

The Benefits of Elderly Education in the Context of Active Ageing

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Abstract

The ageing of the population is an inevitable social development trend and is presenting many challenges to modern society. The issue of population ageing has involved politics, economy, culture, society and other fields. With the increase of ageing population, the well-being of the elderly will determine the realization of harmonious society. The development of education for the elderly is an inevitable trend of social development. Education for the elderly will contribute to the harmonious development of the whole society. The concept of active ageing is gaining popularity among governments. Continuing education for the elderly in the context of active ageing has many potential benefits. Elderly education can improve the quality of life of the elderly, help them maintain physical functions and productivity for a longer period of time, create opportunities for the elderly to form learning groups, meet new friends, increase social participation, and reduce the feeling of alienation. The development of education for the elderly can also help to develop and use the potential human resources of the elderly and thus promote economic development. The analysis of the benefits of elderly education will draw people’s attention to the importance of the development of elderly education and encourage people from all walks of life to support the further development of education for

the elderly. While there are many benefits of continuing education for the elderly, there exist some challenges, one of which is the lack of special teachers for elderly education. The lack of specialized teachers at the Open University for old people can be solved partly by taking advantage of the learners’ lifelong work experience and accumulation of knowledge, and encouraging them to become volunteer teachers. Another solution is to offer various kinds of online courses to facilitate flexible learning at the elderly’s convenience. The development of elderly education will contribute to the active ageing process.

Key words: Ageing society; Active ageing; Benefits; Elderly education; Solution

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INTRODUCTION

Elderly people can be defined from different perspectives such as chronological age, physical age, mental age and social age etc. If elderly people are defined by the time of their retirement, then there is the problem of the difference of retirement age between males and females, and what’s more, the retirement age may change with times. According to the criteria of the Third Population Census of the People’s Republic of China, people at the age of 60 or above are categorized as elderly people.

Why should elderly people continue their education? What are the benefits of continuing education after retirement? Can further education contribute to old people’s well-being and happiness? The exploration of these questions will arouse more concerns about the well-being of the ageing population.

Jarvis once said ‘Fundamentally, it is the person who learns and it is the changed person who is the outcome of learning’ (Jarvis, 2009a, p.24). UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning offered an authoritative definition for learning as ‘an inevitable human activity from birth to old age...essential for the realization of human potential and the spread of human rights and democratic ideals’ (UNESCO, 2011).¹ The implication is that learning can have an influential impact on a person’s life and it is a lifelong process. The journey from cradle to grave is full of ups and downs and one is expected to learn to cope when new demands arise. For the old people, learning involves adapting to the new phase of life, which does not necessarily means deteriorating. Some people shift to a new field of interest after retirement and make great achievements. Though the ageing of physical body is an inevitable process, the development of crystallized intelligence is continuing even at one’s old age. If one can face up to ageing and continue learning, getting older can mean getting better. Life becomes simpler for elderly people. When their children grow up, the elderly people have more time to spend on their own interests and hobbies. Without the pressure from work, they can choose to learn what they really want to learn. Fewer responsibilities and distractions mean that old people are more likely to be able to focus on their learning.

THE CONCEPT OF ACTIVE AGEING

China has entered an ageing society in 1999, and the proportion of the elderly population is still increasing year by year. According to statistics released by the National Bureau of Statistics, at the end of 2018, the number of elderly people over 60 in China was 249.49 million, accounting for 17.9% of the total population; among them, the population of 65 years and over was 165.58 million, accounting for 11.9% of the total population. Due to the development of modern economy and society, the family structure has undergone great changes. The traditional family model of several generations living together is no longer common. The nuclear family model is becoming more and more common. Under this family model, naturally, there are more and more empty nest elderly people, which has become a social problem that cannot be ignored. According to the introduction of the first National Intelligent Elderly Care Strategy Seminar held in 2012, the proportion of empty-nest elderly in China is already very large. By 2050, the elderly living alone and empty-nest elderly in China will account for more than 54%. A survey shows that the proportion of empty-nest elderly people with psychological problems is as high as 60%. With the development of China’s economy, the material life of the

elderly has been greatly improved, but the spiritual life is still relatively scarce and insufficient. The education of the elderly has received more and more attention from governments at all levels in recent years. For example, in 2016, the Ministry of Education proposed further promoting the development of community education, and vigorously developing education for the elderly. But the elderly who can receive elderly education still account for only a small part of the elderly population. According to statistics from the Ministry of Education in 2017, there are only more than 7 million elderly people studying in institutions such as senior universities.

