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Folk High School as an educational alternative for older adults²

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Abstract

There is just one challenge for the 21st Century person, and it is an omnipresent change. In order to exist successfully and effectively in such a reality, one should constantly develop and also take part in an educational process (formal and informal). A huge number of places direct their educational offer to seniors and use this alternative education, which is, on the other hand, often thought to be directed to children. In the author's opinion, a form of alternative education for adults and seniors is a folk high school in its contemporary version. That thesis is being discussed in this chapter.

Introduction

As the population of senior citizens has been growing in Poland (as well as in the whole of Europe) for at least a decade, as observed, and the average life expectancy lengthens, andragogists continually ask themselves about changes which take part in the educational area of senior citizens.

The postmodern world somehow makes every man and woman, at every age, take up the initiative in the field of education, so senior citizens are no exception here. Talking about education nowadays one does not only bear in mind acquiring new knowledge or skills, but also expanding expertise mastered before, teaching inwardness, creative thinking and forming communication competence. Augustyniak writes that "today

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adults learn different things using other forms and methods of work” (Augustyniak, 2010).

So, it is possible to assume that searching for alternative forms of education in order to make an offer for the discussed age group attractive ones and fulfilling their needs and expectations is the main aim of the present and future education of senior citizens.

Therefore, the aim of this chapter is a presentation of contemporary folk high school as one of the educational alternatives for senior citizens. The Kashubian Folk University and its project entitled: “Wandering Folk University for Senior Citizens” is an example of the folk high school that runs its educational business for this exceptional age group.

A senior citizen, who is he?

In everyday speech, a notion “senior citizen” is interchangeably used with such terms as an elderly person, grey beard, retiree, pensioner or an old citizen. However, it is necessary to be aware of the fact that the term should not be used interchangeably, although it lacks explicit definition, as it is used to describe one of the stages of human life which are adulthood/ senility.

In andragogical and gerontological literature it is possible to find at least a few classifications of a mature person’s stages of life. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), we can talk about young-old (aged 60–75), middle old (aged 75–90) and very old (90 and older). Dubas (2007), on the other hand, divides adulthood into its pre-adulthood (18–25 year of life), early adulthood (25–40), middle adulthood (40–60/65 year of life), late adulthood (60/65–80 year of life) and senile adulthood (over 80 years of age). It is also worth underlining that the time of senility, as a stage of life, is nowadays 30–40 years and researchers pointed out the need of dividing this stage into two or three phases (the third or fourth age or young, middle or late senility) (Bugajska, 2015).

Due to a lack of unambiguous definition of the term “senior” in modern andragogical and gerontological literature, in this chapter, the above word will be used concerning people over 60 years old.

It is worth mentioning that scholars describe senility in its numerous aspects. Therefore, we talk about calendar, mental, social, biological, economic or legal age. Such a broad range of issues causes a lot of terminological and methodological problems.

Alternative education

According to a “Contemporary Polish Language Dictionary” edited by Dunaj, the word “alternative” means “possibility or necessity of choice between two preclusive things or courses of action” (Dunaj, 1996). However, when I used the word alterna-

tive in the title of this chapter I was not driven by the lexical meaning of the word, but I was rather referring it to a paradigm of an alternative school (Kupisiewicz, 2010).

My understanding of the alternative education, is similar to the one by Konarzewski, who wrote that “alternative in this nonstandard meaning is the same as distinct from dominant forms. In the broad understanding of education, which includes both forms of practice and forms of thoughts, which justify the practice, alternative education would include all kinds of educational activities and thinking, which consciously differ from practice and theories dominant in the given time and period. Assuming that dominant forms represent the standard of the majority of the society, alternative education can be called “the education of the minority” (Konarzewski, 1995, p. 31). Then, folk high schools are, with no doubt, institutions of a minority nature, because they have never existed in mass numbers on the Polish territory. There have never been very many folk high schools, and the number of graduates has rather shown that some kind of elite attends there and the institutions are not places of common education.

So, what is the presented school or alternative education? In “Pedagogical Encyclopedia” edited by Pomykała one can read that “a constructive feature of this school, alternative towards the one called conventional or traditional, is its openness towards the surrounding things, the creative and enlightened, which makes students act unassisted, pushes them to unprompted cognitive activity, which shapes and develops their interests, fulfills their multifarious intellectual and emotional needs, teaches them self-study, stimulates group work, so summing up – it favors multilateral development of children, youth and adults” (Kupisiewicz, 1996, p. 784). It is another premise that determines folk high schools, according to the author of this chapter, as forms of alternative education. The fact, that folk high schools have always aimed at both: intellectual and emotional development of the student having an effect on him/her with “real words”, working in groups and living in dormitories, proves that. Significant pressure has also been put on self-studying and self-development during long courses. However, learning through practical action has favored multifarious and multifaceted development. So, referring Kupisiewicz’s words to education at folk high schools, it is possible to judge that it is the alternative education indeed.

