Education experiences for the elderly: The investigation of obstacles and opportunities

Maggie Grosvenor Bice

University of Northern Iowa

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Education experiences for the elderly: The investigation of obstacles and opportunities

Abstract
Education at any age is considered to be a means for enhancing the quality of one's life. The researcher contends that improving the quality of life is a continuous and eternal theme, filtering through the entire life span of any human being. Thomas Jefferson was quoted in Ronald Gross' book The New Old as saying "The care of human life and happiness, and not their destruction, is the first and only legitimate object of good government" (p. 259). If we can assume that education is a means for improving the quality of life, then we can sense the need for increased knowledge and information in the field of Educational Gerontology.
Education Experiences for the Elderly:
The Investigation of Obstacles and Opportunities

Maggie Grosvenor Bice
University of Northern Iowa
Department of Educational Psychology
This Research Paper by: Maggie Grosvenor Bice

Entitled: EDUCATION EXPERIENCES FOR THE ELDERLY: THE INVESTIGATION OF OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education: General Educational Psychology.

Director of Research Paper
Charles Dedrick

Co-Reader of Research Paper
Sherry Gable

Graduate Faculty Advisor
Charles Dedrick

Head, Department of Educational Psychology & Foundations
Lawrence L. Kavich

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Date Approved
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Education at any age is considered to be a means for enhancing the quality of one's life. The researcher contends that improving the quality of life is a continuous and eternal theme, filtering through the entire life span of any human being.

Thomas Jefferson was quoted in Ronald Gross' book The New Old as saying "The care of human life and happiness, and not their destruction, is the first and only legitimate object of good government" (p. 259). If we can assume that education is a means for improving the quality of life, then we can sense the need for increased knowledge and information in the field of Educational Gerontology.

Donald Kennedy has stated "The great thing about education is that it should be unfinished, that it should prod people ceaselessly to acquire more insight and more knowledge" (Ryan, 1988, p. 8). We have a considerable amount of information on the subject of education but we lack sufficient information on how to create a bridge linking aging and educators. It has been stated, "in our culture we lack a tradition of self-development for the elderly" (Flynn, 1986, p. 139).

The concept of education for and about older people as a means of acquiring a more thorough understanding of the dynamics of an aging society is only now receiving general recognition (Lowry, 1986, p. XV). To understand the sense of urgency regarding educational services for the elderly, one must realize the change in demographics for this age group. Older adults are defined as individuals 65 years of age and/or older.
(Peterson, 1986). The percentage of these individuals has increased from 4 percent in 1900 to 11 percent in 1980. The 1980's will possibly be thought of as the Rights of the Aged, just as the 1960s were equated with the Civil Rights Movement and the 1970s were associated with women's rights (Gross, 1978). It is projected that in the year 2000 there will be 36 million older adults comprising 13 percent of the total population. The most rapid increase in population will occur when the "Baby Boomers" (persons born in the 1950s and 1960s) reach age 65 between the years 2010 and 2030, when there will be 1.1 billion older adults (Williams, 1987, p. vii).

A large number of older adults will be entering the world of formal education. As David James stated, we need to understand "the issues that relate to the education of the older generation itself, and to others in society who wish to understand better the learning needs of older people" (Peterson, 1986, p. vi).

Statement of the Problem

The theme being examined in this research paper is educational gerontology. The review of the related literature deals with the following questions: 1) What are the myths associated with aging?; 2) What are the concepts of lifelong learning?; 3) What educational opportunities are available for the elderly?

Definition of Terms

Education. The act or process of cultivating the moral or intellectual facilities; imparting knowledge; training (Webster Dictionary, 1975).
Educational Gerontology. The study and practice of instructional endeavors for and about the aged and aging (Lumsden, 1985, p. 3).

Older Adults. Those individuals who are 65 years of age or older (i.e., elderly, aged) (Peterson, 1986, p. 1).

Myths. Ill-founded beliefs that are held uncritically or the contrast of fact (Webster Dictionary, 1970).

Significance of the Study

Information and education are never more crucial to a sense of well-being than during the advanced years (Gorovitz, 1985). Dr. Miriam Stoppard said, "We have to take advantage of the influence from the outside so we can continue to develop and grow" (1983, p. 21). What are these influences from the outside? If a person maintains good health, intellectual curiosity, and social involvement, there is no telling what possibilities may be experienced.

However, there are obstacles which hinder the provision of educational services to the elderly. There is a general thought that somehow the elderly are less than normal. Normal, as defined in Webster's Dictionary is "characterized by average intelligence, free from mental disorder." This study will attempt to identify some of the myths which prohibit the elderly from taking advantage of educational opportunities. If being old and continuing with education are going to be understood, then definitions of what constitutes lifelong learning are necessary. This study will attempt to explain some of these concepts. Finally, the facilitation of an intellectually healthy and active life is a commitment society owes to its senior population. Some of the
educational resources currently available to the elderly will be included in this research paper.

**Procedures in Obtaining Literature**

Library research was reviewed on related topics such as aging, elderly, education, adult education, lifelong learning, and educational gerontology. Bibliographies of magazine articles and other material provided additional resources. Information was obtained from several agencies such as American Association for Retired Persons, the Education Network for Older Adults, the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, and the United States Department of Education. All material utilized provided a thorough review of current literature.
Chapter II
Review of Related Literature

Introduction

In the investigation of educational opportunities for the elderly, three areas will be researched. The first area involves a discussion of myths associated with aging. Five myths associated with aging will be explored.

