

READING PROMOTION WITH  
ELDER PEOPLE, EXPERIENCES IN  
A NURSING HOME IN TUXTLA  
GUTIERREZ

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— *Abstract*—

In the following pages it is described a reading promotion experience with elder people. Based on the importance of knowing the needs of the group that worked with us, interests and daily life, it was discovered as the main problem, the loneliness. From there, it was prepared with the group a workshop to reflect, review and debate in relation to the shared reading, and thinking how to improve their living situation in a realizable way.

Gradually there were favorable changes that helped to reduce the loneliness feeling, besides the reading appropriation and positive attitudes to improve their relationships. This experience wants to be an example for other projects to promote reading, where the main stare is directed to the participant in the meeting with the text.

**Keywords**

*Reading promotion, elder people, reading*

Technological, scientific and social innovations, among other factors, have allowed people's life expectancy to increase, to such an extent that the estimate that has been made as a result of the research on old age, refers that by the year 2050 the elderly population will reach 21% of the total world population. With this growth, diverse needs arise that must be solved by each society, depending on how the elderly are perceived and treated.

An element that has been studied as an ally to improve the quality of people's life, as a recreational activity and even as treatment for some diseases, is reading, which in every age, social group or subject takes different meanings.

Much of what has to do with reading and society is related to the promotion, which for several years has taken a fundamental part in literacy processes, approaching the book to people, and in projects of reading development with different objectives. This promotion usually responds to institutional reasons that sometimes start from generalized diagnoses, and others from objectives and goals that often do not correspond to the group's needs with which they work.

On the other hand, it is clear that encouraging the appropriation of reading as a daily life activity is not easy, but it is considered necessary to begin to take the first steps to develop an activity more consistent with what the groups require, for this it is necessary to know the life situation of the people and their own interests, so that the intervention is efficient and effective.

The experience narrated here was aimed at strengthening the group cohesion of elders through reading and to alleviate their loneliness. The reading then has to do with the way in which it was appropriated by the older adults who reside in a gerontology center in Tuxtla Gutiérrez to diminish their feeling of solitude and how to be able to replicate it in other opportunities. It is about sharing everything that can contribute to the experts in these issues so they can acquire new tools and techniques to address this problem.

## ELDERS IN CHIAPAS

In order to define who and what it is to be an elder, it is necessary to mention that "age is an arbitrary criterion for reducing aging, since the threshold of self-perceived or socially assigned old age shows differences" (INEGI, 2005, p.7). It is clear that the conception of being part of this group has references rather cultural than natural, however in this case was taken into account

the official information of the State, which is from which emanate all public policies concerning the population.

Mexicans considered as part of this population sector are "those who are sixty years of age or older and are domiciled or in transit in the national territory" (Ley de los Derechos de las Personas Adultas Mayores, 2012, p.2), that is to say, that they are based or that they are situated within the country, and they are perceived and treated depending on the contexts in which they live: "In many traditional societies, the old people are respected as 'our greater'. But in others, older women and men may be less respected" (WHO, 2014, Put down Stereotypes). Thus, this stage can also be understood as full of experience, maturity, and knowledge about themselves and about society from their generational conformation.

There is a tendency to live longer, due to "the decrease in mortality in all ages, especially the infant, the control or eradication of some communicable diseases, as well as the improvement in social conditions" (Vega, González, Arias, Cabrera, Vega, 2011, p.13); however, with respect to the latter, it is important to emphasize that it is the context that will determine the role of the elderly in society and how it will respond to their needs.

According to Article 9 of the Law on the Rights of Older Persons (2012, p.6):

The Family of the elderly must fulfill his social function; therefore, in a constant and permanent manner, it must ensure the wellbeing of each of the older adults that are part of the family, being responsible for providing the satisfactory needs for their care and integral development and will have the following obligations to them:

- I. Granting food in accordance with the provisions of the civil code;
- II. Encourage daily family life, where the older adult participates actively, and at the same time promote the values that concern their affective needs, protection and support, and
- III. To prevent any of its members from committing any act of discrimination, abuse, exploitation, isolation, violence and legal acts that endanger their person, property and rights.

