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The Cuban model for Higher Education of Older Adults: Generativity, social commitment and collaborative work

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Abstract

The present work is an approach to study the “Cuban model” for educating the elderly and its aim is to describe the main features of the experience developed by this country. The University of the Third Age is more than three decades old in Latin America, but none of the countries in the region can show a state educational policy regulating and orienting its development. Cuba is the only country that has designed an educational programme for Older Adults at national level. The model is the most outstanding one among the rest of the countries in the American continent. This research is based on documentary analysis and interviews held with leaders and managers of the Chair for Older Adults, who were located in different towns of Cuba. Results led to a reconstruction of a set of dimensions of the Cuban model, such as: the process of institutionalization, syllabus organization, the process of expansion and universalization, educators’ training strategies for elders. Finally, bearing in mind the features of Cuban

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political organization and gerontological positions it was possible to draw its future evolution and challenges faced by the Cuban model for educating Older Adults.

INTRODUCTION

Comparative analysis of educational institutions for Older Adults (OA), constitute an essential task for deepening various gerontagological practices and developing the construction of theoretical categories that may encompass this field of knowledge.

Many authors and researchers have surveyed educational plans for elderly people devised by institutions (Arnold & Costa, 1996; Clennell,S., 1988; Yuni, 2003). This heterogenousness is closely connected to socio-political processes and configurations, educational traditions preserved by different countries, and representations held about old age by institutions providing these services. The same research shows a wide diversity of institutional structures as well as gerontagological orientations among countries, regions or cultural communities; it also deals with the shape of differential circuits into those units of analysis (Yuni, 2005). However, such diversity is the result of the founding inspiration of education for the elderly based on the principles of Continuing Education for old people that was boosted by UNESCO in the 70s and based on the Faure report (1972). This promotion meant the inclusion of OA in the field of non-formal educational experiences (Yuni, 2003; Manheinmer et al, 1995; Majeski, Damond& Stover, 2007). The present work is an approach to what we call ‘the Cuban model’ for the older population. The socio-historical configuration of this model is derived from conditions generated by the political system. Cuba became a Socialist Republic in 1959 and the

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Communist Party became the dominant political power. Although some signals of political opening have been given during the last years, the regime is characterized by a strong concentration of political power on the state (at the central, provincial, and local levels). The government also strongly emphasized the conservation of socialist tradition on the basis of a thorough social planning, the low weight of private initiative in socio-economic life, and the controlling influence of the Communist Party in power over ideologies by means of various instances and mechanisms. Then, we could hypothesize that the Cuban model of education for OA was made possible on the basis of these structural conditions, in so far as this would be the result of a nationwide state policy.

The following sections aim at providing a description of the main characteristics of the experience developed by this country, which remarkably differentiates from the rest of the countries in Latin America. (see Yuni&Urbano, 2008). Its distinctive features are manifold and they will be the subject of our discussion throughout this paper.

I. ORGANICITY AND ARTICULATION

Organicity is the first feature of the Cuban educational model for adults; it is a metaphorical reference to the organic character of its design and implementation. While it also represents integration and interaction of a number of institutions of different nature, that have made possible the rise and development of this educational model. Besides, each social and political organization involved in its functioning fulfills different roles; thus, the emergence of this educational model as a totality is the result of their interactions.

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The Cuban experience in education for the elderly is a little more than a decade old. Cuba has the most aging population, both in Latin American and Caribbean countries, around 17, 4% of the population is older than 60; it is also the country with the highest rates of longevity as well centenarians in the region. (Marín Domínguez, & Fernández Suárez2001; CEPAL, 2009; Malagon, Guevara & Brenes, 2005).

For many years, non-formal education of Older Adults (OA) has been part of the most important advancements of Gerontology in this country. However, the rise of this educational device was made possible due to the confluence of institutions and people who, by the mid 90's, started organizing the University Chair for Older Adults (UCOA. In Spanish: *Cátedra Universitaria de Adultos Mayores*) in the University of Havana (UH); this is considered the germ of the experience on which the model is based.

The first university trait adopted by the UH was the creation of the chair devoted to studies and education of OA. For the Cuban Higher Education system the word 'chair' implies two traditional meanings: a) the room where a certain subject is taught and b) the special subject taught in a university by outstanding academics of the same institution or visiting professors especially for some particular subject. In this way, the 'chair' can deal with specific topics, in this case OA; from the point of view of teaching, as well as from investigation and extension services. Besides, the notion of 'chair' admits the contributions of many academics from other disciplines and faculties; thus, expanding its activities beyond the limits of the organizing faculty.

The UCOA was established in 2000; it was the result of the collaboration of the Faculty of Psychology, the Cuban Association of Educators, and the Cuban Workers Federation. It was this union that called on retirees and collaborated with the chair in its operative aspects (Orosa, 2006; Lig Long Rangel & Sanchez Proenza, 2006). , As we shall see later on, other institutions were incorporated as well as actors who also played an essential role in its development.

