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The Impact of Participation in Educational Programs on Elderly’s Life Satisfaction

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Abstract: This study explored the impact of the participation in educational programs on the elderly’s life satisfaction. Semi-structured interviews were conducted. It showed that participation in educational programs has positively impacted the elderly.

Keywords: educational programs, older adults, life satisfaction

Introduction

According to U.S Census Bureau (2010), between 2010 and 2050, the United States will experience rapid growth in its older population. “In 2050, the number of Americans aged 65 and older is projected to be 88.5 million, more than double its projected population of 40.2 million in 2010” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010, p.1). By 2030, the last baby boomers turn to age 65 who are also likely to have healthier physical condition, more opportunities for education, and more secure finances in general. (Danner, Danner, & Kuder, 1993). Despite the soaring numbers of older population in the country, a review of the current literature on participation in educational programs and life satisfaction reveals that educational researchers have not adequately investigated a relationship between educational programs that older adult learners participate in and their life satisfaction (Boulton-Lewis, 2010; Dench & Regan, 2000; Hodkinson, Hodkinson & Hawthorn, 2008). In particular, even though an educational sector has employment and financial opportunities, in a real situation where old adults gather to learn and interact with others, there are insufficient resources that organized instructional manuals or guidebooks and person who can teach the older adult learners with various learning needs. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of the participation in educational programs on the elderly’s life satisfaction. The following research questions guided this study: (a) how does participation in educational programs affect elderly’s emotional satisfaction; (b) how does participation in educational programs affect elderly’s physical health satisfaction; (c) how does participation in educational programs affect elderly’s cognitive/intellectual satisfaction? In response, this study focused on participation in educational programs and the elderly’s life satisfaction within their socio-cultural contexts of home, community, and educational place as a result of their participation.

Literature Review

For this study, this literature review is broken down into several major sections regarding quality of life and life satisfaction; the effects of older adult education; and finally, various types of older adult educational programs.

Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction usually is viewed as a holistic evaluation of successful aging. In general, individual’s life satisfaction can be determined by physical condition, perceived health, education, secure finance, family relationship, and social relationship (Chipperfield & Havens, 2001; Hsu, 2009). Active aging encompasses enhanced health, community engagement, and safe environment for individuals and older generation. (World Health Organization, 2002). Furthermore, participating in enjoyable leisure activities, sustaining secure finance, and living in a reliable community have positively affected the elderly’s quality of life (Prieto-Flores, Moreno-Jimenez, Fernandez, Rojo-Perz, & Forjaz, 2012). “These results suggest the need: to contribute to the promotion of active aging, “with special allusion to World Health Organization of older adults in social, financial and cultural spheres;
and to favor the creation of policies, programs and services that would enable senior citizens to age in their own community and would aim to ensure an age-friendly environment” (Prieto-Flores et al., 2012, p.37).

**Older Adult Education**

Continued learning can offer various experiences to older adults with regard to enhanced self-confidence, self-satisfaction, active citizenship, social inclusion, and employment related aspect (Dench & Regan, 2000; Fidansen, & Formosa, 2011). By continuing to learn, older adults meet many opportunities to adopt new technology that can help maintain quality of life by enhancing their social connection, self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and coping strategies to deal with challenges related to health and social relationships. (Tam, 2011). Withnall (2000) stated that in recent neurological research, older people with the habits of continuing learning can improve intellectual power, maintain cognitive function, and retain memory. Hence, the benefits of life-long learning for the elderly are obvious, and there should be increasing demand for accessible opportunities that formal, non-formal, and informal learning methods provided by various service providers for global older population (Tam, 2011).

**Educational Programs for Older Adults**

In light of the unique learning needs of older adults, it is important to deliberate what kind of educational programs best serve their various interests (Hebestreit, 2008). A number of educational programs have been specifically designed to meet the needs of older adults. The following section reviews various educational programs for the elderly.

**Physical activity programs.** Until now many studies have examined the impact of physical activity on the well-being of various groups of individuals. Numbers of studies regarding maintaining the habit of physical activities and perceived level of well-being have underpinned their positive association. (Poon & Fung, 2008). Planned and structured exercise can contribute to maintain longer or enhance the elderly’s physical condition with various health benefits and decrease risk of geriatric diseases. (Ferrand, Martinent, & Bonnefoy, 2014). Furthermore, regular physical activities positively affect older adults’ psychological well-being. Physical activities can encompass simple housework, structured exercise, leisure activities, and occupational activities in relation to either enhance or decrease the elderly’s overall quality of life (Rejeski & Mihalko, 2001). Participation in a higher level of structured physical activity was associated with enhanced life satisfaction, increased social connection, and better emotional status (Poon & Fung, 2008). Through participating in a physical activity program, older adults experience improved perceived life satisfaction.

