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Intergenerational Learning of Younger and Older Workers and Active Ageing

Abstract: Dušana Findeisen examines the need to link active ageing with intergenerational educational programmes. She discusses educational and training programmes for older workers in companies and how they ameliorate intergenerational ties among workers. Moreover, she emphasizes that older and younger workers have much in common and that their position in company could be changed considerably through the use of intergenerational educational programmes. Older and younger generations are marginalized; therefore education of these generations has to be accompanied by the education of those who shape their position.

About the labour market and generations in the ageing society

Years ago, it has become clear to me that younger generations and older generations have much in common: there is little room for both of them on the labour market. If they enter or reenter the labour market, they have to compete with generations in the middle who are already there and do not willingly share labour with them.

But ours is an ageing society and in an ageing society there is no active ageing possible without older generations being able to mix up with other generations at work or in voluntary activities. In the ageing society, older people and younger people should have equal access to public resources; work, education, health, accommodation, etc. And moreover younger and older and other generations have a lot to offer each other and to construct together and intergenerationally their learning.

EUROSTAT estimates that 22.547 million men and women in the EU 27- were unemployed in April 2011. In April 2011, the youth unemployment rate (those aged below 25) was 19.6 % in the euro area and 20.3 % in the EU-27. In April 2010, it was 21.1 % and 21.2 % respectively.

The lowest rates were observed in the Netherlands (6.9 %) and Germany (7.9 %), and the highest in Spain (44.4 %) and Greece (36.1 % in the fourth quarter of 2010), Slovakia (35.6 %) and Lithuania (34.1 % in the fourth quarter of 2010).

Youth unemployment rates are generally much higher than unemployment rates for the whole of the population. This does not necessarily mean that the group of unemployed persons aged between 15 and 24 is large. Many young people are studying full-time and are therefore neither working, nor looking for a job, so they are not part of the labour force (which is used as the denominator for calculating the unemployment rate). However, high youth unemployment rates do reflect the difficulties faced by young people in finding jobs.

The youth unemployment rate in the EU-27 was around twice as high as the rate for the total population throughout the last decade. (source Internet). These data lead me to the conclusion, that dealing with the issues of older generations necessarily means also dealing with the issues of younger generations, so their issues could be a perfect topic for an intergenerational educational programme.

Adult education, education of older and younger workers and intergenerational education are dependent on how well social and economic changes are understood

In order to understand contemporary adult education and intergenerational education one has to have also the understanding of social and economic changes having occurred over the last decades. Thus, a number of relatively recent studies have been focusing on the way in which production and work in the post-fordist society have been organized and on how the »new production concepts« relate to education and training of adults (Edwards, 1993). The changes and “new production concepts” require knowledge and skills of *all* generations of workers, improved mutual relationships of younger and older workers, as well as a *radical change in the position of younger and older workers in companies and society.*

The position of older workers in companies and society depends on the fact that population has been ageing, and that the structure of economy has changed. Namely, the ageing of

population has been accompanied by *interior ageing*, i.e. the *ageing of work force* and the latter seems to be one of the *major employers' and policy makers' issues*..

To sum up, the position of younger and older workers in companies and society is resulting from economic changes and from the changed structure of economy. Employers are persuaded that younger workers have fresh new knowledge acquired formally in schools and are less expensive to hire and that older workers are not worth to be retained at work because they are more expensive than younger workers and supposedly they are less productive and less mobile and less flexible than younger workers (1996). But, of course, these are nothing but stereotypes. There are other stereotypes about older workers, saying that older workers are less ready to work hard, that they are not very undertaking. Under this kind of pressure, many older workers retire in spite of the fact that four out of five jobs are in the field of services where experiential knowledge and older workers' communication skills are badly needed.

