



Community Education for active aging: Experience in construction from self-development

Educación comunitaria para un envejecimiento activo: experiencia en construcción desde el autodesarrollo

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ABSTRACT

Population aging is a global concern. Active aging is a must. The projects and actions that promote their development and sustainability must increase. Community education can contribute in a sustained way to active aging, from the conception of sociocultural projects. Villa Clara, a province in the center of Cuba, has very old Popular Councils. The *Consejo Popular Hospital-Chamberí* is one of them and constitutes the research context. This study aimed to identify the potential for designing a sociocultural community education project for the active aging of the elderly in this *Consejo Popular Hospital-Chamberí*. This qualitative research used the Methodology for Community Self-Development (MCS), which proposes a fundamental epistemological and practical paradigm to develop educational and transformative processes in communities. It is structured in five stages, of which two have been applied so far. We identified the recognition of the problem, the willingness to participate actively, the existence of available public spaces and the non-existence of a project for this purpose as some of the strengths and weaknesses that will enable the design of a future sociocultural community education project for active aging from self-development.

Keywords: community education, aging, communities, community development.

JEL Classification: I20; I29.

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RESUMEN

El envejecimiento poblacional constituye preocupación mundial. El envejecimiento activo es una necesidad, los proyectos y acciones que fomenten su desarrollo y sostenibilidad han de ir en ascenso. La educación comunitaria, puede contribuir de manera sostenida al envejecimiento activo, desde la concepción de proyectos socioculturales. Villa Clara, provincia del centro de Cuba, posee Consejos Populares muy envejecidos. El Consejo Popular Hospital-Chamberí, es uno de ellos y constituyó el contexto de esta investigación; con el objetivo de identificar las potencialidades para el diseño de un proyecto sociocultural de educación comunitaria para un envejecimiento activo del adulto mayor en el Consejo Popular Hospital-Chamberí. La presente investigación es esencialmente cualitativa y utilizó la Metodología para el Autodesarrollo Comunitario (MAC), la cual propone un paradigma epistemológico y práctico imprescindible para desarrollar procesos educativos y transformadores en las comunidades. Se estructura en cinco etapas, de las cuales fueron aplicadas dos, hasta el momento. El reconocimiento del problema, la disposición a participar activamente, la existencia de espacios públicos disponibles y la no existencia de un proyecto con este fin, fueron identificadas como algunas de las potencialidades y debilidades que posibilitarán el diseño de un futuro proyecto sociocultural de educación comunitaria para el envejecimiento activo desde el autodesarrollo.

Palabras clave: Comunidades, desarrollo comunitario, educación comunitaria, envejecimiento.

Clasificación JEL: I20; I29.

INTRODUCTION

Population aging is an issue of international relevance. Particularly for Cuba, where the aging rate of its population is high and tends to increase. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines active aging as: "the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security with the aim of improving the quality of life as people age" (Causupié, 2011, p. 10). Therefore, actions and projects that contribute to favor active aging are necessary and relevant.



Health, participation and security are recognized as the basic pillars of active aging. In terms of health, this implies the prevention and reduction of chronic diseases that have an impact on mortality and affect quality of life, which also requires accessible, high-quality health and social services designed with respect for this growing population group. Participation is directly related to opportunities for education and lifelong learning, and the possibility of active participation in activities for economic development, work and volunteering, encouraging and motivating their participation in the community and in organizations and institutions to which they can contribute their experience and constitute a strength. Protection as the third pillar is given in the responsibility to guarantee physical, social and financial security (Azcuay et al. 2021).

Active aging and community education must be united in the conception of community development projects, based on the potentialities that the community possesses, in the coincidence before problems that are recognized as common to the group, which integrates that community, makes it possible to develop public conscience and to unite in the search for consensus and solutions. "Public conscience cannot limit individual freedom, but it has to propitiate a set of actions in the face of reality. It is not a mere search for consensus, there are common situations whose actions can be shared" (Pérez and Sánchez, 2005, p. 326-327).

