

EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITY OF OLDER PEOPLE IN POLAND – SELECTED ISSUES

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Abstract. *This article is devoted to the issues of educational activity of the elderly in Poland. Defining the term “old age” and drawing attention to the issue of human adaptation to old age were the starting points of the discussion. Next, the most important issues concerning the activity of seniors were raised. Further discussed were the conditions and objectives of the educational activity of older people. An attention was also drawn to the role of institutions, promoting education and culture, in supporting the development of seniors. Moreover, the article refers to the results of selected studies of the issues discussed.*

Keywords: *activity, educational activity, education, educational institutions, elderly person, old age.*

Introduction

The increase of the elderly population has contributed to the fact that the issues of aging and old age as a period of life came in the scope of research of many scientific disciplines (Chabior, 2011). The aging of population is, undoubtedly, one of the main social, political and economic challenges of many modern countries. The problem concerns, increasingly, also Poland. The aging of population is often treated as a disturbing phenomenon. Seniors are often accused of uselessness and ineffective use of time. Such approach is a serious threat to the elderly, it may lead to their marginalization. An attention is seldom paid to the possibility of using the potential of seniors. Therefore, there is a need to take any actions (at local, regional and national levels) aimed at prolonging professional activities of older people, involving them in social life and providing them with conditions for an independent and fulfilling life (Fabiś et al., 2015, Fabiś et al., 2014). A special role should be assigned here to the educational activity (Adamczyk, 2015, Pikuła, 2015, Halicki 2009).

Nowadays, the idea of lifelong learning is often put in practice in the late phase of adulthood (Fabiś et al., 2015). Adults may educate themselves in various ways, solely or in many types of institutions (Szatur-Jaworska et al., 2006). It should be noted that the old age learning prevents the weakening of human cognitive abilities and enables man's development in various fields. Therefore it becomes an important development tool, it helps improve the quality of life. From social development point of view, the old age learning

provides man with relevant powers to act at the social, political and media levels. It facilitates understanding of other people, getting to know them, communicating and cooperating with them. Education is necessary to maintain or re-determine old man's social identity (Fabiś et al., 2014). The purpose of this article is to review selected problems of the educational activity of the elderly in Poland.

The problem of adaptation to old age

Old age is a natural stage of life, which follows youth and maturity (Trafiałek, 2003). It is an inevitable result of aging process in which biological, psychological and social transformations take place. The beginning of old age is usually acknowledged as 60 or 65 years of age (Zych, 2010). Some researchers distinguish early (from 65 to 74 years) and late old age (over 75 years) (Birch, 2005). The main developmental tasks of old age period include: taking new roles and activities associated with retirement, inclusion into a group of people of the same age, maintaining interest in the world, adapting to progressing physical limitations, adapting to the loss of loved ones, developing a mature attitude towards death (Pietrasiniński, 1997). These tasks refer not only to social development but also to the attitudes towards life philosophy (Jankowski et al., 2003).

Old age should be examined in close relation to the aging process (Banach, 2013). The signs of aging can be determined by chronological, social, biological and psychological age. Chronological age is measured by the number of years of age of a person, it enables determination of age periods and corresponding development standards. Social age refers to social expectations such as behavior of man in old age, his ability of taking particular social roles or his activity level. Biological age is measured by physical fitness of body, as well as by the severity of changes in individual systems and organs. Psychological age is a degree of human mental efficiency and the quality of mental functioning (Steuden, 2011).

An old-aged person faces the necessity of becoming equal to numerous new tasks and problems (Steuden, 2011, Wnuk, 2006). An important challenge for the elderly is, undoubtedly, retirement (Krzyżowski et al., 2014, Pasik, 2006, Czerniawska, 1996). The end of professional activities means new tasks and functions aimed at replacing the job performed before. The gap, resulting from retirement, must be filled with another type of activity (Szczeszek, 2008). According to Wiktor J. Moś: “Preparing for old age should begin in earlier stages of human life. To be more satisfied with life, people of the third age should develop, already in their early age and in the beginning of the adulthood, the habits that – preserved in individual behavior – would be helpful and valuable in old age. These habits may include, among others – frequent contact

with nature, searching for new interests, activity in various spheres of social life. All that, after retiring, in the absence of professional activity, would provide a job” (Moś, 2007, p. 368).

