

Older adult education: new public pedagogy in 21st century Taiwan

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The lifelong learning concept of “never too late to learn” advocated by Confucius has gradually become rooted in the lives of Taiwanese adults and seniors. In response to the impact of population ageing and low fertility rates, numerous elementary schools, junior high schools, and universities have allocated resources and space to establish learning centers and learning camps for senior citizens, providing them with the opportunity to learn. Older adult education extends beyond the classroom and into society, forming a new public pedagogy in Taiwan. Its important elements include: (1) the changes in population structure and the rising number of older adults, (2) the government’s formulation of older adult education policies based on learning enhancement, (3) the joint promotion of older adult education activities by numerous academic institutions, and (4) the theoretical bases of program design to help senior citizens achieve active ageing and popularise older adult education in communities. Future challenges to older adult learning becoming the new public pedagogy include (1) the public’s skepticism concerning the necessity of older adult education and its efficiency, (2) the need to establish diverse sources of funding to ensure the sustainable development of older adult education, (3) the necessity to develop various program designs to satisfy senior citizens’ needs due to the heterogeneity of senior citizens, and (4) the urgent necessity for research to confirm the effectiveness of older adult education.

Keywords: Lifelong learning, new public pedagogy, older adult education

Introduction

In 1993, the population over the age of 65 accounted for 7 percent of the overall population in Taiwan. This figure is anticipated to rise to 14 percent in 2017, which would shift Taiwan into an aged society. Recently, the phrase, “joyful learning, forget ageing,” has been circulating among senior citizens, implying that participating in learning has become a symbol of happiness among older adults. In Taiwan, older adult education is currently expanding and gaining popularity, becoming this century’s new public pedagogy.

Pedagogy initially referred to the science and art of teaching. However, following the rise of lifelong learning, the implications and applications of pedagogy gradually expanded. There were two reasons for this. First, Taiwan was influenced by lifelong learning trend in the 1990’s; lifelong learning gradually became available to adults, enabling them to return to school and possibly attain graduate or post-graduate degrees. This trend expanded the group of people seeking an education from traditional students to adults and older adults who had left formal education. Second, Taiwan has experienced population ageing and low fertility rates over the past two decades, reducing the number of young students. In response, universities have begun to encourage older adults to return to school. In recent years, an increasing number of retirees have returned to school to receive formal and informal education (Lee & Yeh, 2012).

The promotion of lifelong learning, declining fertility rates, and the progressively ageing population in Taiwan have broadened the scope of educational efforts, which were initially aimed at children and young adults, to include adults and senior citizens. To assist the ever-increasing number of senior citizens to achieve active ageing, the Taiwanese government has been encouraging adults over the age of 55 to continue learning to help them prepare for old age. This has significantly increased the number of senior citizens engaging in learning activities in Taiwan. However, as the types of learners continue to diversify, researchers must rethink the content and application of pedagogy. Based on the course and context of senior citizens’ participation in education activities, the

researchers of the present study examined the development of older adult education in Taiwan through microscopic and macroscopic pedagogy. Microscopic pedagogy refers to the emphasis of classroom learning in older adult education prior to 2006, when teaching methods and learning content were relatively more conservative. By contrast, macroscopic pedagogy refers to the period following 2006, when the Taiwanese government introduced its older adult education policies (Ministry of Education, 2006). The government combined older adult education with social networks to provide diversified learning to senior citizens, increasing the conformity of the learning programs and application of older adult education to the needs of senior citizens, and thereby generating social influence.

Microscopic pedagogy: older adult education in the classroom

“Never too late to learn” is a concept introduced by the historical Chinese philosopher Confucius. This concept reflects the importance of lifelong learning and emphasises that learning must be valued, regardless of age. However, older adult education is undervalued in Taiwan. No older adult education institutes existed in Taiwan until 1978, when the Evergreen Club, the first institute for older adult education, was founded by the Taipei Young Women’s Christian Association. Numerous older adult universities and senior citizen academies soon followed. Although these institutes are long-established, relatively few senior citizens attend. For example, among the 319 senior citizen academies recorded in 2012, only 65,214 seniors enrolled in courses offered by these academies (Ministry of Interior, Department of Social Affairs, 2012); nonetheless, over 90% of the budgets for these older adult education institutes were subsidised by the Ministry of Interior and other social welfare organisations (Wei, 2011).

