

Introduction

In *Learning to Grow Older and Bolder* - a NIACE policy discussion paper - Carlton and Soulsby (1999) maintain that investing in more and better learning opportunities for older people might reduce health and social welfare costs now and in the future by encouraging the retention of independence for longer. The Institute for Employment Studies study *Learning in Later Life: Motivations and Impact* (IES, 2000) discusses the benefits learning can have for older people including increased self-confidence and motivation and an increasing willingness to take on responsibility.

The *Fourth Age Learning Report* considers if the same arguments apply to people in their fourth age (4th Age) - a stage of life where there is some level of dependency on others for care. It considers if those who provide care also believe that stimulating those in their charge through learning and other activities lessens dependency and reduces the cost of medication and care. The report also assesses the amount and quality of learning provision in the residential and care setting and the attitudes towards that provision.

The report does not attempt to provide a comprehensive overview of a very complex field, however, it raises a number of issues for further consideration, particularly for those responsible for educational activities within the care environment.

The study, funded by the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), has been undertaken by Jim Soulsby, NIACE.

Background

Demographic trends show that the number and proportion of older people in the United Kingdom is increasing - some 2.3 million people were aged 80 and over in 1997 and this is expected to rise to 3 million by 2021. Alongside this the Royal Commission for Long Term Care for the Elderly (1999) suggests that long term care costs are set to rise significantly. In 1995 the cost of long term care of elderly people was £11 billion, by 2021 with no changes in demographic patterns, health costs and dependency patterns this would rise to an estimated £19.9 billion with worst and best scenarios this suggests costs are likely to be between £25.9 and £15.9 billion.

The patterns of care for older people are changing. A number of care and housing agencies suggest that residential and nursing care is likely to be replaced by more 'very sheltered' housing schemes.

In addition, care-planning strategies will attempt to keep people in their own homes for longer. (Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS) submission to the Royal Commission on long term care, 1998).

Given these factors, the time seems ripe to consider the potential for reducing dependency and the resulting costs.

Methodology

A literature review and small-scale questionnaire complemented a series of visits between October 1998 and October 1999. The visits were to a broad range of agencies and were based on the premise of highlighting:

- good practice worthy of wider dissemination and replication,
- existing or planned collaboration, and
- developed strategic views

The visits revealed what could be achieved. In every instance, the work was undertaken by people who believed in the continued personal development of older people, no matter what their degree of frailty or incapacity.

Summary of Findings

The visits undertaken, and the questionnaires returned, reveal consistent findings about the benefits of later life learning activities to older people in care settings. There was almost universal acceptance that engagement in learning and similar activities enhances quality of life, lessens dependency and improves well being.

However, the study also revealed that 4th Age learning provision is inconsistent. Examples of best practice and strategic thinking contrasted sharply with an overall lack of meaningful activity and variable quality amongst the activities which do exist.

There are many agencies with responsibility for providing care and/or activity. The study demonstrated that this plethora of agencies makes it difficult to develop a coherent picture of collaborative working, standardised training and consistency of qualifications.

Conclusions

- The personal development of frail and dependent older people through learning opportunities is largely being ignored. Their individuality and potential is not acknowledged.
- Where activities are beginning to happen in private sector institutions it is often because there is a dawning realisation that such engagement reduces dependency and the concomitant costs and is also an effective marketing tool.
- Whilst funding is the most commonly quoted barrier by many institutions to making provision, several of those consulted felt the need for attitudinal change to be more important than more resources.
- Any meaningful improvement in care provision that enshrines learning and personal development requires dialogue between various sectors and agencies – in particular, those in health, housing, social care and education. However this joined up approach is only beginning to touch care in later life. The multi-sectoral approach currently lacks co-ordination, rationale and planned funding.
- There is a lack of common understanding of the terms used to describe older people in care settings, and some of the issues discussed here. This confusion over terms may prevent or delay the development of collaborative services that enhance the personal development of older people in care settings.
- Equally, with the provision of activities coming from so many different agencies, there is little agreement on standards, assessment, qualifications and training of staff delivering activities.

