

## Older people's education: the case of Poland

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### Abstract

*In Poland, as well as in many other European countries, the proportion of older people is steadily growing. This phenomenon is related to numerous challenges faced by the countries. It is also worth pointing out that there is an increasing interest in ageing subjects, especially education in late adulthood. The issues related to education of older people in Poland were discussed in the article. It presents an overview of rapid demographic changes, the situation of the elderly people and their educational needs. Moreover, the article also deals with institutional assistance and support for older people's education as well as the selected Polish research focusing on education in old age.*

**Keywords:** older people education, Poland, aging research

### 1. The situation of elderly people in Poland

The population in Poland is getting older, as it is the case of other European countries. According to *the Polish Central Statistical Office* (Główny Urząd Statystyczny GUS 2016a), Poland's population was estimated to be 38 million people in 2015, including 8,8 million (nearly 23%) people aged 60 and over. By way of comparison, in 1989, the proportion of population aged 60 and over was 14,7%. The elderly population is projected to make up 40% of the total population in 2050. The ageing process results from the lifestyle extension phenomenon as well as low fertility rates. In Poland, women (59%) constitute the majority of the older population. The preponderance of women increases with moving through successive older age groups. Among people aged at least 85, 73% are women living in one-person households. Widowhood among women involves not only living alone for a considerable period of time, but also significantly lower incomes, which makes it difficult to

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satisfy needs independently (Błędowski et al. 2012). Polish seniors seem to have small social networks, consisting of a few persons, mostly family members (Kozerska 2015). The CBOS report (Omyłka-Rudzka, 2012), presenting the research results on ways of spending time in retirement, reveals that almost second woman (46%) tends to regularly or occasionally help care for their grandchildren or great-grandchildren, compared with 39% of men. Furthermore, it was noted that the level of biological disability in elderly people seems to be slightly higher in Poland than the EU average (GUS 2016b). According to the Eurostat methodology, every second person aged 60+ was considered disabled. Nearly 2/3 of the above mentioned population is made up of individuals with minor activity limitations that are not encountered by other people, whereas the remaining 1/3 of the population has more serious activity limitations. Nonetheless, the participation rate of biologically disabled older people appears to be much higher in a number of European countries than in Poland, for example, in Latvia and Slovakia,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the elderly (aged 65+) are biologically disabled, whereas the biologically disabled account for about 60-70% of the elderly population (aged 65+) in Estonia, Romania, Lithuania, Italy, Hungary, Greece and Germany (GUS 2016b). The results of report *Prognoza ludności na lata 2014-2050* (2014) indicate the deepening process of population ageing. Like Lithuania and Romania, Poland, in this regard, will have to face the most unfavourable situation in comparison to other European countries. The major issues and problems related to the phenomenon of population ageing still remain to be addressed. They include (Błędowski et al. 2012, p.28): 1) a decline in the care potential of families; 2) an increase in burdens of the pension system as a result of the necessity of a larger number of various benefit payments in the long term; 3) an increase in health care costs; 4) an increase in community care costs; 5) an increase in institutional care costs, particularly financial outlays associated with institutional forms of care for the elderly. Demographic changes pose numerous challenges for Poland regarding the policy-making process aiming at finding solutions to the issues highlighted above. In Europe, the Active Ageing Index (AAI) measures the potential of older people in terms of employment, participation in social activities, independent living and their capacity to active age. The index was launched by the European Commission in the context of the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations 2012. The index is made up of a set of indicators covering four domains: 1) Employment 2) Social

