

Socio-educational workshops

Talleres socioeducativos

Oficinas socioeducativas

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ABSTRACT: Socio-educational workshops for seniors have become relevant due to the development of new theoretical approaches, public policy, international conventions and conferences, interventions and research. The latter demonstrate the importance of lifelong education, learning and socialization for achieving a better quality of life. The richness of these workshops is based on its inclusive and socializing power. Their proliferation and diversification indicate the seniors' desire for participation and development. In view of its importance and growth, this article proposes a description of the main background, theoretical approaches, experiences and research on socio-educational workshops for the elderly.

Keywords: Socio-Educational Workshops; Seniors; Description.

RESUMEN: *Los talleres socioeducativos para adultos mayores han tomado protagonismo gracias al desarrollo de nuevos enfoques teóricos, políticas públicas, convenciones y asambleas internacionales, intervenciones e investigaciones que evidencian la importancia de la educación permanente, el aprendizaje y la socialización para el logro de una mejor calidad de vida. La riqueza de estos talleres se basa en su carácter inclusivo y socializador, y su proliferación y diversificación indica el deseo de participación y desarrollo de los adultos mayores. En vista de su relevancia y crecimiento, el presente artículo se propone realizar una descripción de los principales antecedentes, enfoques teóricos, experiencias e investigaciones en torno a los talleres socioeducativos para adultos mayores.*

Palabras clave: *Talleres socioeducativos; Adultos mayores; Descripción.*

RESUMO: *Oficinas socioeducativas para idosos tornaram-se relevantes devido ao desenvolvimento de novas abordagens teóricas, das políticas públicas, das convenções internacionais e conferências, intervenções e pesquisa, que demonstram a importância da educação ao longo da vida, de aprendizagem e de socialização para alcançar uma melhor qualidade de vida. A riqueza destas oficinas é baseada em seu poder inclusivo e de socialização. Sua proliferação e diversificação indicam o desejo dos idosos de sua participação e desenvolvimento. Dada a sua importância e crescimento, este artigo propõe uma descrição do fundo principal, abordagens teóricas, experiências e pesquisas sobre oficinas socioeducativas para os idosos.*

Palavras-chave: *Oficinas socioeducativas; Idosos; Descrição.*

Introduction

Education in old age is a relatively new topic in the current scenario. In the last forty years, there have been different experiences of intervention that address educational issues with older adults; also, the topic has gained an important place in international conventions and declarations on the rights of older people, and it has even reached the academic world, outlining research about the importance, reasons and benefits of participating in educational activities.

This article aims at analyzing different theoretical approaches, experiences and research on the socio-educational workshops for seniors. These group dynamics workshops are intended as a specific type of positive intervention including a non-formal educational situation where the only requirement is a minimum age. Even if the offer is heterogeneous, they are organized by a particular topic to promote socialization among peers, prioritizing learning attitudes, values, skills, and relevant behaviors for people's psychosocial development. In general, two pillars support these devices: active life and continuity of learning (Herrera, 2003; Villar, & Celdrán, 2012).

To develop the current information about the socio-educational workshops –seen from the learning approach throughout lifetime–, we present not only the sources but also the different conventions and assemblies that proposed educational measures for seniors. Furthermore, we introduce the wide range of topics offered, the methodology used and the role of the teacher/coordinator. Then, we provide the results of the research that specify the reasons why older people choose to participate in training activities and the benefits they get from them. Finally, we analyze the limitations and scope of the current proposals in order to outline future insight for educational intervention with older adults.

A brief history of the origins of the workshops

Education was one of the first actions that promoted older people's participation and independence; in fact, it is considered that learning throughout lifetime is a social right, highlighting the elderly as subjects with rights to keep updated and develop their potential. This training implies not only professional, but also personal development and enjoyment of leisure time (Pinazo, Lorente, Limon, Fernandez & Bermejo, 2010). Thus, educational approaches traditionally oriented to youth and adulthood, are now considered as a never-ending process. In this framework, education through a person's lifespan may be included in the continuing education approach, considered as:

A continuous process that proceeds throughout life, for a person to keep updated about economic, political, technological, scientific, artistic, cultural and environmental transformations of our world; achieving the highest individual and social development as possible, and encompassing all kinds of experiences and activities that are or may be carriers of education (Cabello Martinez, 2002, pp. 85-86).

Seniors' education has its origin in Europe and it is related to the development of the French model inspired by Pierre Velaz in Toulouse in 1973. In this city, the first University of the Third Age is created, linked to its continuing education service. This model university for seniors has rapidly spread throughout Europe (Villar, & Solé, 2007).