Active aging is based on a policy established by the WHO, and was originally understood as "healthy aging". At present, it incorporates other conditioning aspects such as social participation and security on an individual basis, including communities as the space where the participation of the elderly as protagonists of their own environment can be enhanced. Evidencing that it is possible to carry out actions, projects or strategies that allow promoting a more active aging of its beneficiaries (Troncoso-Pantoja et al. 2020).

While the Cuban social project legitimizes the need for healthy lifestyles and the right to active aging; public spaces do not sufficiently promote, from their design, use and enjoyment, the empowerment of older adults. Thus, they are not friendly to their use from transforming activities that contribute to both leisure and physical strengthening of the elderly in contribution to active aging. The alienation of older adults with respect to public space is exacerbated by fragmenting social practices focused on children, youth and adults. This is endorsed by stereotypes that pay increasing attention to the use of technologies that reinforce individualistic, selfish, competitive, non-collaborative and uncooperative behaviors.

Santa Clara, a city in central Cuba, has one of the highest aging rates in the country. In turn, its historical urban center "Consejo Popular Centro" is the most aged in the province of Villa Clara and in the same way, it happens with the Consejo Popular Hospital-Chamberí, where this research is carried out. The People's Councils are the organ of the People's Power, local, of representative character, invested with the highest authority for the performance of its functions. The Hospital-Chamberí Popular Council constitutes an important public enclave of the city, due to the concentration of educational (Serafín de Zárate Ruiz University of Medical Sciences) and health functions (hospital area) and the concentration of floating population in commercial work, among others.

This Popular Council has facilities and public spaces that can be used by the community, which due to their characteristics can contribute to good practices for active aging of older adults, because they are open spaces, outdoors, and for interaction with groups of different ages or generations. However, it can be seen that, in this Popular Council, these spaces are not used, nor is it known the existence of educational projects that intend to use them with the purpose of promoting active aging. The objective of this research is to identify the potentialities for the design of a sociocultural project of community education for an active aging of the elderly in the Hospital-Chamberí popular council.

METHODS

This research is essentially qualitative and is positioned in the Methodology for Community Self-Development (MAC). This methodology proposes an essential epistemological and practical paradigm to develop educational and transforming processes in the communities. From this theoretical-methodological vision, collective participation is generated, where the research population is no longer considered as a passive object but as active subjects, capable of changing their own reality by themselves, identifying their discomforts and contradictions, and their willingness to search for solutions to their problems.

The community is assumed as a quality of development based on the participation and involvement of the subjects, promoting critical awareness as a premise for change. The contradictions underlying the discomforts of everyday life are identified and building self-development projects considered "process of gestation of a qualitatively superior type of bond expressed in a growth in health where participation and cooperation are increasingly conscious"

(Zurbano et al. 2018, p. 22); hence the educational character of this perspective.

The proposed project is based on the MAC, which consists of the following phases:

- Initial exchange with the subject in need of professional action: the demand is made explicit between the researcher and the persons or institutions demanding community intervention and the initial plan of action is agreed upon.
- Exploration of the scenario or formulation of the pre-diagnosis: allows the analysis of the empirical data related to the problems of the subjects involved, obtained through the application of different methods, techniques and instruments, and confronts them with the initial theoretical references.
- Diagnostic process and search for solutions: it is carried out through the group reflection spaces, it allows to identify the areas that need to be the object of intervention.
- Evaluation: it has two dimensions: the evaluation of effectiveness (it analyzes the fulfillment of the proposed objectives) and the evaluation of impact (carried out in the long term, in which the real transformation of the object of research is assessed).
- Systematization: seeks to deepen and critically evaluate the intervention process, from the professional action, the methods used, to the results obtained, in order to improve the theoretical and methodological references used (Alonso et al. 2004).

The following methods are applied:

- Interviews: applied to key informants with the objective of identifying the potentialities and limitations for the development of active aging in the Consejo Popular Hospital-Chamberí and the need to legitimize transforming educational processes.
- Observation: it was applied in the areas that comprise the space of the Popular Council to identify the opportunities they offer and the uses they currently have.
- Focus group: it is developed with representatives of the Popular Council and older adults with the objective of identifying the existing potentialities and weaknesses for the future design of a project that contributes to active aging from community education.

