Cezary Kurkowski[1]

Project Activities of Animators and the Activation of Local Social Forces (the Case of Warmia and Mazury)

ABSTRACT

The specificity of the Warmia and Mazury region, a unique cultural mosaic paired with social problems, provided a space for building social engagement in the environment by involving the local community in socio-cultural activities. These actions resulted in changes to the living environment of individuals and social groups through their participation and engagement. The aim of the article is to present the results of research showing the views of animators regarding the impact of implemented social and cultural projects on stimulating social forces in small towns and villages of Warmia and Mazury. The research findings presented in the following section show the important aspects of this activity, starting from the sources/motives of creating projects and incorporating environmental resources into them, through cooperation with the local community and creating environmental leaders, to assessing the changes taking place as a result of the implemented projects. The presented research results allow for the conclusion that animators, through their project activities, contributed to permanent, positive changes in the local environment, awakening social forces (open and hidden), and to an increase in socio-cultural activity, both during and after the project activities.

Keywords:

socio-cultural animation, Warmia and Mazury, local environment, animator, social forces, socio-cultural projects/activities.

1   Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Social Pedagogy and Educational Research Methodology, University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, Poland.
E-MAIL: cezary.kurkowski@uwm.edu.pl   ORCID: 0000-0001-9634-1480

INTRODUCTION

The Warmia and Mazury region is located in the north-eastern part of Poland, near the eastern border of the European Union, and largely overlaps with the Warmia and Mazury Province area. It covers an area of 24,173 km² and has a population of 1,422,737 (726,828 women, 695,909 men), of whom 842,096 (59.2%) live in urban areas, and 580,641 (40.8%) live in rural areas (Statistical Office of Olsztyn, as at 31 December 2019). Warmia and Mazury is one of the poorest regions in Poland. This is reflected in a range of external conditions that are detrimental both to groups and to individuals, resulting in a range of social problems. Inhabitants of the Warmia and Mazury Province, compared to inhabitants of the whole country, are worse off in terms of their material situation, which is indicated by statistics describing a percentage of persons benefiting from social welfare, at risk of poverty or unemployment.

Warmia and Mazury is a region that has been subject to many social, political and administrative changes over the last centuries. In the post-war period (after 1945), a long process began, and continues to this day, aimed at building a cultural identity for the population, which is an ethnic and cultural mosaic made up of various ethnic groups, including displaced persons from central Poland, repatriates from Vilnius and Volhynia, Ukrainians and indigenous inhabitants. Warmia and Mazury is an area where "in the recent past an unprecedented exchange of population took place, resulting in the meeting of people of different cultural backgrounds, different religions, and different civilisational habits" (Domagała & Sakson, 1998, p. 12). The settlement of this region by people originating from different parts of the country, each characterised by a distinct culture at the ethnic and civilisational level, resulted in a phenomenon described in ethnology as a "clash of cultures" (Domagała & Sakson, 1998, p. 25).

The analysis of selected features of the Warmia and Mazury region and social problems that are visible on its map outlines the specific character of this place. The problems of building a regional identity for a community composed of diverse cultural groups are magnified by the pronounced issues of poverty, migration, and ageing. These conditions create an important framework for the functioning of individuals and families as well as larger social groups. These factors also create a specific environment for implementing socio-cultural projects that can trigger local communities to take action. What becomes important here is the figure of the local activist/animator, who, through his or her social and cultural activities, can create and support changes in local communities, stimulate social forces or encourage the building of "small homelands".

RESEARCH CONCEPT

The aim of the article is to present the results of research showing the views of animators regarding the impact of implemented social and cultural projects on stimulating social forces in small towns and villages of Warmia and Mazury. The research findings presented in the following section show the important aspects of this activity, starting from the sources/motives of creating projects and incorporating environmental resources into them, through cooperation with the local community and creating environmental leaders, to assessing the changes taking place as a result of the implemented projects.

In this paper, the author analyses several aspects of animation activities, including the reasons for undertaking socio-cultural activities by the animators, the potential of the social forces of the local environment used to implement animation activities, and the changes that have taken place in the local community through the activities carried out by socio-cultural animators.

