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Education and Learning in the Lives of Old People – A Strategy for Development and Adaptation to Old Age

Abstract

The article aims to present the educational activity of seniors not in terms of its outcomes but as a process that enables older adults to use it as a tool. This life strategy allows them to manage their potential. In doing so, they can familiarize themselves with reality and everyday life and acquire skills and competencies, not so much to adapt to changes but to be ready for them and respond appropriately. The article is theoretical; it concerns adult education, educational activity, and lifelong learning of older adults. In addition to explaining the theoretical framework determined by permanent education and lifelong learning theories, the background of social changes and civilizational development, treated as the socio-cultural context of the educational activity of contemporary seniors, will be indicated.

Keywords: old age and aging, educational activity, theories of permanent education, and lifelong learning.

Edukacja i uczenie się w życiu ludzi starych – strategia rozwoju i adaptacji do starości

Abstrakt

Artykuł ma na celu pokazanie aktywności edukacyjnej emerytowanych nauczycieli, zarówno w sferze skutków, czyli funkcji, jak i w aspekcie sposobu oraz strategii działania, które wyposażają w nowe kompetencje i umiejętności pozwalające na zarządzanie własnym życiem w starości tak aby przebiegało pomyślnie. Artykuł ma charakter teo-

retyczny, dotyczy edukacji dorosłych, aktywności edukacyjnej i całożyciowego uczenia osób starszych. Poza wyjaśnieniem ram teoretycznych wyznaczanych teoriami edukacji ustawicznej i całożyciowego uczenia się, wskazane zostanie tło przemian społecznych i rozwoju cywilizacyjnego, traktowanych jako kontekst społeczno-kulturowy aktywności edukacyjnej współczesnych seniorów.

Słowa kluczowe: starość i starzenie się, aktywność edukacyjna, teorie edukacji ustawicznej i całożyciowego uczenia się.

Introduction

The new culture of old age necessitates a new perspective on the senior population and their readiness to fulfill social roles and actively participate in family, social, public, and educational life. It is also an expression of their openness and readiness for change, as well as for taking actions that support them in meeting new challenges. This should be seen as a response to society's expectations of this age group. Of course, this situation does not take everyone into account, because when it comes to the senior population, we must consider the individual differences in their social, health, and family situations, as well as the fact that

> Humans have always been and continue to be individuals who shape their own destiny, regardless of the historical period and conditions in which they live. [...] As a person, a human being can define themselves through action, rather than simply adapting to external conditions. They can create their own life situations, rather than simply adapting to their social environment (Czerniawska 1996: 37, 38).

Educational theory focusing on the needs and educational activities of older people is known as educational gerontology, also referred to as geragogy. It is a practical discipline that provides tools for educational work with older people. It refers to both learning processes and the management of educational activities aimed at this group. It can be defined as teaching and learning for older people that promotes their self-fulfillment, social relationships, well-being, and talent development, which in turn leads to successful aging.

Geragogy can also be understood as an educational strategy aimed at stimulating individual development. With regard to the classic division of old age into early, late, and advanced old age, it is noted that in early old age, the goal of learning is to maintain activity, emancipation, and further development. In late and advanced old age, on the other hand, education serves to support the resolution of everyday problems, primarily related to limited mobility and dependence on others (Fabiś, Tomczyk 2016: 187). The priorities that guide these activities are: independence, agency, autonomy, subjectivity, and dignity until the end, regardless of the circumstances of aging (Chabior 2017: 64).

Representatives of critical geragogy reject the belief in the oppressive conditions of old age and the view of adult learners as dependent, treating education as a tool for the emancipation of aging and elderly people. Critical geragogy emphasizes the fact that learning in old age is a tool for social change and the empowerment of older people.

Critical geragogy recognizes the diversity of senior learners and emphasizes that later life can be a period of profound creativity, reflection on one's own biography, solving personal problems, and developing a sense of agency (Greech, Hallam 2015). In this view, education promotes autonomy and combats social exclusion and marginalization. This process enables seniors to keep up with economic, social, and cultural changes, resulting in independent thinking, interpretive maturity, critical thinking, and courage in forming judgments (Szarota 2019).

