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**PARTICIPATION BY OLDER PEOPLE IN EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES IN NEW ZEALAND:  
SURVEY FINDINGS**

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*Little research has been performed analyzing the patterns of participation by older people in educational activities in New Zealand. There is a dearth of information even on the number and percentage of older people involved in education. This article seeks to rectify this situation. Drawing on data derived from a national survey on undertaken in 1978, some answers are provided to key questions concerning the participation of older people in education.*

A large number of surveys have been undertaken in the United States and other countries to investigate the extent and nature of participation by adults in education (Carp, Peterson, & Roelfs, 1974; Johnstone & Rivera, 1965; National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 1980). Despite differences in methodology and definition, all the surveys show that participation is proportionately greater among young adults, and that the rate of participation drops off sharply after age 55. Thus, the NCES survey reported participation rates of 15.7 % among 17- to 34-year-olds, 13 % among 35- to 54-year-olds, and 4.5% among those 55 years of age and older despite a rapid growth in participation by older adults over the previous decade.

Anderson and Darkenwald (1979) undertook a secondary analysis of the 1975 NCES data. They used multiple regression analysis to obtain estimates of the independent effects of a number of socioeconomic and demographic variables on participation and persistence in adult education. They found that the most powerful predictor of participation is amount of formal schooling. They also found that the second most powerful predictor is age. Older adults are less likely to participate than younger adults. Like schooling, age exerts effects on participation that are independent of other variables such as income and occupation. In a separate regression analysis of the data for those 60 years of age and older, Anderson and Darkenwald reported a participation rate of 2.8%. Furthermore, they found that within this older age group the amount of formal education and employment in the human-services sector had the most significant effects on participation variables such as age, gender, occupational status, and income, although statistically significant, were of relatively little consequence.

Very little research has been done in New Zealand to document the patterns of participation by older people in educational activities. Several studies (Boshier, 1970, 1971; Horton, 1976) of university extension, Worker's Education Association (WEA) and high school programs have shown that those 60 years and older and those with no formal education qualifications are significantly underrepresented

among the participants in these programs, whereas younger adults, those with university degrees, and those in professional and managerial occupations are significantly over-represented. Battersby (1982, 1985) drew attention to the dearth of information even on the number and percentage of older people involved in education. However, he estimated that less than 1% of those 60 years and older are involved in formal schooling and less than 1% are involved in university study, and that between 1% and 5% of those engaged in adult education are 60 years or older.

Drawing on data derived from a national survey undertaken in 1978 (Bird & Fenwick, 1981; Research and Statistics Division, Department of Education, 1979), this article seeks to provide some answers to the following questions: What are the rates of participation by older people in educational activities? How do they compare with those of younger adults? What subjects do older people study? What are their reasons for learning? How do these reasons compare with those of younger adults? Is there a greater interest in learning among older people than is apparent from the existing rates of participation? If so, what subjects would they wish to learn and for what reasons? What obstacles prevent them from undertaking educational activities? How do these compare with those confronting younger adults?

## **METHODOLOGY**

The data presented in this article are derived from a national sample survey conducted by the Research and Statistics Division of the New Zealand Department of Education early in 1978 (Bird & Fenwick, 1981). Interviews were undertaken with 1,599 individuals aged 16 years and older who were not still enrolled full time in a primary or secondary school. The interviewees were drawn from a random sample of households and institutions (such as hostels, nurses' homes, military institutions, and homes for the aged) throughout New Zealand. Despite slight discrepancies (which in no case were more than 3%) on some demographic variables between the sample and the 1976 census data, the sample was considered reasonably well representative of the New Zealand population as a whole (Bird & Fenwick, 1981, pp. 147-148).

The purposes of the survey were to identify the types of organizations offering learning opportunities, the patterns of participation in these learning activities, and the extent to which there existed needs and interests that were not currently being met, with a view to determining whether any improvements could be made to existing provisions. Respondents were asked a series of demographic questions as well as questions about their spare-time interests, their participation in learning activities during the previous year, and their current interests in undertaking learning activities if they had an opportunity to do so. For the purpose of the survey, a focus was on agency-directed learning activities. These were defined as activities "structured by an Organisation (or private tutor) in order to enable participants to learn something about a particular subject or skill" (Bird & Fenwick, 1981, p. 2). For the purpose of this article, these are referred to as formal learning activities. These may be contrasted

with informal or self-directed learning activities in which learners structure their own activities. These informal activities were not included in this survey of 1977 learning activities. However, the study did cover all formal or agency-directed learning activities commenced during 1977.

