SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL SERVICES FOR A VALUED AGEING

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Abstract:
Following the European tendencies, Romania is dealing within the last decade with an empathic process of population aging. The young pensioners aroused due to the appliance for many years of the early retirement scheme in our national context have “fortified” the group of the professionally inactive persons and also have decreased the average age of retired persons’ group. So much the more the need is to push forward socio-educational interventions as the potential of the elderly persons is yet one to be exploited for the personal and social benefits as well. The needs of the seniors to be useful, to be actively involved and to share/valorise their expertise/experience should be the main coordinates to set and design the services for them.

A wide range of socio-educational services can take shape irrespectively if their main aim is the reintegration on the labour market, usually on a part-time basis, the embracement of creative leisure activities or the active involvement of the older person in the local community life. Good practices from countries in Occidental Europe are ones more source of inspiration and action: study circles and universities of third age.

Key words: aging society, active aging, learning communities, supporting seniors’ learning

Aging society
Following the general European pattern, Romania is facing within the last decade important shifts within its age related population structure, being confirmed an empathic process of population aging. This process was determined by the growth of the elderly percentage within the total population (from 13% to 14,8%), on one hand, and by the evident decrease of the younger (under 15) population percentage (15,5% in present, 19% in 1999), on the other hand. Still, in Romania the average on age of elderly is lower due to the early retirement scheme applied for many years and the life
expectation is also lower compared with other European countries. So much the more the need is to push forward socio-educational interventions as the potential of the elderly persons is yet one to be exploited.

We all approach knowledge society and lifelong learning and all of us are mobilized to try to reach „Lisbon 2010” ambitious objectives! We are also in the know of the European and national demographic tendencies (i.e. Europe has 150 mil. older people and they reach the retirement age having a better fettle and a longer life expectation; the forecast is that in 30 years, 1 out of 3 Europeans will be over 60 and 1 out of 10 will be over 80 – as per „Adult learning: It is never too late to learn”, 2006, p.4) and, because of this, all of us are concerned to find efficient solutions in order to capitalize elderly potential.

Although this, seniors’ participation in education is very low and by aging the participation rate decreases even more. The arguments are multiple and vested as the learning barriers at this age are also well-known: attitude towards learning, disposition for learning, time limits due to household responsibilities, financial conditions, access and motion opportunities, difficulties in accessing information regarding learning opportunities and in understanding the learning benefits, specific barriers – related to the social and cultural value bound up with the learning and the extent in which the social environment is supporting the participation in education, or political barriers – low interest in implementing encouraging and stimulating measures for participating in education.

Nevertheless, the professional potential, the experience and the spare time of older persons are yet to be exploited for the personal and social benefits as well. But these resources firstly need investments (i.e. educational, for reactivating knowledge and competences) in order to be maximally valued. Seniors needs to be useful, to be valued, to share their experiences and to be actively involved in community should guide the organisation of the services that address elderly.

**Political discourse**

In the European Commission Communication regarding adults’ learning („It is never too late to learn”, 2006), one of out of the five key messages for widening the adults’ participation in education concerns the third age population: the fourth key message: „Investments in older population and in immigrants”. In the Action
Plan which followed this Communication (‘It is always a good time to learn’, 2007) are provided concrete measures to be undertaken at policy and public management levels, which mean that educational provisions are also regarded in order to increase the rate of participation in education according to the ‘Europe 2010’ objectives (Europe to become the most competitive and inclusive society).

At European level there are also developed actions according to the specific focus of each year (i.e. 2007 – the European year for equal opportunities), the same priority being kept in all Member States. Such political priorities are retrievable also in our national political documents (i.e. National Plan of Reforms, 2007; National Strategy for Development 2007 – 2013, etc.) which include effective stipulations regarding the enlargement of the services offered to the elderly and therefore, the promotion of lifelong learning. This last aspect, LLL, is, at least at declarative level, a top priority of the educational policies in Romania. The lifelong learning philosophy argues through itself the imperativeness and usefulness of such action:

“LLL is of key importance for individuals of all ages and holds an array of benefits for them and society. It promotes their full economic and societal participation, enables them to be better informed and more active citizens, contributes to their personal well-being and fulfilment, supports their creativity and innovation and increases their efficiency as workers and volunteers. Learning is intrinsic and we engage in learning throughout our whole lives.” (v. „Lifelong learning as a tool for all ages”, 2007 - The European Older People Platform).