**Arts programs.** Noice, Noice, and Kramer (2014) found out that participatory arts such as dance, expressive or autobiographical writing, music, theatre, and visual arts provide positive, cognitive, and emotional effects to older adult participants. Kneafsey’s (1997) study of the use of music in older people’s care settings contributed to significantly positive outcome of the behavior of people with dementia. In this connection, numbers of previous research has demonstrated positive relationships between creativity and perceived quality of life among older adults. Late-life creative activities are associated with aspects of late-life thinking: synthesis, reflection, and wisdom (Addams-Price, 1998). Creativities can play a major role in improving problem-solving ability, self-esteem, anxiety, self-control, life satisfaction, depression, and hypochondriasis (Flood & Phillips, 2007). Generally, as people get older, a gradual decline of the numbers of neurons, brain size and weight, blood flow to brain, and short term memory can be considered part of normal aging process (Tabloski, 2007). Despite the adverse neurological changes as part of the aging process, adequate stimulation and practices enable older adults to experience positive alterations and compensate for age-related neurological declines (Flood & Phillips, 2007).
Technologies learning programs. The current interest among the older adults to learn and use information and communication technologies (ICT) can be placed within their continuous demand for social integration and fulfilling their cognitive interest (Katz, 2000). The benefits for older adults in learning and using ICT can be described in the context of social connection, continued learning through innovative methods, upskilling of current workforce, enhancement of receiving medical service and newest health education, developing independence, and various opportunities of leisure activity. (Adler, 2002; González, Ramírez, & Viadel, 2012). Numbers of previous studies have already pointed out that the use of computers, internet access, and social connection through communication technology can offer considerable advantages to older adult learners. Generally, weakened physical condition or loss of social position from retirement negatively impact older adults’ social functions and leisure patterns (Ordonez, Yassuda, & Cachioni, 2011). However, by means of the ICT, older adults can broaden their social networking with people who share interests. (Lee, Godbey, & Sawyer, 2003). For instance, Shapira, Barak and Gal (2007) mentioned that older adults who learned and utilized ICT experienced great improvement in depression, loneliness, and self-control. Numbers of research demonstrated that Internet use can enhance the older adult learners’ well-being and positive feelings related to social interaction, cognitive functioning, and preservation of independence.

Methodology
In this paper, a qualitative methodology was used to gain a detailed understanding of how participation in educational programs affects the elderly’s life satisfaction. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with four participants at Institute On Aging (IOA), a community based organization in San Francisco. Participants were adults aged 65 or older male and female from diverse ethnic background. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed to respond to the research questions.

Data Collection
Data were collected through convenient sampling technique from the Institute on Aging center in San Francisco. Participants were adults aged 65 or older who were able and willing to participate in data collection. In total, the interviews were conducted with two male and two female elderly people from those who said they would like to participate in this study. The interview participants are of different ethnic origins to diversify the participant samples; Caucasian female, Asian female, Caucasian male, and Hispanic male. The age of the participants was 91, 87, 84, and 67 years. All of the interview participants have been participating in the programs for 2 to 4 years.

The interview questions were created by the researcher and was first evaluated by experts who specialize in the field of adult education, gerontology, and program coordinators in IOA. The interviews were conducted face-to-face using an in-depth interview technique. During the interviews, the researcher asked the questions that had planned, but having the flexibility to ask additional questions during the course of the interviews. Each semi-structured interview was recorded on an audio recording device. After conducting interviews, the researcher created transcription that used for the data analysis.

Data Analysis
Qualitative data, from the interview, was analyzed through an inductive process. To analyze data, the researcher first transcribed all interviews. After transcribing the interviews, the researcher read the transcripts in their entirety. The next step was to look for common words or phrases between all of the interviews. When the common words or phrases were identified, categories were selected and noted in the margins beside each statement. From these categories, the researcher looked for overall themes to emerge. By looking for all themes contained in the interview transcripts, the researcher was able to present a robust description of how participation in educational programs affects to satisfy elderly’s daily life.
Discussion

This study examined the impact of participation in educational programs on elderly’s life satisfaction. Through interviews with program participants, I sought to understand the types of educational programs, elderly participants’ emotional satisfaction, physical health satisfaction, and cognitive satisfaction.

