

Sociální pedagogika v kontextu životních etap člověka

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MALGORZATA STAWIAK-OSOSIŃSKA, AGNIESZKA SZPLIT

***Innovative forms of seniors' activation in modern Europe
(Selected initiatives)***

The number of elderly people in the European societies is steadily increasing, and demographic projections indicate that it will continue to increase. This situation is due to the decreasing number of births, as well as extending the lifetime of retired people. Extending the duration of human life causes the growth of the number of elderly people, even being more than 80 years old¹. Medical progress ensures longer and much healthier lives to elderly people. Today, a senior is not associated with an ailing person, closed within four walls of his or her own house, requiring constant care and assistance, or with a cheerful old man in slippers sitting at home, watching TV and entertaining his/ her grandchildren. More and more elderly people are fully independent. Today's seniors are people in good mental and physical conditions, enjoying the pleasures of life as long as possible. The sense of duty and a habit of living an active life that are developed over the years, do not allow them to accept all what fate brings. Most retired people want to spend time in a creative and active way, to feel important and fully participate in a social life².

In order to meet the needs, national and local authorities, as well as different religious organizations and NGOs try to provide seniors with various forms of leisure activities. Also seniors themselves look for new and engaging hobbies. They wish to spend their spare time effectively and efficiently. For many of them, helping their children and grandchildren, watching TV, reading books, gardening or meeting their families are everyday routines, somehow putting them "off the beaten track", hindering them to enjoy life to the full during their later adulthood. They want not only to meet the basic needs, but also to pursue their own passions and interests. Hence, more and more often they engage in work of a variety of organizations, foundations, associations, self-help groups, they become volunteers, work on

¹ Read more in P. Szukalski, *Osoby sędziwe w Polsce i w krajach Unii Europejskiej. Przeszłość, terażniejszość, przyszłość*, „Prace Instytutu Ekonometrii i Statystyki Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego” 2004, no. 142, Series A, pp. 19-27; M. Kubiak, *Współczesne problemy demograficzne w aspekcie społeczno-gospodarczym*, „Nierówności społeczne a wzrost gospodarczy” 2010, no. 16, pp. 183-185; T. B. Kulik, M. Janiszewska, E. Piróg, A. Pacian, A. Stefanowicz, D. Żołnierczuk-Kieliszek, J. Pacian, *Sytuacja zdrowotna osób starszych w Polsce i innych krajach europejskich*, „Medycyna Ogólna i Nauki o Zdrowiu” 2011, no. 2, p.91; W. Wolańska, *Population perspectives for Central Europe residents until 2050*, in: *Społeczno-gospodarcze uwarunkowania i konsekwencje wydłużenia życia ludzkiego w Europie Środkowej w czasach nowożytnych*, ed. H. Kurowska, Zielona Góra 2012, pp.319-331; *Aktywność osób starszych i solidarność międzypokoleniowa. Statystyczny portret Unii Europejskiej 2012*, on: http://analizy.mpips.gov.pl/images/stories/publ_i_raporty/ER2012/final_statystyczny_portret UE_pl.pdf

² K. Szczeszek, *Spokojny wieczór życia? – rozważania nad czasem wolnym w okresie starości*, in: *Starość w perspektywie studiów pedagogicznych*, ed. A. Tokaj, Leszno 2008, pp. 124-128; on <http://www.wolontariat.edu.pl/wolontariat-wsrod-osob-starszych/>

behalf of others, take on new roles in societies (eg. assessors), seek to earn in a part time job, begin new relationships, improve their knowledge, or take on new professional challenges³. Senior citizens, being aware of their limitations due to their age and poorer physical condition, enjoy new, innovative possibilities of spending their leisure time. The European intergeneration solidarity campaign fosters strong relations between the young and the old by spending time together⁴. Most such contacts take place in social assistance centres, clubs, schools and associations. The purpose of these activities is to develop the intergeneration solidarity, increase active participation of older persons in society, improve mutual understanding between the young and the old, and understanding of the needs of the elderly, as well as to use seniors' wide knowledge and experience to emphasise the role of tradition and history in development of communities. Such encounters bring benefits to both parties: children become regardful, careful, and protective, as well as learn a lot; while seniors feel needed, respected, and even indispensable. Often, the result of such contacts is also a long-lasting friendship, a close relation like in the family⁵.

