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Active ageing, social inclusion and wellbeing: Benefits of learning in later life

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The education of older adults has been considered the fastest growing branch of adult education in post-industrial countries and one of the most crucial challenges facing current adult European education. Early research on the learning preferences, motivations and trends of older persons - as well as the impact of learning on the quality of life of older learners - can be traced to the 1950s (Havighurst, 1953), even before the field of educational gerontology was formally established in the 1975 by David Peterson (1976). In recent years, an unprecedented level of influence of the concept of lifelong learning on policies on active ageing have led to a 'renaissance' moment in the practice and research of older adult learning (Findsen & Formosa, 2016). Whilst at the turn of the millennium, one found on a handful of book publications in the field of older adult learning, and the few articles were published in specialised, often in off the radar journals, 18 years later the situation is markedly different. Nowadays, as societies are experiencing, or anticipating, unprecedented number of older persons, the field of late-life learning is firmly established in the majority of adult education and gerontology graduate programmes, and mainstream adult education and gerontology journals. Indeed, nowadays the field of older adult learning boasts an exciting and innovative field of practice, led by experts who group themselves under the mantles of educational gerontologists, geragogists or gerontagogists (Kern, 2014). Learning in later life has entrenched itself as an integral part of adult education research, focusing on the diverse provision of late-life learning, the motivations and interests of older learners, wide-participation and emancipatory policies for older adult learning, as well as the benefits of learning for learners, providers, and society in general.

Whilst this is certainly a cause for celebration, the present scenario is not without its fair share of challenges. Indeed, very few educational theories include considerations on learning in later life by focusing on older learners' interests and needs, despite the fact that the past three decades witnessed a burgeoning number of older adults enrolling in formal and non-formal learning programmes. Moreover, whilst one can never overstate that further longitudinal studies are required to measure the real impact of learning on the wellbeing and quality of life of older persons, emergent evidence of positive effects of late-life learning on participants' physical, psychological, and social wellbeing is surely compelling and encouraging. Participation in learning has been found to enable residents in care homes to learn new skills (e.g. painting), keep the body active (e.g. knitting), learn about current affairs (e.g. discussion of news), keep an active mind (e.g. reading clubs), stimulating the process of affective learning (e.g. arts-based learning), and engage in transformative reminiscence (e.g. films, biography, stories). *This interface between older adult learning on one hand, and impact on wellbeing and active ageing on the other, is precisely the focus of RELA*. Such a focus constitutes a continuation of the international research on the wider benefits of learning

trusted by Tom Schuller, Leon Feinstein, John Bynner and colleagues at the Center for Research on Wider Benefits of Learning as the work of John Field. A more recent European research project (Manninen, 2012) also picks up this research focus, asking for the outcomes of adult learning and adult education. This focus is urgently warranted because emergent large-scale data has been limited to adults in employment phase. Thus, little is known about effects of learning in later life on benefits ranging from human capital, social capital to identity capital (Bynner et al., 2003) grouped different forms of benefits. It also remains unclear if such dimensions are the most relevant for older adults and if there are other kinds of outcomes that have to be taken into account when investigating benefits of learning in retirement. As this focus on forms of capital, distinctively promoted by the OECD (2007), has been criticized for its neo-liberal standpoints, there is no doubt that other dimensions of social and personal benefits, especially their impacts (if any) on existing social inequalities, require urgent attention and deliberation.

The studies mentioned above share a common ground whereby they focus on benefits that are measurable by standardised instruments, with the result that other forms of, non-quantifiable, educational outcomes are running the risk of being left out in the cold. Educational theories underline among other benefits of education on individual development (Mezirow 2000), the changing relation of the individual to the world and itself (Koller 2011), as well as the possibilities to transform the social milieu by bringing advances not only in a materialistic sense but also in psycho-social (habitus) spheres (Bourdieu 2004; Eribon 2009). These latter studies - which tend to hold a qualitative, narrative, and autobiographical approach - are highly equipped to inform us as how educational benefits occur as well as how they are interrelated with the social environment since, after all, educational outcomes are not only dependent on the ethos of particular learning programmes but are also hinged on the surrounding institutional contexts. Nevertheless, despite the fact that these studies all point to a broad spectrum of benefits for learners and societies as an outcome of adult education, they neglect to differentiate between different phases of adulthood. Whilst one may assume that the outcomes of learning found in these research projects are similar to those experienced in later life, so far there is no clear evidence that this is the case. Indeed, the question of interdependencies between educational activities, the social environment, and learning benefits in later life remains relatively unexplored to-date.