The starting point was to investigate the opinions of animators on the socio-cultural activities carried out in the local community. For this purpose, traditional survey studies (Babbie, 2007, pp. 267–301) were used, which allowed the researchers to discover tendencies appearing in the studied areas and observe their changes depending on selected factors. Original research tools were also developed for the study, including a questionnaire survey addressed to animators/performers of socio-cultural activities. The sample selection was non-probabilistic, involving choices based on specific criteria adopted by the researcher according to the knowledge of the population under study and in line with the research objective (Babbie, 2007, pp. 204–205). The research, carried out in 2018–2019 in villages and small towns of the Warmia and Mazury Province, involved 63 animators implementing 31 socio-cultural activities/projects in the local communities of Warmia and Mazury.

ANIMATION AS A WAY OF ACTIVATING THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

The concept of socio-cultural animation appeared in French literature in the 1960s and 1970s, whereas in Poland, it acquired particular significance in the 1990s. Polish researchers in this area refer to a range of sources, showing the multifaceted nature of the animation category. Małgorzata Kopczyńska refers to the Latin origin analysed by Edouard Limbos, who indicates that animation is "to breathe soul, meaning, into a group, a collective, a society, and to evoke revival, activity.

Animation is strongly oriented towards the future, towards changing individuals, groups, and structures. There are no 'animators' on the one hand and 'animated' on the other; animation is done through collaboration" (Kopczyńska, 1993, p. 37). She also points to the work of Pierre Besnard, who approaches socio-cultural animation as a mosaic of various initiatives encouraging people to use their potential, hidden within themselves and in their living environment. The author emphasises that this activity also supports achieving a sense of belonging to a social group, which can be affected and in whose life one can participate (Kopczyńska, 1993, pp. 14, 61). Besnard defined animation as "any action in the community aimed at developing internal communication and building a structure for social life, a method of integration and participation" (Mendel, 2013, p. 15).

However, the notion of socio-cultural animation is primarily associated with domestic social pedagogy, particularly with Helena Radlińska's concept of community work, whose main premise was the transformation of the environment with its inherent strengths, using the community resources (Cyboran, 2018, p. 23). H. Radlińska attributed to social forces the compensatory function of upbringing, which consists in "detecting potential possibilities and levelling out the deficiencies of the living environment of the wards and supporting the development of the wards in a disadvantaged social and educational situation" (Wawryniuk, 1990, p. 56) and animation functions performed by "individuals and groups particularly active and committed to socially-oriented ideas" (1990, p. 56). The category of social forces refers to the process of reorganising the living environment of people, groups and communities based on their capacities (Marynowicz-Hetka, 2006, p. 70). Józef Kargul emphasises that socio-cultural animation means "invigoration, activation of social forces thanks to which transformations can be carried out, including changes of economic, social and cultural nature [which leads to development] of communities in all areas of life" (Kargul, 2012, p. 116). Thus, socio-cultural animation aims at revealing, stimulating, and organising social forces around local needs and opportunities. Animation, as emphasised by Edward Janusz Nycz, is

> a change in progress […]. It is a type of activity consisting in activating individuals, groups, social environments, local communities to independent activities aimed at satisfying their own social, cultural or religious needs in their own environments. The animation method is intended to support self-development, self-creation, creative life of individuals, to promote self-organisation of cultural life of groups, communities and local self-governance in designing collective and public forms of cultural life (Nycz, 2019, p. 12).

According to European authors, socio-cultural animation is an action within a group, community or context, which aims to develop communication and structuring of social life (Debesse & Mialaret, 1988). Animation is often acknowledged as a method of integration and participation, closely related to the idea of a permanent dialogue in which members of a group are invited to participate and contribute to the development of their social environment. It is important that socio-pedagogical actions relate to "continuous learning and knowledge sharing to the social reality of a particular group of people in a specific context" (Kalcheva, 2016, p. 204). The socio-cultural animation is a combination of measures focused on creating conditions for the active involvement triggering development of the subjects involved and the development of their community (Kurki, 2000). According to the researchers in the field of health studies, cultural animation is located within the broader field of creative methods and "underpinned by an ethos of dissolving hierarchies within mixed-background groups to enable and facilitate the co-creation of knowledge and embodied learning" (Kelemen, Surman, & Dikomitis, 2018, p. 806). Thus, it aims to create a space in which existing hierarchies become less dominant and boundaries are crossed.

A socio-cultural animator, known as a "cultural and educational worker" in the Polish People's Republic, becomes the implementer of animation processes, closely linked to the living environment of local communities. The animator operates in the social space, stimulating the social or cultural activity of individuals. He or she helps them

> to discover their own creative resources. At the same time, the animator creates the conditions for establishing interpersonal relationships, which encourages the formation of an entire network of social interactions. In this way, resources based on social ties, which might represent a sort of social capital of the community, are increasing (Kargul, 2012, p. 273).

