

**ANALYSIS OF SELECTED AREAS OF EDUCATIONAL
ACTIVITY OF SENIOR CITIZENS**
**Vecākā gada gājuma cilvēku izglītojošo aktivitāšu veidu izvēles
analīze**

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“The rhythm of development, similar to the rhythm of the changing seasons, is a necessity. We cannot avoid old age or death. Just as Autumn may be the most beautiful season of the year, so the old age may be the best stage of life, in which one achieves worldly wisdom and tastes life, while one’s life experiences give the sense of solid accomplishment. Nevertheless, there are Autumns which are rainy and fruitless, and so there is old age which is barren, painful, and perhaps even tragic.”
Antoni Kępiński, Rytm życia
(translated by „Gruca-Wolski” s.c.)

Abstract: *The aging of the society caused increased interest in problems of the elderly. This article presents the place of seniors in the educational space, defines the selected forms of their educational activity. Education counteracts social exclusion and sense of loneliness, provides access to the amenities of the modern world, allows the seniors to satisfy their need for self-accomplishment. Seniors thus face challenges they have never confronted before, while the age of transformation forces them to engage in continuous education, which becomes not only a duty, but also an obligation. Developing the expected forms of education of the elderly is one of the most vital tasks in the years to come.*

Keywords: *educational activity, lifelong learning, seniors education, social exclusion.*

Introduction

Education, as a crucial element of adaptation to the ever more changing conditions of life, plays an important part in the preparation for the old age. The concept of lifelong learning assumes that the acquisition of qualifications and skills is possible through formal education system (scholar system), non-formal education (supplementary education, professional development and training), and informal education (self-learning and experience). Social transformations and technological developments (including new communication technologies and IT), as well as globalization, have led to a substantially easier access to knowledge, mass application of IT (including the Internet), and the need for continuous

improvement and adaptation. All this is combined with the increasing level of quality of life, which determines the pursuit of a higher standard of life, affecting also people of post-professional age (seniors). Dreams and pressure exerted by the environment of the elders originate willingness to shape one's own old age and assume responsibility for the quality of one's own life, which, in turn, determines the decision on continued education. Education counteracts social exclusion and sense of loneliness, provides access to the amenities of the modern world, allows the seniors to satisfy their need for self-accomplishment, including in the areas previously neglected due to shortage of spare time caused by professional activity. Seniors thus face challenges they have never confronted before, while the age of transformation forces them to engage in continuous education, which becomes not only a duty, but also an obligation. However, there should be no doubt that the elderly, physically and mentally fit, self-accomplished, live longer lives of higher quality and activity.

Place of seniors in the educational space

Research shows that people in Poland retire several years earlier than it is statistically done in Europe. "The process of population aging is perceived by many as the most important long-term phenomenon of the 20th century in terms of economy and principles of social interaction" (Szukalski, 2008). According to the data of the Central Statistical Office of Poland (GUS), the number of people aged 60-74 is to increase in the years 2008-2030 by 40%, of those aged 75-84 by 65.6%, of those aged 85+ by 90%, and the number of people aged 100 will increase by 253% (Szukalski, 2008). In 2010, 25% of the elderly in Poland were aged 80+.

The aging of the society caused increased interest in the issue, development of the field of gerontology, including its specific fraction of pedagogical gerontology. Gerontology, supported by pedagogy, determines a more comprehensive perception of the issues, as it develops knowledge about the elderly, not only from medical perspective, and, furthermore, presents the possibility of full application of the achievements and output of pedagogy. With time, education and teaching transform into self-learning, self-improvement, self-education and self-accomplishment of people. As professor J. Homplewicz defines it, pedagogical gerontology is "a pedagogy of needs and abilities of the elderly in the face of their reality, from which they depart. Pedagogical gerontology is the appeal of not only the 21st century, but also of the entire humanism, with which we are to reach also the elderly" (Homplewicz, http://www.utwstrzelin.pl/?page_id=40).

The elderly are perceived nowadays, in the age of the "cult of youth", as persons incapable of independent and meaningful life, alienated, treated with compassion and often socially discriminated against. B. Synak even claims that „never has the world been so allied against the older generation as it is now, and never has the social standing of an old person been so low” (Synak, http://www.pulib.sk/elpub2/FF/Balogova1/pdf_doc/9.pdf).

However, achieving a status of a senior should not necessarily be associated with social degradation. One may prepare for the old age through modifying their view of oldness and quality of post-retirement life. Factors affecting the perception

of quality of life of the elderly include, inter alia, diverse positive effects of late life learning. These include:

- maintaining good health, coping better with everyday challenges,
- accepting more responsibility for one's own life,
- increased independence from others,
- better use of one's own resources,
- development of reflectiveness (self-awareness),
- following the development of science and technology,
- expanding one's knowledge of the modern world,
- learning one's rights and appreciating one's role in the society.