Nevertheless, the rate of adults’ participation to education and learning is of only 1,6% out of which the elderly percentage is almost insignificant. Precarious infrastructure of (educational) services for elderly, scarce resources for older people stimulation to learn and the absence of a national strategy of lifelong learning are still realities that contrast the political discourse. We could easily say that the Romanian society is still far away from the aim of providing these elderly cohorts with real opportunities to maintain an active and productive social life which is essential for the validation of their self-concept. This aspiration is rather hard to become reality as many of the older persons must work in order to round their low incomes or are undertaking parental roles and
responsibilities towards their nephews whose parents emigrated to work abroad.

It is difficult to provide support for seniors’ learning within a society mostly oriented towards the young. Third age learning is not yet acknowledged like it should be by the politicians and community if we think about the visibility, resources and political priority that are attached to it.

A vision on education for the third aged is compulsory within a society with obvious aging tendencies as it is necessary to enable the seniors for an active and decent life and for continuing personal development through learning. The involvement of the political factor is much more needed if we understand elderly as a category of population depending on resources assigned by others in the sense that seniors, once retired, have no direct access to resources and, therefore, their decision and expression autonomy is rather limited. Besides these aspects, the level of dependence increases by aging and the fourth age is the one mostly in need of social and medical assistance. “Long life”, this new phenomenon in our times, must be regarded as an opportunity for the individual to have an intense life, as a social resource that should be protected through the most adequate tools and as a difficulty which has to be approached with special care for the person’s dignity, when becoming a problem.

Gerontological education acts like a preventive therapeutics (i.e. to overcome the critic moments in life) through personal development which allow that the imminent physical decline not to be accompanied by the mental decline; just the opposite: the mental activism and health can postpone the biological decline.

Learning benefits; motivation to learn

The studies developed by the Research Centre of learning Benefits (www.learningbenefit.net) showed that the individuals which are continuously studying have a better health and life. The learning benefits for older people were demonstrated as regards the mental tonus and health (with positive influences on physical health) as well as the ability of elderly to adapt their experiences and abilities to changing contexts. There were also demonstrated significant corelations between the third age learning and the prolongation of the civic engagement. The seniors which are confident in their learning become inspiration source for the young.
in increasing their performance and efficient and patient mentors for their younger colleagues within workplace learning.

The motivation for learning at this age is usually related with the pleasure to learn, interest for a subject, increase of self-confidence, meeting new people and friends and new communication opportunities. Meeting of new persons through learning increases in importance for the seniors due to their fear of isolation as they usually loose their social networks once retired (Aldridge, Tuckett, 2007, p. 13-16).

The mentioned study emphasizes that from the range of elderly learning preferences on the first place are situated the digital acquisition competences courses, followed by the ones promoting the learning of foreign languages, arts, history, religion, medicine and health care, music, business studies and social work. It becomes more than obvious that in order to maintain themselves active and autonomous, the basic competences needed in the present society (i.e. digital and linguistic) are of high importance even for seniors. It is well known that functional illiteracy level is rather high to older people, so the assistance needs increase for this group.

The order for learning preferences do show that seniors seek to enable themselves to stay active and independent. Some years ago, seniors were taking courses to develop their general knowledge, to enjoy their hobbies or to actively spent their free time. Nowadays, their preferences for computer use and foreing learning courses speak loud about their active attitudes towards reducing the social exclusion they experience because of the lack of this basic competences. Even if ICT courses on are the first place in the top of preferences, the motivation and learning benefits the seniors mostly invoke are the same: „I grew as a person” and „My self-confidence increased”.

McClusky (1974), a pioneer in gerontological education, cited in B. Findsen (2006, p.169) distinguishes between several need categories trying to conceptualize elderly needs:

- **coping needs**: adults engaged in physical fitness, economic self-sufficiency, basic education;
- **expressive needs**: adults taking part in activities for their own sake and not necessarily to achieve a goal;
- **contributive needs**: adults deciding how to be useful contributors to society;
- **influence needs**: adults becoming agents for social change.
This kind of classification directs the focus towards the social involvement of the senior citizens, their expressed availability and interest in making themselves useful in the community and also towards maintaining active seniors’ previously established relations with the social environment. The majority of the provisions addressed the first categories of needs, for active spending of seniors’ spare time. The contributive needs are in close relation with seniors’ desire to give something back to society through volunteer actions or through intergenerational learning, these needs being addressed by a wide range of inter-institutional arrangements. By contrast, there are facilitated no opportunities for seniors to express their influence needs. The current tendencies are to overcome this limitation: elderly accept no more to be a cohort or an entity becoming important just around the elections and they take the initiative to express their opinions and needs within the context of decision-making (i.e. self-help institutions).

