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## CHAPTER 48

### MEETING OLDER ADULTS LEARNING NEEDS THROUGH ADULT LEARNING AND EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION

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#### **Introduction**

One of the fundamental laws that is globally recognised is that individuals of all age, irrespective of ethnicity, race, sex, circumstances and situations are provided access to learning in order to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to grasp opportunities and fully participate in the society, (United Nations (UN), 2015). Among other aims of the international laws were the full development of the human personality and sense of its dignity and to enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society (UN, 2010). Obviously, these laws cannot be achieved through exclusive education that is limited to children and young adults. This has necessitated the right to education taking cognisance of the importance as a lifelong process.

Adult learning and education (ALE) are an integral part of the right to education and lifelong learning (UNESCO 2015). It involves all forms of education and learning that ensure that all adults participate in their societies and the world of work. ALE denotes the entire body of learning process, formal, non-formal and informal whereby those regarded as adults by their society in which they live, develop and enrich their capabilities for living and working both in their own interest and those of their communities, organisations and societies (UNESCO, 2016). This definition of 2015 appears comprehensive, though concise as it replaces the 1976 generally acceptable definition that was adopted in Nairobi Kenya during the UNESCO'S 19<sup>th</sup> Session General Conference. Furthermore, ALE constitutes a major building block of a learning society and the creation of learning communities, cities and regions. It fosters a culture of learning, throughout life that revitalises learning in families, communities and other learning spaces and in the workplace.

Adult learning and education include education and learning opportunities for active citizenship, popularly referred to as community popular or liberal education. This education empowers people to actively engage with social issues such as poverty, gender, intergenerational solidarity, social mobility, justice, equity, exclusion, violence, unemployment, environmental protection and climate change. ALE helps people to lead a decent life, in terms of health and wellbeing, culture, spirituality and in all other ways that contribute to personal development and

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dignity (UNESCO, 2015). Implicitly, adult learning and education creates opportunities for all categories of individuals to learn in order to adapt to current life situations and circumstances. This apparently makes it very relevant to older adults.

Older adults are interchangeably used in this paper as the elderly and the aged. The Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) describes the aged as individuals whose age ranged from 65 years and above, disengaged in almost all productive works and retired from daily work either public or private. However, there is an exception for those in certain professions like professors who lecture in Nigerian Universities and the Judges whose retirement age is pegged at 70 years. More still, variation in chronological age exist in other parts of the world. For instance, the United Nations use the calendar age of years as old age. It has also been noted that due to lower life expectancy in Africa, the aged are considered to be those between 50-55 years of age. (UN, 2010). Even though chronological age most of the time is taken, as an index of old age, it is at best only a rough indication to the aging of the individuals in biological terms because chronological age has no innate tendency since it cannot be used to express the feeling and experience of the older adult (Findsen&Mauruin, 2011). The authors define older adults as individuals of whatever their chronological age, who are past-work and past-family in the sense that they are less, or no longer involved in an occupational, career or with the major responsibilities for raising a family.

Older adults are also described as those in their old age which suggests advancement in age, decline in the function of organs of the body, loss of flexibility, decline in hearing, vision, lesson of muscular strength, intellectual and social decline (Olajide &Ayantunyi, 2016). Owing to these changes and experiences, many of the older adults are unwilling to accept the old age. Hence, older adults are reported to suffer from psychological trauma as the advance in age +(Osunde&Obiunnu, 2005). From the foregoing, it could be deduced that older adults constitute individuals with special needs, as such, their learning arrangement falls within the purview of special needs education.

Special Needs Education is a customised educational programme designed to meet the unique needs of persons with special needs that general education programme cannot cater for (FRN, 2013). Among the categories of special needs persons stipulated in the national policy on education are those with physical and health impairment. This invariably explains why the older adults are categorised as those with special needs comprising physical, cognitive, social and familial losses that bring with it an increased incidence of disability and need for assistance with activities of daily living (Srivastava, 2017). Adults with these disabilities are considered one of the most vulnerable groups in the society. They are increasingly being a target group for adult learning and teaching (UNESCO 2019). To this end, meeting older adults learning needs through adult learning and education, and its implications for special needs education attempts to provoke thoughts on the provision of learning opportunities for the older adults through special needs

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education. Discourse was presented under the following sub-headings: the place of adult learning and education for the older adults; older adults with special and learning needs; educational gerontology: teaching and learning for older adults; conclusion as well as implications and suggestions.

