

Old Age - Education (Adult)

Address on

"Educational Problems of an Aging Population";

To be given by

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Exploratory Ventures in Education of Aging

The implications of an aging population for adult education are many and varied. Institutions and agencies of adult education are increasingly being called upon to find programs and study opportunities that will help the maturing person adjust to the changes and tensions of our times. For those who are not familiar with the development of this phase of educational activity, a brief review of a few of them will be helpful at the outset. These efforts of educators are, as yet, scattered and somewhat sporadic, but they do indicate that there is a noticeable concern for the education of the older adult.

In Public Schools

One indication of the increasing awareness of educators to the problem of educating the aging, is a recent recommendation of the New York City Board of Education that all new public school buildings should provide at least one room for the daytime uses of older people. If such a recommendation is carried out, we can visualize eventually an increasing number of neighborhood facilities in which older people can gather and to carry on social, recreational and civic activities, within easy walking or transportation distance, accessible to them at any time of day. Many public schools in the state-wide program of adult education in California are making facilities and services available to the aging for group meetings, discussion group, recreational and occupational activities.

The bureau of Adult Education of the State of New York has just published an eleven-unit teaching bulletin for courses on preparation for retirement, called Retirement - a Second Career. This Bureau has a full-time consultant on its staff, giving special attention to assisting leaders of study groups concerned with this problem.

In Colleges and Universities

Colleges and Universities have also shown an increasing concern with the problems of educating the aging. Queens College Speech Clinic has broadened its program to include treatment of older persons who have suffered losses in ability to hear, speak, read and write. About ten percent of the Clinic's load now is composed of older people suffering from aphasia, resulting from strokes.

Similar Conferences or Institutes to these now being held here at Northwestern University have been held at the University of California at Berkley, Washington University in St. Louis, Chicago University and Michigan University.

Courses relating to the problems of the aging have been instituted in the undergraduate and extension curricula of Cleveland College, of Western Reserve University, New York University, the University of Michigan and the University of Chicago. At Teachers College, Columbia University, the courses in Psychology of the Adult have been based upon many of the psychological studies pertinent to the problems of the aging. At the same institution the Institute of Psychological Research and the Institute of Adult Education are cooperatively carrying on case studies of the attitudes of the aging toward retirement and the attitudes of other people, such as friends and relatives, toward the aging. New York University's Department of Sociology will cooperate with the New York House and School of Industry and the Greenwich House in developing a Vocational Training School for the Aged. The long-time aim is the preparation of older people for gainful re-employment. One operation of the Department of Sociology in this enterprise will be to conduct a survey of the community, locate the potential learners and to determine how they will be affected by the program.

In Government Agencies

Governments on local, state and national levels are showing increasing concern with education for an aging population by providing services and research that will be of value to educators. The New York State Joint Legislative Committee on Problems of the Ageing has recently published a pamphlet of advice to the aging on securing employment. The Federal Security Administration has appointed Clark Tibbets of its Committee on Aging and Geriatrics to "gear the skills of older people to the nation's mobilization program."

In Voluntary Associations

In addition to the work in education for the aging being conducted by schools, colleges and government agencies, there is also much educational activity and experimentation being carried on by voluntary associations, civic, welfare and social groups. The New York City Adult Education Council has initiated a three-year program, under the direction of Dr. Alonzo Myers of New York University, to help people in their 40's and 50's to prepare realistically for later retirement and the years that follow. One hundred persons will be selected and invited to study in the three-year program. For those who cannot pay the cost of the program several scholarships have been assured by contributors. The Welfare Council of New York City publishes a directory of the recreational facilities which are available to the aged in New York City. The Cleveland Public Library has for many years sponsored a program of The Live-Long-and Like-It-Club, providing a program of group discussion of current news, Great Books and film programs.

There are many voluntarily formed clubs for older people in various cities which have programs of recreation and education for their membership. These clubs are organized and operated by the aging themselves, drawing upon educational institutions and resources for their services when needed. Outstanding among such clubs

is the 40-Plus Club of New York City which aids its members, who had previously been retired from creative and useful work, to find new and challenging employment.

In Industry

Industrial management and organized labor are also showing some concern with the education of employees or members in preparation for retirement. The International Ladies Garment Workers Union is, at present carrying on a study, in cooperation with the Institute of Adult Education and the Institute of Psychological Research of Teachers College, Columbia University, to determine problems and attitudes of its members (a) before retirement; (b) at retirement age and (c) several years after retirement.

A recent survey conducted by the Institute of Psychological Research and the Institute of Adult Education of Teachers College, Columbia University, of 70 large corporations employing 2.75 million workers, revealed that 36 percent of the respondents have some kind of pre-retirement program in operation. An additional 9 percent indicate that they are conscious of the need for such a program.

Some Implications of the Exploratory Ventures in Education for the Aging

The brief and somewhat sketchy survey of exploratory ventures of education in industry serves at least to show that the subject we are discussing here is realistic. Education for the aging is going on in one form or another, and interest in it has been demonstrated by educators, social workers, industrialists, labor leaders, government officials and civic leaders.

