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Ageing in Fiji: How Older Teachers Perceive Ageing and Their Lives

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Worldwide the population is ageing and data concerning how people want to age actively is limited. The paper is a description of an inductive interpretive-descriptive study of how a sample of older retired teachers in Fiji viewed ageing and their lives as older people. The objectives were to determine and describe perceptions of ageing held by a sample of retired teachers. The methodology consisted of responses to an open ended questionnaire similar to a phenomenographic approach and the analysis was interpretive – descriptive. A purposive sample of 30 retired teachers between the ages of 55 and 60 responded to the questionnaire. The results indicate that most of the respondents were positive about lifelong learning and in particular learning new things; that they were involved in a range of post retirement activities for personal and financial reasons; that there were some barriers and facilitators to their activities; that they generally accepted ageing and being older; and that more should be done by Government and other agencies to provide for a better life for older people in Fiji. These results should be considered in future planning for ageing populations in Fiji, the Pacific region and in other developing countries.

Keywords: ageing, developing countries, retirement, teachers, Fiji

Introduction

This paper focuses on ageing in Fiji where most public servants including teachers must retire at age 55. Specifically, it deals with the perceptions of retired teachers of ageing and their lives as older people. Ageing has become a world-wide phenomenon. The world's population is ageing rapidly. According to United Nations' statistics, people aged 60 and above made up 11% (705 million) of the world's population in 2007. By 2050 the percentage is expected to double with about 22% (2 billion) of the world's population aged 60 and over (United Nations, 2007). In the case of Fiji, a small developing nation in the Pacific region, the number of people of age 60 and over is projected to increase from 69300 in 2010 to 170, 500 by 2050 (Fiji Ministry of Social Welfare, Women and Poverty Alleviation, 2000). This is about 300 people per year or an increase of about nine per cent by 2050. Given that an increasing number of people in Fiji are ageing it is important to explore their views for planning and development purposes.

Background

Ageing has an impact on all aspects of human life, including social, economic, cultural and political domains. Understanding and providing for ageing is

therefore a significant issue for the twenty-first century. The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2002) proposed a model of active ageing based on optimising opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life for people as they age. In some developed and developing countries Universities of Third Age (U3A) have been established to cater for the needs of older or retired people but this has not happened in Fiji. It is common sense that at one point in time people will retire from service and the way they will spend their later life is a concern for all. Some older people and those who retire from service have considerable experience and expertise in certain areas of work and if their skills and knowledge are usefully utilized then they can contribute their expertise to wider society (Beddington et al., 2008). However, in some contexts their expertise is not valued and at the same time people hold negative perceptions of older and retired people. Building positive images of older people and their capabilities together with adequate provision of opportunities for them will help them to enjoy a better quality of life (Swindell, 1993).

Conversely, lack of suitable opportunities for them can lead to dissatisfaction and rapidly rising costs for families (Productivity Commission, 2010). Schuller and Watson (2009) asserted that in the UK there needs to be a better allocation of financial resources across the life-span for learning. As it is, only a meagre amount is allocated for people above 50 years for the purpose of learning. Due to changing

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demographics the world over, learning in later life is also important for the purpose of enabling older people to remain healthy and active as well as productive members of the society (MacNair, 2009). For this to happen, various stakeholders need to put in place suitable programmes to enable older people to remain active in later life. Education and training, for example, can contribute towards maintaining cognitive ability (Rowe & Kahn, 1999; Vaillant, 2002). Research also illustrates the benefits of exercise in terms of a person's psychological being and in turn, in sustaining cognitive function (Erickson et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2011). Added to this, research has shown that suitable networks can positively contribute towards the well-being of people in later life (Dorling et al., 2008; Ertel, Glymour & Berkman, 2008).

