

Inclusion of the theme “Health of older people” in the Nursing, Physical Education, and Nutrition undergraduate courses of public universities in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

A inserção da temática “Saúde do Idoso” nos cursos de graduação em Enfermagem, Educação Física e Nutrição das universidades públicas do Rio de Janeiro

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RESUMO

Objetivo: Analisar a formação no que se refere à Saúde do Idoso em três dos cursos superiores da área da saúde das universidades públicas do Rio de Janeiro, que fazem referência direta aos idosos em suas Diretrizes Curriculares Nacionais. São eles: Educação Física, Enfermagem e Nutrição. Método: Foram realizadas entrevistas com docentes que mantêm relação direta com a temática em suas atividades acadêmicas, tendo sido discutidos o perfil docente, a estrutura e conteúdo curricular das atividades acadêmicas e concepções sobre a inserção da temática na formação profissional em saúde. Resultados: A temática ainda é pouco abordada na formação universitária nos cursos estudados. Segundo os docentes, as principais causas para a pouca expressão da saúde do idoso nos currículos foram o número reduzido de docentes na área, a própria formação a que foram submetidos que também não foi suficiente em relação à temática e o fato do envelhecimento populacional ser algo relativamente recente no país. Conclusões: Os docentes envolvidos mantêm pesquisas e atividades isoladas, havendo a necessidade do estabelecimento de parcerias e redes de cooperação mais consistentes para o maior desenvolvimento e visibilidade da área.

Palavras-chave: Educação Superior; Envelhecimento; Saúde do Idoso; Idoso.

ABSTRACT

Objective: To analyze education in regard to “Health of older people” in three undergraduate courses in the health area at public universities in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, whose National Curriculum Guidelines make a direct reference to this theme, namely, Nursing, Physical Education, and Nutrition. Method: Data were collected through interviews with teachers who have a direct relationship with this theme in their academic activities. These interviews discussed the teacher profiles, the structure and curricular content of academic activities, and the views on the inclusion of this theme in health professional education. Results: “Health of older people” is still little addressed in the university undergraduate courses investigated. According to the teachers, the main causes of the poor relevance of this theme in the curricula are the reduced number of teachers in the area, the education they have received, which was also not sufficient in relation to this theme, and the fact that population aging is a relatively recent phenomenon in Brazil. Conclusions: The teachers interviewed conduct isolated research and activities on “Health of older people”; therefore, there is need to establish more consistent partnerships and cooperation networks so that there is greater development and visibility in this area.

Keywords: Higher education; Aging; Health of older people; Older people.

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INTRODUCTION

It is desired that the contents addressed in the education of health professionals with regard to the theme “Health of older people” be operationalized to provide this population with comprehensive care, which involves the understanding of aging as a collective and complex phenomenon. To this end, there is need to focus on more than the diseases common to aging and to contemplate, among others, the social aspects and public policies aimed at older people that provide for the adequacy of curricula, methodologies, and specific teaching material for the education of health professionals, aiming to comply with their guidelines (BRASIL, 2006).

Education that does not include such aspects entails professionals who are not very determined and are unable to understand and cope with the vulnerabilities inherent in this population.

Ayres et al. (2020) defined three categories of vulnerability: individual, which comprises the biological, emotional, cognitive, attitudinal and social aspects; social, which is characterized by cultural, social and economic aspects that determine the opportunities to have access to goods and services; programmatic, which refers to the social resources needed to protect the individual from risks to their integrity and physical, psychological and social well-being.

The aging theme is relatively new in the initial education of undergraduate students, and has been gradually incorporated into higher education institutions by means of interdisciplinarity as a lasting proposal for the organization of their curricula (AGLIARDI et al., 2020).

International studies addressing the education of health professionals in regard to “Health of older people” have pointed out weaknesses in the teaching of this theme, or even the absence of its contents in undergraduate curricula, and the negative consequences for the care of older people (ALSENANY; ALSAIF, 2014).

A study conducted by Alsenany and Alsaif (2014) with the objective of knowing the attitude of Nursing teachers towards older people and their reflections on Geriatrics and Gerontology in undergraduate curricula in Saudi Arabia, highlighted that Saudi Arabian Nursing curricula should include more extensive content in these fields of study, as well as clinical experience with older people.