Literature will be reviewed that stress the relationships between lifelong learning and increased quality of life. A second area of investigation focuses on the concept of lifelong learning.

Lastly, it is necessary to delineate educational resources available for older adults. Three types of programs will be examined: 1) programs offered with special privileges for senior citizens, 2) programs that have been adapted to fit the special needs of the elderly, 3) specially designed programs that are offered for seniors only.

Myths Associated with Aging

There is a bias in our youth-oriented culture against older adults (Willing, 1982). Elderly people in the United States have many hurdles to overcome because of the prevailing view that old age is a time of atrophy, decline and collapse. Gerontology authors Schwartz, Snyder and Peterson (1984) discovered there is little information available to contradict myths associated with the aging process. Information available is at best descriptive and lacks details. Maggie Kuhn, founder of the Grey Panthers, coined the term "Gerontophobia" -- being afraid of old age (London, 1982). Myths regarding the aging process are damaging even for
the young. Misinformation can heighten sociological factors already contributing to the separation of young and old. In addition, as extended families decline, the young do not have access to the natural understanding of aging which perpetuates the stereotypes and myths associated with aging.

Gerontophobia not only affects the young, but also affects middle-aged persons in terms of their perceptions regarding their own aging process. Middle-aged people become fearful and apprehensive as a result of a host of stereotypes associated with aging. To the elderly, gerontophobia becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Gross, 1977). If people believe they can not learn, they probably will not; if people believe all the myths associated with aging, some of them will become victims of these myths.

Myths surrounding old age can in part be explained by lack of information and insufficient contact with a wide variety of older persons. Some gerontology researchers feel it is absolutely necessary to identify and dispel many of the myths associated with aging. Robert Butler, American Geriatrician (Glendenning, 1985), has done more than any other person to dispell myths that portray older people in negative images.

The Myth of Unproductivity. The dictionary defines unproductive as failing to produce or yield results (Webster, 1982). Older adults do produce test results at a different rate compared to younger persons, their output may appear to be qualitatively less. If one views the myth of unproductivity on the basis of test results which compare younger and older persons, the resultant comparison of these two age groups only indicate age differences.
There are a great many cultural, environmental and social reasons to account for the observed differences based on test results between a person aged 20 and a person aged 70, in addition to the aging process itself (Midwinter, 1982). What is viewed as unproductive may be a misinterpretation of test results.

One must also consider the proposition that the elderly are being viewed as unproductive simply because of assumed memory loss. Speed of response and short term memory have been proven to increase during childhood and adolescence and gradually decline during adulthood (Lowry, 1986). What is omitted in these studies is the measurement of "crystallized intelligence" which involves long term memory and is therefore cumulative in nature. In general, learning ability remains fairly stable over time. "The older person tends to increasingly compensate for the loss of fluid intelligence by greater reliance on crystallized intelligence, to substitute wisdom for brillance" (Lowry, 1986).

Research supports the view that older people have the desire and potential to be productive and contribute if they are sufficiently challenged (Peterson, 1986). Leslie A. Westhoff (1984) stated in her book Breaking Out of the Middle-Age Trap, "Jogging the mind as well as the body seems to be essential for well-being" (p. 130). The elderly must not be assumed to be unproductive based on test results only.

The Myth of Disengagement. The myth of disengagement focuses on the belief that as older persons experience physical and mental limitations, they willingly disengage themselves from life. Growing old does bring about situations which include personal loss. Retirement brings
loss of occupation and identity. Death of spouses, children, friends result in loss of security, belonging and love. Certain roles that a person formerly played may be eliminated entirely—such as role of parent, administrator, teacher, etc. Fromme (1984) asserted that when something significant is removed from a person's life, the individual must replace this loss with something of meaning that restores the individual to normal functioning and wholeness. This principle would apply to persons of any age.

Many elderly were not required to attend public school for a predetermined number of years to a certain age. The myth of disengagement is fueled by the fact that many elderly have not had the benefit of today's educational system. As a result, the elderly may perceive themselves as no longer having the ability or right to improve or better themselves in an educational sense. If a person adopts this mentality, they may view themselves as an outsider, no longer an integral part of society.

The Myth of Inflexibility. Alex Comfort has written, "Ageism is the notion that people cease to be people, cease to be the same people, or become people of a distinct and inferior kind, by virtue of having lived a specified number of years" (Glendenning, 1985, p. 12). It is as though being old and being inflexible are synonymous. Of all the myths associated with ageing—old people are grumpy, old people are depressed, old people are cantankerous—probably the best known cliche is "You can't teach an old dog new tricks". Dr. Miriam Stoppard (1983) in her book, The Best Years of Your Life negates this previous statement. The fact that a
person is old is not the reason for "not learning new tricks". People at any age are different, some are more flexible than others. If a person is a flexible, fun, and energetic person at age 25, more than likely they will be flexible, fun, and energetic at age 65.

Though many changes occur in a person's life, research suggests that personality and interests remain fairly consistent through the latter years (Williams, 1987). This consistency is assumed to produce wisdom as people age. With this age-related wisdom comes the challenge of remaining intellectually flexible throughout life (Stoppard, 1983). This challenge is applicable to all people, not just the old.