It is important to mention that in our country this population sector is considered as a vulnerable group. According to INEGI (2005, p.32):

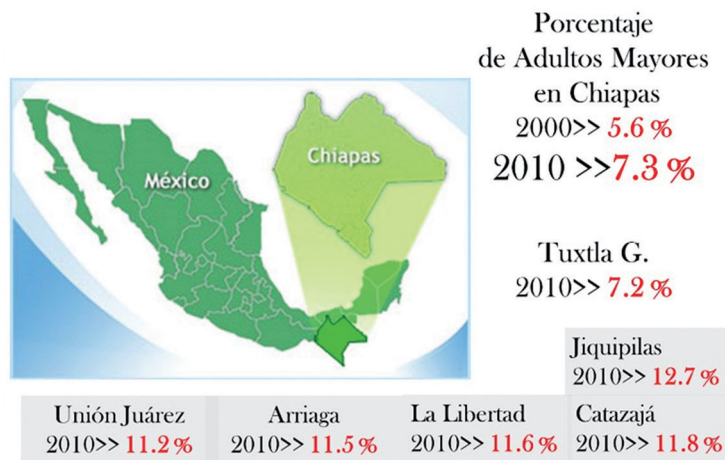
*Elderly are considered as part of these groups, since many of them are dependent, do not have a definition of roles and are often excluded from*

*decisions. All of them share the basic attribute of age, which is supposed to generate similar problems and make them the target of sector programs or specific public policies in the country.*

Since older adults are a vulnerable population sector and recognizing that there is diversity as to how they are conceived and treated, it is necessary to generate different proposals that respond to the particular needs, without thereby not taking into account the official statutes of this country.

According to the latest census of INEGI (2010) in the case of Chiapas, the elderly population represents 7.3%, which compared to the 2000 census had an increase of 1.7% as shown in the following figure, as well as the municipalities of Chiapas that have the highest percentages of this population sector.

**Image 1.** Elderly in Chiapas.



Source: Own elaboration based on INEGI 2010

The percentages above not only show the demographic growth of older adults, but raise different questions as to whether the world, the country and the State are prepared with services, public policies, among other items, to cover the needs that will also increase. It should be mentioned that the complexity of this phenomenon increases if it is thought that each cultural group, depending on its concept of an older adult, will require satisfiers that, from their perception and treatment, will suit the subject.

In the specific case in question, the regime on which all actions related to this population sector must be based and regulated by the Law for the

Protection of the Rights of Older Persons in the State of Chiapas (2004 , p.5), where article 10 presents the rights that should be enjoyed by the elderly:

This law recognizes the following rights for the elderly:

i.- integrity and dignity:

a).- to a quality life, being the obligation of the family, the government bodies: state and municipal, as well as society, guarantee the older adults, access to programs that have the purpose of enabling the exercise of this right [...]

f).- to receive protection from their family, government bodies: state and municipal, as well as society [...]

i).- to be respected and recognized as human beings, men and women, as dignified older adults, regardless of their ethnic or racial origin, impediments or situations of any kind; and

j).- to live with honor in their homes and near their relatives until the last moment of their existence; unless it is the cause of serious, contagious or mental illness that requires their internment in specialized institutions; or that their descendants or collateral relatives up to the fourth grade are unable to offer them the necessary care and attention older adults require.

ii.-legal certainty and family:

a).- to live in a family, or to maintain personal relations and direct contact with them even in the case of being separated, unless this is contrary to their interests [...]

d).- to receive the support of the state and municipal institutions in the exercise and respect of their rights [...]

f).- enjoy their human rights and fundamental freedoms, when they live in homes or institutions where they are cared for or treated with full respect for their dignity, beliefs, needs and privacy, as well as their right to make decisions about their care and quality of life [...]

iv.- education, recreation, information and participation:

a).- to associate, meet and be part of organizations of older adults to promote their development and influence in the actions directed to this sector; [...]

c).- to have access to the creation, production and dissemination of books, publications, artistic works, and audiovisual, radio and multimedia productions, in which their rights and duties are promoted;

d).- to establish policies and actions relevant to facilitate the elderly, the appropriate spaces that allow them to exercise recreational and cultural rights. Sports fields, gymnasiums and official infrastructure suitable for the practice of sports or recreational activities shall be available to that group on an equal basis, and in accordance with the regulations issued [...]

vi.- legal and social assistance:

a).- to be subjects of social assistance programs by the state and municipal institutions, with preference being given to those who are at risk or helplessness [...]

vii.- the popular complaint:

Any person, social group, non-governmental organizations, associations or societies, may denounce before the competent bodies, any act, or omission that causes or may cause harm or damage to the rights and guarantees established by this law, or that contravenes any another of its provisions or other regulations that regulate matters related to older adults.

