

The Role of Public Libraries in Gerontological Education

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Interest in the life-long learning of the aging has increased recently. This paper examines the role of public libraries in that learning. Also described are the different services public libraries, as the nearest learning center for the aging, should provide to cope with the increase of the population of the aging.

Keywords : The aging, Gerontological education, Library services

Introduction

The population of over 65 or 60 year-old is increasing worldwide, especially since 1960's. The ratio of the population over 60 year-old to whole population was 8.1% in 1950, 10.0% in 2000, and in 2050 is estimated to be 22.1%¹⁾. In Japan, in September 2003, the population of people over 65 year-old is estimated at 24,310,000, the ratio the whole population being 19%²⁾. In 1970, this ratio was about 7% and in 1995, approximately 14%. In France it took over one hundred years for reach 14% from 7%. This same ratio in the United States of America became over 7% in 1945 but it still has not reached 14%. Japan is aging the quickest among developed countries. This rapid increase in the aged population has created several serious issues such as the increase of the cost for medical care, lack of proper care facilities, and flaws in the Japanese pension system.

While the aging who need special care are increasing, simultaneously the ones who do not require special attention are also increasing. To those who can use them, life-long learning programs after retirement are required. The increasing population of the aging is introducing a change in the idea of who the aging are. The idea that the elderly are burdens on society or that they are useless after retirement is changing into the idea that they are a useful, precious human resources and that people grow at each life-stage even in later life. This change, in the view of aging, is making society recognize the necessity of life-long learning for the aging.

The 1971 White House Conference on Aging Educational Section adopted the following recommendation,

...public libraries serve to support the cultural, informational and recreational aspirations of all residents at many community levels. Since older adults are increasingly advocating and participating in lifetime education, we recommend that the public library, because its nearby neighborhood character, be strengthened and used as a primary community resource³⁾.

In this paper, I would like to describe the role of public libraries concerning the study of gerontology and public library services to older people in Japan and the United States of America.

1 Function of a Public Library

1.1 In Japan

The function of public libraries in Japan is to provide materials. In the 1970's, public libraries started to be near to residents. In the beginning of 1970's, the number of public libraries was less than 1,000. Since then, the number of public libraries has tripled, the number of items has increased ten times, the number of staff has doubled, and the number of books borrowed has gone up sixteen fold⁴⁾. Therefore, in these 30 years, public libraries in Japan have developed considerably.

Yet many problems are left. One of these concerns lacks of access; areas where no library services are provided. Under 50% of towns and villages have libraries whereas libraries in cities are already at almost 100%. Towns and villages are aging faster than cities. The percentage of 65 year-old people in many towns and villages is over 25%⁵⁾. The gap in access to libraries between cities and villages and towns has become a serious challenge. The second problem is an inadequate distribution of branch libraries. Branch libraries are mainly in larger cities, not in medium or small ones⁶⁾. If a library is not near a neighborhood, it means libraries are not accessible to people. There are some areas where library services do not reach. These are challenges for public libraries in general. Adding to these, is the task of extending services to the aging.

One impediment to extending services to the aging comes from stereotyped ideas on the aging that older people do not read books, or they do not use libraries. These ideas are the largest barrier for older people to use a library. It seems difficult to say that library world in Japan has grappled with the difficult problem of services to the aging. Japan Library Association (JLA) has a committee that focuses on people who have some troubles using libraries but, at these meetings, services to the aging are hardly discussed. In the report⁷⁾ on those who have troubles using libraries, in 1998, services to the aging is mentioned only in the introduction. Older people are not regarded as the subject of the survey and services to the aging were not investigated. After this, no survey has been taken. Also JLA does not publish guidelines on the services to the aging like the American Library Association.

Under current situation, it is hard to use a library for institutionalized and home bound people. There are a few public libraries to provide services to the aging in Japan. The following libraries are possible to access at websites, Osaka Municipal Central Library, Sumida-ku Midori Public Library, Fujisawa Citizen Public Library, Hirakata Public Library and Hikawa Town Public Library. They provide to send materials and deliver to homes. In Japan, sometimes services to the aging are included in the services to disabled people. Therefore, the interest in services to the aging in the library world in Japan is not high. The recognition of libraries as the nearest neighborhood institution of life-long learning is also low. Even the most basic function of providing materials is currently not being completely met in

Japan. Public libraries in Japan should provide this basic function.

1.2 In the United States of America

The American library world has concerted efforts to follow its motto "to all." It coped with the change of society in the 1960's utilizing that motto. Recently it is facing new problems caused by the development of computers and the Internet. American libraries have tried to make this new challenge a main priority. Providing materials and reference services are not special but routine services. The library functions, in the USA, is to meet the needs of people from every class, race, age and gender.