The Myth of Senility. There is no denying that aging is a process of gradual bodily decline; and it is not surprising that many assume that as the body grows less sprightly, the brain must follow suit (Midwinter, 1982). It has been stated that the human brain does not shrink, wilt, perish, or deteriorate with age. It normally continues to function well through as many as nine decades. It is not fair or appropriate to attribute mental dysfunctions associated with disease, improper diet, drugs, or alcohol to the aging process. According to many aging specialists, old age gets blamed for problems that may have existed all along. When a person is 35 and forgets someone's name, he or she is forgetful; when an elderly person forgets in the same situation, they are becoming senile (Midwinter, 1982).

Aging Research Specialist Ewald W. Busse, (1982) stated that it does not appear that older persons who remain healthy and mentally active automatically experience a serious loss of memory. What occurs is that
speed of recall and speed of performance are slowed down. The slower response may be misinterpreted as senility. Even though short term memory may decrease, other functions may increase such as ability to make judgements, ability to understand both sides of a situation, and ability to deal with and understand complicated ideas and concepts.

Intellectual capacity does not necessarily change with age, but the retrieval of stored knowledge may decrease in efficiency. American psychologists are even skeptical of some of the studies being done on the subject of aging and memory (Midwinter, 1982). There is a difference in the material presented in standard memory tests and tests of "real world" knowledge such as current events and history. Elderly persons scored rather well on the latter.

The previous myths associated with aging that have been defined are complex and difficult to document. Older adults range in age from 60 to 100 plus years--there are many different variables affecting people in a 40 year age span. Children 10 years old and adults 50 years old are not in the same category. In this same context, all senior citizens fit in the same mold. There are different intelligence levels in the young, as there are in the old. Human beings can be vigorous all of their lives with proper diet and exercise. As Helen Hayes (1984) said "it's entirely normal to maintain intellectual capacity for life. You must believe in it, like Tinkerbell. It works." The portraits of the process of aging are often exaggerated and distorted, leading to stereotyping of older persons. "It is not aging that is at fault, but rather our attitude towards it" (London, 1982, p. 12).
The myths associated with aging are best described by the following in the definition of "ageism".

Ageism can be seen as a process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender.

Old people are categorized as senile, rigid in thought and manner, old fashioned in morality and skills. Ageism allows the younger generations to see older people as different from themselves; thus they subtly cease to identify with their elders as human beings (Glendenning, 1985, p. 12).

Inaccurate and inappropriate perception of older persons can in part be explained by a lack of knowledge. In summary, the young need to be educated about the elderly so as not to accept myths associated with aging as documented facts. In turn, the elderly need to be educated about themselves so they can live more productive and fulfilling lives.

**Lifelong Learning Concepts**

Kenneth Wain (1984) stated that we should create a learning society where everyone, no matter what age, should be able to learn and to be educated even after leaving the so-called educational system. Helen Hayes (1984) in her book *Our Best Years*, said we must create a learning society -- one that is devoted to the joys and rewards of continual learning.

Lifelong education is seen as facilitating personal development throughout life thereby providing avenues for life satisfaction. Life satisfaction is defined as "essentially a cognitive assessment of one's progress toward desired goals" (Brockett, 1987, p. 227).
The term lifelong education is synonymous with lifelong learning. More specifically, lifelong education contains the following four components: 1) It lasts the whole life of each individual; 2) It leads to systematic acquisition, renewal, upgrading, and completion of knowledge; 3) It is dependent upon intrinsic motivation to engage in self-directed learning activities; and 4) It acknowledges all formal, non-formal, and informal education influences as beneficial.

The first concept of lifelong education is that education lasts the entire life of an individual. Education is a continual process, not limited to a formal preparatory phrase. American philosopher, John Dewey said education is participation in life rather than a preparation for life. All persons, no matter what age, should have the opportunity to discover the joy of learning. If there is support for the fact that learning goes on throughout the course of one's life, then a thorough understanding of the significance of lifelong education becomes a necessity.

A second definition of lifelong education entails the systematic acquisition, renewal, upgrading and completion of knowledge, skills, and attitudes so as to cope with the constantly changing conditions of modern life, thus promoting the ultimate goal of self-fulfilment (Cropley, 1980). Author Eric Midwinter (1982) stated that "education history suggests that changes come not because they are desirable, but because they are unavoidable" (p. 16). Ideally learning experiences should be made available to every person throughout life for it is this learning that stimulates growth in people of all ages (Flynn, 1986). There needs to be a more concentrated effort to educate the elderly so that they can remain intellectually agile and alive.
The third principle of lifelong education depends on the ability of people to engage in self-directed learning activities. People engaged in lifelong learning become more involved in self-enhancing activities. The impetus for their pursuits comes from an inner self-directed motivation which pushes for expansion and growth. The prime time to learn is when one's own need, curiosity, taste, or hunger is driven in a certain direction (Flynn, 1986). Everyone, elderly included, has some particular area of interest about which they would like to find more information. With the thoughts of lifelong learning in mind, there needs to be the realization that educational opportunities are found not only in schools and universities, but in all of life. All of the experiences people have during the course of their lives is defined as "life-wide learning" (Cropley, 1980).

The concept of life-wide learning provides the foundation for the fourth and final concept of lifelong education which is acknowledging the contribution of all available sources of education: formal, non-formal, and informal. It is thought that lifelong learning takes place not only in schools and institutions but in all types of "educational" situations. A sample of agencies fostering this "other" learning place includes the National Extension College, the International College and the Open University. These institutions help to de-institutionalize the educational system by seeking to utilize television, radio, (local as well as national), cassettes, along with postal and other communication devices (Midwinter, 1982). The possibility of a home-based learning situation with visiting tutors once a week is representative of this informal type of learning. Meeting places for the elderly such as clubs, senior centers, community
centers, bingo places and social-type centers can be utilized for all kinds of educational purposes.