The intergeneration solidarity, as a form of activation of the elderly generation is evolving constantly, and its supporters search for new and interesting opportunities to develop it. This can be seen for example in the initiatives of the 'Allo-grandparents' operating in France since 1994, the members of which are seniors⁶. The association aims at contributing to the development of a more humanitarian society in which everyone has a place, feels appreciated, is not excluded⁷. Initially, the cooperation between seniors and children was reduced largely to reading books aloud to children in kindergartens and schools. The adults involved in the project were more expected to be skilful carers of children, in good heart and careful, than to have any specific professional competence. After some time, the association started the co-operation with local schools and the members of it began their weekly drama workshops for pupils and visits in the surrounding cities and museums⁸.

In 1994, they started to meet in the local pubs, where the seniors were telling stories related to the past, enjoying a simple repast⁹. The purpose of these meetings was to introduce children to the timeless values and to encourage them to build their own identity. Another initiative of the association was a film or theatrical discussion meeting untitled "Words and Pictures". At the beginning of each meeting, the participants saw a movie or a play, and after the screening they open a discussion. The purpose of these kinds of meetings was to stimulate the open attitude towards other people, ability to undertake discussions on difficult topics, and to create

³ M. Kaczmarczyk, E. Trafialek, Aktywizacja osób w starszym wieku jako szansa na pomyślne starzenie, „Gerontologia Polska” 2007, no. 4, p. 117.

⁴ Active ageing and solidarity between generations. A statistical portrait of the European Union 2012, Eurostat, European Commission, pp.112-117. http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-EP-11-001/EN/KS-EP-11-001-EN.PDF

⁵ <http://www.twojaeuropa.pl/3190/europejski-dzien-solidarnosci-miedzypokoleniowej>

⁶ up to 2007 the association was using the name of „Grandparenfant”;

⁷ G. Therain, S. Lescomffe, Cele i działania stowarzyszenia „Grandparenfant” (Dziadkowie - dzieci), in: W obliczu starości. Opis projektu i dobrych praktyk, ed. H. Misiewicz, D. Błsiak, S. Adamczyk, Katowice 2007, p.93.

⁸ ibidem, p.93.

⁹ The topics of the meeting were the following: „Immigration –riches and hardships”, „Profession yesterday and today”, „Energy and environment”, „Living in a couple or alone?”, „Our belief helps us live”.

solidarity between representatives of different age groups, based on understanding, friendship and respect for the elderly¹⁰.

Currently, the association is multi-faceted. One of the most interesting initiatives held by seniors is "Tricotez cœur pour les bébés" (Layette for children). It is giving the layettes kits for newborn children of poor women in one of the 16 large hospitals in Paris and its surroundings. Elderly weavers, the members of the association, make the layettes. Each layette kit for a baby consists of eight elements in a variety of sizes (including a blanket, jackets, tiny clothes, etc.). Now, about 10 thousand weavers produce the kits and they supply their products to volunteers distributing them among women in childbed.

Another, a very attractive campaign led by seniors is called "Wednesdays with the grandchildren". This action responds to the social needs of working parents who cannot provide care for their children on Wednesdays (Wednesdays in France are days off from school). Children are put under the care of seniors who organize fun activities for them, outdoor or indoor. The outdoor activities are held in parks, churches, museums, theatres, at the concerts, exhibitions, etc. Some institutions adjust their repertoires to both: the young and their caregivers. The indoor classes are workshops in which the participants produce various art forms, flat and spacious, and even utilitarian. Every child can take home all the "four"-hand-made production. Often, such meetings include cooking together, preparing various dishes and baking cakes or cookies. Occasionally, some meetings are devoted to learning about useful objects "of the past", learning to use them, and become familiar with their functions¹¹.

