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## The Role of a University Teacher in Activating the Socially Marginalized Group of Retired Prison Service Officers

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### Abstract

**Research objectives (aims) and problem(s):** The purpose of the study is to examine the role of university teachers in the education and activation of individuals in middle and late adulthood who belong to a socially marginalized group.

**Research methods:** Data were collected during the educational project “Academy RetroC@fe,” implemented from 2020 to 2024 at Ignatianum University in Krakow. Qualitative research was conducted with a group of 38 retired Prison Service officers affiliated with the National Union of Prison Service Retirees (KZEIRSW). The participants, aged 46 to 82, were engaged in educational activities. Empirical data were gathered using narrative interviews, group interviews, and e-documents produced as part of the workshops.

**Structure of the article:** This study focuses on issues related to the role of university teachers in the educational activation of retired prison officers belonging to a socially marginalized group. The research considers the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, treated as a category of a “difficult situation.” The competencies of university teachers, which are key in working with adults, are described. Additionally, the study brings attention to innovative

educational activities designed to support the development of adult learners in socially marginalized groups.

**Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences:** Learning in middle and late adulthood occurs without coercion. Activating and encouraging individuals to pursue educational efforts in later phases of life helps them adapt to a changing social world. It promotes positive aging patterns in which education enriches life experiences. The university teacher is instrumental in this process. Their competencies, along with their understanding and definition of their social role, greatly impact the educational path of individuals in middle and late adulthood.

**Conclusions and/or recommendations:** Educational activities for retired Prison Service officers broaden their horizons and equip them with key knowledge and skills that help them adapt to a dynamically evolving reality. By creating virtual learning spaces, university teachers, in effect, contribute to the individual development of retired prison officers and build their social capital—both by bridging and bonding social networks.

**Keywords:** role of the academic teacher, teacher competencies, adult educational activity, activation of people in middle and late adulthood, social marginalization.

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was a difficult time for universities, but it also became a period of reflection on the conditions, opportunities, and methods that create space for learning and action for educational subjects. Questions about the goals, directions, forms, tools, and limitations of the educational process during such a tumultuous era resurfaced. Educators and scholars began searching for educational solutions that are effective and appropriate to the conditions. A key responsibility fell to university teachers, especially those working with individuals in middle and late adulthood. The pandemic clearly showed that mature learners needed educators capable of supporting them during these demanding times.

More than two decades ago, Zbigniew Kwiecieński (2000) pointed out the important truth: “The situation of crisis and cultural shifts, axiological confusion and anomie, and the loss of meaning in existing values and the means of their realization presents serious challenges for the teacher.” The COVID-19 pandemic created precisely such a challenge for academics, especially those engaged in ongoing educational projects with retired prison officers. It was undoubtedly a difficult and crisis-ridden period, which prompted people to ask existential questions about the meaning of life, their identity, the direction of social change, and the possibility of self-realization.

The pandemic significantly altered the lives of retired prison officers, bringing about qualitative changes. The activities of the National Union of Pensioners of the Prison Service faced substantial challenges. Respondents reported feeling the profound effects of restrictions, including anxiety, fear for their health and safety, and limited access to penitentiary premises. These factors hindered the individual functioning of retirees and paralyzed the operations of local union structures. The most acute restriction, however, was the inability to spend time together—organizing meetings, gatherings, planned events, excursions, outings, or occasional parties—which, before the pandemic, had been vital elements of community integration for retired prison officers.

The deficit of interpersonal contact led to the disintegration of the actively cooperating community within many of the union’s field structures. Mounting isolation, feelings of loneliness, apathy, and depressive states further weakened interpersonal ties. For some retirees, who had little time to adjust and adapt to the new situation, the pandemic became a source of tension and anxiety, which they often could not manage on their own. The excess of unstructured spare time and the inability to be active were associated with a decline in their quality of life, which directly impacted their mental well-being.

In response, retired officers, in collaboration with the academic community, began seeking strategies to cope with the current problems posed by the pandemic. One key strategy was the adoption of modern technology. Through this collaboration between academics and both retired and

active prison officers,<sup>1</sup> it was possible to create a friendly and supportive virtual space conducive to accessible education for this group. This virtual environment became a hub for learning, skill acquisition, the development of social competencies, and the enhancement of intellectual capital among participants.

Recognizing the educational needs of the prison officer community, consultations led to the development of the “Academy RetroC@fe” educational project. The foundation of this initiative was a community-based approach centered on social networks and relationships. This educational framework (Jakubowski, 2022) was carefully planned, well-organized, and tailored to meet the expectations of the learners. Ensuring participants felt safe and that their education was meaningful and personal formed the cornerstone of the program. As a result, the education of individuals in middle and late adulthood became more effective and offered a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment.