Between 1978 and 2006, the most common teaching method employed in older adult education institutes was classroom lectures, while teaching methods such as traveling, the Internet, and service learning were rarely used. Subsequently, the majority of the courses offered at these institutes were based on interest or entertainment (Wei, Hu, & Chen, 2010). During this period, course options were scant and highly repetitive, focusing on leisure, languages, computers, and health (Wei, 2011). In senior citizen academies, older adult universities, and senior citizen

groups, which are the institutes with the longest history in Taiwan, 70% of the courses offered are related to karaoke (Wei & Shih, 2009).

The majority of the administrators (53.8%) serving in older adult education institutes were untrained, and teachers of older adult education were not required to possess specific qualifications or academic backgrounds. Therefore, the number of trained older adult education teachers was low, with only 22% of the teachers having received proper training (Tseng, 2010). During this period, teachers who were passionate and possessed a “know-how” level of knowledge were deemed qualified. They were not required to possess professional knowledge in older adult physiology, psychological development processes, or older adult education. In terms of the business aspect of older adult education institutes, each institute maintained approximately 101-300 older adult learners each year, which is considered small-scale education. The majority of these students were retired civil servants (Huang & Lin, 2008; Wei, 2011).

The unpopularity of older adult education during this time was due largely to the government’s and the public’s insufficient understanding of related concepts and their significance. Thus, older adult education was not actively promoted by the government. Although the Taiwanese government introduced the Senior Citizens Welfare Act in 1980, this act and its subsequent article amendments in 1997 focused on the welfare measures of senior citizens, only indicating concern for senior citizens from a social welfare perspective. In 2003, the government further introduced the Policy for the Elderly. Although this policy mentions the importance of older adult education, leisure activities, and social participation, it still primarily focuses on the promotion of healthcare and only deems the provision of older adult education activities in relevant institutes as an added benefit. In other words, the government only considered the educational “wants” of senior citizens and only provided courses that interested them. This is also the primary reason why courses were based on interest and entertainment at that time. Course content included singing, dancing, exercise, chess, and calligraphy. During this time, the number of senior citizens who participated in older adult education was low, confined to only a minority of retired military and civil servants, as well as citizens of higher social statuses (Wei, 2011). Thus, this period in the history of older adult

education is considered microscopic pedagogy because relevant activities were confined to the classroom and only a small amount of people were involved in relevant teaching and learning. Although the influence and impact of older adult education cannot be observed during the period of microscopic pedagogy, unresolved problems during this period are evident.

Macroscopic pedagogy: announcing older adult education policies, connecting social networks, and enhancing the social impact of older adult education

As of 1993, the senior population over the age of 65 was over 7 percent in Taiwan. It is estimated that this percentage will increase to 14 percent by 2017, making Taiwan an aged society as defined by the United Nations. In contrast, the fertility rates in Taiwan have rapidly declined from 25.93 percent in 1976 to 8.99 percent in 2014 (Ministry of Interior, 2015a). The ageing population combined with the low fertility rates has reduced the number of students in the formal education system, impacting the operations of formal education. This has been particularly apparent in higher education, as multiple colleges and departments have failed to recruit a sufficient number of new students, thus forcing the Ministry of Education to consider the feasibility of older adult education in schools.

In response to the advent of an aged society, the Taiwanese government announced the “Toward Aged Society White Paper on Senior Education Policy” in 2006, which outlined the concept that older adult education was “education for all” and should facilitate senior citizens in achieving a self-sufficient, independent, and active lifestyle through their participation in education activities. This policy confirmed the government’s intentions of promoting older adult education, and older adult education became formally planned and promoted as of 2007. Since 2008, 306 senior citizens learning centers have been established under the cooperation of elementary and junior high schools, local governments, and non-profit organisations, and 101 senior citizen learning camps have been established in colleges and universities. The development of older adult education in Taiwan in recent years is discussed below.

Programs designed based on the concept of active ageing

The Taiwanese government anticipates that senior citizens may achieve the goal of active ageing through learning. Therefore, program designs have focused on the three dimensions advocated by active ageing, specifically, safety, health, and participation. That is, learning content was planned based on the educational needs of senior citizens (McClusky, 1971; WHO, 2002). Wei, Chen, and Lee (2014) considered the needs of senior citizens in Taiwan and defined 27 learning themes based on the three dimensions of active ageing in considerable detail. These learning themes were provided to senior citizens learning centers and camps as a reference for program design.