The animator is also described as "the one who spontaneously, or by virtue of his/her function, enlivens the environment, passing the initiative on to others" (Żebrowski, 1987, p. 30), as a catalyst of change, "it is the person who as a 'starter', 'mobiliser' creates the environment for change, and inevitably, the environment for conflict. Because a change is a clash of views, personalities, approaches and, of course, interests" (Jordan & Skrzypczak, 2003, p. 15). The animator reveals a subjective approach, which is to see individuals as being able to act independently and take the initiative. This means open and collective participation in the process of changing/transforming the environment. In undertaking animation activities in the local environment, the common vision of the group members, set-

ting out the direction of activities and changes they want to make in their community, becomes extremely important. All of this is intended to foster the building, revealing and stimulation of social forces in local environments, the formation of interpersonal ties, creativity, activity for the benefit of the community and the willingness to continually transform social reality and thus change individuals and social groups. Local communities require animation and social animators, and there is a need for actions aimed at stimulating hidden and overt, individual and group social forces. Animation makes it possible to achieve the objective of building local communities based on their resources and potential.

IMPLEMENTATION OF PROJECTS BY ANIMATORS AND CHANGES IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Animation activities can be one of the crucial elements of change in the local community. However, they must be adapted to the needs of the given environment and directly reach the community living there. In villages and small towns, where the communities are quite integrated but often closed to outside interference, it is not easy to make an effective attempt at animation. Consequently, one of the important qualities of individuals making such attempts (i.e., animators) is a strong motivation to act.

Motivation is one of the main elements of social activity; it is the driving force behind various initiatives seeking to change the existing reality. The current study analysed the dynamics behind the power of motivation for social action as declared by socio-cultural animators. More than half of the animators (52.4%) indicated that their motivation remained at a similar level throughout the project. One in three respondents (34.9%) felt that their motivation to act tends to increase, particularly if their action meets with a receptive response. Only a few representatives of this group (12.7%) declared a decreasing willingness to undertake activities. This creates a rather optimistic picture of the dynamics describing the animators' motivation to act, which is more likely to increase than to decrease.

The research also attempted to capture the motives behind creating the socio-cultural projects identified in the course of the research (Figure 1).

Animators most often mentioned *motives resulting from the diagnosis of the needs of the community to which the project was addressed* (93.6%), which means that the undertaken activity, in almost all cases, is a response to the real needs of people living in a given environment. This starting point makes it possible to launch activities and encourage people to participate and maintain this willing-

ness throughout the project. More than half of the responses (58.7%) refer to the organisation's activity profile as a strong motivator to apply for project funds. This, in turn, requires searching the community for groups of people whose needs coincide with the organisation's primary focus. It is also worth observing that more than one-third of the animators (36.5%) mention an economic motivator, i.e., the provision of funds for the organisation to apply for project funding. This does not change the fact that the outcomes of its activities can contribute to the development of numerous desirable environmental initiatives. Almost 25.4% of the respondents indicated the *possibility of joining the project with other partners as a motivator for action*, indicating the need for cooperation and building local partnerships among animators. Other forms of motivation (28.5%) included: *improvement of the inhabitants' life, promotion of the rural areas, building the image of the place, the need to integrate the community, and keeping the community active.*
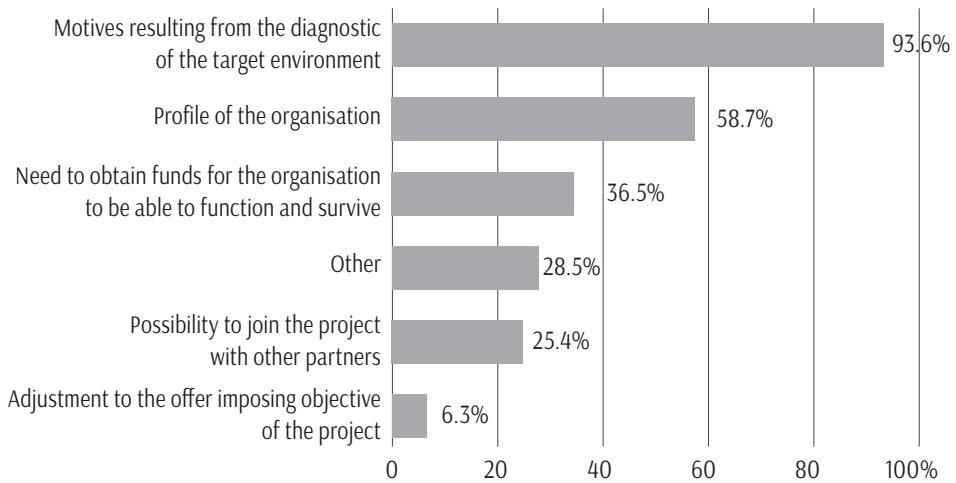