The purpose of educating the elderly in terms of lifelong education needs to be explicitly defined. Education for the elderly can prevent premature decline of healthy minds. Minds can remain at peak performance and possibly increase if each person uses his or her own mental capabilities (Stoppard, 1983). Education for the elderly can facilitate meaningful purpose in life. The self esteem and satisfaction that is gained by older learners enables them to become their "best self" (Midwinter, 1982). By becoming this "best self", education for the elderly simultaneously encourages psychological growth. Whether educational opportunities are creative or practical, one point stands alone—education for the elderly epitomizes intrinsic learning; no longer are there pressures for career prospects or pressures for additional income.

The concept of lifelong education appears simple enough, but there are many complications. Today's world is a new information society. The emphasis is on speed, on quantity of information processed. Education becomes complex, specialized, and interconnected. The contradiction arises when the elderly cannot "keep up" or cannot rely specifically on prior knowledge and learning. In the book Education and Aging (1986) the authors, Peterson, Thornton & Birren stated this contradiction: "Age and experience offer no guideposts because ordinary experience is no longer intelligible on its own terms, and so the knowledge derived from experience is susceptible to obsolescence" (p. 27). The following has been the subject of education for the elderly. "As
educators, we have no clear idea of why older adults should be educated, and this absence of fundamental philosophical reflection is ultimately dangerous for the whole enterprise" (Lowry, 1986, p. 5).

To clarify these previously mentioned contradictions, a further explanation of education is necessary. Education is defined as an enhancing quality of life or putting meaning into the whole of life (Brockett, 1987). James C. Hall (1982) stated that education is just a dynamic view of life. People continue to change so continuing education throughout life is just a function of peoples' development. Education just does not occur from ages five to twenty-five, but it occurs consciously and purposefully throughout a person's lifetime.

The basic ultimate goal of lifelong education and learning is to maintain and improve the quality of life (Wain, 1987). Lifelong learners are open to new experiences and insights; they are continually looking for things they would like to know more about. Lifelong learners develop educational plans and goals for the future. Lifelong learners believe in personal growth as an investment, that every experience is a learning experience (Gross, 1977).

If one endorses the concept of lifelong education, there is no longer a question whether or not to educate the elderly. One must set into motion procedures to accomplish this task (Midwinter, 1982). The merits of a structured, diverse, continuing, cooperative, budgeted, publicized and evaluated program of lifelong education for the elderly cannot be over emphasized (Flynn, 1986).

What do the concepts and principles of lifelong learning and education mean specifically to the elderly? It can mean a time when
learning is transformed from a task or a problem, into a "way to be in
the world" (Gross, 1977). Learning becomes enjoyable when one is no
longer in the position of having to pass a course, get a degree, make a
grade, or move up the job ladder. Learning exists because of the love of
learning; this pursuit becomes the major motivational force behind the
material being learned. Education takes on a new image when older
adults have selected their own educational goals and established their
own pace for learning. Opportunities and philosophies need to be
provided that will encourage seniors to take the time to learn what they
finally want to learn.

Educational Opportunities for Older Adults

Armed with the knowledge of the demographics of our elderly
population and the myths associated with the aging process, a better
understanding of the importance of education for our elderly has been
articulated. Acceptance of the principles and the concepts of lifelong
learning is associated with a greater importance placed on maintaining
educational goals throughout life. Basically there are three categories of
education for older people: They are 1) Programs with special privileges
for senior citizens; 2) existing programs adapted or modified to fit the
special needs of senior citizens; 3) and programs designed and offered
specifically for seniors (Lumsden, 1985).

Programs with Special Privileges for Senior Citizens. There are
vast resources of educational opportunities for our youth ranging from
trade schools and short term programs to major colleges and universities
with degrees and professional programs. In the last twenty years, these
institutions, which once discouraged the adult learner, have begun to make special provisions for our senior citizen community.

With altering exams and assignments in educational situations, classes become less frightening to the elderly. When making physical adjustments such as temperature control to educational situations, learning is made more comfortable. Allowing tuition reduction for our seniors makes learning affordable. By providing alternate class sites and situations, more senior citizens are allowed to take advantage of educational opportunities. By providing special assistance with learning processes, new and exciting educational opportunities are discovered for all ages to experience and grow. Ellen Williams in her book *Gerontology Careers* (1987, p. 95) says "the older population, characterized by diversity of lifestyles and complexity of needs, calls for a workforce of visionaries to meet the challenges they present." Programs with special privileges for the elderly are a vital part of our educational process.

These special provisions come from a variety of sources. The first pertains to the need to change the so-called rituals of education (Schwartz, 1984). Accepting the fact that the elderly population may no longer be pursuing educational goals such as grades or degrees, and also considering the decrease in seeking a specific professional or monetary goal, the importance of altering some of the older student expectations is necessary. Most standard classroom objectives, such as preparation for tests and projects, are sometimes altered for senior citizens. Instead of preparation for an exam, a book report is substituted for the assignment. If attendance is a requirement of an instructor, this qualification may be
waived for an older learner. These changes help to make the format of class better suited for the educational needs of elderly populations.

The special privileges given to our elderly sometimes take the form of physical change in accessibility and comfort. Elevators are made available since stairs may prohibit access to particular classroom situations. Occasionally classes are moved to a more accessible place in a building where temperatures are more closely monitored to aid in comfort.

