

## EDUCATION FOR THE ELDERLY IN TIMES OF SOCIAL CHANGE

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**Keywords:** education, elderly people, social change, development, exclusion, seniors' social situation

**Summary.** The paper deals with issues concerning lifelong education in the context of current social changes. The authors have focused on elderly people as the social group whose position has significantly deteriorated over the centuries. Educational activity for older aged persons enables them to have a feeling of satisfaction, raises their quality of life and helps mitigate the impact of negative phenomena that people in this age group experience, e.g. ageism, discrimination or exclusion.

### EDUKACJA OSÓB STARSZYCH W CZASACH ZMIANY SPOŁECZNEJ

**Słowa kluczowe:** edukacja, osoby starsze, zmiana społeczna, rozwój, wykluczenie, sytuacja społeczna seniorów

**Streszczenie.** Artykuł porusza problematykę edukacji całożyciowej w kontekście zachodzących zmian społecznych. Autorzy skoncentrowali się na osobach starszych, jako grupie społecznej, której pozycja na przestrzeni wieków uległa znacznemu obniżeniu. Aktywność edukacyjna w okresie starości pozwala na odczuwanie satysfakcji, podnosi również jakość życia, pozwala niwelować wpływ negatywnych zjawisk, jakich doświadczają osoby starsze np. ageizmu, dyskryminacji czy wykluczenia.

## Introduction

Modern times are marked by numerous social transformations and changes which in turn generate transformations for the functioning of individuals, groups and communities. The range of factors that affect modern man cause both positive and negative feedback. Mankind today is exposed to the pressures of technological, cultural and social transformations which determine the behaviours and attitudes of both individuals and social groups.

Such changes affect lifestyles as well as social values and norms, cultural trends and family relationships. Joanna Zalewska points out that it is not only the number of transformations that is on the rise today but also the pace of changes taking place<sup>1</sup>. Zygmunt Bauman, who wrote about the speed of changes and their impact on man, indicates that, *Life in a society of liquid modernity cannot stand still. [...] Life in a society of liquid modernity, urged by the spectre of obsolescence, is going swiftly forward. [...] Now you have to run as fast as you can just to remain in the same place, far away from the dustbin where all the marauders will inevitably end up*<sup>2</sup>. According to him, man is, as it were, 'doomed' to the speedy pace of life and individuals who fail to meet the requirements of contemporaneity are marginalised and excluded from the full social life.

In view of these demographic projections, it seems justified to focus on the situation of the elderly people in modern societies which are entangled in civilization transformations which often forget or ignore the needs of the oldest members of society. The position of the elderly in the 21st century differs significantly from the approach of past centuries. From the perspective of social and cultural transformations modern times have been defined by Margaret Mead through the prism of the prefigurative culture<sup>3</sup>. According to her, the determinants of modern times are marginalisation and exclusion of elderly persons as well as multiculturalism, speed of action, lack of permanence and the patterns imposed by the young generations which have placed a burden on the older generation to adjust and function properly, especially as they are not always fit and often suffer from both physical and psychological health problems.

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<sup>1</sup> See J. Zalewska, *Człowiek stary wobec zmiany kulturowej. Perspektywa teorii praktyk społecznych*, Scholar, Warszawa 2015, s. 45.

<sup>2</sup> Z. Bauman, *Płynne życie*, Wyd. Literackie, Kraków 2007, s. 8.

<sup>3</sup> M. Mead, *Kultura i tożsamość*, PWN, Warszawa 2000.

The aim of the paper is to focus on the need for education of elderly people during times of social change. In fact, education provides an opportunity for seniors to not only overcome their health deficits and experience the final phase of life in a more constructive way but enables them to more fully participate in social life according to their willingness and abilities.