Part of the observation and the approach to work with older adults in the public sector through the System for Integral Family Development (DIF, Spanish acronym) State and Municipal, reflected that in the agenda of care in shelters and day stays that the DIF's systems has for people who do not have a family that supports them, or that their children work all day, are not considered the diverse needs of a subject, that is to say, what these institutions are interested in as part of their work is to see for the food, hygiene, health and housing of the elderly, without regard to affective needs, recreation, belonging to a group, etc. Proof of this is that when this project was presented to both systems, it was submitted to the managers because it did not come from the health area, as one worker commented: "if your

project was about food, hygiene or health, it would be approved without revision, but as it is about reading and that is not a priority, we will review it and call you". Obviously they did not.

A point of reflection on the experience narrated previously in relation to the figures on increase of older adults, notes that there is no analysis by those who coordinate the public attention with respect to what implies the demographic growth of this population sector and the different needs arising from the demographic increase and its relation with the multiple spheres of social life as the economy, politics, ecology, education, etc., even having a legal framework that should guide the actions so that the older adult has a dignified life until the last of his days.

### READING AND THE ELDERLY

The benefits of reading are diverse and particular for each social group and each subject, specifically for the elderly. It has been studied and applied especially in relation to how it influences to improve the quality of life of the subjects, and decrease or delay diseases such as depression, Alzheimer's, among others that have to do with memory. In the case of this experience, we worked to reduce the feeling of loneliness and that is why it is proposed as that reading allowed older adults to meet with themselves, identify with their colleagues in the gerontology center and thus may decrease that feeling.

Valera-Villegas defines reading as:

*A way of acting and not resting, involves affective, ethical and intellectual commitments, because there are present actions, to a lesser or greater extent, such as: the recognition of the other, empathy and welcoming. This would result in the recognition of their difference, some measure of mental and affective identification, and the opening or exiting of themselves to meet the other. (2009, p.64).*

It is sought that the older adult, through the text and the strengthening of the cohesion with his companions can diminish his feeling of solitude; that reading is the space "where the subject finds himself again in his own individual structure" (Barthes, 1970, p. 49), and is also recognized through experiences shared with the other members of the group.

From the stories that were used in this work, the older adult was creating a sense of his own with the theme that was proposed from the text. It is not a question of finding what the author means, but rather of recognizing



that "every individual reader has the possibility and the right to construct a meaning, his meaning" (Poulain, 2011, p.203).

In this look, it is said that the reader is a producer, who builds from reading. Barthes states that "the product consumed becomes production" (1970, p.47), so reading leads to create or recreate something. In this case the production will be directed to write while reading, raising the head, that is to say, from sharing lived experiences in the group dialogue that the text invites to emerge from the memory, and to the strengthening of the cohesion between the older adults.

The meaning of reading is shaped by the experiences lived by the reader, is a coming and going between reading the text and the context, between the look of their own reality, their history, experiences, ideology, among others, and what the writing provides, confronts, reinforces or changes, that is to say, as Freire (1991) mentions, the reading of the world always precedes the reading of the word and the reading of the word implies the continuity of the reading of the world. The proposal is that in reading "it is based on the historicity of the reader, in the condition of a human being subject to experiences" (Valera-Villegas, 2009, p.66). That is why the subject will read from his position of the world.

As a cultural process reading must be understood as a way to go, because "despite being a tool and solving practical things every day, it is also an instrument without an immediate what for" (Argüelles, 2012, p. 29) so that the influence of the text in the life of the reader is often not observed instantaneously, but with the passage of time can find the transcendence of that text, even when it is believed that it has already been erased from memory.

The proposed reading not only has to do with what the older adult knows, but with what he is:

*When one reads, one puts all his senses in the pages, but also the accumulated experience of the reader. One does not only read the book he has at that moment in his hands and before his eyes, but also reads the previous pages of other books and, of course, those of the book of life (Argüelles, 2012, p. 30).*

From the lived experiences and the points in common that each one can find with the other members of the group, the reading becomes a mechanism to contribute to diminish the solitude felt.