Alternate class sites are sometimes offered for senior citizens. Classes are still open to all age of students, but they are held in libraries, senior centers, and community buildings so to be more readily available. The importance of the physical circumstances has been investigated by the Workers Education Association and National Adult School Association (Greengross, 1985). These organizations involve lay people in the planning and production of educational programs including special provisions for the elderly.

Occasionally, there is a necessity for reduction of tuition costs. Many universities and especially community colleges offer reduced tuition for elderly persons. This is an important consideration as many of our seniors live on limited fixed incomes and should not be denied educational life-enhancing experiences because of financial barriers.

The true essence of learning is linking new information to prior knowledge (Jones, 1987). With the acceptance of this fact, it can be realized that sometimes the elderly, as well as younger people, need assistance in this learning process. Jean Rose who teaches English at
Scotia-Glenville High School in Scotia, New York (Rose, 1986) realized this particular need and started what she called the Community Creative Writing Class. Her idea surfaced as a result of teaching creative writing at a local Senior Citizen Center. She was assisted by one of her high school students and was impressed with the excellent rapport that her students developed with senior citizens. Rose then created a class composed of teenagers and senior citizens, one focus of which was to share feelings and experiences in life. What she found was that friendships developed and age barriers fell. Benefits occurred throughout the high school such as students gaining an acceptance of the elderly. What began as a special privilege for senior citizens developed into a learning exchange between teenagers and seniors. As one youth in her program concluded, "Older people are not as different as I thought they were" (Rose, 1986, p. 13).

Existing Programs Adapted or Modified to Fit Special Needs of Seniors. The second category is similar to the first dealing with special privileges for the elderly but these programs deal more specifically with the educational needs and desires of our senior populations. This section will be devoted to gerontology programs involving seniors, to the world of computers and seniors, and finally to special one time programs targeted towards senior citizen needs.

The understanding that gerontology is the study of the aging process leads us to believe that gerontology programs merely exist to help us study aging (Williams, 1987). While the former statement is true, it is not the only subject in the field of gerontology. Gerontology
students are not always under the age of twenty-five. Many senior citizens are entering the field of gerontology bringing life experiences and different perspectives into the classrooms of these programs.

Dr. Scott Bass, the Associate Director of the Gerontology Program and Gerontology Institute at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, has modified some programs for the elderly. His gerontology students are required to undertake a major applied research project dealing with the needs and concerns of the elderly. Dr. Bass sites "evidence indicates that the quality of interviewing done by the older students in their research and the sensitivity to the issues affecting the elderly contribute immeasurable to the success of the studies" (Bass, 1986, p. 14). The projects have encompassed a wide variety of subjects dealing with nutrition programs, home health care programs, nursing home problems, and many others. Some of the accomplishments of the elder gerontology student research projects have been astounding. They include:

10% increase in state (Massachusetts) home health care funds.
A bill presented to give tax credits to middle and low income elderly.
The formation of a coalition to work for the equity in nursing home admittance for medicare patients and private pay individuals.
An increase in senior meal programs which alloted $500,000 to ethnic elderly and homeless older people (Bass, p. 14).

These seniors who are being trained in the field of gerontology are taking an active part in their own aging process and the problems associated with aging. Not only are the elderly interested in being students, but
they are being trained to serve as professionals in their respective fields. Funded by the Administration on Aging, Dr. Robert Morris and the University of Massachusetts/Boston (Bass, 1986) developed the Gerontology Certificate Program to prepare people over 60 to serve as professionals in the field of gerontology of all ages. Students of all ages may enroll but the majority are over sixty. There may be a tuition waiver for those students 60 and over. The program consists of thirty undergraduate hours directly related to care, administration, and policy dealing with the elderly. This program is designed to train senior citizens to serve senior citizens. "By tapping the capabilities of older individuals, this nation can expand the resources and ideas that it will need to solve the problems of a graying America" (Bass, 1986, p. 15).

Another fast growing area of educational information that is being modified to meet the special needs of seniors is the world of computers. It may sometimes seem the age of the computer belongs to the young but this is not true. The following five areas are rationales given for the elderly population to learn more about computers: 1) recreation; 2) technology; 3) communication; 4) challenge; 5) health and safety.

The first reason is purely recreational in nature. Learning about computing and programming for some seniors can be a hobby. There are classes offered to teach people about computers and many senior citizens clubs have begun to offer such courses. The Little House Senior Adults Community Center in Menlo Park, California has an active computer club with an expanding enrollment in its computer classes (Gorovitz, 1985).
Not all seniors are learning about computers because it's entertaining; some feel a more pressing concern for computer information. The second reason for gaining computer knowledge is that many older adults do not want to be left behind in the ever changing world of technology. They view computer applications as a sound investment for the future. Specific programs include special financial management programs for retired persons dealing with the confusions of Social Security, Medicare, investment income, pensions, taxes, and expenses (Gorovitz, 1985).

Some use computers as a pastime, some view computer information as a technological advancement. The third reason for the interest of the elderly in computers is to use the information as a means of communication and self development. While some elderly are somewhat threatened by the complexity of the computer, others see the advantages for self development. Psychiatrist Stuart Schwartz developed a nonprofit firm called Senior Software, Inc. (Gorovitz, 1985). The firm develops programs for Senior Centers to help study such subjects as social interaction, self-esteem, and general psychological well-being.