The research conducted also shows that 87% of the surveyed undertake physical activity of varying intensity, while a mere 10% declare engagement in intellectual activity, 36% of those questioned declare being socially active, and only 4% undertake all forms of activity (Gębska-Kuczerowska, 2002).

Although it appears more difficult for the seniors to focus their attention, to learn new things and remember new terms, it turns out that experience, previously gained knowledge and maturity are often helpful in drawing the correct conclusions (in particular, in situations where intuitive assessment plays an important role), making the right choices, making rational decisions, better planning, etc. It happens, unfortunately, all too seldom, that the intellectual potential and professional experience of the seniors are considered valued resources for employers, who, appreciating their qualities (including sense of responsibility and loyalty), employ them as mentors for the younger staff.

However, the elderly, most often, find it difficult to (re)enter the job market. Surveys show that as much as 29% percent of people under the age 60 intend to undertake paid jobs after they reach retirement age, while, in reality, a mere 10% of people do work after they reach the aforementioned age (this may be further broken down into 5% of those working on a full-time basis, 3% on a part-time basis, and 2% performing casual work). This may be evidence of social withdrawal of the elderly (Wądołowska, 2010).

Marginalization of the senior citizens in Poland is further reinforced by, inter alia, their low activity in terms of demanding their rights and privileges, limited access to information, being ignored by the media, no real interest in the problems of the elderly, attitudes towards oldness and a negative stereotype of the old age in Poland (Rejman, www.pulib.sk/elpub2/FF/Balogova1/pdf_doc/9.pdf).

It is easy to explain to oneself the unwillingness to continue education or self-development. Discussion on the factors hindering the decision to participate in educational programs includes such elements as conviction of one's own social inferiority, fear of derision on the part of others, fear of the unknown, unwillingness to attend school or to learn, shortage of financial resources, physical and mental conditions, uncertainty surrounding the worthwhileness of learning, objections on the part of the family, no conditions for education, inaccessibility of educational institutions or their not meeting the expectations of the elderly.

It is doubtless, however, that there are seniors who do wish to learn. There is a direct link between the level of education, having clearly defined interests, current activity we show at reaching the old age, and the willingness to continue education. The higher the level of the above-mentioned factors, the stronger the motivation to undertake further forms of education. Most often, such persons decide to continue education in its organized form when they realize that the knowledge they may acquire could help them in solving personal, social and professional issues, or that it may give satisfaction.

Motivations for older people to commence further education include, inter alia, wish to acquire new skills and information, as well as their improvement, preparation for work in a new position, productive use of spare time, wish to meet new, interesting people, achieving greater efficiency in performed duties, wish to change one's financial standing, expected social or professional promotion, personality development, improvement of interpersonal bonds, developing physical fitness, wish to adjust one's education with reference to the others, as well as attempt to increase one's self-esteem.

Selected forms of educational activity of the elderly

Seniors usually prefer educational offers which allow them to learn things they perceive as useful in their everyday life. Declarations concerning educational needs of the elderly change with their age. The oldest seniors are mostly interested in issues relating to their personal wellbeing, good health and security. Younger pensioners are more interested in foreign language learning, acquiring new knowledge, specifically information useful during travels, and show interest in new technologies (including computers and the Internet). These expectations should be taken into consideration when preparing educational offers for the elderly. Also, we must not forget that there is a group of skills of whose usefulness the older generation is unaware, e.g., access to resources of knowledge and information on services which could improve their quality of life (Andrzejczak, <http://www.edunews.pl/badania-i-debaty/badania/483>).

However, seniors often declare in surveys that they do not feel the need for using computers or the Internet, thus dissociating themselves even more from the outside world. And so, 64% of the elderly are not interested in new technologies, while 26% are not engaged, even though they would like to be (Wądołowska, 2010).

Nowadays, we live in the age of a super-intense development of new technologies of communication and information which determine the birth of the information society. Seniors should also participate fully and actively in the modern, computerized and digitalized world. This is the reason for the importance of senior education relating to computer and Internet usage. Acquiring these skills not only leads to broadening of knowledge, but also provides the opportunity for social, civic and professional activity. E-learning becomes nowadays an important e-service. This fact has been noticed by numerous institutions, which results in many on-line courses becoming available on the Internet. The seniors in Poland,

being a rapidly growing social group, unfortunately do not often have the skills needed to take advantage of such forms of education, and this certainly leads to situations where this type of e-services adjusted to the requirements of the elderly has not yet been sufficiently developed. Meanwhile, e-learning, as an idea which in short time gained much popularity and applause, may constitute either a supplementary or an individual form of knowledge acquisition, also for persons of retirement age. It must be noted that the number of seniors using the Internet will shortly rise sharply due to the fact that today's 40 and 50-year-olds will reach older age and using the Internet for them is an element of their everyday lives.

