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Educational opportunities for seniors and the most common non-formal organization of senior education – Polish perspective

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to show the specifics of the educational offer addressed to the Polish senior. Selected forms of cultural and educational work were analyzed, including the offer of senior clubs, dance classes and language learning. Poland, through its senior policy, organization and creation of some educational projects, tries to support the development of this social stratum. The possibility of participating in various types of activities carried out, e.g. in senior clubs, universities of the third age and courses positively affects the well-being of seniors. Older people gain the opportunity to maintain good interpersonal relationships, meet new people, share their experiences, and expand cognitive horizons. Senior clubs, U3A, dance and language schools enable lifelong intellectual development. Researches prove that in the elderly people can improve their own physical condition, they can start speaking foreign languages, work on improving memory and developing a network of new friends.

Introduction

The purpose of the article is to prove that Poland is a country that has a rich educational offer for seniors, cares for their education and intellectual development. Among the various forms of gerontological education implemented in senior clubs, U3A and other facilities (learning in old age² (Szarota 2015), dance and language classes were selected for analysis. Assumptions of the theory of activity (see Halicki

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2 Z. Szarota (2015). *Uczenie się starości*, *Edukacja Dorosłych* 1 (72), p. 23–36.

2006)³ show that seniors, in order to maintain their own emotional balance, mental and physical well-being, should take on new roles and fulfill themselves in new areas of activity. Conception life-long learning, actually late life-long learning also includes elderly people. The benefits of educational involvement are indisputable.

Senior's clubs

In the gerontological literature you can find reports that indicate a high correlation between the activity of seniors and their sense of happiness, satisfaction and assessment of the quality of life in old age (Bugajska, 2007). According to information based on the National Senior Policy, senior clubs are institutions for the normalization of activities by combating the feeling of loneliness, isolation and redundancy functions. In addition, they support the intellectual and creative capabilities of older people. They began to arise in Europe after World War II, and have been present in Poland since the 1960s. The genesis of this movement is associated with the growing demographic changes of aging societies and the resulting cultural consequences, that is, the need to develop a free-time offer for the growing number of elderly people. Well-managed and used free time is an ally of permanent education. In this approach, it is a factor conducive to the creation and development of autotelic and cognitive values (Szarota, 2009).

Senior clubs in Poland are the most widely available and in most cases a free form of activating older people. In Polish conditions, senior clubs are also a relatively new organizational form related to the activation of older people. The offer and development of clubs depend primarily on the activity and efficiency of the leaders and members of these institutions. The range of activities carried out as part of senior clubs can be quite diverse. These classes are associated with the lowest costs, are the easiest to organize and in most cases take place systematically (minimum once a week) (Raczyk & Herbut, 2016). Some clubs offered their participants various types of workshops and training. Their most common form was meetings with specialists people: doctors, nutritionists, pharmacists, beauticians, police officers, as well as writers, poets, and travelers. This thematic category also includes artistic workshops, mainly during the holiday season (e.g. preparation of decorations, cards). (Gulanowski, 2012). Other categories (choir, card games, logic games, club cinema) are indicated relatively less often. Noteworthy, however, is the very large diversity of popularity of classes. It can be noted that seniors prefer those forms of activity that they are unable to provide themselves and which are associated with the intensification of social life (e.g. dance evenings, trips, parties). Senior clubs in Poland are self-help centers of social, cultural, educational and caring life. The purpose of senior clubs is to improve the quality of life of older and lonely people through their integration with the local environment.

3 See: J. Halicki (2004). Społeczne teorie starzenia się. In: M. Halicka, J. Halicki (Eds.), *Zostawić ślad na ziemi...*

As part of the clubs' activities, seniors can also participate in courses and training, e.g. computer use or Internet use. The activity of the elderly meets, above all, the need to be useful and necessary, gives a sense of accomplishment, independence, enables the transmission of life wisdom and accumulated experience (Pośluszna, 2012). The first stage in the educational process of seniors is motivation. It is this that influences the fact that seniors meet with their instructors, e.g. in the computer room and start learning together. The theory of motivation is based on the assumption that human predictions related to education are related to his previous educational experience (Jurczyk-Romanowska, 2012).