While some elderly deal with the serious side of computers with regard to communication and self development, some have taken a much lighter attitude. They use computers as a way of communicating with children and grandchildren! Not only does it keep them in touch intellectually but it is also used "long distance". As one senior citizen computer user said, "I think it is exciting to see something appear on the screen that you know someone far away is typing" (Chin, 1985, p. 6).
The fourth reason for gaining computer knowledge is quite simply because it is a challenge. Dr. Matt Lehman, 75, who was a former science researcher at Stanford University is now an instructor at a computer club in California (Chin, 1985). Lehman believes the major benefit of computers for senior citizens is the challenge to the mind. He stated, "When you get older, too many people do not spend their time thinking. That, in itself, is fatal. You've got to keep that brain alive" (Chin, 1985, p. 5). In short, the active mind is a healthy mind.

And finally, computers can serve a very vital and important purpose in the lives of the elderly in helping them lead healthier, safer lives. Computers can fill special informational needs of the elderly, such as programs monitoring special diets and menu plans. Computer alarm systems that are linked to fire and police stations can serve a very functional purpose. Another example of how a computer program was used to aid in the health of seniors was at the Hebrew Home of Greater Washington. The director of Human Services, Shulamith Weisman, provided modified computer games for fifty frail, elderly residents. Weisman discovered that the residents who used the games showed increased vitality, improved ability to concentrate, and greater interaction (Gorovitz, 1985).

The age of computers in our elderly population is helping to dispel the myth that people stop functioning and lose their usefulness once they grow old (Chin, 1985). Whether computer interests are a hobby or a challenge, whether the information about computers is merely to keep up with technology or to provide an up-to-date means of communication, all
are important. Computers also fill some of the special informational needs of the elderly. Whatever the reason, computer advocates in the senior citizen age range are growing, as it should be. "Information is never more crucial to our well being than during the advanced years. We should begin applying all that we know about information technology to the needs of older generations" (Gorovite, 1985, p. 76).

Through gerontology programs and computer programs, important educational opportunities are made available to the senior population. For example, there are short term programs offered by churches, community colleges, professional organizations, and public libraries. These programs are taught privately or by correspondence. Some use professionals as instructors, some use lay persons. Instructional television courses can also be utilized.

The Institute of Retired Professionals at the New School for Social Research in New York started a program for retired professionals (Williams, 1987). Retired professionals are given the responsibility of planning and teaching their own courses; for example, the Greater Capital District Teacher Center sponsored day long seminars for people over 60 years of age. The seminars use people of all ages and put them into small groups and instructed them in Human treasure hunts (Rose, 1986). These "hunts" encourage mutual sharing of life experiences.

The Center for Unlimited Enrichment (CUE) at Queens College in New York City offers many different programs adapted for the older learner. They plan workshops, two eight-week courses, educational day trips, social events, film festivals and forums on controversial issues.
There are no tests or assignments. Another activity includes a series of "Brown Bag" lunch presentations on a variety of subjects (Sheppard, 1986). These presentations take the forms of lectures, discussions, or demonstrations. Subject matter includes current events, meeting book authors, art, creative writing, and folk dance. Brown bag style seminars have also been adopted by other organizations such as public libraries and community colleges.

Many other examples of short term educational programs can be found in the literature. Curricular topics are unlimited. Most universities, colleges, and community colleges have extensive listings. Newspapers, yellow pages, and employment agencies are other means of discovering possibilities for educational programs devoted to the needs and desires of senior citizens.

Programs Designed and Offered Specifically for Seniors. The third and final category of educational opportunities that are available for older people are those programs that are designed and offered specifically for seniors. Programs in this area are growing in numbers. The most well known educational program for the elderly was founded by teacher Martin Knowlton in 1975 and is called Elderhostel. Another well known national organization which promotes the general well-being of the elder population is call AARP. The American Association of Retired Persons is a second organization that pertains to education and the elderly. There are many organizations which sponsor specifically designed educational programs for seniors which are included in this third category.
What prompted Elderhostel founder, Martin Knowlton, to start this world wide educational opportunity for seniors was that he observed a lot of negative feelings associated with retirement. Being a senior citizen himself he believed that as one gets older, one learns better. The very first Elderhostel was held in 1975 at New England College in Hennikes, New Hampshire. Since that time, according to Michael Zoob, Vice President for this non-profit organization, there has been an explosion of the Elderhostel phenomenon. It is a movement that has grown into 80,000 students enrolling at 750 different educational institutions in the United States and abroad. The average age of the Elderhostel student is 68 and these students study subject matter ranging from the History of Plato, to traveling in Israel or Virginia (McGrath, 1984).

The key to Elderhostel's success is the ability to combine low cost youth/Elderhostel living with college courses. The senior citizen students are put into situations similar to college students. Sometimes they sleep on cots and eat cafeteria food which can keep costs to around $200 per week. There are scholarships available from the respective college or university sponsoring the Elderhostel. Also Agencies on Aging such as the Elderbridge Agency on Aging in Fort Dodge, Iowa, and other senior citizen organizations sponsor tuition incentives.

Another key to the success of Elderhostel is that the subject matter treatment is stimulating without being overly strenuous. Usually Elderhostel students are not interested in competitive scores, but rather are motivated by ideas. Sometimes elderhostel instructors are challenged by students who may have actually lived through or experienced the
subject being taught. The "hostelers" often come to their classes with more mental energy and drive than undergraduate students (Edwards, 1987).

