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# AGE AS A DIVERSITY ISSUE IN GRADES K-12 AND IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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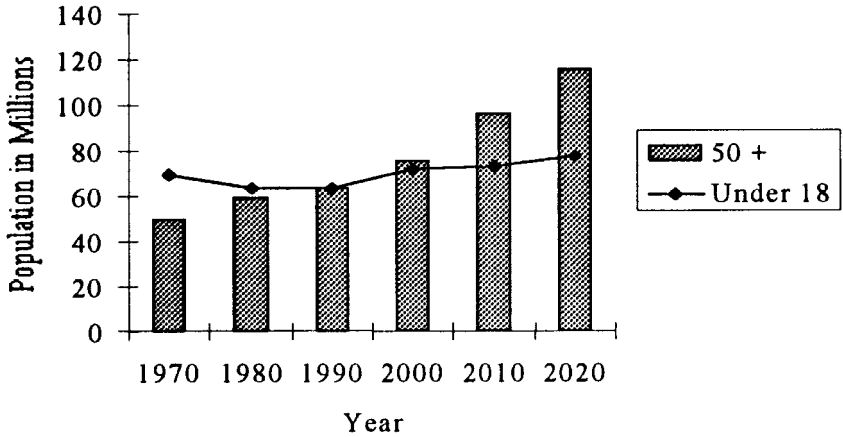
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*An aging population will be one of the world's most important social issues of the next half-century. Diversity programs should prepare individuals to function successfully in the world of the future. Diversity programs have traditionally included information sensitive to the issues of racism, sexism, culture, and disability. However, the needs of the older population have rarely been addressed in diversity programs. Educators must instill a balanced understanding of aging at all levels of education (K-16). The article provides an overview of aging education as a diversity issue. Specifically, it provides the reader an overview of the components of effective diversity education programs, and instructional methods and techniques for teaching aging as a diversity issue at the elementary through secondary levels. Finally, issues in teaching older adults in higher education are discussed.*

As we begin the new millennium, it is imperative that children and young adults have a balanced understanding of the positive and negative aspects of growing older. Individuals who are 8, 18, 38, or 68 years old define "old" very differently. Teenagers, for example, tend to view anyone around age 30 as "old."

Should educators be concerned about aging? Consider that the proportion of persons under 18 is expected to stay approximately the

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**FIGURE 1** Americans under 18 and age 50+, in millions, 1970–2020. Adapted from The Roper Organization (1995).

same for the next 25 years, whereas the number of persons over 50 is expected to dramatically increase within the same time period (Couper & Pratt, 1997). Figure 1 illustrates this dichotomy of cohort growth through 2025.

Is the issue of aging education important? The United Nations General Assembly has recognized 1999 as the “International Year of Older Persons” and Donna Shalala, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Secretary, reported that by the year 2030, older people will outnumber children in the United States for the first time in history (1998). An aging population will be one of the world’s most important social issues of the next half-century.

## AGING EDUCATION

One of the most important goals of education is to instill a sense of appreciation for the diversity of human experience. This includes the different ways people from varying cultural backgrounds view the world. Appreciation of human diversity also includes understanding the perspectives of people born at different times in different historical periods. In a rapidly changing world, each succeeding generation share experiences as different from other generations as there are differences among cultures. (Couper & Gregg, 1992, p. 1)

Many of the stereotypes about older adults are untrue. It is important that children and adults of all ages recognize that older adults are

not a homogeneous group. In fact, people tend to become increasingly different as we age (Allen & Hart, 1998). Differences in education and experience—not to mention physical and health limitations—are so great that few generalizations are accurate (Caswell, 1994).

Increasingly, children are growing up in homes with intergenerational families, participating in college courses with older learners, working and learning in the corporate environment with older workers, and in some cases learning along with older adults in secondary classrooms (e.g., “Adults-in-Prime-time” programs). Pratt stated that “children should begin at the earliest possible age to develop a healthy and realistic view of aging” (Couper & Gregg, 1992, p. 21). He further stated that “none of us, and least of all young people, can afford to face our individual or collective future(s) guided by ageist myths and stereotypes or by patterns of age discrimination and gerontophobic behavior” (Couper & Gregg, 1992, p. 21).