According to Oeseburg et al. (2013) Dutch health professionals, especially those working in primary care, are challenged with a paradigm shift in the emphasis from

disease treatment to health promotion. Those authors emphasized that interdisciplinarity is a necessary aspect to carry out this change in professional attitude, aiming to provide effective, integrated and well-coordinated care for older people.

Mateos-Nozal et al. (2014) conducted a study comparing the Spanish regulations with the European recommendations for the undergraduate teaching of Geriatrics and Gerontology, and concluded that Spain adopts only a third to a half of such recommendations. They considered that it would be convenient for the country's official requirements to converge with the European recommendations, which is a task to be carried out by the Spanish health schools.

In Australia, a study carried out by Flicker (2013) pointed out that, although there has been great progress in the education of health professionals in aspects inherent in Geriatrics and Gerontology in the country, even more efforts focused on health education are needed to face the aging of the population.

The lack of specific education in this area has negative consequences for health professionals in Brazil. According to Montanholi et al. (2006) health professionals often do not see older people as individuals who have needs different from those of other adults and, consequently, their students are not encouraged to apply specific knowledge and concepts related to “Health of older people” in their care dynamics. Those authors warned of the need to develop academic activities that not only inform about aging, but also educate professionals to respect the limits and peculiarities that result from aging, making them able to recognize the physical, emotional and social changes of older people in order to better assist them.

In Brazil, Willig et al. (2012) found that education and specific training in “Health of older people” in the country are deficient, and that the legislation aimed at this population, although well-structured and advanced, is incipient in practice. Those authors also emphasized that knowledge about the aging process is not present in most of the curricula of undergraduate courses in the health area, and that this fact, together with the lack of consistency between higher education institutions and the new demographic and epidemiological reality in Brazil, generates a shortage of human and material resources directed to the care of older people, which hinders the interdisciplinary and multidimensional approach advocated by the National Policy on Health for the Elderly (BRASIL, 2006).

In view of the need to think about the education of health professionals regarding the aging process, this study aimed to analyze the inclusion of “Health of older people” in three university undergraduate courses whose National Curriculum Guidelines make a direct reference to this theme, namely, Nursing, Physical Education, and Nutrition.

METHOD

Data were collected through interviews with teachers from the Nursing, Physical Education, and Nutrition courses of five public universities in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, that offer these undergraduate courses: Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), Fluminense Federal University (UFF), Rio de Janeiro State University (UERJ), Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO), and Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRRJ).

After selection of the universities and courses, personal contact was sought with their respective coordinators, who authorized the study and named the teachers who were linked to the "Health of older people" theme according to their disciplines, projects, internships, or any other action that involved the older population. Next, the referred teachers were contacted to schedule the interviews, which occurred between September 2014 and April 2015, based on a pre-defined script.

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (CEP) of Sergio Arouca National School of Public Health, Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (ENSP/Fiocruz), through opinion no. 901813. All participants signed an Informed Consent Form (ICF) prior to study commencement, and all 21 interviews were recorded and later transcribed and analyzed by the researchers.

Chart 1: Distribution of interviewed teachers according to undergraduate course and university, state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2015

Undergraduate course	Number of interviewed teachers	Teacher affiliation
Physical Education	5	UFRJ (1) UFRRJ (2) UERJ (1) UFF (1)
Nursing	11	UFRJ (3) UERJ (1) UNIRIO (2) UFF (5)
Nutrition	5	UFRJ (3) UNIRIO (2)

The propositions of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (2019), especially on the notions of field, agent and position, were used as a theoretical framework for analysis. According to Bourdieu, field is the social space of competition and internal dispute in which the social position of its agents is determined, and where, for instance, the figures of “authority”, holders of the largest capital, are revealed. The position of the agents, in this case, the teachers who were the study subjects, was identified through analysis of the field.

The thematic analysis proposed by Minayo (2014) was used to assess the results. This analysis consists in identifying the nuclei of meaning that comprise the communication, and whose presence or frequency provide a meaning to the object in question. After reading the transcripts of all interviews, these nuclei were divided into the following categories, which were used to analyze the results: (1) teacher profiles and their lines of research; (2) content and nature of the academic activities related to the theme in question; (3) views of the teachers on the inclusion of the study theme in higher education.

