

## **Lifelong Learning in Later Life**

## INTERNATIONAL ISSUES IN ADULT EDUCATION

Volume 7

### **Series Editor:**

Peter Mayo, *University of Malta, Msida, Malta*

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This international book series attempts to do justice to adult education as an ever expanding field. It is intended to be internationally inclusive and attract writers and readers from different parts of the world. It also attempts to cover many of the areas that feature prominently in this amorphous field. It is a series that seeks to underline the global dimensions of adult education, covering a whole range of perspectives. In this regard, the series seeks to fill in an international void by providing a book series that complements the many journals, professional and academic, that exist in the area. The scope would be broad enough to comprise such issues as 'Adult Education in specific regional contexts', 'Adult Education in the Arab world', 'Participatory Action Research and Adult Education', 'Adult Education and Participatory Citizenship', 'Adult Education and the World Social Forum', 'Adult Education and Disability', 'Adult Education and the Elderly', 'Adult Education in Prisons', 'Adult Education, Work and Livelihoods', 'Adult Education and Migration', 'The Education of Older Adults', 'Southern Perspectives on Adult Education', 'Adult Education and Progressive Social Movements', 'Popular Education in Latin America and Beyond', 'Eastern European perspectives on Adult Education', 'An anti-Racist Agenda in Adult Education', 'Postcolonial perspectives on Adult Education', 'Adult Education and Indigenous Movements', 'Adult Education and Small States'. There is also room for single country studies of Adult Education provided that a market for such a study is guaranteed.

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# **Lifelong Learning in Later Life**

*A Handbook on Older Adult Learning*

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This first truly comprehensive interdisciplinary, international critique of theory and practice in lifelong learning as it relates to later life is an absolute tour de force. It opens up new vistas for discussion about learning and education as we grow older whilst remaining accessible and engaging in its structure and approach. It will appeal not just to academics but to a range of professionals interested in different facets of ageing including the contributions older people can make to their communities in a climate of rapid change. It deserves wide recognition and debate.

*Alexandra Withnall, Universities of Warwick and Leicester, UK.*

This is an important and apt book which takes up a subject which tends, unfortunately, to be neglected in the now very ample literature on lifelong learning; the subject of learning in later life. This is because much of that literature has been occupied with an economic agenda, especially with issues of performativity (how to deliver successful outcomes effectively and efficiently), employability, and knowledge production. Even today it remains a struggle to persuade ordinary people that learning is something that is possible and desirable in later life, and policy makers that older learners are worth investing in, not just socially but even economically. Findsen and Formosa's handbook is valuable in this context because it provides a comprehensive coverage of the subject in a scholarly way that is available also to the non-specialised reader. Impressive in its scope it seeks to describe older learning critically within the lifelong learning literature at the same time that it makes a strong and persuasive case for taking older learning seriously in our postmodern world.

*Kenneth Wain, University of Malta*

This is a book that needed to be written: it provides a most thorough and skilful analysis of a comprehensive range of contemporary literature about learning in later life from many localities and countries of the world. It combines old and new perspectives and locates the discussion in the wider fields of adult learning and the learning society. This is an excellent contemporary reference book about the theories, practices, developments and outcomes in third and fourth age learning in both formal and non-formal contexts. It is an essential text for students, practitioners and policy makers.

*Peter Jarvis, Professor Emeritus, University of Surrey*



## **DEDICATION**

Marvin dedicates this work to his wife, Fiona

Brian dedicates this book to his lifetime friend and wife, Caterina



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## SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

I welcome the completion of this marvellous volume on an important aspect of international adult education. This is a collaborative endeavour by two of the finest scholars in the field of educating older adults. One of these is a specialist in the area from New Zealand, the other is a sociologist focusing on gerontology from the University of Malta. Both boast an impressive publication track record on the politics of aging.

The education of older adults has, for quite some time, been featuring in the adult education literature through the works of such authors as Alexandra Whitnall, Keith Percy, Eric Midwinter, the late Cambridge history professor, Peter Laslett, the late Frank Glendenning, Paula Allman (who subsequently moved on to dealing with other issues), Ron Manheimer, Dorothy MacKeracher, Roy Carole and the two authors of this volume. The scope of analyses has been impressive ranging from discussions concerning learning in later life in general to universities of the Third Age (the subject of excellent critiques, based on Bourdieu's concept of distinction, by Formosa) to old age learning as a form of social movement learning as well as learning for social awareness and change (see Roy's work on BC's 'raging grannies'). A common thread throughout these writings is the notion of older adults as subjects and therefore social actors as opposed to the more conventional pathologising accounts of individuals in older age.

