

Life Satisfaction and Happiness of Thai Senior Citizen

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Abstract

Thailand has been seen as an aging society since 2005. Thailand also has promoted the concept of “schools for senior citizens” to the community. This concept is promoted in this article to generate better understanding of Thai senior citizen’s learning activities. Schools for the senior citizen can enhance citizen’s self-esteem and dignity. From the in-depth interviews with community leaders and senior citizens in rural areas, the activities in schools for the senior citizens were focused on non-formal and informal learning. In addition, an author employed the Life satisfaction and Happiness instrument which is a self-administrative structured questionnaire survey to eighty-six seniors in rural areas. The understanding of life satisfaction and happiness, which is a state of mind or feelings characterized by pleasure or contentment of a senior citizen’s life, is recognized. Therefore, promoting more variety in learning activities, especially in non-formal and informal learning activities is recommended.

Keywords: Elderly, Happiness, Lifelong learning, Life satisfaction, Senior citizen

Introduction

Situation in Thailand

Thailand is a country in South East Asia with a population of approximately 65,104,000. The life expectancy is 71.6 for men, 78.4 for women. Population over 60 years of age is

26.51 percent, with 11.76 percent male and 14.75 percent female. Thailand, like other developing countries, is experiencing a demographic change with an increasing senior citizen population. Thailand has been seen as an aging society since 2005. In fact, the number of people over 60 years of age will triple between 1990 and 2020, while the total population will increase by approximately one-third (Francesse1992). The senior citizens could continue to increase, from 13.2 percent in 2010 to an expected 32.1 percent in 2040. The population projections for Thailand during 2010-2040 indicate that the percentage of the late-elderly (aged 80 and over) population could increase sharply from approximately 12.7 percent to almost one-fifth of the total senior citizen population. When considering the distribution of the senior citizen population by gender, it is found that female senior citizens accounted for 55.1 percent in 2010, which is expected to increase to 56.8 percent in 2040, with the late-senior female group from 13.9 in 2010 to 21.3 percent in 2040. Females tend to live longer than their male counterparts. In planning for the future, therefore, it is important to keep in mind the major challenges looming as a result of demographic changes, particularly accelerated population ageing and longer survival during old age. Moreover, even with the country's economic development, many older people in Thai society remain highly vulnerable. This is particularly true with respect to elderly in rural areas compared to urban elderly (Knodel et al. 2013).

From the registration population in 2012, there were about 65 million people, of these, about 23 million people, accounting for 33.9 percent were living in municipal or urban areas and about 42 million, or 66.1 percent living in rural areas. In the 2014 survey of the population, it was found that among the older age groups, there were about 40.9 percent living in urban areas and 59.1 percent living in rural areas. The elderly population in rural areas was higher than those in urban areas (National Statistical Office 2016, 2014, 2013). This obvious rural-urban divide in Thailand makes the implementation of social service and health care difficult since people living in urban areas enjoy easier access to secondary and tertiary health care as hospitals and specialized medical facilities are mainly located at provincial cities or large district towns. Geographical location and transportation might hinder the building of infrastructure and delivery of services in rural areas (Chan et al. 2010). This may contribute to the higher migration of people from rural to urban areas. The Foundation of Thai Gerontology Research and Development Institute (2009, 2010) summarized the distribution of the elderly, according to area of residence (rural/urban) in the different regions in Thailand, and found it had not changed as elderly people tend to live in rural areas rather than urban areas.

The region with highest proportion of elderly people was the Northeastern region, followed by Central (excluding Bangkok), Northern, Southern and Bangkok region. However, the regional proportion of the elderly is changing with time. The proportion of elderly living in the urban areas increased from 30 percent in 2006 to 35 percent in 2010. Hence, it is possible that they migrated to urban areas in order to access health care and other social services.