All of these programs and many others deal chiefly with the problem of educating the aging to improve himself in his occupational or recreational skills, to find, recover or relearn some useful tasks that will give the older citizen a

continuing sense of usefulness. All of them, moreover, reflect the influence of some of the psychological studies regarding the educability of the adult. Up to a quarter of a century ago, the belief was at least popularly held, that since learning was a necessity for children and youth it was, therefore, an exclusive function of childhood and youth. As our social, economic and cultural problems become more complex, the adult citizen realizes increasingly that he cannot learn all that he needs to know in twelve, sixteen or twenty years of education. The progress made in the studies of the educability of the adult over the past quarter of a century has gone a long way toward establishing the concept that education throughout life was not only desirable but necessary and essential to mental and emotional stability and the full expressions of personality.

Studies of Thorndike, Lorge, Strong, and others regarding the educability of adults gave impetus and scientific basis to the surge of adults toward self-improvement. These studies revealed that the inhibitions that many adults had entertained about their power to grow and ability to learn throughout life were groundless. Adults could learn anything about as well as they could have learned it as children and youths. There are changes and slowing down, to be sure in our sensory and perceptive abilities; there are slight changes in our reaction to stimuli. But we did not need to blame age for our major difficulties in learning, namely lack of interest and motivation. Indeed, it appears that older people had additional qualifications for effective learning, namely intensity and clarity of interests. Interests are fairly well established by the time we are twenty-five years old. It often takes more than one life time to really give expression to most of those interests. Few have ever lived as well as they already know how. We have also learned that about as large a proportion of young people of any given age are "conservative" as are older people of a given age group, and about as many of each group are adventuresome. While adults tend, as they grow older, to resist change

as individuals, they are never too old to "modify an attitude or habit, acquire a minor skill, render a service, keep up-to-date, create something beautiful, or say to a new idea: "I'll try it; not every new idea is bad; not every change a revolution." Studies of mental health have added much to the significance of continuous learning as a personal experience essential to healthful living, particularly studies based on adult education rehabilitation during the war.

We know from these and other studies that most of the earlier explorations of education for the aging, designed as they are to help adults find ways of directing their experience toward self-improvement, is sound and important to the welfare of the people. Education of the aging directed toward the cultivation of useful tasks is as sound a psychological formula today as it was twenty-five years ago when Burnham underscored it.

Reduced to their lowest terms, what are the fundamentally essential conditions of mental health--conditions universal for all, young and old, rich and poor, the educated and uneducated, the different emotional and ideational types, the individual with robust health and the invalid alike? On the basis of observation and many investigations, the answer may, I think, be formulated very simply as follows: the essentials, without which a person cannot be quite sound mentally and with which, apart from accident, infection, or heredity, one can have no serious mental disorder, the absolutely essential conditions are three: a task, a plan and freedom.

The task in the generic sense includes everything from the immediate and concrete goal of the moment to the objectification of the highest ideals and ends. A plan is necessary to make the work purposive activity. It must be my own task; hence freedom is necessary.

It is hardly necessary to dwell on the evidence that these are the essentials of mental health. Function, work, is the condition of health everywhere. Mental activity is even more essential for health, if possible, than physical activity. In all conditions of life and society, work is the condition of health and happiness...

The greatest thing the teacher can do is to give opportunity for a task worthwhile.

The Task Worthwhile

What are some of the characteristics of the task worthwhile for the aging?

As Burnham suggests, the task must be purposive. The significance and social challenge of the task should be apparent to the learner. Garment workers interviewed in our current studies of the aging in cooperation with the ILGWU often feel that they should not retire at all unless they are ill. The reasons go far deeper than the income differences between their wages and their retirement income. They felt that their job was useful, significant and that they were necessary parts of the scheme of things. Even to have things to do in retirement, a small place to care for, travel, friends and relatives to visit with, a bit of an income producing responsibility that absorbs a few hours of their time--these are not purposive tasks to most of them. They are not big enough nor socially significant enough to take the place of responsibility.

In spite of the fact that the garment industry had seasonal layoff periods these periods themselves involved the active responsibility of looking for another job, of keeping the bills at home paid, of meeting with the trade-union and casting a vote, of keeping abreast of things. It becomes increasingly apparent in our interviews that after a few weeks at the most of irresponsibility, or even of substitute chores or recreational or occupational expediencies, the novelty of the situation pales and the purposive quality of their tasks is lacking. Not much seems to happen whether they carry on these tasks or not. They can abandon them at will and they go unnoticed. The tasks they assumed in the garment industry were a part of a larger plan and even though the task may have been specialized and repetitive, it carried with it a sense of responsibility.

To date most of the work in education of the aged has overlooked this important fact. There seems to be, on the one hand, the assumption that retraining a person for an occupation of almost any sort will be an adequate substitute, or,

on the other hand, that the only purposive task for the worker is the one he has done all his life and that education should just help him to adjust to the inevitable, get out of the way and have a happy, irresponsible time of it. To retrain people to make useless ash trays instead of automobiles, or to teach them to play chess instead of fighting the five o'clock rush in going and coming from work, is to offer a man a stone when he asks for bread.