### **Educational Activity of People Belonging to a Marginalized Social Group**

Several years of qualitative research conducted among prison officers indicate that they constitute a marginalized social group and are at risk of becoming another socially excluded group.<sup>2</sup> The findings reveal

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<sup>1</sup> Since November 7, 2016, within the framework of a signed multilateral agreement, scientific and research cooperation has been implemented between the academic community (Ignatianum University in Kraków, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, University of Rzeszów), active and retired officers (associated with the National Association of Retired and Pensioned Prison Service Officers and the Association of Prison Officers), and the private sector (Mentor S.A. and IL-PROJEKT company).

<sup>2</sup> The exclusionary factors identified include: health-related factors (e.g., health status, susceptibility to addiction); socio-local factors (e.g., family crises); competence and educational factors (e.g., educational deficiencies); economic factors (e.g., low pay, loss of privileges, lack of opportunities for additional work); physical factors (e.g., retirement at 45+); normative factors (e.g., nepotism, discrimination, social stigmatization of the profession); and institutional factors (e.g., inadequate system solutions

that prison officers, both individually and collectively, are significantly affected by the process of marginalization, which often lies beyond their control, even while they are still on duty. This marginalization is linked to factors such as professional stigmatization, unequal privileges, and a lack of institutional or social support. The low prestige of the profession, social resentment, entrenched stereotypes, mutual misunderstandings of social roles, and the absence of adequate programs to assist them in adapting to new roles and situations, especially after retirement, compound their difficulties. These issues often translate into daily adversities and further isolate this social group. One potential solution that could counteract this marginalization is to empower prison officers through educational activities.

The rapid pace of social and technological change requires that people continuously learn to adapt to the surrounding world. The primary goal of adult education is to enable adults to participate actively in social life. Education motivates individuals to develop adaptability in response to changing life circumstances and enhances their quality of life. For individuals in middle and late adulthood, education provides not only pleasure but also a pathway to personal development and independence. Adult educational activity is broadly understood as “not only the acquisition of various forms of knowledge, but also the development of attitudes and skills that can improve the quality of life and bolster satisfaction and contentment” (Mandrzejewska-Smól, 2014, p. 204). In this context, the education of retired prison officers is both a means of cognitive support and an avenue for enhancing their quality of life.

Adult educational activity is most valuable when it responds to the specific needs of the learners. For many retirees, one motivation for pursuing education is the desire to satisfy needs for self-development, security, and belonging, which become more pronounced after retirement. Successful aging requires maintaining and developing social relationships, and education plays a crucial social role in this regard. Networking through

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in policies and the methods and forms of functioning). For more details, see publications by Urlińska and Urlińska (2015) and Urlińska-Berens and Urlińska (2021).

educational activities strengthens acceptance and contributes to the psychological well-being of adult learners. The goal of activities implemented during virtual meetings was to facilitate developmental change in the knowledge and skills of participants. For many adult learners, participation in these activities became a catalyst for building and developing individual and social competencies, and, in the long run, for building social capital (both bridging and bonding capital). This activity also has an emancipatory potential for participants, as acquiring knowledge empowers them with the ability to make informed choices, which in turn provides a sense of personal freedom.

The basic principle of adult education is to recognize and accommodate the individual and group needs, learning styles, and varying rates at which learners absorb information. Education is a tool of transgression (Kozielecki, 2000), which enables adult learners to transcend developmental boundaries and overcome their personal limitations. For retired officers, this transgression is manifested in the development of psychological, intellectual, and emotional competencies. The design of the educational initiative took into account both the specific needs of the target group and the conditions under which the proposed learning activities would occur. Activity in middle and late adulthood is often associated with the diverse interests of the learners themselves.

## Research Methods

Empirical data was collected through qualitative interviews and the implementation of tasks as part of the educational project “Academy RetroC@fe,” conducted from 2020 to 2024 at Ignatianum University in Krakow. The research findings are derived from content analyses of narrative interviews, group discussions, and e-documents produced during workshops titled “Me and My Remote Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic.” The research focused on issues such as the significance of education in middle and late adulthood, the dynamics of teacher-adult learner relationships, teacher competencies and their role in remote

education during the pandemic, and participants' experiences with on-line learning.

The "Academy RetroC@fe" project was implemented between 2020 and 2024, during which 38 retired officers transitioned their educational activities into the virtual space within a short timeframe. Participants learned to use communication platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom, and MSTeams. The classes were conducted exclusively through e-learning and were structured around thematic modules, which included ten topics, namely health, social pedagogy, childhood pedagogy, andragogy, intercultural education, social communication, anthropology, philosophy of life, personality psychology, and modern technologies. Virtual meetings were held on Google Meet and Microsoft Teams in sessions consisting of one or two 90-minute classes per month. In addition, participants attended workshops once a month.