participation 3) Independent, healthy and secure living 4) Capacity for active ageing. Poland is the country which hardly scored 28,2 points in the AAI in 2014, assuming that the index value of 100 represents a perfect situation with a 100% task completion rate in each specific area and 100% participation of the elderly in all areas. When the overall ranking of 28 European countries is taken into account, Poland, which is ranked only above Greece, occupied the penultimate position (*Active Ageing ...* 2014). Slovakia, Hungary and Romania also became the bottom-ranked countries. In Poland, the active ageing policy, particularly since 2012, has aroused considerable interest designing and implementing the Government Programme for the Social Participation of Senior Citizens (ASOS): development of the Long-Term Senior Policy in Poland for the years 2014-2020; the programme Solidarity between Generations: Measures to Increase the Activity of People Aged 50+; and then introduction of the Senior-WIGOR multiannual programme for the years 2015-2020 (Perek-Białas 2016, p.23). All activities are carried out in compliance with the objectives of the European Social Fund for 2014-2020. Both investing in lifelong learning and promoting social inclusion are considered high priority. It is assumed that a significant contribution to achieving those objectives can be made by improving access to various forms of lifelong learning, the active social integration of individuals in every age group, striving to promote active and healthy ageing and improving access to high quality social services, including older people's services (*Rządowy Program ...*, p.21). According to papers related to promoting active ageing, "social policy towards old people cannot be exclusively policy in aid of old people but should be a policy of assistance in organising their lives" (Błędowski 2002, p.231).

## 2. Educational needs of older people

Educational needs of older people refer to "personality regulatory mechanisms with the particular emotional and motivational character helping individuals strive for things and situations, etc. (both tangible and intangible) which let experience significant educational value and satisfy their cognitive needs. The series of needs are fulfilled by broadly understood learning which takes place both in institutions and outside them by their own learning process or having a tutor, learning systematically or occasionally implementing in all aspects of life and all time perspectives (Dubas 2016, p.242). Older people's needs are influenced by their social and demographic characteristics, an economic

situation, health status broadly understood, including a sophisticated approach to the ageing process (Ziębińska 2007). This also relates to the educational needs. It is argued that maintaining independence is the purpose of older people's education (it is also one of the basic educational needs) (Halicki 2000, Leszczyńska-Rejchert 2010). For example, Halicki (2000, p.21) claims that "human life is understood as a task which needs independence required to perform the task (...) the independence is perceived as an important basis for competent behaviours characterised by taking responsibility for one's own actions. You cannot take responsibility for something that is not completely decided about on your own".

Educational needs of older people are somehow imposed by rapid changes and reality that surrounds us. It is also related to a fast development of technology, but also to some social changes which we are observing. Certain educational needs in elderly people are the result of not fulfilled desires (Sulik 2009). These needs may also appear in crisis situations, in case of illness or experienced disability. In such cases the aim of educational activity is to develop skills necessary to keep on living. Frequently these are totally new skills for an individual. A person's education has always something to do with one's activity, thus educational needs are in line with a person's fields of activity. Kargul (2005) distinguishes the following fields in which an average man's activity is showed: family life, working life, leisure time, corporeality or interpersonal relations. Dubas (2016) identifies four categories of educational needs of the elderly: conscious, unconscious, fulfilled, and unfulfilled.

### **3. Institutional support of learning of the elderly in Poland**

The most common institutional form supporting education of the elderly in Poland is the idea of third age university. The first institution of this type was established in Warsaw in 1975, only two years after the first in the world third age university had been founded in France. In 2015 in Poland there were 575 TAUs (Polish Central Statistical Office/Główny Urząd Statystyczny 2016c). According to The Polish Central Statistical Office (2016c) a majority of third age universities functions as associations and foundations (57%). Almost every fourth entity (23%) is run by an academic institution (out of which 63% is run by non-public schools), and 55% out of entities not functioning as academic institutions has a

signed agreement with an academic institution concerning a cooperation or a patronage. The survey (Polish Central Statistical Office 2016c) revealed that a majority of TAUs indicated developing their students' interests, education, and broadening knowledge as the main aims of their activity. A priority is also to give participants a possibility of spending free time in an active way, to promote a healthy lifestyle, to give them a chance for socialization and to update the skills necessary to live an active life in the contemporary world. Those who take advantage of TAUs offer are characterized by a relatively high formal education. People with secondary education make almost a half of all participants (49%), and those with higher education make 39%.

Among organisations supporting older people, for instance when it comes to satisfying their educational needs, we can mention some non-governmental organisations. A characteristic feature of such organisations is their non-profit nature, independence from public institutions as well as being established and run by their own members (Zych 2001). According to Leszczyńska-Rejchert (2010, p. 176-177) non-governmental organisations supporting the elderly in Poland can be classified as follows: 1. Organisations supporting the elderly people in the sphere of health, 2. Organisations gathering older people and acting for the benefit of them (i.e. senior and veteran organisations, third age universities, senior clubs, and church organisations, as well as self-help groups), 3. Organisations supporting the elderly people as well as poor and lonely people, 4. Organisations supporting social assistance centres or centres for seniors, 5. Organisations promoting issues related to gerontology. It is worth mentioning that the elderly are quite socially active in the above institutions, they often act as volunteers there.

