Educational activities for older people as a part of social work

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Abstract. The article is an attempt to highlight the value of the educational activities for the quality of human life and educational practices of social workers in gerontology. The article introduces the research results obtained from the focus group. 10 social workers with the experience of organizing educational activities in social care institutions for older people participated in the research. Organising of social events for social workers means implementation of leisure, culture, art related activities through utilizing inner resources of the organisation and by outsourcing of educational activities. Organizing educational activities for social workers is a creative process. It offers learning experience and, while dealing with limitations of resources, allows for collaboration with organisations that are involved in cultural and art activities.

Key words: educational activities, quality of human life, social care institutions, elderly, social workers.

1 Introduction

Recent demographic processes have introduced alterations into the age structure of the population and brought into focus the ageing processes of the society. According to Statistics Department of Lithuania, in 2003 over 20 per cent of the population of Lithuania was 60 and more years old; it is estimated that if current demographic trends persist by 2030 the share of the population that is 60 years old and older will have reached over 27 per cent. The ageing of the society changes the structure of the societal needs in essence; meeting those needs poses challenges to the social institutions and social workers employed by these institutions. The provision of social services in Lithuania is regulated by the Law on Social Services [1], the Law defines the concept of the social services and the order of their provision, and diversity and accessibility of social services for the consumers are stressed. Social workers employed in gerontology area are guided in their practice by the Catalogue of Social Services [2], it defines the services that are provided as preventive services (with preventive purposes) to avoid social distress and social exclusion; to activate community and to enable individuals (families) cooperate while receiving services, to take part in group events, in educational and leisure activities of choice.

A number of surveys have been carried out to analyse the phenomenon of ageing and its key indexes. Lithuanian and foreign researchers [3–10] have focused on the effect of the individual ageing processes to the quality of life, to social environment and to the satisfaction of physiological needs. However, research done on educational aspects of ageing with opportunities for active inclusion and empowering of older people who use log-term

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social care institution services, is rare. Researchers [11, 12] review educational practices (cultural, art, leisure activities) organized in the older people's institutions and focus on the role of the social worker. It is accepted that leisure pastime activities and participation in art and culture events are among older people's needs, they reinforce their satisfaction with life, provide an opportunity to stay socially active citizens.

This article aims at highlighting the value of educational activities for the human quality of life and educational practices of social workers in gerontology.

2 The value of educational activities of art and leisure for the quality of life of older people

Culture provides form and contents for the human leisure activity in modern society; it is a source for spiritual development. According to Pauliukevičiūtė and Raipa [13], "social function of culture is of great importance. It shapes behaviour of the members of society, and delineates their system of values" [13]. Lemme [14] notes that culture not only constructs values, premises and expectations but also influences on the individual approach and decision making processes. Culture seems to define human possibilities and limits, to influence world outlook, which in its own turn frames phenomena of reality. Culture empowers individual self- building process [15], guarantees opportunities for life fulfilment and social cohesion, develops spiritual state, self-reliance, "yields" dominant values [16]. In the opinion of the researchers [12, 17, 27] education and culture cannot be separated from reciprocal learning, acquisition of norms and values, active learning, identification of common cultural interests, cultural excursions, support of artistic activities. Educational activities supported by social workers employed in older people's care institutions allow social involvement and individual support. Jarvis [18] treats adult education in the advanced age as an important aspect in defining quality and meaning of life in older age, encouragement of taking care of oneself and participation in communal life. Leisure spent by older people with friends, neighbours and relatives support physical and cognitive functions which are directly linked to positive emotions and their stability, with positive self-assessment [19]. Kuzmickienė [20] states, that leisure types are personal rights of an individual, by exercising this right the individual reveals one's attitude to the value system. While planning educational activities, and organizing leisure for older adults their needs have to be taken into consideration, since every older individual has favourite activity types and makes one's own decisions as to the allotment of time and energy for these activities. Some are interested in a single type of an activity, some devote their time, skills and knowledge to several types of activities: they get involved into work and participate in several communal organisations, spend a lot of time with their families and doing social work, show interest in arts, theatre, books, music. Staniulevičienė [21] states that leisure can be treated as a source of self-growth, experience, harmony, happiness, self-realisation. Černius [22] expresses an opinion that life quality enhances for older people who participate in creative activities. "The longer older people stay active, occupied, the happier their old age is [22]. Miezytes-Tijusienė and Bulotaitė [23] also confirm that social activity allows older people to manage their emotional imbalance better and this positively affects their psychological status. Thus, maintaining social activity allows strengthening contacts with others and accepting support. Older people when receiving social care or relocating to social care institutions can deliberately avoid new social contacts that would lead to friendship, reciprocal acceptance and decisions to maintain such contacts [24]. To quote Mockus et al. [25] "educational and social activity group incursions, directed to specific groups can reduce social exclusion and loneliness among older people".

3 A social worker as an organizer of educational activities

Many social workers employed at old people's care houses and day care centres recognise that the key goals of their organisations increasingly tend to see activating their inmates through educational, cultural and leisure activities apart from provision of social and health care, which, undoubtedly, constitutes substantial part of their work. Research carried out [4, 19] allows us to state that the growing population of the older people gives impetus for the building of a new more favourable environment, for diverse services in stationary and in communal institutions and centres. Lithuanian social workers today take care not only of the diversity of social services to older people through organising and coordinating educational programmes. In cooperation with institutions and enterprises, involved in educational (cultural, leisure) function, social workers become initiators and creators of educational programme. Researchers [11, 26] identify the following roles of social workers in gerontology in organising social activities: *assessor's role*, to identify the inclinations, needs and interests of the older people, to know developmental tendencies for older people's leisure activities and particular features of different leisure activities; *empowerment's role*, to try to draw older people's interest to the new forms of leisure and education activities, to encourage old people's active involvement; *mediator's role* – to help develop social contacts during educational activities; *consultant's role* – to assist in overcoming emerging difficulties, paying attention and showing empathy as a social worker; *creator's role* – to carry out project implementation as social workers often do; propose education programmes which allow older people to realise themselves, get involved into activities encouraging individual cooperation, learning, health care support. Alongside with the above specificity of the social worker's function in gerontology, the function is conditioned by the social change, human relationship problems, human empowerment for their wellbeing, support in human life quality enhancement.

