

Lifelong learning as a source of well-being and successful aging

Aprendizado ao longo da vida como uma forma de bem-estar e envelhecimento saudável

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Abstract

When we were born, we 'received' a script saying how our life would be. We would go to school, and then to the University, begin to work, marry, have children, then grandchildren and retire. What about after retirement? Nobody told us what to do for the next 20, 30, 40 years of our existence. In this scenario, education has an important role to keep older adults as active members in the society, increasing their quality of life. This paper explores the importance of educational programs for older adults; it describes some of these programs; and discusses the importance and necessity for planning these educational programs, according to the target audience, their needs, and wishes. Finally, this paper offers some recommendations and conclusions about older adult education according to the existing literature.

Key words

Lifelong Learning. Education for Older Adults. Educational Programs.

Resumo

Quando nascemos, recebemos um 'script' dizendo como será a nossa vida. Nascer, brincar, ir para a escola, para a Universidade, começar a trabalhar, casar, ter filhos, netos e se aposentar. E depois da aposentadoria? Ninguém nos ensinou o que fazer nos próximos 20, 30, 40 anos de nossa existência. Neste cenário, a educação tem um papel importante para manter os idosos como membros ativos da sociedade, melhorando sua qualidade de vida. Este artigo explora a importância de programas educacionais para idosos; descreve alguns desses programas; e discute a importância e necessidade para o planejamento destes programas educacionais, de acordo com o público-alvo, suas necessidades e desejos. Finalmente, este artigo oferece algumas recomendações e conclusões sobre a educação de idosos, de acordo com a literatura existente.

Palavras-chave

Aprendizagem ao longo da vida. Educação para idosos. Programas educacionais para idosos.

1 Introduction

With the emerging transformation of our aging population in the mid-twentieth century, we are facing a marked change in the age structure of our global population. The aging population is a global phenomenon; currently there are more than 600 million people over 60 years of age in the world, and it is anticipated that it will grow to 1.5 billion in 2050 (WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION, 2010). Advances in medicine, new technologies, as well as social and economic development have increased longevity, but longevity is not everything and we must think about the importance of living longer with a good quality of life. Therefore, whenever possible, older adults should be able to enjoy daily life with their family and community, and should be encouraged to be healthy, safe and satisfied active members of society, aging successfully. The elderly group will clearly grow. Their well-being in community and society will become more of an issue as time goes by for all generations, not just the elderly. Education has a key role in providing wellness, as it contributes to the elderly's citizenship, so they have conditions to remain active and aware of their aging process.

This paper proposes a reflection on the meaning of successful aging, and how education contributes to this, since it is an excellent tool to engage older adults as citizens in the democratic society. This paper will highlight older adults'

perceptions of lifelong learning, what are the motivations to participate, the perceived impacts of those educational programs on their quality of life and well-being, as well as the barriers they experience.

2 The impact of education on successful aging

In Western society, the search for meaning of successful aging began in 1944, the year that the American Social Science Research Council established the Committee on Social Adjustment to Old Age (TORRES, 1999). Besides starting the discussion on the definition, the work of this committee resulted in the development of measurement instruments that correlate to subjective well-being to autonomy, psychological well-being, coping strategies and generativity.

Over the past five years, emphasis was placed on the perceptions of the older adults' experience, associating this knowledge with the results of professional reviews. The result is a lack of agreement on the meaning of successful aging among researchers in the field (TEIXEIRA; NERI, 2008).

Rowe and Kahn (1987) proposed a distinction between typical and successful aging, suggesting that the study of the determinants of this process should observe individuals with physiological and psychosocial characteristics considered above average. In the following years, Rowe

led several studies that included topics of physical performance, cognitive function, and health.

According to Teixeira and Neri (2008), the main feature of healthy aging is the ability to accept the physiological changes caused by age. For Hansen-Kyle (2005), healthy aging refers to a personal concept, and planning should be focused on one's history, and physical attributes and individual expectations, thus constituting a journey and not an end.

Menec (2003) states that aging well depends on the balance between the limitations and potential of the individual, with losses occurring with aging. Successful aging cannot be seen as a single set of conditions, but as a general process of adaptation. According to the author, it is defined in terms of health, life satisfaction and happiness, coupled with physical and cognitive functions.

Aging well depends on the opportunities of the individual to enjoy adequate conditions of education, urbanization, housing, health and work throughout their life course. These are the basic determinants of health, longevity, activity, satisfaction, productivity, cognitive ability and social competence. The ability to seek and maintain contact and social support with family and friends, the capacity for self-regulation of personality, the level of individual motivation for seeking information and social interaction, all are indicators of successful aging (NERI, 1995).