Types of Elderly Educational Programs

The participants are currently participating the following programs; physical activity, arts/practical art, age-related cognitive, and technology learning programs.

Physical activity programs. Physical activity programs that the senior center currently provides are group exercises including group stretching, Tai-chi, balloon games, elderly bowling, parachute game, water exercise, yoga, and laughing yoga. Furthermore, in the rehab facility, elderly sports specialists such as physical therapists, personal trainers, and nutritionists help the elderly participants to do their individual exercises. All of them are participate in group exercise programs regularly under structured and planned instruction.

Arts programs (or practical art programs). Art programs take up much of the elderly educational program in this center. The center provides art programs including painting, glass painting, clay, sand art, wall decoration, art-craft, and origami classes and practical art programs that include knitting, needle point, beadwork, gardening, and simple baking classes. Most of the participants participate in painting and art craft programs frequently. The finished art works were displayed on the activity room and hand knitted pieces were sold in annual bazaar that profits are donated.

Cognitive programs. Cognitive programs that the center provides are composed of special lecture and cognitive training program. The special lecture consisted of several subjects that are relevant to elderly’s daily life such as nutrition, health, food, domestic arrangement, travel, various culture, and consumer education. All the participants engage in the lecture regularly and response to the contents of lecture is useful.

Technology programs. This senior center does not provide group technology learning programs. Computers are equipped in the quite room for individual use and when older adults have an inquiry for usage of computer, the instructors provide individual lessons. Young-old male participants mentioned the needs of technology learning class for the entertainment, e-learning, and social network.

Emotional Satisfaction

In terms of older adults’ emotional satisfaction, a sense of social bond, positive mentality, and humanism was gained through participation in this program.

Social connectedness. The mental health of older adults is closely tied to the relationships with family members and social connectedness (You & Lee, 2006). This finding is consistent with research that indicates the importance of social connection in elderly’s overall life since older adults’ life satisfaction relies heavily on their social relationships (Choi, Ransom, & Wyllie, 2008; Compton & Hoffman, 2012). Furthermore, Goleman (2006) demonstrated that strong social bond are the substantial determinants of quality of individual’s happiness. Goleman elaborated function of human brain through a series of neural circuits one node operate as providing insight regarding emotion and another node as logic. This means that maintaining positive relationships in elderly’s life, including perceived closeness and empathy, affect overall emotional satisfaction of their life. Therefore, quality relationships greatly affect the life satisfaction of elderly and actually, the all participants acknowledge the importance of maintaining quality relationships in order to live more energetically.
Optimistic view of life. “Many people still associate aging with loss—loss of physical capabilities, loss of mental capacity, loss of family/friends, and loss of independence” (Donorfio & Chapman, 2009, p.17). It is true that many older people go through various limitations in their later life. Most of the participants from this study showed fears that involved dealing with many, mental or physical limitations, not being alone, and death. However, continued learning through participating in the programs played major role in tempering their fears of becoming physically or mentally disabled in the future. At least, as being a member of a senior center the elderly participants may gain an opportunity see their life with optimistic perspective. Continued learning and keeping away from socially isolation through participating in the programs positively impacted on the participants’ overall views of life.

Humanity. The participants regarded the staff who work for elderly as instructors, nurses, social workers, and dietitian in the center as their friends rather than having relationship between client and service providers. Having close friends and sharing one’s feeling positively influence the psychological well-being of older adults (Felmlee & Muraco, 2009). Both frequent interaction and emotionally close friends play a major role in supporting older adults’ level of well-being. (Adams, 1998). Numbers of studies support the importance of friendship in later year of people. A friend is called to be people who enjoy spending time, share common interests and have frequent contact so that older adults are significantly affected by their friends when they think about their well-being. (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1995). The elderly participants showed the feeling of trustworthiness, displays of affection, expressions of support, and thankfulness through promoting friendship with other elderly and the staff. Thus, the elderly participants are likely to experience touch of friendship and connection in this learning place.

