Formal and informal learning as connecting factors to enhance social inclusion: assessment and evaluation of knowledge acquired by participants of adult education programs aimed at enhancing social inclusion.

Abstract

There is no gainsaying the fact that education for the majority and for all of the populace brings about stability, peace, and economic prosperity to a nation. It is also undeniable that in this present knowledge-driven society, a combination of more effective teaching and learning strategies are required to keep us abreast with the sociological changes amongst others that surround us as a continent of Europe. Globalization for example, has brought about unprecedented changes – particularly; cultural diversity, language requirement, integration and socialization of immigrants, etcetera to Western Europe. The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union also recognizes the crucial need for a better combination of learning methods to educate the diverse citizenry. This study is specifically focused on how to instruct the generality of the participants of an adult education program, taking into consideration their diverse experiences (informal and formal learning) and how to connect these learned experiences within the provision of a formal adult education curriculum; all geared towards enhancing social inclusion. The assessment of acquired knowledge of these adults is also examined.

Keywords: Formal learning, informal learning, social inclusion, lifelong learning and adult education

Introduction

The current economic and social change, the 21st century and its information laden complexity, the modern and knowledge society, the immigrant influx shaping the demography of Europe and the care for an aging population are but a few of the challenges facing the European Union and its Member States. Hwang and Seo (2012) are of the opinion that these challenges partly necessitated a new approach to education and training, particularly within the framework of lifelong learning. Galanis, Mayol, Alier, and Garcia-Penalvo (2015) raised the question of if knowledge obtained and acquired through informal and non-formal learning means can be corroborated and quantified so as to be recognized and hence, deemed comparable to a formal curriculum. While formal learning continues to be highly valued and reckoned with, there have been recent clamour for the injection of informal and non-formal learning, particularly in educating a knowledge-driven society (Ainsworth and Eaton, 2010). Asides from the ongoing debate of validation and measure of acquired knowledge of informal learning, this study also takes a deeper look into what formal education entails; though the Council of Europe (2007), broadly said that formal education was and is designed to prevent social exclusion- schools, universities, other higher institutions of learning and the vocational training centers are all designed to provide students and young people a basic knowledge to be used for their social integration into the society. In the course of this study we came about different definitions for these learning strategies, but an undeniable and generally accepted fact was that formal learning/educational system remains a norm of a modern society while non formal and informal learning though, important in a knowledge society, still suffers recognition and appreciation.

In providing learning and instruction for the vulnerable adults, educational programs that only consider and operates only in the formal setting is deemed sub-optimal and insufficient (De Greef, Verte, Segers, 2012). Having said this, in order to make a well rounded learner, organizers of adult education programs must find a means of connecting informal and formal learning processes in order not to exclude some certain people desirous of learning. Answers to some thought provoking questions like; what are the reasons for building frameworks to improve adult

education programs? (Patridge, 1999) or rather, what are the reasons for concerns to improve the effects of the learning processes in adult education Greef, Verte, Segers, (2012) are suggested in this study.

Social inclusion which actually is the motive and end product of this study, as defined by the World Bank (2007) cited in De Greef, Verte, Segers, (2012), is an arrangement ensuring that those at risk of being economically incapacitated and socially excluded are given the opportunity and provided avenue to participate and be fully absorbed in both economic and social-cultural life befitting or considered standard in the society in which they live in. In achieving the above, the political agendas of the main Western International Organizations (EU, UN, and the OECD) had been to introduce lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is seen as a key factor for the development of a more rounded individual, that is, a more productive and efficient workforce and a means of promoting social cohesion (Field, 2006:1) cited in De Greef, Verte, Segers, (2012). Summarily, according to McClusky 1970; Main 1979; Serrano-Garcia and Bond 1994; Solarczyk-Ambrozik 1998, cited in De Greef, Verte, Segers, (2012); Eaton (2010), the measure of the outcome of an adult education designed for the vulnerable or at risk of social exclusion, is defined in terms of increase in social inclusion. The European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) corroborated that adult education allows people to participate and to be involved in the society they live in and hence, be socially included.