## Elderly people and social change

As is clear from an analysis of literature on the subject, social change is not easily defined unambiguously. Such change can be related to many processes taking place on the levels of individuals, families, local communities and whole societies within the contexts of cultural, technological, economic and industrial areas as well as numerous other contexts characteristic for a specific area. Piotr Sztompka notes that the components of social change include the social bonds and interactions taking place as well as relations, the sense of community, functions of the system components and the environment<sup>4</sup>. According to Sztompka, social change also includes modifications of societies in the context of patterns of thinking, conduct and action of organisations as well as the relations taking place within them<sup>5</sup>. The lack of permanence determines the manner of functioning of contemporary individuals including elderly people who tend to have traditional backgrounds based on universal values and norms and are therefore unable to adjust to the social and cultural transformations taking place. *“Permanence” is a relative concept with regard to the dynamic social transformation, interpersonal contacts or the functioning of man in the network of social arrangements and interactions. Man living in the 20th and 21st centuries must be ‘modern’ from childhood to death in order to be able to have existence in the social and cultural life*<sup>6</sup>.

At present, seniors are in a sense, ‘forced’ to experience their old age in a modern way and flow with modern trends. Old age, as the final phase of life has been deprived of its permanence, authority and often times dignity. As Elżbieta Dubas notes, *it can be stated that old age in modernity implies old age strongly determined by the social and cultural context which quite clearly attempts to disassociate itself from the biological basis of human life. Old age in post-modernity,*

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<sup>4</sup> P. Sztompka, *Socjologia zmian społecznych*, Znak, Kraków 2015, s. 22.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> N.G. Piłkuła, *Sytuacja społeczna osób starszych w kontekście rynku pracy*, [w:] I.M. Światała, N.G. Piłkuła, K. Białożył (red.), *Etyczne i społeczne wymiary pracy*, Impuls, Kraków 2017, s. 62.

*on the other hand, implies old age robbed of its meaning*<sup>7</sup>. Departure from the traditional model of societies has undermined the position of elderly people in the family and thereby also in larger social groups. Contemporary seniors are commonly perceived not as carriers of knowledge, skills and experience but as an economic burden. Undoubtedly, this state of affairs is to a large extent the result of the ubiquitous cult of youth and one's body which has become the predominant lifestyle in many societies.

These current social changes are associated with a significant decline of the authority of the oldest members of communities in favour of younger people who fit more ideally into the modern global patterns of social functioning. In today's modern world, elderly persons are often times considered unattractive, both physically and mentally. The characteristics currently emphasised as being ideal include vigour, eagerness, openness to change, quick assimilation of novelty, rivalry, the ability to make quick decisions as well as a lack of attachment to places/people. In modern times, these characteristics are considered essential for achieving success and fully participating in social life, something that elderly people, who 'deviate' from the conventional view of a 'citizen of the modern world', often fail to achieve. Beata Bugajska, who deals with problems related to elderly people in the 21st century, states that, *we live in a world in which it is youth that is placed on a pedestal. In a world in which old age is not a symbol of wisdom or experience but rather of infirmity, humiliation and dependence on others*<sup>8</sup>.

Seniors' social position in times of social changes is determined by instant culture and a fast lifestyle as well as numerous other negative phenomena that they found themselves faced with, such as stereotyping, ageism (discrimination due to age) and gerontophobia. Cultural trends oftentimes pay homage to beauty, physical and mental fitness, the chase for success and prestige and negate old age and thereby also the older generation. Loss of fitness, infirmity, natural ageing processes, illness, suffering and death are not compatible with these prevailing hedonistic attitudes. Old age in modern culture is a little studied phenomenon, which in turn limits social knowledge of this phase of life. As this is the last phase of human life, it is rather unappreciated, and elderly people are oftentimes perceived as useless, which results in a pejorative social image of this age group. As Joanna Wawrzyniak

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<sup>7</sup> E. Dubas, *Starość znana i nieznaną – wybrane refleksje nad współczesną starością*, „Rocznik Andragogiczny” 2013, t. 20, s. 141.