Representatives of critical geragogy advocate moving away from traditional, transmission-based models of education in favor of approaches that are activating, participatory, and based on the biographical experiences of learners. The educational process should be dialogical and partnership-based, taking into account the subjectivity and existential resources of seniors (Formosa 2018: 13–17). Contemporary educational practices, implemented both individually by older people and as part of social initiatives, confirm the effectiveness and relevance of this approach. Contemporary educational practice aimed at seniors, both in the institutional dimension (e.g., universities of the third age) and in grassroots social initiatives, confirms the effectiveness of an approach based on dialogue, activation, and biographical reflection. The growing interest in education in late adulthood reflects not only a growing awareness of the importance of lifelong learning, but also cultural changes that are leading to a redefinition of old age as an active and creative stage of life (Jarvis 2004).

Aging and old age – the humanistic model

Aging and old age are complex, multidimensional processes that are difficult to define unequivocally. They have become an interdisciplinary subject of research in many fields and disciplines of science: anthropology, psychology, sociology, economics, social gerontology, and philosophy. Each of these sciences places a human being at the center, but from different perspectives – biological, social, cultural, or existential.

Therefore, a model of old age based on humanistic values should take into account the individuality of the person, their freedom, dignity, and need for self-fulfillment until the end of their life.

Old age gives rise to a kind of oppression, which stems not only from the fact that old age is the last stage in a person's life, ending in death, but also from the changes in values that take place in the biographies of seniors, in social life, and in the pace of change, which are of strategic importance for the individual and social functioning of older people, and above all, for building and maintaining their identity. Older people are expected not only to adapt to a new and different stage of life, namely, old

age. They are expected to be ready for change, to take an active approach to it, and to be prepared to make decisions and take action in new and unfamiliar situations. They are expected to be ready for change and development that will enhance their ability to perceive, understand, and solve emerging problems. A sense of agency and causality[1] in terms of actions and activities undertaken, readiness for socio-cultural participation, accepting support and care in coping with everyday life, coping with everyday life and one's own life in old age. Learning to be an old person also in the context of existential concerns and anxieties, such as thanatic anxiety, loneliness, suffering, mourning, and death (Fabiś 2018). Developing inner life, spiritual development that helps in coping with life in old age, maintaining dignity, and striving to achieve full humanity (Dubas 2024), learning to become an old person (Muszyński 2024). Therefore, people who have reached middle and late adulthood must overcome significant difficulties in terms of orientation and adaptation to this phase of life, which is often further complicated by rapid technological transformations and changes in values taking place in the lives of older people. Older people are expected to be active to "tame" reality, and educational activity and its basic component, learning, are commonly recognized as such.

The complexity of old age and the dominance of its individual dimension mean that, from prehistoric times to the present day, it remains difficult to fully understand. The experience of old age, viewed from the perspective of the individual, still eludes attempts at comprehensive understanding and complete objectification. Nowadays, however, humanistic and holistic approaches are becoming increasingly prominent in the discourse on old age, allowing us to describe the lives of older people in a multidimensional way, focusing primarily on what is most important for living this stage of life with dignity.

The humanistic perspective on old age is at once universal, fundamental, and applicable to every human being. The term "humanistic" also carries the meaning of "holistic" – signifying the pursuit of a comprehensive understanding of human life in old age. It is in the humanistic view of old age that we find the most accurate way to describe, understand, and interpret it. The key attribute of this vision of old age is dignity—an inalienable value that is fundamental to both the elderly person and their social environment, as well as to humanity as a whole.

> A dignified old age is also a value: for the elderly person themselves, for their social environment, and for humanity. It encompasses an important aspect of holistically understood humanity, in which old age is also present. However, it is a value that must be discovered and nurtured (Dubas 2024: 23).

The humanistic approach to old age does not introduce rigid divisions between its dimensions – internal and external, subjective and objective. On the contrary, they

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[1] In Polish, the word *agency* is translated as causality, causative action, subjectivity, or subjective action. One can speak of the causality of a subject, institutional causality, or collective causality. Most often, agency means the action of an individual within a socio-cultural context (Muszyński 2024).

are presented as intertwined spheres, which, only when viewed holistically, can contribute to a deeper understanding of the multidimensionality of life in old age. However, such an approach requires that they be taken into account in the individual development process and given appropriate significance.