As a meeting point, we encourage sharing not only the moment of reading, but also what the text evoked in them: their feelings, thoughts, experiences, among other things, because "when we share what we read, we transmit a passionate joy and something is left in the soul, in the spirit, in the intelligence of whoever accompanies us in our reading" (Argüelles, 2012, p.43), that is to say, that sharing foments empathy and sympathy among the group members so that they can cope better with the situation they live.

### READING PROMOTION WITH ELDER PEOPLE

In order to define what reading promotion is about, we have to start by taking into account two factors that are an important part of this process: motivation and interest. According to Bamberger (1975, p. 37):

*When we speak of motivation, we think more about the logically determined guidelines and intentions that guide behavior, while the determining factor of interests are rather emotional attitudes and experiences. The interests and motivations of an individual are broadly reflected in the way they live. What the child learns or stops learning in school depends more on their interests than their intelligence. Make it so that he can learn more in his favorite subjects and the type of activities he chooses in his leisure or recreation.*

As mentioned by this author, the first factor to take into account to be able to influence a reality with a reading project are the interests of the people, because it has a starting point to create a reading-reader relationship. According to Del Ángel and Rodríguez (2007, p.11):

*The promotion of reading comprises the set of activities as well as systematic and continuous actions aimed at motivating, arousing or strengthening the taste and interest in reading and its active use; is a sociocultural practice not limited to the librarian and school environment, which contributes to the transformation of the individual and the community, facilitating social development (Naranjo, 2003).*

The promotion of reading as a cultural process has to do with recognizing the particularities of the other, their interests, needs, among other things, to create conditions in which this activity is aimed at "transforming the way of conceiving, valuing, imagining and using the reading. It seeks to make reading an activity potentially liberating and edifying the condition of the citizen". (Morales, Rincón, Romero, 2005, p. 201)

Reading promotion has been carried out in our country in multiple ways, responding to diverse needs and interests, mainly of those who carry out the projects, and not so much of the users. Initially this activity was carried out as an effort to eradicate illiteracy, in another stage to create and strengthen the access of books for all; however "little has been done to train citizens with the ability, capacity and commitment to make those books a part of their lives". (Del Ángel, Rodríguez, 2007, p. 12)

Based on the experience described here, reading promotion with the group of older adults was based on a diagnosis of needs and interests that guided not only the way of carrying out the intervention, but also the texts that were used.

#### EXPERIENCES ABOUT READING PROMOTION IN A GERONTOLOGY CENTER IN TUXTLA GUTIÉRREZ

One of the changes emerging from the demographic growth of older adults is the displacement of living with their families, or in their own homes, to share spaces for geriatric care, whether public or private.

The gerontology center where we worked is a private company that for 17 years has been dedicated to providing specialized gerontology intervention and nursing services 24 hours a day to elderly people whose mission (information provided by the center) is to provide care and health services to the elderly. Currently it serves approximately 50 people who are residents of the place, and all having different health problems such as: diabetes, depression, renal failure, Alzheimer, among others.

So for anyone who wants to enter, they must have an interview with the director, who talks to the family about the health status of the elderly and does a brief socio-economic study.

According to its website, the services offered are: accommodation, food, laundry and ironing, auxiliary care for mobility, daily personal hygiene, care for the conservation and maintenance of health conditions and emergency primary care medical conditions. Also complementary programs, among which stand out: physiotherapy, cognitive stimulation, and recreational activities.

The nurse in charge of the residents mentioned that: "Some students from the health area attended to practice their professional and social service,

and a group of medical students tried to form a reading club, but it was not possible because older adults are lazy to read".

She also commented that when they, the caretakers, have wanted to put them to draw or to write, these activities are rejected under arguments that they do not know how to do it, they are tired or they do not like it. She categorized these attitudes as laziness of the residents and even exhorted not to mention that the sessions were to read, but rather that it was a visit to talk to them.

The families of the residents can visit them any day, at specific times, being the main ones for this activity on Saturdays and Sundays. Based on the planning of its activities, the authorities of the institution designated that the reading work would be on Tuesdays from 11am to 12pm, after their walk, for those who can do it, and before the snack.

