PROMOTING CONSCIOUS AND ACTIVE LEARNING AND AGING

HOW TO FACE CURRENT AND FUTURE CHALLENGES?

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WHO IS A DISADVANTAGED SENIOR IN EUROPE?
MAIN IDENTIFIERS FOR ASSESSING EFFICACY FOR SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING OF THE AGED AND AT-RISK

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Abstract

This chapter studies the conditions that define seniors in Europe as disadvantaged. Although the term “disadvantaged” is case-specific (referring to those in a disadvantaged, needy or deprived state or position) it is necessary to approach it within a specific context (such as social, economic, cultural, educational or medical). In general terms it refers to a particular group of people with inadequate learning resources due to limited or restricted access to learning provision, people who are unemployed, education dropouts or non-participants in learning such as migrants, unskilled or low skilled seniors, people with disabilities (mental or physical), those who have taken early retirement and third-age learners (50+). The main argument of the chapter with regard to disadvantaged seniors in Europe is that their drawback is highly related to the inability to access education and learning because they are either not informed or unaware of educational opportunities, or because existing educational opportunities are not appropriate to this particular group of people. Furthermore, seniors may be unable to participate in learning because they do not consider it as important or because they think it is irrelevant to their development. Reflecting on existing theory and relevant research evidence, the chapter concludes that it is of critical importance in addressing these conditions to assess how disadvantaged seniors may be enabled or empowered towards self-directed learning in order to make their way in and actively take part in a productive way of life.

Keywords: Disadvantage senior; Identifiers; Self-efficacy; Self-directed learning

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Introduction: changing demography and aging in Europe

Europe is an aging society. The aged population (50+) in Europe is increasing rapidly. Why this is happening is definitely an issue of demographic change; yet the numbers according to Eurostat (see Boateng, 2009) are indicative of a steadily growing condition. For example the proportion of the population aged 50-64 years in all 27 EU member states, grew from 16.8% in 1998 to 18.6% in 2008. Similarly the population aged 65-79 years grew from 11.9% in 1998 to 12.7% in 2008, and the proportion of the population aged over 80 years grew from 3.4% in 1998 to 4.3% in 2008. In 2006, there were around 83 million elderly people aged 65 and over in the EU-27, compared with 38 million in 1960. Today there is one elderly person for every four people of working age (15-64). By 2060, the ratio is expected to be one elderly for every two people of working age. The proportion of very old people (aged 80 and more) is expected to triple in the EU-27, from 4% in 2007 to over 12% in 2060. Low fertility levels, extended longevity and baby-boomers’ aging mean that the EU-27 population is aging. As Doblehammer and Ziegler (2006) point out, these tremendous changes in the population structure will have far-reaching consequences for society as a whole. It has repeatedly been pointed out that the increasing share of an elderly population may result in a raised demand for care, particularly if the health status of the elderly remains unchanged or even worsens as has already happened in many EU members states today due to the socio-economic crisis. On the other hand, the supply of private care may diminish in the coming decades due to changes in the family structure, brought about by the second demographic transition.

Based on this observation what we need is to strengthen education and participation in learning which may prove crucial especially for those older adults who have no or little participation in it. For Withnall (2000, p. 94, cited in Glendenning, 2001, p. 69), we need to understand the basis on which older people make choices about undertaking learning in both formal and informal contexts in a changing world, to identify what constitutes a successful learning experience and to assess what learning