After the success of this chair of the UH, the Cuban Ministry of Higher Education demanded that each of the nine existing universities in the country created a similar chair. The aforementioned decision implied the formalization of the experience, the transformation of an institutional experience into a ‘national model’ of non-formal education for OA. Therefore, the scope of the ‘national model’ was established in all regions of the country, as well as the systematization and formalization of an almost uniform curricular and pedagogical design (Lig Long Rangel, 2004).

II. THE CURRICULAR DIMENSION

The main activity of this chair for OA is the annual course lasting nine months and organized under the pattern of modular structures. The particular feature of these curricular offers is based on the programme of the chair, it deals with subjects closely connected with oldness and aging; the approach is made from a multidisciplinary and integral perspective (Román González, 2006). The different modules consider various subjects such as: bio-psycho-social changes of aging, sexuality, family relationships,

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nutrition, etc. Similarly, the programme includes the consideration of social subjects and current events, as well as recreation and leisure activities.

The programme designed by the UCOA works as the core for all universities, nevertheless, each of them can introduce further adaptations according to their own particular and local needs, the profile of the university, and the sort of institution in which the courses are given. In order to officially accredit participation in these courses, participants must submit an academic research paper (thesis) about a subject of their choice; this is generally connected with topics on aging or any other of a social nature. This work represents personal investigation carried out by participants under the guidance of an advisor; once it is finished it is evaluated by a board of examiners and defended publicly. The fulfilment of this requirement implies the end of the course and the achievement of the status as a graduate from UCOA.

Once the annual course is over, the faculty offers what are known as “Courses of Continuity” or Post Basic Courses, they consist of in-depth study of various subjects, on the basis of the participants’ interests. These courses greatly differ from those of the Programme, which is tightly structured. They are characterized by their flexibility, thematic variation, and the deepening of methodological strategies of a more participating kind by OA.

III.UCOA AND THE DYNAMICS OF ITS EXPANDING OFFER

The quick expansion and implementation of the UCOA all over the Cuban territory, is recursive with university policies of the last decade (Lig Long Rangel, 2006). In fact, within the framework of policies for the generalization of Higher Education, universities made agreements with municipalities in order to implement careers and university activities in each of them. In every case, a model of co-management and collaboration between local governments and institutions had to be applied. Consequently, there are university sees in the most important localities in which some UCOA has been established (Benitez Ortiz y González Velasquez, 2008).

On the other hand, the particular features of the socio-political model had a synergistic effect as a consequence of university actions; thus, they favoured inter-institutional and inter-sectorial articulation. The economic situation imposes high operative restrictions; and within this framework, the state tries to make its resources more effective through the confluence of different sectors and institutions (Coyula, 2010). For example, some subjects, pertaining to the programme and carried out by the UCOA, are organized, developed and dealt with by professionals from the health area and classes are given in hospitals or health centres. In this way, the preventive character and promotion of health institutions receives feedback; something similar happens with other public and/or social sectors. These institutional factors explain why there were 90.000 graduates during its first decade of operation. Nowadays, there are 694 UCOA classrooms distributed in urban and rural areas, as well as in prisons.

IV. THE GERONTAGOGICAL APPROACH AND THE TRAINING OF TRAINERS

The Cuban model of non-formal higher education for OA provides seniors with a central role as political subjects contributing to social transformation. Similarly, the model adopts a prospective view of old age as a social category having its own needs, that is derived from increasing longevity and strong ideological and political commitment. This viewpoint has left deep traces on their own social participation. From the perspective of gerontagogy (Yuni&Urbano, 2005), the chair promotes images of older adults as active subjects of law, socially committed. It also bases itself on the generativity of older adults so as to display its actions. Those seniors who carry out tasks as trainers show a deep commitment with the fate of their communities, they feel themselves co-responsible for intergenerational bonds. Besides, they carry out their practices under the ideals of social commitment and equality that marked their youth and adulthood; therefore, they give high priority to education as a tool contributing to socio-cultural transformation (Lig Long Rangel, 2009).

The adoption of this gerontagogical position can be seen in the different organizational levels and in specific empowering practices, of which we selected the most outstanding ones:

- 1) OA participate actively in the management of the chair; they are even members of its executive committee, along with the professional academic appointed as head by the university.

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Seniors are also in charge of arranging for specific needs of the teaching staff and looking for space so as to have classes conducted.

They are often asked for their opinions so as to evaluate activities as well as to learn about their needs and particular interests.

Senior graduates often become, in many cases, trainers for volunteer and solidarity work.

They are also often involved in action-research tasks or the systematization of its practice within the context of the chair.

OA also participate actively in the spreading of information regarding tasks performed by the chair, subjects dealt with, and socio-cultural entertaining activities.