The First World Assembly on Aging - held in Vienna in 1982- gave a formal framework for the old age educational dimension to be recognized and also gave relevance to the achievement of a better quality of life. This meeting gave birth to the Vienna International Plan of Action on Aging, where 18 of the 62 specific recommendations referred to education. In turn, in 1991 the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 46/91, which included the United Nations Principles for Older Persons, based on the International Plan of Action on Aging. These principles are organized into five regulatory criteria of the elderly's rights, three of which relate to education and training: the *self-accomplishment* as a criterion implies full potential through access to educational, cultural resources, spiritual and recreational resources. The second criterion is *participation*, which involves sharing knowledge and skills with younger people and forming movements or associations. The last criterion is *independence*, including basic rights such as access to education and training.

Regarding this background, we see how the interest in seniors' socio-educational phenomena was shaped in the European Union, and expanded worldwide. In the Second World Assembly on Aging, which was held in 2002, the results of the first meeting were reviewed and a long-term strategies plan was approved (Limon, & Crespo, 2002).

According to Montoya (2002), back in 1996 over 3.000 universities around the world that offered programs for seniors were surveyed. In parallel, there are new fields of study, such as the so-called educational gerontology, "gerontologic pedagogy", or even the application of educational psychology expertise for the understanding of older adults' educational phenomena (Villar, 2005).

Workshops that suit all tastes (and much more)

Seniors workshops and courses offered by different public and private organizations have not only increased, but also diversified. This situation is observed in a growing number of countries covering a wide range of interests that provide many opportunities for the intellectual, physical, personal and social development of the elderly.

Beyond their apparent heterogeneity, the older adults' socio-educational workshops can be classified according to common characteristics. According to Villar, and Solé (2007), programs can be of two types: those that guide the compensation of losses associated with aging, and those geared to the growth and development of skills. These skills should not only compensate or prevent possible losses but also improve personal and social functioning. The authors also point out that in Spain the offer can be summarized in three generations of programs. In the context of the so-called "Classrooms for the Elderly", a first generation is oriented towards cultural promotion and a comprehensive training offered by schools. Organized by universities, in a second-generation program, workshops have a similar structure to regular master degree courses but adapted to older people. And finally, a third-generation program, similar to the above, which aims to integrate the workshop within the regular master degrees programs, combining specific courses for adults with others in which participants attend regular college classes.

On the other hand, in the book *Active aging and socio-educational activities with the elderly*, Lourdes Bermejo (2010a) classifies twenty-five seniors' socio-educational good practices proposals in five types of programs. The *transversal or generalist* program (socio-cultural practice, dependency and heteronomy prevention practice, preparation for retirement practice, intergenerational practice); the *fitness oriented* program (physical activity, diet and medication, prevention of domestic accidents, road safety). The *cognitive-emotional-psychological well-being oriented* program (sense of humor, reminiscence and personal identity, sexuality, memory, mourning etc.); the *socio-emotional well-being oriented* program (rights, volunteering, participation and management of senior centers, human communication, promotion of good treatment, personal development through leisure activities and games, etc.);

and *the instrumental or technological* program (new information and communications technology and other technological products etc.). In each chapter, the authors develop the proposed workshop, including theoretical foundations, methodology, dynamics and the suggested activities.

In Argentina, quantitatively and qualitatively speaking, the workshops have improved, increasing the number of people attending since they started (Soliverez & Dottori, 2013). From the educational field, eight out of ten universities across the country have developed various programs for seniors that promote academic, recreational and cultural activities (Yuni, 2011). One of the non-formal educational programs in the educational field is the University Program for the Elderly (PUAM), which draws on the French model. The PUAM pioneered in Argentina and throughout Latin America. It began in the city of Entre Rios in 1984 with the creation of a Department for the Middle-aged and Seniors. Since then the range of activities has rapidly multiplied, the number of participants increased and they received social and scientific recognition. The PUAM workshops function as self-managed projects with very low fees for participants (Zolotow, 1997).

A second area for the development of university non-formal education proposals are those from UPAMI program (University Program for Integrated Elderly), by an agreement between PAMI (Programa de Atención Médica Integral, medical insurance for retired people in Argentina) and various public and private universities.

The agreement starts in 2009 and has a top preventive target, which is the conservation of elderly's personal autonomy, their participation and exercise of their full citizenship (res. 1274-1209). All these being part of not only a process of continuous and lifelong learning as an intrinsic need to improve the quality of life and personal growth but also to ensure equal opportunities and the development of vocational and cultural values (Annex I, res. 1247-1209). At this early stage, agreements were signed with 34 universities. Since then, there has been an increase in the supply and demand for courses (res.730 / 12). The program shows an upward trend from 27 agreements, 182 courses and 3276 members in its first year of development, to 87 agreements, 1758 courses and 30,371 certified members in 2011, reported by the National Institute of Social Services for Pensioners.