On the other hand, there is a remarkable urban-rural difference regarding roles in the community as there is a greater tendency for the older people living in the rural areas to participate in community activities. This could result from culture-based differences in which the lifestyle and social relations within the rural community are more closely-knit. The Department of Social Development and Welfare also promotes community involvement in improving the residences for the elderly, engaging resources from the community and local entities such as the municipal government, Sub-district Administrative Organizations, educational institutions (i.e., vocational colleges), in order to improve public spaces used in support of the elderly activities such as a community center, village's multi-purpose hall, temple's courtyard. These activities included elderly club, cremation for social welfare groups, vocational network, housewife club, savings club, village scouts, annual village activities (Foundation of Thai Gerontology Research and Development Institute 2010, 2012). Furthermore, in 2014, the majority of older persons reported participating in community activities during the past year. Participation is somewhat higher among those in their 60s and 70s than those in their 50s or those 80 and older. Around a third of persons 60 or older participate in an elderly club compared to only about 15 percent of persons 50-59. In addition, they reported that more opportunity for participation of rural older persons in community activities contribute to more life satisfaction, level of mental health, and happiness in older age than those in urban areas. Therefore, remaining engaged in community activities can contribute to the social support experienced by older persons and thus affect their well-being (Gray et al. 2013; Knodel et al. 2015). Such as in 2016, teachers and education experts established the school for the elderly in Ban Khai district, Rayong province, and organised educational activities for the older learner. One year later, 81 senior citizens have proved that no one is too old to learn, by taking the country by the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, Ministry of Interior and Senior Citizen Council of Thailand. The main purpose of these community centers at the tambon (sub-district) level is to provide comprehensive services to improve the quality of life of community-dwelling older persons, including healthcare promotion,

lifelong learning activities, and promotion of volunteer caregivers among the older persons themselves. However, due to the 2014 survey, the vast majority (87 percent) of persons 60 and older have no more than a basic primary education. Meanwhile psychological well-being levels of older persons are higher numbers signifying greater life satisfaction and happiness but it declines with age. (Knodel et al. 2015) As a result, the major life events experienced in the aging process are expected to have a profound impact on the aging population's life satisfaction. As people get older, life satisfaction may decrease sharply year by year as they are affected by major life events such as retirement and physical health deterioration (Anantanasuwong and Seenprachawong 2012). Headey and Wearing (1992) suggested that when we talk about well-being, we ask people in surveys how satisfied they are with their lives. The evidence is that they make relatively calm, cognitive judgements about how well their lives are going. In general, judgements of life satisfaction are very closely related to judgements of happiness. Therefore, an examination of differences in the aging population's life satisfaction and happiness becomes critical for lifelong education which is an important factor in the well-being of older persons and should be aware of the importance of engaging them the educational scenarios for the future.

Theories and literature review

Successful lifelong learning for the aging groups in many countries is normally conducted in a form of non-formal education managed under the University of the Third Age (University as in a place of learning) for which senior citizens are encouraged to participate in the activities of their interests during their final years. These learning activities include informal meetings for sharing ideas of interests, exercising, dancing, singing, producing artistic works, producing printing matters, participating in recreational activities. As for the case of lifelong learning for senior citizens in Thailand, no University of Third Age has been established thus far, however, there are other learning activities available. For example, there are learning activities and information sharing programs where useful information for living, working, self-developing is provided. Moreover, there are social activities and community networks where senior citizens can participate. In addition, in the scenario of the University of the Third Age models for lifelong learning of the Thai aging groups, there are four models in: (1) short course programs; (2) schools for seniors; (3) informal learning activities; and (4) visual classrooms. Particularly in Promoting lifelong learning for senior citizens based on schools for seniors, the proposed strategies and policies should be supported by relevant organizations in

the communities. There should be some study trips for learners to learn from reality. The knowledge exchange and learning management for senior citizens should be done based on a multiple-age basis, both on formal and informal ways (Ratana-Ubol et al. 2015).

School for the senior citizen

The school for seniors is one tool for lifelong learning which can provide facilities or life course approaches in order to improve their well-being and bring them to lead active ageing. This means having better physical and cognitive functioning, having less depression, as well as having higher levels of life satisfaction and happiness. The substantial of schools for seniors is activities provided by organizations or communities in order to develop their learning process, enhance living appropriately, and adjust to the social changes for self-reliance. Thailand has promoted the concept of the University for the Third Age (U3A) as “school for the senior citizen”. Schools for the senior citizen are modeled on activities for seniors to promote lifelong learning. Life skills promotion, informal learning and non-formal learning are conducted in schools for the senior citizens according to their needs and interests. The course contents are important to their daily lives in order to increase their life skills. The volunteer guest speakers in schools for the senior citizens are from all networks, including the intellectual members in the community. Presently, there are approximately 20 schools for the elderly in Thailand.