Senior clubs play not only the role of social activation but also the concept of cultural participation and socio-cultural animation. Senior clubs through their activities influence the change of personality and behavior of older people, allow to find a satisfactory model of life in old age. The basic elements of such an old age model can be activity, creativity, and prosociality. This is a place where seniors can pursue their interests, develop hobbies, feel comfortable in a circle of matters and people they know and understand. Their main task is to keep older people in a state of activity, and thus self-sufficiency and independence in life for the longest possible life in a natural environment for them. The reference to the basics of cultural and educational activity and the theory of cultural participation as well as social and educational animation shows that they have a much broader social and cultural context and dimension. Senior clubs are treated as a form of social activation, at the level of which cultural participation and socio-educational animation are implemented (Chabior, 2011).

The Polish phenomenon are undoubtedly Universities of the Third Age. Their mission is to activate seniors, among others, by educating, learning, expanding knowledge and developing the interests of listeners, as well as organizing active leisure time and enabling meeting new people. In 2018, 640 Universities of the Third Age operated in the form of various organizations and institutions in Poland. The total number of U3A students in the 2017/2018 academic year was 113.2 thousand, of which 86.3% are people aged 61 and more. The most numerous group of participants was made up of younger seniors (61–75 years), whose participation in the analyzed period amounted to 70.3% of the total audience, and people aged 76 and more accounted for 16.0%. The largest number of seniors aged 61 and above took part in activities in the Podlasie and Lubusz Voivodships. The least seniors from the Świętokrzyskie and Wielkopolskie voivodships in this age group participated in the classes. The students of the Universities of the Third Age, irrespective of the voivodship and age group, are the vast majority of women. In the 2017/2018 academic year, they accounted for 84.3% of the total number of U3A students. Among students aged 61–75 years, the share of women was slightly higher and amounted to 84.8%, and among U3A participants aged 76 and more was at the level of 79.4% (Wyszkowska & Gabińska & Romańska, 2020).

Dance classes for seniors

Some seniors want to stay fit and self-sufficient for as long as possible, which is why more and more people are looking for ways to active old age. Some of them have dreamed of going to dance classes, but they have never had such opportunities before. When it comes to health, then dance exercises tailored to their own physical abilities bring maximum effect. Rhythmic exercises with musical accompaniment, properly selected for age and mobility, are one of the means of gerontological prevention. Dance classes prevent senile dementia, increase the body's ability to absorb oxygen, improve lung ventilation, and increase the maximum stroke and minute volume of the heart (Banio & Banio-Surmiak, 2017).

In recent years, dance has become one of the most popular forms of physical activity in Poland. Due to the widely propagated fashion for dancing, an increasing number of people enroll in all dance courses. Every year there are more and more dance schools presenting a very diverse offer. Abilities or skills are also irrelevant, because classes are organized in many levels of advancement, which allows to find classes that will give satisfaction and joy, and will also meet expectations. Participation in dance classes helps an individual adapt more easily to changes - increased activity and effort as well as new conditions. By dancing, senior can compensate deficiencies and unmet needs, and support and stimulate human psychophysical development. According to research conducted in Poland, the majority of people attending dance classes for seniors are single people (widowed or divorced). This involves the need to be with someone, belong to a group and create a community. It is important for them to be in the company of people of a similar age, brought up at the same time, struggling with similar problems and understanding each other. Some of them hope to find a life partner in this company. They have an innate need to be useful and needed. The desire to remain in full psychophysical fitness is quite obvious because every person would like to become self-sufficient as long as possible. This is an undeniable reason that explains the need for active aging, fulfilling your dreams and taking care of your own health (Banio & Banio-Surmiak, 2017) The effect of great interest in dance in our country is the dynamically developing dance clubs and interest circles at the Universities of the Third Age or Senior Clubs coming out with an offer of movement and dance classes. Dance is a great fun proposition, it gives you entertainment, allows you to escape from everyday problems, greatly improves your mood and relaxes you mentally. At the Universities of the Third Age dance classes are conducted which use therapeutic knowledge based on the principles of kinesitherapy, music therapy, and choreotherapy. These types of activities streamline and strengthen their participants through the use of ballroom and folk dance techniques, yoga elements as well as aerobics and choreotherapy (Śliwińska, 2014). Dance is one of the most desirable physical activities among seniors. Dance with all its range of types and styles and a variety of pace becomes one of the most pleasant forms of stimulating the work of the human

