



## The relationship between art education and the physical and mental health of the elderly in Poland and abroad

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### Summary

**Keywords:**

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music education,  
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therapy, and music  
therapy

The author of the article discusses the impact of artistic activities on the physical and mental health of elderly people. She describes the correlation between music and dance and the well-being and mental development of seniors. Both Poland and other countries organize classes in choreotherapy, art therapy and music therapy to support this social group. The author pays special attention to the functions of artistic activities and their importance for human health. In this article, she presents three forms of therapy for seniors which are organized in Poland and abroad: choreotherapy, art therapy, and music therapy. The article also includes descriptions of government programmes designed to support active older adults.

### Związek pomiędzy edukacją artystyczną a zdrowiem fizycznym i psychicznym osób starszych – w Polsce i za granicą (Streszczenie)

**Słowa kluczowe:**

osoby starsze,  
edukacja muzyczna,  
edukacja taneczna,  
choreoterapia,  
arteterapia,  
muzykoterapia

Autorka artykułu przedstawia związek pomiędzy aktywnością artystyczną a zdrowiem fizycznym i psychicznym osób starszych. Opisuje wpływ muzyki i tańca na samopoczucie i rozwój umysłowy seniorów. Zarówno Polska, jak i inne kraje organizują zajęcia z choreoterapii, arteterapii i muzykoterapii, aby wspierać tę grupę społeczną. Autorka zwraca szczególną uwagę na funkcje działań artystycznych i ich znaczenie w zdrowiu człowieka. Opisuje także formy terapii seniorów, które są organizowane w Polsce i za granicą. W artykule przedstawiono trzy formy terapii pedagogicznej: choreoterapię, arteterapię, muzykoterapię. Artykuł zawiera również opisy działań programów rządowych, które mają na celu wsparcie aktywności osób starszych.

## Introduction

The aim of the article is to analyse the relationship between art education and the physical and mental health of older people. Due to the progressive aging of society, the issue of providing seniors with a variety of activities is becoming increasingly important. The moment of retirement is very often associated with a decrease in activity. Therefore, it is very important to provide seniors with offers of activities in which they will be able to engage after leaving their professional career. There are many concepts that show the process of human development throughout life (Berk 2004). It turns out that biological age and objective health condition are not the best predictors of good functioning in old age. Finding optimal ways to cope with everyday life (Flood & Philips 2007) and having an extensive social support network (Baltes & Lang 1993) prove to be crucial. Education can significantly support the process of adapting to changes, related, for example, to a decline in physical fitness or the death of loved ones (Goulding 2013). Participation in systematic classes for people with similar interests plays a very important supporting and preventive role. These activities can be informal or formal. They are organized by associations, foundations, private persons, cultural centres, but also institutions such as nursing homes (Sienkiewicz-Wilowska 2016).

## Functions of artistic activities

Artistic activity has an influence on science, as proven by the concept “multiple intelligences”, described by Howard Gardner (Sherman 2006). It activates various processes related to emotional, cognitive, social, and motor functioning. Art can perform several functions: communicative, cognitive, educational, integrative, ideological, breaking stereotypes, adaptive, therapeutic, cathartic, humanizing, and expressive (Gołaszewska 1983). Many of them turn out to be particularly important in late adulthood, such as communication, adaptive or therapeutic functions. In old age, art also contributes to increased self-confidence, better coping with stress, illness, and loss. It creates a space for personal creativity. As art relates to opening to new solutions, and searching for new possibilities, it is an important solution to the limitations that appear in old age. Artistic activities such as painting, carving, and handicrafts are considered creative activities. However, if we look at creativity from a developmental perspective, we can see that all activities stimulating thinking, reflection, analysing and synthesizing can be considered as creative forms of activity (Flood & Philips 2007). Creativity, however, is related not only to thinking, but also to action. According to older people, at their age it partly manifests itself in solving problems in everyday life. Seniors also claim that artistic activity plays an important role in stimulating such broadly defined creativity, as it results in better coping with everyday challenges, increased motivation, and the ability to look for new solutions (Fisher & Specht 1999). Creativity can help mitigate the negative effects of retirement, reduce negative