RESULTS

All teachers interviewed had professional education corresponding to the course to which they were affiliated, that is, they were nurses, nutritionists, and physical education teachers. Among the 21 teachers interviewed, 17 had doctoral degrees (three of them also had post-doctoral degrees) and four had master’s degrees. The qualifications of the participating teachers according to course were as follows: Nursing - five doctors, three postdocs, and three masters, Physical Education – four doctors and one postdoc, and Nutrition – four doctors and one master.

Chart 2 shows the distribution of teachers according to the position held at the university.

Chart 2: Distribution of interviewed teachers according to the position held at the university, state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2015

Undergraduate course	Associate Professor*	Assistant Professor**	Lecturer***
Physical education	1	3	1
Nursing	4	4	3
Nutrition	1	4	1

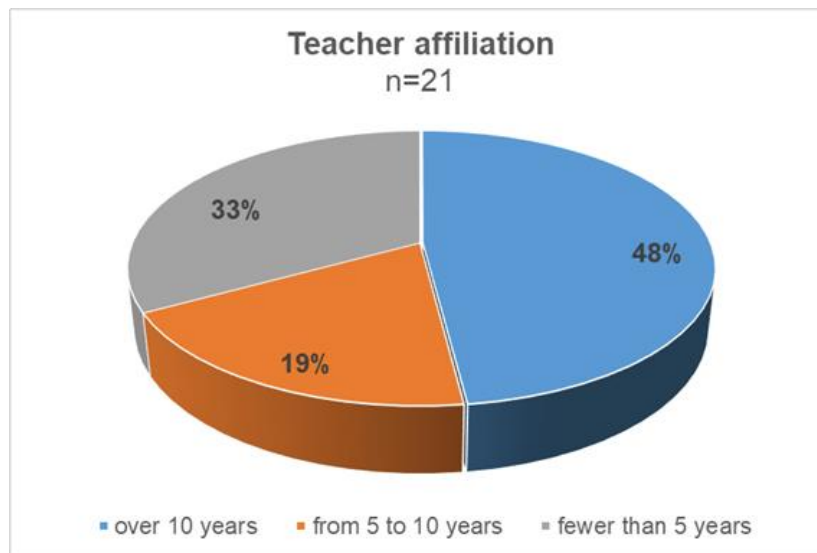
*Professor with a doctor's degree who has been in the teaching career for least 8 years.

**Professor with a doctor's degree.

***Professor with a master's degree.

Most respondents in the Nursing course had been with their universities for over 10 years, whereas in the Physical Education course, most of them had between five and 10 years of experience in their universities. As for the Nutrition course, most teachers had been affiliated to their universities for at least five years. Still regarding the Nutrition course, it is worth noting that part of the teachers interviewed belonged to a newly opened campus located in the interior of the state. Graph 1 illustrates the teachers' time of affiliation to the universities

Graph 1: Distribution of interviewed teachers according to time of affiliation to the university, state of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 2015



The study sample was composed mostly of women (76.2%), and the mean age of participants was 46 years – the youngest and oldest teacher were 26 and 69 years old, respectively.

The nature of academic activities on the theme in question varied according to the course.

There was a consensus among the interviewees that “Health of older people” is relevant to the education of health professionals and that this theme is undervalued in the curricula of their courses. When asked about the possible reasons for this devaluation, it was possible to verify similarities as well as distinctions in the teachers’ explanations according to the courses to which they were affiliated.

DISCUSSION

Position of the teachers at the universities assessed

Regarding the general teacher profile, the interviewed professors from the three courses held average positions in their universities - they were Lectures with a doctoral degree. None of them were Full Professors, that is, the top of the university career, and only one of the interviewees occupied a leadership or coordination position. According to Bourdieu (2019), and considering that the hierarchy of disciplines in a scientific field is mediated by factors such as their approach to the field of power and the cultural capital held by various agents, the agents who tend to have more visibility in the field, the most prestigious and recognized by their peers, are those who, in addition to scientific authority, have a certain proximity to the political field. For Bourdieu, “academic capital”, recognized exclusively within the limits of the universities and founded, mainly, on the control of the faculty members’ instruments of reproduction, “is obtained and maintained by holding a position enabling domination of other positions and their holders” (BOURDIEU, 2019).