### **The Place of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) for the Older Adults**

Adult learning and education are wide ranging in scope with inexhaustible programmes and activities (Zuofa, 2017). It provides variety of learning activities that continually engage adults to attach pattern of experience, adaptive skills, positive disposition, well-articulated evidence, empowerment and courtesy (Latchen, 2014; Bolton, 2006). ALE advocates human rights that help adults and older adults in particular to meet the challenges of change emanating for aging and the creation of learning opportunities (UNESCO, 2019).

Education and learning for older adults are necessary tools to engage them in diverse activities and opportunities in their lives (Schuler, 2010). Studies have also proven that the capacity of older adults to remain physically, mentally and socially active is partly dependent on continued participation in learning and education (Purdue & Bolton- Lewis (2003). Hence, cognitive and social activities including educational activities improve the health and well-being of older adults, individually and collectively, but also the societies in which they live (Istance, 2015). Suffice it to say that adult learning and education provides active older adult lifestyles and healthy aging (Menec, 2003). This goes to show that as older adults continue their learning process in life, they are found to adapt and deal with new challenges and changes in their lives and surrounding environment (Gilroy, 2012). Engaging in learning by these older adults therefore add to community well-being because of the contributions of their life experiences, expertise and service (Merriam & Kee, 2014).

Agreeably, the contribution of the older adults in the community is believed to have called for more attention to their learning owing to their increasing high population (UNESCO, 2020). For instance, the proportion of older adults in 1950 was 8%, 10% in 2000 and has been projected that it would be 21% by 2050. In another report it was explained that the worlds number of people aged 60 years and above is expected to triple in the next 40 years, from 737 million to 2 billion (UN, 2010). The same report recalled that the population of older adults in some countries like Brazil, China, and Nigeria will double by 2025. Considering this emerging increase in older people population, there is need for awareness creation. This further explains the role of adult learning and education in the life of the older adults.

Additionally, learning in older adults provides opportunity to explore, learning goals previously missed at early stage of their lives. These opportunities are but not limited to developing reflective mode of thinking, contemplating the meaning of life, coming to term with ones past as preparation for death and the quest for self-fulfillment (Findsen& Marvin, 2011). The authors added that learning

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at the later age enables the older adults appreciate arts, music, philosophy and well-being. It is also observed that emerging generation of older adults are active, want creative challenges, intellectual stimulation, opportunities to learn and contribute to their community (KOP, 2020). Increasingly, learning in its various forms, helps older adults remain healthy, cope with life challenges, and engage with and support others (Dench & Regeon, 2000). Opportunities to resume neglected interest and reflect on life experiences that could lead to greater understanding and individual insight are all gained through learning by older adults (Withnal, 2000).

### **Older Adults with Special and Learning Needs**

Special need is generally conceived as a difficult or impairment that requires specialised services or assistance. The Federal Government of Nigeria (2013) stipulates in section 7, article 118c of the NPE that persons with special needs include those with physical and health impairment. By this view, the older adults who as a result of aging process experience both-physical and health challenges are found under this category of persons with special needs. Aging process is referred to as senescence. The rate at which senescence affects individuals comes in a variety of ways (Komblungs & Julian, 2010). They observed that as aging progresses, muscles lose some of the strength, coordination and endurance become more difficult. Such organs like, lungs, kidneys, heart decline slightly in function whereas the effect of aging is less on the brain and psychomotor joints. Visible sign of aging they also noted are the appearance of wrinkle on the skin, shortened, posture from compressed spinal disk, caging and thinning of hair. Older adults with special needs frequently experience issues with anxiety, depression, dementia, arthrities and osteoporosis. These health conditions obviously impair their ability to engage in some daily activities thereby reducing the quality of life (Walsh, 2010).

Furthermore, Fike (2018) identified eight areas of needs for the older adults.

- First, it was identified that ageism and outdated social norms have resulted in isolation and marginalised older adults in both rural and urban communities. The need to help older adults get and stay meaningfully engaged was described as critical for their health and well-being.
- Financial wellness of the older adults is another need that requires attention and review. Older adults now live, longer as such the usual traditional models of work and retirement can no longer keep pace. There is need to finance longevity which requires new models, new tools and new norms. This means that there is need for new opportunities for later life, employment, new models for planning and financing care and better ways for taking care of the older adults.
- Infrastructural provision is another area of need identified in both rural and urban communities. The everyday objects, homes, and public not originally designed with older adults in mind. This situation has become obstacle to movement, safety, independence, and socialisation because it is important to ensure that older adults remain safe and mobile.