European policy makers and trade unions have come to the conclusion that early retirement is no more a useful solution and have come to understand that *working conditions have to be adapted to the capacities of older workers and in-service education for older workers is to be encouraged*. It should be emphasized that today's jobs require less physical force (than they used to) but they require more mental abilities, which means that older workers should and can remain productive for a longer period of time on condition they have access to education. *Consequently, planning older workers' professional growth and employment has been put among the priorities of some companies and states*.

In various working environments there is a shortage of knowledge and skills that are typical of older workers. In order to understand their specific knowledge and skills the life span approach is to be adopted. (Baltes, 1978). Most of the times, however, the older workers' abilities and their developmental competencies are not valued. As a result of it, *older workers often lack self-confidence and perceive themselves negatively and they do not require access to adult education that would support their development of their abilities*.

Among all older workers, physical workers are mentally and developmentally the least encouraged through education. Older workers are not often enrolled in courses and other forms of adult education and training. Knowing that knowledge and skills get easily and

quickly outdated nowadays, education and training in working organizations, whose working force is ageing, should definitely be increased. Nevertheless, this has not happened so far due to the negative attitudes, values and beliefs about older workers prevailing in the company. Therefore, it can be said that the *position of older workers (and younger workers) is a result of the attitude and values of employers and society as a whole.*

With their characteristics and their capacities older workers can essentially benefit to economy and training of they can get involved and should get involved in intergenerational education and training of younger workers. *Older jobless workers could set up and organize new companies together with younger people, those who have only just entered the world of work. This in itself would involve a lot of intergenerational education and training, common intergenerational construction of new knowledge.*

It seems that employing, motivating, developing and retaining older workers at work would be sensible for several reasons; *younger employees, those who have just finished their studies, lack important skills and knowledge necessary for increasing efficiency and productivity.* On the other side, more experienced, mature workers may have them; *specific knowledge about the culture of their working organization and collective memory associated with this working organization, are worth to be transmitted to younger employees and might be precious when setting up strategic goals and further development orientations of the company (1996).*

Older workers' knowledge and skills, however, should not be used restrictively but constructively. Using older workers' knowledge and skills provides for greater recruitment possibilities on one side, and on the other side this is an appropriate response to the changes brought about by the ageing population, and it also means the true understanding and supporting the difference at workplace, understanding the true nature of difference of culture older and younger and mid aged workers bring to the company.

Moreover, *working organizations should employ older workers because a diverse age structure, -working collective comprising workers of different age- seems to be more convenient, since the company has also an age diversified structure of buyers and users.* In addition, older workers seem to be more loyal to the company and on average they stay with the same company till the end of their active working age (approx. 10 years) and

younger employees just 5 years. Older employees are more incrustated in the social network, they are not so often absent from work, they can produce more and better. Thus some companies are slowly getting aware of the urgent necessity that *age management taking into account older workers, younger workers and those in the middle should be established as soon as possible.*

Education of older workers helps consolidating intergenerational ties at work

In 1995 the Council of Europe prepared a document named "Resolution on the employment of older workers" *stating that training and working conditions in companies are to be adapted to older workers. Learning opportunities for older workers and the organization of education for older workers enabling them to acquire professional knowledge and to maintain and develop their relationships with other generations and professional should be made possible.*

"Social encounters and ties in a company, which is socially well organized, have an impact on the efficiency of work and development of older workers' identity" The French author Sainsaulieu (1998) gives a lot of thought to the impact of education on the relationships within a working organization. He argues that *companies denying older workers' access to education at the same time deny older workers' access to working relationships.* Thus, in the long run, older and other workers who do not have access to education and training get less educated and less competitive and what is more, *they get alienated from the working relationships* inducing all consequences one can imagine. As a result of it (older) workers *lack confidence, they get insecure and start underestimating themselves* It would be pointless, in such conditions, to expect that older workers will be very much engaged and creative at work.