The main lines of research mentioned by the teachers in the Nursing course were “Care for human groups”, “Safety of hospitalized patients”, “Resilience”, and “Oncology”. Despite being indicated by the course coordinators as teachers linked to the “Health of older people” theme, only two of the teachers mentioned aging as their main line of research. As for the Physical Education course, the main lines of research pointed out by the teachers were “Physical activity and aging”, “Adapted physical education”, “Studies of leisure and playfulness”, and “Fall prevention”. Concerning the Nutrition course, the main lines of research were “Nutritional assessment”, “Diagnosis and nutritional intervention in communities”, and “Nutrition and aging”.

The different lines of research pointed out by the interviewed teachers were an indication that they were possibly not combined with each other, even though they were affiliated to the same course and university. Working in a disjointed way, the teachers linked to “Health of older people” failed to establish a network capable of providing them with more scientific visibility and authority.

According to Bourdieu (2019) the academic field is, like any field, a space of dispute to determine the conditions and criteria of legitimate belonging and hierarchy. The different sets of individuals, constituted in groups, must strive to transform their

interests into legitimate property and to increase their chances of profit in the academic market.

Thus, it is understood that most of the participating teachers, in addition to not occupying the highest positions in the university hierarchy, because they do not combine into research groups, have greater difficulty in legitimizing their practices and constituting academic capital.

When teachers work in a more coordinated manner, and belong to the same research group, they are able to strengthen and establish themselves in the field - a situation identified in the case of teachers linked to the Nursing course of one of the assessed universities, who maintain a *lato sensu* specialization course addressing “Health of older people”. The existence of specialization in a theme has an impact on graduation, and can attract students to the area of expertise, as it awakens in them the expectation of pursuing their studies at the graduate level. The number of students interested in a given theme favors the development of its field of knowledge.

Structure and curriculum content of academic activities

In the Nursing courses investigated, there were no mandatory disciplines that focused exclusively on the aging theme. According to the teachers, this content was part of the disciplines titled “Nursing in the health of adults and older people”, “Nursing care models”, and of other practical disciplines carried out in hospitals and other health services where older people ended up being a considerable part of the assisted population. Among the contents related to “Health of older people”, the major geriatric syndromes, the main diseases present in the older population, and the guidelines for caregivers of older individuals were the most cited. The least mentioned were public policies, the PNSI, and the issue of violence. University extension actions on the theme included rare projects and courses involving older people and their caregivers. Some of the Nursing course teachers interviewed were linked to the *lato sensu* graduate studies course, and their actions related to “Health of older people” were primarily conducted at this level, to the detriment of the undergraduate level. Few teachers belonged to *stricto sensu* graduate studies programs, and those in this situation were not linked to lines of research related to gerontology.

Specific disciplines addressing the aging theme were found in the Physical Education courses of two of the five public universities assessed: a mandatory discipline

named “Physical Education and Gerontology” and an elective discipline titled “The school preparing for healthy aging”. According to the interviewees, the contents on this theme were also present in other disciplines, namely, “Individualized physical training”, “Adapted Physical Education”, and “Nutrition and Physiology”. The respondents drew attention to the fact that older people are always remembered when it comes to physical education for special groups, such as the diabetic and hypertensive populations. Half of the interviewed teachers claimed that they include the National Policy on Health for the Elderly (PNSI) in their disciplines, whether they are specific or not. Both university research and extension projects on the “Health of older people” theme were mentioned.

In the Nutrition courses, there are no mandatory or specific elective disciplines on the study theme. According to the interviewees, the content associated with “Health of older people” is taught in disciplines such as “Nutritional assessment”, “Nourishment and health”, and “Nutritional Therapy I and II”. All teachers interviewed carried out university research or extension projects on the theme, and some of them even had support from research funding agencies. Both the research and the extension projects related to the theme were closely related to the promotion of health, quality of life, and leisure.

Regarding the curricular contents on aging in the three courses studied, it was possible to infer that inclusion of the study theme occurred more through the approach of diseases common to aging than through the aspect of health promotion or public policies.

Nursing is a profession focused on care and procedures that are often standardized, and the inclusion of the theme in question occurred mainly in practice scenarios, where older people are almost always examples of how to proceed in adverse health situations.

Although Physical Education and Nutrition are professions whose characteristics can favor the approach to the discussed theme through health promotion, which refers to actions on the social health conditions and determinants aimed at favorably impacting quality of life, it is still through the approach of diseases common to older people and their limitations that, in most cases, these contents are included in the curricula (VELOZ et al., 1999).