Figure 1. Motives for Establishing Socio-Cultural Projects (N = 63)

Source: Author's own research[2]

An important area of the study was the attempt to determine the extent to which activities addressed at socio-cultural activation were based on incorporating the potential of social forces present in the local community. Here, a broad spectrum of intertwining impacts of individuals and environmental elements, both personal

2   Multiple-choice question, % of individual answers does not add up to 100.

and material, emerges. The real change and transformation of a given environment depend to a large extent on them. Therefore, the current study attempted to identify elements that, from the animators' experience, occupy an important place in this broad conglomerate.

An important issue examined in the study was determining the extent to which factors related to the conditions found in the environments were considered in the project activities. The vast majority of animators (96.8%) emphasised, in the first place, that socio-cultural activities took into consideration the previous level of involvement of project participants in activities of a similar nature. Slightly less, i.e., 95.2% of the animators, declared that the project activities took into account the customs and traditions existing in the community. More than 90% of the animators stated that the activities accounted for the geographical and natural conditions (e.g., location, use of natural resources and tourism potential). 84.11% of project implementers declared that they considered demographic conditions such as age, education and origin of project participants during project activities. This high percentage indicates that animators consider environmental factors when creating animation activities that can significantly improve the quality of the proposed activities and encourage participants to make changes in their immediate environment.

The next step in the research was to identify the approaches taken by project implementers to recognise potentials among participants. Based on the analyses, it can be concluded that in the opinion of more than half of the animators (57.1%), the participants themselves declared or indicated their knowledge, skills, and competencies. In turn, 46% of the animators declared identifying the potential of the participants through a diagnosis of knowledge, skills, and competencies. Nearly 17.4% of the animators claimed that they used situations when other project participants reported on their colleagues' knowledge, skills, and competencies. A very low percentage of the respondents (3.2%) declared that the participants' knowledge, skills, and competencies in the project activities were not recognised. The animators presented different choices of paths to gain knowledge about the potential of participants in their projects. Almost one hundred percent of those indicating such activities emphasised the attentiveness of project implementers and their openness to individuals' interests, talents, and competencies.

The current study also made it possible to identify potential that, in the opinion of the animators, was revealed by the participants in the initial phase of the animation project. More than three quarters of the participants revealed artistic skills and talents (77.8%), and almost half (49.1%) revealed the potential to establish relationships and build bonds with others. Around one-third of the anima-

tors indicated organisational skills (31.7%) and the participants' ability to think and act creatively (34.9%). The study also examined which of the participants' resources, in the animators' opinion, were activated by the activities carried out in the projects. During the projects, it was possible to stimulate potential relationship skills and build bonds with others. This value increased from 49.1% to 74.6% after the completion of project activities. The projects also focused on the organisational skills of the participants. In the initial phase, they amounted to 31.7% but this increased to 46% after completing the project. According to the animators, it was also possible to stimulate creative thinking and action skills among the participants (from 34.9% to 61.9%). The last category under investigation included skills related to coping with conflict situations. This resource was not indicated by the animators among the potential of the participants in the initial phase of the project, whereas an increase in this resource was observed in almost 17.4% of the participants after participation in the projects.

The study not only analysed individual potential but also tried to identify what potential existed in the group implementing the project. Reference was made to the initial phase of the projects and changes occurring during their implementation. In the opinion of the animators, the most frequently indicated potential was the teamwork skills of the project participants and their ability to cooperate in a group (53.9%). Another resource, according to the animators, was artistic talent in different areas of culture and art (49.1%). More than 30% of the animators declared that the group showed high creative potential, creativity and inventiveness as their strengths. Almost one in four animators (23.8%) considered that the group already revealed self-organising skills at the beginning of the project. During the sociocultural projects, two potentials were activated to the greatest extent: artistic talents in various areas of culture and art (69.8%), and group cooperation skills and teamwork (65%). According to 57.1% of the animators, the project activities also helped stimulate creative potential based on creativity and inventiveness. Slightly more than one in four animators (26.9%) mentioned the activation of group self-organisation skills resulting from participation in the project.