Ten years later Kupisiewicz extends the above definition a bit and adds, that alternative schools are “educational establishments, where all – or only some – components of planned and systematic training are executed differently than in schools working according to typical assumptions of a traditional school. That is why the alternative idea of schools can be complete or partial” (Kupisiewicz, 2006, p. 85).

In a lexicon of Polish Scientific Publishers (PWN) “Pedagogy” edited by Milerski and Śliwerski, on the other hand, we encounter the expression of alternative bringing up, which is to be understood as “a kind of bringing up referring to different premises, rules, forms or contents from customary education or institutionally popularized in a given country or approved; a concept of alternative upbringing is not aggressive, so into educational alternatives, one can include pedagogical innovations, authorial

projects in upbringing and educational areas as well as strands which are absent or rarely encountered in existing educational practice” (Milerski & Śliwerski, 2000, p. 13).

It is possible to notice that defining education/ upbringing/ alternative school has been described in literature both, in a broad way (Milerski & Śliwerski, 2000) and a narrow one (Kupisiewicz, 2006). However, it is not so crucial “what” we exactly define the terms described, but the fact that “extraordinary power of educational alternatives is their endlessness, infinity, and permanence. There is not one alternative education against one conventional, traditional education. There will always be appearing educators or group initiatives, which will be aiming at asking for a different solution, other contents, forms or methods of introducing and conducting them in upbringing and educational practice” (Śliwerski, 2008, p. 9). The example is folk high schools, which have always been in opposition to traditional education because of their forms and methods of work. Moreover, the fact that “Schools for Life” have managed to survive for decades proves their uniqueness and social demand for both: such institutions and alternative education.

Seniors’ Education

A term education comes from Latin “*educare*” that meant to bring up and educate. So, education is “a generality of intergeneration influences serving forming entirety of man vital abilities (physical, cognitive, aesthetic, moral and religious ones), turning a man into a mature human being who consciously fulfills his aims, settled in the culture and capable of constructive criticism of contemplative positivity” (Milerski & Śliwerski, 2000, p. 58).

Due to the paradigm of whole life education spreading around, the need for older adults’ education development has been noticed. Just as Halicki states, seniors’ education should be understood in a broad spectrum; it ought to be learning any forms of knowledge, abilities, and basics, which may help to improve the quality of older adults’ lives (Halicki, 2000).

More and more numerous andragogical research projects (Czerniawska, Halicki, Fabiś, Dubas) prove, that the process of seniors’ educations can be considered in various areas: aims of education, needs of people who study, their motivation, possibilities of learning (biological, mental and social), forms, methods, contents, and measures, as well as sociocultural or civilizational conditioning (Dubas, 2007). As the topic of this chapter only relates to educational institutions for older adults, I will stick to this idea further on.

Nowadays, it is possible to name up to a dozen or so forms of older adults’ education in Poland, and the number is still growing. The most common institution among this age group is unquestionably the University of the Third Age. In Poland, the first one was set up in 1975 (Warsaw) and now there are 575 such institutions in the whole country, with 96 370 seniors studying there (data from academic year 2014/2015)

(CSO Central Statistical Office, 2016). It is possible to differentiate three “types” of the Universities of the Third Age in Poland: (1) educational establishments at universities; (2) establishments set up by associations, which perform popular science activity; (3) institutions at community centers, libraries or daily house of social support.

Another, important forms of seniors’ education are organizations that operate within university structures, and that means that senior citizens are a part of the academic life of high school. They take part in the lectures as “auditors”, special lectures, seminars, and conferences are organized especially for them. A good example of such a form of education may be the Szczecin Humane University of Senior (SHUS) operating within a Department of Szczecin Humane University, initiated by Bugajska (<http://shus.whus.pl/o-nas/>).

One is not to forget that institutions and organizations such as seniors’ clubs, seniors’ academies, associations, funds, libraries, rural hostess circles or local councils also run educational activities aimed at older adults. As I have already pointed out in this part of the chapter, the number of educational forms for older adults has been growing but it is not a reason to lapse into extreme enthusiasm, because as Trafiałek writes “demographic, old age rises much quicker than the development of educational activation institutions for seniors” (Trafiałek, 2005, p. 77). Therefore, it is necessary to remember that the popularisation of different forms of seniors’ education is becoming a peculiar challenge for present educational politicians.