In recent years, various ageing models have emerged such as successful ageing, ageing well, healthy ageing, productive ageing, and positive ageing. Each of these models differs in terms of emphasis (Friedrich, 2003). For successful ageing, for example, the following are the features: low risk of disease and disease-related disability, high mental and physical function and active engagement with life by maintaining social networks and continuing to do interesting things (Swindell, 1993).

Two studies in Australia have explored the concept of active ageing: the Australian Active Ageing Survey (National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre, 2005) investigated the indicators and meaning of active ageing for older adults; the Department for Community Development, Government of Western Australia (2006) developed and implemented the Active Ageing Benchmark Indicators. Both studies described active ageing for older people in terms of being proactive in keeping healthy, being physically and mentally active, engaging in learning, living in safe environments, working, and actively participating in family and community life. The areas covered are comprehensive and surely if all are in place then definitely older people's well-being will be improved.

Various models have been proposed for post retirement activities. They depend in part on job satisfaction, work/life balance, and attractiveness of various options. Older people have mixed motives for continuing to work. It is suggested that older people who continue to work want flexibility, including higher levels of part time work for a variety of reasons; to spend time with family and friends, for hobbies, caring responsibilities, health problems, to avoid boredom, and to meet people. Manheimer (2009) proposed four post-career models in the context of North America: neo Golden (pursuing self development and social adaptation), second career orientation (dream job), portfolio life (balance of

family, leisure, work and travel), and continuous employment (extension of midlife career). The associated learning needs for these are as follows: neo Golden (enrichment, socialization, new skills), second career (learning new skills and new businesses), portfolios (to meet interests, needs and new career skills) and continuous employment (new skills to keep up for employment purposes). These four models highlight the fact that people as they age want a range of different lifestyles and therefore have differing learning needs and expectations. Other post career models propose similar categories. Yeandle's (2005) classification of motivation to continue working is as follows: Career changers - want to try something new; Downshiffters - want less stress, and more autonomy; Identity maintainers - use existing skills in another setting; and Workers until they drop - have to work until forced to stop. CROW (2004) divides continuing workers into; Choosers - usually highly qualified who will continue if interested; Survivors - with low qualifications who stay until forced out; and Jugglers - usually women with medium level qualifications least likely to stay on working. Even though these models are external to Fiji some aspects might be relevant and therefore appropriate especially for those who have been employed and have retired from public service such as teachers. In particular what kind of post retirement lives do such people want?

There are very few studies documenting what older people themselves say about ageing and what their choices are for learning, being active, living environments, working and being involved in family and community life. Boulton-Lewis et al (2006) found in Australia that the most frequent reasons participants gave for wanting to keep learning were 'to keep the mind active, use the brain, exercise the mind, stay mentally stimulated, grow, attain goals, constantly learn, never stop'. As far as we can ascertain no such data have been obtained in Fiji. Such information is important in terms of planning for active ageing in the Fijian context.

The Study Context

Fiji is a small developing nation in the South Pacific. Its total population is about 850,000 with two major ethnic groups, namely, Fijian (the i-taukei, people of the land, a growing majority) and Indian (in the main, descendants of indentured labourers). In addition, there are several minority groups which make Fiji a plural society. Economically, Fiji is not a rich country. Its main sources of income are from sugar and tourism. According to the World Bank Human Development Report (2006). Fiji is a middle-income

country with per capita annual income in excess of US \$2000. The political mayhem of past years and the global economic crises have contributed to a slow economic growth. Both the political and economic situation of the country have had an adverse impact on all aspects of development. This has implications for the support and provision for older members of the society who are forced to retire early often without adequate financial resources and choice of other activities.

Method

This is a mixed method qualitative study. The data collection was open ended through questionnaires similar to the open ended approach used in phenomenographic research (Marton, Dall'Alba, & Beaty, 1993). The questionnaire consisted of questions which gave the respondents the opportunity to express views on ageing freely. This open ended data gathering technique captures significant information as well as allowing richness in the data.