The research also identified the extent to which the project has stimulated the resources/potentials of participants and created leaders in the local community. Almost three quarters of the animators (74.6%) expressed the opinion that participation in the project greatly affected the stimulation of the resources/potentials of the project participants, and only 3.2% of them concluded that this impact was low. In contrast, 88.9% of the animators indicated that participation in projects and the impact of the implementers on revealing individual potentials contributed to creating leaders/activists in the local community.

Summarising this activity area, the animators indicated the use of the potential and creativity of individuals and groups operating in the community. More than half of them (57.1%) declared a high level of using individual potential, and 49.1% declared a high degree of using the potential and creativity of groups operating in local communities.

An important element of the current study was determining what physical resources available to the local community were used during project implementation. In their responses, the animators indicated which institutions and organisations in the local community provided support to the projects and what type of support was offered. The respondents most often indicated assistance provided by the authorities of the commune/district/town (92%), other organisations and associations (84.1%), and cultural centres (79.3%). They less frequently mentioned schools (65%), libraries (33.3%), church (17.4%), and social welfare centres (11.1%). The most common form of support provided was the lending of sites/premises for the project purposes. The respondents less frequently mentioned assistance in promotion, co-organisation of the project (partnership), substantive and organisational support or personal support of specialists, or voluntary work. The lending of equipment for implementing activities, financial resources, and in-kind support was mentioned least frequently. The analysis of the research results also made it possible to specify the scopes in which individual entities provided support in implementing socio-cultural project activities. The projects involved various environmental resources, while funding was most often obtained from local authorities and other organisations and associations.

Regarding lending of premises (rooms, facilities), the most frequent use was made of the resources owned by cultural centres and local governments. The premises of schools and libraries were also used to a fairly large extent. In terms of loaning equipment for the implementation of activities, project implementers could most frequently rely on cultural centres and other organisations and associations. The institutions mainly involved in advertising and promoting the project activities were the commune authorities and cultural centres, while other organisations and associations were less active in this area. Schools and cultural centres most often provided personal support involving experts and specialists. In-kind support, in turn, was most often provided by the cultural centres, other organisations and associations, and local authorities. Substantive and organisational support was offered by cultural centres, commune, district and town authorities, and other organisations and associations. Volunteer support for project activities was mainly provided by schools, other organisations and associations, and cultural centres. The final element of using environmental resources in the course of projects was

the creation of project partnerships. The co-organisers or partners in the projects most often included other organisations and associations, cultural centres, or local authorities.

The survey also demonstrated a high self-assessment of the animators, who claimed that their socio-cultural projects contributed to the stimulation of activity in local communities. Most animators (90%) believed that the projects they conducted resulted in an increase in activity among the participants, consequently contributing to the local community's activation. None of the animators negated the project's impact on stimulating local activity, while 10% did not evaluate this impact.

The study also attempted to capture the extent of changes in the local community brought about by participation in socio-cultural projects. The highest rate of change throughout the projects was observed in increased social activity in the community and improved cooperation between community members (100% each). The changes in raising social awareness (96.4%) and using the creative potential of the local community (93.2%) were also rated very high. Establishing cooperation with other organisations and institutions was also considered significant. Nearly 88% of the animators declared an increase in changes regarding the involvement of existing creative groups. In turn, 77.4% indicated that participation in the project resulted in high dynamism in using environmental resources/values.

CONCLUSION

This paper discusses activities undertaken by animators in the form of socio-cultural projects to benefit the local community. The specificity of the Warmia and Mazury region, a unique cultural mosaic paired with social problems, provided a space for building social forces in the environment by involving the local community to participate in socio-cultural activities. These actions have resulted in changes to the living environment of individuals and social groups through their participation and engagement. Through their activities, the animators strive for changes in value systems, social integration and stimulation of social forces, are perceived as catalysts for social and cultural transformation. The research results presented above led to the formulation of several conclusions.

First of all, the motivation of the animators for social action is positive and increasing or is maintained at a similar level. The most commonly declared motives for creating socio-cultural projects are those resulting from a diagnosis of the needs of the community to which the project is addressed. This means that

animators are perfectly able to recognise the socio-cultural situation in the environment of the people to whom they direct their activities, which allows action to be taken to initiate changes in the local community. These findings correspond with the theory describing animation processes, according to which the first phase of animation, referred to as pre-animation, focuses, among other things, on the diagnosis of the environment.