Folk High School

Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig, a Danish philosopher, a reverend, writer, and pedagogist, is thought to be a father of the folk high schools’ idea. He was the first one to present his idea of academic folk institution worldwide in an essay entitled “School for Life and Soer Academy” (Skolen for Livet og Akademiet i Soer) (Dam, Gaertner, 2008). That was in 1838, and seven years later in 1845 Christian VIII (Danish lord) passed a decree about setting up a Real High School in Soer, which was to realize Grundtvig’s ideas. However, the project failed. There were a few reasons for the failure, but the most important ones were: questioning both forms and methods preached by Grundtvig in those times; in fact, the Academy in Soer was aiming at young people, not adults; the “political” disapproval of M.F.S. Grundtvig; and the idiosyncrasy of “clergy” for the father of folk high school idea (Maliszewski & Pierścieniak, 2016).

As Świeżyński wrote in a quarterly “Promień” (“Ray”) in 1924 “the first folk university was set up in Roedding, Denmark in 1844 in the south of Jutland. Ludvig Schroder, Ernst Trier, Jens Nórregaard and had remarkable achievements in spreading the idea and setting up folk high schools. A teacher Christian Kold was also totally devoted to the idea” (Świeżyński, 1929, p. 100). The latter extended Grundtvig’s concept adding obligatory, communal living in a dormitory, sovereignty of students and introduced

a higher number of practical actions to educational schedules of “School of Life” to it (Wolert, 1939; Maliszewski, 2016).

As it comes out of the literature of education history, folk high schools became of great interest not only in the idea homeland but also in the majority of European countries and even on the North American continent.

For the first time, the idea of folk high schools came to Poland thanks to a priest Antoni Ludwiczak who entered the office in Dalki in 1921, and later in 1923 thanks to Ignacy Solarz who was in charge of the institution in Szyce and next in Gacia near Przeworsk (Maliszewski, 2003). The high schools above mentioned based their actions on the idea of Grundtvig pedagogy. However, the school directed by the priest Antoni Ludwiczak was promoting patriotic upbringing based on the Polish nation’s deep Catholic faith. He was convinced that “the main thought that led initiators of folk high school was the love of the homeland and the need to create patriotic citizens for the country. The same thought motivated us when we started the action of setting up Folk High Schools, and we even dare to say, that the development of these schools depends on these principles: religious and national ones” (Ludwiczak, 1929, p. 97). Thanks to such management philosophy of folk high schools, the priest Antoni Ludwiczak gave a peculiar character to institutions under the patronage of the People’s Libraries Society.

The second of the fathers of folk high schools (the first one according to educational historians) – Ignacy Solarz, also based his educational activity on M.F.S. Grundtvig assumptions, but he sorts of adjusted them to Polish needs and realities. A detailed educational plan and authorial pedagogic conception (often called “coiling”) let the institutions in his charge become phenomenal. Thanks to those features and features of his character – truly pedagogical one – Ignacy Solarz was able to influence people in rural areas strongly, and his deep faith in their intellectual potential enabled him to achieve remarkable pedagogic success. Moreover, it led him to become a known personality in Polish education history.

Since setting up the first folk high school in Poland, those institutions have been more or less popular, and their history has been chequered. There was a time when there were only a few such institutions in the whole country, but there was also time, the interwar period when there were up to 80 schools (Pilch, 2007). Despite that, folk high schools have never been as popular as they are in Denmark, Sweden or Germany.

So, what is a folk high school nowadays? Years ago, Ryszard Wroczyński defined those institutions as “high schools for folks, which gave rural youth a chance to learn the basics of folk and national culture. Through a peculiar pedagogic atmosphere – which included: living in a dormitory, alumnus social activity, artistic forms development: musical, vocal and theatrical - rural activists staff was trained and they were returning to villages where they became the initiators of social and cultural movement of the community” (Wroczyński, 1987, p. 165).