body (Kott, 2017). Group dancing brings satisfaction when you manage to master new systems. This requires increased concentration and memory exercise. You can dance them in any group, regardless of the number of men who are necessary in traditional dances. They often use traditional folk tunes and forms of group dance (Zaorska, 1997). Australian research⁴ shows that social interaction is the motivation for attending ballet classes for the elderly. Motivation is a key factor motivating active older people to participate in and enjoy ballet. Participation in ballet classes positively on the body of the elderly. They feel more energetic, lively, keeping fit, body control, awareness, posture, flexibility, physical well-being, and general well-being. When ballet classes for seniors began to be organized, it turned out that in some incentive motivations for activity in the classes resulting from previous ballet experiences of women. Ballet participants for seniors openly admitted that now they would have time to fulfill their dreams. Further incentive criteria are present in the group who contribute to the inspiration of participating in ballet. People participating in the classes interact with people. They often go to coffee together after classes and organize social gatherings. An important issue of ballet exercises is also a matter of exercise exercises for seniors. Exercises must be set at a level so that they are not too difficult and do not demotivate the class. When it comes to experienced social ballet participants, they feel that they are feeling community and building relationships (Ali-Haapala & Moyle & Kerr, 2018). According to the theory of activity⁵ that are still valid more active older people are more satisfied with their lives. In order to maintain a positive self-image, older people must replace with new roles those who lost along with the aging process. In this way, well-being in old age is the result of increasing activity in newly acquired roles (Halicki, 2006). During the joint dance, a bond is established between mutual participants of ballet classes. It is worth noting that the participants of dance classes exchange comments with the participation of them refer to ballet movements. In classes for seniors, there is a culture of mutual assistance in obtaining movements and sequences. The ballet hall serves seniors not only to work on their own body and development, but also is a meeting place, and then a weekly contact point supporting social engagement. Unlike classes for young people, there is no phenomenon of competition, judgments, feelings of feeling worse or better than others in seniors classes. In groups of senior members, the participants help each other and get accepted, help and receive help. Participation in ballet classes is undoubtedly a very pleasant activity for active seniors. Ballet love, joy, a sense of achievement and happiness are common emotional experiences that are involved in attributing ballet (Ali-Haapala & Moyle & Kerr, 2018). Dance has a

4 Ali-Haapala, A., Moyle, G., Kerr, G. (2018). Ballet Moves for Adult Creative Health, Stage One – Research Report, Australia. Retrieved from <https://www.braceworks.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Queensland-Ballet-Balet-Moves-for-Adult-Creative-Health-report-2018.pdf>

5 See: J. Halicki (2004). Społeczne teorie starzenia się. In: M. Halicka, J. Halicki (Eds.), *Zostawić ślad na ziemi...*

positive effect on both the physical, mental and social levels. The physical activity of the individual increases. As a result, the level of general physical fitness also increases, visual-motor coordination and functioning of the systems, mainly motor, circulatory, respiratory, nervous and metabolism, are improved. On the other hand, attention and memory are improved on the mental level (Pluta & Krzykała & Andrzejewski, 2018).

Słowińska (Słowińska, 2019) draws attention to the fact that the field in which seniors are involved is often of secondary importance to them. Not because of the interest in a certain area of culture and the need for implementation within it, these people join in cultural activity. The choice of the field of participation is dictated by the relational nature of the classes, in other words, seniors reach for such a form and a field that provides direct, close interpersonal contacts. Cultural activity with this approach has no autotelic value, seniors do not engage in it for itself, but because it enables them to maintain social contacts, it becomes an antidote to social isolation. The instrumental approach to cultural activity is also represented by those caring for form, but in this case, the goal is to maintain fitness and physical fitness. Although the field of involvement is not chosen by them because of cultural passion, it is not accidental. For seniors who care about their form, it is about a kind of activity that is based on physical effort and promotes fitness. For example, this criterion is met by dance, treated not so much as a field of artistic culture, but as a kind of gymnastics (Słowińska, 2019).