Also, the director decided that the coordinating nurse would designate the people who would participate in the workshop. The only conditions they put were that the elderly participating would not have Alzheimer's, some other memory problem or some intellectual deficiency, because we mentioned having no experience doing reading workshops with people who had some suffering of those already described.

In total, the reading group consisted of 27 people, 22 women and 5 men, ranging in age from 57 to 88 years old. They attended the sessions depending on their health and emotional state, or if their families visited or left them, and their stay in the group also depended on their residence in the center.

Through a group interview it was possible to know that none of them made the decision to be there, and it was their relatives who decided that they should be, although in some cases they did not live with them. On the other hand, when the elderly were moved to the gerontology center they were not informed that they would go to that place. In addition it was observed that they do not like to carry out activities of writing or drawing, but in each session we had very good participation through opinions, anecdotes, questions, etc.

In the first sessions to get to know the group, the main strategy was to tell them stories, due to the staff saying that "they did not like to read"; however, when we took copies of a story for everyone, the enjoyment of having the reading in their hands even modified their participation, since the reading became shared, but appropriate for each one. It is important to mention that in the group there are 2 people who cannot read or write, and 2 others who

have vision problems, but they paid attention to what others read and in the end they commented on the reading or the subject matter.

Some of them said that they had made friends and there are more people with them, but that was not enough, because they had lost (among other things) their autonomy. When they talked about this issue, they mentioned that not having their belongings, not being at home and not having personally decided to move to the stay were some factors that made them feel constantly alone.

During the sessions it was also observed that despite being together in the same space, the gerontology center, not all of them knew each other. In the group talks they could find similarities in their names, some experiences, music or food tastes and even the loss of a child. These relationships through the reading group, which were believed to be strengthened, are a key point to alleviate the loneliness they feel, since the strength of relationships with others can positively affect the emotional state of subjects.

After having made a diagnosis with the group, it was proposed to hold a reading workshop with 14 work sessions, 11 planned by the researcher along with them and 3 free sessions, with the objective that they would be the ones guiding the theme and the activities of the day. The duration of each workshop was 1 hour. The general objective of the workshop was to form a reading group with the elderly of the gerontology center to strengthen the cohesion between them and thus help to reduce their loneliness.

In order to be able to work the sessions of the workshop it was necessary to have the appropriate strategies, on the one hand it was necessary to find a way to select the texts that were used so that they were the suitable ones according to the subjects, and also to select the way to work with the group to take advantage of the time agreed with the institution and thus achieve what was originally thought.

In this case and according to the characteristics found in the context described above, it was decided to work with the group discussion technique, because it allowed to gather and motivate the opinions of each one, as well as the collective debate that generated proposals to improve the elderly's life situation.

On the other hand it is worth mentioning that for the selection of the texts a documentary revision (or bibliographical as some authors call it) was done, to determine which texts would be the most adequate to achieve the

objective of the workshop and, of course, that of the research. In the end the following were chosen:

- Legend: "The tree that did not know who it was"
- African Tale: "How Wisdom Spread Through the World"
- Carpentry, in Tales that my boss never told me. Juan Mateo
- The Little Prince, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry
- The selfish giant, Oscar Wilde
- Ears in the corner, M.B. Brozon
- The paw, José Emilio Pacheco
- The truce, Mario Benedetti

Generally the agenda was that the topic of the previous session was first taken up, the text was read in a shared form and from their own opinions questions were raised to debate. Each reading generated different reflections that linked the reading with some situation of life, as described below:

*The group did not know each other very well even though they lived together all day. Older adults did not know about their places of origin or how they had reached the geriatric stay, nor about their tastes respecting music, food, daily life, skills, defects, among other things; by putting them together in a new activity, was a radical change because the head nurse selected a group of people with a health condition not so complicated and that they could carry a coherent talk between them. At first they did not speak with confidence, perhaps because they did not know the researcher, so the first sessions were dedicated to getting to know each other, namely if for the group was important friendship, and above all to share some aspects that motivated the attraction between the members.*

Little by little each one found similarities with others and above all sharing their experiences, fears, anger, and also recognizing that having interaction with others is necessary to be able to cope with their life and the loneliness they feel in that place.