Talking about institutional support of education of older people it is worth mentioning that there are some differences between a city and countryside inhabitants (Leszczyńska-Rejchert 2010, p.109-111). Activities for those living in the village are less accessible to them because of a worse communication network, smaller number of cultural institutions, health centres or social assistance centres. People living in the countryside belong to the poorest group in our country. Family is the main source of support in this group, as well as religious organisations. The elderly people in Poland (both in towns and villages) can be distinguished by a higher level of religiousness measured by a frequency of religious practices, resorting to a prayer in difficult life situations and perceiving God as a source of a

happy life (Czapiński, Błędowski 2014). Religious and Catholic organisations constitute a very important element of educational support of older people, and for many seniors they seem to be the only place of social involvement. The scope of activity of those organisations is very wide, related to the interests of participants, for example social and cultural matters, educational and pedagogical issues, as well as charity and educational care matters (Kamiński 2008, p.8). 'Experiences which contribute to one's presence in a religious organisation go beyond a religious sphere, they regard a development in the cognitive and axiological sphere, acquisition of social competences, communication skills, co-organisation and co-decision. The potential of people and environments, being developed in such a way, can be generalized and transformed into a broader social sphere' (Szymczak 2010, p.116).

#### **4. Polish research on education in late adulthood**

Together with changes in the structure of Polish society there is an increase in the interest of issues related to ageing and old age. Gerontological research in Poland and the key issues related to senior policy in our country were presented to foreign readers, for instance, in *'The Gerontologist'* journal by Magdalena Leszko et al. (2016). At present there are three magazines being published in Poland which describe the issue of ageing: *Gerontologia Polska (Polish Gerontology)*, *Polish Journal of Geriatric and Psychiatry*, and *Geriatrics (Geriatrics)*. There is a series called EXLIBRIS. Biblioteka Gerontologii Społecznej (*EXLIBRIS. The Library of Social Gerontology*) that portrayals the sphere of educational and social gerontology. There is not, however, any journal that would fully present education of the elderly people. Articles dealing with such issues are often published in magazines discussing the problems of adult people. These are, for example, *Rocznik Andragogiczny (Andragogy Yearbook)*, *Edukacja Dorosłych (Journal of Adult Education)*, *Edukacja Ustawiczna Dorosłych (Polish Journal of Continuing Education)* and *Społeczeństwo I Edukacja (Society and Education)*. Education of the elderly was identified by Polish authors with third age universities (Halicki 2013). The review of scientific research on the issue of older people by Halicki (2013) shows that in the years 2000-2013 a vast part of summaries was dedicated to issues regarding Third Age Universities, however the authors opt for the activity theory in their deliberations. The authors of articles regarding education in late

adulthood tend to be focused on health, activity of the elderly, and life satisfaction (Chabior 2000; Halicka 2004; Fabiś 2005, Orzechowska 2007, Zielińska-Więczkowska et al. 2008). On the grounds of my analysis including 105 scientific articles on educational issues, it can be concluded that activity theory is one of the theories on ageing most frequently referred to. In the articles in which the activity theory or a model of successful ageing constitutes a perspective of viewing reality, such values as self-reliance of the elderly, their productivity and health have been emphasized. Intentional educational activities taken up by the elderly people are perceived as a means of counteracting some negative phenomenon associated with ageing. Much attention in the texts has been paid to the issue of relations between the quality of life or life satisfaction of the elderly people and other variables. One of the determinants under analysis is often activity of seniors, their social involvement, and participation in TAU classes. Much room was left for the issue of institutional support of old people (Szarota 2004, 2010; Leszczyńska-Rejchert 2010). Analysing some research works, it can be observed that the authors' attention has to a greater extent been focused on the education of women rather than education of men. There are popular topics such as informal learning of women, though the analysis of components of research samples in the empirical articles dealing with the issues of senior learning (both women and men), show that women dominate there in an explicit way. Regularities observed there may arise from the fact that the population of the elderly people consists in majority of women (the phenomenon of feminisation of old age). Another reason for a bigger number of women participating in the groups which undergo some research on senior education is a little interest of men in educational offers targeted at the elderly by institutions, and that is an issue of interest for researchers to a great extent. A proportion of men at TAU is 15% (Gołdys et al. 2012). My analysis of collected articles in Polish journals shows a little interest of researchers in education of the older people struggling with health problems, socially inactive, and functioning in poorly developed social networks. A review of literature made by Halicki (2013) showed a clear advantage of research and diagnostic literature over practical literature in favour of the elderly.