Languages classes for the elderly

The place and form of learning foreign language classes for seniors is determined not only by their psychophysical abilities, funds, lifestyle, or access to broadly understood infrastructure ensuring the possibility of participating in a language course, but also by specific experiences, needs and interests. In smaller institutions specializing in language training of seniors, the most commonly taught are modern lingua franca – English – as well as German, French, Italian and increasingly Russian and Spanish. However, it is in large Universities of the Third Age, associating several hundred and more members – these operate mainly in large agglomerations – seniors have the opportunity to learn less popular languages, even those which in Polish are considered exotic, such as Japanese, Chinese or Esperanto. Among Polish seniors, some people are willing to learn about cultures and languages from distant corners of the world. If one of the languages of interest is not in the program offer of the nearest UTW, senior club or even a commercial language school, then this gap is filled with sources and multimedia courses to which an increasing group of seniors has access every year. Among the preferred activities that seniors undertake while learning foreign languages is active participation in discussions, asking / explaining problems, independent work, e.g. when solving written tasks, working in pairs or larger groups, participating in projects requiring activity and creativity. It is also worth consider-

ing active activities in which seniors take part in language courses in Poland. These include activities such as joint trips abroad organized as part of a language course, reading texts and then solving, exercises for these texts, written grammar exercises, repetition of converted material, physical education, e.g. in dance, using the recorder, and then listening recorded material and thus preserving it. What is more, seniors have opportunity to learn through games and plays, play scenes in a foreign language, watch thematic films and then discuss them, write stories on a given topic, repeat after a teacher, solve written tests, listen to texts recorded on a CD, sing (as breaks in the lesson), interpret and translate, oral or written description of the event, joint checking of homework from the previous lesson (Jaroszewska, 2013).

Stolarczyk-Zielonka (2010) draws attention to the fact that old age is characterized by some changes taking place in various spheres of human life, which in turn leads to linguistic and communicative changes. Determining specific dependencies can be helpful in maintaining language skills by old people. It should also be added that the output of linguists regarding the discussed issue is extremely modest. All information on aging comes from psychological, biological or sociological sources. Only based on them are a few linguistic conclusions. It is worth paying attention to the biological, psychological and social aspects of aging and their impact on language and communication skills. Language communication is one of the most important aspects of how people function in society. It consists of some skills, including intellectual (speaking, understanding, or cheap, etc.), whose mastery and high level of qualification guarantee the effectiveness of communication events occurring between people. Not only linguists but also researchers remaining in the field of other specialties, such as the important role of language and language communication in human life like psychology or sociology. Much attention was therefore directed to research on children's language development in the ontogenesis process. Multi-faceted experiments in this area carried out by such scientists as Piaget, Wygotski, and Łuria, expanded knowledge about the acquisition of human language and communication skills, and created a rich scientific and research base. On its basis, it is known that language and communication skills are conditioned by some social, psychological and biological factors. In recent decades, there has been an increasing proportion of elderly people in society. In the face of this demographic process, it seems reasonable to pay attention to the language and language communication of this group of people (Stolarczyk-Zielonka, 2010). The factor that is undoubtedly associated with old age is the deteriorating state of the senses, such as eyesight, hearing, and decreasing motor skills of the body. The information delivered to the brain through these senses is no longer as consistent, less detailed, and takes more time to provide than young people. "A clear defect in the process of perception is due to the fact that the old mind is less fluent in merging the sorption information into one coherent whole" (Stuart-Hamilton 2000, p. 34). With age, the weight of the brain also decreases, which means that the number of nerve cells responsible for learning efficiency and speed decreases. Some