This information leads to reflection on how health professional education perpetuates stigmas associated with old age. Social representations about older people are still related to losses, disabilities, and illnesses (VELOZ et al., 1999).

Although the PNSI of health courses advocate that professional education should meet the social needs of health, with an emphasis on the Brazilian National Health System (SUS), and ensure comprehensive care, the universities still do not seem permeable to this idea. It is known that, historically, professional education in the health area has occurred from a technicist view of care, centered on the treatment and cure of diseases (ALMEIDA, 2013) .

There is a difficulty with regard to changes in academic dynamics that affect the conformation of the curricula and the constant valorization of certain contents in professional education to the detriment of changes and inclusion of emerging themes. The dynamics in the admission of new staff in courses and universities, which would allow the renewal of teaching contents and practices, is not easily managed, and in this respect, Bourdieu (2019) considers that to protect “the social invariance of the corps” in the admission processes, those responsible for this selection resort to “a system of implicit and hierarchized criteria”, yet out of all forethought, but which tend to “ensure their own reproduction, producing masters endowed with nearly constant and homogeneous social and academic characteristics”.

View of the participating teachers on the inclusion of the “Health of older people” theme in health professional education

The teachers in the Physical Education courses considered that the space occupied by the study theme in the curricula is still small, but that it has been growing. In general, they explain that, historically, careers have always been designed for young people and children, and that the large work market, until then, was formed by schools and gyms, which shifted the focus of the profession away from the older population. According to the teachers, this is a more recent discussion in Physical Education; however, there is an economic opportunity, represented by the individualized training of older people, that has already been envisioned by the students, which is strengthening the approach to the study theme in their professional education. According to the interviewees, the area has not yet been developed further because changes at the university occur slowly.

According to the teachers in the Nursing courses, the small space occupied by the study theme in university education can be explained by the following aspects: "precarious care network for the older population, which hinders specific practice

scenarios”, “reduced number of teachers in the area compared with that of other areas of expertise”, “theme-oriented teachers who are not politically and scientifically involved”, “the trajectory of the theme is still weak in Nursing because most teachers are from a time when aging was not valued”, and “few congresses and scientific events on the theme”. Other lesser-reported reasons included “excessive focus of the profession on children's and women's health”, “existence of a closed group of researchers on the theme in the city that hinders new inclusions”, and “difficulty in thinking about the social role of the course”.

In general, the teachers linked to the Nutrition courses mentioned the lack of professionals with an interest in the study theme as the main factor for its limited space in the curricula. As a result, they pointed out that there is not much novelty in the profession or research on the theme, which turns the interest of young researchers to other areas of nutrition.

The teachers linked to the three courses had difficulties expressing their opinions about the reason why “Health of older people” has been little explored in the education curricula of health professionals. As common points, they pointed out their education as a central issue, which was also not sufficient in relation to the theme, the fact that population aging is a relatively recent phenomenon in Brazil, and that “Health of older people” has been attracting more attention only recently.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

From the interviews with the teachers, it was possible to identify aspects that interfere with the poor development of the theme “Health of older people” in the education of health professionals in the three areas: Nursing, Nutrition, and Physical Education. The first aspect is the fact that the teachers linked to this theme occupy ordinary positions in their universities, that is, currently quite far from the spheres of power and control.

Although the teachers interviewed have been nominated to their positions and are recognized by the coordinators of the courses to which they belong as professionals involved with the “Health of older people” theme, they explained that because they are in contact with researchers that belong to other thematic areas and act in different lines of research, they work in a disjointed way, even being in the same institution, and have the theme in question as secondary in their careers. As a result, they have failed to foster the

movements and combinations needed for their development and strengthening in the universities.

This small articulation implies aspects that the teachers mentioned as possible causes of the limited inclusion of this theme in the university education of professionals, such as few congresses and scientific events addressing the theme and little scientific and political involvement of faculty members.

The ascension criteria and prestige of a given theme are produced inside the university. It is within their study field that peers define different criteria and strive to make them legitimate. Thus, for the “Health of older people” theme to be developed in education, there is need for a network capable of ensuring the growth of a population of interested students and teachers, the creation of related research and disciplines, as well as the growth of influence in instances of external acclaim, such as the media.

This study showed that there is still a need to establish more consistent cooperation networks and research groups among university teachers aligned with “Health of older people” in the three undergraduate courses assessed as a way of valuing and strengthening this approach in health education.

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