

Anthony M. Schembri and J. Godwin Agius (eds.), *Education for the Elderly: A Right or Obligation?*, University of the Third Age (Malta), Malta, pp. 82, 1997.

This volume consists of papers read at an international conference organised by the University of the Third Age in Malta. The aim of the conference was to "*focus attention on whether the education of the older person was in itself a fundamental right, and consequently to be provided by society, or whether the onus fell more on the older person himself (sic)*" (p.vii).

Three of the first four papers, the ones by Peter Laslett, Kenneth Wain and Alfred Cuschieri, are of a very high calibre. Every adult educator would acknowledge that they constitute a very positive step in responding to the void which is apparent in the literature on philosophical and pragmatic issues regarding older adult education (Lawson, 1992). I am referring here in particular to literature which focuses on the Universities of the Third Age. Peter Lasslett, Peter Laslett, being the keynote speaker, builds on a previous publication (1996: Chap. 10) to project the U3A movement as an effort to address inequality in educational opportunities and as representing an important contribution to the restructuring of education. Lasslet provides a useful account of the major differences between French and British U3As, assesses the benefit that older persons could get from joining the U3E, and gives an extensive overview of what are the philosophical and pedagogical aims of these universities.

The articles by Kenneth Wain and Alfred Cuschieri are very important when keeping in mind the sparse literature on the U3E in Malta. Both papers outline the genesis of the U3E movement locally and detail the first few days of the University of the Third Age. They describe how the U3E, building on 20 years experience of U3As in Europe, was successful in offering the same level of commitment to the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, through lectures and debates led by a natural and legitimate sense of inquiry. It is also interesting to observe that Cuschieri, in noting that 99% of the elderly do not attend the classes provided by the U3E, asked whether the U3E was providing the right type of education. It is in this light that one must highlight the importance of Cuschieri's affirmative answer to the question "*should education for the elderly be made more accessible to those elderly who have a limited educational background?*" Cuschieri's comments surely echo Morris' (1984: 136) assertions, expressed more than a decade earlier, that affirmed that most pander to "*the cultural pretentious of an aged bourgeoisie who had already learnt to play the system*", and thus alienating even further a significant proportion of older people. Wain's

philosophical academic background was highly influential in his explorations of the philosophical basis underpinning U3Es. Wain's paper is also excellent because it is the paper that best attempts to fall within the purview of the conference.

Midway through the proceedings, Alan Roger's paper provides great insight into the potential and limitations of education for older adults. Emphasising that he speaks from the vantage point of someone who is an 'older person', Rogers comments on two major areas, that of 'education with older adults' and the 'modern understanding of adult learning.' In discussing these two concepts, Rogers focused on current educational provision for older persons, with special emphasis on the U3A approach, the dangers of such educational provision, negativity and marginalisation of older persons. These are the barriers to older adult learning that he encountered when researching these two areas.

Unfortunately, as I read through the rest of the proceedings, I noticed that the conference's aim was largely overlooked. I was dismayed by the fact that the papers by Martin O'Fathaigh (summarised in a mere five points), Antonietta Ariotti, Nurit Stavy, the late J. Aquilina, Jean Thompson and Renato P. Verras, albeit providing interesting reflections on education for older adults, failed to address the conference's main question. Ariotti spoke about the characteristics, purposes and objectives of the University of the Third Age project in Turin (Italy) where importance is given to 'being' and not only to 'knowledge.' Stavy's paper, which one finds only in the form of an abstract, was an impromptu speech, focusing on the 'Neot Yishai' Community Centre in Israel. This centre aims to create communication channels between different age groups. Thompson commences her paper by presenting an international perspective on U3As and then focuses on the British contribution to 'later life' education.

I was pleased to read, towards the end of the proceedings, Joseph Troisi's remarks on the structured disadvantages that older women have and still are experiencing in education. Troisi showed clearly how, in educational settings, older women suffer from the double oppressions of ageism and sexism, and showed how older women differ from older men in their experiences and should be considered as a distinct category of older adults. It is unfortunate, however, that he stopped short of placing his comments within a more general socio-political framework – failing to note the unequal income distribution between men and women (Stone, 1997), and, perhaps most importantly, the sexual division of labour which leaves women with the primary responsibility for informal care (Qureshi and Walker, 1988). I do go along with Troisi in arguing that society has a responsibility to contribute towards the emancipation of women by providing

opportunities for them to study in a structured manner. Troisi's paper is followed by Julian Mamo's report which essentially presented a well-informed socio-demographic picture of the changing levels of education in the later years of life. The paper clearly highlighted Mamo's research abilities in demographic issues. I would nevertheless point out that such a paper should have been placed at the beginning of the publication rather than at the end. Prospective readers are advised to read Mamo's essay first.

The last paper is by Renato P. Verras who discussed the aims and objectives of the Open University for Studies on the Elderly (UnAti) situated in Brazil. Verras asserted that the main purpose of UnAti is to develop cultural and intellectual opportunities for older persons through Teaching, Extension and Research.

In conclusion, I cannot but comment that this volume does partly confirm my long standing suspicion of conference proceedings. I have often felt uneasy about books consisting of the proceedings of international or local conferences. While I do not, in any way, underestimate the efforts and professional aims that the hosts have in wanting to publish the proceedings, I am, on the other hand, too well aware that, in most instances, this decision is taken before the editors have the papers in hand. Unfortunately, this tends to result in numerous substandard papers being published due to the fact that the editors lower the standard in order to include as many papers as possible or even to have enough papers for publication.

First of all, I believe that many of the authors are capable of higher level academic papers than the ones included. Moreover, authors (speakers?) often tend not to include references, base their arguments on anecdotal evidence and utter sweeping statements. One other problem is that the papers contain only slight and, in the majority of cases, no references to the charges of elitism and the middle class 'cultural arbitrary', to use Pierre Bourdieu's term (1977), of much U3A provision. We come across gratuitous assertions such as the one by Peter Lasslet who states that older learners "*do not educate themselves for rewards, power or promotion*" (p.7) These are general assumptions. Moreover, the book does not address the potential of U3As in promoting educational activities in residential homes, sheltered housing and day care centres, reaching out to housebound older persons, the immense difficulties that the implementation of the self-help philosophy of older adult education is facing; or else assisting the elderly in forming a political agenda and becoming critically aware of their surrounding environment. However, despite these limitations, the proceedings on the whole, paint the U3As as a dynamic, flexible, accessible adult education movement that is meeting the wants and needs of growing percentage of older adults.

References

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