older people, therefore, absorb new knowledge more slowly, remember more slowly, and have weaker adaptability. Age also significantly affects memory, which is an essential factor in mental functioning. "The decrease in the number and efficiency of neurons responsible for remembering and processing new information means that the physical memory system is constantly at risk" (Stuart-Hamilton 2000, p. 113). Thanks to efficiently working memory systems, it is possible to learn new things, recall and reproduce information learned earlier. As memory in people over the age of sixty tends to deteriorate, the consequence of this fact may be a gradual decrease in intellectual skills, including language and communication skills. Research on memory processes in old age shows that direct memory, i.e. the one that is responsible for recalling content in the field of attention, reduces its capabilities. On the other hand, the indirect memory indicates that elderly people have problems with referring to content, things, events that have ceased to be the object of their reflection. Without much difficulty, they use knowledge and experience to which they return with their thoughts (Zych, 1999). In old age, other difficulties are also observed at the language level. These include speech disorders caused by various factors, for example, hearing problems, but also changes in the brain. Speech organs are controlled by some of its spheres, damage to any of them as a result of illness or other event causes difficulties in the process of speaking. Speech disorders may be the result of brain aphasia. "Aphatic disorders are injuries to the brain that perform intellectual functions" (Maruszewski, 1970). One of the Russian scholars, Luria, who was observing people with aphasia, noted that the disease was caused by damage to the phonemic hearing responsible for all speech activities. Another reason for the communication problems of the elderly may be the so-called auditory-verbal memory, thanks to which it is possible to remember words and their sound, as well as is necessary when interpreting spoken speech. In the case of aphatic disorders, also internal speech conditioning the production of speech does not fulfill its functions (Stolarczyk-Zielonka, 2010). In the case of pedagogical considerations should be distinguished gerontological education and geragogy. Gerontological education disseminates knowledge about old age, using various educational environments, organizational forms, methods and means of didactic communication in this process. Geragogy is the pedagogy of aging and old people. It is a study of the conditions and effects of educational and educational activities that accompany the aging process and old age. It conducts research on the extension and optimization of the active life conditions of people in post-working age (Szarota, 2015). Paying attention to the basics of gerontological education, it should be taken into account that the program for training seniors covered medical, socio-cultural and social issues. They were supposed to contribute to the development of old people, but above all to equip them with the ability to adapt to life in modern society. From the point of view of general old age models, modernist education of seniors is best described by a deficit and conservative old age model. The essence of the former is the theory of limited use, which assumes that the body's functions diminish with age. However, they can be kept in shape by exercising

and training to delay deterioration processes. Conservative old age model, however, emphasizes the importance of individual activity, allowing you to enjoy physical and mental health for longer. This model directly derives from the theory of activity, which according to some researchers should be seen as the theory of adaptation to old age. The deficit model of old age recognizes the elderly as a kind of mechanism that breaks down, deteriorates and breaks down. It can be repaired by appropriate treatments (Muszyński, 2016). We can distinguish three possibilities of foreign language education. Firstly, at the level of formal education – this may include learning foreign languages at primary school, high schools and colleges; as a result, an appropriate level of formal education targeted at a given foreign language is obtained (this possibility is more specific for children, young people, and adults of working age). At the level of non-formal education, i.e. learning foreign languages at language schools or as part of educational language programs/activities at third-century universities, third-century academies, day centers, and retirees' clubs. At the level of informal education – this is the most accessible, spontaneous and non-institutional education in foreign languages, e.g. through communication in communities, watching TV programs or listening to radio programs in a foreign language, reading books, materials or tourist guides, etc. (Švec, 2008).

Older people learn to be self-sufficient in undertaking subsequent tasks resulting from personality development. According to E. Skibińska (Skibińska, 2008), global goals of senior education are “understanding the world combined with the ability to interpret it”, “shaping the attitude of responsibility for oneself and one’s future”, as well as acquiring “the ability to solve everyday problems” (Skibińska, 2008, p. 100). Given the specifics of learning in old age, and therefore mainly through non-formal education, its characteristics and purpose can be defined in words Olga Czerniawska: “Educational aspects of quality of life consist in accepting the reinterpretation of one’s own experiences, one’s past, searching for forgotten or undervalued values in it, reliving them for self-development, for a better life in the present, for accepting one’s change through maturing to today, until tomorrow, by constantly designing your life, seeing future perspectives, even if this perspective is for tomorrow, week, month” (Czerniawska, 2000, p. 178). According to the theory of activity, to survive old age, seniors must take care of their activity, also on the level of learning. So that it would give them satisfaction, and at the same time, that the community would accept these activities and be able to use this activity in part. Education is not only the goal of activity but also a tool for acquiring new competencies that allow development and action. One can propose an education model as a tool for self-determination and self-sufficiency in old age based mainly on its three basic functions: emancipatory, altruistic and egotic (Fabiś, 2005). The emancipation function aims to strengthen the whole generation. Education not only maintains the position and place of seniors in all environments, which constantly develops, freeing oneself from dependencies, oppressive conditions, stereotypes, superstitions, up to raising the generation of seniors in the social hierarchy,