<sup>8</sup> B. Bugajska, *Tożsamość człowieka w starości. Studium socjopedagogiczne*, US, Szczecin 2012, s. 32.

states, *It is no wonder then that old age is treated as a period in life that is not associated with any special hopes or plans, devoid of any attractions or any potential for development, and with a disproportionately reduced value as compared with other phases of life*<sup>9</sup>. Brunon Synak, on the other hand, points out that, *the frantic pace of life, the turbulent development of science and industry, the information overkill, the cult of technology and strength, paying homage to records and youth, and the hedonistic spirit of civilisation – these are the circumstances that make modern life more and more difficult for the weak and old individuals*<sup>10</sup>.

Undoubtedly, the transformations taking place in many cultural and social areas pose an obstacle for seniors towards their experiencing the final period of their lives in a constructive manner. They are oftentimes lonely and have to struggle with diseases and a lack of understanding from those around them. Education undertaken during old age can be a means of their coping with and understanding the changes which are taking place in their lives.

## **The need for education in the period of old age**

According to Stefan M. Kwiatkowski, the need for or even the necessity of lifelong learning is the result of the unprecedented acceleration of civilization. Man is able to gain new knowledge at various levels of education: at school institutions, courses, workshops, during professional work but also through interactions with other people<sup>11</sup>. Thus, regardless of age, man should continually undertake the effort of obtaining further education in order to have a better understanding of the world and the transformations taking place in it. The world today is constantly presenting new challenges and tasks in many different areas of life. Regardless of age, an individual must be able to meet the challenges they face, which undoubtedly involves education, both in the formal, extra-formal and informal areas. In her discourse on lifelong learning, Ewa Solarczyk-Ambrozik notes that this process is determined by changes of a social, cultural, economic or political nature. According to this author, lifelong learning is a

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<sup>9</sup> J.K. Wawrzyniak, *Adaptacja do starości*, [w:] A.A. Zych (red.), *Encyklopedia starości, starzenia się i niepełnosprawności*, t. 1, Śląsk, Katowice 2017, s. 43.

<sup>10</sup> B. Synak, *Ludzie starzy w warunkach transformacji ustrojowej*, UG, Gdańsk 2000, s. 8.

<sup>11</sup> S.M. Kwiatkowski, *Kompetencje przyszłości*, [w:] S.M. Kwiatkowski (red.), *Kompetencje przyszłości*, FRSE, Warszawa 2018, s. 16.

requirement of modern civilisation<sup>12</sup>. Knowledge gained 10–20 years ago is no longer sufficient to meet today's challenges and requires constant updating. This updating is linked to an awareness of development in all phases of life, even in old age which is often treated and looked upon more as a time of idleness. Mirosław Nerło emphasises that old age encourages verification of previous experiences and above all further development<sup>13</sup>. Therefore, this final period of life must not only be considered in terms of deficits and losses, a focus should be placed above all on the options and chances that are provided by experience and wisdom gained over the course of an individual's whole life, the crowning of which is old age. According to Maria Kuchcińska, despite physiological and even social changes that occur, there is no age barrier to undertaking efforts aimed at development which enable full participation in the social life<sup>14</sup>.

Education of the elderly is a need of modern societies. As Henryka Kwiatkowska writes, *Each essential change in the human world confronts individual people and the society with the necessity of acquiring new ways of behaving and setting values, and demands essential mental and awareness-related changes, demands therefore lifelong education*<sup>15</sup>. The changes that are taking place today provide a basis for an academic discussion on the need and problems of educational activity in old age. Without doubt, one problem that seniors face today is the clash between traditional lifestyles and new circumstances as well as the changes resulting from scientific and technological progress. Individuals who adopt a passive attitude towards modern transformations will in many respects be gradually eliminated from social life. Unfortunately, a person who ceases to develop and expand their knowledge will not be able to take full advantage of the achievements of modernity but to the contrary, may fall 'victim' to progressive regression. Elderly persons are exposed to reduced activity in many fields, such as retirement from work. For many seniors, the transition associated with retirement involves a reduced quality of life caused in part by a decreased number of

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<sup>12</sup> E. Solarczyk-Ambroziak, *Uczenie się przez całe życie jako rzeczywistość edukacyjna. Dyskurs całościowego uczenia się w tle zmian społeczno-ekonomicznych*, [w:] E. Solarczyk-Ambroziak (red.), *Całociągowe uczenie się jako wyzwanie dla teorii i praktyki edukacyjnej*, UAM, Poznań 2013, s. 11–13.