As shown in numerous studies, man's attitude towards his own retirement depends primarily on gender and old age phase. Women are characterized by greater ability to adapt to old age than men, which is usually interpreted as a consequence of frequent experiencing different kinds of stressful situations. Great importance is attributed also to old age phase – with time passing man gains experience that changes his attitude towards life, other people, and himself (Mandrzejewska-Smól, 2012). The scientific literature points to various typologies of attitudes of seniors towards their own old age (Szatur-Jaworska et al., 2006, Muchnicka-Djakow, 1984).

Activity in late adulthood

Gerontologists point to the important role of activity in successful aging, in fact the activity of seniors determines the size and quality of their living space (Halicka & Kramkowska, 2011). The need for being active is one of the most important human needs. Activity is also a condition of fulfilling social roles, functioning in a group and society. The lack of activity may cause the loss of other people's appreciation and, consequently, lead to isolation (Szatur-Jaworska et al., 2006).

The activity of older people is strongly linked to the need of individual development, self-esteem, affiliation, realization of life plans, adapting to variable environment, social expectations, as well as one's own abilities. The type of activity depends not only on individual preferences, health, skills, it also reflects the social context, the expectations and abilities of the environment in which an individual exists (Steuden, 2011). The factors that may determine the activity of the elderly include gender, education level, the influence of family environment, health and physical condition, material living standard, place of residence, the influence of cultural institutions (Szatur-Jaworska et al., 2006). Among the factors that may inhibit the activity of man in old age are: mental and social isolation, low material living standards, transformation of environmental conditions, low health education level, lack of appropriate forms of recreation, insufficient preparation for old age, bad attitude to old age and the elderly (Orzechowska, 1999).

The activity of seniors can be generally divided as follows: formal activity (e.g. membership of a social association, interest in politics, working for local community, volunteering), informal activity (e.g. contacting with family, friends, colleagues, neighbors), and solitary activity (e.g. reading, watching TV, developing various interests) (Halicka & Kramkowska, 2011).

As for the fields of interest, the following types of activity of seniors are distinguished: home-family activity (performing various activities associated with household running and close family life), cultural activity (e.g. reading, listening to the radio, watching TV), professional activity (which satisfies the need of recognition, usability and usefulness, and protects from lowering social status), social activity (usually typical of the people socially active before, it is associated with acting in a specific environment), educational activity (it enables continuous self-improvement and learning, and promotes the exercises of mind), religious activity (with age, the importance of religion and participation in its rituals are increased), recreational activity (resting, physical activity, doing favorite things in free time) (Szatur-Jaworska et al., 2006, Orzechowska, 1999).

Many forms of activity of the elderly are reckoned among free time activities. As pointed out by Olga Czerniawska, the problem of proper use of leisure time is an important issue of educational gerontology (Czerniawska, 1996). Based on the results of their studies, Małgorzata Halicka and Jerzy Halicki identified the following types of free time activities of seniors: recreational and hobbyistic activity (e.g. sports, gardening, amateur activities, going to the cinema or the theater), receptive activity (e.g. watching television, listening to the radio, reading newspapers; usually this kind of activity is carried out at home), public-oriented activity (social and political activity, and also public activity in a parish), integrative activity (meetings and various forms of activity, especially of the scientific and the social kind, e.g. meetings at a senior club, housewives meetings, classes at the University of the Third Age, meeting friends), and other activities (Halicka & Halicki, 2002).

Releasing the activity of seniors is an important pedagogical problem. What matters is if and to what extent the activity of the elderly can be stimulated. According to the main principle of the theory of activity, active lifestyle helps improve mental and physical condition of man. For pedagogists, the theory of activity is a starting point of the search for the ways to activate the elderly (Mandrzejewska-Smól, 2012, Czerniawska, 1996). Activation is understood as a process aimed at achieving specific goals, as well as the result of the process, and the achievement of the objectives. General objectives of man activation include: maintaining physical fitness and health, empowerment, preparing for community life, keeping the faith in the meaning of life, developing various interests, development of personality. In the process of activation each person should be treated individually and subjectively (Mogielnicka, 2007).

Educational activity of seniors

The important roles in adaptation to old age are played by cultural and educational activities. Their key forms include: the realization of individual interests and cultural needs, the content of which is determined by previous lifestyles; amateur and hobbyistic activity (individual or in a group); reading and mass culture content reception (Szatur-Jaworska et al., 2006).

