THIRD AGE PERSPECTIVES on LIFELONG LEARNING: THIRD AGE UNIVERSITY

Esma ESGİN GÜNDERa *

aCelal Bayar University, Salihli Vocational School, Salihli, Manisa 45300, Turkey

Abstract

In this study, the examples of applications taken from different European countries will be discussed by focusing on the role of Universities of the Third-age (U3A) as a new perfective for lifelong learning in maintaining active citizenship in economic and cultural fields for changing society and on ‘active ageing’ rather than the term ‘ageing’ defined as something due to deficiency.

1. Introduction

All the information and definitions related to ageing are formed socially like the other kinds of information. Ageing is a biological process, however the meanings and evaluations attributed to this process are the products of social construction (Featherstone vd. 2005). Accordingly, besides being a biological and physiological phenomenon, ageing also represents a period defined as social. In one hand, the elderly who are especially retired from a professional occupation group through compulsory retirement law abandon their professional career before using the knowledge and experience that they have obtained. On the other hand, they are deprived of the power to create added value and to change the society. Today, particularly in Europe societies, Universities of the Third-Age take part in the lifelong learning project as an important educational process for making the elderly use their potential in order to get an individual satisfaction and make a social contribution rather than being thrown out of labour force by disregarding their experience. During the process of reconstructing human resources in the period of global and social change, universities have been given privilege especially among the basic politics of European Union. The principles of ‘Learning to learn’ and ‘Lifelong Learning’, which are the main philosophy of educational politics of EU, have played an important role in terms of creating common values in life quality as well as forming a common ‘EU identity’ under the roof of EU (Tatlıdil, 2011).

The demand for accessing education has increased due to the elderly population growth in society with longevity and the population becoming more inclined, active and aware. So, it is essential that the learning necessities

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* Corresponding name: Esma ESGİN GÜNDER  Tel.: +905072444424
E-mail address: esmaesgin@hotmail.com
of the individuals at Third-age group (50-70) in preparing the future educational politics and programmes should be taken into consideration according to the ideal of lifelong learning.

Types of Age and Third-Age

Age is a social concept which determines the status of individuals in both life duration and in social life. Thus, age is “an important regulatory element in society which gives social roles to individuals and determines the introduction of individuals to certain social activity fields” (Victor, 2005:36-37 Akt: Erol, 2011:31).

In the studies, where age is considered and handled sociologically, the types of age are generally classified into 3 categories as follows:

1. Chronological Age: The age which is defined as the total number of the years that the individual lives from birth and which is also named as ‘calendar age’.

2. Functional Age: The age that is defined as to the appearances of individuals and the activities which they are capable of doing (the level of self-capacity of the elderly in daily activities).

3. Subjective Age: The age defined as to how old the individual feels himself/herself.

Among the classification of the age types, subjective age is closely related to functional age. Because, individuals tend to assess their subjective age through the functions either ongoing or not. For example, while an individual at his/her nineties, who is still productive, feels himself/herself younger, another individual at his/her fifties not even considered as old chronologically can feel himself/herself subjectively old because he/she believes that the functions of his/her life are dramatically decreased (Erol, 2011:33). Ageing is a process of every kind of change which appears in physical and psycho-social respects, as the organism ‘gets older’. Ageing is a biological process; however, the meanings and evaluations attributed to this process are the products of social construction (Featherstone vd. 2005).

Accordingly, besides being a biological and physiological phenomenon, ageing also represents a period defined as social.

Laslett (1989: Ch:X.) categorized life as the first, second, third and fourth age. In this categorization, First Age, which is also defined as dependence period, is a process by which social responsibilities are taken and preparations for adult roles are made during socialization period beginning with teaching in educational institutions. Second age is the period of productivity. In this age category, individuals have a job with income and they take part in active working life. The marriage relationships are initiated and individuals begin to have children and properties. Third Age is a retirement period. It is the crown of life. Although the individuals of this age group do not take part in active working conditions, they get the freedom (time and environment) of achieving their personal needs and passions due to the reduction (or ending) of many domestic and family responsibilities. Fourth Age is a new dependency period and the last part of old age where there is no hope for living in the course of life before death.

Among the ages of third and fourth which refer to the period of old age, particularly the third age is called as the period of personal satisfaction by Laslett, and according to him, this age is the most important period of subjective age (1989:193). Because the individuals maintain their social activities in spite of being out of active labour force. In this period, the individuals can feel themselves older/younger than their chronological age and this assessment has a determining factor in their active ageing and active citizenship.

Laslett (1989:101 – 102) has mentioned that third age cannot be defined as chronologic since it is the most important and specific period of subjective age and varies from one society to another and one individual to another. Third age refers to a period, during which individuals enjoy a longer retirement period through a prolong life expectation and have a high level of disposable income. They are healthy and active during this period, and maybe this is the reason why Laslett has regarded this period as ‘crown of life’.