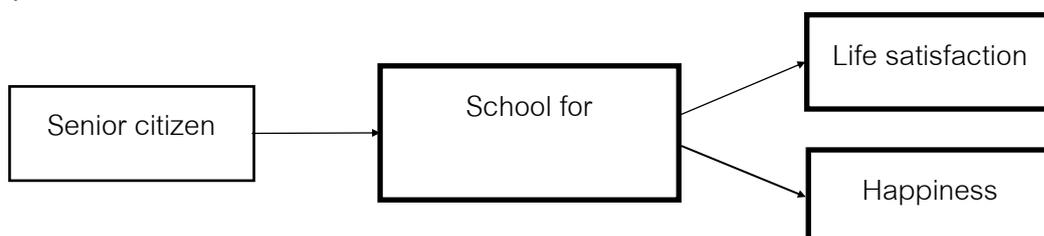
Objectives of the study

Objectives of the study is to investigated life satisfaction and happiness of Thai senior citizens after attending schools for the senior citizen.

Research methodology

This study used mixed methods for collecting the data. The researcher used documentary analysis, in-depth interviews and questionnaire survey. The samples were seniors in the rural areas of Laembua, Nakornpathom and Samut Songhkram provinces.

Conceptual framework



Results

Schools for the senior citizen are aimed at elaborating better understanding of Thai senior citizen's learning activities. Schools for the senior citizens can enhance senior citizen's self-esteem, dignity and self-worth. Senior citizen should have spaces or places for meeting, talking, exchanging experiences, sharing wisdom and self-developing in various perspectives. A Motto for a School for Senior Citizen is "Aging with Dignity and Integrity". A Vision for a School for seniors are "knowing accurately, doing actively, transferring sensible". Therefore, the senior citizen will have the opportunity to participate in learning activities in school, promoting the activities for a happy senior life. Schools for the elderly are established in many places such as the old school buildings, senior citizen clubs, a temple, or the founder's home. The activities are mostly arranged for once a week on an ongoing basis. Activities are promoted as scheduled events. The courses can be conducted continuously for a year or for a short period of time. Mission for the Schools for the senior citizens are: 1) to promote self-development and lifelong learning for the senior citizen; 2) to promote the physical and mental health; 3) to encourage the elders to dedicate themselves to the community and society; 4) to enhance the value of the seniors' wisdom which will be acknowledged and valued by others; and 5) to transfer the local culture and wisdom to the society.

From the in-depth interviews conducted with the leaders and the senior citizen in the rural areas, the activities in schools for the senior citizen were found to focus on non-formal and informal learning. The activities in schools were flexible. It depended on the context, culture and needs of each community. The analysis of success factors for enhancing lifelong learning for senior citizen in Thailand were: self-awareness and successful aging; influential leadership; specific and clear goals for continuous activities; actively participating; strong social networks; continuous self- reflection; viewing lessons learnt amongst the senior citizens group; and support from communities and local authorities.

In addition, problems found concerning the schools for senior citizens were: misunderstanding of the technical term of "school"; poor financial support; leaders who do not understand the nature and needs of the senior citizen and persisting in expecting them to work continually; not using the capacity of the senior citizen effectively or efficiently; and little collaboration among the government and communities (Ratana-Ubol, et.al. in referred)

This study employed the Life satisfaction and Happiness instrument which was adapted by an author. This instrument is a self-administrative structured questionnaire survey which was conducted with 86 seniors in the rural areas of Laembua, Nakornpathom and Sumut Songhkram provinces. The questionnaires were adapted from the Orientations to Happiness Scale (OTH) (Peterson et al. 2005) and Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener et al. 1985). Pilot study was conducted with 30 senior citizens in rural areas of Thailand. A report of the Item Objective Congruence (IOC) of the instrument was > 0.50 . In addition, the Cronbach alpha was .78 (N=30). The general status of respondents and results of the Happiness instrument of senior citizen are in the following Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1 The general status of respondents

General Status		N	Total
Sex	Male	12	86
	Female	74	
Age	60-70 years	56	86
	70-80 years	22	
	80 years and above	8	
Status	Single	35	86
	Married	51	
Education	Below high school	75	86
	Undergraduate	11	
Living	living alone	15	86
	living with the family	71	
Religion	Buddhist	86	86
	Other	0	

Table 2 Results of the Happiness instrument and translation of senior citizen in Laembua Nakornpathom and Sumut Songhkram province

Items	(Max = 7)	Translation
In general, I consider myself a very happy person.	5.27	Happy almost all the time.
Compared to most of my peers, I consider myself less happy or happier.	4.90	Happier than others.
Some people are generally very happy. To what extent does this characterization describe you?	5.06	Happy almost all the time.
Some people are generally not very happy. To what extent does this characterization describe you?	2.80	Very few times of unhappiness.