Although there are different definitions emphasizing functional capacity, the following characteristics were also considered: life satisfaction, longevity, absence of disability, independence and positive adaptation. Predictors varied according to the authors, such as high educational level, regular physical activity, sense of self-efficacy, social participation and absence of chronic diseases. Thus, according to Menec (2003), educational programs for older adults has a direct relationship with the promotion of wellness and improved quality of life, because the insertion of the elderly in the context of lifelong learning becomes the active participant of their social time.

3 Overview of lifelong learning for older adults

3.1 Education for Older Adults

In the Vienna International Plan of Action (1982), education was understood as a way to assist in the adaptation of the individual as they age in a society that constantly evolves and requires more capacity, including labor. There are various recommendations with regards to education, most importantly, teaching geared to the elderly, respecting their learning pace and encouraging self-sufficiency and responsibility. It should also educate the population about the aging process, and promote the respect and acceptance of the elderly (ONU, 1982).

Twenty years later, the Madrid International Plan of Action (2002) stated that education is seen as a prerequisite for an active and full life, especially when aging. According to this plan, a lot of older people in developing countries reach old age still illiterate (ONU, 2002).

Educational programs for the elderly work as a tool to extend to old age, the socialization process that begins in childhood, goes through adolescence, and reaches adulthood. The elder continues to be considered as a subject and agent of socialization. In childhood and adolescence, updating the values and norms occurs predominately through school, in old age, education is viewed as an opportunity to upgrade and acquire knowledge and to participate in cultural, social, political and leisure activities. On the other hand, the older adult is considered more as an agent than as an object of educational activity (PEREIRA, 1980).

According to Peterson (1990), one of the goals of education is to provide opportunity for personal growth, through learning and occupation of free time, bringing benefits to their physical and emotional well-being, their quality life and providing opportunities for social contact. The author also suggests that education for older adults can work on promoting literacy and to develop new skills to solve current problems and prevent future ones. Browning (1995) highlights that educational programs targeted to the elderly provide benefits in their daily life, promote wellness,

revive motivators for learning, all of which can be hidden since their youth, and contribute to the acquisition of new cognitive skills through practicing activities.

Panayotoff (1993) states that education is seen as an activity that promotes well-being, interpersonal relations and provides a positive impact on the lives of older adults in relation to depression, social satisfaction and symptoms of aging. He concludes that education acts as a therapeutic space for the elderly, and shows that educational programs for older adults contribute to personal growth, provide opportunities for work in the community, promote the development of creativity and productivity, create spaces for socialization and acquisition of new knowledge, and can contribute to new ideas and positive attitudes toward aging.

Cachioni (1998) states that during the aging process, people are faced with new challenges and new demands. Physical limitations are added to those limitations created in society, such as ageism. The challenge is to keep older adults developing attitudes that lead them to overcome difficulties, and gain a greater quality of life.

Education, therefore, is a way to overcome the challenges posed by age and society, providing them with the possibility to acquire new knowledge and opportunities to pursue physical and emotional well-being. Brazilian educational programs for the elderly

seek to meet their needs, working with various pedagogical methods in order to raise their critical thinking, generating knowledge that goes beyond avoiding or delaying diseases (CACHIONI, 2002).

Lifelong Learning is not only for cultural renewal, but, more importantly it is a new requirement for individuals to retain their autonomy and remain active citizens due to the rapid changes in the society.

3.2 Programs and resources

According to Sloane-Seale and Kops (2008), there are three kinds of programs and resources for older adults: a) *Non-formal learning resources*, such as seniors' centres, churches, libraries, museums, art galleries, and legions; Organizations and groups that students use to facilitate their learning and whose main priority is not the provision of educational activities. b) *Informal learning resources*: aids to learning such as Internet, radio, libraries, newspapers, books, and magazines; c) *Formal learning resources*: Refers to learning opportunities located within institutions with a mandate to provide education, such as programs for seniors offered in school divisions, colleges and universities. Currently, there is a wide range of educational programs offered to older adults some of which will be described below.

3.3 University for Older Adults

Pierre Vellas, from the Toulouse University of Social Sciences in France, created the first University for Older Adults in 1973. Its purpose was to serve a population that had undergone two major World Wars. According to Vellas, the Universities for Older Adults was created with the purpose of contributing to the advancement of gerontological research, Continuing Education programs, health education and service actions to community (AIUTA, 1991; LEFÈVRE, 1993). Its purpose is not only to contribute to the development of life and health for the older adults, but to work for the progress of older adults. According to Vellas, the original goals of the University of Older Adults were to get the older adults away from isolation, to provide them with health, energy and interest in life and to modify their image in society (AIUTA, 1991; LEFEVRE, 1993).

