Promoting Health for Older Adults Through Education

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. Currently there are more than 600 million people over 60 years of age in the world, and it is anticipated to increase to 2 billion by 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. Yet many older adults around the world do not achieve this outcome. Brazil has a population of 206 million (IBGE, 2013). The percentage of the population over 60 increased from 9.3% in 2003 to 12.6% in 2013. There are approximately 25 million people over 60 years of age, a group now representing over 10% of the Brazilian population. This group will clearly grow and their health and well-being in society will become more of an issue over time for all generations, not just the elderly.

The issues related to aging are just as relevant in Canada, as demonstrated by the 5 million people over the age of 65 living in Canada in 2011, which represents 14.8% of the total population (Statistics Canada, 2011). Furthermore, it is estimated that this number will grow to between 9.9 million and 10.9 million older adults by the year 2036. Statistics Canada states that those aged between 60 to 64 years old, otherwise known as the baby boomer generation, currently represent 27% of the total population and will represent the fastest growing age group of this growing population. This trend is expected to continue for the next few decades and will signal important new changes to Canadian society, specifically in relation to older adults’ active engagement in education, as this enables them to be healthier and active citizens.

I believe that education is an excellent tool to engage older adults, and plays a crucial role in promoting older adults’ health and well-being. Health promotion is defined as “a process enabling people to increase control over and to improve their health” (WHO, 1986). Learning about health promotion can empower older adults, transforming them into knowledgeable participants and managers of their own care (Gilford, 1988).

In response to this evidence, my PhD research will explore how older adults perceive education that has been designed for them in Brazil and Canada, and how they understand it to be linked to healthy living and well-being. This will build on research I completed in Brazil for my Masters of Education where I interviewed educators on what they thought was important about educating older adults, and how best to do so. In Brazil, I will interview older adults engaging in classes offered by the Universidade da Melhor Idade (a University Program focusing on older adults), family members and managers/coordinators of the program. For the Canadian context of my research, I will interview Canadian older adults who are par taking in a wide range of educational programs and affiliated managers/coordinators there as well; such as, continuing education programs that are offered at the University of Manitoba and University of Winnipeg, as well as community based programs.
By engaging older adults in their communities through a range of education and training programs, they will be seen as a vital resource, building strong intergenerational relationships and communities through learning. Improving the health and well-being of older adults through active learning and engagement may also reduce other costs associated with an increased use of health care services as we age. Recommendations may work towards improving not only the daily life of older adults as they engage in education in their communities, but it also has the potential to improve the lives of those around them as well (Menec, 2003; Sloane-Seale & Kops, 2008)

**Objectives:** The purpose of this study is: a) to learn more about and be better able to describe the overall impact of education in the lives of older adults; b) to listen and share what older adults imagine the future potential impact of education is for them, including for the concept of healthy living; and c) to delineate recommendations for curriculum development as well as strategies to expand and develop the state of education for older adults with the focus on healthy living as an outcome.

**Method:** I will use qualitative research methods to learn directly from older adults participating in educational programs. In this study, I will use ethnography, because it allows the researcher to observe a cultural setting, using a diverse set of data collection tools. The purpose of the study will be met through the use of naturalistic, descriptive, inductive, and investigative inquiry, aimed to better understand and relay information from the perspective of older adult participants of educational programs, their family members, instructors and coordinators of these programs. The settings of this study will be educational programs for older adults in Winnipeg-Canada and Campo Grande-Brazil. In this study, as an overview, I will conduct individual interviews, focus groups, collect archival data and take field notes. I will do this by entering the aforementioned educational programs for older adults to obtain data from classrooms and resource rooms. The qualitative data will be highly descriptive and provide quotes, real examples, and detail so that the readers can be brought to understand participants’ perspectives about their experiences participating in these programs (Eisner, 1997, Berg, 2007, Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

**References**
Sloane-Seale, A. & Kops, B. (2008). *Older Adults in lifelong learning - Participation*

