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Impact on Senior Learners' Quality of Life through Lifelong Learning

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Abstract

Learning in later life (citizens over 65 or retired) is becoming common; job related needs or labour market qualification requirements are replaced by more personal aims such as curiosity, understanding the environment, feeling more integrated, pleasure or keeping active. These personal aims can be seen from the quality of life (QoL) perspective, where education increases well-being and understanding of self and society, and helps senior learners to feel they are participating in and form part of society. The thesis presented in this paper is that education increases QoL. Taking into account that QoL has both objective and subjective facets, and education is a complex long-term process, this article shows the relation that exists between a lifelong learning activity in senior citizens and the impact on their QoL. This research has been conducted within the QEDuSen project (supported by the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Commission) using quantitative and qualitative research methods.

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1. Introduction

Each life stage – childhood, adolescence or adult – has its own most suitable pedagogies and aims, and the same can be said for senior education. When seniors (citizens over 65 or retired) attend class, they are not pursuing

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professional goals or seeking competitiveness. Their objectives are more related to personal interests, sociability, adaptation and integration in today's society, participation, active citizenship, and above all, improving their quality of life through a lifelong learning process. Enhancing seniors' quality of life is therefore the main aim to be achieved through education.

The European project (within the European Commission's LifeLong Learning Programme) QEDuSen started on November 2011, with seven participating adult education institutions. The aims of the project are to develop two products: a guide and an evaluation tool for educational institutions that want to increase the impact of education on their learners' quality of life.

The first stage of the project is now completed. It consisted of a study into the relationship between education and quality of life among senior learners. Quantitative and qualitative research was undertaken with learners to discover their perceptions of quality of life due to education. Staff and teachers groups with experience in teaching seniors were also surveyed to gather their approaches to improving their impact on learners.

Results show that in this context (senior citizens who were not challenged or disabled) and when basic needs are covered (safety, income, reasonable health), education impacts their quality of life (physiological well-being, enjoyment and personal adaptation in the main). This research shows that the methodologies and the environment must be carefully chosen on the basis of the needs of these learners, but more important is the human factor, the teachers and staff, and their ability to communicate and transmit attitudes as well as knowledge. We also found that subjects dealing with psychological and physical health were accepted more readily by learners since they recognised that they had some beneficial impact on their lifestyles.

2. Quality of Life and education among the elderly

The most significant QoL dimensions and facets that should be taken in consideration when talking about individuals' QoL can be extracted from the main theories on Quality of Life (QoL) developed in recent years. The World Health Organisation defines QoL (WHO 1997) as "individuals' perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns". Cummins' comprehensive QoL scale aimed at the general population (Cummins 1997) affirms that QoL is both objective and subjective, and has seven domains: material well-being, health, productivity, intimacy, safety, community, and emotional well-being. But the most notable consideration is that, according to Cummins, (1997) "subjective domains comprise domain satisfaction weighted by their importance to the individual". The WHO also evaluates QoL from objective and subjective perspectives. Objective indicators such as access to basic needs, food, income, health, security, transportation, etc., are important for QoL, but they must be weighted from the individual subjective point of view, the cultural and value systems of the rest of the community and its expectations. Indeed, Schallock & Verdugo 2003 (p.11-30) state that once a person's basic and most fundamental needs are met (income, health and social contact), improved QoL is based on subjective factors, but mainly on "the perception of the individual" and it is based on "needs, election and individual control".

QoL can be seen from a hedonic perspective (satisfying one's own needs, pleasure, wishes), and it is related to ownership of material property, money, pursuing pleasure, not being in pain, etc. When a person is facing risk of exclusion, is very poor or has nowhere to live, QoL can be improved through social services, health providers and direct policies from decision makers (such as transportation, security, etc).

When basic needs are covered, the eudaimonic perspective prevails (from the Greek, eudaimonia means literally "the state of having a good indwelling spirit, a good genius", Encyclopaedia Britannica). This perspective regards QoL as a long-term, highly subjective state that is related to attitude, motivation, integration, community participation, perceived control and personal aims in life. From this perspective, education can promote QoL.

Education should not be considered in a context where teachers provide learners with information to memorise, but in the broader sense of the word, through specific subjects, activities, pedagogies, and models of education, in a context of an educational institution, comprising managers, staff, technicians, trainers, tutors, facilitators and the learners themselves. All these factors encourage learning among the elderly in a challenging society, providing the attitudes and competences necessary to remain as part of the community, through participation, being active,

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