With the exception of Tables I and 4, which are based on data contained in the draft report on the survey (Research and Statistics Division, Department of Education, 1979, p. 11), none of the data presented in this article have been published previously. The other tables are based on data derived from computer printouts provided on request by the Research and Statistics Division, Department of Education in December 1986.

## FINDINGS

### What Are the Rates of Participation by Older People in Educational Activities? How do They Compare with those of Younger Adults?

Table I presents data on the number and percentage of formal learning activities and participants in each age category, with the mean number of activities per participant. Nearly 30% of all respondents

**TABLE 1**  
**Participation in Formal Learning Activities**

Age (years)	Formal learning activities		Participants		Total sample	
	<i>N</i>	<i>N per participant</i>	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
16-19	61	1.4	44	50.6	87	5.4
20-24	109	1.5	72	50.7	142	8.9
25-29	142	1.6	89	40.1	222	13.9
30-34	94	1.3	70	38.3	183	11.4
35-39	85	1.5	57	38.0	150	9.4
40-44	54	1.4	39	31.7	123	7.7
45-49	53	1.6	33	28.9	114	7.1
50-54	22	1.3	17	16.8	101	6.3
55-59	29	1.6	18	17.6	102	6.4
60-64	23	1.3	18	15.0	120	7.5
65 and over	16	1.1	14	5.5	255	15.9
Total	688	1.5	471	29.5	1,599	100.0

reported having undertaken at least one formal learning activity in the previous year.

The participation rate of all those 60 years and older was a low 6.8%, with only about 1 in every 15 persons participating; and of those 65 years and older only 5.5% or 1 in every 18 persons participated. Age is strongly associated with participation in learning activities. The participation rate for older people is substantially lower than that for younger adults; and those who do participate undertake fewer learning activities. These findings are consistent with those of much North American research.

Alternatively, a not insignificant number and percentage of older people do participate in education: 15% of those in their early 60s and 5.5% of those 65 and older. These figures are all considerably higher than those reported in comparable North American research and are higher than previous estimates for New Zealand.

### **What Subjects Do Older People Study? How Do They Compare With Those Studied by Younger Adults? What Reasons Do Older People Give for Engaging in Learning Activities?**

Table 2 presents data on the kinds of formal learning activities undertaken by older participants and by all participants. Among individuals 60 years and older, the most common field of learning was crafts and hobbies, followed by sports and physical recreation, organization-related learning activities (i.e., cultural, political, social, and trade-union organizations), and general education (which includes literacy, numeracy, school certificate, languages, history, philosophy, and the natural and social sciences). It is noteworthy that 25% of the educational activities undertaken by those aged 65 and older was in the field of the expressive arts (which includes acting, dance, writing, and musical performance).

The reasons given by older people for undertaking formal learning are presented in Table 3. The primary most common important reason given by those aged 60 and older was to give them an interest outside their job or home (26.3%). This sets them apart from the rest of the participants, only 11 % of whom gave this as their main reason. When we consider this reason given by older people in combination with the third most important reason-to spend their spare time more enjoyably-the contrast in motivation is even more marked. Nearly 40% of those 60 and older gave these reasons compared with 15.4% of all participants.

The second most common reason in both groups was to learn more about their special interest. However, this reason was given as the main one by a slightly higher percentage of participants 60 years and older. The next most common reasons given by participants 60 and older were to make some contribution to the community and to improve their general education. The former was given significantly more frequently by older participants and the latter significantly less frequently than by

participants of all age groups.

Finally, job-related reasons were the most common main reasons given by all participants (30.7%). Not surprisingly, the percentage of those 60 and older giving these kinds of reasons was relatively small (7.9%).

In summary, external pressures of job and home on people to engage in formal learning appear to diminish among older people. This may be one reason why a number of older people cease to engage in formal learning. However, among those who do continue their education, reasons having to do with developing interests and enjoying their spare time predominate, whereas the desire to make a contribution to the community and to improve their general education motivate a significant minority.