Careful consideration should be given to research works discussing the issue of education of the elderly when it comes to some biographical research, Olga Czerniawska in the first place (2000, 2007). Biographical data refers to the literary output of Swiss, French



and Italian school of biographical research such as: Pierre Dominice, Martine Lani-Bayle, Ducio Demetrio, Laura Formenti or Gaston Pineau. The beginning of interest in this mainstream in Poland dates back to the 80s of XXth century. In the 90s of XXth century, in the school of andragogical research in Łódź, Olga Czerniawska and her students developed a context of biographical didactics as well as some research on memory of the school (Dubas 2014). There is an increase of interest in spirituality of the elderly people in the Polish literature. An example of work dedicated to a spiritual development in late adulthood can be a selection of articles edited by Artur Fabiś and Aleksandra Błachnio (2015). There have also been publications discussing gerotranscendental theory (Halicki 2006, Steuden 2011, Malec 2012, Muszyński 2016). The publication of Danuta Seredyńska (2013), based on analysis of publications from Polish conferences, makes an interesting compendium regarding educational discourse on old age in Poland. According to Seredyńska the pedagogical discourse, linking all the themes discussed by the conference participants, is mainly focused on: social and cultural activity, as well as the issue of subordination of the elderly to the rules set for seniors by society and family. The analysis of collected texts let the author observe that contemplations of the conference participants (educators and related sciences representatives) are often aimed at the theory of social life exclusion. On one hand it is presented as 'the requirement of meeting the younger generation expectations, and on the other hand it is seen as a re-definition of reality made by a senior on one's own initiative' (ibid. p.196). Seredyńska (2013, p. 195) is of opinion that the pedagogical discourse is of enlightening and positivist nature, favouring some effective and reliable educational solutions. There is hardly any discourse of critical nature, revealing a real social functioning of education.

## Conclusions

On the basis of the analysis of published papers completely or partially dedicated to seniors' education in individual years, it can be stated that there is a considerable increase of interest in research on this area (cf. Halicki 2013). According to gerontological literature, activities aimed at supporting and facilitating older people's education in Poland focus, to a large extent, on promoting (external) activity, which may consequently improve their health status, as well as contribute to an increase in economic productivity among elderly



people. It is claimed that the successful ageing is based on Rowe and Kahn's biomedical model (1998). More recently (in the last few years), interest in other models of good old age has increased in scientific literature. Interestingly, the level of external activity tends to be lower in seniors compared to internal activity, spiritual development in this age group. However, it appears that, for a long time, there have been organizations and religious communities providing spiritual support and assistance in the educational process in Poland.

If we, like Kuchcińska (2004, p.152), Malewski (2010, p.17-32), Seredyńska (2013, p.66), hold the view that three approaches to seniors' education can be identified:

- a deterministic model focuses on the fundamental process of the internalisation of individuals' own needs and interests in order to fit into society and its own set of values and needs. The purpose of education is to emphasise that individuals are considered to be subordinate to the interests of society and responsible for fulfilling social roles or to shape individuals' perceptions in accordance with a generally accepted model (e.g. a model of grandmother or a model of a health-conscious person).
- a humanistic model concentrates on meeting the needs of participants of the educational process. Education is regarded as the possibility of personal development or a tool for coping with today's changing world
- a critical model is based on transformation of the content of consciousness among participants of the educational process,

it must be stressed that both the humanistic and deterministic models reflect the approaches to older people's education in Poland.

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