Third Age Perspective in Lifelong Learning

Even though lifelong learning ideal has been more commonly shared today through the globalization process and information society, the idea that people continue learning during their life time is not new. In 1920s, while saying “Education is Life”, Lindeman emphasized that as a process associated with life, education’s goal is to ‘give meaning to whole life’ by stating that there wouldn’t be an endpoint for education and on the whole, life is learning. Similarly, in 1931 Alfred North Whitehead emphasized that today education has to be defined as a constant lifelong research process with his statement that “now, the argument that people should use the things learned in youth in
their whole life has become invalid” (Knowles, 1996:168). Therefore, for everyone (both adults and children) the most important learning is to learn how to learn by achieving self governed research skills.

The report of UNESCO in 1972 titled “Learning To Be” prepared by the commission, the chairman of which was Edgar Faure, has two important thesis. These are: “Continual Learning” and “Learning Society”. The first one is the keystone of the education policies; and the second one, on the other hand, foresees a strategy which will put a society into a learning process (Tanilli, 2004; reporter, Ayhan, 2005: 6). In this way, in Faure’s Report it has been stated that if learning involves the whole life of a person and if it concerns the whole society with all its social and economic sources as well as the educational ones in terms of both life span and variety, it will not be enough to repair educational system, so it is necessary to be a learning-oriented society. In this context, the sense of learning society can be thought to be the reflection of the design of a new world in the educational field.

In 2000, the Lifelong Learning Manifesto in which the steps taken for lifelong learning was published in the member countries of European Union. According to this manifesto, there are two aims of lifelong learning. One of them is to introduce and establish active European citizenship. The other aim is to make people gain professional skills necessary for accommodating the new information based society and attending social and economical life completely. In this way lifelong learning has been designed in order to make people achieve abilities allowing them to improve themselves thanks to various devices, to have required skills in technological areas, and to take active roles in modern society (http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/other/c11047_en.htm). In order to be in the society of 21th century, learning is a process that should keep going throughout life. Life itself is a continual learning process, yet every individual needs to benefit from some new and more advanced educational opportunities in both professional and general fields in order to keep up with social and technical changes, and to adjust the changes occurring in specific conditions (such as marriage, parenthood, professional status, and old age) (UNESCO, 1985:38).

In order to fulfill “lifelong learning” and “active citizenship”, which are the reasons for the existence of a learning society, the priority in learning should be given to defining Third Age perspective. Particularly, determining the perspectives and expectations of the elderly related to education can be regarded as the first step in making the ideal of lifelong learning more comprehensive for all individuals. Friedan (1993:25) has stated that as the key of productive and healthy aging in the third age, physiological and cognitive capacity should be used carefully and has concluded that prolong learning via the activities feeding mind by keeping it active is the result of successful and productive aging. In this way, it should be acknowledged that the lifelong learning perspective which is the basic component of “active aging” concept is going on in the general nature of learning during life.

In his work named “A Fresh Map of Life” (1989: Ch.X) Peter Laslett has stated that many elderly become lazy with retirement after social responsibilities and professional status and facilities belonging to Second age period in the whole life course. However, as a result of the efforts to have a family and career during the second age, the aim in the third age is self fulfillment. So that, the third age is defined as the “crown of life” by Laslett. Yet, fulfilling the expectations in the third age requires a careful and devoted effort to be made lifelong. Therefore, especially in the societies where life expectations are long, it is also another important necessity for the lifelong activities to be organized with the increase in the rate of individuals in their forthcoming ages. Because in realizing social responsibilities and forming future, the elderly plays an important role as much as the young for the preparation of policies. Thus, Laslett (1989:153) has stated that the third age elderly who are named as young elderly have more social responsibilities than the young and these responsibilities gradually continue.

As a result, when considered from the third age perspective, education and learning facilities are the particular values themselves besides providing personal and social use; and they provide individuals with unlimited experiences which are worthy of wasting effort and time. The educational environment and applications revealing learning potentials of third age learners appropriate for third age learners’ present life conditions and social environments can be listed as follows: Third Age University, Public training centers, nursing homes, distance education applications performed with mass communication devices and several publications.

In the next part of this study, samples from applications in different European countries will be discussed by emphasizing the educational applications in the third age universities as a new perspective in lifelong learning and educational applications in these universities.

University of the Third Age UTA

Among the elderly who give up active labour force with retirement, especially the professional job owners have to leave their working life without using the information and experience sufficiently which they have gained during their professional life. This condition leads to some kind of discontinuity in the lives of elderly and an obstacle against their revealing of the potential to transform, change and contribution to the society. Thus, especially some
industrialized countries where urban workforce is intense have developed organizations under the name of University of the Third Age which enables elderly to use this potential and make important contributions to the society (Erol, 2011: 42).

Universities of the Third Age which are accepted as one of the most successful educational foundations providing learning opportunity to the elderly are defined as socio-cultural centers where they can add new information to their current information as well as sharing their knowledge with the third age learners (Formasa, 2010: 198). Universities of the Third Age as an alternative elderly educational application for old people provide the third age perspective in lifelong learning with practical classes and recreation facilities as well as enabling students to share their experiences and knowledge.