**TABLE 2**

**Kinds of Formal Learning Undertaken by Older People and by All Participants**

	<b>50-59 years</b>		<b>60-64 years</b>		<b>65 and older</b>		<b>All ages</b>	
<b>Kinds of formal learning</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Vocational training	20	39.2	2	8.7	-	-	223	32.4
Crafts and hobbies	12	23.5	10	43.5	6	37.5	151	22.0
General education	8	15.7	4	17.4	1	6.2	93	13.5
Organization-related activities	4	7.9	3	13.0	2	12.5	89	12.9
Sport and physical activities	2	3.9	3	13.0	3	18.8	64	9.3
Expressive arts	2	3.9			4	25.0	35	5.1
Human relations and parent education	2	3.9					24	3.5
Unclassified	1	2.0	1	4.4			9	1.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>688</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**TABLE 3****Most important Reasons for Participation in Education**

	<b>60 years and older</b>		<b>All participants</b>	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Give them an interest outside their job or home	10	26.3	67	11.1
Learn more about their special interest	8	21.0	106	17.5
Spend their spare time more enjoyably	5	13.2	26	4.3
Make some contribution to the community	4	10.5	35	5.8
Improve their general education	4	10.5	105	17.3
Help them in their current job	3	7.9	136	22.4
Meet other people with similar interests	2	5.3	22	3.6
Improve some aspect of their home life	2	5.3	59	9.7
Prepare them for a new job			50	8.3
Total	38	100.0	606	100.0

**Is There a Wider Interest in Formal Learning Among Older People? If So, What Subjects Would They Wish to Learn?**

Respondents were asked whether there were any formal learning activities that they would like to undertake if they had the chance. They were then asked what learning activity they were most interested in undertaking and why. They were also asked why they had not already undertaken the activity.

The data presented in Table 4 provide an affirmative answer to the first question posed to participants. There is a wider interest in formal learning among older people. Half of those in their early 60s and 30% of those 65 and older expressed a desire to undertake some formal learning. This compares with 15% and 5% of the respective age groups that had in fact participated in such activities during the previous year. Clearly there is a substantial number of older people - potential participants - who wish to undertake some formal learning if they had the opportunity. Alternatively, of course, there is nevertheless a substantial number of older people who expressed no interest in formal learning, and the data in Table 4 suggest that expressed interest is age related, although not as markedly as is

actual participation (See Table 1).

**TABLE 4**  
**Number and Percentage of Respondents Expressing Interest in**  
**Undertaking a Formal Learning Activity**

Age group (years)	<i>N</i>	%	Total
			<i>N</i>
16-19	69	79.3	87
20-24	118	83.1	142
25-29	182	82.0	222
30-34	146	79.8	183
35-39	108	72.0	150
40-44	77	62.6	123
45-49	76	66.7	114
50-54	59	58.4	101
55-59	57	55.9	102
60-64	60	50.0	120
65 and older	77	30.2	255
Total	1,029	64.4	1,599

Table 5 presents data on the subjects that older people indicated they most wished to learn if they had the chance compared with the responses to the same question by people of all ages. The most common learning interests among people of all ages were crafts and hobbies. Forty percent of potential participants of all ages expressed most interest in this field. This compares with nearly 50 % of potential participants in their 50s, 36.7% of those in their early 60s, and nearly 50% of those 65 and older.

The next two most popular fields of formal learning among older people were expressive arts and general education. Among potential participants, interest in formal learning in the expressive arts is

in fact proportionately higher among older people than it is for those of all ages. With regard to general education, the proportion of potential participants expressing an interest remained relatively constant, with a somewhat greater level of interest among those 65 and older. This must be compared with the sharp drop in actual participation in general education among those 65 and older (see Table 2). These three fields account for approximately 66% of the interests expressed by people of all age groups, compared with 80% of those in their 50s and 76% of those 60 and older. Organization-related learning activities accounted for 11.1% of the interests expressed by those in their early 60s, significantly higher proportionately than the 4.7% of interests expressed by all age groups. Apart from that, the proportion of interests in other fields expressed by older people were in each case well below that for all age groups.