<sup>13</sup> M. Nerło, *Mądrość w okresie późnej dorosłości jako efekt indywidualizacji rozwoju*, [w:] A.I. Brzezińska, K. Ober-Łopatka, R. Stec, K. Ziółkowska (red.), *Szanse rozwoju w okresie późnej dorosłości*, Humaniora, Poznań 2006.

<sup>14</sup> M. Kuchcińska, *Bariery uczestnictwa społecznego seniorów*, [w:] D. Sereżyńska (red.), *Uczestnictwo społeczne w średniej i późnej dorosłości*, UKW, Bydgoszcz 2012.

<sup>15</sup> H. Kwiatkowska, *Edukacja nauczycieli. Konteksty – kategorie – praktyki*, IBE, Warszawa 1997, s. 9.

friends and acquaintances; contact with former work colleagues also changes as well. The professional activity that had served as field of development should now be replaced with more satisfying activities, which poses a challenge for a large number of pensioners. Education provides a 'way' to spend time constructively and also a chance for further development. *Education as a lifelong process enables humans in various developmental stages to "be active in the society", have their higher order needs satisfied and to develop in a versatile way, and thereby it leads to an increase in their self-esteem and life satisfaction*<sup>16</sup>.

Through education during old age, seniors can adapt themselves to the changes taking place in their lives, understand the essence of the transformations and gain the ability to think critically so that they can reassess their existing views. The purpose of education in old age is not meant to be an effort to strive to 'thoughtlessly' accept the changes that the global community brings about but to attempt to understand the essence of these phenomena and reject that which is adverse, related to risk factors or exclusion.

Ewa Skibińska emphasises that the pace of life of modern societies provides a basis for lifelong development. Acceptance of the modern world and a clear understanding and interpretation thereof is the first and overriding objective of education of elderly people. It should also be borne in mind that each age group has its own potential and capabilities, therefore, it is so important to use the abilities of ageing people in the context of independence and self-responsibility<sup>17</sup>. Educational activity serves this purpose and is a means to enhance seniors' potential, encourage self-improvement, as well as to prompt them to explore their own resources which oftentimes lay dormant or forgotten. By becoming motivated to action, seniors gain the ability to develop a forward-looking approach instead of only focussing on the present. In part, educational activity is intended to serve the purpose of helping individuals make conscious decisions and aid independence in daily living. Skibińska emphasises that the third important objective of education in old age is for individuals to learn how to solve the problems of everyday life<sup>18</sup>. Without doubt, daily functioning can be a challenge for many seniors, and they cope with it on their own. By engaging themselves in formal, extra-formal and informal education they have a chance to acquire

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<sup>16</sup> K. Białożył, *Znaczenie aktywności edukacyjnej osób starszych w adaptacji do emerytury*, [w:] I.M. Świtała, N.G. Piķuła, K. Białożył (red.), *Etyczne i społeczne...*, s. 104.

<sup>17</sup> E. Skibińska, *Proces kształcenia seniorów*, [w:] A. Fabiś (red.), *Aktywność społeczna, kulturalna i oświatowa seniorów*, WSA, Bielsko-Biała 2008, s. 99.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem.

such skills and competences that will facilitate their existence. In the context of the topics discussed, attention should be drawn to e.g. counteracting digital exclusion or functional illiteracy which is becoming more and more common among elderly people. By being engaged in educational activities seniors have an opportunity to develop social skills.

Małgorzata Dziegielewska indicates that involvement in education in old age has a much wider context which takes account of economic, socio-cultural and political aspects, and encourages a global approach to certain matters.<sup>19</sup> Without doubt, times of permanent social change require individuals to have a broader approach that takes into consideration observation of phenomena and processes on the macro – and micro-social scale. Thus, it becomes justified to undertake educational initiatives for the benefit of the oldest generation as it enables them to have better understanding and existence. Such efforts provide a basis for full participation in social life based on participation and self-determination. As Zofia Szarota points out, *'An individual who cultivates their interests in a creative manner and satisfies their curiosity cannot be banal or average; they are interesting to the world and indispensable to the world'*.<sup>20</sup> Thus, education counteracts exclusion, marginalisation or self-marginalisation. Educational activities for seniors are not only about gaining new knowledge but above all about enabling their functioning in today's ever changing reality.