In 1975, the University for Older Adults had expanded not only in other French Universities, but as well as in Universities of Belgium, Switzerland, Poland, Italy, Spain, Canada (Quebec) and the United States (California) (CACHIONI, 2002).

The English model of the University for Older Adults was born at Cambridge University in 1981, with a substantial modification of the French model. In this model, people who attend the program can act as both teachers and students with the opportunity to engage in research. It is based on the concept

of self-improvement, considering that experts from all areas get old and retire. Thus, benefit from contact with their peers and through this, collaborate with the university and society. Besides the elderly, professionals and non-professionals are involved in the program. Some benefits of this version are: the low cost to the participants, unlike the French version which had high costs for their students; easy access because the activities are offered in the City Halls, libraries, community centers, schools, homes, schedules, flexible methods and curriculum and no academic restriction for entry (SWINDELL; THOMPSON, 1995). Currently, it is estimated that there are about 1,200 universities around the world.

Canada offers a wide range of educational programs for older adults. The Universities of Older Adults are present in several institutions, working with both, the French and the English models. In Montreal, L' Institut Universitaire du Troisième Age, founded in 1983, caters to a clientele of people over 50 years of age and that have sufficient knowledge of the two official languages (English and French). The program's goal is to update knowledge; therefore enabling students to better manage their personal and social life. Students receive a certificate after fulfillment of 30 credits; and when they have completed 90 credits, they are awarded a Bachelor of Arts (CACHIONI, 2002).

The compulsory courses of this program are: Education and Senior

Citizens, Development and Learning in Old Age, Psychology of Aging, Creativity Techniques, Communication and Self-Expression, Art and Life, Psychology of Leisure and the Importance of Education (LEMIEUX, 1995). The purpose of these courses are to encourage right of every older adult to participate, to contribute as a protagonist of the development of the community, to make decisions, to cultivate new friendships, having a dignified and harmonious life.

I will now describe 3 specific programs in Manitoba – Canada.

3.4 Creative Retirement

Creative Retirement is a non-profit organization devoted to lifelong learning. They are firm believers in mental stimulation as a major factor in good health and longevity, providing interesting and informative programs for people of varied interests. It contributes to the well being of older adults and their communities by developing and offering innovative learning opportunities. Its goals are to enrich retirement years with educational programs, to make it possible for retired individuals to continue to be productive members of the society by sharing their talents and skills, by facilitating courses or by taking part in their Seniors and Students Together Program.

Their philosophy: people in all of their diversity have the right of access to education across the life-span; lifelong learning promotes well-being intellectually, emotionally, physically,

socially and spiritually; the well-being of individuals and the health of communities are interconnected; retirement presents a creative opportunity for individuals to enrich their lives and that of their communities; people involved in Creative Retirement are active in governing, shaping and delivering programs; and seniors have a very valuable role to play in their communities by sharing their knowledge and life experience (<http://www.crm.mb.ca>).

3.5 55 Plus Program

This is a University of Winnipeg program that stimulates older adults' minds and to remain an intellectually active, vital member of the community as they approach or enjoy retirement. The courses offered are: current affairs, politics, religion, history, music, science and literature.

The 55 Plus Program offers non-credit courses (without the tests and assignments) that deliver knowledge as diverse and interesting as the students who attend them (<http://pace.uwinnipegcourses.ca/55-plus-program>).

3.6 Age and Opportunity (A&O)

Age and Opportunity Support Services for Older Adults is a non-profit organization that provides specialized services for older Manitobans across the province. The goal of these programs is to empower and support older adults in the community. The programs support and enhance the physical, intellectual,

emotional, social and spiritual lives of older adults and actively promote participation in all aspects of community life.

A&O strives to be a recognized community partner in the development and delivery of innovative services that empower seniors to lead healthy vibrant lives (<http://www.ageopportunity.mb.ca/main/index.htm>).

4 Older adults participants

Older adults, who participate in educational programs generally are over the age of 55, have completed high school, and are predominantly female. There are several factors that contribute to the large percentage of women accessing educational programs; typically women outlive men (HURWORTH; CROMBIE, 1995), women leave employment at an earlier age, usually for marriage or family reasons (MIDWINTER, 1996). A third reason for the gender imbalance in educational programs for older adults has to do with men and women's marital status in old age. Men who have lost a spouse, for whatever reason, are more likely to remarry than women in the same situation (GINN; ARBER, 1995). Older women without partners, living alone, seek social companionship outside the home (WILSON, 1995). Typically the users are housewives and retired men. They are willing to share their life experiences, and to put into practice their acquired knowledge.

