DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 259 211 CE 041 953

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TITLE	Adult Development: Implications for Adult Education. Overview. ERIC Digest No. 41.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Columbus, Ohio.
SPONS AGENCY	National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	85
CONTRACT	400-84-0004
NOTE	3p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Adult Counseling; *Adult Development; Adult Education; *Adult Programs; Adults; Andragogy; Behavior Theories; Comparative Analysis; Counseling Techniques; *Developmental Stages; Educational Research; *Educational Strategies; Educational Theories; Literature Reviews; Models; Postsecondary Education; Program Administration; Program Development; Psychological Studies; *Research Utilization; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

Various researchers, including Carl Jung, Charlotte Buhler, Erik Erikson, and Robert Havighurst, have formulated sequential models of adult development. More recent investigators, such as Daniel Levinson, Roger Gould, and Gail Sheehy have formulated age-related sequential models of adult development that view the various stages of adulthood in terms of different strategies toward perceiving and coping with reality. In addition, several theorists have postulated models of adult development with a special focus (for example, Jane Loevinger's concentration on stages of ego development, William Perry's scheme of intellectual development, Lawrence Kohlberg's notion of the interconnection between levels of moral and intellectual development, and James Fowler's theory of faith development). Many of the findings of such research and examination of human development have important implications for adult educational programming. Many aspects of these models, particularly Knowles' theory of andragogy, can be applied by practitioners involved in developing and administering adult education programs or in teaching or counseling adult students. (MN)

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OVERVIEW

ERIC DIGEST NO. 41

Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

ADULT DEVELOPMENT: IMPLICATIONS FOR ADULT EDUCATION

Changing Views on Adult Development

Research on adult development is a fairly recent phenomenon. Although mention of various stages of adulthood appears in the writings of the ancient Greeks and Confucius, it was not until the middle of the 20th century that adulthood began to gain the attention of researchers. The recent dramatic increase in life expectancy, rapid changes in technology and sociocultural patterns, a better understanding of the concept of development, and other factors have given adult development an increasingly important place in the investigations of both psychologists and educational researchers (Merriam 1984). This overview examines research on adult development and discusses its implications for adult education.

Early Sequential Models of Adult Development

Beginning in the early 1930s, investigators began to examine human development systematically and to formulate models of its various stages from infancy through old age. Because these models view adult development as a series of age-related stages, they are known as age-related sequential models. Merriam (1984) mentions four individuals—Carl Jung, Charlotte Buhler, Erik Erikson, and Robert Havighurst—as major figures in the early investigation of adult development and outlines the principal points of the theories underlying their models:

- In his 1930s work, Carl Jung postulates three stages of life—youth, middle age, and old age—based on his own clinical observations. Jung views youth as a period of expanding consciousness, middle age as a period of questioning long-held convictions, and old age as a period of increased introspection and preoccupation with self-evaluation.

- Charlotte Buhler, basing her theory on an analysis of 400 biographies, proposes 4 stages in life. According to Buhler the first period, which extends from birth to age 15, is a period of physical growth in which decisions begin to be made; the second, from age 15 to age 25, is a period of sexual reproduction and goal setting; the third, from age 25 to age 45, is one in which goals are examined and attention begins to be focused inward; and the fourth, from age 45 to age 65, is a time of physical decline and self-assessment.

- Erik Erikson formulates a theory of human development with a model of eight stages of life. The three adult stages of the model are viewed as struggles devoted to the accomplishment of a primary task: young adulthood, a struggle between intimacy and isolation; middle age, a struggle between generativity and stagnation; and old age, a struggle to achieve a sense of ego integrity.

- Robert Havighurst, also proposing a series of tasks that individuals must face at ensuing stages in life, focuses his attention on various sociocultural patterns and values to which adults must adjust.

Recent Sequential Models of Adult Development

In a review of the literature on adult development, Merriam (1984) singles out the following recent theorists and their age-related sequential models of adult development:

- Daniel Levinson, basing his theory on in-depth interviews with 40 males between the ages of 35 and 45, proposes a model in which adulthood is characterized by alternating periods of stability when individuals solidify their life structure and periods of transition when that structure is reexamined and modified.

- Roger Gould, combining observations of adults in therapy and the results of a survey of 500 adults not undergoing therapy, develops a model comprising 6 stages of adulthood in which individuals progressively abandon one childhood myth after another, manage to confront reality to a greater degree than before, and eventually succeed in raising their levels of consciousness.