## **AGEISM AS A COMPONENT OF DIVERSITY PROGRAMS**

Diversity programs should prepare individuals to function successfully in the world of the future. A major goal of education for survival in a global society is to help students acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to participate in the world’s social, political, and economic systems so that individuals from diverse ethnic, cultural, religions, and age groups will be politically empowered and structurally integrated into their societies. Assisting students to acquire the competencies to participate in effective civic action in order to create equitable national societies is one of the most important goals for education in the next century (Banks, 1997).

Our nation’s curriculum must be transformed to accurately reflect the diversity within our country. To respond adequately to the diversity realities with the nation and the world, the curriculum should be transformed and should help students develop decision-making and social-action skills. Banks stated that an effective diversity curriculum should include (1) broadly conceptualized topics, including the study of a wide range of people; (2) a comparative approach in studying a variety of groups of people; and (3) a multi-perspective approach when delivering major diversity concepts, especially across discipline areas (e.g., math, social studies, art, literature, sciences). Diversity programs have traditionally included information sensitive to the issues of racism, sexism, culture, and disability. However, the needs of the older population have rarely been addressed in diversity programs.

Research conducted by Dodson and Hause (1996) found that young people tend to have very negative attitudes about the aging process and older people. They often see older adults not as individuals, but as stereotypes. What young people hear or read plays a critical role in shaping their perceptions of older people. Thus, the following representations should be included in diversity programs.

1. Older adults should be represented in proportion to their numbers in society.
2. Among the older population, all ethnic and racial groups should be represented and should not be given stereotypic roles.
3. Older men and women should be presented in a full range of meaningful occupations and settings.
4. The older person should be developed as a unique individual who pursues a span of activities ranging from active to passive.
5. Information should be more descriptive about the physical process of aging and accord it a balance of strengths and weaknesses.
6. Older people should be illustrated in varied groupings—alone, in communication with peers, and with individuals from other age groups. (Dodson & Hause, 1996).

## **AGEISM IN K-12 CURRICULA**

The National Retired Teachers Association (a division of the American Association of Retired Persons) and the National Academy for Teaching and Learning About Aging (Couper & Pratt, 1997) have addressed aging issues from a curricular perspective. The fact that society is facing the “potential to live longer than any previous generation” is creating a need for young people to have information and understanding about the aging process that will enable them to be better prepared “about work and family issues related to aging than did their parents or grandparents.” Consequently, educators are encouraged to develop curriculum that will enhance students’ understanding of the aging process and arm them with the realistic and balanced perspective of aging as a lifelong process.

The School-to-Work, career education, and vocational-technical education initiatives have strengthened the curricular emphasis on ageism. Educators have recognized the importance of ageism. The supply and demand of health care workers for the aging population has created a need for skilled employees with a greater understanding about aging and the knowledge base and skills of society to better deal with age-related issues. Just as racial and gender sensitivity

came to the forefront and created an awareness in society, so has the awareness of aging come forward. As the baby boomers deal with aging parents and face their own age-related issues, a sensitivity to the need for understanding and strategies in dealing with such issues take on greater importance in society.

The National Retired Teachers and the National Academy for Teaching and Learning About Aging (1997) have developed models for improving K–12 aging education. They contend that educators need staff development opportunities to equip teachers with up-to-date knowledge and teaching strategies to prepare them to teach about aging issues. Teachers are encouraged to include units, lessons, and objectives that provide significant information about the aging process to students. The following are suggested curricular activities.