stereotypes about old age, and help seniors seek new social roles. Creative seniors take up creative activity in various fields of culture, art, and science, and assume the roles of animators, artists, and researchers (Leszczyńska-Rejchert 2007). These activities can lead to the improvement of health, forgetting about the disadvantages of old age and searching for gerontechnologies aimed at making life easier. These people are likely to “rejuvenate” more often, question the existence of retirement age, continue working, start new careers or start their own businesses (Giddens 2009). The concept of active aging relies on the need to reduce age discrimination, as well as to employ multi-dimensional education, and civic activation in securing the economic, political, and social rights of older people, which in turn is meant improve health and solve family and local problems. Indirectly, attention is also paid to the creative potential of the elderly, but does not make it the main target of the activities. The creative aging paradigm concerns the involvement of seniors in creative activity to move away from highlighting their problems to highlighting their potential. Programmes combining art with lifelong learning, community integration, and rehabilitation and therapeutic activities are intended to improve the physical and psychosocial condition, build friendships, and foster the use of experiences and the transfer of heritage to future generations. This policy could lead to more people having “cultural and prestigious longevity”. Researching and creating art can help you find meaning for the future that is denied or forgotten as a value in old age. There are six benefits of creativity for older people: sense of self-realization and well-being, increased self-confidence and self-esteem, new educational experiences, new social contacts and commitment, the opportunity to share knowledge and cultural heritage with younger generations, and improvement of mental and physical health (Klimczuk 2013).

### **Choreotherapy**

Four main educational areas can be distinguished in gerontology education: 1) education to old age (preparation for the role of an older person), 2) education for old age, (preparation and professional development of staff working with the elderly, 3) education / learning in old age (learning offer aimed at older people) and 4) education through old age (intergenerational dialogue, transfer of values) (Szarota 2015). Dance education can be one of the ways of active aging. Dance makes it possible to stay fit, provided that the exercises are tailored to one’s physical abilities and bring maximum effect. Dance education is the study of a natural and universal form of physical activity. It shapes the health of the elderly by caring for a comprehensive and harmonious psychophysical development, and by shaping one’s will and character (Banio & Banio-Surmiak 2017). Seniors in many Western European countries take advantage of the possibility of attending dance classes. In Germany and Austria, classes are organized especially for the elderly. Instructors have also been educated to ensure the greatest possible opportunities for professional and effective

conduct of the classes (Zaorska 1997). Dance is an excellent opportunity for entertainment, which allows to escape from the problems of everyday life, greatly improves one's mood and has a positive effect on one's mental condition. At the Universities of the Third Age, dance classes use therapeutic knowledge based on the principles of kinesiotherapy, music therapy and choreotherapy. These types of classes improve and strengthen their participants thanks to the use of ballroom and folk-dance techniques, elements of yoga, as well as aerobics and choreotherapy. Dance has a positive influence on people in late adulthood by helping them to maintain their mental and physical balance (Kott 2017). According to Kaczorowska-Masny (2012), choreotherapy helps not only the students, but also the teachers. As they work with people who suffer from problems with motor skills, therapists improve their methodological skills, which in turn improves their ability to effectively solve the problems of therapy participants. Dance, as one of the elements of human functioning, affects our physical, social, and mental wellbeing. Broad rhythmic and technical possibilities allow for the creation of several choreographic arrangements. This allows working with people who have different physical abilities. Choreotherapy teaches a person to control their own body. People participating in the classes have a better mood and greater control over their emotions, which is reflected in their interaction with the surrounding people (Jasionowska 2014).