- Daily living and lifestyle are aspects of older adults' life that require one form of assistance or another, relating, especially to their eating, bathing, dressing among others. This also is an area of need that calls for attention.
- Care giving is emphasised as an essential area of need for the older adults. In many countries of the world, care for older adults is provided informally and formally as well as by family members. It is recommended that there is need for better support, training and incentive to all those who give any form of care to the older adults.
- Health care coordination for the older adults is very fragmented and complex. Many of these older adults have more than one chronic condition to deal with at any given time. Government in some countries as well as families spend quite some reasonable amount attending to health needs of the older adults. It has become very obvious that there is need for more provision, support and if possible, create new tools and care models to improve and facilitate care delivery.
- The brain health is very key factor and need for the older adults. Alzheimer's disease affects the older adult in a bit high proportion. Although there is no cure for it, but it is suggested that if appropriate attention is given to delay its occurrences, it will help in creating awareness for early predication and diagnosis, while optimising cognitive fitness and delay cognitive decline.
- Finally, is end of life or death. It is inevitable but not easy to discuss or prepare for. Many older adults are concerned about it and how it would come. In most cases they have end of life wishes which they would like to be accomplished. Creating avenues of entering into conversation and discussing them may provide a lot of joy and ease for the older adults.

Looking at the above need areas, engaging the older adults into informal, formal and non-formal educational programmes will spur them to purposefully reflect on their personal and community needs, give personal meaning and seek to integrate their ways of knowing (Findsen& Formosa 2011). They further explained that learning opportunities for older adults are such that they are able to explore learning goals that eluded them at early stage of life. This clearly explains, why the older adults appreciate arts, music, philosophy and well-being.

Older Adults learning is mostly associated with their needs. Five of such learning needs were identified as coping needs, expressive needs, contributory needs, influence needs and transcendent needs (Patrick, 2020). It is explained that learning at older age is predominantly intended to meet the coping and expressive needs. The coping needs of adult learning prepares those at the verge of retiring to adjust to retirement while the older adult learning is focused on leisure, recreational activities and alternative income to complement their pension.

The older adults need for learning also includes providing insight and awareness to deal with problems of retirement. In which case, their learning is geared towards reducing the problem of, social isolation, dwindling social network of peers, family support and anxiety which they often suffer from due to lack of

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activity and social exclusion. To give attention to the learning needs of the older adults especially with regards to their coping needs, learning is often centered on, health matters such as personal hygiene, healthy diet and well-being. Learning opportunities are therefore provided to provide understanding of these aging problems that present such diseases like heart and kidney failure, stroke, arthritis and other related to old age. While it is believed that older adults face multiple role challenges which include increased leisure time after retirement, changes in housing requirements, death of spouse, and reduced income, the multiple changes are seen as catalyst towards delving into more areas of needs which invariably spur their participation in learning and education to inform and support life transitions (Blaxters& Tights, 2006).

### **Educational Gerontology: Teaching and learning for older Adults**

Gerontology is coined from two Greek words “Geron” which means “old man” and “- ology” suffix meaning “the study of” (Biology Dictionary 2017). Gerontology therefore is the study of aging. It is the scientific study of processes in human body that occur from middle age to late life. To understand societal changes as population, live unto old age requires a multidisciplinary approach. Hence, gerontology is a field of study that creates opportunity for the application of various range of multidisciplinary knowledge not limited to psychology, public health, social science, and education. Gerontology should be understood as different from geriatrics. Geriatrics focuses on the prevention and management of diseases of aging while gerontology involves scientific studies of processes associated with aging, mature and aged adults from different perspectives of humanities and other disciplines (Formosa 2000). It is the application of this knowledge that gives rise to educational gerontology.

Educational gerontology simply refers to teaching and learning of older adults (Findson& Formosa, 2011). It is the study and practices of instructional endeavours for and about aged and aging individuals (Formosa, 2019). Suffice it to say that educational gerontology as it relates to this paper consists of educational programmes designed to investigate and meet the needs of older adults. This means that the learning activities undertaken by older adults through the use of informal, formal and non-formal modes of learning is regarded as educational gerontology (Finsen & Mark, 2016). From the forgoing, it could be said that the multifaceted nature of adult learning and education includes educational gerontology. Hence, educational gerontology is described as a sub-specialty within the education of adults (Javis, 1990). Furthermore, Formosa (2019) outlined four areas of interest where educational gerontology has expanded into few decades as follows.

- *Instructional Gerontology*

Instructional gerontology creates opportunity to understanding how older people function; environmental context; educational motivation; the psychology of learning; memory and intelligence; learning aptitude;

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programme models teaching methods; good practice, theory and research among others.

