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Pathways into the profession of *older adult educator* in the non-formal education sector

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Abstract

This article addresses the underexplored issue of professional trajectories among educators of older adults within Poland's non-formal education sector. Based on a qualitative analysis of 17 in-depth interviews, three distinct entry models into the profession were identified: adaptive, pragmatic, and mission-driven. The trajectories of the educators proved to be diverse, non-linear, and often shaped by external factors, chance events, or personal experiences, rather than long-term career planning. The study also highlights the absence of formal qualifications, fragmented institutional support, irregular employment conditions, and ambivalences regarding professional identity. It expands the existing knowledge about this group and points to the need for establishing frameworks of support, training systems, and formal recognition of this profession within educational policy, particularly in the context of an aging society.

Keywords: older adult educator, non-formal education, professional trajectories, professional identity

Introduction

Non-formal education for older adults, implemented within local communities, is experiencing dynamic development both in Poland and globally. This trend reflects the growing importance of educational activation in public policy responses to an aging population. In 2023, over 151,000 older adults in Poland participated in educational and cultural activities organised by Universities of the Third Age (U3A), cultural centers, senior clubs, and other public and private institutions (GUS, 2023; MRiPS, 2023). These institutions offer a wide range of activities, from computer and language courses to artistic, sports, and recreational classes (Szarota, 2022).

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Individuals with diverse professional pathways are behind the implementation of these activities. Although the data is fragmented (Hansen, 2021), it shows that the teaching workforce in senior education – includes teachers, sports instructors, therapists, entertainers, artists, university lecturers, health professionals, as well as passionate professionals and volunteers (e.g., de Maio Nascimento & Giannouli, 2019; Formosa, 2014; Gołdys et al., 2012; Jun & Evans, 2014; Kops, 2020). Despite widespread recognition of their role in non-formal education and their importance in ensuring the quality of educational programs (Jacob et al., 2023), knowledge about who older adult educators are, how they enter the profession, and how they construct their professional identities remains incomplete and fragmented (Jacob et al., 2023; Malec-Rawiński & Bartosz, 2017).

Their roles are not clearly defined, and the terminology used in the literature – such as *teacher*, *trainer*, *instructor*, *facilitator*, or *leader* – reflects affiliations with different institutional traditions and work styles (Escuder-Mollon et al., 2014; Hallam et al., 2016; Jacob et al., 2023; Kops, 2020; Luppi, 2009; Sobral & Sobral, 2021; Szarota, 2022). This study adopts the term *educator*, which emphasises both the professional and structured nature of educational activities, as well as the necessity for psychosocial and didactic competencies (Gierszewski & Kluzowicz, 2021; Jacob et al., 2023; Malec-Rawiński & Bartosz, 2017; Szarota, 2022). The lack of standardised terminology may indicate the difficulty of clearly delineating this group as a distinct occupational category. In order to function as practitioner-educators, these individuals continually negotiate their roles and identities within fluid and often informal contexts (Malec-Rawiński & Bartosz, 2017; Jacob et al., 2023). Similarly, the very concept of *adult educator* as a profession remains elusive (Bierema, 2011; Lattke, 2016).

Previous studies – both domestic and international – have primarily focused on the description of courses, participants' needs, and the required competencies of educators (Jacob et al., 2023; Kops, 2020; Koutska, 2024; Lan et al., 2016; Szarota, 2022). While these studies provide valuable insights, they predominantly concentrate on instrumental aspects – didactic methods, curriculum content, and sets of competencies. Rarely have questions been raised regarding the educators themselves – their motivations, professional trajectories, or the ways in which they assume their roles.

Particularly noteworthy in this context are the studies by Hallam et al. (2016), which are among the few that attempted to capture both the motivations of educators and their professional preparation. These studies demonstrated that many educators lack formal pedagogical training, and their career choices result from complex determinants – personal, institutional, and financial. However, it is important to emphasise that this analysis focused solely on British music facilitators, which limits the potential for generalisation to other areas of older adult education.