Nowadays it is difficult to get a clear-cut definition of folk high schools. We may presume that authors avoid giving a specific definition, and there are also voices that

there is a need for redefining folk universities. So, let me present an extract from “A Declaration of Folk University in Denmark”, where it is stated that “when educating, folk high schools should enable to connect fundamental human approach with practically useful knowledge and engaging in cultural and social issues” (Aegidius, 2016, p. 17). A Polish point of view should be added to this chapter, the one presented by Maliszewski and Rosalska in one of their papers where they write that “folk high school is a community of learners mounted in a democratic way, which gives the opportunities for development – both in personal and social area, it allows to use time wisely and flexibly choose forms of reaching various targets, and encourages community to contribute to the program” (Maliszewski & Rosalska, 2016, p. 11).

The modern view of the folk high schools in Poland shows a huge potential of these educational institutions for adults. Moreover, although now, there are only six folk high schools in Poland (based on my research), one can hope that the year 2016 could be beginning to a peculiar renaissance of those exceptional educational institutions. Hopes arose when Polish folk high school community (Folk High School National Network) and the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage took up an initiative of framing a National Programme of Development Support of Folk High Schools (NPWRUL), which will be introduced in 2017 as a pilot program (Felska, 2016). The team working on this document has to create legislative regulations, which will aim to (similarly to Denmark, Sweden or Germany) regulate the functioning of “Schools for Life” in Poland, and to create general rules of their existence and operation.

Folk high school as an educational alternative for seniors on the example of the Kashubian Folk University

Grundtvig created the idea of a folk high school to oppose the Latin system of higher education. In that way “Schools for Life” became the educational alternative for adults. As we can read in the Pedagogic Encyclopedia “Danish variation of alternative school derives from school traditions endorsed by Grundtvig – dormitories and folk high schools, which were of crucial importance in the development of adult education in Scandinavia” (Pomykała, 1996, p. 786). Gołębiewski thought alike, years ago, he wrote that “folk high schools were set up as alternative institutions for schools and they protect their non-school profile until now” (Gołębiewski, 1999, p. 179).

As the analysis of literature in the field of education history shows, folk high schools had a crucial role in educational institutions for seniors already in the 1970s. Maliszewski even writes that “throughout the whole XX century different nations successfully experimented with opening their folk high schools to more and more students” (Maliszewski, 2010, p. 57).

Records in the literature and initiatives undertaken in that area in Poland prove the real openness of folk university communities to educate the eldest group of the society. A quote from Halicki from 2000 proves the former: “folk high schools have

been educating seniors since the 1970s. The first folk high schools for seniors have also been created as the departments of folk high schools” (Halicki, 2000, p. 55). Moreover, the latter one is proved by specific activities, such as an initiative called “Wandering Folk High School for Seniors” organized by Kashubian Folk University in Wieżyca. The first edition of this project took place in 2013, and the second one in 2016. The idea of “Wandering Folk High School for Seniors” is aimed at people over 60, living in Kartuski and Lęborski county (Borowska, 2016). Activists from Kashubian Folk High School phrased their offer in a way it would enable them to attract seniors who did not have an opportunity to enjoy educational offer in their local communities. As the originators, they underline that “Wandering Folk High School for Seniors” project: “was to become an attempt to answer seniors’ needs. As the main aim, we have pointed out the activity enhancement in the social life of older people living in the Kashubian villages – in particular motivating them to active participation in various forms of educational, cultural and social activity” (Maliszewski, 2016, p. 73).

Conclusion

From the perspective of the multiannual tradition of folk high schools operating for the benefit of the oldest age group, such as seniors, and from the analysis of the contemporary conducted initiatives, it is possible to say that “Schools for Life” are an educational alternative for seniors now as well as in the future. As Maliszewski states “when looking for current and future optimal educational solutions it is important not to forget numerous values, concepts well known from the history of education and pedagogy, the ones which served generations for consecutive decades of the XX century (and some of them even earlier) with really positive effect, because creative modification of tested educational patterns from the past, to prepare them to fulfill modern (and future) educational tasks may bring significant social effects” (Maliszewski, 2010, p. 52). Such a role the author of the chapter looks for in folk high schools, which, according to her, is a form of alternative education, also for senior citizens. Meeting social expectations, and also social needs folk high schools are somehow obliged to prepare their educational offer bearing in mind the seniors. A demographic forecast has been unambiguous for years and it shows that Polish society is getting older and older, and a lifespan in good health and intellectual condition lengthens, which means that educational institutions should prepare themselves to employ qualified andragogists and to adjust syllabuses to seniors. As the work on the National Development Support Program of Folk High Schools in Ministry of Culture and National Heritage (Felska, 2016) states, that the whole community of National Network of Folk High Schools notices that the group that is truly interested in the offer of the existing folk high schools are senior citizens.

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