An interesting variation of intergenerational cooperation is a French initiative "Ar'toit 2 generation". The major cause of it was the tragic event in the sweltering summer of 2003. Giovannetti reminds that the great heat gave, directly or indirectly, rise to 15 thousand deaths, mainly among the elderly, whether living alone or living in care facilities (nursing homes)¹². Bearing in mind the elderly and lonely people, in order to prevent the repetition of the situation in France, the authorities introduced an action, previously accomplished in Spain. The elderly people were asked to give accommodation to students, free of charge, in exchange for help and supervision over their hosts. In September 2005, the association "Ar'toit 2 generation" was established (first in the region of Arras). It launched the agency and hired qualified social workers. The office staff collected the application forms from those interested in this form of cooperation between seniors and foreign students. Each party was required to fill out the form. In case of an elderly the application form contained a brief description of a flat (e.g. space, number of rooms), the standard of accommodation and what kind of help the student was expected to give (cooking, taking out the garbage, taking care of a pet, shopping, etc.). The elderly person had to commit to lend at least one room without paying any rent (and the student could participate financially in charges for water and electricity). Moreover, the family of an elderly person had to be informed about this agreement and agree for it, to avoid

¹⁰ ibidem, p.94.

¹¹ www.egpe.org/

¹² P. Giovannetti, Inicjatywa „Artoit 2 pokolenia, in: W obliczu starości ... , p. 97.

any future problems. In case of a student the application form mentioned different activities that students could do¹³. Each student had to be at least 18 years old to be able to benefit.

The procedure for placing the student in a senior apartment is complex. Each application is carefully analysed. After selecting a student whose application has been accepted, he or she is asked to participate in an interview. Then, in the presence of the housing association employee, the flat is carefully overviewed. And the next meeting of both parties may be arranged without an intermediary. When both parties reach a consensus an agreement is signed, in which mutual obligations for a period of one year are clarified. In the period stated in the agreement, the employee of the association once every two months controls if the provisions of the agreement are complied with, by talking separately to the senior and to the student. At the end of the first year, benefits and disadvantages of the situation are carefully checked. If everything goes well, the agreement may be extended for another year. The participants of the initiative are required to pay the membership fee (30 Euros per year for an elderly person and 10 per year for a student) to finance the monitoring of the action¹⁴.

The interest in such cooperation is significantly higher among students than among seniors. The reason is that elderly people do not trust young foreigners, and are afraid of having problems with them. Some people probably do not want to admit that they are becoming more and more infirm and dependent on others. For those who decide on this cooperation benefits are measurable. The presence of a young man in the house of a lonely elderly person makes seniors feel safer; they have someone to talk to, they have support in case of illness, etc. Students gain cheap or free accommodation in exchange for help that usually is not tedious and time-consuming.

In Poland, there are also more and more interesting forms of cooperation between the generations. One of the initiatives of this kind is "Intergenerational House of Memory and Future" in Łódź. It was formed in 2008 and initiated by the director of an orphanage. She assumed that two separate institutions could work in one building, and members of both could benefit much. So, next to a children's home designed for about 40 pupils, a day care home for seniors was established. The idea behind the project is to make the children and seniors spend time together. The meetings are always held in the afternoons, when the children get home from nursery or school. Then the seniors play with the children, tell them some fairy tales, read books, help with homework, draw, play board games, etc. Thanks to the action, the orphans gained "step" grandmothers or grandfathers, and the seniors feel important, needed and loved¹⁵.

A slightly different form of intergenerational cooperation was arranged in February 2013 in Toruń. A project "The Caravan - Intergenerational House" is an initiative of an old lady and a young girl. They created a mobile home culture centre in which seniors and youth could meet for workshops. The aim of the initiative is to facilitate intergenerational integration of people in different ages, mainly the children from The Rod Association in Toruń, the volunteers from the Municipal Culture Centre in Gniewkowo, and the seniors from The Senior Club in

¹³ibidem, p.98.

¹⁴ ibidem, p.98.