In the Polish context, data on U3A (Gołdys et al., 2012; GUS, 2023) indicate the significant role of volunteerism. The work of educators is often casual, project-based, or unpaid, which makes it particularly vulnerable to employment instability, multitasking, and the necessity of redefining their role. This situation raises questions about the qualification standards of staff and the uniformity of competence levels (Gierszewski & Kluzowicz, 2021; Gołdys et al., 2012; Malec-Rawiński & Bartosz, 2017). At the same time, this picture does not take into account individuals working in cultural centers, day support centers, or senior centers. Despite the growing number of studies on the institutional aspects of senior education, the educators themselves remain at the margins of scholarly reflection.

Some earlier analyses have addressed the career paths of adult educators, exploring the formation of their professional identity and their decisions to engage in educational

practice (e.g., Andersson et al., 2012; Maier-Gutheil & Hof, 2011; Rushbrook et al., 2014). Although these studies effectively illustrate the complexity and dynamics of entering the profession, they do not directly concern educators specialising in work with older adults. Nevertheless, they emphasise the need to consider individual trajectories and the specificity of the context of practice – not only formal qualifications but also personal experiences, aspirations, and working conditions (Lattke, 2016). They also highlight the importance of turning points, events that initiate career decisions, and the influence of significant individuals from the surrounding environment (Rushbrook et al., 2014). An approach combining structural and individual perspectives further enables the capture of tensions between systemic expectations toward educators and their personal resources, beliefs, and institutional conditions (Rushbrook et al., 2014). However, such a perspective has not yet been applied to those working with older adults. It remains unclear how they enter this field of activity, what motivates them to undertake this work, and what their career plans are.

The aim of the present study is therefore an in-depth analysis of the career paths of older adult educators, focused on understanding their choices, motivations, and the conditions influencing their engagement and continuation in this field. In doing so, the study contributes to a broader discourse on the professionalisation of educators working with older adults in Poland, shedding light on a professional group that remains poorly recognised.

Method

The study was qualitative in nature and based on semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, following the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This procedure made it possible to capture individual perspectives and experiences of educators working with older adults, while maintaining a structure that enabled data comparison. The use of semi-structured interviews was intended to balance two dimensions – on the one hand, allowing participants to engage in free biographical reflection, and on the other, focusing on key thematic areas related to their professional trajectories and identities.

Selection and context

Seventeen individuals working in ten senior-focused institutions located in central Poland were recruited for the study. The respondents varied in age, level of education, length of experience working with older adults (ranging from six months to over twenty years), and prior professional backgrounds. The recruitment followed a purposive sampling strategy, aiming for maximum variation in order to capture a broad spectrum of motivations, entry pathways into the profession, and various models of combining educational work with other occupational activities. Table 1 below presents the basic information about the participants.

Table 1. Characteristics of participants (n=17) (author's table)

Participant pseudonym	**Gender**	**Age**	**Education**	**Work experience**	**Type of institution/ location**	**Type of activities**
ADAM	M	54	Higher: Pedagogy	10	Community integration centre at the city office, e-senior program, metropolitan area	IT courses, 2 groups, twice a week for 2 hours each; in addition, a supervisor in an open-access computer lab, also provides individual consultations
EWA	F	37	Higher: Pedagogy	3	Senior club at a social assistance centre, town with 50,000 inhabitants	Integration activities, once a week for 4 hours
ALEKSANDER	M	30	Higher: English studies	1	Cultural centre, metropolitan area	English language courses, 3 groups, once a week for 60 minutes
ANDRZEJ	M	42	Higher: History, postgraduate Library Science	1	Senior club in a housing cooperative, town with 30,000 inhabitants	Integration activities, once a week for 4 hours
MARTYNA	F	36	Secondary: Administrative	4	Recreational and active holidays for 60+ individuals, holiday resort, town with 20,000 inhabitants	Leisure and integration animation, daily for 6-8 hours
MARTA	F	53	Higher: Visual artist	9	Senior club at a cultural centre, town with 30,000 inhabitants	Handicraft classes, once a week for approximately 2 hours; additionally, a club supervisor