Nowadays, women are more free of the responsibilities of their maternal roles, and with free time, are further motivated by media to see educational programs as a way to slow down the aging process (NERI, 1995).

Men and women approach retirement differently. The two most common differences are that men are inclined to stay home and women more motivated to do things outside the home. Some women become free to do many of the things they have wanted to do all their lives and have not been able to, while widowers are inclined to “sit” in retirement. This suggests that this is a negative thing, which can be explained in terms of men and women being different in this regard and behaving according to their gender socialization and ideas about retirement. For some men their health problems at or after retirement compound the usual difficulties of retirement and add to their desire to “sit” (WILLIAMSON, 2010).

Gender differences in educational programs for older adults and the relatively low participation rates by men reflect a variety of issues centering on their retirement interests, the feminization of the educational programs, members’ marital status, and the social groups to which they belong in the Third Age. Clearly there is an important issue of gender differences in older adults participation in learning which warrants further investigation.

5 Older adults perceptions of lifelong learning

5.1 What are the motivations?

According to Sloane-Seale and Kops (2007; 2008) and Cachioni (2002), the motivations for older adult’s participation in educational programs are: a) *Learning for the sake of learning* - Gaining knowledge for its own sake. Students take part in learning activities because they are seeking for knowledge or they have an inner drive for knowledge and intellectual stimulation. They want to learn for the pleasure of learning; b) *Socializing* - older adult students participate in educational program to socialize, specifically, to be a part of a larger community, to find emotional supports, form friendships, meet new people, and feel at home in a group; c) *Achieving a goal* - students attended learning activities to achieve specific goals; to use their mental and physical abilities while learning about specific topics, such as health or world issues.

5.2 What are the Barriers?

There are a number of obstacles to participation in educational programs, such as personal dispositions, transport, level of education, socio-economic status, and language (HURWORTH; CROMBIE, 1995). Sloane-Seale and Kops (2008) and Cachioni (2002) describe the barriers as follow: *Situational Barriers* - conditions that limit participation, such as time, money, location, convenience,

transportation and mobility. *Dispositional Barriers* - relates to personal attributes and abilities, such as a negative attitude, fear, pride, or lack of self-confidence, that prevent participation. *Institutional Barriers* - requirements of an institution that inhibit participation, such as lack of adequate parking, program costs, inaccessible buildings, and lack of information about program availability. *Systemic Barriers* - Gender, age, geographic location, and politics of educational cost, can prevent participation.

5.3 What are the learning preferences?

Withnall (2002) suggests that older people enjoy learning, they welcome more informal learning methods, get intellectual stimulation from learning, cope better with constant societal change as a result of learning, and enjoy better health when they are stimulated by continued learning. According to Sloane-Seale and Kops (2008) and Cachioni (2002) the learning preferences of older adults are: *Experiential Learning*: which refers to practical, hands-on, learning-by-doing and interactive modes of learning. *Content/instructor-centred learning*: this is a preference for learning specific topics from content experts. *Self and learner-directed learning*: refers to student's preferences for directing and taking charge of their learning, such as trying something on their own.

6 Recommendations for adult learning

Education for older adults is seen as a source for successful aging because it stimulates and provides opportunities for mental and physical activities; it offers a sense of satisfaction and achievement; it opens up new opportunities for learning and friendships and it provides information on healthy living. It is important to understand the experiences of the older adult learners in order to create an adequate environment for learning.

7 Conclusion

After reviewing the literature, conclusions can be drawn. Education constitutes a fundamental right for older adult that proposes and provides meanings for social advances, recognition of old age, preparation for aging, training to face globalization, training for the workforce, and finally, allows the older adults to feel capable and integrated in the society, improving their quality of life.

Participation in educational activities is often seen as inherently good, worthwhile, and critical to individual and societal success because it promotes intellectual, physical, emotional, and social well-being. This should apply to our increasingly aging global population as well. Educational programs are seen as a great success in many countries, since they are creating opportunities for intellectual challenge and promoting the

welfare of older adults who are seeking to age successfully.

These programs can mean the creation of new friendships and continuing good relationship with older adults' family and neighbors, and even improved family relationships was seen as one of the most significant changes (NERI, 1993). Knowledge is a powerful source of enrichment and modulation of intelligence at any time in human life.

As described in this paper, participation in learning activities has a positive effect on successful aging, which is defined in terms of life satisfaction, happiness, good physical and cognitive function. Since the old conceptions of old age are changing thanks in part to educational programs geared to older adults, there is a need for further research into the characteristics of these age group and the effects of these programs.

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