The Polish Internet Research defines a typical Polish senior Internet user as a male graduate of higher education institutions, city resident of average financial standing. Although such person had used the Internet before, it was not until their retirement that they found the time to become more active on the Net, searching mostly for information on law and economy, real estate and construction industry, finance and insurance, tourism and automotive sector. What is more, the seniors often visit the websites of governmental agencies and read on-line press releases (Megapanel PBI/Gemius, 2008 research results analysis).

In the course of professional activity, it is often difficult to find the time for supplementing one's education and broadening one's interests. Retirement provides more spare time and it is worth taking advantage of. Learning foreign languages may offer a perfect opportunity to get acquainted with and comprehend new cultures, thus, it may encourage to start traveling abroad. Additionally, courses allow for meeting interesting people, they integrate the participants and motivate to further action.

Contrary to common stereotypes, the elderly may successfully learn foreign languages. Research shows that progressing age is not necessarily associated with substantial reduction in learning capacity, except for its consequent weakening of eyesight and hearing. It is not the age of the foreign language learner that is a crucial factor of the learning process, it is rather the context in which mature people learn that substantially affects their ability to acquire a new language. Difficulties which the elderly may encounter in the course of study can be overcome through changes in the learning environment, paying more attention to affective factors and applying effective teaching methods. The most serious obstacle in the foreign language learning of the seniors is presented by their own doubts regarding their abilities. Stereotypes concerning substantial difficulties in foreign language learning among this age group relate mostly to two spheres: brain aging and discrimination against older people in the area of education.

Frequently, separate course groups are created for the seniors, so that they may be at ease and not feel the impulse to compare themselves to younger students. What is important is an atmosphere of support and a possibility of building trust and freedom of expression. Learning methods independently developed by the seniors, alongside life experience and strong motivation, put them at an even more advantageous position over younger learners. Recent research showed that adults are better at learning than children, especially when it comes to vocabulary and

language structures. Young student learn faster but more often rely on short-term memory, while seniors use long-term memory and are more successful in memorizing things (<http://www.edukacja.senior.pl/130,0,Nauka-jezykow-obcych-a-wiek,12699.html>).

Ever more common is senior education by means of Universities of the Third Age which motivate the elderly to learn and act. The aims of the U3As focus precisely on spreading educational initiatives, intellectual, social and physical activation of the seniors, maintaining social relations and communication among the elderly and engaging them in activity for the welfare of their own environments. Such U3As offer a wide range of activities: lectures, conferences, interest groups, senior clubs, thematic sections, physical activity, tourism, recreation, rehabilitation, training, advisory services, computer courses and foreign language learning.

Conclusions

Old age should nowadays be perceived as a stage of new challenges, and the elderly ought to be considered in the context of their vitality, possibilities and opportunities for development. Presently, education of the elderly is a must, as it leads to improvement in the quality of their lives, influences their self-esteem, their feeling of accomplishment and self-realization, while providing the younger generations with the opportunity to take advantage of the experiences of the seniors. A. Kamiński claims that useful work and non-personal interests are the two main elixirs extending one's youth to over the age of sixty, in particular, if they are accompanied by financial security (Kamiński, 1982).

Currently, in the education of the elderly, we may observe a transformation from its organized forms (which share is reduced with age) to the less formalized ones, departing from education towards self-education, from centralized solutions to the more dispersed educational practice. One example of the non-formal education which has recently undergone dynamic development are Universities of the Third Age.

At the same time, we observe an alarming phenomenon of discrimination, exclusion of the elderly from the social life as part of the "cult of youth". Difficulties in adjusting to changes make the environment of the seniors even more alien, incomprehensible and hostile, while barriers perceived in the participation of the elderly in education are rather subjective and often are a result of low self-esteem and conviction of reduction in cognitive abilities along with the progressing age. It appears indispensable to prepare an educational offer which would be well adapted to the needs and possibilities of the elderly, otherwise, the issue of social exclusion, and, above all, of the digital divide, will be solved only through the natural process of generation change.

Developing the expected forms of education of the elderly is one of the most vital tasks in the years to come. An active aging society in good condition will be less onerous for the younger and will most certainly have a beneficial effect on the economic growth.

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