- Curriculum development has to be sensitive to cultural and religious factors. The curriculum - as planned and subsequently delivered – is only infrequently subject to any rigorous evaluation.
- In many institutional settings where the curriculum is delivered by care staff, they have little training to do so. Similarly, for many activity organisers, the entertainment of the resident is seen by their managers to be their responsibility alone, and not within the remit of other care staff. Learning activity may be seen as an ‘add-on’ exercise, with the delivery and learning outcomes not being shared with any of the staff, volunteers or residents families.
- In some day care settings – even when programmes build on existing skills and experiences, or include the development of new skills – they are not constructed in such a way as to maximise learning gain outside the class time.
- Further study is required into the impact of learning on health and the wider social and community involvement of older people in the 4th Age.

Examples and Case Studies

The Report highlights some of the work currently underway. For example:

Extra Care Housing, West Midlands welcomes frail older people. Upon arrival each resident is given ‘The Book of Life’ © in which they record their past, the present and most importantly the future in terms of unfulfilled ambitions, dreams and aspirations. This loose-leaf book has space for photographs and to record achievements. It is in effect their ‘case history’ to be shared with their key worker.

Lancashire County Council Social Services with the support of the adult education service and others runs courses for carers which include assertiveness training, self-protection, career development, reflexology, keep fit, coping with feelings and outings.

The *National Association for Providers of Activities for Older people* (NAPA) is developing a training programme for activity organisers and seeking accreditation through the Open College Network.

Brighton Social Services has created its own NVQ programme to train care workers to look at care as a profession, to enhance their employability in the private and public sectors and to raise their status and remuneration in a locality where there is a shortage of appropriate labour. It has also developed a rating system to measure the quality of care in residential homes in the area.

The *Wandsworth Housebound Learning Scheme* and its equivalent in Adur, West Sussex rely on volunteers to deliver education courses to housebound older people.

Nightingale Lane in Balham, South London, is a large complex comprising residential and nursing care, sheltered housing and day care for over 300 Jewish elders. The Jewish community supports the scheme very generously.

There has been a home on the site for 100 years but it has recently been extended to house a theatre and a synagogue. There is a very well appointed arts and crafts centre with two teaching staff, which in the main is viewed as providing therapy. There is also a paid activity

and leisure manager who facilitates, or runs the clubs, discussion groups, theatre and other outings, residents' forum, the magazine (containing poetry, reminiscence and topical articles produced by residents, visitors and volunteers) and the choir.

The Housebound Learners' Project was set up in 1988 to provide free adult education for housebound people, the majority of whom are elderly, in Wandsworth.

Each week a volunteer attends a free class at one of the centres of South Thames College in a subject of interest and then passes on what has been learnt to a housebound person. Feedback and opinion from the housebound learner is fed into the class the following week.

The Project Director ensures compatibility between volunteer (for whom training is provided) and learner. Courses usually last for 2 hours and run for 10 weeks, with about 8 courses running each year. Where possible visits for volunteer and learner are arranged to places with relevance to the subject studied.

Funding has been obtained from NLCB and other sources to support the work. Potential students are referred to the project by Age Concern Wandsworth, the Multiple Sclerosis Society and the Carers Centre.

Obtaining the Report

Copies of this summary and the full report can be obtained from DfEE Publications:

PO BOX 5050
Sudbury
Suffolk
CO10 6ZQ

Tel: 0845 60 222 60
Fax: 0845 60 333 60
Minicom: 0845 60 555 60
E-mail: dfee@prologistics.co.uk

Please quote ref: 4ALRSUM for the summary and 4ALR for the report.

The IES research *Learning in Later Life: Motivations and Impact* is also available from the same address. For the free summary quote reference number RB183; for the full report, cost £4.95, quote reference RR 183.