The last phase of this study will examine some validation and recognition projects, according to De Greef, Segers and Verte (2010), there is scarcity of evaluation studies that looks into educational programs aiming to enhance social inclusion of vulnerable adults, even in the face of the monumental attention for lifelong learning, adult education, formal and informal learning strategies etcetera by the Western International Organizations (EU, UN, and the OECD). Jarvis (2004) reiterated that, it is doubtful as to whether there are available or sufficient innovative educational programs to create and enhance active citizenship.

It is also pertinent to mention that non-formal learning is considered a form of informal learning in this study; likewise adult education is also regarded as a type of lifelong learning. Widening participation and universal participation are considered as a subset social inclusion.

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. *How is the informally acquired knowledge and experiences of adults able to support the learning requirement of formal adult education programs?*
2. *What are the necessary conditions for combining formal and informal learning as an inclusive method to enhance social inclusion?*
3. *What are the expected practical evidences (outcomes) after using informal learning to promote formal learning?*

Research objectives

1. *To identify and scaffold on the life experiences, acquired knowledge, skills and attitudes of adults following adult programs*
2. *To create an all encompassing conditions necessary for the combination of formal and informal learning as an inclusive method aimed at social inclusion.*
3. *To Make available pointers and indicators of increase in social inclusiveness of participants*

Review of the literature

Lifelong learning

Lifelong learning is not a new phenomenon, however, it is germane we discuss it were the issue of social inclusion and adult education is concerned. It is the continuous building of skills and knowledge throughout the life of an individual (Hwang & Seo, 2012). The individual is said or required to be self-motivated in the pursuit of the knowledge, while the act is a voluntary endeavor embarked upon either for a personal or professional purpose. The European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA) concluded that the international organizations guiding the educational policies of the EU and its Member States are favourably disposed to the concept of lifelong learning. The reason for the positive shift towards lifelong learning, according to Hwang and Seo (2012) was the fact that it enhances social inclusion, active citizenship, competence development, encourage competitiveness and promote employability.

One of the requirements of a knowledge society is a reform on how learning is delivered - changing educational focus from the conventional approach of transmitting isolated knowledge and skills to one of acquiring complex knowledge in problem solving, critical thinking, employability skills, life skills, information and communication, systemic thinking and life-long learning - (O' Hara 2007); leading to a successful social and professional life. Knapper (2000) cited in (Coskun & Damirel, 2010) opined lifelong learners plan their own learning, and are active rather than passive learners. A lifelong learner learns at every opportunity; informal and formal learning spaces, from relatives, friends, in the community, among their peers, with neighbours, teachers or even colleagues at the work place – they are capable of integrating knowledge from different subject areas, able to learn under combined teaching and learning strategies in order to have a whole understanding of a concept.

From the aforementioned, lifelong learning will not only produce people with better opportunity of being employable or of a better economic status or higher standard of living but, they will be more responsible; civil and actively cooperating as citizens of the society they live in (Cullen, Batterbury, Foresti, Lyons & Stern, 2010). The resultant effects of a lifelong program on the society are crime reduction, improved economic distribution, and economic growth amongst others (Coskun & Damirel, 2010). Lifelong learning is continuous (Hwang and Seo, 2012) and it is centered on building knowledge and skills throughout the life of the learner. As earlier

mentioned, it is voluntary and self motivated. In a time of rapid economic changes, where newer knowledge is required every now and then Hwang and Seo (2012), lifelong learning is a medium to equip oneself with the needed knowledge and dexterity, it is a channel that enable people to aim for employment, citizenship, and economic empowerment in a complex and rapidly changing world.

In their education and training 2020 action plan, the EU member States have set a target and projected that by 2020 fifteen percent (15%) of the 25 years to 64 years, that is, the adult population should be engage in lifelong learning (Council of Europe, 2007).