Some of the finest and more perceptive writings on learning in older age and on older age in general debunk some of the stereotypes surrounding this variegated category of people and citizens. Old theories and paradigms of thinking are refuted outright, paradigms reflected in such inane comments as 'you cannot teach an old dog new tricks' and other graphic illustrations concerning intelligence such as the gradually descending curve featured in such psychology textbooks as Alice Heim's (1970) *Intelligence and Personality*. Furthermore we often come across glib statements such as that by the septuagenarian, former 60s-70s rock icon, now turned painter, Grace Slick. The television network CBS issued a profile of Grace Slick in which she states: "When you're old, you should be heard and not seen, when young you should be seen but not heard..." (Grace Slick Profile - CBS, 2011). This comment might well fit into the stereotype that "older adults should render themselves invisible in a youth-oriented society" (Findsen, 2005 : 439). I wonder what such crowd-pullers as Ian Anderson, Carole King, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Eric Clapton and John Mayall would have to say about this piece of witticism from a remarkable woman who once wrote powerful lyrics fronting the legendary S. Francisco Band, Jefferson Airplane. And, true to her remarkable and creative personality, she serves as a great role model for people in Third Age by reinventing herself as a painter.

Adult education too has had its version of a role model for people in their third age in the form of Paulo Freire. In his late sixties and early 70s, Freire would pull crowds wherever he spoke. He tried to make up for the lost time in exile, severed

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from his roots, by serving as Education Secretary in the PT Municipal Administration and taking on the onerous task of reforming the entire public education system in the megalopolis of São Paulo in Brazil. As a speaker, he was 'seen' as well as 'heard,' and often ushered into auditoriums as though he were a rock star, even though his looks were those of an Ancient Greek philosopher, a Socrates. He would write in *Pedagogy of the Heart*:

I was returning hopeful, motivated to relearn Brazil, to participate in the struggle for democracy...As I write this at seventy five, I continue to feel young, declining - not for vanity or fear of disclosing my age - the privilege senior citizens are entitled to, for example, at airports...People are old or young much more as a function of how they think of the world, the availability they have for curiously giving themselves to knowledge.

Freire, 1997 : 72

Pathologising older adults also entails adopting the medical model when dealing with issues and policies concerning people falling into this large and variegated age bracket. People are expected to view themselves in a system shaped by and for people of a younger age and are otherized or pitied for not conforming to the societal norms, without asking: who sets these norms and in favour of whom? But adult education is also replete with literature in which older adults learn and impart the fruits of their learning, resulting from a social construction model of old age. This is one that can make them react politically and collectively to disabling environments, often in the form of older adults' movements or political parties. Older adults in Copenhagen are visibly active in different walks of life not least in reinventing themselves as jazz players in public arenas. In British Columbia they take on the role conventionally attributed to student movements on campuses and in the public sphere as they use their wit and imagination to raise awareness regarding local and global ills as well as target policy makers and politicians when doing so. The 'raging grannies' earned themselves a lot of publicity with their takes on issues concerning nuclear proliferation, environmental degradation and so forth, as amply demonstrated by Carole Roy and other writers.

Others engage in pensions associations, political-party veterans' clubs or remain active within movements to which they helped give rise in the past. Here we have the sense of older adults as social activists. And yet not all adults have the opportunity to engage in such activities, which, as with all social movements, have a learning dimension. They are denied such opportunities in the same way they are denied opportunities to engage in such romanticized older adult education leisure pursuits as joining Universities of the Third Age or Elderhostels, the latter involving learning through travel. There are, after all, 'older adults and older adults' just as there are 'workers and workers.'

Social class plays an important role here. The romanticized versions of Older Age adult education we often come across are those belonging to the middle class and especially those categories of the middle class which have not become déclassé. This applies to not only U3As and Elderhostels but also to church

organizations and other veterans' clubs. It also applies to older adults gaining access to universities and other centres of higher learning. One of the major challenges for adult educators is that of targeting older adults threatened by or suffering from poverty or social restrictions including mobility impairment or limited financial means which prevents them from engaging in a variety of pursuits.

For many older adults, who are able-bodied but denied financial stability, continuing employment is not an option but a necessity. Moreover we are living in an age when demographic shifts are compelling people to continue working beyond conventional retirement age. An EAEA report on trends and approaches to adult education confirms this (EAEA, 2006). The discourse regarding the vocationalisation of adult education is getting stronger now that even the situation of older adults is being dragged into it. Many countries, especially in the western world, are experiencing an aging population and are grappling with how to prepare for and accommodate older adults' needs. Let us take Italy as an example. An ISTAT (2010) press release states that Italy has an increasingly elderly population. On 1 January 2010, individuals aged 65 + years represented 20.2 per cent of the population (as compared to 18.1 per cent in 2000), while minors represented only 16.9 per cent (17.5 per cent in 2000). Youths aged 14 are under represented 14 per cent (14.3 per cent in 2000) (Eghbal, 2007):

- Concurrent with the expected reduction in population, those aged over 65 are growing in numbers. They numbered 11.6 million in 2006 compared to 8.2 million of those aged 0-14 years. The former age group has grown by 10.4 per cent between 2001 and 2006 whilst the latter group has grown by 1.9 per cent.
- There are 12.7 million pensioners in Italy, accounting for 21.6 per cent of the population in 2006 compared with 18.0 per cent for the Western European average.