AGATA	F	64	Secondary: General	21	Village women's circle, rural area	Folk ensemble, once a week for 1.5 hours
OLA	F	26	Higher: Artistic education in music	1	Cultural centre, metropolitan area	Singing classes, 1 group, once a week for 1.5 hours
GABRYSIA	F	23	Higher: Psychology	1	Senior club at a social assistance centre, town with 50,000 inhabitants	Zumba classes, 1 group, once a week for 1 hour
MAGDA	F	33	Higher: Pedagogy, Post-secondary: Occupational therapist	6	Cultural centre, metropolitan area	Art classes, 3 times a week for 1.5 hours, 4 groups
ANNA	F	31	Higher: Theatre arts	1.5	Senior club at a housing cooperative, metropolitan area	Theatre classes, once a week for 1-2 hours; additionally, a coordinator
WOJTEK	M	30	Secondary: IT technician	1	Senior club at the city office, town with 50,000 inhabitants	Computer course, once a week for 1.5 hours
MICHAŁ	M	36	Higher: Public health	5	Active senior zone in a cultural centre, town with 50,000 inhabitants	Computer classes, once a week for 1 hour; additionally, assistant coordinator
MARLENA	F	28	Higher: Pedagogy	2	Senior club at a cultural centre, town with 30,000 inhabitants	Fitness classes, 1 group, once a week for 1 hour
ANTOSIA	F	41	Higher: Pedagogy	2	Senior club at a social assistance centre, town with 50,000 inhabitants	Creative thinking workshops, 1 group, once a week for 1.5 hours

EWELINA	F	65	Secondary: Accounting	3	Senior club at the city office, town with 50,000 inhabitants	Integration activities, 3 times a week for 3 hours; additionally, a supervisor
ZBYSZEK	M	37	Higher: Pedagogy	1	Senior club at the city office, town with 50,000 inhabitants	Integration activities, once a week for 4 hours, 1 group

Data collection

The interviews were conducted using a pre-prepared thematic guide, which included questions about, among others, the participants' beginnings in working with older adults, motivations for engaging in such work, previous professional experiences, and plans regarding the continuation of their educational activities. The guide was informed by a literature review on older adult education and the role of educators in cultural institutions. The interviews, which lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, were audio-recorded in their entirety and fully transcribed. The flexible structure of the conversations allowed for the elicitation of individual professional narratives and the identification of internal tensions, transitions, and motivational contradictions, forming the basis for an in-depth thematic analysis.

Although biographical and narrative elements appeared in the participants' responses, the aim of the study was not to reconstruct complete autobiographies. Instead, the focus was on fragments of personal experience that gave meaning to their professional trajectories. Thus, the collected data are thematic and contextual in nature – they reflect the participants' personal experiences and reflections while remaining embedded within the structure of the interview guide-based study.

Ethical considerations

Participants were thoroughly informed about the aims and procedures of the study, and their participation was entirely voluntary. They were assured anonymity, the right to withdraw at any stage, and the right to refrain from answering any specific questions. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and served as the basis for conducting the interviews in accordance with ethical standards.

Data analysis

The analysis followed the thematic approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which enabled both the identification of recurring patterns and the exploration of the diversity of participants' experiences. The process involved repeated reading of the transcripts, coding, grouping codes into thematic categories, and conceptualising broader analytical themes. The text was divided into segments, which were assigned to preliminary thematic categories. These categories were then clustered into broader themes. In the final stage, the themes were named and described in detail.

The themes not only address the research questions but also reveal connections between life experiences, motivations, professional identity, and the institutional context of the participants' activities. Selected quotes serve an illustrative function, giving voice to the participants and deepening the understanding of the phenomena described.

Results

Building on the thematic analysis, three main axes of meaning were identified: (1) pathways into the educator role and prior professional experiences, (2) meanings ascribed to working with older adults, and (3) plans for continuation and reflections on professional status. These axes organise the following presentation of findings.

How do educators perceive working with older adults – as a primary or secondary profession?

Participants' accounts portray a complex picture of work with older adults – most often described as a supplementary activity carried out alongside other forms of employment, and less frequently as a main professional path. Underlying this are both structural factors (e.g., work under mandate contracts, fragmented funding, multitasking) and personal narratives in which working with seniors holds varying degrees of importance – from a marginal role to a central element of professional identity.