### **Art therapy**

Creative activities are commonly used in occupational therapy – for example, in Sweden (Müllersdorf & Ivarsson 2012). There, occupational therapies focus primarily on personal development, searching for meaning and creating positive energy. Creative activities turn out to be optimal to achieve such effects. In Poland, the access of seniors to occupational therapy is very limited. They are conducted mainly in nursing homes and social hospital wards (Tobis et al. 2011). In principle, occupational therapy is not conducted directly at the patient's place of residence, as is very common outside of Poland (Sienkiewicz-Wilowska 2013). In Poland, there are three basic methods of work within occupational therapy: ergotherapy, sociotherapy and art therapy. Creative activities (e.g., painting) are approached in two ways: they can be a target in themselves and an aid in regaining help to regain health, which will help in carrying out everyday activities (Tobis et al. 2011). Analysing the differences in defining occupational therapy in Poland and abroad is important since the way it is understood directly affects the therapeutic practice (Sienkiewicz-Wilowska 2013). As a method supporting the treatment process, it is aimed at people suffering from depression, anxiety, addictions, neuroses, physical problems, and affective disorders. It is especially effective for people with family problems, victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse, as well as people with difficulties in establishing social contacts (Skwarek & Szulc 2017). Art therapy has a recreational, educational, and corrective function. The recreational function is focused on creating such conditions of therapy

that the patient can feel rejuvenated afterwards and have more energy to solve everyday problems. The educational function of art therapy is to enable the individual to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills. Educational development improves one's orientation in the world and encourages attempts to solve difficult life problems. The corrective function is aimed at changing one's way of thinking, and thus, the approach to difficulties that an elderly person must face (Korbut 2016). Art therapy is becoming more and more popular among seniors living in nursing homes and using institutionally organized forms of support.

### Music therapy

Music therapy has become a separate branch of science that combines the influences of psychology, medicine, psychotherapy, and pedagogy with broadly defined culture. Music therapy can be divided into receptive (listening to music) and active (singing and playing instruments) therapy. In the context of an elderly audience, it is not always easy to encourage active music-making, but inviting seniors into the world of sounds through participation in the role of a listener should not be a major difficulty. Both active and receptive music therapy can be combined with other forms of art therapy, such as choreotherapy or relaxation. Music classes can take the form of individual and group meetings. In addition to their therapeutic value, they also have a sociological dimension as they support integration in a group of peers. In terms of the selection of musical material, we can distinguish between relaxing and activating pieces. Music therapy can be used as a method supporting pharmacological treatment, particularly in the cases of depression, dementia, and mild cognitive impairment. In Parkinson's disease, playing instruments affects the motor skills and smoothness of movement. Listening to music and actively participating in its creation has been proven to (Radzińska 2008) significantly improve one's mood and quality of life and reduces anxiety. A drop in tension has been also observed in patients who listened to music during surgery. In Poland, the use of music during rehabilitation is very popular, but it is not the only form of music therapy used by specialists in various fields. Relaxation training with music is of increasing importance in the treatment of patients exposed to high stress. Music and art therapy classes dedicated to oncological patients are also in high demand. In China, music therapy has been used to support patients after mastectomy. The group of people who received an additional stimulus in the form of music in addition to pharmacological treatment had a lower level of pain than the group that was limited to the use of painkillers. Music therapy can influence various systems of the human body. In the cognitive sphere, it improves the psychophysical mood, influences the shaping of social competences and the improvement of thought and memory processes. It also affects one's self-esteem and reduces the feeling of isolation through group therapy. Music therapy also has the influence on the reduction of cortisol levels, activation of the limbic system or decrease in blood pressure with the use of appropriately selected

songs. When working with an elderly patient, music is most often used for activating or calming purposes. With the use of active forms of music therapy, improvement of psychophysical fitness has been observed with regular repetition of exercises. According to the concept of gerontotranscendence, popular in Scandinavia, a person can develop at any stage of life, which goes hand in hand with the principles of gerontopedagogy. When it comes to seniors, it must be considered that they constitute a non-homogeneous group, from fully able-bodied patients to patients suffering from multiple diseases. The most common cause of musical interventions in this age group is counteracting the effects of depression, dementia, Alzheimer's dementia, and deficits in social life. The most important aspect of musical activity is increasing the quality of life. The main goal of the intervention is to make people feel better and reduce their level of anxiety. When selecting songs for seniors, it is important to consider their musical preferences. Most of them respond positively to pieces of classical music and hits remembered from their youth. Cheerful pieces with soft melodies are best accepted. Researchers of senior patients all over the world focus mainly on attempts to reduce stress and alleviate symptoms occurring with depression and cognitive disorders common in this age group (Radzińska 2018).