Services to the aging include special programs whose main participants are older people or those who work for older people, and delivery of books to institutions. This is the main difference with Japan.

In 1964, the American Library Association adopted "The Library's Responsibility to the Aging." It states the ALA's formal view on the aging. This statement was revised in 1971 and 1981. After that, guidelines of the services to the aging, founded on the declaration, were constructed. "Guidelines for Library Services to an Aging Population" was published in 1975. These guidelines were revised in 1987 and 1999. In the revision in 1987, the title was changed to "Guidelines for Library Service to Older Adults" and the contents were totally revised. In the 1999 revision, the adoption of the Disabilities Act and the spreading of personal computers were the main reasons for the revision. The title also was changed to "Library Service to Older Adults Guidelines."⁸⁾

At each library, services are provided to meet the community's needs, like delivery service to nursing homes or private homes and special programs. In the special programs, reading discussion, computer classes, reminiscence programs, movies, concerts, and reading aloud are included. In areas where many immigrants live, the public library provides materials and programs in their mother tongues.

2 Needs of the Aging

2.1 Physical Needs

Many people become farsighted as they grow older. Generally from about 45 and 50 years old, people start to need reading glasses. Small letters and non-clear contrast letters are hard to read. Also people over 70 years old, often get cataracts. As people get older, chronic diseases are more common, and people who need extra care increase. In general, older people often do not physically feel good and are easy to tire. Health is the biggest concern of older people. Physical changes force people to change their life style. Often, if older people want to go somewhere without driving a car or using public transportation, they must ask someone to take them. When older people are provided the necessary help, then they do not have to alter their life styles. If the society takes better care of accounts for the elderly, then younger people can also live more comfortable lives; small print becomes larger, transportation becomes better and the pace of life may be slowed down.

2.2 Mental Needs

In modern society, people generally have many years to enjoy retirement. Free from

the responsibilities of work, they begin to start to think about themselves more and tend to evaluate their lives. Programs targeting the aging are increasingly addressing this. In the field of developmental psychology, studies on identity and old age are few⁹⁾. Among them, E. H. Erikson's work, *Vital Involvement in Old Age* (New York, W. W. Norton, 1986), provides some insights. In his study, Erikson stated that self-identity and acceptance of life and death becomes an increasingly more important mental challenge as a person ages. Life-review is a good means of answering this challenge. "Life-review acts as an important role to unify one's life and confirm continuity and identity of one's life."¹⁰⁾

In the field of educational gerontology, the study by Howard Yale McClusky is useful. He points out the following 4 educational needs of older people.

1. Coping Needs: Since transition to the later years of maturity to old age involves, for the vast majority, substantial reductions in such things as income, position, influential affiliations, and energy, becomes a matter of central concern. Coping with this reduction becomes a preeminent need at this stage in the life cycle.
2. Expressive Needs: It is postulated that in most people—especially in the later years because of postponed desires—there is a large domain of unexpressed and underexpressed talent and interest which, if properly cultivated, could be activated to enrich one's living.
3. Contributive Needs: Older people have a need to contribute something acceptable to others and to the community, blending the need to be useful and to be wanted. But there is another dimension to the contributive need which is largely ignored and which deserves much greater recognition. We refer to the wisdom latent in the reserves of the older person's cumulative experience.... But the argument here is that in the dimension of wisdom there is a resource that society greatly needs and has not yet learned to exploit.
4. Influence Needs: In brief, it is argued that older people have a vital need for the kind of education that will enable them to exert influence in protecting and improving their own situation, and in contributing to the well-being of the larger society¹¹⁾.

Many of these needs are not only older people's needs but are common needs shared by young and middle aged people. Some needs, however, emerges as people come to face their own mortality and here, of course, older people are the prime focus. Programs meeting these needs are provided mainly at the life-long learning centers in Japan. At the municipal level, older people can volunteer and even employment is organized for older people. Unfortunately, those needs and programs have less relationship with public libraries. There is much room for development in the public library system. The library world does not attend much to the educational or mental needs of older people. Libraries services do not account either for developmental psychology or educational gerontology. What , then, is the role of public libraries to meet older people's needs?

3 The Role of Public Libraries

3.1 Providing Materials

Older people live in diverse places depending on their health condition. Healthy people and those who get the necessary help often live in their own homes. Those who can not get help or who need professional care live in institutions. Public libraries have responsibility to provide materials to everyone including older people who live in the service areas¹²⁾. To put this responsibility into practice, public libraries should take into account where and how older people live, and try to meet their needs.

The materials older people need include large print books and talking books and magazines. Large print books and normal books should be published simultaneously, like in Europe and the USA, but this does not happen in Japan. Large print books should be provided and enriched as soon as possible using governmental aid. Materials from electronic sources are also useful for older people to get materials and information at home.

