

Learning of Older Adults in Community

(Editorial)

Population aging and, consequently, the emergence of elderly societies in developed western countries constitute a reality that demographic, social, economic, and educational policies have been addressing ever more directly at both national and supranational levels. The fact that the year 2012 has been declared the European Year of Active Aging and Solidarity between Generations testifies to the awareness that these are issues concerning the whole population, that is, all generations, and that they have a relevance that reaches beyond the borders of nation states. The year has been marked by many activities intended to raise awareness and to change attitudes towards old age, aging and the elderly – nothing new *per se*, since the field has already been developing for some decades, as a number of scientific publications will demonstrate (see, for instance, Hlebec 2009; Hlebec et al. 2012; Kump and Jelenc Krašovec 2010; Ličen and Gubalova 2010; Ramovš 2003). In Slovenia, the year 2012 has included an international scientific conference organized within the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA), more specifically the ELOA (Education and Learning of Older Adults) network, called “Intergenerational solidarity and education of older adults in community”. The research findings presented at the conference concerning older adult education and intergenerational education, in connection with aging and the role of different activities in the process of older adults’ participation in community and society as a whole, suggest that learning and education – as important supporting and accompanying activities – are gaining an especially relevant place in the provision of activities for the elderly (Jelenc Krašovec and Radovan 2012). Despite the very rapid development in this area of expertise, older adult education remains a marginal activity politically. Its marginal position is reinforced through insufficient funding of older adult education, as well as inadequate legal regulation of the field. Conclusions reached by various authors suggest that this is characteristic of several European countries (Findsen and Formosa 2011; Withnall 2010).

The development of older adult education poses a variety of challenges, including changing terminology and developing the concepts related to the role of older adult education. It is for this reason that the relevance and implementation possibilities of the principles of critical (educational) gerontology are being brought into discussion (Estes 2011; Formosa 2011), in addition to the significance and drawbacks of the (politically colored) concept of active aging (e.g., Boudiny and Mortelmans 2011). Critical authors have described the concept of active aging as an enforced theoretical strategy to encourage older adults, after long periods of work and with increasingly late retirements, to participate in further social activities – while being as independent and proactive as possible. Needless to say, this process requires education. Studies of older adult education place special emphasis

on older adults' activities in local communities, pointing to the difficulties arising from the inadequate opportunities offered by older adult educational programs, which do not actually reflect the needs of older adults. Furthermore, the studies critically assess the focus on caring activities for the elderly (Withnall 2010) and the neglect of other needs that older people in a community may have (e.g., the need for learning and creative socialization, etc.) (Field 2009). Consequently, it is important to inquire whether the offer of older adult education, in accordance with the principles of critical educational gerontology, includes increasing social awareness of older adults as a collective body, one that is not merely a receiver of assistance, but also a subject in the process of social transformation.

This issue of the "Journal of Contemporary Educational Studies" is the outcome of a scientific collaboration between European experts working in the field of older adult education. It presents certain dilemmas about the development of the field and, by raising the issues it does, identifies the pertinent questions surrounding older adult education, and opens up the possibility of setting concrete goals for the future. For this to succeed, a more comprehensive and multidimensional expertise, along with political support for older adult education at national and supranational levels, is essential.

Marvin Formosa's article "*Critical Geragogy: Situating Theory in Practice*" demonstrates convincingly that older adult education is an area characterized by remarkable development. The article provides an insight into concepts such as educational gerontology, critical educational gerontology, geragogy, and critical geragogy, illustrating a possible implementation of the concepts in practice through an actual educational program. Educational gerontology, combining adult education with social gerontology, emphasizes the importance of education in reducing the marginalization of older adults, which is the result of economic, social, political, and cultural factors operating in society. It also maintains that education in later life depends on the individual's education over the course of his or her life (Glendenning 2000). Critical educational gerontology, originating in the radical attempt to overcome the oppression that forces the elderly into ignorance, poverty, and helplessness, asserts that older adults control their own thinking and learning, and also have the opportunity for further development, thinking, inquiring, and reflecting upon what they already know or upon new learning contents. Formosa has elsewhere (Formosa 2011) argued the importance of applying the principles of critical educational gerontology, including the implementation of adequate policies and the rejection of the view that any type of education empowers older people. Formosa highlights the significance of reaching out to all distinct segments of older people, with the elderly themselves playing an important role; in addition, a self-help culture should also be embraced. Finally, when practicing critical educational gerontology, "progressive" movement (including counter-hegemonic activities) should be supported. One paradigm of critical educational gerontology is critical geragogy, which has been defined as the educational practice of critical educational gerontology, the aim of which is the emancipation, empowerment and influencing of older adults (Glendenning and Battersby 1990). Critical geragogy conceptualizes teaching and learning as a collective and negotiated enterprise

among older adults, who are thus able to gain more power and control over all aspects of the educational activities, including the contents, organization, and planning of learning programs.