**TABLE 5**  
**Kinds of Formal Learning Older People Expressed Most Interest**  
**in Undertaking Compared With All Respondents**

<b>Kinds of formal learning</b>	<b>50-59</b>		<b>60-64</b>		<b>65 and</b>		<b>All ages</b>	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Craft and hobby activities	57	49.6	22	36.7	38	49.3	413	40.1
Expressive arts	16	13.9	10	16.7	13	16.9	124	12.1
General education	19	16.5	8	13.3	14	18.2	152	14.8
Organization-related activities	2	1.7	7	11.6	3	3.9	48	4.7
Vocational training	11	9.6	4	6.7	5	6.5	165	16.0
Sport and physical activities	8	7.0	5	8.3	3	3.9	106	10.3
Unclassified	2	1.7	4	6.7	1	1.3	21	2.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>100.1</b>	<b>1029</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Why Do Older People Wish to Learn These Subjects? What Obstacles Prevent Them From Learning? How Do These Obstacles Compare With Those Confronting Younger People?**

Table 6 presents the reasons given by older people for wanting to learn something for which they had not had the opportunity. A markedly higher percentage of potential participants 60 and older wanted to learn mainly to spend their spare time more enjoyably and to make some contribution to the



community. There is also a similar difference, although not as marked, in the proportions wanting to learn mainly to improve their general education. Indeed this latter reason, which was the most common reason for the sample as a whole, was also the second most common reason among those aged 60 and older.

Reasons associated with improving some aspect of family life and learning more about a special interest were given with more or less the same frequency by potential participants 60 and older and in the entire sample, whereas to give them an interest outside their home or job was given as the main reason somewhat less frequently and to meet others with similar interests somewhat more frequently by those 60 and older. Not surprisingly, job-related reasons, which were the second most frequently stated main reasons for the sample as a whole, were given by only 2 of those 60 and older.

**TABLE 6**

**Most Important Reasons for Wanting to Undertake a Formal Learning Activity for Which They Had Not Yet Had the Opportunity**

Reasons	<b>60 and older</b>		<b>All respondents</b>	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Spend their spare time more enjoyably	30	23.2	168	16.7
Improve their general education	26	20.2	173	17.2
Make some contribution to the community	17	13.2	64	6.4
Improve some aspect of their family life	17	13.2	135	13.4
Learn more about their special interest	15	11.6	107	10.6
Give them an interest outside their home or job	15	11.6	157	15.6
Meet others with similar interests	7	5.4	30	3.0
Prepare for new job or help them in present job	2	1.6	172	17.1
Total	129	100.0	1,006	100.0

When one compares Table 6 with Table 3, which lists the main reasons given for actual participation with those given for wanting to participate, important differences emerge. According to Table 3, the most common main reason for actual participation, given by 26.3% of participants 60 and older, was

to give them an interest outside their job or house. By contrast based on Table 6, this reason dropped to sixth place among those 60 and older who wished to participate; it was given by only 11.6% as a main reason for wanting to participate.

Similarly, the desire to learn more about their special interest was given as the main reason for participating or for wishing to participate by a significantly larger percentage of actual participants than of potential participants. By way of contrast, three important reasons-the desire to spend their spare time more enjoyably, to improve their general education, and to improve some aspect of their family life-were given as the main ones for participating or wishing to participate by a significantly smaller percentage of actual participants than of potential participants 60 and older.

Finally, what do older people who wish to participate perceive as the obstacles to participation? How do these compare with those confronting younger people? Table 7 presents data on all the reasons given by those aged 60 and older for not having undertaken a formal learning activity that interested them compared with those given by all potential participants in the sample.