Adult Education

Lifelong learning and adult education as evidenced in the use of lifelong program to educate 15% of adults in Europe by 2020 seems like one and the same, that is inseparable. Finding an absolute definition for adult education has been a herculean task because the sector is very diverse and complex in terms of provisions, structures and stakeholders composition. However, according to the Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), (2009) under the European Guidelines for Validating Non-formal and informal leaning, defines adult education and learning as covering all forms of learning at all levels undertaken by adults after having left initial education and training. Some research work corroborated by calling it the second chance to get education. Hoare (2009), cited in Peeters, De Backer, Buffel, Kindekens, Struyven, Zhu and Lombaerts (2014), maintained that adult education is beyond knowledge acquisition and behavioural change, but is a process that revises prior knowledge or a means to increase self-knowledge and a sort of human capacity development.

To fully understand the complexity of adult education, it will be important to know the motivation of the adults involved in this type of education. Before learning about the driving force or purpose Jarvis (2004) described adulthood as when an individual has reached a level of social maturity in which he/she can assume a responsible position in society. (CEDEFOP) and Jarvis, (2004) unanimously divided the motive of adults embarking on adult education into two; either for professional development and/or personal development. An adult education for professional purposes is normally closely linked to enterprises and the labour market and can be more readily identified as further education or continuing vocational training, etc. (CEDEFOP, 2009). Learning for personal development, referred to as ‘leisure’ and termed as liberal education in the United States context (Jarvis, 2004) is regarded as learning for simply wanting to learn, in

other words for private, social and/ or recreational purposes. In line with this particular study, the later (adult education for personal development) is the platform on which the formal and informal learning strategies are experimented, and as earlier established and corroborated by the Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), forms a very important part of lifelong learning, and contributes significantly to knowledge and skills development, active citizenship, political participation and cultural integration and social inclusion.

Formal, Non-formal and Informal learning

The Webster's online dictionary simply defines 'learning' as the acquisition of knowledge or skill. In the CEDEFOP, 2009 multilingual glossary, learning is defined as a process by which an individual assimilates information, ideas and values and thus acquires knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences. (Baxter Magolda 1992; Belenky et al. 1997;Olafson and Schraw 2006; van Rossum and Hamer 2010), cited in Peeters, De Backer, Buffel, Kindekens, Struyven, Zhu and Lombaerts (2014) also made known the shift from perceiving learning as the acquisition of absolute knowledge to considering learning as active knowledge construction. Looking at the dimension through which learning takes place, Ainsworth and Eaton (2010) says learning is a lifelong endeavour and can happen at anyplace, anywhere and anytime. Buttressing the shift in learning as mention by Peeters etal., (2014), Bjornavold (2000) describe learning as not only reproduction, but also reformulation and renewal of knowledge and competences. This chapter defines formal, non-formal and informal as the three processes through which learning can be carried out.

Formal learning

Formal learning is typically institutionally sponsored, classroom-based, and highly structured. It refers to learning in courses or programs leading to nationally and internationally recognised qualifications (Peeter et al., 2014). It is conscious, deliberate, intentional, organized, planned and well structured learning process usually arranged by educational institutions. Credit courses, modules, programs and etcetera, characterizes formal learning scheme and they are usually guided by learning objectives and expected learning outcomes (Ainsworth & Eaton, 2010). Just as explained above formal learning is location and space bound; a type of learning that occurs in an organised and structured environment (e.g. in an education or training institution or on the job) and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or resources) and intentional from the learner's point of view leading to validation and certification (CEDEFOP, 2009). In

addition, the conclusion of formal learning usually leads to obtaining a diploma or certificate (European Commission 2000, p.8).

Non-Formal learning

The European Youth Forum defines non-formal education as organized and semi-organized activities outside the structure and routines of the formal educational system. Non-formal is readily ascribed to the workplace – the needed professional skill development to boost competency on the job. Though, usually well planned and executed does not necessarily lead to national or internationally accredited certification (Council of Europe, 2007). Some other researcher described non-formal learning as an alternative where the concepts that eluded the formal learning setting are acquired. However, in the mini-compendium on non-formal education by the Council of Europe (2007) it was stated that non-formal education should not be taken as a replacement for formal education but rather a means by which the educational concept not provided in the formal system can be attained in a non-formal arrangement. From the above, it is clear that Non-formal learning refers to learning in structured programs for developing skills and knowledge required by workplaces, communities and individuals and they are highly structured with specific aims and objectives. Finally, in the mini-compendium on non-formal education by the Council of Europe (2007), non-formal learning is said to be an essential element in the development of a fully-rounded individual.