### **Government programmes for the elderly in Poland**

The Government Programme for Active Ageing for 2012–2013 was developed in response to challenges posed by demographic and social processes in Poland. Its main goal was to create conditions for the development of social activity of the elderly, who, due to the baby boom of the 1950s, were the main target of the project. They are will enter their 60s soon, and while at the end of their professional activity, are still in good psychophysical condition and have potential, qualifications, life experience and free time, which can and should be managed by creating an appropriate offer of social activity. Activity is one of the essential conditions for healthy ageing. A significant role in this process is also played by cooperation and integration, both within and between generations. The programme involved simultaneous actions in four areas encompassing social activity of seniors. It was based on the following priorities:

1. Education of the elderly which included activities aimed at developing an educational offer addressed to seniors, using the potential of mutual learning, developing innovative forms of education, including informal and non-formal, and promoting the so-called voluntary competence.
2. Social activity promoting intra- and inter-generational integration which assumed the development of various forms of activity of the elderly with the use of existing social infrastructure (such as public libraries, community centres) and inclusion of the younger generation in common activities, which will allow building mutual understanding and developing social skills.

3. Social participation of older people – activities to increase the participation of older people in public, social, economic, cultural, and political life, which will contribute to the development of civil society. A very important role in this regard was played by organizations representing the interests and needs of older people, which fostered their involvement in the life of local communities, such as senior citizens' councils under local governments.
4. Social services for older people – activities aimed at developing various forms of support by increasing the availability and quality of social services for older people. The creation of local support networks based on volunteer activities to create a self-help atmosphere was of key importance here. The programme was financed from the state budget. Funds in the amount of 20 million PLN in 2012 and 40 million PLN in 2013 were provided for its implementation.

The programme consisted of a competition component and a systemic component. The competition component provided financial support for projects implemented by organizations operating in the public benefit sphere in the four above-mentioned priority areas for the elderly. The first edition of the open call for proposals was resolved in October 2012. It aroused great interest, as evidenced by the number of 1,400 projects submitted. Most of them concerned Priorities 1 and 2, and there were no limits for priorities when selecting projects for co-financing. In the end, more than 420 of the best projects were selected, most of which were planned to be carried out in a 2-year time frame (409 of them will continue in 2013). The first edition of the open competition showed an enormous potential of local organizations working for the social activation of seniors. The financial support made it possible to implement many innovative ideas for the inclusion of older people in community activities. The second edition of the open call for proposals is currently underway and will end on March 28, 2013 (GOV, n/a).

A new government programme for the elderly, named "Active +", will operate between 2021 and 2025. In each year, the budget will amount to 40 million PLN. The main objective of the programme is to increase the participation of older people in all areas of social life. A priority of the government's senior policy is to support seniors in as many areas as possible. The programme was created with the idea that the elderly should be active for as long as possible, that they should develop their competences and interests throughout their lives, and that the ageing of society should be treated as a challenge and an opportunity for development, and not as a threat to it. As part of the project, "Active+" non-governmental organizations and other eligible entities working for the benefit of the elderly will be able to apply for funding of their projects from 25,000 to 250,000 PLN. The funding will be awarded in four priority areas:

- Social activity, which includes activities aimed at increasing the participation of older people in active forms of leisure, supporting dependent elderly people and people close to them in their place of residence, developing elderly volunteerism in the local area, and increasing the involvement of older people in the labour market;

- Social participation, which contributes to strengthening of the self-organization of the elderly community and increasing the influence of the elderly on decisions concerning the living conditions of citizens;
- Digital inclusion, which encompasses activities meant to increase the literacy of older people in using modern technologies and new media, as well as the dissemination and implementation of technological solutions that foster social inclusion and safety of older people;
- Preparation for old age realized by strengthening lasting intergenerational relationships, shaping a positive image of the elderly, and increasing the safety of seniors (GOV 2020).