Other examples are the workshops offered by the National Social Security Administration (ANSES), the Municipality of General Pueyrredón -the "Art workshops for seniors"- (Mar del Plata city), the "FAMAC" (Seniors Training Córdoba) belonging to CEPRAM (Development Center for the Elderly) and those offered by senior centers, among others.

The topics are predominantly recreational-oriented and technological updating; followed by a strong presence of language and cognitive stimulation workshops, presenting their own characteristics due to the freedom teachers have to build the program.

Apparently, there are no substantial differences between the topics offered by universities and those provided by other sources, since what prevails is not the disciplinary content. Unlike Spain, in Argentina we do not have socio-educational proposals that resemble a Bachelor degree or that are contained within this degree.

As for the goals, beyond the characteristics of each program and each workshop, all have the common objective of promoting personal growth, improving quality of life and achieving equal opportunities. Also, these workshops are inclusive as they are generally for free or low cost. Likewise, as they are group activities, they promote socialization and active participation in society, which is a basic human need that leads to empowerment, confirmation of self-identity and strengthening of self-esteem.

Finally, the obvious growth in enrollment can be considered as an indicator of the need to create more environments that respond to the elderly's interests, their motivations and their desire for participation (Urrutia, & Sans, 2006).

On methodology and the role of teachers

The methodology of these workshops is aimed at reducing the teacher-student asymmetrical relationship as well as promoting a more egalitarian and dialogic education through teamwork and cooperative education where seniors are able to take the initiative (Triadó, & Villar, 2008). Beyond the educational resource chosen, learning situations that are emotionally satisfying and focused on the participants' interests and wishes must be generated. They should also promote the seniors' prominence and their active involvement (Bermejo, 2010b).

The role of the workshops instructors can be considered, then, as a facilitator in the production of knowledge, and not as a transmitter of pre-set knowledge. According to Yuni and Urbano (2005), the key to the instructor's actions is to be an operator of the didactic transposition; a mediator who transmits academic knowledge into taught knowledge which is recovered and redefined from the experience and expertise of the participants, encouraging reflexivity through different means, resources and conceptual elements.

The methodology must be flexible, diverse, and especially significant; that is to say, it must be connected with the experiences, interests and prior learning of older people (Rojas, 2012). Finally, another key element is the professional training and specialization of those in charge of the elderly's training tasks, taking into account the characteristics of this age group and their different types of personalities, experiences, capabilities and skills (Yuni, & Urbano, 2008).

Reasons for participating in socio-educational workshops

One key factor in this point is the heterogeneity of the elderly, which is also among the reasons why they participate in workshops and they profit from them. However, there is a tendency in gender, age and educational level; the latter being an important predictor of continuity in the training system. Thus, some authors point out that in the classroom the percentage of women is higher than men, except in intergenerational programs, where the amount is equated (Merriam, & Caffarella, 1999; Villar, 2006). The usual average age of the participants is 70 years old and they usually have a medium-high level of education.

As for the results of several studies, Pinazo, Lorente, Limon, Bermejo, and Fernandez (2010) show that the reasons that lead seniors to participate can be classified in: cognitive interests; social interaction and interpersonal relationships; growth, personal satisfaction and enjoyment.

Meanwhile, Triado, and Villar (2008) suggest that the common trigger for older people is not only the development of skills, but also the achievement of other benefits such as the pleasure and satisfaction that provides the learning process, or the interaction with others.

According to studies by Montoro, Pinazo, and Tortoza (2007), in agreement with previous research on the European and US environment (Kim, & Merriam, 2004), the main reasons relate to improving their education, feeling active, being involved in a new activity, improving the quality of life and meeting people.

Another study delved into the reasons and benefits for seniors in Spain to participate in training activities and compared older adults who attended two university programs with different degrees of formality and requirements.

The results were similar among participants in both programs, and indicated that the most frequent reasons for attending were of cognitive and expressive nature: to acquire knowledge, to open their minds, and to learn just for pleasure. On the other hand, the perceived benefits were linked to the social and psychic aspects: to make friends, to increase their life satisfaction, and to feel joy (Villar, Pinazo, Triadó, Celdrán, & Solé, 2010).

In terms of gender, Solé, Triadó, Villar, Riera, and Chamorro (2005) found no differences between men and women regarding the perceived benefits, but there were differences in relation to the reasons why they got involved in the training activities. In men, the primary motivation was to increase cognitive ability, whereas in women the social aspect appeared more strongly (not to be alone, to develop bonds, the "widowhood"). In turn, women perceived themselves to be different from men, arguing, for example, not having been able to study because of the household activities they had to perform. Other studies link gender differences in educational participation by ascribed roles throughout history. In this sense, Ruiz, Scipioni, and Lentini (2008), hold that women positively value the possibility of learning more than men, but feel that "it is harder for them," while men resist such proposals for fear of appearing ignorant or making a fool of themselves. However, both obtain similar results when included in these kinds of proposals.