We should not forget that training can exert a long lasting impact on the style of relationships in a working environment. The time devoted to training is also the time devoted to learning mutual and intergenerational relationships and the time following the training is an opportunity for transforming the existing strategies for inserting workers into the working organization. After the training the previous horizontal relationships as well as other hierarchical relationships are no more perceived in the same way as they have been perceived before. *More criticism towards the working group can be felt but also more*

engagement in interpersonal relationships and also more flexibility in the life of the collective (Sainsaulieu, 1992). For older workers being included in education also mean that they can meet younger workers and that they can establish relationships which can help decrease ageism in society and working collectives.

Age management is a kind of company's prevention policy

Age management can be perceived as a kind of company's prevention policy, helping employees to remain healthy and productive as long as possible. Therefore age management policy taking into accounts the workers' age and their age related advantages and deficiencies would be welcome. Age management policy should also lead to intergenerational education focusing on age related advantages.

New working conditions are to be shaped for the workers approaching or having reached the retirement age. Older workers should be free to manage their time as they choose. They could work from home, etc. Companies that would really want to retain older workers should therefore provide for flexible working conditions, taking into account specific knowledge and skills of older workers, flexible working time and gradual decreasing of the number of working hours. Companies should as well introduce counselling for continuing once working career and for understanding other generations and their generational cultures at work. In spite of the fact that older workers may have already gone into retirement, they can still be a part of the working life by being self-employed and to that end they need education and training. On the other hand, older jobless workers need education and training to continue their professional work.

Education of older workers is supposed to provide for the best working conditions for older workers. Thus, older workers can remain productive and employable till the end of the active working age or till their retirement. Nevertheless this is not always possible, due to the existence of age discrimination in companies and society. Namely, employers do not consider old age of the workers as a positive and for them and interesting period of their life, being persuaded that older people at work have to face a number of changes and transitions that can exert a negative impact on their productivity. On the other hand they do not appreciate younger people having numerous developmental tasks ahead (given birth to children, rising children). *Older workers and employers, as well as society as a whole, need*

more knowledge about ageing and work, as not to yield to the negative or positive stereotypes about younger and older workers. In my view older workers are a social group and like all other marginalized social groups they need education, which necessarily has to be accompanied by the education of their working environment, their family, their employers and society as a whole. *Namely, attitudes, towards age and ageing and towards younger and older workers have to be changed.*

There are several measures that might help older workers. Policies should encourage (1) professional insertion of older workers. Policy makers should introduce (2) gradual retirement, (3) laws on employment, (4) public campaigns raising public awareness, (5) rules on shorter working hours, (6) laws on education and training at work, and laws on pension, etc.

Older workers could get retired “by installments”. They could retire for a year or two and could be reactivated later on. Education and training of older workers are meant to improve older workers’ working capacity, their social relationships at work, society as a whole, but they can also provide older workers with better work or a new type of work.

Education and training of (older) workers and their impact on social relationships in company

Education and training can provide older workers with better qualification, but they cannot bring back their youth and amazingly, youth is what employers expect. Therefore, education of older workers is to be accompanied by the education of employers and by public campaigning, focusing on the value of workers who are more than 40 or 45 years of age. And what is the aim of such public campaigning? Raising public awareness, changing the behavior, the attitudes and the beliefs of all people, not only the employers and older workers themselves.

Education of (older) workers is not important only from the social point of view, but it is also important for consolidating the social ties and bonds in a company or institution-the same holds for intergenerational education and learning.

Through participating in education and intergenerational education some older workers can contribute a lot to the common spirit, common work and common success. Not all of course,

but some certainly can. Namely, "the world of everyday work" is for some workers- those who treasure more other fields of activity than work- a strategic refuge, but for some other workers the world of every day's work can be the place and space where their different resources, the resources they get also outside work, can be used to the benefit of the company and to the benefit of all workers" (Sainsaulieu, 1987).

Younger and older workers, who enroll in education by this act alone, get opportunities to be recognized and their sense of belonging to the working collective can be increased as a result of their participation in education. For older workers education also provides possibilities to bring their experiential and professional knowledge back to the working environment.