The methods were applied to 45 subjects selected in a non-probabilistic, intentional way, as key informants of the community. Of them: 35 older adults, and 10 subjects: community representatives of the Popular Council, of the communities that make up this Popular Council and directors of the schools in the area.

RESULTS

The results obtained are presented from the stages of the methodology applied. In the first stage, initial exchange with the subject in need of professional action: a meeting was organized with the representatives of the Consejo Popular Hospital-Chamberí. Where the concern for population aging, the need to contribute with concrete actions for an active aging was evidenced, they recognize from the structure of the Popular Council and the community that they can carry out some project, but they do not have any designed. They explained that on multiple occasions they have been approached by inhabitants of the communities suggesting actions, but they have been isolated and have not been implemented.

The communities that make up this Popular Council have facilities and public spaces that can be used and enhanced as common spaces for various activities that contribute to the active aging of the population. The institutions, organizations and companies that are part of the People's Council show interest in supporting the research and contributing to the design of a future project.

In the second stage, exploration of the scenario or formulation of the pre-diagnosis, interviews, observation and a focus group were conducted. The interviews made it possible to identify that:

- Population aging is recognized as a growing social problem, which concerns and should occupy all those who can somehow provide solutions, alternatives and actions for the benefit of older adults and active aging.
- The representatives of the People's Council, institutions, organizations and older adults of the community are willing to support the conception and design of a future project that promotes active aging through community education.
- Older adults have experiences that make up a wealth of knowledge and expertise that they can contribute

- to the community and its development from the professions they have developed.
- The existence of institutions such as the University of Medical Sciences in this Popular Council is a strength that can actively contribute to the educational and training actions that promote active aging in the communities.
 - The Popular Council has facilities of the institutions and public spaces that can be used for the development of actions in the community and currently they do not have that use.
 - There are no known projects in this Popular Council that currently have active aging as a goal in their conception.

The observation method applied made it possible to confirm that in the areas that comprise the space of the Popular Council, there are currently no activities that contribute to active aging. Their existence constitutes an opportunity and being able to use these areas for the benefit of the community constitutes a potential. The focus group was convened and developed with representatives of the Popular Council and older adults. Group work techniques were applied at the beginning and end of this space; at the beginning, with the intention of recognizing all participants as members of a common group and focusing on the objective of the meeting. In the development of the focus group, concerns emerged such as: the increase in population aging, access to community services, facilities and options for older adults at the community level, the lack of socio-cultural and/or community projects for the insertion and participation of older adults of reciprocal growth (I contribute to the community and receive from it), there was evidence of willingness and interest in participating in the design of that future common project for the communities of the Popular Council; The group's willingness is vital for the conception of community actions or projects. As a result of the exchange, an outline was collectively constructed with the topics that were addressed in the meeting.

Figure 1.
Group Elaboration Scheme on Active Aging from Community Education



Source: Own elaboration.

Note: the figure appears in its original language.

This group dynamic made it possible to ascertain the concerns, discomforts and needs of the group, to learn about their willingness and interest in real participation in this research and in the conception of a future project, and to inquire about the existence of concrete ideas for actions to be developed. These ideas were reflected in the diagram in Figure 1.

In the closing, after explaining the results of the meeting and agreeing on the realization of a next exchange space, the participants were asked to express in a word or short phrase, the meaning of this space for them. Each participant was heard: hope, project, initiatives, commitment, opportunity, joy, encounter, experiences, were some of the expressions that marked the meeting.

Therefore, the results obtained in the first two stages of the methodology of community self-development, allow us to state that "human activity is mediated by possibility and reality, so development is neither ascending nor linear" (Riera et al. 2018, p. 134). The context, the critical analysis of reality and the recognition of the real possibilities that are possessed, are essential in the development projects that are generated from the community.