As public libraries have responsibility to provide materials to everyone, including older people, libraries are required to meet not only requests from users but also potential needs. Needs arising from differences in education backgrounds, including reading level and education attained, and physical abilities should both be attended to. There are a few options to get materials from public libraries including visiting the institutions, home delivery and Book Mobiles. The best way to access the collection, however, is to visit libraries. Of course, for those who cannot easily go to libraries, because of physical limitations, transportation may be necessary. Library resources should be readily accessible using branch and book mobile system.

3.2 Providing Opportunities

Diverse programs, lectures and working in closer connection with colleges are required for libraries to meet older people's needs. Connections with life-long learning institutions make public libraries and their services more vivid, attractive and diverse. Planning and providing programs should account for specific culture and spiritual needs. Below are examples of libraries providing these kinds of services;

- Hordaland County Library, Bergen, Norway "Aging and Verval Creativity": Seniors were taught basic writing skills, allowing them to write hundreds of texts including poems, haiku, short stories, essays, articles, and orally told stories. The seniors reported that the course had a therapeutic effect upon their lives as they felt that their identities were strengthened when producing stories that have had a strong impact on them. A poem written by one of the participants;

You live in our neighborhood
but nobody sees you.
You go about so quietly
doing your own thing.
Your coat is grey
not the latest model.

You are a “grey mouse”.

Well, are you really?

Perhaps you have colorful memories
and sparkling expectations inside.

Perhaps you are a picture book
in a worn grey cover
that no-one bothered to open¹³⁾.

- Beauregard Parish Library, DeRidder, Louisiana “Senior Outreach Service”: The Beauregard Parish Library program can be described as one that reaches into the soul of every senior in the service area, providing educational and recreational opportunities to all. Books, games, and songs are brought to the places where seniors live and congregate. The library works with other senior organizations to ensure that all that can be done for seniors is being done.
- Brooklyn Public Library “Services to the Aging”: A multitude of programs includes book delivery, books by mail, computer classes, and specialized programs like Our Words and Memories and In Other Words. There are also free concerts, informative lectures on a variety of subjects, and book discussions¹⁴⁾.

At the Brooklyn Public Library a unique approach utilizes senior assistants. These assistants plan, manage, and carry out special programs. They are paid, though a small amount, to provide direct peer support. These senior assistants are seniors themselves because the best way to develop services to older people is allow the elderly themselves to take charge of the programs. Who better to recognize older people’s needs than older people themselves¹⁵⁾.

4 Challenges

4.1 Reforming Librarians’ Notions of Older People

Kanner (1972) asserted that the attitude of librarians toward older people and the recognition of getting older are a mirror of a society’s attitudes. Older people were often overlooked or their needs were included in the services to the disabled. The services offered did not specifically address older people. Kanner’s research indicate that services to the aging are a reflection of the attitudes of librarians towards older people¹⁶⁾.

In American society, Butler (1975) says, there are many myths and stereotypes about the elder including the following:

He is bound to himself and to his past and can no longer change or grow.... He has lost and cannot replace friends, spouse, job, status, power, influence, income.... Feeble, uninteresting, he awaits his death, a burden to society, to his family and to himself¹⁷⁾.

Older people were often regarded as a burden to society and a hindrance to society's progress¹⁸⁾. Library services to the aging, therefore, were often influenced by these ideas. Life-long learning programs that libraries provided were more of a charitable exercise than a means of meeting older people's needs.

Since the 1970's, services to the aging in the U. S. A. have changed to needs-oriented services. Important factors facilitating this change include the White House Conference on Aging, various studies and surveys of gerontology, the increasing power of the voices of minorities, and laws and institutions for older people. These elements have worked to change people's view of the elderly. Adjusting to this societal change, librarians now provide services to older people by treating them as the subject, not as object, of the service. Some libraries now provide services to the elderly by treating them not as an exercise in charity but as human resources with useful experiences and wisdom.

In Japan and the United States, stereotypes of older people are still there, but now, it has become possible that people who need care and are dependent on others still have the right to make their own decisions. Once people who were thought of as the objects of mercy have their rights recognized, their voice can more easily be heard and their needs more adequately met. These kind of thoughts has gradually appeared. Librarians are required to reform of thoughts. As long as older people are seen as pitiful ones or a burden on society, librarians cannot meet the needs of older people.

4.2 Easy Use of Facilities

It is necessary that library facilities are easy to use for older people. Fortunately, this ease of use for older people generally means ease of use for everyone. Especially important are ramps in addition to stairs, bright lighting, adequate spaces between bookshelves, low shelves which aid wheelchair-bound users, and signs with easy to read, large letters. Public libraries must adopt the idea of universal design and build facilities which are easy to use for every generation.

Notes

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- 2) Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunication, Statistics Bureau
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- 10) *ibid.*, p. 262.
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