Attempts to explain old age reveal its various models, including the deficit model of old age, the conservative model, the developmental model, and the humanistic model.

Leaving aside the first two, we will refer only to the humanistic model of old age as the one that most comprehensively captures human life and the activities that fill it.

In the humanistic paradigm, the aging process is understood not as the decline of life, but as its natural and integral phase, constituting a form of existential maturation. Old age appears here not as a deficit, but as a value in itself – a full-fledged stage of human existence, with its own meaning and significance.

This model assumes a holistic, comprehensive approach to the human being in the aging process, as opposed to reductionist and technocratic approaches, which treat old age in a fragmentary manner. In the humanistic approach, old age is not isolated from earlier stages of life, but remains in constant dialogue with them, as their consequence, complement, and continuation.

In the humanistic model, aging is viewed holistically as maturation:
– from the perspective of the full life cycle, where old age is treated as an inalienable component of existence, it is "in life" rather than 'outside' it, it is linked to a person's earlier experiences, it is the stage that "closes" the cycle of human life;
– from the perspective of the three dimensions of human nature, which include the physical (soma), mental (psyche), and spiritual (spirit) aspects of a person;
– from the perspective of the connections between the internal and the external, it is the social, cultural, and civilizational context of aging;
– from the perspective of time, connecting the present with the past and the future, also referring to the cosmic dimension – eternity;
– from the perspective of a comprehensive approach to developmental processes, i.e., in the biological, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual spheres (Dubas 2024: 132).

The humanistic model is considered to be the most adequate way of describing, understanding, and comprehending human old age, whose inalienable attribute and one of its aspects is human dignity, together with its determinants: subjectivity, autonomy, self-determination, activity, responsibility, self-awareness, "accompanying on the journey" (in the sense of social roles with the Other/Others/physical, spiritual), development, learning, and striving for fulfillment. The second aspect of the humanistic view of old age is the holism of experiencing life with its various dimensions, such as: the trinity (body, mind, spirit), the world of life (external, internal), the dimensions of old age (objective, subjective), time of life (past, present, future, eternity), values of life (transcendentals, universals), existential concerns (illness and disability, suffering, loneliness as isolation, passing and death), dynamics of life (body, modern technologies, fashions, lifestyles, religion, family, place of residence), dynamics of the

person (objectively being older, old) and subjectively becoming a person (older/old), aging (factors of aging: biological, psychological, socio-demographic, cultural-civilizational, historical, political, spiritual, and others). The humanistic model of old age presents an image of a person with inalienable dignity, immersed in life and experiencing it in a multidimensional way. And life is an extremely complex, multifaceted space in which a person experiences their unique existence (Dubas 2024: 154–159).

The humanistic model of old age presents a picture of a human being immersed in the multidimensional reality of life, experiencing their own unique existence. This perspective seems particularly relevant in the context of lifelong development, including education in old age – understood not only as activation, but as a profound process of self-discovery, reflection, and searching for/finding meaning in life.

It can be assumed that the humanistic approach is a valuable proposition not only for gerontological theory, but also for social and educational practice – especially in an era of aging societies and civilizational changes that raise questions about the meaning, quality, and subjectivity of life in old age.

Adult education and lifelong learning theory – theoretical references

Adult education is often associated with institutional coercion and measurable results expected on the labor market. However, when talking about the education of adults and older people, it is important to consider the learning process as the central element of this area. In the context of adult education, it is important to understand the specific educational needs and development opportunities of people from different age cohorts, which leads to the conclusion that education is an activity assigned to every human being throughout their life, from birth to death.

Adult education has a strong theoretical basis, mainly in andragogy and educational gerontology. Contemporary concepts of adult education are based on two paradigms: continuing education and lifelong learning. Both paradigms emphasize the importance of lifelong educational activity, but differ in their approach to the implementation of education.

