

Research into the elderly and participation in the arts in the Netherlands

Analysis of existing studies and findings based on an expert meeting with researchers

The subject of 'the elderly and arts participation' is of growing interest in the Netherlands, both in terms of research and practice. Primarily literature research and quantitative measurements are carried out into the cultural participation (receptive and active) of the elderly. Less qualitative research is carried out and practically no evaluation studies. Research shows that actively participating in the arts has positive effects on the social well-being and physical and mental health of the elderly. However, little is known about suitable methodologies and learning methods. The questions of 'how do the elderly learn?' and 'what do the elderly learn through participating in the arts?' are still insufficiently answered by research.

At the expert meeting with researchers from various universities and colleges, as well as from various specialist fields¹, the following questions were central:

- What do the elderly learn from participating in the arts?
- How do the elderly learn? Do they learn differently from younger people?
- How can you determine the above and what research methods are best suited for this?

Examination of the concept 'learning'

Various perspectives

- Participation in the arts as a social activity that leads to learning in various areas, such as biographical, therapeutic, aesthetic
- Learning as an adaptation process of the aging individual
- Providing meaning (how does art function for the elderly/how can you lose yourself in art)
- Learning is not always progression
- Mutual learning: the elderly learn from teachers, and teachers learn from the elderly
- Participation in the arts as a discussion of and between generations (dialogue)
- What do people learn through participation in the arts and what makes the elderly

¹ Participants were associate lecturer E.H. Bisschop Boele (Healthy Ageing through Music and the Arts) from the Hanze University of Applied Sciences, Dr. C. van Campen (active ageing) from the *Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau* and Windesheim University of Applied Sciences, Dr. J.H.R. Lutters (art-based learning) from Windesheim University of Applied Sciences, independent researcher S. Franssen MSA (European policy on the elderly and the arts), emeritus professor R. Hortulanus (art with ambition, programme stimulating the participation of the elderly in the arts), Prof. Dr. D. Sikkel (elderly communication and consumer behaviour) from the University of Amsterdam and Dr. C.M. Vuyk (art policy and management, the arts in society) from the University of Utrecht.

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different?

- What happens neurologically or psychologically when playing music or actively participating in the visual arts? Different effects through different arts disciplines.
- Didactics: how do you guide the learning process? Connect with the identity of the elderly.
- Research-based art learning: the elderly come with a specific question
- The elderly are supposed to be able to do certain things better: the role of the elderly in society as vehicle of culture.

Fundamental or gradual difference between the manner of learning by the elderly and the young?

- Distinction between normative, gradual and fundamental:
Normative: accepted cultural ideas about how you should learn in the arts, namely achieving an as high as possible level (talent is key), get in the way of 'learning by the elderly'.
Gradual: the capabilities of the elderly are different (but then again there are also elderly people who learn quickly and young people who learn slowly; learn to respond to the individual)
Fundamental: in the pedagogic relationship between student and teacher the biographical baggage of the older student is very important.
- Employ a flexible biographical concept: biological age is not always the same as biographical age
- Make use of the theory of 'age-coding': individual and collective conceptualisation of age
- The elderly mainly learn through practice: younger people find it easier to remember things, whilst the elderly learn better by doing
- Other connections are formed in the brain of the elderly; learning occurs in an 'integrated' manner, connects with previous experiences; neuroscientist know more about this.

Research methods and theories

Research methods that can be validated

- A multidisciplinary approach from the perspective of the arts, health sciences (including neurology and care for the elderly) and social sciences is desirable.
- Combining quantitative and qualitative research: start on qualitative research on the basis of which variables or scales are determined, which in turn are validated in qualitative research.
- Field experiments: this helps to control the variables (skills, loneliness, social cohesion), allowing differences to be shown.
- Small-scale qualitative studies, such as the narrative approach and ethnographic approach.
- Biographical approach provides perspective: the older you are, the less homogenous the group; every person has an increasingly individual biography. And: what do you

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have to do to prepare for teaching the elderly? Therefore also invest in the young.

- Design research: use the creativity of art professionals.
- Embed the results of qualitative and quantitative studies in larger (European) panels in which questions are asked regarding health, phase of life, etc.

Theories that can be used when researching the elderly and participation in the arts

- 'Possible world theory': appealing to the imagination in research. Interesting for research with people suffering from dementia.
- Theory of Emerson (1841) on Self-Reliance: the arts develop skills and character. Learning these days is often only focused on skills. It would be good to measure how 'character' can be developed. (personality, identity, authenticity)
- Age-coding /conceptualisation
- Grounded theory: identifying condensation based on micro-observations.

Conclusions

- Looking at learning in a broad perspective: the elderly participating in the arts has an effect in various areas.
- Examine the learning process of the elderly and the learning process of teachers.
- Further research is required into the difference in the learning process of the elderly and that of the young and whether this is gradual or fundamental.
- Multidisciplinary research would have great benefits, but in the Netherlands hardly any has been carried out in this area.
- A combination of qualitative and quantitative research can lead to validated scales.
- Small-scale and more experimental research would provide perspective, such as ethnographic approach, narrative approach, biographical approach, design research and field experiment.

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