The first issue; what older people believe about ageing-getting older, their self concepts, role and situation was indirectly addressed by asking about their views on life-long learning and its importance, their willingness to learn new things, their description of ageing and what they felt about being an old person.

The second issue; what older people would like to do as they get older (active ageing)- keep working, learn new things, help others, rest and the like was investigated by asking questions relating to activities they are engaged in and why.

The third issue; what are the possibilities and challenges for them as they age (facilitators and obstacles) were explored by asking them to describe what hinders them from doing things and what facilitates them doing things. A further indication of their perceptions of ageing was sought by giving them an opportunity to comment on any other aspect relating to ageing.

Sample

Since this is the first study on ageing issues conducted in Fiji, the researchers considered it appropriate to target a specific group and in this case retired teachers. The sample was recruited through an invitation extended to eligible teachers via Fiji Postal mail service to participate in the study. Addresses of these teachers were obtained from the teachers union. This resulted in a purposive sample of 30 retired teachers between the ages of 55 and 60. In terms of ethnicity, there were 14 Indigenous Fijians

and 16 Fiji Indians. They all held teaching qualifications either from the teachers' college or from the university. On average these teachers had served in the teaching service for almost 33 years. Apart from 5 teachers, the remaining teachers retired recently from the civil service in 2009 when the government suddenly reduced the retirement age from 60 to 55. Despite being retired from the civil service, some are still employed in non-teaching related jobs either as part time workers or self employed. The majority are engaged in domestic activities.

Data collection and analysis

The questionnaires were sent via Fiji Postal mail service to the retired teachers who had agreed to participate. With the questionnaires, a cover letter was also included which informed the participants about the purpose of the research. The cover letter informed participants of their rights and involvement before confirming their voluntary participation with the study. Of the 40 questionnaires sent, 30 (75%) completed questionnaires were received from the retired teachers.

Data gathered for the study were analysed in two ways. The data relating to demographic details were tabulated and summarised. For the qualitative responses, an interpretive - descriptive method (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994) was used to determine the factors and issues that are critical in ageing, active ageing and the facilitating circumstances and obstacles that exist. The study is exploratory and reliant on people's words and meanings (cf. Belenky, 1992, Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The method is based mainly on the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) in grounded theory. In interpretive - descriptive research the approach to data collection and analysis is inductive. Data collected are related to the focus of the issues to be investigated and the propositions and categories emerge from a constant comparative method of data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). Each completed questionnaire was read by both members of the research team to undertake the preliminary analysis. The final set of issues and hence categories were decided after thorough discussion and negotiation.

Results

Lifelong learning

The major reasons given for the need for lifelong learning were to keep up with changes, stay mentally active, to improve life, to pass skills on to others and to keep on living.

New inventions/ technologies and changes are occurring everyday and we need to keep up with these (7F)¹; Learning does not end. It continues till death. Continuous learning brings wealth of knowledge and skills. The new knowledge is important to carry out daily activities based on the new technologies. The knowledge and skills could be passed on to others. (3 I); It keeps ones mind thinking and energetic psychologically (2 F); Lifelong learning is important. People should learn from cradle to the grave. Once a person stops learning he/she becomes ignorant. Learning widens your thinking scope. Knowledge is like light and ignorance is darkness. If you keep on learning you can make better decisions in your life (6 I)

Learning new things

A variety of reasons were given for wanting to learn new things. These included the need to keep on living fully, to add to wisdom and knowledge and purely for interest. These reasons really affirmed the desire of most of them to keep experiencing life to the full. There was also an interest in keeping up to date to help the next generation and a few said they just wanted to relax. Yes to improve situation and cope (1F); Yes, to keep up with all the new gadgets and cope with the younger members of my household (7F); Yes absolutely...life is too short and I should make the most of what I have and live it to the full (10 F); Yes, because I am still strong and alive (11F); Yes, I am trying my best to learn computing, internet, etc., I feel that this is very important in this era since it's a digital age and we need computer knowledge everywhere (4 I); I am willing to learn more new things to cope with life. The skills and knowledge could be passed to friends and children (3 I); No, I want to relax and be cheerful, the sun rises every day (13F) [he was 84]; I can attend any workshop of my interest (9F)