- *Senior Adult Education*  
This enables older adults to extend their range of knowledge and skills; assessment of learners needs; training of facilitators; curriculum development; marketing and delivery evaluation.
- *Self-help Instructional Gerontology*  
This refers to learning and helping others to learn; how to teach and how to learn in a self-help mode; establishing a curriculum; quality control; establishing standards; access to educational institutions; encountering distrust of formalism, needs for independence; consumer sensitivity; developmental potential; relationship of teacher and taught good practice, theory and research.
- *Self-help Senior Adult Education*  
This involves groups, coping skills, helping the home-build, the institutionalised, the frail elderly, reminiscence, administration, assistance, problem of travel.

These various areas of educational gerontology underscore the fact that the learning needs of the different categories of older adults are catered for irrespective of their present state in terms of being active and strong or frail and weak. In addition to educational gerontology, there are institutionalised homes for the elderly. These institutions have special needs, as such require proper planning.

## **Conclusion**

Admitting that the global increase in aging population has negative effect on the society, the paper therefore highlights relevance of adult learning and education to addressing the needs of the older adults through the application of educational gerontology. Considering the fact that the situation has attracted experts in various fields including special needs education to make policies that would protect and give attention to the needs of the older adults, providing learning opportunities that would encourage their active participation for longer living, happier and healthier living as well as improving their self-confidence were advocated. It is important to utilise the opportunity provided by UN in declaring 2021-2030 the decade of healthy aging to consider all necessary avenues to improve the life and living of the older adults.

## **Implications of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) to Special Needs Education For Older Adults**

Adult learning and education support and enables individuals understand change which is acclaimed in all facets of life, cope with change, respond to change and transform both the individuals and the world they live in. The ALE is the main driver of the issue of inclusive education which is a global phenomenon that



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ensures that all individuals including older adults benefit from learning and education (UNESCO, 2020).

Adult learning and education have all variety of programmes and activities to meet the learning needs of all categories of individuals, including those with special needs. For the older adults most of their learning is for leisure. The knowledge is not necessarily for certification, monetary gain or employment, rather, elimination or reduction of boredom, loneliness, depression, improve cognitive health and delay dementia (Vyasamorthy 2018). The ALE activities for the older adults could be informal, formal or non-formal, this feature makes it possible for older adults to acquire planned healthy physical and healthy lifestyle which includes physical and mental fitness. (Weinstein, 2004). The author added that exercise, challenge and stimulation to the mind have been proven to contribute to healthy aging and mental ability. Mental function, mental fitness and memory involve brain cells that like muscles need constant exercise to stay in top condition. The more you exercise it, the stronger the brain and the psychomotor joints (Weinstein 2004).

In addition, aerobic exercise has been identified as one of the most significant means of attaining physical fitness. It is a type of exercise that is simple and not time consuming. The benefits of aerobic exercise to older adults include decrease in resting heart rate and increase in cardiac muscle strength, reduction in blood fats such as cholesterol and triglycerides, to aid the risk of cardiovascular diseases, causes increased toxin elimination and healthier skin, increase the calcium content of bones, helping to prevent osteoporosis and fractures in later life, reduced the risk for women in having breast and reproductive system cancer and it is a natural tranquiliser and anti-depressant (Galbraith, 2009). The author added that the best, anti-aging agent with positive, effects in the older adults is exercise. A consistent exercise he maintains achieves and maintains physical fitness by reducing the impacts of most age-related health problems which limit mobility, reduce independence and affect the ability to enjoy life in older adults.

With the above health related challenges, special needs education comes into play, first recognising the older adults as those with special needs and the need to integrate adult learning and education. This call is timely considering that the United Nations General Assembly declared 2021-2030 the Decades of Healthy Aging (WHO, 2021). This Decade is believed to reduce health inequalities, ensure inclusive education, improve the lives of older adults, their families and communities through collective action in four areas: changing how the society thinks, feels and act towards age and ageism; developing communities in ways that foster the abilities of older adults, delivering persons-centered integrated care and primary health services responsive to older adults; providing older adults who need it with access quality long-term care and learning opportunities.

The need for adequate, collaboration and integration between adult learning and education and special needs education can never be over emphasised. Even though in this part of the world, Africa and Nigeria in particular, older adults have

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not been given due attention, the clarion call is now to change the history. Older adults should not be perceived as being frail, dependent and a burden. This is the time to address the ageist attitudes which could cause discrimination and alienation to change the trend to influence policy development and learning opportunities for the older adults.

### **Suggestions For Future Studies**

1. The UN declaration of 2021-2030 as Decade of Healthy Aging be given utmost priority by the government to improve the life and living of the older adults.
2. A review on inclusion of older adults in special education be provided in the national policy on education.
3. Special education experts should be encouraged to closely work with the government on developing learning needs of older adults in the curriculum

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