adaptive process and elders who practice learning activities will maintain their abilities. Further, research and theory of the psychological state of older adults suggest that reminiscence or "life review" is of serious consequence. Programmers should also be aware that interests based on gender may merge or reverse in later life and should consider how education might provide life satisfaction in old age. A longitudinal study of older adult learners has found that the act of partaking of education was often an empowering gesture. A followup study seven years later indicated that most had stopped attending formal educational activities. Reasons fall into three general categories: health problems, life patterns, and unfulfilled expectations. Other findings are that informal educational activities still attracted elders, age is irrelevant, and the motivations that brought them into the educational system have not changed--most were related to lifelong personality constructs. Educators must keep in mind that research in gerontology is often cohort-bound; therefore, they must follow older adult participants into the next stage of their lives to see the effects of education. (YLB)

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ED290895

SELFHOOD AND THE OLDER LEARNER:
THE PROMISE OF EDUCATION

by

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Paper Presented at the Annual Conference of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, Washington, D.C., October 22, 1967

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Life is more important than school, the student and the learning more important than the teachers and the teaching. More lasting than having heard and read is to have seen and experienced.

Joseph Albers (June, 1934)

In recent years more and more has been "discovered" about aging. The field of gerontology has burgeoned: research journals and studies on aging have multiplied. We have begun to collect knowledge of the aging body, diseases affecting the elderly, social and economic conditions of older people, and educational preferences of the cohort currently old. We are beginning to understand lifespan development and can predict that future generations of elders will live longer, be healthier, and may be in need of more educational programs.

What is difficult to describe, however, is how the aging spirit develops. If Erikson (1963) is correct, great integrity and wisdom may be found in elders who can harvest the fruits of their lives in old age. The elder can adapt "to the triumphs and disappointments adherent to being" (Erikson, 1963, p. 268). It is a time for the fulfillment of the self, the attainment of self actualization (Butler, 1975; Erikson, Erikson & Kivnick, 1986; Maslow, 1962). It is a time, too, for our elders to teach us how life has been understood. What we, as adult educators must remember, is that older adults demonstrate the promise that education has had for many: the chance to continue learning, developing, and creating.

Providing adequate adult education activities is a challenge to educators: one which we take seriously. We know that adult education can surely be an empowering experience for older learners who continue to grow emotionally and need the opportunity to maintain cognitive and political skills. It may be an essential ingredient in growth, vital to health, and necessary to development in the last stage of life. The maxim "use it or lose it" may be especially true for the elderly whose loss of cognitive ability can be traced directly to lack of stimulation.

We ask what role can we play in the development of persons who are currently our elders but will certainly become ourselves? How can we create learning opportunities that help "to harvest the fruits" of these many lives? How will we operationalize "self fulfillment" in adult education?

First we must begin to assess this most diverse population of Americans. What can we expect from them cognitively and affectively? Why would they choose or not choose to come into our programs? We need to ^{approach} ask those persons who are currently actively engaged and ask, "How does education play a role in your world?"

Cognitive Development vs. Decline

What can we expect by way of cognitive status in our older learners? While there is variation in elders, research indicates that no loss of intellectual functioning need accompany aging if the individual is stimulated cognitively throughout the lifespan (Baltes & Schaie, 1982,; Camp et al., 1983; Datan, 1984; LaBouvie-Vief, 1985). Further, stimulation

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can revitalize and rehabilitate cognitive capacity when neural changes have occurred (Clutes, 1984; Greenberg & Powers, 1987; Hulicka, 1978; Katzman & Terry, 1983). And, finally, older adults have adapted strategies and cognitive patterns which may be different but are more useful for their lives than the cognitive patterns of younger cohorts (Baltes & Schaie, 1982; Botwinick, 1977; Clayton, 1982; Cornelius, 1984; Elias, 1977; LaBouvie-Vief, 1980, 1985). Cognition, then is an adaptive process and elders who practice learning activities will maintain their abilities.