From table 1 and 2, the general status of respondents in Laembua, Nakornpathom and Sumut Songhkram provinces, were mostly females and their ages were between 60-70 years, were married and lived with families. Their educational background was below high school level. All of them were Buddhist.

In general, as senior citizens they considered themselves as being happy individuals. In varied situations, they considered themselves happier than others.

Table 3 Results of the satisfaction with life instrument and translation of senior citizen in Laembua, Nakornpathom and Sumut Songhkram provinces

Items	(Max = 6)	Translation
In most ways my life is close to my ideal.	4.93	Agree
The conditions of my life are excellent.	4.99	Agree
I am satisfied with my life.	5.15	Agree
So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.	4.93	Agree
If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.	4.77	Agree

From table 3: senior citizen in Laembua, Nakornpathom and Sumut Songhkram provinces, agreed that in many ways the nature of their lives close to their ideals. The conditions of their lives were excellent. They were satisfied with their lives. They had gotten the important things they want in life. In addition, if they could live their lives over, there were little which they would wish to change.

In addition, during the interviews with the Thai senior citizens it was found that they were particularly satisfied with the following aspects: 1) Participation: Senior citizen desire for participation in their communities; communication with other people; awareness of relationships with others, a feeling of worth, and nurturing the next generation; 2) Health: In general senior citizens endeavored to keep healthy and recognized the value and importance of good health; 3) Fulfillment: Senior citizens experienced fulfillment through activities, using time for relaxation, realization of happiness in everyday life's activities, through the successful activities of descendants; 4) Reflections: Verbal or in writing, as in/stories, memories, are important in nurturing the next generation because it defines cultural practices, promotes intergenerational communication and enhances a sense of belonging; 5) Preparation: Senior citizens would have made some preparation for aging, preparation for their future life, consideration of preparation, and readiness for death; 6) Life review: Senior citizens would spend some time in retrospection of their life and self-independence; and 7) Challenge and exploration of new learning: Senior citizens were interested in varying degrees to self-development. In addition to lifelong learning, this is a concept which they are now starting to embrace as being necessary.

Discussion and conclusion

On the first assumption, it seems clear that there is much to be gained for individuals, groups, and communities through the promotion of lifelong learning. Our findings of the

activities focusing on non-formal and informal learning in schools for the senior citizen illustrate the two pillars of lifelong learning. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view and takes a wide variety of approaches, which makes consensus harder to reach. Non-formal programs are those sponsored by community, civic, and voluntary organizations, such as the local library sponsoring a book club, the Red Cross offering diabetes screening, a civic club sponsoring a travel outing, a faith group meeting to study their faith's literature, and so on. In term of informal learning, a category that includes incidental learning, it is learning that results from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It is in most cases unintentional from the learner's perspective but often referred to as learning by experience or simply as experience. Therefore, non-formal learning and informal or incidental learning are at the heart of adult education because of its learner-centered focus and the lessons that can be learned from life experience (Merriam and Kee 2014; Werquin 2010; Marsick and Watkins 2001). In addition, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) which has been researching and promoting the importance of lifelong learning, views the recognition of non-formal and informal learning as a crucial part or an important means for making the lifelong learning (Cameron and Harrison 2012). The significance of findings from a qualitative study presented by MacKean and Abbott-Chapman (2011), which investigated the part played by informal learning in positive ageing, allowed respondents to speak freely about their perceived needs and expectations for a satisfying lifestyle, in the context of their membership of community-based organisations. Findings revealed the benefits that older people perceive they derive from participation in the informal learning which they enjoy. The study found that learning taking place is appropriate to the phase in life which is characterised by loss of paid employment and of relationships, and that this learning plays an important role in helping older people stay positive, and maintain independence and social engagement.