**TABLE 7**

**Reasons Given For Not Having Undertaken Learning Activities That Interested Them**

<b>Reasons</b>	<b>60 and older</b>		<b>All ages</b>	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Lack of time	48	24.6	431	29.8
Lack of facilities and so on	37	19.0	268	18.5
Health reasons and so on	27	13.8	102	7.1
Clash with other activities and so on	23	11.8	198	13.7
Transport difficulties	13	6.7	31	2.2
'Too old'	13	6.7	19	1.3
Cost	10	5.1	136	9.4
Recent interest only	7	3.6	74	5.1
Other reasons	17	8.7	186	12.9
Total	195	100.0	1,445	100.0

Lack of time and facilities and a clash with other commitments were among the most common reasons given by both young and old. Reasons of health and feeling too old were common among older people and very much less common among younger people. Transport difficulties were also given significantly more frequently by older people than by younger people as a reason for nonparticipation. Alternatively, reasons of costs and lack of time were given significantly more frequently by younger adults, as were clashes with other commitments and recency of interest, although in the case of these latter two reasons the difference was not as marked.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

This article has sought to provide answers to several key questions concerning the participation by older people in education in New Zealand. Data derived from a national survey undertaken in 1978 have been presented that support several conclusions. First, the rate of educational participation of older people is significantly lower than that of younger adults; and those who do participate undertake fewer projects than their younger counterparts. This conclusion is not surprising and is in accord with the findings of numerous other studies. Alternatively, a not insignificant percentage of older people do participate in education: 15% of those in their early 60s and 5.5% of those 65 and older. These figures are higher than those reported in comparable North American research and are higher than previous estimates for New Zealand.

Second, older adults participate most frequently in education that is related to crafts and hobbies, whereas younger adults not surprisingly participate most frequently in vocational education. Participation in other fields of education is not as closely age related. Not surprisingly, the most common reasons for participation also differed; those given most frequently by younger adults are vocational, compared with older adults' desire to pursue an interest outside the home. The desire to pursue a special interest was the second most common reason given for participation by both young and old.

Third, expressed interest in educational participation is also age related; a significantly smaller proportion of older people express such an interest. However, it is not as strongly age related as is actual participation. Fifty percent of those in their early 60s and 30% of those 65 years and older in the national sample expressed an interest in participation. It appears that there is a much greater level of interest in educational participation among older people than is evident from their current level of participation. Nevertheless, 70% of those aged 65 and older expressed no interest in participation.

Fourth, the most common educational interests among people of all ages including older people were crafts and hobbies: 40% of people of all ages interested in participating in education chose this field compared with nearly 37% of those in their early 60s and nearly 50% of those 65 and older. The next two most popular fields of education among older people were expressive arts and general education. Among those who wished to participate in education, interest in the expressive arts is proportionately

higher among older people than among younger adults. In addition, proportionately, the level of interest of older people in continuing their general education remains relatively high.

Fifth, there are marked differences between the reasons given for wanting to participate and those given for actual participation. The desire to develop an interest outside the home and to pursue a special interest were given much less frequently as reasons for wishing to participate than they were for actual participation. By way of contrast, the desire to spend their spare time more enjoyably, to improve some aspect of their family life and to improve their general education were given much more frequently as reasons for wishing to participate than they were for actual participation. The desire to make some contribution to the community is an important reason among older people both for actual participation and for wishing to participate.

Sixth, the most common reasons for nonparticipation given by people of all ages was lack of time. However, this reason was given somewhat less frequently by older people than by younger people. The next most common reasons given by people of all ages were those associated with a lack of facilities, classes, or opportunities to study. The next most common reasons given by older people were associated with ill health and a lack of energy. Finally, important reasons given by older people for nonparticipation were the perception that they were too old to study and the transport difficulties they experienced.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study, in common with most survey research in adult education, lacks any explicit theoretical framework. Hence, the explanation and interpretation of the findings is problematic. How, for example, does one explain the lower rates of educational participation among older people? How does one explain the finding that, whereas 1 in 3 respondents 65 years of age and older expressed an interest in participation, only 1 in 18 had in fact participated during the previous year? How does one explain the finding that this difference in the ratios between actual and potential participation is so much greater among older adults than young adults, with nearly 2 in every 3 respondents of all ages expressing an interest as opposed to 1 in every 3 who had in fact participated during the previous year? How does one explain the differences in participation and expressed interest in the various fields of education or the differences in reasons given for participation and nonparticipation between younger and older people? How does one explain the considerable differences between the kinds of education in which both older and younger people expressed an interest and those in which they had in fact recently participated? The next, article in this issue examines various forms of explanation and the theoretical perspectives within which they are located. It also discusses the implications of this study for policy development.

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