1. Develop a list of basic vocabulary related to aging, growth, and development.
2. Invite older volunteers to class to read and discuss books about growing older.
3. Organize a pen pal program with children and older community residents.
4. Analyze advertisements, cartoons, comic strips, birthday cards, book illustrations, and common sayings.
5. Invite retirees as guest lectures about aging and retirement issues (e.g., different experiences during historical moments, immigration, recession, and civil rights).
6. Compare students' roles with older adults in various cultures in the United States and other countries.
7. Investigate ways that businesses use technology to market to older adults.
8. Create E-mail pen pals with older citizens.
9. Practice accessing information over the Internet by locating resources and organizations for older adults.
10. Identify technology to help persons of all ages with hearing and vision loss.
11. Use examples of older persons contributing to society.
12. Provide students with a list of long-lived artists, poets, musicians, photographers, architects, dancers, or actors noting their age at which their contributions were made (e.g., Grandma Moses, Michelangelo, etc.).
13. Invite older artists to class to display, discuss, and demonstrate techniques of their art form.
14. Role play mini-dramas expressing problems and solutions about aging.

15. Invite architects, housing design specialists, travel agents, and home care providers to discuss their contributions to meeting the needs of older citizens.
16. Demonstrate and practice effective customer service with older people.
17. Identify and discuss cases of age discrimination in the workplace and strategies to overcome situations.
18. Diagram life cycles.
19. Explore potential careers in aging.
20. Invite community health and social service professionals to explain resources for the aging population.
21. Research Elderhostel programs and/or Adventure Travel for people who are 50 + .
22. Invite local health professionals into the classroom to discuss what young people can do to avoid health problems in later life.
23. Interview older citizens, take notes, and use the notes to write character sketches.
24. Identify examples of stereotypes of older characters in contemporary movies.
25. Use problem solving to draft spending and savings budgets that older and younger people might use.
26. Explore legislation that the aging population can utilize to advance their cause.
27. Explore topics of age prejudice and advocacy.

There are numerous resources that can assist educators in developing curricular resources on the aging process. These include state departments on aging, state departments of education, area agencies on aging, senior centers, nursing homes, housing facilities, adult day centers, municipal agents, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), and the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP). Each agency and organization can make a significant contribution to the curriculum development progress. Teachers can utilize the resources to develop units, lessons, and projects that center around ageism and the issues that surround aging. Increasing attention will be paid to the age development process and its impact on society. Society will demand that the school curriculum attend to the older population, their health, and lifestyles.

## **AGING AS A DIVERSITY ISSUE IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTRUCTION**

Research provides significant insights about the variation of intelligence and learning in the aging population. Emphasis has been on

instructional results. This allows for the development of a foundation to build instruction for aging learners. Additional research is needed in order to determine the most effective methods, techniques, and teaching strategies for older persons. Instructors of older people must have information about learners. The role of the instructor is to facilitate the learning process by setting the tone of instruction, modeling an open and supportive posture, valuing each individual, and creating a nonthreatening environment.

When selecting methods of instruction for older learners, the primary consideration in the planning and design of instruction is the older learner. Education of older learners should be geared toward the perceived wants and needs of learners, the current levels of learners' knowledge, attitudes toward self and learning, learners' life experiences, preferred methodology, and orientation of content. This suggests that instructors must possess general knowledge of older people and of the intended participants (Peterson, 1983). According to Peterson, older learners vary more in intellect, experience, motivation, interest, and skill than people at younger ages. Andragogy, the term used to describe the instructional process for adults, assumes adults volunteer to participate in formal learning because they find it of interest or value, not because it is required by law or custom (Knowles, 1980). Thus, the key to effective development of andragogical instruction is the relationship between instructors and adult learners. These relationships require an environment that facilitates cooperative planning, instruction, and evaluation.

Most adults have the ability to learn throughout life (Hiemstra, 1992). In addition to having the ability to learn, adults want to learn (Hiemstra, 1992; Peterson, 1983). Factors that should be considered in adult learning include: (a) intrinsic motivation; (b) presentation of material that is relevant to the learners' needs and interests; (c) information that is meaningful and useful; (d) positive reinforcement and performance feedback; (e) larger differences in learning abilities within rather than between age groups; (f) previous education and work experiences; (g) different learning styles; and (h) the influence of current learning by previous learning experiences (Brookfield, 1989; Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982; Houtkoop & Van Der Kamp, 1992; Tuijnman & Van Der Kamp, 1991; Van Der Kamp, 1990).