Diversified sources of subsidies

Previously, older adult education in Taiwan was primarily funded by the Ministry of Interior. However, following the formulation of the “Toward Aged Society White Paper on Senior Education Policy” in 2006, the Ministry has gradually increased subsidisation for older adult education each year. To encourage their participation, senior citizens have been enabled to enroll in senior citizens learning centers and camps free of charge. However, due to the increasing demand for older adult education each year, the government has encouraged organisers to integrate external resources to promote the development of older adult education. The government anticipates that investment from the private sector in addition to government subsidization will ensure the sustainable development of older adult education.

Training provided for older adult educators

Specialisation in older adult education is a recent development. Therefore, the most urgent necessity is to elevate the professional knowledge of workers involved in older adult education. To achieve this, the Ministry of Education has collaborated with relevant university departments to intensively arrange basic and advanced training programs for older adult educators and counselors, in addition to providing assessments to evaluate their performance (Ministry of Education, 2012; Wei & Shih, 2009). Promoting specialisation in older adult education not only ensures that relevant workers and educators possess the appropriate knowledge in ageing and older adult education,

but also elevates the education quality of older adult education institutes.

Expand learning opportunities in the communities

To overcome the obstacles deterring senior citizens from participating in older adult education, such as immobility and inconvenient transport, the older adult education activities in Taiwan have transcended previous classroom-based lectures to include flexible lessons taught directly in communities. Specific practices include the utilisation of labor and space in schools, community activity centers, and non-profit organisations, encouraging these facilities to deliver learning activities to senior citizen groups and thereby integrating education into the lives of senior citizens. Mobile learning offers senior citizens with mobility or transportation difficulties the opportunity to receive education. In addition to the 400 fixed senior citizen learning centers and camps currently available, mobile learning has delivered learning activities to over 1000 locations, including schools, temples, community activity centers, and private associations (Ministry of Education, 2013).

Free course offered by older adult education institutes for senior citizens

Successful active ageing in late adulthood requires preparation; therefore, the Taiwanese Ministry of Education has encouraged senior citizens over the age of 55 to participate in the courses offered at senior citizens learning centers and camps. In 2013, over 1.39 million learners participated in older adult education activities (Ministry of Education, 2013). The Ministry has also encouraged citizens under the age of 55 to become volunteers at these institutions, enabling them to not only learn knowledge required to achieve active ageing in advance, but also to assist senior citizens, thereby increasing understanding and integration between different generations. Currently, there are over 10,000 volunteers at older adult education institutes (Ministry of Education, 2015).

Assistance and guidance provided to older adult education institutes by academic units.

To improve the operational performance of older adult education institutes, the Ministry of Education has invited four academic institutes that have established adult or older adult education divisions in Taiwan to collectively counsel older adult education institutes with regard to their operations. The assistance provided by these academic units includes at least two visitations per year, assessing the program design of the institutes and the compliance between their education activities and active ageing concepts, and assisting institute owners or educators in resolving difficulties through forums or seminars. Through the assistance of university professors, the utilisation of resources invested by the government into older adult education in Taiwan can be maximised.

Increased exposure of older adult education and its impact in the society

The development goals of senior citizens should include the integration of life experiences and making contributions to society, thereby allowing seniors to obtain more meaning and value in life (Erikson, 1959; McClusky, 1971) Based on the observations of researchers, senior citizens who learn about transportation safety, food safety, and medicine typically share their learning outcomes with others at elementary schools, in communities, and at nursing homes (Lee, 2015) Older adult learners become contributors to society by helping other senior citizens and their communities (Lee, Lu, & Yeh, 2015) These services and contributions provided by senior citizens have become a “silver force” in Taiwan, consequently changing how Taiwanese media report on senior citizens. Media reports have shifted their portrayals of older adults from indicating that they are “impaired” and “in need” to indicating that they are “active” and “energetic,” thus further promoting successful ageing (Hsu & Lee, 2013; Lee & Hsu, 2013)

Reasons for older adult education becoming the new public pedagogy

Older adult education has gradually expanded from the classroom into township communities, allowing for the formation of a new learning trend in Taiwanese society. The reasons for the emergence of this trend are discussed in the following section.