For this group of retired prison officers, online education represented an innovative approach. The class program exemplified the concept of life-long education. Participants gained knowledge about themselves and the world and acquired key competencies that they began to use on a daily basis, both in their personal, social, and professional lives. The project was part of an educational intervention aimed at supporting and integrating the retired officers. Lectures and workshops were conducted by academic staff from universities across Poland.<sup>3</sup>

### Teacher as *Spiritus Movens* of Educational Situations

In the educational activation of retired officers, the academic teacher occupies a key role. In pedagogical literature, numerous categories have been proposed to describe the role of the teacher. Fulfilling the professional responsibilities of an educator requires certain knowledge and

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<sup>3</sup> The lectures were delivered by academics from Ignatianum University in Kraków, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, the School of Banking in Toruń, Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, the University of Rzeszów, and the University of Białystok.

competence to meet the expectations inherent in social roles. This includes knowledge about the world, relationships, and oneself. Understanding is the cornerstone of pedagogical practice, as it enables teachers to interpret the realities and relationships within which they function, as well as those experienced by other participants in the educational process. Understanding oneself and estimating one's capabilities and limitations is crucial. It provides the teacher with the tools to interpret surrounding realities, relationships, and personal experiences, to ask questions about the meaning and essence of their own and others' actions, and to evaluate the legitimacy of these actions (Dziemianowicz, 2001).

For years, scholarly discourse on the teacher's social role has revolved around defining who a teacher should be in order to resonate with difficult times. Various descriptions of the teacher's profession refer to roles such as guide, interpreter, researcher, reflective practitioner, emancipated teacher, transformative intellectual, or post-positivist practitioner (Kowalski, 1986; Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2001; Kwieciński, 2000; Rubacha, 2000; Szempruch, 2012). Analysis of the empirical data revealed that these well-recognized descriptions fit into a mosaic of roles performed by teachers of adult students. Furthermore, a new and particularly complex role emerged: that of the trainer, who serves functions such as advisor, analyst, designer, coach, facilitator, moderator, validator, instructor, expert, organizer, and manager (Jakubowski, 2022).

In the context of educational activities involving retired officers, it was the role of the **teacher-educator** that was paramount and key. This role is embodied by someone "who leads another person to the fullness of their development, who guides them through the complexities of life paths and the constant decisions they must make, who knows how to wisely advise or safeguard against poor decisions, who cares about others, and ensures that no person becomes a passive object of history or the machinations of political forces, but instead becomes an independent agent, a maker of their own destiny, and a co-creator of the community's well-being" (Kwieciński, 2000, p. 265).

The **teacher-guide** knows the purpose of the journey, understands the answers to key questions about the direction of an individual's



development, and is aware of the ways to reach the destination. They make the right choices while taking into account the specifics of the educational situation. An educational leader builds bridges of understanding—across differences and between role partners—that enable learners to freely explore new “lands of knowledge.” They are mentors who share their expertise, offer advice, support development, and help (adult) students find their way in rapidly changing times. The **teacher-guide** possesses the knowledge of how, on what principles, and at what pace education should proceed. They do not impose the destination of the path but offer solutions, provide protection, and open doors to new meanings. This role requires a different kind of leadership from the teacher, one based on intensified communication and on building bridges across differences between participants in educational processes, institutions, or environments. It involves empowering others to learn to transcend habitual patterns and “open the libraries of the world” (Kwieciński, 2000).

The **teacher-translator** mediates between the individual and the social world, as well as the world of culture. They maintain a certain distance from both the content of culture and the co-participants. They explain the possibilities of choice and clarify the meaning of opportunities “that emerge along the individual, personal, unique path to the full development of subjective identity, and the proximate preservation of oneself in the struggle with the world and the trials of life” (Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2001; Kwieciński, 2000). Acting as an interpreter requires the teacher to possess communicative knowledge and linguistic competence to construct a faithful and adequate message. A sense of responsibility for interpreting and explaining reality to others is vital. Additionally, the interpreter serves as an inspirer and director who encourages self-discovery and self-interpretation among participants in the educational process (Kwieciński, 2000).

The **teacher-reflective practitioner** draws upon their own experience as a source of knowledge necessary for performing their tasks and fulfilling their role. This role requires an awareness of established goals, pathways, and the motives for undertaking educational activities. Such

awareness and knowledge ensure the ability to reflect on and interpret educational situations in which the subjects are active participants in educational events (Kwieciński, 2000; Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2001). The **teacher-researcher** discovers, inquires, facilitates, and enhances the cognitive activity of participants in educational events. Simultaneously, they are both creative participants and competent observers (Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2001). The **emancipated teacher** understands the essence and role of resistance in an individual's life, adopts a critical perspective, and becomes the author of their own practice. They acquire tools to modify their practice, prioritize continuous improvement, and develop their knowledge and skills. As an agent of change and empowerment in education, they play a transformative role (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2006).