Just as incorporating methods that enhance adult learning is important, so is overcoming barriers to adult learning. Obstacles faced by older adults that can impact learning ability and activity are numerous (Hiemstra, 1992; Van Der Kamp, 1992). Typical obstacles include (a) inadequate transportation; (b) time limitations; (c) high costs; (d) low self-esteem or self-confidence; (e) stereotypes regarding

the elderly and education; (f) lack of knowledge about various learning opportunities; and (g) health concerns such as fatigue, reduced mobility, and declining hearing or visual acuity. Declines or losses in these areas can create a variety of problems that may affect learning and instructional success (Hiemstra, 1992; Peterson, 1983). It is vital the instructor has insight into the characteristics of the learner.

## TECHNIQUES

When working with older learners, instructors must employ a variety of teaching approaches to enhance their learning and accommodate their losses. Hiemstra (1992) recommended that facilitators (a) remove any element of competition; (b) eliminate time barriers; (c) reduce high risk situations; (d) limit the possibility for learners to make errors; (e) modify the speed used to present information to older learners; (f) organize the materials into manageable units; (g) allow for adequate response time; (h) use recognition rather than recall techniques, (i) provide adequate feedback on learners' progress; and (j) employ self- or peer-evaluation techniques. A second technique to be employed by instructors is to build effective learning environments (Filipczak, 1998). Hiemstra (1992) defined a learning environment as the physical surroundings, psychological or emotional conditions, and social or cultural influences that affect the growth and development of an adult engaged in education. Instructors are encouraged to pay attention to the physical space where learning occurs. This involves understanding the emotional issues adult learners may bring to the environment. Instructors might also be conscious of social or cultural impediments that might affect learning. Instructors should analyze the learning environment to determine whether or not concerns exist. This can be accomplished using a checklist via interviews, observations, or reviewing available documents (Hiemstra & Sisco, 1990; Hiemstra, 1992).

Van Der Kamp (1992) described two promising innovations in adult education: new information technology and open learning. New information technology, which allows learners to pace their learning experiences, is training through technology. Examples include traditional media such as broadcasting and audio-cassettes and innovative media such as pre-programmed computer-based learning, computer-based communications, interactive video, tutorial systems, and simulation programs. New technologies enhance learning in the workplace, change the context in which learning takes place, and encourage standardization directed toward individual learners.

Advantages of these innovations include improved learner feedback through self-assessment and optimized learning.

New strategies of effective adult learning being developed as a result of new information technologies include “integrated learning” and “accelerated learning.” Integrated learning is a cooperative approach. Instruction is based on job analysis followed by completion of learning modules for specific skills development. Activity guides, job-plan sheets, and other instructional materials are developed cooperatively between instructors and learners. Accelerated learning can be achieved through the following principles.

1. Be learner-centered.
2. Utilize mindmaps to organize material and improve retention.
3. Use a variety of methods to present materials.
4. Use cooperative learning exercises.
5. Use knowledge bridges.
6. Create high expectations for learner outcomes.
7. Provide support for learner self-esteem.
8. Utilize positive experiences of early learning.
9. Create a stimulating and comfortable learning environment.

Open learning refers to the principle of open access to learning opportunities and being learner-centered. Although currently conceived as associated with distance education, relying solely on educational technology applications may hinder the open learning concept in its contribution to effective adult learning. Learner-centered, self-directed learning, and informal learning using a wide range of teaching and learning strategies are not the only characteristics of open learning (Van Der Zee, 1989). Additional characteristics of open learning are in sharp contrast with the supplier-oriented approach and include allowing students to choose by creating diverse individual opportunities, being user-friendly, and removing barriers to learning. Whereas open learning usually occurs at home or in the workplace, it can also occur at the institution. Examples of cultural institutions that facilitate open learning are resource centers such as libraries and museums.

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