A study was conducted by Darlene O'Conner for the Gerontology Institute (1987) to determine whether older persons enrolled in educational classes for instrumental or expressive goals. Instrumental goals pertain to some specific objective while expressive goals pertain to learning which takes place for its own sake. The results showed 96.6% of Elderhostel enrollees surveyed were participating for expressive reasons. They used terms like "education addict" which expressed a sincere love of learning (O'Conner, 1987). This attitude was communicated by one active senior citizen who said "getting the Elderhostel catalogue is like getting a wish book for Christmas" (McGrath, 1984, p. 89). Elderhostel provides adventure, comradeship, and challenge.

Authors Beverly and Sam Edwards (1987) were participants in an Elderhostel designed specifically for owners of recreational vehicles. They made the following observation:

"Seeking new horizons through learning experiences posts no age boundaries. The desire to learn does not stop when we have achieved our career goals or reached our senior years. Instead, maturity brings the patience to satisfy our curiosities about the wonders of our world and the people who inhabit it. It is this never-ending desire to expand our minds, to achieve and to enrich our lives through learning that has contributed to the enormous success of the international Elderhostel program" (Edwards & Edwards, p. 59).
Before the existence of Elderhostel, a retired educator named Ethel Percy Adams founded an organization called AARP which stands for American Association of Retired Persons. The founder vowed that the organization would work for the good of the elderly without a concern for profit. Since its beginning, a quarter of a century ago, AARP has grown into one of the nation's largest organizations. This non-profit, non-partisan organization has grown to over 27 million members (1987, AARP).

AARP encompasses a wide variety of services and benefits from travel service, to volunteer training. One of the organization's main objectives is to keep the senior citizen in contact with challenging ideas. AARP produces much information on a wide variety of subjects. Additionally, AARP trains their own members to serve as teachers. Continuing education comes in the form of publications, audiovisuals, workshops, and training sessions. The curriculum subjects take many forms including consumer affairs, energy, minimal justice services, health advocacy, housing, intergenerational activities, lifetime learning, safety, and many others.

Much of AARP's educational programming takes the form of training volunteers who provide services for millions of individuals. An example of a service provided includes assisting recently widowed individuals regarding housing options. AARP provides the necessary technical guidance and support for the elderly to become successful service volunteers in their respective communities. Their efforts are beneficial to people of all ages.
Elderhostels and the educational programs of the American Association of Retired Persons are two of the most widely recognized sources of education for the elderly. There are many other organizations which also support and facilitate the concept of lifelong learning. One such organization is the "Help the Aged Education Department" which provides special programs for the elderly. This organization provides opportunities for individuals to further develop their reading, writing and public speaking skills, as well as utilize counseling and career placement services. The staff also presents tape and slide presentations used for therapy in geriatric hospitals. Patients were shown slides with taped verbal reinforcement and then encouraged to repeat and expand upon the activity (Greengross, 1985). The intent in this instance is to improve memory recall.

An entirely different type of program, but also sponsored by the "Help the Aged Education Department", was called "The Creative Craft Project". This program was designed to allow older people a chance to pass on their skills and crafts to younger people. The elderly serve as tutors to younger persons assisting them in woodworking, painting, and handiwork activities (Greengross, 1985).

Other organizations include The Institute for Retired Professionals which began in 1962, and the "Then & Now Club" which was established in 1973 (Greengross, 1985). Both of these groups emphasize information sharing seminars which focus on a wide range of topics.

Education for the elderly takes many forms and encompasses a wide variety of materials and resources. Curriculum requirements are
relaxed, tuitions are reduced and class sites are made accessible. More specifically, certain existing educational programs have been adapted or modified to more closely fit the special needs of senior citizens. Gerontology courses have increased in numbers helping both young and old to deal with the aging process. The world of computers is a fast growing field and is beginning to include the older population. Computer programs for the elderly are being developed for purposes of enjoyment of communication and self development.

Lastly, there are educational resources designed specifically for seniors. The most widely known of these programs is Elderhostel. The Elderhostel success is the result of stimulating, but not overly strenuous, curriculum coupled with low-cost hostel living.
Summary

Throughout this research paper, information relating to educational gerontology has been introduced. Myths associated with aging were discussed and found to be uncharacteristic of most elderly persons.

Secondly, concepts pertaining to lifelong learning were identified. At every age it is important that the human brain be stimulated by the acquisition of new knowledge and understanding.

And finally in the discussion of education for the elderly, educational resources were identified. The following three areas were discussed at some length: 1) programs with special privileges for senior citizens; 2) existing programs adapted or modified to fit the special needs of senior citizens; and 3) programs designed and offered specifically for seniors. These three areas provide the groundwork for a more thorough and complete educational program for and about the elderly.

Being "old" does not have to sound like a punishment. Programs need to be developed to help improve the culture's attitude on aging. The young need to be educated to understand the aging process so they can improve the quality of life for themselves as they age.

The elderly deserve a life full of learning opportunities. "Older people have a vital need for the kind of education that will enable them to exert influence in protecting and improving their own situation and also in contributing to the well being of a larger society" (McLusley, 1982; Glendenning, 1985, p. 35).
Conclusions

It used to be that people didn't age. They died, according to Ken Dychtwald, a gerontologist in Emeryville, California. The life expectancy of a person has expanded from 35 years of age to present day Americans having the possibility of living into their 90's. (Gibbs, 1988). People are living longer and healthier lives. The number of people 65 and older has been steadily on the increase. Currently, of the 238.2 million people in the United States, 12.4 percent are 65 years of age and older (U.S. Dept. of Education, 1988). Not only are there more "old" people, but the image of growing old is changing too. In a recent article in Time magazine entitled "Grays on the Go" author Nancy Gibbs had observed that "America is finding a new way to grow old. Far from fading away, the elderly seem to be brightening on the horizons of the mind, the family, the work place, the community" (Gibbs, 1988, p. 66).