The ageing population and low fertility rates have promoted the development of older adult education

Between 1993 and 2014, the proportion of the Taiwanese population aged 65 and over increased from 7.11 to 11.99 percent, which constituted an increase of approximately 1.32 million people (Ministry of Interior, Department of Statistics, 2015a). Conversely, the fertility rates dropped from 32,000 births in 1993 to 20,000 in 2014 (Ministry of Interior, Department of Statistics, 2015b). This low fertility rates have caused a decline in the number of students in elementary and junior high schools, while the increase in senior citizens has stimulated schools to allocate resources and space to accommodate older adult education. Subsequently, the government realised that senior citizens can play a positive role in society. These are all reasons for the emergence of older adult learning.

Announcement of senior citizen policies: enhancing learning through welfare subsidisation

Both the Senior Citizen Welfare Act and the Policy for the Elderly, which were announced, respectively, in 1980 and 2003 in Taiwan, indicated concern for the needs of senior citizens based on their social welfare, health promotion, and the provision of care measures. Older adult education activities, however, were only actively planned and promoted following the 2006 announcement of the “Towards Aged Society White Paper on Senior Education Policy”, which introduced four key goals, including lifelong learning, health and happiness, independence and dignity, and social participation. As a result, the policy perspective of the Taiwanese government towards senior citizens took a dramatic turn, such that senior citizens were no longer merely the targets of support and assistance. Senior citizens were thus made more able to improve themselves through learning, and consequently to contribute back to society. The policy perspectives of the government gradually shifted from welfare-oriented perspectives into those that promoted self-enhancement, anticipating that older adults in Taiwan can become valuable human resources through the implementation of older adult education.

Program design with a theoretical approach focused on educational needs of older adults

The basis for older adult education program design in Taiwan has gradually shifted from educational wants to educational needs. Early older adult education institutes focused on providing senior citizens with courses that they enjoyed, such as leisure, entertainment, and art courses. In recent years, program designers have instead designed course content based on the developmental needs of old age. In particular, current programs offered by older adult education institutes are based on the 27 learning themes for active ageing that were developed based on the three active ageing dimensions advocated by the World Health Organisation. In summary of the development of older adult education program designs in recent years, course content is designed to reflect active ageing and comply with older adults' needs when entering old age (Wei, Chen & Lee, 2014).

The government has integrated resources, focusing and expanding older adult education into society

Not only must the government establish a clear promotional direction in its policies in order to successfully promote older adult education in Taiwan – such as, for example, by confirming policy objectives, establishing and expanding the location of older adult education institutes, and subsidising expenses – providing assistance to academic units and professors is also important. The Ministry of Education has integrated academic resources, such as by having relevant professors serving in adult education departments, older adult education research institutes, and older adult education research centers; organised training for older adult educators and program designers; and invited professionals to audit and provide counseling to various older adult education institutes. In addition, the government has invited relevant professionals to provide policy suggestions during key meetings. In the process of promoting older adult education, university professors were the think tanks for policy formulation and execution.

Increasing popularity of older adult education: making learning activities available in all townships

Numerous factors, such as physiological degeneration, inconvenient transportation, and unfamiliarity with the locations of education institutes, may hinder the learning participation of senior citizens. In response to these factors, the Ministry of Education has set a goal of establishing an older adult education institute in each township. Currently, 407 active learning centers and camps have been established in 368 townships. In addition to the courses offered at these institutes, learning activities are also delivered directly to senior citizen groups. These institutes do not passively wait for learners to attend, but actively deliver learning activities to senior citizens, thereby increasing the opportunities for senior citizens to learn. This communalisation and localisation of older adult education has provided an increased number of senior citizens the opportunity to learn. These are also key factors explaining why older adult education in Taiwan has become the new public pedagogy.

Future challenges facing older adult education

Under the booming exterior of Taiwan's older adult education efforts there remains considerable opposition. The primary arguments and future challenges are discussed in the following section.