Physical Health Satisfaction
Older adult participants were likely to improve their physical fitness and prevent age-related illness. All of the participants strongly expressed their concerns as health both in discussions about abilities they still have and they have lost. In this regard, numbers of previous studies have shown that physical health changes with declining in functioning and manifesting chronic health problems as age increase (Borg, Hallberg, & Blomqvist, 2006; Compton & Hoffman, 2012; Gerstorf, Ram, Estabrock, Schupp, Wagner, & Lindenberger, 2008; Inal, Subasi, Ay, & Hayran, 2007). Even though all the participants admitted their infirmness, they well recognized that participating in constant physical activities and regular medical examinations support to maintain or enhance their physical health conditions. Thus, active participating in physical activities programs and medical care programs greatly affect the elderly’s overall physical health satisfaction in terms of physical fitness improvement and illness prevention or treatment.

Cognitive/Intellectual Satisfaction
The older adult participants were likely to maintain or enhance their intellectual ability and attempt to apply the gained knowledge for their daily living through engaging in cognitive programs, so that they can fulfill their cognitive satisfaction.

Cognitive fulfillment. Even though all the participants expressed that they encountered difficulties with regard to loss of sensor-perceptive functions, psychometric capacity, memory, and intelligences when they learn new things, all of them showed a great desire to continue to participate in elderly programs in order to learn just for the sake of learning and to satisfy their inquiring mind. On the one hand, participating in various cognitive training programs enable older adult learners to cultivate their level of cognitive activity including memory, reasoning, attention, learning and problem solving, and use of fine motor skills (Requejo, 2008; Saboor, Sum, Sahaf, & Pourghasem, 2015) so that they can be satisfied with their retained or even enhanced cognitive ability. On the other hand, the
elderly participants can fulfill their need for cognition, through participating in educational programs, interacting with others, and exploring inner thoughts by themselves. Furthermore, since today’s older adult is seen as more vibrant, confident, and able to remain a more active, contributing member of society (Donofrio & Chapman, 2009), through continued learning they feel a sense of cognitive fulfillment with seeking new learning and adventures. Thus, engaging in educational programs satisfy older adult learners’ cognitive achievement.

**Usability of knowledge.** Most of the elderly participants expressed their satisfaction with taking the special lecture with variety practical subject that they could apply to their real-life situation. Since older adults have relatively limited source of knowledge despite high inquiring mind, they can take full advantage of the special lecture with regard to nutrition, health, food, domestic arrangement, travel, culture and history, and consumer education. In this regard, “older people want to learn ‘real things’ that have social, cultural, and spiritual significance to them” (Harley & Fitzpatrick, 2009, p.19) as a result cognitive programs enable the elderly participants to access other classes and utilize those skills to their daily life. Therefore, older adult learners fulfill their cognitive satisfaction engaging in informative lectures that provide highly applicable subject for older people.

**Conclusion**

This study examined the impact of participation in educational programs on elderly’s life satisfaction. Through interviews with program participants, I sought to understand the emotional satisfaction, physical health satisfaction, and cognitive satisfaction of elderly who participated in this study. This study revealed that participation in educational programs affect overall life satisfaction of the elderly participants. Result showed that all the participants deemed this elderly educational programs, additional programs, and services that they currently receive as necessary to help them age satisfactorily. Specifically, the elderly participants have their own specific motivation to participate in the elderly programs. More importantly, all participants attributed their enhanced emotional, physical, cognitive satisfaction to continued learning both participation in elderly and interacting with other elderly or younger people. Understanding elderly learning motivation and whether they are satisfied with their life as well as the elderly educational programs are pivotal for the adult education practitioners in developing effective adult education programs for the older adults. These elderly educational services offer stimulation on various levels which encompass great opportunities of overall enhancement for older adults’ life quality within their community.

**Recommendations**

This researcher closes this study with recommendations for other future researchers, elderly educators, and elderly people. A limitation of this research is the small number of participations, so the findings cannot be generally applied. In this study, although the researcher includes several ethnicities, it is difficult to analyze of how race might affect elderly’s perception of life satisfaction. Further exploration with various ethnic groups could be a useful follow-up to this research. Other recommendation for future research is that the elderly participants showed different characteristics in terms of cognitive abilities, exercise abilities, and emotional state along with age. Further research with subdivision of elderly age group which are young-old, middle old, and oldest-old will be valuable because there are different age-related characteristics among the elderly people.

Secondly, this researcher offers a recommendation for educators for the older adult learners. Educators who work in lifelong learning institutes, senior centers, community centers, and college extended learning institutes should offer the possibility of social inclusion, active citizenship, employment-related aspect as well as personal development. Furthermore, it is recommended that the office of professional development within each senior center investigate the design and development of instructional strategies to meet the diverse learning styles and needs of old adult learners.
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