Psychological Task Theory

Further, research and theory of the psychological state of older adults suggest that reminiscence, or what Robert Butler calls "life review" is of serious consequence (1963, 1982). The life review may be the means by which older persons achieve the integrated sense of the life cycle (McMahon & Rhudick (1967). Robert Butler writes of old age

Another important feature is the development of an inner sense of the life cycle, definable as the sensation of the rhythm, variability, timing, and inevitability of changes. This is a profound awareness of the process, maturation. . . It is not a morbid, but rather a nonmorbid realization of the precious and limited quantity of life and how it changes. (1975, p. 654)

No one needs to be told that older people will spin memories at the drop of a hat, but now we are learning that this

process--the recollecting of earlier times and the restructuring of life stories--may be of the greatest possible educational value to older people (Kaminsky, 1983, 1984; Myerhoff, 1979, 1983). Programming based on oral history and reminiscence has had some success in adult education (Hateley, 1982; Wolf, 1986).

Gender Shift Theory

Interests based on "masculine" or "feminine" roles may merge or reverse in later life. Gutmann (1975) found that older men often became more affiliative, exploring nurturing and caring paths after retirement. Women, on the other hand, were often assertive and independent, wishing to explore roles related to areas traditionally dominated by men. Thus, he proposed, a developmental "unisex of later life" (Gutmann, 1975). This gender shift was also confirmed in cross-cultural studies (Gutmann, 1977).

Education and Life Satisfaction

Programmers want and need to be informed about successful and practical experiences that will engage older learners. They often mean to provide profound learning experiences to this growing group. However, to understand how elders may interact with adult education, it would be useful to step back into the world of elders and to reflect on how individuals fare in learning environments, what education might mean to them, and to what degree education might provide life satisfaction in old age. Theory and generalizations aside, individual stories can be a prime means of understanding older learners. Theory and speculation can grow out of listening carefully to what elders say about "education" and its function in their world. Then perhaps we might begin a discussion of whether or not empowerment and self-fulfillment are achieved through education.

A Group of Older Adult Learners: 1980

An on-going research project may lend a realistic note to the discussion of the role of adult education in the fulfillment of elders. A longitudinal study of a small cohort currently residing in a medium-sized Western Massachusetts city is discussed here. In 1980 an in-depth phenomenological study of 12 older adults (ages 62 to 79) found that older learners made use of adult education experiences in diverse ways (Wolf, 1982, 1985a). At that time, each person had been engaged in learning activities through an adult or continuing education program. The content of the activity or course was of an academic or enrichment nature rather than a leisure-time endeavor such as bridge, swimming or crafts. All of the learners had high expectations of the activities which were both formal and informal in nature. Several were endeavoring to complete tasks yet outstanding in life (Wolf, 1982, 1985b). One man expected to understand the Holocaust through which he had lived; one woman was engaged in reflections of childhood and family.

It was found that the act of partaking of education was often an empowering gesture. The learners felt that their lives were enhanced through participatiuon and social networking. Some elders found meaning in the content studied as though they were looking for answers to personal questions. The act of going to school, too, was often embued with

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symbolism. One man sought to "show academe": he had been a municipal clerk and had resented his lack of education.

Another sought to learn about workman's compensation and the law: he was suffering from work-related asbestos poisoning.

Two women sought self esteem through earning degrees: they had been denied education in The Depression years.

The Group in 1987

A follow-up study was conducted seven years later. The study participants were then ages 69 to 86. This study sought to analyze the impact that adult education has had on the participants' lives throughout the past seven years. It asked: Were the individuals still engaged in learning activities? If so, were they different from the activities of seven years before? If not, had they replaced the educational experiences with other activities? And, in what way had these elderly individuals changed? Were the changes for the better or for the worse? And, finally, how had the educational activities of 1980 contributed to (perhaps empowered?) the elder's lives in 1987?