Current activities

Both groups described a range of current activities. These included volunteer work, leisure and domestic activities, and social activities. Some of them talked about their need to keep working and a few were engaged in new occupations. Retired teachers association, discuss and participate in action on a range of serious concerns (1 F); Girls school leavers' income generating activities – sewing, cooking, horticulture (8 F); Member of Fiji Muslim League, Nadi Muslim Women's Branch (8 I); Walking, singing, swimming, reading, planting (3 F); I help teach my grandchildren how to speak Fijian, Fijian culture, the importance of knowing who we are, how

to dress, the importance of following Jesus (9F); Home gardening, social and religious work. Swimming, walking, visiting friends and relatives. Overseas trips to spend time with children (6 I); Translator – English to Fijian (2F); Managing Spare Parts and tyre sales, a new concept for me but very challenging and enjoyable too (8 I).

Barriers to doing things

The participants, both Fijian and Fijian Indian described those things that stopped them from doing more of the things they wanted. These included lack of resources, physical problems and fatigue and other things such as age. A few said there was nothing stopping them from doing things they were interested in. Not enough money to go around in family and time taken volunteering (1 F); My age (F12); Old age is stopping me from doing things I am interested in. I am now almost 85 years old and I am feeling weak and I cannot do those things I used to do before (13 F); My sickness, had a heart by-pass (9 I).

Facilitators to doing things

The main factors that facilitated continuing activity were their social networks, families and religious groups, their own self beliefs, good health, and their acquired skills and knowledge. Supportive family and co workers, Faith (1F); The biggest support I receive comes from my wife (10 F); My son and daughter help me to do the things I want to do (11 F); My family and the community I work in (7 I); Positive thinking (2 F); My own determination (9F); My personal effort helps me do those things I want to do (13F); Good health; relaxed, and free from 8-4 work (7 F); My health and knowledge of plumbing and painting work (2 I).

Ageing

A range of definitions and descriptions of ageing were given. These included accepting and enjoying the process, statements that it is inevitable, that it is to be valued and that it brings physical changes that you have to live with. Getting on in life, enjoying benefits, heartaches, broken dreams with grace (7 F); Never thought I would be like this... but coming to terms and accepting that I am old (10 F); No one can prevent ageing and no one can live forever. Acceptance of becoming old is necessary to continue and complete what is left of life (10 F); It's natural and an inevitable part of every human being (4 I); Like gold (3 F); Ageing is a beautiful stage of life ... (6 F); Ageing is a natural process of human life. It is often thought that the body weakens as the tissues age. But regular exercise and nutritious food would keep one

going for long even beyond 100 years. One should realize that ageing is not a factor that stops one to continuously develop one's potential (16 I); No longer has physical ability to do what he used to do (2 F); Like descending a slippery hill where we look here and there to get things to keep us steady (6 F).

Being older

These statements reflect the state of being older rather than the process described in the previous category. Some people felt good, proud or lucky that they had survived. Others felt satisfied that they had made a contribution to lives of others. Got there successfully, and keep learning and enjoying life (1F); I feel proud of myself because I get a lot of respect from others and I am at better position to guide others (11 I); I feel like I have done something to assist people to live in a better way than I did (6 F); I am more matured, more wise, very resourceful, therefore very confident and feel at peace with my life (7 F); I never feel that I am old because I keep myself fit, healthy and happy (15 I).