The regulations of the “Active+” programme will be adjusted to the epidemiological situation in the country. This will allow us to fully utilize the potential of nongovernmental organizations to implement projects aimed at increasing the activity of seniors, which will counteract the negative social effects resulting from the ongoing pandemic. The projects will aim to enrich the daily lives of the elderly and provide them with safe and varied activities adapted to their needs and abilities (GOV 2020).

In recent years, the Ministry of Family and Social Policy has implemented two long-term government programmes to support the social activity of older people:

- The “Senior+” Programme (addressed to local government units),
- Government Programme for Social Activity of the Elderly for 2014–2020 (aimed at non-government organizations) (GOV 2020).

The programmes contributed to an increase in the range of activities and initiatives addressed to seniors, and consequently to their activation and increased quality of life. A total of 280 million PLN has been allocated from the state budget to finance the Programme for Social Activity of Older Persons (between 2014 and 2020). Over 2,700 projects implemented throughout Poland benefited nearly 1.4 million elderly people, including the disabled elderly. As part of the “Senior+” Programme, nearly PLN 235 million was allocated to establish and maintain institutions throughout Poland. 777 “Senior+” support centres have been established, offering more than 19,000 places for seniors (GOV 2020). The government programme for social activity of the elderly, despite positive evaluations of its participants, has not really activated the elderly socially. Its main objective – to improve the quality and standard of life of the elderly and increase their social activity – has not been achieved. This is because its assumptions were partly based on outdated data and were not preceded by direct research into the needs of older people. Secondly, the programme was not sufficiently consistent with the country’s development strategies. Thirdly, the same activities were implemented with different priorities (e.g., volunteering). A report by the Supreme Audit Office found that only about 27 percent of the projects examined were aimed at stimulating active seniors and achieving sustainable results. Over 60% of the projects were subsidized for the so-called passive activity, i.e., short-term, one-time activities consisting mainly of consumption of various



services (going to the cinema, theatre, exhibitions, trips, sports, or training in new technologies). In the opinion of the National Audit Office, such activities are needed in the implementation of local policies but should not be dominant. Nearly 850,000, or about 10 percent, of Poland's seniors benefited from the programme between 2013 and 2017. They were more likely to be female (73.5 percent), urban dwellers (69.5 percent), and their average age was 67. Seniors mainly took part in one- or multi-day trips (about 41 percent), meetings with experts (about 36 percent), actions promoting a healthy lifestyle (32 percent) and courses in using new technologies (about 31 percent). They expected to broaden their knowledge and skills (about 67 percent) or gain the opportunity to be among people (about 51 percent) and have a good time (43.5 percent) through their participation in the activities (Gazeta Prawna 2019).

### Summary

Participation in art and exercise activities is extremely important in the lives of older adults. Both in Poland and abroad, seniors have access to many activities that positively affect both their physical and mental well-being. Older adults enjoy taking classes because they want to stay fit for as long as possible and be independent. Physical activities are not only an element of entertainment but also a factor in maintain good health and fighting many diseases. With experienced instructors who are constantly expanding their knowledge of how to teach the elderly, any senior can find a class that fits their condition. Government programmes in Poland have been aimed at the elderly support seniors who, despite their age, want to continue to expand their knowledge and take care of their health. However, they do not fully meet their goals because, in many cases, they do not consider important factors about older adults' lives, such as health options, financial options, and access to organizations that provide assistance or support. Based on the analysis of the obtained materials, it can be concluded that the governmental programmes in Poland which support the physical activity of seniors should analyse the life needs of this part of society to a greater extent.

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## Biogram

**Krystyna Kacprowska** – studentka studiów magisterskich na kierunku zarządzanie finansami przedsiębiorstwa oraz doktorantka w dyscyplinie nauki o polityce i administracji Szkoły Głównej Handlowej w Warszawie. Ukończyła studia magisterskie na kierunku lingwistyka stosowana (angielski z rosyjskim) na Uniwersytecie Warszawskim oraz studia podyplomowe z zakresu negocjacji i mediacji na uczelni SWPS w Warszawie. W 2021 roku została ogłoszona przez Ministerstwo Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyższego oraz Niezależne Zrzeszenie Studentów finalistką Studenckiego Nobla 2021 w kategorii dziennikarstwo i literatura.