Secondly, when planning and implementing project activities, the implementers considered the relationship between the individual and the community, which is reciprocal. In the opinion of the animators, project activities took into account the active attitude of project participants which they had already adopted towards the community, their demographic features and the customs and habits prevailing in the community. Project planning also incorporated the natural potential, the location of the local environment in question, and its tourist attractiveness.

Thirdly, the current study made it possible to identify the potential that, in the opinion of the animators, was revealed by the participants and groups in the initial phase of the animation project and the potential that was stimulated through the activity in the project. In the case of individual potential, during the animation process it was possible to develop creative thinking and acting skills, establish relationships, build bonds with others, and enhance the organisational skills of the project participants. As regards group potential, the most successful efforts were made to activate artistic talents in various areas of culture and art and group cooperation skills and teamwork. Furthermore, projects also succeeded in stimulating the creative potential of the participants based on creativity and resourcefulness.

Fourthly, the animators employed resources offered by the commune, district and town authorities, most often in the form of lending rooms and facilities, providing financial resources or promotion. The projects additionally used resources of other organisations and associations, which were most often partners of the projects and offered voluntary work: cultural centres, schools and libraries, offering premises for the implementation of the activities, as well as promotional support.

Fifthly, the animators assessed that their socio-cultural projects had a positive impact on stimulating local activities. They believed that participation in the projects greatly contributed to stimulating the resources/potential of project participants and to creating leaders/activists in the local environment. It is also worth emphasising that the animators observed the dynamics of change in the local environment as a result of the project activities in the following areas: increasing social activity in the environment, improving cooperation between members in the community, exploiting creative potential from the environment and involving existing creative groups.

The key conclusions allow the claim to be made that in the opinion of the animators, the projects resulted in positive, lasting change and contributed to increased socio-cultural activity, even after completing the project activities.

References

Babbie, E. (2007). *Badania społeczne w praktyce*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.

Cyboran, B. (2018). *Animacja w systemie zależności instytucjonalnych. Uwarunkowania rozwoju animacji społeczno-kulturalnej na tle polskiej polityki kulturalnej po 1989 roku.* Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.

Debesse, M., & Mialaret, G. (1988). *La Animacion Sociocultural* [The Sociocultural Animation]. Barcelona: Oikos Tau.

Domagała, B., & Sakson, A. (Eds.) (1998). *Tożsamość kulturowa społeczeństwa Warmii i Mazur.* Olsztyn: Ośrodek Badań Naukowych.

Jordan, P., & Skrzypczak, B. (2003). *Kim jest animator społeczny?* Warszawa: Szkoła Animatorów Społecznych.

Kalcheva, A. (2016). Theoretical and Historical Aspects of Socio-Cultural Animation. *Trakia Journal of Sciences*, *14*(3), 203–206. DOI: 10.15547/tjs.2016.03.002.

Kargul, J. (2012). *Upowszechnianie, animacja, komercjalizacja kultury. Podręcznik akademicki*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.

Kelemen, M., Surman, E., & Dikomitis, L. (2018). Cultural Animation in Health Research: An Innovative Methodology for Patient and Public Involvement and Engagement. *Health Expectations*, *21*(4), 805–813. DOI: 10.1111/hex.12677.

Kopczyńska, M. (1993). *Animacja społeczno-kulturalna. Podstawowe pojęcia i zagadnienia.* Warszawa: Centrum Animacji Kulturalnej.

Kurki, L. (2000). Sociocultural Animation in Learning. *Lifelong Learning in Europe*, *5*(3), 162–167.

Marynowicz-Hetka, E. (2006). *Pedagogika społeczna. Podręcznik akademicki*. Vol. 1. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.

Mendel, M. (Ed.). (2013). *Animacja współpracy środowiskowej.* Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek.

Nycz, E.J. (2019). Animacja kultury lokalnej jako inicjatywa instytucjonalna. *Lubelski Rocznik Pedagogiczny*, *38*(1), 9–22. DOI: 10.17951/lrp.2019.38.1.9-22.

Urząd Statystyczny w Olsztynie (2019). https://olsztyn.stat.gov.pl

Wawryniuk, S. (1990). *Siły społeczne wychowania w osiedlach mieszkaniowych*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza.

Żebrowski, J. (1987). *Zawód i osobowość animatorów kultury (w świetle nowych koncepcji wychowania zintegrowanego).* Gdańsk: Wojewódzki Ośrodek Kultury.