Since the 1970s, adult education has been shaped by the concept of lifelong learning, whose development has been supported by international conferences under the auspices of UNESCO and the work of many authors, including Robert J. Kidd, who proposes a comprehensive approach to lifelong learning, pointing to its vertical, horizontal, and in-depth dimensions (Aleksander, Barwińska 2007: 109). Vertical education covers all levels of formal education, from kindergarten to doctoral studies. Horizontal education is implemented in extracurricular forms of education, enabling the exploration of various areas of life outside formal education. In-depth education, on the other hand, refers to the individual's own activity, expressed through the process of self-education and self-development.

The last two processes point to the independent organization of learning and development. In this approach, educational activity, especially among older people, takes on particular significance, as it is treated not only as a strategy/method of development, but also as a natural tendency of the individual to learn (Półturzycki 2003: 39–59).

Organizations such as UNESCO, the European Commission, the World Bank, and the OECD have made significant contributions to the development of the concept of lifelong learning, especially in practical terms. Mieczysław Malewski notes that the concept of lifelong learning is the result of a discourse between these organizations, each of which emphasizes different aspects of education: UNESCO on humanistic values, the World Bank on economic aspects, and the European Commission on European integration.

> UNESCO, which considers itself the guardian of European humanistic tradition, emphasizes the developmental and moral values associated with education, the World Bank emphasizes the economic and market aspects of education, and the European Commission and the Council of Europe seek to bring to the fore those dimensions of education that serve to strengthen European integration and build a sense of European identity among the citizens of the EU member states (Malewski 2013: 15).

In the 1990s, a distinction was made between education and adult learning. Education was reserved for formal, planned activities, while adult learning began to be seen as a cognitive process that takes place in learners in both organized and incidental situations. The focus shifted from the basic organizers of formal education to the learners themselves. The basic element of the organization of education is still the school or other institutions where learning is organized, but it is also the learner, with their potential and readiness to learn from all the sources they encounter in their lives. In this context, lifelong learning has become an integral part of an individual's daily life, regardless of age.

The idea of lifelong learning is based on three pillars: it lasts throughout life, takes place in various contexts, and focuses on learning rather than formal education (Muszyński 2024: 54). Marcin Muszyński emphasizes that lifelong learning should be considered on three levels: macrosocial, mesosocial, and microsocial (Muszyński 2024: 57-60).

At the macro-social level, lifelong learning is transnational in nature and is linked to education policy and strategies implemented at the national level. In this context, lifelong learning is defined as an opportunity created by social institutions, enabling individuals to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary in a globalized world (Muszyński 2024: 55; Jarvis 2009).

At the mesosocial level, lifelong learning takes place in institutions and organizations that conduct planned educational activities, both formal and informal. It is characterized by a diversity of educational offerings and a multitude of places where education takes place (Muszyński 2024: 58).

At the micro-social level, lifelong learning has an individual and existential dimension. It is a process in which an individual experiences reality, transforms it co-

gnitively, emotionally, or practically, and integrates these experiences into their own biography. In this view, learning is a process of becoming and being in the world, and its center is the identity of the learner. Muszyński writes:

> Applying this dimension of lifelong learning to the final phase of life, which is old age, it can be said that it is primarily existential in nature, which means that learning is a process of becoming and being in the world. Therefore, this phenomenon cannot be defined by the effects of this process (learning outcomes – the amount of knowledge acquired, the number of skills acquired), but by who the learner has become. It is therefore not important what an individual knows and can do, but what kind of person they have become. At the center of this process is the learner's identity, which is formed as a result of interaction with others and through the very fact of existence. In conclusion, it can be said that the process of lifelong learning is fundamental to understanding humanity and refers to the way of being and becoming of the world in the individual (Muszyński 2024: 59).

The idea of lifelong learning emphasizes a different understanding of the learning process, highlighting its subjective nature, especially in relation to adults and older people. Within this framework, people are seen as autonomous individuals, and learning becomes an experience rooted in everyday life, both resulting from it and undertaken for its sake, as well as serving as a means of reflection on one's own biography, the world, and one's place in it.

This model distances itself from traditional, normative approaches to education, in which the development of the individual is often shaped and controlled externally. On the contrary, the learning process is embedded in individual existential experience, including the process of aging. Knowledge and development are no longer identified exclusively with institutional education, but function as the result of active, conscious human participation in a dynamically changing reality.

