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Reciprocity and Influence: exploring dimensions of learning in people with Alzheimer's disease

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Keywords: Alzheimer's disease, adult education, well-being

Abstract: The field of adult education has steadily grown over the past 60 years to recognize the importance of lifelong learning as essential to health and mental wellbeing (UNESCO). Furthermore, the prosperity associated with both formal and informal educational activity extends well beyond the realm of the learner to those within familial, professional and cultural circles. Less apparent is the notion that persons with Alzheimer's disease, particularly those who strive to adapt to progressive cognitive decline, remain learners who benefit from formal and informal educational opportunities. While contemplating procedural, cognitive and affective realms of learning, the author examines the impact of dynamic educational experiences upon individuals with dementia.

Alzheimer's Disease

Alzheimer's disease is a neurodegenerative disease, marked by progressive memory loss, difficulty performing familiar tasks and confusion, resulting in death 10-15 years after diagnosis (Alloul, 1998). It is associated with old-age, affecting women more often than men, typically presenting in people over the age of 65 (Alloul, 1998), however, Early-onset Alzheimer's may emerge as early as age 40. The growing prevalence of Alzheimer's poses significant social, cultural and economic problems for future generations as the *grey tsunami*, a growing wave of elderly people over the age of 65, proportionately outnumbers those under the age of 14 (Williamson, 1997). It is predicted that 10% of this cohort of adults over the age of 80 will be diagnosed with Alzheimer's or related dementia (Swindell, 1997). This impending health crisis resonates, as budgetary cutbacks in the public sector require educational, social and health services to meet growing demands with fewer financial resources. Increased awareness of the Third-Age, longevity and the notion of inclusion for older people in professional and cultural spheres, places these services at the centre of debate concerning the health and well-being of our elderly populations world-wide.

Challenging Perceptions of Alzheimer's

This paper examines the role of educational programs in reclaiming opportunities for social engagement and learning among people with Alzheimer's. Positioning persons with neurodegenerative disease as learners who continue to strive to assert their sense of agency within the world, challenges negative stereotypes and affirms notions of personhood. This perspective elevates the status of persons with dementia, claiming opportunities otherwise perceived as without value and recognition of therapeutic

education, which may slow the progress of the disease.

Adult Education

The Third-Age

Drawing upon the presence of the Third-Age – a growing social movement that stems from the generation of baby-boomers now in the latter third of their lives – the development of educational programs for people with Alzheimer’s may parallel those opportunities that third-agers generally seek out to sustain vitality and engagement with their social worlds. Gaining access to formal and informal educational opportunities has emerged as one of several key themes for third-agers. This impetus has contributed to the establishment and proliferation of U3As – Universities of the Third-Age – in Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain and North America (Portero, 2007, Swindell, 1997, Williamson, 1997). This movement speaks to a growing awareness of the social benefits of life-long learning, and its broad contribution to society, while bolstering physical, mental and emotional wellbeing (Portero, 2007). In addition to the satisfaction of learning is the prospect of developing new relationships and social networks (Portero, 2007). Therefore, life-long learning is viewed as “intrinsically valuable to human existence and quality of life.” Butler, 1989 (as cited in Williamson, 1997). Moreover, humans are predisposed to learning – throughout the life-course – as a means of survival and dynamic transformation (Luppi, 2009). Similarly, individuals with dementia retain an instinct for survival and a desire to interpret their world.

Teaching People with Alzheimer’s Disease

Individuals diagnosed with Alzheimer’s come from diverse cultural, professional and social spheres, embodying a wealth of life-experience, professional expertise, knowledge and wisdom. The certainty of progressive, cognitive decline and the loss of connection with society, coupled with deeply entrenched cultural beliefs about dementia instill feelings of isolation and diminished sense of purpose. Yet, people with Alzheimer’s live for many years after their initial diagnosis and, despite the progression of their disease may remain determined to function as optimally and for as long as possible. Through social advocacy, clinical care, access to continued education and participation in the activities of daily life (Zeisel, 2009), people with Alzheimer’s may continue to contribute to society in vital ways.

Educational Theory

Many ideas embodied within educational theory support the notion that people with Alzheimer’s may retain the capacity to learn throughout the early to mid-stages of their disease. Piaget stated that learning is contingent upon the ability to adapt to environmental change. Responding to and grappling with subtle and overt changes within the social environment is an important aspect of the learning process, connecting prior knowledge to new experiences. Vygotsky formulated a sociocultural theory of mind which recognized the social and cultural underpinnings of psychological development. He noted the essential contribution of the social and cultural context of the learner to his or her experience of the world and the creation of knowledge. Further to his theory of mind, Vygotsky’s concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) encapsulates the profound connection between a teacher and student working together in a process of

shared cognition (Swain, 2010).

The phenomenon of *reciprocity and influence* emerges from the activation of the ZPD through which cognitive and affective dialogue flows. This phenomenon relies upon mutual respect and a devoted recognition of the other, permitting the simultaneous opening and expansion of minds. Together, student and teacher work to inform the other – enacting a state of reciprocity and influence. While Vygotsky recognized the connection between interpersonal and affective factors, which together impact upon cognitive development of the student, he did not acknowledge the development of the teacher or others within the learning context. Indeed, the enactment of reciprocity and influence with people with Alzheimer’s contributes to broad circles of learning within and without the realm of the teacher and student.

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