**Educational institutions and services for seniors and for their active involvement in the community**

Having a discussion about older people means to outline a painful and negative image because we usually start from the premises that elderly are just resource consumers and checkpoints of the past. Getting old means for most of the people features and events which induct fear: loneliness, illness, dependence, isolation and death; their ineluctability determines a certain distance going beyond the physical aspect between the other generations and the one representing more these things – the elderly. Once retired, the older people tend to substitute their lost roles with other similar, continuing to maintain specific modalities to adapt to the environment and to ensure their internal equilibrium. Thus, the need of socio-educational services is felt much more for this age category – the pensioners, as they cannot be considered an apathetic, languid group.

When we relate to this social category from the perspective of the socio-educational services we mustn’t forget about the diversity degree it presents, determined by the following variables: age, gender, rural-urban area, previous social status, institutionalised versus non-institutionalised, lifestyle etc. The differences regarding their health state, income, professional and life experience, lifestyle are also criteria supporting the lack of homogeneity of this group.
Here from arise different aging models if the continuity of previous individual styles is taken into account (Gîrleanu-Şoitu, D., 2006).

Changing the optics and attitude, or better picking up the ones from the traditional societies where elderly benefited of prestige (significant was older people forum in our society, recognised as the most capable in finding solutions to the community’s problems on the basis of their large experience of life) leads to the reappraisal of elderly unexploited potential which is unconditionally put at the disposal of the community.

To maintain older people as active citizens within the community means to create facilities (including at the level of community consciousness by changing the non-participative stereotypes) enabling them to keep in contact with the larger social environment, to conserve effective networks, to positively involve and work not necessary for a financial reward (voluntary activities, mentors for young, cultural actions for the hoarding of values and traditions). It is well known that besides the seniors working to round their income, the others benefit of expression, learning and participation opportunities only at informal and non-formal level, so (educational) offers dedicated to them are focusing more on leisure then on the development of the critical capacities to challenge the social order or the abilities of social participation and self-determination.

Nevertheless, elderly needs keep changing and their assumed roles get to know some shifts. Even the traditional role of the grandparent is nowadays getting new connotations: residentially and financially autonomous many grandparents involve themselves less in their grandchildren education, refuse to do baby-sitting and opt for the role of Sunday and/or vacation grandparent. Besides this, it becomes a stereotype the isolation of elderly by significant family relations diluting. Many older people describe the relations between generations as being intense and long-termed within the family and flexible and emotionally distanced within the freely agreed relations. So, they are more oriented towards the socialisation with the ones of their age, more dynamic, more socially involved, more vivid as intellectual performance and, thus, new ways to relate to the environment (family and community) (Taccani, 2003, p.347-9).

This kind of shifts determines also changes within the service providers plans.

A clear delimitation between the leisure-oriented, socio-cultural and educational interventions in making the best use of the
elderly spare time is needed in order to highlight the specificity of each one (Taccani, 2003, p.355-357). For sure this kind of differentiation arises also from the adopted perspective on seniors’ free time: „empty” time which needs to be filled or „resource” which can be used in different ways. Our experience from the „Elderly Never Lonely” project which aimed at enabling the personnel working in institutions for elderly showed that they have social and medical assistance knowledge, plenty of dedication but no minimum pedagogical ability necessary to conceive diverse activities for older people in order to keep them involved and active.

The ones working with elderly by investing in different initiatives in leisure and education domains have to courageously pass from the question: „What is to be done for seniors?” to the one at the next level: „What are the elderly doing and what would they like to do?” (in order to take into account what they have to say).

For sure, the seniors don’t want to be captured within stressing experiences characterised by recentness and modernity meaning to relive the traditional school period within an asymmetric teacher – student relation. That’s why the institutional offers addressing the elderly have to afford elderly to be autonomous and self-determined and to adapt to their specific needs.