Informal learning

Informal learning is a process of lifelong learning whereby an individual acquires attitude, values, skills and knowledge from the educational influences and resources in his or her environment; family, neighbor, friends, play and generally life circumstances (Council of Europe, 2007). Merriam and Caffarella (1999) in agreement stresses that adults as active learners often acquire information, knowledge and skills even beyond the stipulated program confines or boundary. Informal learning has educational influences or rather, is an education because of its effect in changing an individual's knowledge, behavior and attitude (CAVACO, 2002) and it's an education which can be intentional within a hidden curriculum as student learn from teacher's unintentional behaviours, beliefs and attitudes and from implicit and culturally laid down rules (Ozolins et al., 2008 cited in Peeters et al.). CEDEFOP, (2009) mentioned that informal learning is mostly unintentional and without any organisation or structures in terms of objectives, time or learning support. To this end, informal learning is readily connected to adult learning because of

its learner-centeredness and the lesson that can be learned from life's experiences of the adults (Smith and Smith 2008 cited in cited in Peeters et al., 2014). Bruce, Aring and Brand, (1998) cited in Kim, Hagedorn, Williamson and Chapman, (2004); 70% of the critical skills and competences needed in the workplace is informally learned. Another dimension found out in this study is that informal learning can actually occur in institutions, either as incidental, but the fact still remains that, it is not typically classroom-based or highly structured like the formal learning which is guided by the curriculum with specific aims of learning. Summarily, informal education comprises all forms of learning accomplished and acquired by a person through his relationship and interaction with other people (Barros, 2011).

Connecting Formal and Informal learning

In the in-depth interview conducted by Peeters et al. (2014) with 15 students, 2 teachers, and 2 program coordinators of an adult education program – examining informal learning outcomes, processes and personal informal learning experiences within formal education. The respondent of the exercise described informal learning to have occurred through self-directed learning projects, daily conversations, experiences and the program's informal and hidden curriculum. In order to adequately uncover informal learning within a formal education program, there have to be the application of the informal curriculum (the intentional transfer of information to the students by the instructor) and the hidden curriculum (student learning from the teacher's unintentional behaviours, attitudes and beliefs) (Peeters et al., 2014). Demonstration and occasional arrangement of informal learning can also be driven by organizations; making informal learning sometimes intentional within a formal education setting (Misko, 2008). And once this learning mix is realized, informal learning then becomes an additional and suddenly more tangible way of learning for more participants – particularly adult learners involved in adult education programs. In hindsight, using the inclusive method of combining formal and informal learning suffered a set-back at the earlier attempt due to lack of know-how into informal learning processes (Ainsworth & Eaton, 2010). Summarily, informal and formal learning experiences can occur separately and also simultaneously, the processes sustain one another and are rather complementary (Livinstone, 2001; Reder and Strawn, 2006; Reischmann, 1986, 2008; Smith and Smith, 2008 cited in Peeters et al., 2014).

Social inclusion

The desire to combat exclusion and promote social inclusion was reiterated at the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 stating unequivocally that, there is a need to pay attention to exclusion as a result of low levels of initial education, unemployment and rural isolations. The Council made known that strengthening the institutions of lifelong learning and training requirements of older workers and migrants are means to achieve social inclusion. Isaila (2012), in her conclusion report on the study of social inclusion in the context of knowledge society, concluded that: training of key competencies for all as a result of effective teaching process that is based on the adjustment of supply to individual need, offers an important role to an education that promote social inclusion. In the above conclusion by the researcher the key word worthy of note is 'effective teaching processes'.

In addition to effective teaching processes, Hwang and Seo (2012) stresses that, universal participation in lifelong learning is necessary for social inclusion in a time of rapid changes in economic and social affairs. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) deemed widening participation as necessary for meeting the economic demands of the 21st century knowledge society. According to OECD universal participation includes using both formal and informal learning methods to enhance social values, economic development and personal purpose. Having said this, universal and widening participation is centered on increasing opportunity for those who are resistant to formal learning and excluded in one way or the other from learning (Cullen, Batterbury, Foresti, Lyons & Stern, 2000).