In addition, similar to our findings, the findings presented by Sasipat Yodpet and the Foundation of Thai Gerontology Research and Development Institute (2016), indicated the strength of schools for the senior citizens that can encourage the lifelong learning to enhance their self-esteem, self-worth, self-control, self-awareness, physical health, and life satisfaction. The project was conducted in 4 communities in different provinces, and it was found the strength of ageing by implementing the knowledge which were included in such a knowledge base of health care, social changes, technology and communication, and informal learning activities such as agriculture, invention, music, etc. However, the problems found concerning

the schools for seniors, were partly the same as this study, were the lack of consideration for actual needs of the learner and funding for operation, besides the lack of insight about lifelong learning, knowledge and skill for designing the learning course, teaching skills and facilitators. As described by Pires (2009), there is a lack of studies and research on adult reasons and expectations regarding learning, education and training, especially from a lifelong and life-wide perspective. Their reasons, interests and needs are seldom known in depth, although they play a fundamental role in their demand and participation in education and training activities. Overall, these findings related to the needs of policy as well as practical issues of organizing U3A education or senior citizen lifelong learning in a way that the flexible convergence of formal, non-formal and informal education modes of teaching, learning and provision of education is required to sufficiently, adequately and clearly cater for a diversity of needs and interests (Ratana-Ubol and Richards 2016).

According to the assumption underlying andragogy proposed by Knowles (1980 cited in Merriam 2001), describes the adult learner as someone who is motivated to learn by internal rather than external factors. Nowadays, understanding the motivational structure related to adult learning is becoming more and more important, specifically in the knowledge society and lifelong learning society (Pires 2009). Due to our findings that senior citizens are partly motivated by internal factors, including self-awareness, self-reflection, and actively participating, seniors have a range of motivators for participating in lifelong learning activities. Although motivators are best classified into two specific types of motivators: instrumental motivation (work, career, and skills training) and expressive motivation (personal development and social relations), but several studies point to expressive motivation as the main driver behind later lifelong learning (Mathew and Leong 2014). Similar to our findings, described by Yang and Hung (2015), senior citizens demonstrate greater self-perseverance, and successively participate in community lifelong learning based on their personal intentions to achieve the goals of self-satisfaction and life fulfillment. However, differ to our findings of external factors, some theorists concluded that social support is more essential to the well-being of the elderly than to younger people, or implied that support has more influence on well-being in older groups than younger groups (Kunkel 1981; Gallagher 1980). Some findings, including Thailand, indicated that social support is the important factor that plays a major role in maintaining well-being and happiness in the aged. The social relations integral to an

exercise environment and the social networks among the elderly, such as families, friends, and the community, are significant determinants of subjective wellbeing, including perceived satisfaction in life, in older adults (Hsu et al. 2014; Kuhirunyaratn et al. 2007). As a result, the findings have several important implications for elderly behaviors such as how to support the elderly to maintain good attitudes toward life, how to maintain good physical health status, and the elderly's ability to perform daily activities etc. It must be remembered that numerous internal and external factors are involved (Gray, Rukumnuaykit, Kittisuksathit, and Thongthai 2008 cited in Rojpaisarnkit 2016)

Focusing on the studies of life satisfaction, a relatively large body of gerontological and medical literature examines the effect of health on the life satisfaction of the oldest old. Among the numerous factors identified as affecting the life satisfaction of the most elderly, health plays a highly prominent role (Gwozdz and Sousa-Poza 2009). Similar to our findings, health were found to affect elderly life satisfaction in congruence with the study proposed by Clemente and Sauer (1976) who conducted an analysis of life satisfaction with 1491 individuals 18 years of age and older, reported health as the most effective predictor. Similar to the study proposed by Jung and colleague (2010) who utilized herein consisted of 3278 elderly people aged 65 years or older, from 9308 households, suggested that one of the most influential variables in life satisfaction was health checkups. In addition, family income has also been presented as having a strong positive correlation with life satisfaction in the general population (Bradburn and Capolwitz 1965; Wilson 1967). Spreitzer and Snyder (1974), in an analysis of 1547 persons from 18 to over 65, similarly found income to be the predominant predictor of life satisfaction. In the context of Thai culture, Herberholz (2012) also suggested that income aspirations, health and being integrated seem to matter most for life satisfaction. It was concluded that health and income are the most significant factors related to life satisfaction and happiness of the senior citizen. However, the activity theory of life satisfaction and happiness among the aging, first developed by Havighurst and Albrecht (1953) and revised by Lemon, Bengston, and Peterson (1972), asserts a positive relationship between the aged individuals level of participation in social activity and his life satisfaction (Knapp 1977). Lemon, Bengston, and Peterson (1972) have extended the theory to consider the effects of different types of activities. They identified these areas of activity as informal activity (on a personal or intimate level), formal activities (i.e., participation in organizations) and solitary activity. Both informal and formal activities are seen as providing more opportunity for role supports (which are seen as contributing to life

satisfaction) than does solitary activities. Some research studies analyzed the role of social activity and reported it to be a determinant of life satisfaction and happiness among the aged (Lemon, Bengston, and Peterson 1972; Edwards and Klemmack 1973; Knapp 1977).