Based on the review of the researches and analyses (Mandrzejewska-Smól, 2012, Brzezińska, 2011, Szatur-Jaworska et al., 2006, Halicka & Halicki, 2002), it is clear that the most popular among Polish seniors are the receptive activity (watching TV, listening to the radio, reading newspapers – usually at home) and the integrative activity (especially meeting friends). The seniors are mainly active in the area of family life, and their participation in public and social life is small, also their interest in the educational activity is relatively low. They are dominated by passive attitude, apathy, exclusion from life.

The learning today means not only the participation in organized forms of education, but also the acquisition of knowledge in everyday life situations, deriving it from one's own and other people's experience, to get to know oneself and the world around. The involvement of seniors in educational activity is strongly connected to the problem of adaptation to old age. Education helps older people understand ongoing changes, it enables proper functioning in the contemporary reality (Mandrzejewska-Smól, 2012). It should be noted, however, that educational activities, directed at seniors, can be more efficient if an elderly person, in his entire educational biography, is adequately prepared for retirement. The attitude of openness towards educational activities is very significant in this regard, as well as the awareness of the role of lifelong learning and methodical preparation for self-studying (Fabiś, 2006).

Intellectual capabilities of seniors are much larger than it is stereotypically assumed. Older people, however, learn differently from young people. It results from their preparation, training, input abilities or motivation, rather than old age itself (Fabiś, 2006).

As held by Zofia Zaorska: “The specificity of older people's learning is, among other things, about the fact that the elderly, to a much greater extent than young people, compare their actual knowledge with what they learn from the lecturers. Also, they get more emotionally engaged, listening to a particular lecture. They like to admire, marvel, be moved, and also to think, ponder over their personal opinions on the topic” (Zaorska, 1997, p. 25).

The factors, which determine the educational activity of seniors to the greatest extent, include: preparing for the period of old age, health status, social and educational experience, mental abilities, personality traits, free time, self-esteem, a sense of meaning in life, motivation to learn, training improving

mental performance, economic situation, environmental stimulation, cultural and educational offer directed to the elderly (Fabiś, 2006). On the other hand, the important factors that may hinder older people's learning include, among others: reduced sight and hearing efficiency, or intellectual changes, e.g. creativity decline, word association difficulties, generalization and abstraction difficulties (Fabiś et al., 2015).

Due to mental fitness retainment till the late years of life, older people's learning is not just possible, but also necessary. Therefore, the issue of the education of seniors should be investigated in the perspective of change, rather than elimination or reduction of educational activities. It may be assumed, generally, that the purpose of education of older people is better coping with requirements of everyday life. By getting involved in educational activity, seniors have a possibility to increase their income and return to the labor market (e.g. by gaining currently desired skills), to cope better with requirements and problems of everyday life (e.g. by gaining knowledge stimulating initiative and self-reliance), to help other people (e.g. by sharing their experience and supporting other people), to free from the stereotype of the ability to act in late adulthood, they also have the possibility of further development and shaping their identities (Mandrzejewska-Smól, 2012).

According to Jerzy Halicki, the purposes of education of older people are as follows: geriatric prevention (learning should neutralize the aging process, distract man from everyday life and fill his free time), broadening and deepening of knowledge (in this case, updating the knowledge already acquired or completing the knowledge of a specific area), preparing for life in retirement (e.g. through participation in the activities offered by the University of the Third Age), preparing for social activity (e.g. through the activity in charitable organizations) (Halicki, 2000).

There are many educational and cultural institutions in Poland, where older people may satisfy their educational and cultural needs (Panek, 2007). According to Zofia Szarota, “the support to the elderly is provided by instructors of amateur artistic, cultural, and educational movements, as well as by social workers and volunteers often recruited from the pensioners” (Szarota, 2004, p. 74). In Polish educational institutions, mostly the younger seniors learn, especially those better educated. Mostly urban dwellers, and the majority of them are women (Fabiś et al., 2014).