It is not possible to discuss the issue of aging as a social problem without listening to and exchanging with older adults, knowing their concerns, needs and willingness to participate in a sociocultural project in the community, to which they can contribute knowledge, experiences and common goals. Community self-development advocates a participatory and democratizing process as an alternative of community participation that emanates ideological commitment.

In the methodological process for community development, it is important to strengthen the organized participation of the population and to find solutions for the improvement of the locality, where cooperation, mutual aid and collectivity must be present. This is conceived and strengthened from the application of the methodology and its stages, where the community, the group participates in the collective construction of this project, and for which it is initially necessary to carry out a diagnosis that visualizes potentials and needs.

Community education implies the recognition of the subjects, of their possibilities of action together with the subjects who share and exchange with their community, facilitates the creation of projects in the face of community processes (Pérez and Sánchez, 2005). This is why community education, in alliance with community self-development, can facilitate the gestation of socio-cultural projects, from the flexibility provided by a systematic educational process, which encourages conscious and active participation, the exchange and discussion of common problems, and the search for consensus, for alternative solutions to the problems socialized by the participating group, which undoubtedly constitutes a significant learning process.

Community education recognizes in its projection lifelong learning as an element that transversalizes and sustains its essence, which applied to the topic of active aging is supported from the conception of Cambero and Díaz (2019): "An older adult who learns, is a citizen concerned about himself and committed to others, who promotes social change from life experience, thinking about his own generation and those to come" (p.120). Since learning has an impact on the quality of life, from the cognitive, emotional and general benefits it brings to each subject.

The existence of studies that endorse dissimilar strategies for active aging (Troncoso-Pantoja et al. 2020) offer the theoretical and methodological bases for the conception of new research that contribute novel and practical strategies for the treatment of this topic. Therefore, working on active aging from community education and using the methodology of community self-development with experiences of its application in multiple spheres of society, allows consolidating the bases for the construction of a future sociocultural project conceived from the principles of self-development and taking into account the pillars that support active aging (Alonso et al. 2004).

Taking advantage of the potentialities of the People's Council that emerged from the interviews and the focus group conducted in the research, allows fostering the participation of older adults and members of the communities, in spaces for social interaction, self-care and physical activity that favor the development of new motivations that transcend family contexts. This coincides with the results of the research by Abreu et al. (2020) on the educational needs for active aging, where they expressed that the potentialities offered by the community spaces in which they develop in their daily lives should be taken advantage of, thus favoring the development of sociocultural projects that contribute to active aging.

Making reference to a sociocultural project, a community project, a community education project, do not contradict the objective of the research, on the contrary, they enrich it in its purpose; since a sociocultural project is conceived using the cultural resources available in the community (Borges, 2020), it seeks transformation from participation and thus contribute to the gestation of development. The methodology of community self-development as evidenced here allows and facilitates the construction of community projects, where community education can be the axis, support and foundation for their conception. Therefore, in the purpose of studying population aging from community education, from self-development constitutes a potentiality in itself.

The criteria of Alonso et al. (2004), Pérez and Sánchez (2005), Zurbano et al. (2018) and Riera et al. (2018), allow understanding that both community self-development and community education, take into account and foster, awareness and critical consciousness as daily practices. They link cultural patterns and values present in the communities; which propitiates community actions of social transformation.

CONCLUSIONS

Active aging is a challenge that requires the participation and involvement of everyone, especially in the communities. Cuba, and specifically the city of Santa Clara, has very aged Popular Councils that require projects

that promote active aging.

For the conception and design of a sociocultural project for active aging from community education, a diagnosis is required to identify the real potentialities and needs, as a starting point for its creation. The potentials and needs found in the diagnosis applied in the People's Council where the research was carried out, ratify the group's willingness to participate, the existence of spaces for the realization of activities, the importance of conceiving the project from the participation and collective construction, as it allows and encourages community self-development.

The research is in progress and intends to advance by applying the stages of the community self-development methodology, up to the design of the project. This will allow the project to be conceived from the participation of the members of the community, their needs and interests, and to contribute to active aging through community education.

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