Therefore, education for the senior citizen, the concept that education should be holistic and its main aim should be the pleasure of learning and meeting other friends in conducive surroundings. However, there are problems related to education for senior citizen such as, misunderstanding of using the education term for senior citizen learning, and over structured education for senior citizen. Informal education settings offered strengths and appeal to senior citizens. They felt disenfranchised in formal settings. Real senior citizen learning happens in a setting where they feel less intimidated and more comfortable than they do in a structured institution or setting. Lifelong learning enhances happiness and well-being of the senior citizen.

The conclusions for senior citizen learning are as follows: firstly, life satisfaction and happiness or a feeling characterized by pleasure or contentment about their life should be recognized. The pursuit of happiness is an important goal for senior citizens and the World Health Organization is increasingly emphasizing happiness as a component of health. (DeGargino 2014). Secondly, successful aging has become a very important concept for senior citizens which mean they are living a healthy, happy and positive life. The seniors can enrich their life by maintaining a positive attitude. Therefore, achieving a positive approach to aging is significant in the senior years. Third, senior citizens should be able to reflect on past experiences of life with a sense of appreciation promote intergenerational conserve culture. Senior citizens learning should promote the awareness of life-reviews which is an understanding of the realities in modern life. Fourthly, the senior citizen's perception of the quality of life is significant. It's prudent to examine the senior citizen's life conditions as well as their ratings of quality of their life. It is especially important that care givers are made aware and be able ensure that physical, intellectual, emotional and social factors are present for individuals in their care.

Recommendations

In support of the Education for All (EFA) movement, which aims to expand basic education in order to build strong foundations for lifelong learning.

1. Actively promote motivation amongst the stakeholders to work collaboratively in order

to write a policy as a plan of action to promote lifelong learning. The stakeholders are, Government, Local Authorities, NGO's, Health Care Services, who are the primary source of funding, the family, Senior Citizens Clubs, Non-formal Learning Centres in the Communities and the Temples who are active in planning, providing, organising and implementation of activities. Families should be involved in the writing of proposed policies which will promote stronger bonds between families in the communities. The core message in the implementation of activities should be realistic, creative, collaborative and accessible to senior citizens. The benefit of this is the spreading of the information, opening up opportunities to move amongst other seniors, meet new friends, allow a measure of independence and increase self-esteem. Proactivity in encouragement in the members will greatly enhance happiness and an active senior life's outlook.

2. Promote the value and understanding of learning, both overt and covert. The value of learning and the application of knowledge in daily living, also to promote social integration and the opportunities for which it could create financial benefits, which in turn enhances self-esteem and happiness. Edutainment - learning in a happy and friendly atmosphere, will result in many benefits and promote participation amongst the members, also all the stakeholders. Identifying the knowledge and experience will lead to the discovery of the lost resources amongst the senior citizens which could be revitalised to the benefit of the individual, community and the general economy. To think about and seek the future of their communities based on their own inherited cultural values, indigenous knowledge and beliefs encouraged.

3. Provision of facilities and resources. These are mainly provided by the Government, NGO's, donations and charities. Senior citizens should be encouraged to embark on fund-raising activities and explore for additional resources which will cover expenses and promote self-sustainabilities. Follow the present trends in creating more schools for the elderly, especially in the poorer communities. This will require more individuals willing to be involved in teaching, such as retired educators tapping into an available resource. Explore ways that education can be provided for seniors who are no longer mobile and do not have access to ITC. Transform the learning and training environment, creating places of pleasure and interest involving the youth, family members and volunteers. Develop support systems for the caregivers.

4. Promote the concept of intergenerational learning and teaching with the emphasis on Respect, Reciprocal learning, Revitalising indigenous knowledge and beliefs. Aim to advance a culture of reading and writing promoting Lifelong Learning. Strengthen community bonds through active citizenship. Encourage interdisciplinary discipline. Intergenerational learning and activities can and will promote the culture and beliefs of a community which will result in strong family bonds and support.

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