Human resources, who are in charge of carrying out academic tasks, come from the teaching staff of various universities; particularly those who are assigned tasks and duties connected with academic management and research. As it was mentioned earlier, professionals coming from other institutions also collaborate. However, OA, who collaborate as entertainers or teachers, constitute the main human capital for the chair (Lig Long Rangel, 2009). Although the Cuban model could be considered within the frame of an inter-generational approach (as long as it includes as teachers and entertainers people of different ages), it achieves greater generational weight when

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seniors become the trainers and managers of the large number of classes taught.

Recruitment of senior trainers is done among graduate groups of the annual course; it includes not only retired professionals but also community leaders concerned with the growth and development of this chair. Senior people exercising community leadership are generally accepted as new teachers and coordinators.

The improvement in the training of OA as trainers has been brought about by means of the constitution of a tutorial system called ‘pedagogical family’. This “family” is made up by people having different qualification levels, who have performed various roles in different activities of their social lives (e.g. a professional, a peasant, a worker, a public official, a teacher, etc.). This family delves deeply into subjects making up the various modules of the programme carried out by the chair; they also learn notions about leadership, how to lead groups, and so on. The pedagogical family is also in charge of making a situational and contextualized assessment of older adults living in the neighbourhood. The results of this analysis become useful tools for the proposal of future and necessary adaptations (Díaz, 2009)

Thus, the family becomes a formative resource that supports egalitarian ideals for this Cuban generation, by favouring the integration of social class differences (Orosa, 2001). This formative device also contributes to the nationwide definition of the model, since it strengthens not only the curricular structure but also the pedagogical proposal by

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practical tools for the development and implementation of classrooms for OA (Román González, 2006).

V. PROSPECTIVITY AND CHALLENGES OF THE CUBAN MODEL FOR OA

It took Cuba a little more than a decade to develop a model of non-formal higher education for OA; this model was devised along with the convergence of different institutional and socio-political factors. Its special characteristics widely differentiate it from the rest of Ibero-American countries. The particular features of this experience, which are largely connected with the current political situation, lead us to talk of 'model' because of its nationwide application; its high level of formalization and standardization regarding its curricular and pedagogical organization.

The distinctive features we have reviewed show good institutional practices (Palmero Cámara & Jiménez Eguizábal, 2008; Formosa, 2005), such as the following:

- Organicity, articulation, institutional and sectoring integration in the different government levels.
- There is a national proposal for development and extension of non-formal educational opportunities for OA as devised by the UCOA.
- Flexibility, pertinence, contextualization, and creativity are outstanding features of the curricular proposal as well as the methodological options encouraged for working in class.

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OA contribute with a strong component of self-management and participant management with UCOA, in which academic and extra-academic actors also take part, besides OA.

Challenges to the model's further implementation are:

The UCOA should adapt to the contextual changes that are being undergone within the scope of the Cuban state and its society as a whole. It is this transformational context, the university situation, and the impact of the socio-economic crisis over family budget, and answers from the state, through its social policies, that create a new structural scene as an adjustment frame affecting the UCOA. The chair has lately made a turn towards the implementation of the Post Basic course dealing with inter-generational relationships in families, which represents an effort to respond to challenges sent from society. Although it does not obey to explicit regulations it has produced certain standardization, both territorial and thematic, of the Post Basic course. This course has also concentrated on analysis and investigation of inter-generational relationships; a space that reproduces at a micro-social level hard conflicts, as well as further critical issues of structural nature.

Besides, socio-demographic aging in Cuba shows some peculiarities which, in other words, mean a challenge to be considered under any prospective policy. Seniors make up a collective group becoming more and more numerous and enjoying good health and longevity; they also show good educational levels and a strong social commitment (Coyula, 2010). Qualitative changes in the public attending the UCOA are mainly made up by the group of OA (especially housewives); they are not retirees from union sources,

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they belong to different social organizations, particularly those that originated the UCOA.

The connection of universities, the Workers' Central Union of Cuba, and the Teacher's Association is being redefined due to the growth and development of the UCOA.

In spite of the extraordinary growth and territorial expansion of the chair all over the country, ever since its creation, there is a need for strengthening its institutions. This is so, as regards universities' commitment with their resources and conditions to fulfill their tasks.

The participating nature of UCOA brings about secondary effects for academics, since they are not deeply involved in activities carried out by the chair. Thus, one of the challenges is the encouragement of greater involvement as a multi-disciplinary support in teaching and investigation activities. This challenge represents a complement to the need Cuban universities have for constant improvement and the search of new ways of mobilizing and channelling OA's generativity into the participation and commitment of this first decade. During the last years, there has been a big boost given to the participation of psychology students in activities connected with teaching and researching in different branches of UCOA; it is an effort to get would-be professionals involved in OA's issues.

The 'national' character of the model has been stressed throughout this work, as well as the organizational, institutional, and curricular factors that contributed to this achievement. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that some practices must have been

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carried out in order to answer to the contextual features and areas of implementation of classes, particularly those concerning urban and rural factors. In this sense, one of the challenges to be faced is the appraisal of the various experiences developed within the frame of the UCOA.

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