The increase in numbers and the changes in image of the elderly population are just beginning to be felt in the realm of education. Educators and institutions of learning need to understand the needs of the elderly.

The Implications for Youth. The increase in numbers of healthy older adults in today's society challenges existing myths which link aging with such negative characteristics as slow, grumpy and senile. The youth need to be educated about the correct natural aspects of the aging process so they can form positive attitudes about the elderly. More contact between the young and old needs to occur. A current example of elderly and youth meeting each other's needs is the Foster Grandparent Program.
The Foster Grandparent Program is a federally-funded part of ACTION, the national volunteer agency. The goals of this program are two-fold: the first being to assist special-needs children (i.e., those with physical, mental, and/or emotional handicaps) the second is to provide an opportunity for elderly persons to feel needed and purposeful. The utilization of programs such as the Foster Grandparent Program will need to be expanded.

The more frequent the opportunities for interaction between the young and the old, the less chance for the development of debilitating stereotypes regarding the elderly. If children are educated at an early stage to understand the positive aspects of aging, negative attitudes about aging may diminish. Education on aspects of aging could be implemented through existing programs such as History, Social Studies, and Health.

The Implications for Education. There are an increasing number of aged Americans who represent an expanded student body for adult education. Educators, as well as educational curricula, institutions, and values, will need to adjust and expand to the needs of this growing elderly population. Educators need to anticipate the special learning requirements of these "new" older students. Special in-service training for teachers should be implemented in order to help them better understand the needs of the elderly student. The fact that learning is a means to an end, not an end in itself, needs to be emphasized. For example, many older learners are seeking a specific learning experience because they have a use for the knowledge or skill being taught. Another important concept is that elderly students bring many life experiences to the classroom. These experiences could be utilized as valuable sources of information.
Another consideration for educators dealing with older students is the introduction of what the French have called "The University of the Third Age," a fast growing movement involving older adults in educational activities. The First Age is that of childhood and development, with the active working part of life being the Second Age. The Third Age is considered the active retirement years, with the Fourth (and final) Age representing senility and dependence (Greengross, 1985). The theory behind the University of the Third Age states that if you are active and stimulated enough in your Third Age, negative aspects of the Fourth Age can be put off or avoided all together.

This "university" is not an institution, but an organization with a special attitude toward education and life. Members are committed to educating (in the broadest sense of the word) themselves, each other, and the general public (Greengross, 1985). Adopting this point of view would possibly give educators a better understanding of the older student's motivation for learning.

Not only do educators need additional information regarding the learning style and priorities of older adult learners, but curricula needs to be re-evaluated. It would be advantageous to include older persons as participants in the planning of new courses. Specific points regarding the design of a curriculum for older adults were researched by Ron and Susan Zemke. They concluded the following:

1. Adult learners need to integrate new ideas with what they already know if they are going to keep and use new information.
2. Information that is in conflict with prior knowledge is integrated more slowly.

3. Learning tasks that are too complex, fast, or unusual interfere with the learning.

4. The adult learner is efficiency-minded. They do not want to learn material which is not directly applicable to their present situation. A concept needs to be "anchored" to the older person's developmental life stage in order to be learned (Zemke, 1981).

The impact of an aging society will not only be felt by educators and the course they teach, but also by the institutions that deliver educational experiences. "The future of a well-financed and well-organized educational institution depends on changing a youth-focused curriculum and structure to the one that is responsive to the growing number of those in the last half of life" (Schwartz, 1979, p. 77).

Tomorrow's older adults are going to have higher expectations for themselves and their educational opportunities. The elderly are going to realize that education is a way of finding out who they are and how they can maintain an active role in life activities.

The Implications for the Elderly. If the elderly are to maintain active, enthusiastic, productive lives, it is necessary for them to internalize the notion of education as a life-long process. The assurance of a life of good quality for older adults is not an option for society, but a moral imperative (Williams, 1987). The elderly need assistance in realizing the importance of maintaining active and interested minds. This is crucial to the quality of life that a person can sustain through the aging process.
The aging process should not be viewed as a problem or a social
disaster, but should be accepted as a normal progression in life. The
physical changes associated with aging should be presented to the young,
as well as the old to distinguish between facts and myths. People and
situations are continually changing. The elderly need to be encouraged to
be active in the educational process so they may continue to be an active
part of society.

Older persons have the intellectual resources and motivation to
remain productive citizens but they may need assistance in the life
changes that cause them to feel otherwise. Ossofsky stated that
educational opportunities must be expanded to their fullest to keep the
hearts and minds of the elderly alive through intellectual, cultural, and
artistic experiences (Gross, 1978).

The question is sometimes asked, "How old are you when you are
old?" This question can be answered in terms of a prism. All of life's
problems, complexities, joys, and changes are paralleled to the many
facets of a prism. As the prism turns, the light that shines on it presents
many different colors that are continually changing. A person becomes
"old" when the light no longer shows through their prism. A person is old
when they cease to learn and change and grow.

Education is essential. Every young person is aging. The value of
education -- about the elderly, and for the elderly -- is imperative for
today's society. "Adults must continue to learn. Learning, like breathing,
is a requirement of life" (Ruchkin, 1980; Boss. p. 11).
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