Some talks that developed after some readings led to reflection on happiness and freedom, which reflected the importance of the autonomy of people even in this, the last stage of their lives, and especially when they have not develop an illness that makes it impossible to have judgment about themselves; it was also observed that some consequences of feeling that loss can affect not only their state of health, but their mood, sympathy for others, tolerance, among others.

As we progressed in the work weeks, they had more interaction between each other; they even kept talking when the researcher finished the session. Little by little, they came closer to each other from meetings inside and outside the reading group, and it was noticed that in the first sessions when they went out to walk, each one did it separately, and now they helped each other to have better support and avoid falls.

After putting things in common to create empathy and sympathy, people were taking the initiative to read aloud and give opinions about reading, and no longer had to ask what did you think?, they knew that by the ending of the story everyone could say what they thought and how they faced it from what they lived at that time, so they were also taking courage to debate with respect to the perspective of others if they did not agree, or if they felt differently.

As time passed, they took into account who was missing and asked to wait for everyone to start, or those who already knew that they were leaving warned the companions not to worry about their absence. On the other hand, through the progress of the sessions and the interaction between the members, the group was providing support to cope with their days in the center, recognizing the positive attitudes of others to take them as an example.

Further deepening the attitudes of the group, these were changing as they were having confidence between them, in the beginning the person moderating had to intervene over the voices that murmured while reading or giving an opinion at the time, and after they controlled the situation by themselves, when they saw that somebody was distracted they called them out so that they would quiet or requested shift to speak.

On several occasions there was music and noises that did not contribute to the sessions passing in calm and with the appropriate silence so that everyone listened to the text and opinions, this also changed, although not outside the group, between them they were muted to be able to listen the story or the opinions better. This, in addition to helping the communication between members of the group, also showed interest in having better spaces and moments of encounter between them and reading.

Finally, it is also noteworthy that the elderly were asked to read different titles or authors that they had heard or read at one time: Eraclio Zepeda, Jaime Sabines, Octavio Paz, Pablo Neruda among others, although these were not considered as part of the project, are rather a result of the

motivation and encounter to read and could contribute to future projects with the same group.

## CONCLUSIONS

To carry out reading promotion without recognizing the needs, interests and life situations of the group with which it is intended to work is like walking with a blindfold in the eyes, without direction, sense of orientation and not knowing if it will reach the destination. Prior to any project it is necessary to carry out a diagnosis that allows to know to be able to influence and transform.

This project did not have as main objective that the old adults became a group of friends, but rather that there they could find support to diminish their feeling of solitude; so it must be recognized that not all of them ended up together. The attraction between the members of the group is similarly due to affinities of character and we did not tried to force ties that in the end would result in breaking what was achieved. While they now know more about each other and there is more interaction, the encounter led to different kinds of friendship within the group.

On the other hand, it was also sought that the group not only be one that works as such in the workshop sessions, but that cohesion persists and takes an important part in their daily life; of course not the 27 managed to be attracted to the group in the same way, but now everyone has in mind that there are 26 other people willing to talk, to advise and also to support them.

The most important aspect to consider regarding the motivation of older adults to work in groups is that they should not be forced, because instead of helping cohesion it may end up breaking the attraction between the members and the collective. Again, it is important to reiterate that not all people have the same character and the same disposition to tolerate the other, but the role of the researcher was to be mediator and inclusive to motivate the opening towards the diversity of perspectives, to strengthen the confidence in the group, and thus encourage participation.

Both old age and solitude have been studied from different perspectives that allow us to observe that both are constituted by diverse socio-cultural, economic, environmental, and other elements. Thus, through this experience and the literature consulted, it can be concluded that solitude is not something that can be eliminated through reading-writing in the life of the elderly, because it is a multifactorial and complex situation; however it is possible



that reading is part of the solution to an emotional health problem. It is also considered necessary to encourage people working in geriatric institutions to collaborate with projects that improve the elderly's life quality.

The reading group made it possible to realize that all people are vulnerable and marginalized in different life situations, and that is why through this experience we had the opportunity to recognize that this kind of projects, often closed to certain selections, must be open up to know different realities, diverse cultures, where you can find an invaluable wealth of knowledge and experiences that contribute to transforming societies favorably.

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