In the academic subject description of social work [28], a social worker is defined as a specialist who is able to activate people, to strengthen their social responsibility and in this way contribute to the societal strife to meet the goals of civic involvement, creation of wellbeing, protection of socially disadvantaged people. Trainers of social workers aim to educate future social workers with creative approach to social work process, creative application of professional and personal skills in meeting the needs of older people [29]. Organising of educational activities for older people requires initiative from social workers and their competence to amass both internal institutional resources of a social care institution and external human resources.

4 Research methods

In the implementation of the Lifelong Learning Programme within the international project "INNOMEC – Innovative Management and Educational Practices in Elderly Centres" in the period 2013-2015 (No. 539829-LLP-1-2013-1-IT-GRUNDTVIG-GMP) a focus group research was carried out to identify the expertise of Lithuanian social workers in organising educational activities for older people. In order to reveal a distinctive experience of the social worker obtained while working in social service for older people the phenomenological research method was chosen. From the phenomenological point of view experience emerges from the stream of daily life [30]. The data was collected using the focus group interview method in order to answer the raised questions of the research.

Participants of the research. Characteristics of the Lithuanian focus group participants: ten social workers (all focus group participants are women) working in institutions for old people, the age of the participants ranges from 30 to 45 years old. The scope of research

participants is targeted, i.e., the informants that are able to reflect and reason about the researched phenomenon responsibly were selected. Selection criteria: gerontology work experience in social service for older adults no less than 5 years; professional qualifications of the social work – university-level education. The data of the research was collected in May 2014 after focus group meeting at Mykolas Romeris University (Lithuania) and interview texts were recorded using a voice recorder.

Research ethics. The researchers obligated themselves to the participants of the research not to make public information related to an individual social service (institution) informant. The research was based on the principles of anonymity, voluntarism and goodwill. The social workers were acquainted with the goal of the research and its circumstances, interview questions and the importance of the reflection of their experience.

Research limitations. The focus group of the participants comes from Vilnius region. The choice of setting can be considered as limitation. The location has an influence on the discussion, and it is important to consider the connotations that a particular location may have for participants [31].

5 Research outcomes

How is organizing educational activities for older people related to social work practice?

Focus group member interviews revealed that organising educational activities is part of social work. Workers of social care institutions indicated that they receive a strong support from their administration, they do not feel disconnected from the decisions administration is taking, rather they are included in such processes and take part in the processes related to organising educational practices. They discuss organising of educational activities with the leaders of their institutions, with regard to older people's needs, wishes, initiative and supply for educational activities social workers compose event calendars. The survey participants mentioned contacts with culture centres of municipalities, schools, kindergartens, who show initiative and willingness to extend their cultural and artistic programme to older people.

In the opinion of the survey participants, older people show preference to the activities they are familiar with or have prior experience of, since this gives a sense of security. They are inclined to distrust new activities, afraid to try them out. Social workers in organising new educational activities seek to strengthen motivation of the older people, provide them with more self-reliance and trust in personal strength. Survey participants in organising educational activities noticed that older people feel more content with routine schedule and activities which repeat themselves. Older people do not like surprises but expect predictable things. Social workers try not to "persuade" older people to undertake activities since in their opinion older people experience "vulnerability". Older people through sharing their experience motivate and encourage others to get involved into activities.

Focus group participants noticed that singing folk songs, religious songs are favourite activities with older people since they are related to their life experiences and emotional past. Organising such activities brings together older people with different interests – some like singing, some - listening, others like meditation. Focus group participants mentioned that for older people with vision impairment reading aloud group activities are organised. Social workers in such instances noticed positive emotions, improved overall status and better spirits. Survey participants employed in care homes noticed that educational activities help to recognise dynamics of recession, the shrinking of recognition powers of older people. Older people get easily tired, therefore, their physical capability should be considered when planning for educational activities.

What would you identify as obstructions in implementing educational, engaging activities?

Survey participants remarked that they experience limitations in organising educational activities in relation with the resources of the institution or shortage of the personnel, time resources and lack of competence for social workers. Often more support is given to the health and nursing needs for older people, which are both undoubtedly important and educational activities receive status of secondary less expedient needs and for this reason they receive slimmer financing.

Survey participants stressed the lack of individual competences of social workers, since dealing with older people's needs requires emotional readiness, professional fatigue reduces creativity and initiative. There is a need in sharing good practices about educational activities, reflexions on identifications of meaning and effectiveness of the activities.

Research data showed that social work practice in gerontology, particularly in organising educational activities, suffers from the lack of identification and is recognised with difficulty. Social workers in organising educational activities enter the process of trial and error, they learn to identify and to invent educational activities for improving older people's life quality. However, survey participants feel the need for recommendations for organising educational activities for older people with special needs. Organising of educational activities often rests on personal search of social workers, their creativity, learning from their own and their colleagues experience within the limits of their institutional experience.

6 Final remarks

Specific characteristics of gerontology function of the Lithuanian social workers might be associated with organising educational activities for older people. Social workers undertake organiser's roles which they implement in accord with their personal, organisational and collegial resources and learning from experience because they see the importance of the educational activities for the quality of life of older people. Yet, the limitation of resources restricts the scope and quality of services for older people, educational services including.

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