Why is it difficult to see the evidence of social inclusion? This question is prompted from the assertion made by DeGreef, Verte and Segers, (2012) that evidences of outcome of adult education aiming to enhance social inclusion is nowhere to be found. The problem might as well be that many of the adult education programs are formulated or are of the agenda preparing participants for the labour market rather than tacking exclusion and helping to overcome social problems (DeGreef, Verte and Segers, 2012). In a related development and buttressing the point made by DeGreef et al., Cullen, Batterbury, Foresti, Lyons & Stern, (2000) from their study report, opined that measuring the outcomes of informal learning on the basis of economic rates of return, rather than social value (active citizenship, personal development, social inclusion, personal development etcetera) will inadvertently realize poor results.

Validation and recognition issues

The recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April, 2008 on the establishment of an European Qualification Framework (EQF); promotes an approach for the description of qualification based on learning outcomes, regardless of the means or where the competence is acquired. However, the European Union addressing the issue of non-formal learning commissioned a white paper on teaching and learning in a bid of meeting the demands of a knowledge society; emphasizing the need to making competences and knowledge acquired in informal learning visible (Bjornavold, 2000). In a related development, the 5th International Conference on Adult Education in Hamburg in 1997, cited in DeGreef, Segers and Verte (2010) reached an agreement on the necessity of a framework for evaluation to gain insight on the outcome and possibilities for the improvement of adult education program. The Leonardo da Vinci approach to identification assessment and recognition of non-formal learning, the Personal Skill Card (PSC) mentioned in Bjornavold (2000) are some efforts just to mention a few.

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) is another innovative tool for evaluating and validating languages learned irrespective of the form in which it was acquired (Council of Europe, 2001). Social Inclusion after Transfer (SIT) by DeGreef, Segers and Verte (2010) is among the innovative tool to evaluate acquired knowledge of participants of adult education. Currently, the European Union is seriously committed to the development of methodologies and tools needed to assess key skills and competencies; including and particularly those acquired outside formal education by having them validated and defined in terms of learning outcomes. As the policy makers intensify efforts and fund projects regarding validation and recognition of non-formal learning, there is dearth of evaluation studies on outcome of it success (DeGreef, Segers and Verte 2010).

Further study revealed that there are cases, especially in vocational training where knowledge acquired informally in the course of work and life experiences have gained recognition and thus, have been adequately validated with the use of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) – a pathway that makes knowledge acquired understandable and easily converted to equivalence in formal learning (Bjornavold (2000).

Conclusion

This study was able to establish some facts; how the use of a blend or synergy between formal and informal learning aims to promote inclusion. The keywords associated with this review have been properly dissected in order to give an understanding or general overview of components like adult education, lifelong learning, formal and informal learning, social inclusion and validation of acquired knowledge. Noted is the fact that there is an earnest/urgent need for reforms on how we educate people in the era of knowledge society (Hwang & Seo, 2012). The use of informal learning as a 'binding agent' (Cullen, 2010) in shaping societal reconstruction may be integrated or extended to broader policy agendas, like health reforms and social inclusion enhancement.

A clearer understanding of the working relationship between adult education and lifelong learning was brought to the fore, even, as the European Commission made known the intention to educate 15% of adults through the medium of a lifelong process (Council of Europe, 2008). Social inclusion and active citizenship was encouraged 'as an end' (Cullen, 2010; Eaton, 2010 & Ainsworth & Eaton, 2010) rather than gains on economic rate of return usually ascribed to formal learning. Validating informally acquired knowledge still eludes most researchers as recognition of it is difficult because of the tacit nature of knowledge; it is incidental and sometimes, participant are not even aware they posses such knowledge (Peeter et al., 2014). And if at all, it is usually determined through self- reflection and recognition (Livingstone, 2001).

Although it may be true that there is dearth of evaluation work on the studies of how adult educational programs have enhanced inclusion (DeGreef, Segers & Verte, 2010), there are indications of good report even as the Western International Organizations (EU, UN, and the OECD) are throwing more weight in making informal learning visible and valid.

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