The contribution “*Older Learners in the Community? Provocative Reflections on the Situation of Older Adults in Portugal*” by **António Fragoso** warns of the effects of population aging in Portugal, especially the growing share of the oldest citizens, and the consequent problems they are faced with. The author pays special attention to their loneliness and exclusion from the community. Fragoso also stresses the issue of increasing institutionalization of the elderly (he uses the term “institutional families”), which mostly affects the oldest segment of the elderly adult population, primarily widowed individuals with low levels of education, who are often illiterate, increasingly excluded from their communities, and directed toward something not dissimilar to “warehouses” for the poor. Analyses show that European nation states are reaching a situation already familiar for some time in countries such as Japan, where population aging has a clear correlation with the loneliness and exclusion of older people in communities (Sawano 2012). Moreover, this is strongly exacerbated by inadequate social and educational state policies, based on neoliberal principles. Fragoso finds that older people with low levels of education in Portugal do not participate in community education, and asks how this problem could be approached. What should the educational programs consist of for these, usually excluded, older adults? He considers community a space of conflict rather than a space of consensus where conflicts could easily be resolved, and where one could appeal to an overall sense of belonging. A consideration of community development in Portugal encourages a debate on the opportunities it offers for formal and non-formal education, as well as informal learning, for older people in a community. Through this process, the elderly are able to participate actively in community development and improve their own position within the community. Over two decades ago, Glendenning and Battersby (1990) emphasized that the majority of older adult educational programs were based on false assumptions. According to them, it was widely believed that the learning abilities of older people slowed down, that any type of education encouraged the emancipation and empowerment of the elderly, and that older people were a homogenous group with similar motives for education. The authors also stated that another false presumption was often made, namely that most older adult education was conducted in the interests of older people. The majority of experts addressing these issues today believe that older adult education has not yet rectified the errors, and that these educational programs are still far from being diverse, accessible, and emancipatory enough, thus failing to meet the different needs of different older people.

The offering of educational programs for the elderly and the programs’ suitability for their needs are the topics of the two articles written by Slovenian authors. In “*Older Adult Education and the Well-Being of Local Communities*” **Sonja Kump** and **Sabina Jelenc Krašovec** examine the extent to which the availability of older adult education in Slovenia depends on the levels of well-being in the municipality (Rovan et al. 2009). They also look into the question of whether the levels of urbanity or rurality define the availability and content

of older adult education. The authors presuppose that Slovenian municipalities with higher levels of well-being provide better possibilities in terms of older adult education. At the very beginning of their study, however, they find that adult education remains largely ignored as a factor in ascertaining the levels of well-being within municipalities; it is therefore absent from the set of indicators of well-being. The authors inquire as to whether the offer of older adult education is based on the established needs of older people for education, and whether it encourages older people's independence, social inclusion, understanding of and respect for diversity, and personal growth in later life (cf. Withnall 2010, p. 14). Conducting a case study, they conclude that in the selected communities, the key factor influencing the diversity and quality of older adult educational is the rurality or urbanity of the community. The extent of the need for education is only rarely established, with availability being fairly random and/or dependent on the capabilities of community organizations. The authors also write that the offerings from educational organizations tend to be directed towards educated women, with various associations typically providing gendered activities. Just as Formosa (2011) describes education in Malta, the two Slovenian authors conclude that, in general, educational programs in the selected Slovenian communities are not developed in accordance with the principles of critical educational gerontology, the objective of which is to use education to provide older adults with better control of their knowledge and thinking.

Gabi Ogulin Počrvina's article "*Education of Older Adults in Rural Areas at Adult Education Centers in Southeastern Slovenia*" discusses the availability of older adult education in the selected area of Slovenia. The author asserts that older adults are not treated as a priority target group in national or European educational policy documents. As a result, national strategies for the development of older adult education remain uncoordinated, inconsistent, and unfocused. The author investigates whether educational opportunities in communities, and especially in universities of the third age and adult education centers throughout south-eastern Slovenia, respond to the needs of the elderly living there. She also attempts to answer the question of how much older people actually strive to influence the educational offer. She concludes that the offer is predominantly shaped by those participating in education, which underlines the already well-known problem: the elderly who do not participate in the educational activities provided have no real influence on the development and change of the offer. Furthermore, this is before we mention the fact that the inclusion of these groups would require completely different stimuli and motivational levers to be included in community activities. G. Ogulin Počrvina also finds that level of education and socio-economic position are the factors with the biggest influence on older people's participation, and readiness for active participation, in education.

The thematic section is concluded with **Ann-Kristin Boström's** contribution on "*Adult Learning in a European Context*". The author examines the degree to which the documents and strategies of supranational organizations such as the OECD, the EU, the WHO, etc., incorporate older adult education and intergenerational learning. She evaluates the concepts related to older adult and intergenerational

education according to two aspects of lifelong learning – *lifelong* and *lifewide* – and the possibilities of establishing social networks, strengthening social cohesion, and improving the quality of life and well-being in a community. She perceives community well-being as accumulated social capital, established through networks in the community. Older adults' formal and non-formal education, as well as informal learning, are all very important; which of these an individual will opt for depends on his/her needs and the contexts in which the individual lives.

Although the articles published in this issue of the “Journal of Contemporary Educational Studies” only address some of the currently topical questions related to older adult education, there is no doubt that they have great potential for further lively debate.

Accompanying the thematic section is a non-thematic contribution “*The Effect of Preschool on the Reading Literacy of 15-Year-Olds: A Secondary Analysis of PISA 2009*” by **Ljubica Marjanovič Umek**, **Katja Grgić** and **Ajda Pfifer**. Having analyzed the results of the 2009 PISA international comparative study, the authors show that in the majority of countries, the 15-year-olds who attend preschool for more than one year score higher in reading literacy than their peers who do not attend preschool or only attend it for one year or less. In addition to attending preschool, a higher level of reading literacy depends crucially on encouraging economic, social and cultural environments. The authors also emphasize that preschool participation in itself is not a sufficient indicator. Rather, other key structural indicators of preschool quality need to be analyzed: the length of preschool attendance, the ratio of the number of adults to children in a group, as well as certain other indicators (e.g., preschool teachers' education levels, the number of children in a group, etc.). Although Slovenia maintains standards similar to those in the Nordic countries, the impact of preschool in Slovenia on the reading achievements of 15-year-olds is not as strong as it is in those countries. As a final point, the authors underline some of the legal solutions conceptualized in the new “White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia”, which could contribute to greater fairness in preschools.

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Editors of the thematic issue

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