Now, among educational institutions, the University of the Third Age dominates. The number of such schools is still increasing, currently there are about four hundred of them. They are formed primarily in urban areas, just every tenth school is located in the country. And every fifth acts under the auspices of a university, usually a non-publically financed one. The primary purpose of the University of the Third Age is to support the development of

older people through implementation of various educational and preventive activities (e.g. interests and skills developing classes, organization of cultural and recreational events, free time organization, healthy lifestyle promoting activities) (Fabiś et al., 2014). The training has two basic forms – on the one hand, it includes lectures (in thematic blocks), and on the other hand, individual classes (developing passions and interests of the listeners). Grażyna Orzechowska points to the role of the students of the University of the Third Age in shaping their own learning space. They create programs, plan lectures and individual classes, establish contacts with representatives of different circles, gain funds for keeping their activities (Orzechowska, 2013).

New information technologies and foreign languages (especially English) are the most frequently chosen courses by the elderly. Learning how to use new media not only improves the quality of seniors' life, but it is also a way of acquiring fresh knowledge, which facilitates the involvement in other forms of educational activity. Language learning is a useful form of mental efficiency training. Also, it facilitates the communication during foreign journeys and the understanding of words and simple phrases while working with a computer (Fabiś et al., 2015).

There are also other institutions (or initiatives) supporting the development of seniors, through educational, caring, animative or therapeutic activities, at the places of their residence – senior clubs, country housewives' circles, libraries, day care centres, clubs, community centres, parishioner groups, and others (Fabiś et al., 2014).

A special role should be assigned to senior clubs. They constitute the centers of cultural, educational, social and recreational life for the elderly. In some cases, they also perform the function of self-help groups. These centers are intended to establish and maintain social contacts, to form social bonds and, consequently, fight the feeling of boredom and loneliness. It is being achieved through organized occupations, diverse in terms of form, content, and meeting frequency. Also important is the cooperation of the clubs with other institutions and organizations (e.g. schools, hospitals), which facilitates the integration of seniors with the environment (Leszczyńska-Rejchert, 2010). The offer of senior clubs include, for example: circles of interest, educational courses, lectures, organized forms of recreation, exhibitions, participation in amateur artistic movements, competitions in various fields of knowledge, and others. The clubs also enable joint watching TV, reading newspapers, organizing social evenings. The members have the opportunity to decide direction of work (e.g. organization of events, scheduling, inviting guests). Some of the centres get involved in local and regional activities (Szarota, 2004).

Another institution that plays an important role in creating and satisfying the interests of the elderly is community centre. Community centre, among other

things, organizes social gatherings for seniors, excursions, gymnastic exercises. Its work also includes various circles of interest, cabarets, dance groups, bands, choirs (Szarota, 2004).

Seniors' learning takes place not only in educational institutions. An important role should be assigned also to informal education. It is a lifelong process of acquiring knowledge, skills, improving competence, forming attitudes, through personal experience gained in various environments in which an individual exists (e.g. family, local community, work environment) (Fabiś et al., 2015). According to Artur Fabiś, “it is a natural process, which takes place unconsciously, in the activities of everyday life, through experience and as an occasional activity” (Fabiś et al., 2015, p. 196).

Therefore it is worth making efforts to encourage seniors, as many of them as possible, to take up educational activity. An important role in this area should be played primarily by the actions aimed at education animating, promoting it among older people, and specialized preparation of the creators of this education and the people nursing seniors (Mandrzejewska-Smól, 2012). The educational policy towards older people should be dynamic and varied, it should take into account the specificity and the individuality in the process of aging (Fabiś, 2006). Creating conditions for seniors' informal learning and promotion of cultural and recreational activities, which allow learning through action, are particularly important (Fabiś et al., 2014).

It is worth noting, in conclusion, that the education of seniors “should be understood widely, as the science of all forms of knowledge, skills and attitudes contributing to prosperity, quality of life, and life satisfaction achieving” (Szatur-Jaworska et al., 2006, p. 169).

Conclusions

It may be concluded from the foregoing that the educational activity plays very important role in the lives of contemporary seniors. It serves older people in achieving independence, it helps them improve life quality. It is also, for many of them, an important way of self-realization.

In summary, it can be seen that various forms of educational activity enable today's seniors, or at least make easier, to develop individual interests, to satisfy cultural and educational needs, to increase their chances of returning to the labor market, to cope with requirements (problems) of everyday life, to provide assistance to others (including the elderly), to establish and maintain social contacts, to be rid of old age stereotypes, to achieve life satisfaction. It is vital, however, that actions are taken to promote education among seniors, to create appropriate conditions for educational activity, to point various opportunities in

this respect, and to stimulate them with expertise. This should be provided by, among other things, dynamic educational policy for the elderly.

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