In Argentina, Yuni (1999) also found several reasons, among which stand out curiosity, learning to achieve goals, the need to readjust emotionally or maintaining good physical and mental condition. Also, from a study in Mar del Plata, several and different reasons lead the elderly to participate in these workshops.

The most frequent refers to an intellectual or personal search. In this regard, over 90% of participants considered as a fairly important or very important reason to "be mentally active" and "grow as a person." Also, between 70% and 89% considered quite important or very important, emotional and vocational reasons like "to have fun", "to be entertained" and "vocation or hobby". Other reasons were related to the leisure time, creating bonds, and improvement of health (Dottori, 2015).

As for the benefits of participating in socio-educational workshops, studies show that older adults perceive they obtain higher social integration (Montoro & Pinazo, 2005), better quality of life and greater self-worth (Villar, 2006).

There is also an increase in positive perception of aging and in emotional balance (Fernandez-Ballesteros, *et al.*, 2013). Nationally, the results also indicate an improvement in the social and psychological areas of personal development (CEPRAM, 2013; Dottori, & Arias, 2013; Lagarrigue, *et al.*, 2013; Yuni, Urbano, & Tarditi, 2012).

Finally, participation in social and educational activities is also considered a form of social inclusion that promotes empowerment and generativity (Dottori, & Soliverez, 2013). It enables the building of new social roles - mainly the role of student - defying negative stereotypes about aging and making a new position in society possible (Manes, 2012). In the case of the elderly, empowerment implies the belief in an alternative and active force against the traditional myths of dependence (Iacub, & Arias, 2011). While generativity could be summarized as the development of activities that produce goods or services of interest to the family, the community and/or society, among which are the civic participation and volunteering (Villar, 2012). Different researchers have shown that despite not being in a typically generative age - as it is the middle - aged group -, many of the older adults show generative behaviors and motivations (Urrutia, *et al.*, 2009).

Conclusions: challenges ahead

Throughout this article, we have made a summary of the available information regarding the socio-educational workshops for seniors. From a positive approach and in the context of learning throughout life, they have been defined and characterized from its origins until today.

The major conventions and assemblies that proposed educational measures with older adults were enumerated and analyzed. In addition, we stressed the heterogeneity of the topics offer, the methodological characteristics and the teaching role. Finally, the reasons leading the elderly to participate in training activities and the benefits obtained were thereby mentioned.

With this background in mind, the limitations and scope of the current proposals are analyzed and some future prospects are set.

As for the scope, it is important to note the wide body of evidence on the positive effect that such proposals have in the workshop participants; this is revealed in the multiplication and diversification of practices, as well as in the increasing number of participants registered.

This shows that learning and social participation are needs of these new older adults, who are more motivated, in better shape and who live longer than in previous decades. Therefore, they present needs that we have to address.

However, despite the diversification of the offer - which includes a great amount of interests- in most cases the emphasis is on personal growth, health, recreation and leisure, rather than in community participation and intergenerational nature. This may leave seniors who are looking for social participation unsatisfied (Villar, & Celdrán, 2012). It is necessary that the offer extend to other scenarios, including preparation for work entrepreneurship, and pre-retirement programs, volunteering, among others.

Also, considering the population participating in the workshops, we point out the need to rethink practices so that its reach increases into a more heterogeneous population, including a higher number of men and people of middle-low education.

In any case, the question is how to ensure that educational opportunities throughout life – understanding this as a social right - are achieved. This task implies an active role for governments, and public-private coordination with the different social actors involved. Universities should promote education and innovation in methods and topics, in addition to researching and providing information to assist in the development of policies and proposals (Rojas, 2012).

Another challenge lies in the training of teachers in gerontological knowledge, given the scarcity of this discipline in the undergraduate area. Consequently, there are few graduate programs on the subject.

Many of the teachers involved have no specific training, nor do they have basic on group dynamics, which are necessary to coordinate group workshops and take the role of facilitator.

Finally, from a pedagogical point of view, the practices should be designed and systematized so that they can be replicated. Methodological foundation should be based on gerontological pedagogy. Its objectives must be clear and the knowledge developed must be updated, inclusive, useful, and interesting for the elderly. Therefore, it is convenient to conduct evaluations of the practices during the process - to refine interventions - as well as at the end of it - to certify the program's effect.

With the aim of contributing to the design and systematization of new practices, in the following articles, we describe elderly positive interventions that address different aspects. In each case, the theoretical basis and the proposed activities are detailed.

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