It is often difficult to locate subjects in longitudinal research (Busse & Maddox, 1985). However, 11 of the 12 elders studied in 1980 were found and interviewed in 1987. They varied in their current status. For the most part, however, they had stopped attending formal educational activities. The reasons fell into three general categories: health problems, life patterns, and unfulfilled expectations.

1) Health problems. When health problems occurred, the older adults had dropped their adult education activities; They did not later resume them. Health patterns were also seen as including the health of the spouse. Half of the adult learners in this small sample fit this pattern. Two had personal health problems; two had spouses with health problems which necessitated their staying at home; two had both of these situations.

2) Life patterns. Several older adults stopped attending adult education activities because of changes in life patterns. Several devoted more time to volunteering.

3) Unfulfilled expectations. Several individuals stopped participating in adult education experiences because of disappointment with the educational process. One had been ignored by GED teachers who never looked at the worksheets he brought to them. Another had fallen through the cracks in a college program in which the Dean of Continuing Education who had been committed to older learners left and the new administrator made no effort to schedule classes to accommodate evening students. A third gentleman became cynical of the educational process that had motivated him for many years. One woman had found her course in child psychology to be too academic when she wanted an applied approach. ("Those teachers don't know what they're talking about," she stated.)

In general, the women claimed to have found success and fulfillment through adult education. One said, over and over, "It changed my life. It made everything possible for me." Empowerment--even when displeasure with the course was expressed--was 100% for the women; it was not expressed or negatively expressed for the men. (One man said, "It was the biggest hurt.")

Informal educational activities, however, still attracted the elders who were able to get out. The most active (50%) were volunteering in activities that involve children. One was teaching the Finnish language; four were tutors in the public elementary schools; one worked with homeless women and their children; one served as director of a nursery school (non-salaried). Several of the elders volunteered at nursing homes.

Another finding of the study was the irrelevance of age. While the oldest participant (now age 86) is hale and hearty and engaged in attending lectures, concerts, and travelling, the youngest (now age 68) is disengaged, no longer participates in activities, and experiences memory loss. She exhibited early signs of dementia.

The motivations that brought these older adults into the educational system have not changed: most were related to lifelong personality constructs. Some of the gender shift proposed by Gutmann (1975, 1977) was evident. The older women were more extroverted, the older men tended to be less aggressive in their dealings with the outside world. No longer active as adult education participants, the elders often relied on other means for life satisfaction: the majority were involved in community activities which were intergenerational. Most felt that the educational activities of seven years ago had contributed favorably to their current well-being (with the exception of two individuals who were bitter.) One individual had developed into successful post-retirement businesswoman. She stated that her education had made this possible.

Caveat emptor

We must bear in mind that research in gerontology is often cohort-bound (Baltes, Cornelius & Nesselroade, 1980). The questions that we ask of the current elders who may participate in adult education can not be those we ask of coming generations who will need different experiences. They will be more educated and will have concerns which differ from the elders in this sample. Indeed, all generalizations about "older adults" must be curbed as we recognize the diversity of persons who happen to fall into the same age range.

One question we will want to ask, however, is: How does the act of educational participation enhance the last stage of life? Is it a means by which elders might seek to more fully integrate their lives? Can it be the means by which elders participate in the greater culture and remain more active and alert? Can it be the means to empower older persons who must somehow fight a process of decline, both personal and economic?

What can educators do to contribute to growth, development, and fulfillment in old age? Perhaps we can begin by talking to those learners we now know. The study of older learners can help define the characteristics so essential to human development. Indeed, older learners are of interest to us all. They are role models in an aging society. They model the spirit of learning for the sake of fulfillment. They define for us the promise of education. And they are particularly interesting to educators who have begun to see the challenges and gratification that can come in developing experiences for older persons.

Then we might follow our older adult participants into the next stage of their lives. Do they find other means of development based on what occurred in our classes? Have we, as adult educators, provided the basis for continued self-fulfillment? Has the promise of education in late life been kept? Again, we must remember that it is the student and the learning that matters.