- Gail Sheehy, combining data from her own interviews of 115 middle-class men and women with the findings of others, pays particular attention to the development of adult females. She postulates the following developmental stages experienced between the ages of 18 and 50: pulling up roots, trying 20s, Catch 30, rooting and extending, deadline decade, and renewal or resignation.

Sequential Models with a Special Focus

Several theorists have developed models whose stages depend upon developmental, rather then physical, maturation of the individual; in order to attain higher stages, an individual must successfully progress through lower stages. The following researchers developed sequential models with a special focus:

- Jane Loevinger, placing special focus on stages of ego development, defines an ego as that trait that determines how one views and relates to the world. The terms used to describe these stages, in order of increasing self-awareness, are impulsive, self-protective, conformist, conscientious-conformist, conscientious, individualistic, and integrated.

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- William Perry, focusing on intellectual development, proposes nine stages of development, with transitions between each. According to Perry's theory, individuals begin with a sense of absolute knowledge, come to believe that all knowledge and beliefs are relative, and eventually develop a set of values and individual sense of reality.

- Lawrence Kohlberg, asserting the connection between moral and intellectual development and basing his work upon Piaget's four stages of cognitive development, sets forth six stages of intellectual development that involve three levels of cognition: preconventional, conventional, and autonomous or principled.

- James Fowler, formulating a theory of faith development, postulates a six-stage model of the growth of faith from childhood to a final period that may begin in midlife or beyond.

Adult Development and Adult Education

An important relationship exists between adult development and adult education. According to Merriam (1984), one of the best-developed theoretical links between adult development and learning lies in the theory of andragogy. Proposed by Knowles (1980) as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (p. 43), andragogy is based on the assumption that, by and large, adults are self-directed beings who are the products of an accumulation of unique and personal experiences and whose desires to learn grow out of a need to face the tasks they encounter during the course their development.

Implications of Adult Development Research for Educational Practice.

Despite the fact that adult development research is a relatively new phenomenon, adult education practitioners at all levels can apply many of the findings of such research to program planning and implementation. In the final section of her synthesis of adult development research, Merriam (1984) discusses the following areas in which adult development theory can enhance educational programming.

Program development and administration. Program designers, working in school and nonschool settings alike, can use a knowledge of adult development and adult learning theory to address the following program planning concerns: program objectives, target audience, delivery system, program content, and support services. The Framework for Adult Development Programming proposed by Kummerow, Sillers, and Hummel (1978) focuses on the five items on this list. In order to reflect the self-directedness and experiential base that characterizes adult learning behavior, adult educational programming is best accomplished using either the tutorial, group, or independent study mode of instruction. Kummerow and his associates suggest that the following topical areas are the most relevant to the developmental tasks faced by adults: self-assessment, decision making and problem solving, relationships, biological changes, career behavior needs, spirituality, and use of leisure time. Cross's (1981) discussion of the different situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers to learning that exist in various stages of adult life provides insight into some of the support services needed by adult learners of various age groups (including child care, transportation, flexible scheduling, and counseling to overcome fears associated with learning).

Instruction. Based on two of the assumptions underlying the theory of andragogy—those concerning self-concept and experience—Merriam (1984) proposes that adult educators consider the following as among the most effective instructional techniques for use with adult learners: contract learning, experiential learning, portfolios, and self-pacing. In addition to these learning formats, Merriam suggests that teachers strive to make learning experiences as meaningful as possible for individual learners and that they attempt to refrain from the stereotypical role of authority figure and transmitter of knowledge, functioning instead as a role model or resource person.

Counseling. Because it is often more appropriate for adult educators to serve as resource persons rather than transmitters of knowledge, practitioners in adult education—no matter what their titles—perform a variety of counseling functions. Merriam (1984) asserts that, whether making referrals or simply trying to be supportive of their students, adult educators need a thorough understanding of the stages and transitions of adult life, the stages of career development, the interrelationship of adult development and career development, and counseling techniques for use with individuals in transition.

REFERENCES

This ERIC Digest is based on the following publication:

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This ERIC Digest was developed by Michele Naylor, ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, with funding from the National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Education, under Contract No. NIE-C-400-84-0004. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of NIE or the Department of Education. Orders for National Center publications should be sent to the Publications Office, Box E. Or call 614-486-3655/800-848-4815.

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