To find a nice comfortable place where the aging can vegetate unmolested, hacking away at a garden no one looks at, or, to pick away at a mitten for an unknown youngster in place of the exacting and exciting disciplines required to manage a home, seldom can be interpreted by the aging as purposeful tasks carrying with them a sense of responsibility.

Much of the work that is now going on in education of the aging is either on the level of continuing materialistic tasks that have little creative meaning or of recreational tasks which have less. This is because the old are reaching retirement age without enough income to have much choice or are reaching it without having ever had any preparation for worthwhile tasks other than the materialistic and a sort of recuperative, intermittent recreation. Both were experiences designed toward the same end: to keep on keeping on making a living, producing goods and services and selling them. Now we find ourselves in the awkward position of trying to substitute a few new tasks, geared toward the same end, within the same framework of values. The only way for the aging to be happy, we say, is for them to keep on working at the same or very similar tasks, at least tasks geared largely toward the production and distribution of goods and services. In the study cited above of what 70 large corporations were doing to prepare workers for retirement it became apparent that although 36 percent of them reported some activity, very few gave any attention whatever to the problems of preparing the employee for tasks in his community, for meeting the problems he would eventually face in his family

relationships, in learning how to become active and useful participants in neighborhood improvement or to lend themselves to the tasks of ridding the community of crime and corruption. The lack of this kind of preparation is obvious also in the majority of the programs for education for the aging being carried on by educational welfare and government institutions and clubs. There is actually little difference in the proposals and experiments for the education of the aging and the proposals of some secondary school people for improvement of the high school curriculum: training for occupational competency and "worthy use of leisure time."

Yet the great contribution of the aging, the task worthwhile, the task for which the aging are most admirably adapted, is the task of constructive public service. Hundreds of needs exist in every community calling for the balanced judgement of those who have lived long enough to provide it. Education needs strengthening, parks and playgrounds need to be planned, filthy housing districts are still abundant, poverty and illness are not uncommon, foolish prejudices of race and religion still prevail, wars continue to terrify us. The aging have the wealth of time or money or both, the wisdom and the experience to deal with these problems, whether they get paid for doing it or not. These are some of the worthwhile tasks for an education of the aging which we must learn to build with reality

I am aware that there are many who are not going to be able to do much more than struggle on keeping alive, keeping up a thin thread of hope of existence, waiting for the end. These need the freedom to work out a task and a plan and it is to be hoped that another generation will have so managed the present social security program that all the aged will at least have the assurance of a decent place to live, adequate nourishing food and some release from fear, whether they can work or not. But many of the aging already can foresee this possibility. In the Institute of Adult Education, our case studies of the aging reveal worker after worker who says he has little fear of retirement as far as his ability to

get along on his pension is concerned. What disturbs him most of all is inactivity and the most disturbing thing about this is that he can see no other task than the one he has done for forty years as being respectable, challenging or satisfactory. What challenge is there to him to offer him another routine job of production?

It is apparent, however, that some of these workers are finding challenging substitutions in semi-political clubs, in union welfare work, in constructive community tasks that are a part of a larger plan.

I know the too frequently repeated reaction that the aging are too conservative, too reactionary to be entrusted with the affairs of the state. I do not accept this view point for two reasons: In the first place there is plenty of evidence to the contrary throughout our history. In the second place I have worked on too many committees of community improvement to believe that the younger people, caught up in the immediate affairs of the day, can compare in vision, imagination, courage and tolerant good will, with many of my friends thirty years my senior. One of the most exciting creative tasks in community development in New York State in the improvement of rural education, is spearheaded by five gentlemen, four of whom retired from one task or another a decade ago.

The worthwhile task, the task that is a part of a plan and that is in a setting of freedom for the aging to work it out, is one that has social meaning. To my mind the great years for the aging to constructively build are those in which they are relatively free of the materialistic task and can give a few years devotedly to uninterrupted creative public service. The tasks are manifold and the workers are few.

In discussing this possibility of educating the aging for constructive tasks of community improvement with others the objection is often made that if a person has not been engaged in lasting public service or community development before he retires, he will probably never learn to begin. While this is not entirely true,

it is exactly the point of emphasis of this paper: education of the aging for assuming responsible tasks in community development must begin at a very early period of life. It has been said that the time to really begin education in preparation for retirement is at birth or shortly before. The implications are obvious: a strong program of education for responsible tasks in community development should be carried on by schools, colleges, governmental agencies, industry and voluntary associations for all people of all ages all of the time.

Education for the aging is at present in an exploratory stage. Many interesting and exciting experiments are being carried on. What is being done is sound in that it is based upon a recognition that the aging need a constructive and worthwhile task. Its major weakness lies in what its interpretation of what is a worthwhile task. The tendency is to assume that a worthwhile task is one which appeals to the individual in terms of advancement or entertainment. But the worthwhile task, to become an educationally challenging one, must be one that is a part of a larger plan, with freedom for the aging to work out the plan. The most challenging of such tasks lie in the field of public service.