independence – both on an individual scale and in relation to the whole population. Education understood in this way will be utilized through participation in social life through participation in decision-making bodies, to create for seniors – as a generation, an important place in the social structure, to care for the interests of the oldest citizens. The second function – altruistic – helps to realize the need to support another. Learning allows you to understand others and equips you with the necessary knowledge and skills to act for the benefit of others. By opening up to others and engaging in the surrounding world, by working for others and by learning for others and from them, seniors can find themselves in the role of volunteers, carers or local politicians, animators in the local environment of members of charity teams. The third direction of learning allows you to realize the needs related to your development, are selfish learning, aimed at yourself, leading to self-realization, to self-realization, to fulfill your ambitions, dreams, aspirations, and aspirations. Thanks to learning, a mature man not only broadens his interests or develops himself, but he also becomes more perfect in the spiritual space. He can face existential concerns, problems of everyday life in old age, and it is also easier for him to prepare for death. For the elderly, learning creates great opportunities for development. In a life marked by a lot of free time, it becomes an alternative to boredom and underdeveloped activities. Regardless of the level of education and educational biography in old age, everyone can find suitable educational activities for themselves. For people supporting old people, this is an important task: finding areas of educational activity that are appropriate for the individual. Certainly, the university of the third age will be an excellent offer for educated people looking for contacts with others, for open people, social people willing to learn and discuss to other leisure activities, such as sport, tourism, art, but also learning similar to traditional learning at school. Universities for seniors are becoming the meeting place of the local elite, the most emancipated part of seniors. A slightly different target group consists of participants of senior clubs. These have a more local character, are focused on creative and valuable spending of free time. However, these proposals place fewer requirements for participants. These are often meetings with interesting people, joint games and artistic activities, but also activities of a typically ludic character. They allow to establish and strengthen contacts in local communities, maintain mental and physical condition, and above all allow you to spend an interesting and creative time, supporting development in late adulthood (Chabior & Fabiś & Wawrzyniak, 2014).

The activation process is the basis for the functioning of educational institutions, whose offer is addressed to the elderly. Participants of cultural and educational classes undertake various educational tasks, using modern tools to acquire and consolidate knowledge. Learning is not a boring process for them. This is a fascinating challenge, but also a civilizational and conscious necessity. It is cognitive activity open to reflective everyday experience, multiplication of knowledge and skills. This is necessary in the era of rapidly changing technologies (Szarota, 2014).

Summary

Considering the message of the idea of the learning process in old age and the assumptions of Polish senior policy expressed in the support of older people in their dignified, independent life. It is worth noting that Poland is trying to support seniors in satisfying their educational and cultural needs, developing and acquiring new knowledge, skills, shaping various competences necessary in the 21st century. Traditional areas of senior education are expanding. The didactic but also market demand for compliance of the content of education with the educational needs of learners causes the development of new forms and methods of language learning, new forms of recreational activity, in this case dance. The added value of these processes is senior competence in managing time resources and a sense of belonging to society. The Polish life-long education market is open to seniors. The topic of the need for education of the elderly has intensively developed due to the aging of the population. It is worth paying attention to third-century universities, which were created to maintain spiritual health, support personal development and to facilitate aging. The Polish senior education system should focus on the opportunity to acquire new skills for all older people. It is worth paying attention to the qualifications of foreign language teachers and the methodology of working with seniors. When considering the educational offer for seniors, special attention should be paid to the need to distinguish between (foreign language) education of young people and the education (foreign language) of adults and older people on the other hand.

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