¹⁵ http://uwaga.tvn.pl/13982,news,1,miedzypokoleniowa_wymiana_milosci,reportaz.html

Gniewkowo. After the renovation of an old workers' caravan and its adaptation to new tasks, it moves on the roads (the plan is to move between Toruń, Gniewkowo and Marków) and accomplishes its mission. It is assumed that during the workshops of elderly and young people, the seniors will show the young their passions. There are also plans to educate young people through games and activities dating back over 50 years. The youth, in turn, will show to the elderly what they are interested in: comics, playing guitars, movies. In this way, the coordinators of the action want to achieve the mutual understanding and acceptance of the two age groups¹⁶.

For many seniors who go into early retirement or lose their jobs at the age of retirement it is extremely important to find a job and the possibility to work. They believe that being at the age of retirement should not disable them from finding a different form of employment. Those people, who are more active, look for a job without any help. But there is a huge group of people that does not know how to deal with this problem, or whom they should ask for help, how to expose their knowledge and learnt skills. Such people usually need some guidelines from organizations and institutions offering support to find a job.

One of the institutions is the Age UK Milton Keynes, which was formed from the merger of Age Concern and Help the Aged¹⁷, operating in the UK. It works with many organizations and institutions across the country and its primary objective is supporting unemployed people aged 50 + in the correct identification of their skills, and then retraining (and often gaining new qualifications). Verification of skills and opportunities to find a job is done in the presence of skilled workers. It leads to a confrontation between the clients' own ideas about themselves and their real capabilities and limitations¹⁸. During the meetings, the team aims to help the clients realize that they must take on new challenges if they want to remain professionally active. Only when this is accomplished, the real support is possible. The Age UK Milton Keynes proposes courses and training that may bring new qualifications. Most often the changes of qualifications let the people work in the sectors with a constant lack of qualified professionals (retail trade, childcare, social services and health care). Verification of knowledge and acquired skills can take place also in voluntary activities of seniors¹⁹.

Recently, the organisation has emphasised flexibility in employment. It is a direct response to the signals coming from elderly people for whom full-time work turns out to be too difficult and exhausting. The possibility of employment in flexible hours and modified work length are more effective than the standard employment form. The demand for this type of work is enormously huge. The people employed on these conditions have a greater impact on the time and place of work. They are required to complete a task on due time. Nobody, however, requires them to work every day at the same time. The intensity of activities is set with consideration of other duties, mood, health, personal matters, trips, family events, hobbies, etc. Similarly, the work place is individually chosen, for example, some of the tasks can be

¹⁶ <http://www.mmtoru.pl/artukul/barakowoz-miedzypokoleniowa-akcja-w-toruniu>

¹⁷ www.ageuk.org.uk/miltonkeynes/

¹⁸ e.g. if a person cannot work in his profession any more, because of the health problem.

¹⁹ C. Older, *Przełamywanie barier w zatrudnieniu (FLOW Projekt)*, in: *Problemy starzenia się społeczeństwa: teoria i praktyka: perspektywa polska i brytyjska*, ed. M. J. Jarosz, A. Włoszczak-Szubzda, W. Kowalski, Lublin 2011, pp.169-170.

performed at home, and some outside it. The employee in this system is also responsible for the complexity of the task he/she undertakes. This approach to the employment of elderly people allows for a smooth transition from the state of full professional life to retirement; and prevents lot of people from mental shocks or depression. Flexibility of employment is treated as a kind of bridge between work and retirement²⁰.

One of the other proposals for seniors created by the Age UK Milton Keynes is taking parts in various actions on the international level. The task is primarily to arrange sets of training for senior social workers, during visits in partner countries, in order to employ them in this sector as long as possible. In addition, they are instructed to gather information about the recruitment and training for migrants that are run by employers, and to search for information that may help migrants adapt professionally in their home country after their return from abroad, where they were staying a few or more years. Hence, many elderly people have the opportunity to go to another country, learn about another culture and customs, make new friends. They also improve the ability to use new information technologies, search the Internet, arrange skype meetings etc.²¹.

The majority of forms of seniors' activation in all European countries are addressed and more accessible for seniors living in cities. Elderly people living in villages are often left alone, and the only institution dealing with them is a local social assistance. It is much more difficult for villagers to obtain information about opportunities for additional employment, exciting leisure activities, taking part in courses and training. Many of them do not want to leave their houses because they feel better there. The only alternative option for them is to develop themselves in the place of residence, without making significant changes in their daily life.