Due to better medical and health care conditions in modern society, declining infant mortality rates, healthier foods, and a reduction in heavy manual labor, life expectancy worldwide is increasing, leading to a higher proportion of the elderly in the population. With the development of society and economy, compared with previous generations, today’s elderly people are better educated, wealthier economically, and have better health conditions. “Old” no longer means “poor and weak”. Volunteer work, lifelong learning, study tours, and participation in sports can make old age life rich and colorful. The World Health Organization first put forward the concept of active ageing, advocating for the elderly to better participate in social life. Active ageing includes health, participation and protection, the core of which is participation. Active ageing is a positive social construction that enables the elderly to maintain good health, value, and dignity, participate in society with a positive attitude, and continue to contribute to society. Governments around the world promote active ageing, because active ageing advocates an active lifestyle that can promote the health of the elderly, thereby reducing the government’s tax burden caused by ageing and frailty. In order to achieve positive ageing, it is necessary to improve the social pension system, continue to develop education for the elderly, and cultivate the positive qualities of the elderly. The elderly can still play an active role in the economic field. Promoting the development of the silver economy is a realistic way to deal with the reduction of the population labor dividend. The participation of the elderly in reemployment not only contributes to the improvement of economic conditions, but also enables the elderly to maintain their enthusiasm for life, thereby improving the quality of life. Elderly people with mental health can live more actively, so mental health has a strong correlation with active ageing. Many elderly people have the desire to continue learning, which can enable them to have a more positive attitude and participate more in social life. The realization of active ageing requires the active role of education for the elderly.

¹ UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. (2011). Lifelong learning policies and strategies. Retrieved from <http://www.unesco.org/uil/>

THE PURPOSES OF CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR ELDERLY PEOPLE

On November 3, 2015, UNESCO held its 38th conference and released the “Education 2030 Framework for Action”, proposing that the mission of education is inclusive, fair and lifelong learning for all.² Elderly education should also aim at realizing this mission. Education is one of the important values in life, represents the beauty in life, and is a right that should benefit everyone. Today, most people still have good physical and mental health at retirement age, so they can actively participate in various social activities. However, in order to maintain this good state for as long as possible, people need to have an active lifestyle. Elderly education not only represents a positive way of ageing, but also one of the means to find a way of life, life value, learning opportunities and daily necessities. (Lemieux, Boutin and Riendeau, 2007) In the past five decades, the increased attention to lifelong education has undoubtedly led to the expansion of learning opportunities for the elderly. The positive impact of learning on the elderly is also reflected in many studies.

People of older age have to meet physiological, psychological and social challenges. With the ageing process, the strength of older people become weaker and the functions of body deteriorate gradually. Regular exercise and sufficient nutrition may slow this process, but the trend cannot be reversed. Psychologically speaking, older people have to face the feeling of loneliness and the sense of loss especially during the short period after retirement. The more frequent attack of illness and the loss of beloved ones may also cause some psychological problems. When old people withdraw from the working world, their social circle may shrink immensely, which may cause great sense of loss for the outgoing ones. Old people need to learn to come to terms with themselves and those challenges coming with old age.

Older people continue their learning for various reasons. Some well-educated later learners devote to the exploring of the meaning of life. Some do it for personal growth. Some people simply enjoy the process of learning something new. Some want to study things that interest them or help them adapt to later life. Others continue their learning to avoid loneliness or the sense of emptiness.

The focus on lifelong learning calls for foregrounding of the learner’s learning interests, needs, aspirations, preferences and inclinations, in contrast to the traditional educational focus on the provision of educational opportunities (Jarvis, 2014). Old people continue their education to develop interests to enrich their life. They do not care so much about earning a diploma or certain certificate. What they enjoy is the learning process itself. Therefore, their choices of courses usually reflect their

inclinations and interests rather than some pragmatic purposes. Learning is the driving force for growth, and growth is a lifelong process in the sense of cognition and belief.

