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Presentation · August 2017

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.11187.12320

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Redesigning civic education with a participatory lifespan approach

The IDEAL-project (EU - Grundtvig Life Long Learning)

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Research Question

What are the differences in two types of adult civic education, viz.,

- an instructional language approach vs.
- a participatory lifespan approach?

Relevance

Language oriented curricula for civic integration, especially for adult migrants without previous formal education experience, leave them vulnerable to failure, isolation and alienation (Council of Europe, 2017).

An alternative design of civic education, taking the life experiences, family context and perspectives of adult migrants into account, offers opportunities to support them in their efforts to build a new life and participate in society (Nieuwboer & Rood, 2016).

Method

In seven pilot projects, carried out in three European countries (N = 100), a redesign of civic education programme was tested and evaluated, taking the most relevant issues for the learners as a starting point for course development.

Two key principles of a participatory method are: learning about things that matter and learning by exposure to different perspectives.

Qualitative research: focus group interviews.

Quantitative research: scores on language tests and participation levels.

Participants

Migrant mothers of Berber and Arabic origin, living in Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden.

Characteristics:

1. None or only a few years of primary education (illiteracy, low literacy)
2. Very limited knowledge and understanding of the surrounding western society
3. No or very limited command of the language of their host country
4. Low self-esteem and self-confidence
5. Suffering from physical, mental, or psychosomatic illness, often resulting in a predominant "illness identity" overshadowing any other possible self-perception
6. Lack of understanding of gender equality, lack of skills as how to adjust traditional ways of child upbringing to gender balanced societies
7. Lack of understanding of their roles, as of how to bring their resources to bear in society
8. Social or financial problems in the family
9. An experience of stagnation & failure, the conviction that a transformation of one's life is impossible

Results

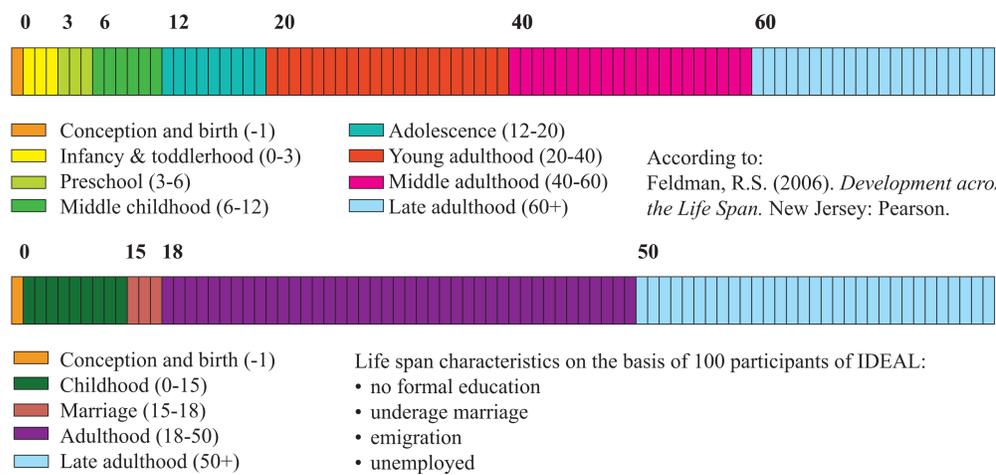
Language levels: +1

Participation levels: +1

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New insights, skills, and attitudes on the topics of communication, health and parenting.
Less physical punishment and use of more positive parenting skills instead.

Why do differences in lifespan matter?



Participants IDEAL

Challenges:
Self-confidence
Trust
Learnability
Empowerment

Strengths:
Life experience
Perseverance
Resilience
Social support

Instructional language approach

"Language belongs to the nation state"

The cognitive perspective:

Language is a unity in structure and form
The learner should understand its vocabulary
Grammar is important
Language acquisition is an individual cognitive process
The learning process is standardized

Key design principles:

Classroom education
Mixed groups
(age, gender, nationalities, languages)
One size fits all
Language teacher (mostly monolingual)
Serial language learning / code-switching

Learning objectives:

Language proficiency similar to native speakers
Employment as way of participation in society
Assimilation

Civic education:

Explaining dominant values and beliefs

Validation:

Uniformed testing of knowledge and language skills

Language oriented civic education is a cognitive process which assumes a standard lifespan with an educational foundation, and mostly instructs dominant and stereotype cultural habits and beliefs by taking goals or tests as the starting point of design, serving mixed groups regardless of age, gender, education and cultural background.

Participatory lifespan approach

"Language is a deeply personal and social affair"

The social perspective:

Language is a tool, used in everyday communication
The learner uses language to express meaning and to reach mutual understanding
Language acquisition is a collective social process
The learning process is unique for every individual
There is no fixed goal: language proficiency is enhanced by exposure and need

Key design principles:

Education in groups, excursions, real life tasks
Homogeneous groups
(age, gender, nationality, language)
Every group is unique
Experimenting and communication
Role model facilitator (bilingual) / social worker
Translanguaging / functional language adaptation

Learning objectives:

Valuing life experiences
Development of critical thinking
Dealing with tensions and dilemma's
Solving everyday problems
Improving self-confidence and communication skills
Improving parenting skills
Acculturation

Civic education:

Constructive dealing with cultural discontinuities
Contextual: involving the family

Validation:

Showing proof of active participation in society to the best of their ability

Participatory methods foster the development of new ways of awareness and coping with the differences between cultures by taking a constructivist approach, providing a safe and conducive learning environment, taking the most relevant issues for the learners and their life experiences as a starting point and moving towards the learning goals one step at the time.

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