One solution to the problem, more and more popular in Italy, is diversification of agricultural activities²². For seniors, it is difficult to re-allocate some of a huge farm's resources into absolutely new production. However, if they are owners of small farms, they have a greater predisposition for structural and income diversification. The best form of the activity is influenced by many factors, such as specialization of the farms (eg. gardens can become food processing farms), the location of the village, its values as spa, climate, folklore, or history seating, etc. People interested in transformation of their farms into different activities or in using natural conditions to obtain additional funds, go into agricultural tourism, leisure activities centres, spas, etc. At a low cost they set up a small family business bringing them high revenue, which allows them to earn for living, does not require a huge amount of manual work and at the same time gives them great satisfaction²³.

Diversification arises considerable opportunities to women, who are given chances to demonstrate their inventiveness and ingenuity. They find themselves well especially in

²⁰ <http://www.ageuk.org.uk/work-and-learning/looking-for-work/why-flexible-working-matters-for-older-people/>

²¹ P. Clarke, Projekt FLOW – elastyczność zawodowa ludzi starszych, in: Polska i Wielka Brytania w obliczu starzejącego się społeczeństwa, ed. M. J. Jarosz, A. Włoszczak-Szubza, W. Kowalski, Lublin 2012, p.236; C. Older, Projekt FLOW (Flexible Lives for Older People), in: Problemy starzenia się społeczeństwa: teoria i praktyka ... , pp. 166-167.

²² It means development of payable activities, not only crops and livestock production. It is linked with multi-functioning, as it gives a chance for employment in non- farming activities.

²³ M. Juchnicka, M. Skarżyński, Aktywizacja zawodowa osób po 50. roku życia: dobre praktyki z Włoch, Białystok 2011, pp. 25-29.

tourism and hostel activities. For their guests they usually offer participation in farming activities (e.g. harvesting the grapes, olives; production of cheese, feeding animal), provide leisure activities (biking, fishing, mountain biking, horseback riding, walking, etc.), or organize interesting evenings for tasting their own wine or food. In their farms, they also set up training centres for young people (e.g. training concerned with healthy nutrition, environmental education, ecology, culture and regional traditions), local art and craft trading centres, mini-museums, shops, or hippotherapy or dogotherapy centres. Some of the women set up small mini markets with vegetable and fruit, in which they sell crops and milk from their own farms, as well as bread and wine produced on their own²⁴.

Recently, structural diversity has gained much popularity, as it is a cheaper and simpler way to reorganize farms. What is fashionable is setting up a lavender farm. Growing lavender makes the raw material for the production of cosmetics, essential oils, dried fragrance, and even herbs and supplements for cakes. They are not processed at the same farm, but in special plants. The farm provides the raw material, and then receives finished products for direct sale on the site. A tiny, cosy, beautifully decorated shop located on the outskirts of the lavender fields, attracts tourists who are willing to purchase the products it offered. The proximity of the lavender fields adds credibility to the seller as it gives the impression that the products have been prepared by the owners of the farm on their own. Tourism is also popular there. In the lavender harvest season (from late June to late August), visitors can take part in harvesting and, in return, pay less for renting a room²⁵.

Elderly age is as important stage of life. As a result of the recent demographic changes the number of seniors is constantly increasing, as well as the number of elderly not being infirm and sick, but able-bodied, enjoying good health and eager for active participation in social and professional life. Hence, various actions are taken to make them feel needed, important and indispensable. It is a pity, however, that there is still a relatively small group of seniors that become involved in these activities, that want to reach for what is at their fingertips, that understand the active life is a better life.

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²⁴ ibidem, pp. 32-33.

²⁵ R. Faben, Creme, oli e biscotti: le molte vite della lavanda, „Agricoltura” 2008, no. 11, pp.68-69, on:
http://www.ermesagricoltura.it/var/portale_agricoltura/storage/file/ra0811068s_1244543286.pdf;
<http://www.lavandadivenzone.it/la-lavanda-di-venzone/lavandeti/>