THE BENEFITS OF LEARNING FOR THE ELDERLY

Carrying out education for the elderly can promote the improvement of the quality of the whole nation. Along with social development, new knowledge continues to emerge, old concepts need to be changed in time, and old knowledge needs to constantly update, so as to keep up with the times and progress with society. Especially in today’s world, the development of science and technology is changing with each passing day. It is very important to implement lifelong education. Through learning the elderly can invigorate the spirit, update their knowledge and strengthen the physique. Elderly education not only improves the life quality of the elderly, but also improves the quality of the entire nation. This is because the elderly plays an important role in spreading human civilization in society. Since ancient times, there has been the traditional virtue of respecting the old. Their words and deeds affect the family and society as a whole. Especially after the elderly retire, they have more leisure time and spend more time in their family life, and become more active in all corners of society, influencing younger generations and society with their values, ideas, and lifestyles. They also take on the responsibility of taking care of their grandchildren, so the words and deeds of the elderly have a direct impact on the younger generations.

In the context of the ever-increasing population ageing, how to delay the ageing process and help individuals maintain physical functions and productivity for a longer period of time has a far-reaching significance for the full development of personal life and the sustainable development of society. Ageing is caused by multiple factors such as heredity, experience, external environment and internal environment, and is characterized by the decline or loss of physical and mental abilities. Compared with physiological age, ageing is more related to physical function status. The state of individual physical functions is closely related to a person’s health literacy. Psychological changes caused by ageing are one of the most important of all factors. With age, the ability to learn will decline to a certain extent, but in many cases, the magnitude of this decline is not obvious. Not all aspects decline during the ageing process. For example, although muscle strength, vitality and reaction speed will decrease with age, with long-term practice skills tend to increase over time. If people keep their mind active through the training of intelligence and creative imagination, it is possible to achieve outstanding achievements at the age of 70 or even 80. (Donahue, 1955) Learning can improve the

² *Education 2030 Framework for Action*. Retrieved from <https://www.taodocs.com/p-216599389.html> [2020-10-21]

health of the elderly and slow down ageing. Learning can also help the elderly take on other important roles, such as serving as community volunteers, helping their children to take care of their offspring, and acting as caregivers for other senior citizens. The social life of the elderly who actively participate in learning is more active because they invest more in the affairs of the community. (Dench and Regan, 1999) Studies have shown that persisting in learning can maintain learning ability, and for those who have been actively learning throughout their lives, there is almost no loss of learning capacity even in an old age. As we age, the decline in intelligence is more likely to be caused by too little use of the brain rather than too much use. Only by staying active and alert can the brain maintain its function. Maintaining the habit of learning can enable the elderly to adapt to changes in social life and achieve harmony with the environment.

Elderly education can provide the elderly with means of scientific health preservation, which can promote health and prolong life. Health education will help the elderly to have a good understanding of pathology and nutrition, so as to achieve a moderate diet and pay more attention to nutrition. Physical education will help the elderly understand the necessity of scientific exercise and choose the right form of exercises according to their own conditions. Education on pharmacological and medical routines for the elderly can help them understand the principles of disease prevention and treatment, and the relationship between disease and medication, as well as the duality of drug treatment and side effects on the body, so that the elderly will pay more attention to disease prevention and use drugs rationally.

The increase in population and the alienation of urban life make individuals more responsible for finding meaning for themselves. With the increase of geographic and social mobility, the randomness of interaction between people increases, long-term contacts and personal feedback decrease, which is likely to lead to psychological isolation. The temporal, spatial and emotional separation of the elderly from their family and friends and the emptiness after retiring from work make the elderly easily feel psychologically alienated. Most elderly people are not incapacitated, nor have they left society because of retirement, but if society does not provide them with other development possibilities, it is difficult for them to remain active and socially involved, and they may become more and more separated from society and therefore may become weaker due to lack of activity. Carrying out education for the elderly can enable the elderly to get out of the closed inner world, enrich their spiritual life. After people reach old age, most of them have a sense of loss. They are often accompanied by loneliness and emptiness. Closing one away from the outside world is extremely detrimental to the physical and mental health of the elderly. Developing education for the elderly can

encourage them to participate in some social activities as much as they can. Receiving a variety kind of education will help the elderly continue to maintain contact with society. Elderly education creates opportunities for the elderly to form learning groups, meet new friends, increase social participation, and reduce the feeling of alienation among the elderly.