This RELA special edition directs attention to the possible learning outcomes which become more or less relevant in later life, and may range from an active lifestyle (Brustio et al. 2017; Ross et al. 2018), wellbeing (Langlois et al. 2013) and social inclusion (González-Palau et al. 2014). Therefore, this special issue demands academic attention on effects of education and learning in later life on social, psychological and health-related dimensions. However, a central focus is commanded on the notion of active ageing as a vehicle to foster healthy ageing (Paúl et al. 2012) and to strengthen the impact of older adults in ageing societies (Chen & Gao 2013). Following a range of empirical research, it can be assumed that being active keeps older people healthy, autonomous, and socially included (Mestheneos & Withnall 2016; Lido et al. 2016), whilst also strengthening the productivity and living standard in a society in times of demographic change (Henkens & Schippers 2012). However, active ageing is not immune to criticism, as it puts pressure on the older adults to engage in

different fields, whilst ignoring the obstacles that some elders may experience in participating in a broad range of activities due to social disadvantages (Ranzijn 2015).

Social inclusion is, of course, necessary for wellbeing throughout all stages of life (Deci & Ryan 2008), and a prerequisite for democratic societies (Martin 2000). Older adults can be perceived as a vulnerable group and at high risk of social exclusion as they are exit the labour market. Gainful work remains a key driver for social inclusion in post-industrial societies, especially in the face of an empty nest, as elders' children leave the nuclear family, and as a growing number of friends, relatives and acquaintances pass away as they reach the latter parts of the life course. In the same way, the digitalisation of many areas of daily living increases the risk of social exclusion of older adults, who are - on average - not as digitally literate and competent as younger peers (Schmidt-Hertha & Strobel-Duemer 2014). In this respect, more attention could be given to contributions of older adult learning towards active ageing, social inclusion, and wellbeing in later life.

The World Health Organization (2012, p. 9) proposed a definition of well-being that considers a subjective and an objective dimension, in that well-being "comprises the individual's life experience as well as a comparison of life circumstances with social norms and values". In recent years, there was a growing concern on that interface between quality of life and wellbeing on one hand, and the ageing transition on the other. A significant research emphasis was spent in determining which factors are most influential in propelling older persons to higher levels of physical, psychological, and social wellbeing. This led to the development of measurement scales that measure subjective and objective well-being in the hope of uncovering the key determinants of active, successful and positive ageing (e.g. Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) - Diener et al., 1985; Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) - Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988; the WHOQOL - Power et al., 2005 - to mention a few). Whilst there is no doubt that measuring subjective and objective well-being can assist us in taking a comparative snapshot of ageing, nevertheless the reliable and valid combination of qualitative and quantitative data is not without its challenges. It is tricky to measure and gauge the extent that social exclusion and inequalities, relations and social life, as well as events and transitions, impact on different older persons with diverse levels of personal resilience and social capital, and living in dissimilar geographical regions which may include positive or negative community environments. Yet, the emerging evidence that older people may be becoming decreasingly satisfied, lonelier and more depressed, and living with low levels of wellbeing (Steptoe, 2015), can no longer be swept under the carpet, and rather, should be researched as best one could.

One trustworthy way to protect against a deterioration in wellbeing in later life is through engagement in social events, but especially, learning activities. As per RELA's interest focus, the study of well-being and quality of life should definitely be linked with education and learning processes. Indeed, despite the fact that both wellbeing and quality of life has both been awarded increasing attention in recent years (e.g. Merriam & Kee, 2014; Jenkins & Mostafa, 2015; Mestheneos & Withnall 2016; Narushima, Liu, & Diestelkamp, 2018), the questions surrounding the real benefits of older adult learning for older learners are far from settled, and no consensus has yet been achieved on this area as far as policy, research and action are concerned. As Field (2009) stated, the implications are immense:

A focus on well-being presents significant challenges to public policy, to providers, and to learners themselves. It suggests the following: The evidence that learning promotes well-being is overwhelming. This has huge implications in a society that is experiencing unprecedented levels of stress, mental illness and anxiety about the future – combined with the adoption of public policies that require individuals to take responsibility for planning against future risk. Learning providers must make much more of their contribution to well-being, as well as promoting the well-being of their own staff. (Field, 2009, p. 5).

In the spirit of the above discussion, RELA is publishing a special issue on the benefits of older adult learning in terms of active ageing, social inclusion and wellbeing on later life, and editors are issuing a call for papers that addresses and covers one or more of the following enquiries.

- What benefits do older adults experience when they engage themselves in learning and education pursuits?
- How can learning in later life impact wellbeing, active ageing and/or social inclusion?
- Which sectors of the older population benefit most from learning and education?
- What benefits can be expected for the social environment (partners, families, communities or even societies) when older adults keep on learning?
- How can outcomes of learning an education in later life be researched and investigated?
- Do benefits of learning differ in later life from those in earlier stages of life?
- When learning and education in later life fail to improve levels of active ageing, social inclusion and wellbeing amongst the older community?

Papers are expected to investigate the above questions or comparable ones with theoretical reflections, historical analysis, and/or empirical research.

Contributions are expected to be submitted by November the 11th 2018, to bernhard.schmidt-hertha@uni-tuebingen.de.

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