Since their foundation in 1972, these universities have provided opportunity for millions of elderly in five continents. It would be enough to say that there were 19,300 education center and 1,800,000 members only in China at the beginning of the year 2000 (Thompson, 2002). With the demand for the first applications in the University of Toulouse (France – 1972), which is accepted to be the first example of Universities of the Third Age, Universities of the Third Age have been spread over the countries such as France and England primarily and Belgium, Holland, Germany, Italy, Spain, the United States of America, Canada, China and Japan. According to the data obtained from the official web site of the University of the Third Age, in 2009 there were 211 centers in Australia (64,535 members), 60 in New Zeland (10,154 members), and 731 in England (228,873 members) (The Third Age Trust, 2009).

Many studies examining Universities of the Third Age (Huang, 2005; Lemieux, 1995; Yenerall, 2003) has shown the important role of young elderly (third age) in the efforts to age actively and successfully as well as the uses provided by these learning centers to the society. Formasa (2010: 198), similarly, has emphasized that Universities of the Third Age help elderly to integrate into the society and to create their own social environments by increasing their intellectual potential as well as developing a goal and sense of responsibility for the members of Universities of the Third Age in their survival and making a moral contribution in a psychological way such as achieving self determination, developing a state of belonging, personal realization, accepting self.

It can be seen as another function of Universities of the Third Age that the education programmes and recreation activities applied (paint, dance, drama, hand works, sport activities and journeys) are assimilated to a therapy for the ones retired from especially hard, tiring and stressful professions. However, some studies (Alflageme, 2007; Findsen, 2005; Formosa, 2000) have reported that it is a shortage of these universities to respond to the needs and expectations of the elderly from upper or especially middle class besides their given social used. Again, despite the increasing attendant number, it is criticized that there is an insensitivity about the expectations and learning needs of the ones living in rural areas and ethnic groups and they are not under examination in these universities.

The view of Peter Laslett that education is a value itself in terms of individual’s self actualization and his ideas towards the educational realities of third age learners have taken a root in this university through the foundation of Universities of the Third Age in England in 1981.

Today there are five models in China, North America and South America besides the Universities of the Third Age in England and France. Among these, the models in France and England are connected to a university hosting them. In the curriculum prepared in the educational programmes performed in “Peer learning”, the members attend some classes as teachers and some other classes as students, The idea that educators should also be educated is adopted. In the model in China, among the lectures in curriculum there are citizenship, cultural variety, philosophy, personal care, health and gerontology. The model in North America is performed in the form of seminary meetings. The lectures are performed by guest lecturers and speakers. The management of the organization is made up of the members. Lastly, as the practices in South America are concerned, besides being similar to the French model, the members of it is formed by the elderly from disadvantageous socio-economic environments at most (Levesque, 2006). Whatever the name of the model is, the main goal of many activities presented to the students in these universities is recreational.

Retirees from different professions having various fields of expertise can present their knowledge, skills and experience through the Universities of the Third Age. In these universities where each member is distributed according to his/her own expertise, the elderly are provided with the opportunity and environment to improve their interests (Laslett, 1989: 221). Through this way, in these universities where the status and roles of student and teacher can be shifted and where the attendants are both teachers and students, elderly members can make their own organization, and can be directed by the members that they select among themselves, by sharing their different life experiences. Moreover, they can make brain storming and can discuss different subjects in their groups.
Result

In order to fulfill “lifelong learning” and “active citizenship”, which are the reasons for the existence of a learning society, the primary priority in learning should be given to defining Third Age perspective. Particularly, determining the perspectives and expectations of the elderly related to education can be regarded as the first step in making the ideal of lifelong learning more comprehensive for all individuals.

In lifelong learning, Third Age Universities can be defined as genuine organizations due to the renovations that they have provided in educational practices and learning approaches by making the third age noticeable in society and by attributing new meanings to it. Today, third age refers to a new period called as ‘young old age’, and particularly in the studies of Laslett, this period is defined as a bufferzone and as a transition period between ‘adulthood’ and ‘ageing’.

Besides meeting the requirements of their members, Third age universities give each member the opportunity to perform self-fulfillment in a democratic environment which makes them noticeable, and therefore maintains sustainability. It is thought that the members, who have the opportunity of ageing more healthy and actively by taking part in university activities, can sustain their active citizenship without keeping away from social life by taking on responsibilities such as learning and teaching through such organizations where social added value is created.

For the countries like Turkey, where the elderly population and highly-educated individuals in this population have increased, Third age universities can be taken as a model in fulfilling ‘active citizenship’. Thanks to the Third-age universities to be constructed, third-age will be integrated with society by sharing the knowledge and experiences of the retired university lecturers and other retired professionals.

References

The Third Age Trust, University of Third Age web site : www.u3a.org.uk