The success of a working organization depends on how well each worker is taking care of the working collective. To illustrate this point let us quote Jean Paul Sartre (1965, p.165) who argues that "the real reality is an individual in the social sphere". Older workers do not exist and work for themselves. They can exist and work only relating to other workers in a company. This holds good also for other generations of workers.

If we want to include older workers into work and if we devise educational programs for older workers or intergenerational programmes, changes having occurred in the lives of older workers and also younger workers are to be taken into account.

Most of the times older workers demonstrate:

- Less physical force and a decrease in dexterity,
- Greater fatigue after longer physical or psychological efforts,
- Decreased speed in perceiving information, processing information and reacting to information, especially if these are related to new and complicated working processes,
- Worse short-term memory, - Decreased ability to work under time pressure.

Some older workers' abilities remain more or less the same

-Facing habitual physical and psychological efforts, the ability to achieve the best working results through the day, the speed of work, when extreme efforts are not expected,

-Attention and focusing of attention, the acquired knowledge and the knowledge of language.

Some abilities in older workers have a tendency to increase and improve. These are:

-The scope of working and professional experience gets increased,

-The force of judgment is greater, communication abilities get better,

-Accuracy in executing work tasks and autonomy are greater,

-Critical thinking capacity, sense of responsibility are increased, better physical and mental capacities, consistency and stability,

-Increased awareness concerning work and the others, improved work ethics, maturity and increased motivation,

Educational programs for older workers have several goals

-To increase older workers' awareness about their working situation, about their own wishes and motives in professional life and also about what they want to achieve in their life,

- To improve older workers' awareness about their professional situation and about how their professional situation is related to the needs of the working organization, the need to have capable, flexible, and efficient workforce,

- To help and stimulate older workers, to have an impact on planning their professional career,

- To help the employees and the managers to prepare their own plan of their professional career,

- To help the employees to perceive the possibilities of changes in the organization of work as well as changes in working tasks, thus enabling them to be more flexible.

Education of older workers can by no means be separated from the education of those who are in the position to shape the working situation.

For the workers older than 58 years an educational program can be devised comprising the following topics: gradual retirement, the decrease in the number of working hours, health and how to lessen physical stress at work, mentoring younger people, their knowledge and skills at work (Kuhn at all, 1998).

Education of older and younger workers dwells upon theories of human capital, arguing that learning and education should lead to economic growth and to increased consumption. The point is that the concept of education of older adults is often related to the concept of making profit (Field 1994 p.. 87). This should be changed. *But intergenerational education means much more. It is above all education for better human ties.*

Intergenerational programmes within in-service education and training can be related to common professional issues at work, new technology, new skills, working environment and conditions, psychological ties at work, socio-cultural animation, sustainable development, the company culture, company history, art, etc. Learning about generations or old age or young age, however, is not an appropriate intergenerational topic. Since intergenerational programmes are meant to consolidate ties among generations, the topic has to be truly of interest and should pertain to all generations.

Active ageing is not just about working longer, it is not just about education of older workers, nor is it just about intergenerational education at work place

The best opportunities for intergenerational learning are provided for by voluntary work in local community settings with generations learning together in order to achieve a common goal. In such intergenerational situations learning occurs in a natural way, though education is, of course, organized. There is a lot of spontaneous learning by doing encouraging relationships. Their improvement is one of the basic goals of any intergenerational educational programme.

Conclusion

Today's adult and intergenerational education depend on the understanding of economic and social changes in post fordist society and also on understanding the ways of production.

Intergenerational learning of younger and older workers is very much connected with active ageing; what holds good for older generations holds good for younger generations since their position on the labour market and in companies as well as society is similar. They can enter the labour market with difficulty since there are already other generations who are not easily ready to let them enter. Companies need educational programmes concerning older workers and younger workers, but above all they need intergenerational educational programmes and also an age management policy in order to consolidate ties among generations in the company. The best intergenerational educational programmes are related to voluntary work in local communities.

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