Another benefit of learning for the elderly is that it can keep their mind occupied. Many countries in the world have already stepped into ageing society, and there are an increasing number of senior citizens living by themselves, which may lead to a feeling of loneliness and a sense of vacancy. This is especially true for those who have recently retired. If they have spent most of their time working before retirement, they may feel at a loss about how to spend the time meaningfully. Taking up a new hobby or learning a new skill will fill up the gap. A person who is engaged in a meaningful activity is more likely to enjoy well-being and happiness than someone who spends most of the time watching TV at home.

Learning can also help elderly people feel young. When one sets out to learn something new, he or she needs to set a goal. Achieving short-terms goals can give people a sense of accomplishments, which in turn will make one feels more active and motivated to learn more and achieve higher goals. For the elderly, setting a definite and achievable goal is especially important since an aimless life may cause boredom and depression.

Learning may contribute to health, because learning requires that one stay focused, and therefore gain a peace of mind, which is necessary to a balanced life. While a young man who is not healthy may feel old; an old person who is in good health will feel young and active. That may explain why some old people who are busy learning new things look younger than people of the same age group.

Learning can enlarge the old people's social circle. If they choose to study at the Open University for old people, they can make new friends who share similar interests and hobbies. Even if they teach themselves some new skills, they can still have more chances to gather with other people who are also learning this skill. When they stay with people of similar age, they have more common topics to talk about. They may also become supporters for each other, either mentally or physically.

The development of education for the elderly can develop and use the potential human resources of the elderly and thus promote economic development. Most elderly people are willing to use their talents to serve the community, however, sometimes it is necessary for them to continue to learn to update their knowledge and familiarize themselves with new technology in order to achieve this purpose.

Percy (1990, p. 236) claimed that 'the aims or the purposes of education and learning for older people

should, in fact, be no different from those of people of any age'. He alluded to learning as a personal quest where 'learners begin from where they are; they follow the thrust of their own curiosities in order to make what is around them more meaningful'. The seeking of meaning is a continuous and changing process, we try to make a sense of the world around us, and the pursuit of meaning in life is an eternal theme in human history. Finding meaning in every encounter can enable people to face up to adversity and survive challenging situations. For the old people, this is especially important, since old people is more likely to encounter more negative events in life such as the passing away of friends or relatives. For some old people, the significance of later life learning may not be the acquiring of new knowledge or new skills, but at the reconstruction of their self-identity. The change of social roles demands reorientation of the focus of their life.

Most elderly learners have a positive attitude toward the study at elderly universities. With the increasing of ageing population, elderly learning is playing an increasingly important role in the construction of learning society. With the transition from staying-at-home mother family mode to the modern family with both parents working outside, some grandparents assume more responsibility in raising the kids. The development of learning environment by grandparents as role models will have a great impact on the younger generation's attitude towards learning.

THE SOLUTION TO THE LACK OF SPECIAL TEACHERS FOR THE ELDERLY

While there are many benefits of continuing education for the elderly, there exist some challenges, one of which is the lack of special teachers for elderly education. There are several feasible ways to face this challenge. The lack of specialized teachers at the Open University for old people can be solved partly by taking advantage of the learners' lifelong work experience and accumulation of knowledge. The Open University can be a place for old people to share their knowledge, their expertise and their life experience. For some people, sharing their knowledge with others is what they want exactly from life after retirement. Those active people feel happier when they feel that they are needed. This can be a mutual beneficial mechanism for both volunteer teachers and voluntary learners. The volunteer teachers are willing to make further contributions to society, the voluntary learners are eager to learn and enrich their life. Older people are more likely to learn from each other, since they have a lot in common and their motivations to learn are similar. What's

more, their accumulation of knowledge through all these years makes them experts in different fields; therefore, they have something valuable to contribute to the learning community of their own interests.

Another solution is to offer various kinds of online courses. Because of the different life experiences and backgrounds, older people may have different preferences to learning and their interest and choices may vary from person to person. It is impossible to address all the needs of old learners relying on one institution alone. Therefore, the availability of various kinds of courses specially designed for older learners online becomes increasingly important. For those who don't want to leave their home and at the same time still want to pursue further study, they can choose to study at home. For those who prefer to study with other people, they can go to the study center to meet others face to face.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the benefits of education for the elderly shows the necessity of further development of elderly education and its significance for the construction of a harmonious learning society. The study of elderly learning will contribute to the development of lifelong learning theory and the construction of learning society. Elderly people are a special group and have its own characteristics, the study of which will expand adult education theory and continuing education theory.

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