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1980

1987

TABLE 1

PARTICIPANT	SEX	AGE	EDUCATIONAL LEVEL	ETHNICITY	WORK LIFE	CURRENT EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE
1. Sophie H.	F	65	M.A. (B.A. & M.A. after 50)	Am/Irish	secretary teacher after 55	Issues of Competency Testing/Education
2. Gertrude S.	F	65	high school	Am/Italian	secretary	Language, Cultural History
3. William S.	M	62	M.A. (B.A. & M.A. after 55)	Am/Irish	municipal clerk	M.A. in English
4. Thorgud J.	M	79	high school & 1 yr. vocation- al	Finnish*	grocer	Sociology, Music, Western Civilization
5. Isadore C.	M	67	M.A.	Jewish	businessman	Piano, Electronics, Computers Education
6. Carlotta P.	F	68	B.A. (after 60)	Black	assistant nurse, housekeeper	B.A. & Reading
7. Madeline H.	F	74	B.A. (after 50)	Am/German/ "Yankee"	secretary teacher after 55	Poetry
8. Lillian R.	F	65	high school	Jewish	secretary businesswoman	Psychology
9. Jenny M.	F	61	high school & 1 yr. college	Black	dry cleaner operator	Childcare, Special Education
10. Wuschko K.	M.	67	high school	Polish*	carpenter, janitor	Sociology, History
11. Paolo A.	M.	69	elementary & 2 yrs. high sch	Black/ Hispanic	laborer	G.E.D.; Engine Repair
12. Henry W.	M.	63	high school	Black	laborer	Pension Issues, Community Relations

Participant numbers are in order of interviews.
All participants were interviewed in their homes
with occasional exceptions (#1, 6, 7, 10).

*Immigrants

All participants are retired from the positions
held during "work life."

All have been engaged or are now engaged in
volunteer activities (#6 and 9 are paid stipends)

Age	Interest
72	working (non soldered)
72	crafts
69	some coursework
86	reading, travel, lectures
74	volunteer, in formal ed.
81	volunteer poetry club
72	volunteer
68	inactive
74	inactive
76	inactive
70	volunteer

13
63
63

1980

TABLE II
PARTICIPANTS' COURSEWORK

PARTICIPANT	MAJOR EXPERIENCE	WHERE THE COURSE OCCURS	TIME DURATION	COST
1. Sophie H.	Competency Testing	S _____ School Committee Workshop	12 sessions	none
2. Gertrude S.	Italian Renaissance	UM _____ undergraduate	1 semester	registration only
	Spanish	S _____ Adult Ed.	1 semester	none
3. William S.	M.A. English	W _____ State College	3 years	registration only
4. Thorgud J.	Sociology, Western Civilization, Music	S _____ Technical Community College	2 semesters	registration only
5. Isadore C.	Piano (beginning), Electricity, Computers	S _____ Technical Community College	1 semester	registration only
6. Carlotta P.	Reading	H _____ Tutor Program	12 sessions	none
7. Madeline H.	Poetry Workshop	Library Basement	3 years 1/wk	none
8. Lillian R.	Psychology	S _____ Adult Ed.	1 semester	none
9. Jenny M.	Child Development, Special Education	S _____ Technical & H _____ Community Colleges	1 semester* 3 days	\$145.00* 45.00
10. Wuschko K.	Sociology, History	W _____ N E _____ College	1 semester	registration only
11. Paolo A.	GED (high school equivalency)	S _____ Adult Ed.	1 year	none
12. Henry W.	Workman's Compensation law	Union Headquarters	7 weeks	\$35.00

*Jenny walked out of her class after two meetings and got her money back.

Most courses are free to senior citizens (over 62) or to veterans on a seat available basis.

1987

Adult education as
contributive to
current life
satisfaction

Empowered +

social exchange

losing motivation

yes

yes

empowered or
(made me what I am)

social exchange

no: disappointed

no: disappointed

no: disappointed

yes

139

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