Lifelong learning, with particular emphasis on the period of old age, is becoming a requirement of modern times. Both individuals and social groups must strive to maintain a sort of homeostasis – the balance between obtaining new knowledge, rapid changes and own resources.

In view of demographic projections, it seems justified to undertake an academic discourse on the subject of educational needs in old age. Education in modern times is not only a medium for obtaining knowledge, skills and competence but is also becoming an essential element of people's lifestyles, which concerns even elderly people.

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<sup>19</sup> M. Dziegielewska, *Edukacja jako sposób przygotowania do starości*, „Chowana – Edukacja Wobec Starości. Tradycja i Współczesność” 2009, t. 2 (33), s. 62.

<sup>20</sup> Z. Szarota, *Era trzeciego wieku – implikacje edukacyjne*, „Edukacja Ustawiczna Dorosłych” 2014, nr 1 (84), s. 9.

## Conclusions

Education over the course of an individual's entire lifetime should be undertaken both in the formal, extra-formal and intentional dimensions. Undertaking educational activities in times of turbulent social changes is a kind of 'necessity' for all age groups, particularly elderly persons who are faced with having to function in modern cultures. The range of factors that determine seniors' quality of life undoubtedly include educational activity which promotes development in a multidimensional manner, regardless of an individual's health status and resources. Research suggests that elderly people desire to be active in various spheres of functioning<sup>21</sup> and lists a number of factors that promote activity (including educational activity) and related lifelong development, such as *strong motivation for action, for being active, for personal development (concern for self); consistence in self-improvement, in expanding your knowledge and skills; a vision of your own future (formulating and defining short – and long-term goals); evaluation of your own actions, of the acquired skills that confirm your development and promote further development; reflectiveness*.<sup>22</sup> This latter characteristic is particularly important with respect to the participation in the process of lifelong education as well as lifelong development<sup>23</sup>. It can even be asserted that without reflectiveness, the process of lifelong education does not exist because reflectiveness is the foundation in its context: *recognition of your own potential, exploring knowledge on yourself, better understanding of the reality and the self; natural adjustment to change; setting new goals; designing your own development; giving meaning to life by accomplishing tasks; developing self-creative, interpretative and implementative competences*<sup>24</sup>.

Today, therefore, it is important to advance the idea of development and education in old age, especially among people who, for different reasons (e.g. health status, level of education or place of residence), do not get involved in this type of activity. Education in the 21st century is a lifestyle component which enables

<sup>21</sup> N.G. Piukuła, *Rozwój zawodowy i zawodowa satysfakcja w perspektywie osób starszych*, „Labor et Educatio” 2016, nr 4, s. 201–217; Idem, *Senior w centrum oddziaływań edukacyjnych*, „Przegląd Pedagogiczny” 2014, nr 2, s. 117–129.

<sup>22</sup> Idem, *Rozwój zawodowy a aktywność emerytowanych nauczycieli*, [w:] J.M. Łukasik, N.G. Piukuła, K. Jagielska (red.), *Rozwój nauczyciela – od wczesnej do późnej dorosłości*, Impuls, Kraków 2016, s. 170–171.

<sup>23</sup> J.M. Łukasik, K. Jagielska, *Refleksyjność emerytowanych nauczycieli jako czynnik zmiany i rozwoju osobistego*, [w:] *Rozwój nauczyciela...*, s. 187.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, s. 187, cf. also J.M. Łukasik, *Poznać siebie i dbać o rozwój*, Ignatianum, Kraków 2016.

full social participation and individual development. This, in turn, depends on both the objective conditions, biological potential and the influence of the social environment and own activity aimed at adapting to the reality being experienced and the changing world<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.

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