According with the level of autonomy of older adults and the focus of the provision, it can be distinguished the following institutional typologies (Findsen, 2006, p.172-3):

- Self-help institutions controlled by older people to meet their own learning needs / ex. Universities of Third Ages (U3A), Institutes for Learning in Retirement, Councils of seniors etc.
- Institutions that develop special programs for older adults (ex. for pre-retirement)
- Mainstream providers that develop courses which might appeal to older adults – i.e. people’s universities, study circles etc.
- Indirect focus on educational purposes – ex. social care institutions for elderly, clubs, day centres, councils of seniors.

Elderly involvement within the community demands first educational provision which enable them to associate, to self-express and to self-help. Some of the potential educational services are:
Prepare for retirement by providing specialized trainings for people in business/enterprises under the threshold of retirement, within the meaning of enabling them to rediscover their creative potential with the aim of actively filling their leisure time, of continuing personal development and of finding ways towards a pleasant, constant, diverse and rewarding activity.

Services of accreditation and validation of previous experiences, to facilitate reintegration into the labour market, even if in a part-time job and even in the form of voluntary activities;

Enabling elders for self-organisation and self-help by maximumly valuing the co-elderly empathy;

Establishing more consistent and functional inter-institutional and intergenerational partnerships, for mutual benefit. A possible direction of development in this regard is represented by the example of the "after school" programmes moderated/managed by seniors. Previous experiences have shown that partnerships with "grandparents" are more pleasant for children than the involvement of support teachers or parents in recreational activities and extracurricular activities organized within the school. Two of our current projects explore the field of intergenerational learning from different perspectives.

EAGLE project - European Approches to the Inter-Generational Lifelong Learning has developed a tool for the analysis of learning experiences between generations, the instrument through which were developed 31 of analytical case studies of intergenerational learning. The CROSS AGES - Inter-generational Learning: from Diagnosis to Impact Evaluation aims mainly to develop a model of lifelong learning based on intergenerational exchange. Examples of good practice in Western European countries are once again source of inspiration and action. Here are a few of them:

*Third age universities* are self-supporting organizations for people who have retired from professional life or no longer activate as full-time professionals, providing educational creative and recreational opportunities, within a relaxing and pleasant environment. These universities of the third age, initiated within the Anglo-Saxon areas, work as a collaborative learning activities based
on knowledge, experience and skills of their members. Not few times, trainers are learning and the learners become facilitators. The educational offers of these universities consists of 300 of subjects/topics in areas such as art, foreign languages, music, history, human sciences, philosophy, technology, crafts, photography, etc. Usually a university of the third age has around 250 members, but can have 12 or 2000. The learning perspective is related to the pleasure of learning: there are no accreditation or validation of learning procedures and no qualifications to be acquired. Bureaucratic procedures are minimal, the elderly self-organise themselves.

A study circle is a limited group of people who meet several times to discuss a topic. The topic of discussion of a "study circle" may vary from politics to religion or hobby sites. This form of learning is aimed at analysing and finding solutions to social, political or community problems. In such a framework, there is no teacher but a facilitator to guide the discussion and ensure the possibility of involving each of the participants, as far as they want to. Audio-visual materials are used as a starting point stimulating the dialogue. This Swedish initiative of self-organisation is at the boundary between institutional, non-formal and informal. It is known that most learning takes place outside institutions, and this manner of interaction, which involves a minimum organization, is feasible for the elderly.

As a conclusion, the qualitative educational offers for seniors should fulfil some criteria: a) starting from the older people needs, interests, and ways of learning – they know what they want to learn; b) letting more control in older people’s hands; c) valorizing their life and learning experience, the informal learning; d) specialized trainers; appropriate and effective teaching; e) resources for older people learning and state/community support; f) facilities for intergenerational learning and interactions.

It is obvious that these services must become more creative, more attractive and functional to constantly promote the concepts of active ageing and intergenerational learning.

Therefore, some challenges that need solutions are still in front of those providing educational services for the elderly: a) increasing overall participation in learning; b) finding appropriate mechanisms for motivating, encouraging, enabling and supporting participation in learning; c) lifting the barriers to participation; d)
bringing learning closer to older people; e) keeping them active, involved and interested; f) tailored offers; g) adequate resources; h) specialized adult educator; qualitative provisions.

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