Other comments

They were also invited to comment on other things that were not included in the questions. The majority of these comments were concerned with treatment of and provisions for older people and the need to make use of their skills and knowledge. The latter concern is understandable in the light of the retirement age for teachers in Fiji being 55 years. This is often the age when people have accumulated a great deal wisdom and knowledge and are still willing and able to use it. More provision for old people – eg Rest Homes (7 F) Resources make a difference... we need a back up plan [in Fiji] to assist us financially during retirement (10 F); More should be given to the Senior citizens of Fiji (8 F); Other things that can be done for the ageing; 1. respecting them, 2. helping and aiding them, 3. talking nicely to them (9 F); Please do provide something to old people, especially their welfare and providence as they may burden their family members financially (10 F); More [places for] senior citizens should be opened by the government and volunteer organizations, religious organizations to cater for the disadvantaged members of the society (16 I).

Discussion

The reasons the respondents gave for the need for lifelong learning were similar to those given by older persons elsewhere (Boulton-Lewis et al., 2006). They believed learning was necessary to enable them to

keep up with changes, stay mentally active, to improve their life, keep on living fully and mentor the next generation. Reasons given for continuing to learn new things included the need add to their wisdom, knowledge and skills, and to stay interested in life. Their current activities included volunteer work, leisure and domestic activities, and social activities. Some of them talked about their need to keep working to earn an income and a few were engaged in new occupations. This fits with the two main reasons given for continuing to work elsewhere; interest in what they are doing and financial reasons (Clayton, 2010). On the other hand a few were happy just to relax and enjoy their leisure after a hard working life. Hence there were a range of post retirement portfolios as suggested by Mannheimer (2009). Barriers to doing things included lack of resources, physical problems and fatigue, and other factors such as age and illness. A few said there was nothing stopping them from doing things they were interested in. Facilitators to doing things were their social networks and religious groups, their own self beliefs, good health, and their acquired skills and knowledge. Social networks have shown in other studies to contribute towards the well-being of people and they need to be encouraged and supported (Ertel, et al, 2008). Definitions of ageing included accepting and enjoying the process, statements that it is inevitable, that it is to be valued, and that it brings physical changes that you have to live with. Being older meant that some people felt good, proud or lucky that they had survived. Others felt satisfied that they had made a contribution to lives of others. Other comments mainly concerned treatment of and provisions for older people and the need to make use of their skills and knowledge. The latter concern is understandable in the light of the retirement age for teachers in Fiji now being 55 years. This is often the age when people have accumulated a great deal wisdom and knowledge and are still willing and able to use it. If they were teaching in most other countries they would not need to retire until 65 years or older and better use would be made of their skills and knowledge for longer. It would also allow some of them to be in a better situation financially. It is also the case that opportunities for further employment and provisions for senior citizens by the government in Fiji are limited. There is also a lack of voluntary groups such as U3A which would allow more retirees to be learning and active.

Strengths and Limitations

The strengths of this study are that it directly obtains the views and experiences of retirement held by a group of teachers in Fiji.

No earlier research to our knowledge has been conducted into how a sample of older people in this developing country view their opportunities and restrictions after they retire and as they age. The limitation is that this is only a representative sample of 30 volunteers. Based on the data from a sample of this size one cannot generalize but it is large enough to determine a full range of issues (Sandberg, 2000). A larger quantitative study using the issues as a guide would now provide more information. Other qualitative studies with other groups in Fiji and in other developing countries would also add to the data.

Implications

Even though this was a small scale study, it confirmed the findings of research conducted elsewhere in terms of what people want to do to age actively. The perceptions of these retired teachers are worth considering in future planning for the ageing population. Since Fiji is a middle-income country, the co-operation of all stakeholders such as various agencies together with the government, will be valuable in terms of creating suitable leisure and work opportunities for older people. Also, more awareness and preparation are vital for older employees so that there is a smooth transition from paid employment to retirement. The findings of this study have implications for the ageing population in other countries in the Pacific region as well as for further research to establish the needs and aspirations of older people in developing countries.

Note

1. 7F means Fijian participant 7, 3I is Indian participant 3

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