Projections for its close neighbour, Malta, indicate that the number of persons in the 65+ age bracket is expected to increase to 20 per cent in 2025 and to 24 per cent in 2050 (NSO, 2009). The situation in these countries is not any different from the rest of Europe (Turkey is one notable exception since it has a very young population).

Europe is not alone, as a continent, in having an ageing population and a decreasing birth rate throughout. The rise of this sector of the population has rendered it an important target for social-oriented adult learning, with NGOs, including those tied to various denominational churches in Europe, playing an important part in this context. The Council of Europe had, as far back as 1988, identified 'Education of the Elderly' as one of its two main topics (the other was 'adult education and the long-term unemployed') in its programme 'Adult Education and Social Change' which came to an end, following a series of meetings and topic group study visits, with a conference in Strasbourg in 1993.

The great demographic shifts that have occurred have led the post-welfare State to consider pensions unsustainable. Suddenly older adults are being regarded as

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important prospective members of the labour force. The retirement age for certain occupations is being raised and we often come across seminars discussing the feasibility of older adults being gainfully employed past the conventional retirement age. The discourse about adult education for the elderly has shifted from one that focused on non-instrumental learning, including the middle class-oriented Universities of the Third Age (Formosa, 2000, 2007), Elderhostels and the more popular community groups, to one that is increasingly becoming vocationalised. An EU commissioned report concerning trends and approaches to adult education in Europe emphasises this point and welcomes the trend to allow retooling of older adults for further employment (EAEA, 2006). It is argued that older adults have much to offer to the economy, as long as their labour skills are retooled. As a result, it is further argued, they would no longer be a burden on the state. I would add that they would thus fall prey to the market which is now rendering pensions an individual rather than a social concern. In Europe, older adults are now being encouraged to continue working after 60 with the retirement age in many places being raised to 65, and older adults are being encouraged to work beyond this age. There seems to be no regard for the reality that there are different types of work which require different types of workers. It is conceivable that a university professor continues in her or his same job till 70 but the question must be asked: Would this apply also to people involved in masonry with their dwindling physical prowess? Even the great Michelangelo had to concentrate on less strenuous artistic work in his older years than sculpturing in marble. Some kind of vocational education would be warranted. I once witnessed the work of a masonry cooperative in Porto, Portugal where masons eventually become instructors at the cooperative's training centre when they reach a certain age. Presumably this also requires some retooling in the form of pedagogical education. In short, the vocationalisation of adult education as a discourse is all pervasive, and serves to render 'human capital theory' a feature of the education of adults not only below the third age but also within this age category. This issue necessitates engagement in not only psychological but also sociological, and more specifically political-economic, enquiries concerning older adults and their challenges for learning. It also requires analyzing the education of older adults within the context of hegemonic globalisation and its underlying neo-liberal ideology.

However the education of older adults takes on a variety forms. Among these are art classes or projects involving the visual arts. This was the area in which I carried out my first activity when working as an adult education organizer in the education department in my home country. The project consisted of a group of young art educators facilitating a process whereby older parishioners in my residential town were encouraged to take up paint and brushes and engage solely or collectively in visual expression. It took long for the ice to be broken but once one person made the first move others followed suit. They admitted to discovering aspects of their own personality which were hidden throughout most of their adult life, often discovering creative streaks which they thought they never had or which were suppressed by the system world in which they operated. Activities such as these also served as a means of socialization and of overcoming the boredom of an

otherwise isolated life inside the home. Other older members of the same community frequently join younger members in parish choirs and seek educational fulfilment in learning to read music and sing. Others find solace in games such as scrabble, joining national championships and honing their skills also at home on the internet. Others, who still benefit from a decent pension, stake a more active part in community politics availing themselves of time on their hands to contest elections for local councils.

There is, however, an urgent need for the provision of general adult education targeting the many *old people's homes* that are mushrooming everywhere in Europe. Adult Education should constitute an important feature of activity in these homes that can serve to improve the quality of life of the residents and therefore make the prolongation of life desirable. There is a need for the preparation of a specialised cadre of adult educators who can provide meaningful educational experiences among older adults in these homes. Some countries are well advanced in this feature of adult education but many others are light years away. Such activities can allow residents in these homes to continue to function as citizens and there is an argument to be made in favour of conceiving of such an education as being an education for prolonged citizenship. Keeping old people in a state of inertia, passively awaiting death, is a denial of the right to citizenship, a genuinely active one which an adult education, that focuses on activity driven and at times collective learning, and which draws on the activation of the learners' otherwise hidden and corroded skills and knowledge, can help keep in motion.

The foregoing ideas connect with some of the many issues concerning the education of older adults which Brian Findsen and Marvin Formosa raise and discuss in this wonderful and detailed volume. There is much material which can stimulate the imagination of educators and the older adults themselves to organise their educational activities in meaningful ways. Any series on international issues in adult education would cry out for a book such as this. Enjoy the read!

Peter Mayo  
University of Malta  
20 May 2011

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