The **teacher-transformative intellectual** is attuned to the problems of others and sensitive to differences and inequalities that perpetuate marginalization and social exclusion (Szempruch, 2012). The **teacher-post-positivist practitioner** reflexively examines their own practice, enables students to actively participate in creating their own image of the world, and teaches critical thinking, dialogue building, improvisation in thinking during action, and responding to unexpected situations. They promote a culture of activity, remain open to students' experiences and different ways of thinking. They are oriented toward actions that break passivity and passive thinking and prioritize emotional security in relationships (Szempruch, 2012).

In the context of engaging a group of retired officers experiencing a difficult situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of the teacher has been enriched with new components. The **teacher-trainer** acts as the student's advisor, guiding them toward broad development and the recognition of their own potential. The teacher, together with the student, seeks solutions and new directions for growth. They identify and design educational activities in accordance with the needs and expectations of the participants, direct the overall educational process, set the course for change, and meticulously plan the learning experience. As a facilitator, the teacher ensures a friendly atmosphere conducive to learning and provides a sense of emotional security. Acting as a facilitator of activities, they engage in

dialogue with participants, establish the scope of activities, and collaboratively develop learning outcomes.

The **teacher-trainer** also takes on the role of a coach who asks thought-provoking questions and supports students on their path to self-development, offering guidance, and clarifying individual components of tasks. In addition, the teacher acts as an expert who shares substantive knowledge and experience on specific topics; as a validator who checks the learning outcomes at each stage; and as an evaluator who assesses the effectiveness of the activities. They are a stimulating collaborator and a partner who creates conditions for growth, advances student competence, asks questions, and initiates tasks. In certain educational contexts, the teacher may also adopt the role of a master—serving as a source of knowledge, organizing the student’s understanding, and leading the learning process while inspiring educational effort (Jakubowski, 2022).

### Research findings

Learning in middle and late adulthood thrives without coercion, as activating and encouraging individuals to engage in educational efforts at this stage of life helps them adapt to a changing social world. It also establishes patterns of positive aging, in which education becomes a valuable asset that enriches life experiences. A key role in this educational process is played by the academic teacher, whose understanding and definition of their social role significantly influence the course and effectiveness of education for individuals in middle and late adulthood.

An analysis of empirical data—gathered from 38 individual and group interviews and e-documents created during workshop sessions—revealed that education contributed to increased self-awareness among retired officers. Participants reported enhanced self-esteem, better recognition of their potential, and an understanding of areas requiring further development. The “Academy RetroC@fe” educational project created an environment conducive to active learning. Its tailored curriculum provided

a catalyst for learners to pursue additional growth opportunities and bridge gaps in their competencies.

The research demonstrated the multifaceted role of the academic teacher in adult education. Learners expressed the need for their teacher to act primarily as a coach—someone who organizes the learning process, coordinates activities, advances their knowledge, and shares their experience. This role involves advising learners, helping them uncover their potential, and guiding them toward comprehensive personal and professional development. The teacher collaborates with adult learners to identify solutions and encourages the pursuit of new pathways for growth. Another important responsibility of the teacher is to plan and structure educational activities in accordance with participants' needs and expectations.

Learners also emphasized the importance of the teacher creating a supportive and welcoming environment that nurtures emotional security. Acting as a trainer for the students, the teacher not only shares knowledge and expertise on the topic but also enriches participants' understanding through structured and engaging activities.

### **Applications**

Educational projects prepared and implemented through cooperation between academia and retired prison service officers serve as a form of social support and guidance that develops individual potential. These dedicated educational activities engage a marginalized social group: They enable retired prison officers to enhance their competitiveness in the labor market, adapt flexibly to a rapidly changing environment, reduce uncertainty, and increase their adaptability.

The educational activities of retired officers effectively counteract marginalization and social inequality within the professional group. They contribute to the growth of individual competencies and equip officers with soft skills that are applicable in their private lives and social activities. Collaboration with the academic community and the presence of the teacher, as a "Significant Other" in the process of adult education also

help build social capital—both bonding capital within the prison officer community and bridging capital with the scientific sector, businesses, and local communities.

The teacher plays a crucial role as a creator of social and technological progress, and bears the responsibility of building the social capital of role partners. This involves a number of tasks: imparting knowledge and experience, fostering motivation to develop interests, cultivating creativity and innovation, shaping value systems, and influencing attitudes and behaviors. Additionally, the teacher is tasked with developing interests, creating conditions for practical activity, and preparing participants for educational, social, and professional engagement. Much depends on the teacher's state of consciousness and personal qualities. The functions and tasks of today's teacher are evolving toward bolstering intellectual independence, inspiring development, and introducing participants in educational settings to the world of knowledge, thoughts, and feelings—all within a spirit of dialogical interchange.

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