Remaining skepticism towards the necessity of older adult education

Many people believe that learning is for young people, and that it is not necessary for senior citizens to learn. However, during the later years of career development, people may transition into retirement or adapt to the empty-nest phase. Lee and Yeh (2012) found that people entering old age are required to face two challenges, specifically, retirement and the impact of ageing. Transitioning into retirement requires two to three years, and learning can teach senior citizens appropriate coping strategies when they find difficulty in transitioning. During the ageing process, the majority of senior citizens typically experience a decline in physical functions and financial security, as well as changes in social networks (Bode, DeRidder, & Bensing, 2006). Senior citizens can consequently prepare for the future through learning (Lee & Lu, 2014; Liang, Wei, & Lee, 2014). Ageing preparation courses facilitates

senior citizens in understanding and adapting to old age, enhancing their confidence when handling problems (Bode, De Ridder, Kuijjer, & Bensing, 2007; Lee & Wei, in press). These arguments suggest that learning is an integral part in the later years of career development, and is therefore essential for senior citizens.

Probing on low efficiency of older education with government funding

The sensory functions and responses of senior citizens gradually degrade as they age, consequently influencing their learning efficiency. Due to this low learning efficiency of senior citizens, questions are raised concerning the essentiality of investing education funds into older adult education. However, the experiences, knowledge, and abilities accumulated by adults throughout their lives aid them in learning (Knowles, 1980). The findings of numerous previous studies indicate that senior citizens who participate in learning activities, even those living in rural areas with low literacy, exhibit improved health and less depression, seek less medical attention, demonstrate increased positivity and activity, have more friends, and are on better terms with their families (Hsieh & Lee, 2015; Lee & Huang, 2015). The National Health Insurance program of Taiwan offers exceptional medical resources. However, these resources are occasionally misused, particularly by senior citizens. Although no large-scale empirical studies have confirmed that older adult learning reduces health insurance expenses, extant research does show that senior citizens who participate in learning activities are typically healthier and require less medical attention (Wei, Hu, & Li, 2012; Hsieh & Lee, 2015).

Allocating diverse sources of funding to sustain the development of older adult education

The Taiwanese government has actively promoted older adult education in anticipation of the notion that the senior citizens of Taiwan can achieve active ageing. Although investments into older adult education have increased in recent years, the number of participants has also increased. In other words, although an ostensible increase in the overall funds for older adult education can be observed, the resources allocated to each participant have, in actuality, decreased. Therefore, under limited funding conditions, maximising the effectiveness of resources to benefit more senior citizens and identifying new sources of funding

to maintain the sustainable development of older adult education are inevitable problems that await resolution in the future.

Provide specialised programs to meet the needs of different groups of older adults

There is great heterogeneity among older adults, with educational levels ranging from illiterate to higher education and residential regions ranging from rural to metropolitan, and these differences result in considerable differences in their learning needs. To assist senior citizens in achieving the goal of active ageing, regardless of heterogeneity, the course content and teaching methods must focus on the differences between senior citizens, and subsequent research must be conducted. This is a challenge for all older adult education workers and is an inevitable problem awaiting resolution in the future.

Verifying the efficiency and impact of older adult education through research and studies.

The number of older adult education institutes and the number of participants in older adult education in Taiwan have increased in recent years. However, numerous issues pertaining to the impacts of older adult education remain unclear, such as whether:

- i. the government health insurance expenditures for senior citizens have decreased;
- ii. the psychological conditions of senior citizens have improved;
- iii. the social participation levels of senior citizens have increased;
and
- iv. the impact that senior citizens' contributions and services have on society, among others.

Research focusing on these issues should be conducted to obtain tangible evidence regarding the influences of older adult education. The evidence obtained through empirical research can serve as a basis for the formulation of future older adult education policies and course design, and also facilitate older adult education in gaining social support and recognition.

Conclusion

Older adult education has become a new learning trend in Taiwan, transcending classroom-based older adult education to now include educational activities that are rooted in society. The key significance of the development of older adult education is the change in the perception of older adult learning. Not only is learning a benefit for senior citizens, it is also their right; senior citizens can improve themselves through learning. In addition, the communalisation of older adult education institutes has increased the number of participants, consequently forming a learning trend that cannot be ignored. Through this evolutionary process, older adult education has been deemed the new public pedagogy in Taiwan because the necessity of lifelong learning is reflected in the development of older adult education. The concept of lifelong learning advocates that people must engage in learning at various stages in life to promote career development and prepare for various challenges. The process through which older adult education became the new public pedagogy in Taiwan can serve as a reference for the development of older adult learning in other countries.

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