What is more, education itself is being redefined. It is no longer understood as an obligation imposed from outside, but becomes a space of free choice, tailored to the individual needs and abilities of the learner. This approach broadens the scope of education to various spheres of life, transcending the framework of institutions and making the learning process universal and individualized.

In this context, older people gain real opportunities to participate in both formal and non-formal forms of education, as well as in self-education. The process of acquiring knowledge and skills can take place independently, which not only promotes the development of competencies but also deepens reflection on one's own life through conscious experience of everyday life.

The social, political, economic, and, above all, technological context, which constitutes a common frame of reference for all dimensions of lifelong learning, is also significant. These changes generate the need to build a so-called knowledge society, in which the educational process becomes the foundation for the adaptation of individuals to changing conditions of existence.

Social and civilizational development of societies as a context for the activities, including educational activities, of senior citizens

The historical period in which a person lives fundamentally determines their opportunities for development and self-fulfillment in various dimensions. It is not only an important predictor of activities undertaken, and thus a significant determinant of successful aging and the assessment of the quality of life of aging and elderly people, but also—and perhaps above all—a widely available method of development and acquisition of competencies for functioning in the present day. The end of the 20th century brought rapid changes to the surrounding reality. These changes transformed the modern world and set new standards in almost all areas of life, encompassing not only the physical space of human life but also fundamentally becoming part of social life and culture. What is more, they are not a closed process, but continue to be and will continue to be dynamic in nature.

These transformations lead to changes in the approach to many different social, economic, and cultural issues. In the attitude towards life of a person living in new political and economic conditions, characteristics related mainly to the economic aspect of life, such as entrepreneurship, creativity, independence, and individualism, have gained importance. A particular feature of the present day is the lack of stability and the emergence of new security threats. The importance of this phenomenon was emphasized by Ulrich Beck, who described contemporary society as a "risk society" (Beck 2004). Some of these threats have already materialized, while others may still occur. These include wars, economic crises, pandemics, terrorism, and environmental threats. They are global in nature and affect people regardless of their social or material status, which means that they impact all areas of everyday life. Zygmunt Bauman described the present day as "liquid modernity," emphasizing the blurring, fragmentation, and impermanence of the modern world (Bauman 2007). In his view, fluidity permeates all spheres of human existence, causing uncertainty and instability in the foundations of existence. Liquid modernity requires individuals to be ready for change and able to accept and cope with it.

Descriptions of contemporary society also point to other processes, such as globalization, consumerism, and cultural homogenization. These are what make it difficult for seniors to maintain their own identity, causing shifts in their value system.

Globalization leads to the disappearance of borders and the permeation of external models. As Jolanta Wiśniewska writes:

> The political transformation enabled this process and became part of its character, which means not only changes in the economic sphere, but also permeation through various areas of human existence, causing transformations in many aspects of social and personal life. The trend of globalization has a significant impact on the sphere of contemporary human existence.

Currently, they can no longer count on the support of the state, as its structures are helpless in the face of a number of phenomena caused by globalization and its impact on the lives of individuals. Globalization leads to the disappearance of borders and the permeation of external models. This means that state organizations no longer provide sufficient support in many matters concerning human existence: social, welfare, professional, health, and personal. This situation leaves people completely alone in the face of various life situations (Wiśniewska 2018: 42).

The phenomena of globalization are inextricably linked to consumerism and cultural homogenization – processes that significantly complicate both the construction and maintenance of individual and collective identity. Consumerism appears to be the dominant paradigm of contemporary societies, devaluing traditional norms and ethical principles, replacing them with market logic and the logic of instant gratification. The expansion of this phenomenon is expressed, among other things, in the commodification of almost all aspects of human life – from education, through interpersonal relationships and spiritual values, to family, and even social pathologies or personal dramas (Krajewski 1997). Everything that has market potential becomes the subject of transactions, which significantly undermines the axiological foundations that are particularly close to older generations, for whom intangible and spiritual values play a key role.

Parallel to consumerism, there is a process of cultural homogenization, which causes the unification of value systems and their detachment from local cultural and national contexts. Shifts in the axiological layer, resulting in the redefinition of social norms and patterns in areas such as family life, aspirations, and social relations, lead to numerous tensions and dilemmas, especially among older people. These people, raised in a different cultural model, often do not identify with the new patterns, which can result in difficulties in adaptation and a sense of cultural exclusion (Wiśniewska 2018).

Contemporary reality, which promotes individualism, efficiency, and material success, may be perceived by older people as an alien and exclusionary space. Integration into dominant social structures is generally possible for those individuals who have the appropriate social, cultural, and economic capital, including education, material resources, good health, and high educational activity. It is education, understood broadly as both a formal and informal process, that is the key factor enabling older people to adapt to dynamic civilizational changes and to participate actively and consciously in a reality dominated by the logic of late modernity.

Functions of educational activity in old age

The educational activity of older people is most often analyzed in the context of its functional effects, with particular emphasis on its impact on quality of life and the concept of successful aging. Education in late adulthood is sometimes seen as one of

the fundamental factors supporting the preservation of an individual's identity and their development in changing everyday conditions. In this context, the learning process is not limited to institutional forms of education, but is understood as a lifestyle and a method of active participation in social reality.

One of the key dimensions of educational activity among older people is its emancipatory function, understood as enabling individuals to keep pace with dynamic socio-cultural, economic, and technological changes. This type of education leads to cognitive autonomy, independence of judgment, critical thinking skills, and deeper reflection, which in turn strengthens the individual's subjectivity and sense of freedom (Chabior 2023: 259).

Other important functions of education in old age include:

– an adaptive function, facilitating adaptation to new social and family realities;
– an integrative function, promoting the creation of bonds within peer groups;
– a compensatory function, enabling compensation for losses resulting from the loss of social or professional roles;
– the educational function, supporting personal and intellectual development;
– recreational and mental health functions, related to stress reduction and strengthening mental well-being;
– a prestige function, consisting of strengthening self-esteem and building a positive image of older people in society, thus counteracting stereotypes associated with old age (Chabior 2023: 267).

Elżbieta Dubas proposes a more extensive typology of educational functions in old age, distinguishing, among others, the following functions: instrumental, socio-cultural-civilizational, revitalizing, auxological, axiological, emancipatory, existential, felicity-related, aestheticizing, and biographical. Their common denominator is the pursuit of improving the quality of life in old age. Particular importance is attached to the existential functions of education, which respond to the fundamental need to understand and work through one's own existence in old age (Dubas 2016: 241).

Education, understood as a permanent process closely linked to a reflective approach to life, enables older people to better understand themselves, their own history, and the essence of humanity. Learning understood in this way becomes not only an adaptive tool, but also a way to regain the meaning of existence in the context of the inevitable changes and experiences associated with old age.

In this context, the category of personal dignity takes on particular significance, which, as gerontological practice shows, is not limited to positive self-esteem. It is a complex construct based on a deep sense of self-worth, recognition of the importance of one's own life, and treating it as meaningful and full of content. Strengthening this kind of attitude through education may be one of the most important goals of contemporary pedagogy of old age.

Conclusion

Undertaking educational activities in late adulthood stems not only from a conscious recognition of one's own needs but also from an internal motivation to fulfill them. This process stimulates personal development, promotes an attitude of openness to the environment, and initiates activities aimed at both personal development and co-operation with others. As a result, it contributes to strengthening the sense of agency, self-fulfillment, and successful aging, understood as the harmonious integration of the individual with the changing world.

Learning in old age, both formal and informal, provides a space for reflection on oneself and reality, enabling critical analysis of the surrounding world. An individual equipped with cognitive tools and social skills gains the opportunity to actively participate in social life, build relationships, and make decisions that promote well-being. Educational activity develops not only practical skills but also interpersonal skills that facilitate peaceful conflict resolution, empathy, and involvement in community activities.

In this context, education becomes a tool that enables older people to realize their full potential by supporting their personal, adaptive, and existential development. Activity, understood as the conscious acquisition and development of skills, requires effort but also brings satisfaction and a sense of purpose and social belonging.

Ultimately, it is worth emphasizing that learning is an integral component of human life, present at every stage. For older people, it is not only a form of self-improvement, but also a way of confirming their subjectivity and dignity. In this sense, education does not end with the onset of old age – on the contrary, it becomes a key element of quality of life and self-fulfillment in its later stages.

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