A fragmented sense of professional identity as the norm

For most respondents, senior education does not represent the core of their career. It often takes the form of a few hours per week and does not involve full immersion in the life of the institution. Wojtek, an IT course instructor, states frankly: 'It's hard to say I work there [at the senior club] as a regular employee. I go there once a week to teach. [...] On a daily basis, I work as helpdesk support in a finance company.' His statement reveals not only the limited time commitment but also a discontinuity in professional identity – the lack of daily contact with the facility and its organisational culture results in a sense of temporariness, even alienation: "I don't really know how the club operates because I'm here more like an instructor than permanent staff.' A similar sense of detachment is expressed by Ewa, a social integration animator at a senior club: 'I'm simply not there on a daily basis.' Her professional identity is dispersed, oscillating between her role as a schoolteacher and an employee of a social assistance center. Although she sees herself as socially engaged, she feels more like a 'mercenary,' emphasising that she views her involvement more as occasional support for the institution rather than being its integral part.

For Magda, a preschool teacher and art therapist, art courses for older adults are just one aspect of her instructional work at a cultural center. Her narrative highlights professional continuity with children, and views working with seniors as an additional, albeit satisfying, pathway. Despite long-term involvement at the cultural center, she notes that these are 'commissions,' engaging her three afternoons a week with various age groups, while her 'full-time job' and source of professional stability lie elsewhere.

The fragmented nature of employment also shapes professional identity. Respondents rarely refer to themselves as 'educators,' which reflects the low standing of this role in their professional self-conception. Andrzej emphasises: 'I work mostly full-time in a school library – this is my second job,' thus underlining that his primary income

comes from a different occupation. Aleksander – a language teacher at a language school and a public school – admits that he also 'picks up extra hours' at a cultural center. Courses for seniors are a 'new thing' introduced experimentally. Although involving only three participant groups and three hours per week, this activity remains marginal in his professional life: 'This isn't my main occupation.'

Similarly, Marta, despite having run handicraft courses for nine years and officially acting as a senior club supervisor, also points to the fragmented nature of her involvement, the multiplicity of professional roles, and the peripheral status of this activity:

> I work one-quarter time. In addition to working with seniors, I also work at the cultural center. For years I've run courses for various age groups. I've worked with seniors at the club for nine years. Here, I focus only on seniors.

Although she emphasises institutional stability at the cultural center, she clearly reveals the dual nature of her professional involvement, where work with seniors is only one part of her broader educational and cultural activities – and a source of modest additional income.

Although Adam and Michal both work in the same institution, where they also teach older people, they still consider this educational part of their work to be secondary. Michal notes, 'Besides that, I also work in administration at the cultural centre', which is his main job, suggesting that his involvement in education is complementary. Similarly, Adam, who leads computer courses as part of the 'e-senior' program, describes his work as part of a broader role, since he also manages a computer lab accessible to all age groups.

Respondents' statements indicate that the peripheral nature of work with older people is not only due to the conditions of employment, but also to its place in the broader scheme of professional roles. These activities are sometimes important, but they are rarely a core part of one's identity – more often they function on the margins of everyday professional activity.

Work with older adults as a primary area of professional engagement: Exceptions

Against the backdrop of the dominant pattern, a few respondents stand out for having made work with older adults the central focus of their professional engagement. Martyna, an activity facilitator during organised retreats, explains: 'I work full time, I'm here every day, available to them.' Her account is one of the few where the language of continuity, full responsibility, and daily presence emerges. Similarly, Anna, a theatre instructor and coordinator in a large social animation center, states: 'I do many things. I'm generally responsible for the cultural life of our housing estate residents. Besides that, I coordinate the senior club, which is a main part of my work, and I also conduct theatre classes there.' Although her work involves multiple target groups, older adults are at the center of her professional routine. Despite juggling various roles and commitments outside the institution, she describes her involvement as a 'combo' – a complex yet coherent narrative of socio-cultural engagement.

In these cases, professional identity is built around role coherence and consistent presence. A sense of continuity, greater autonomy, and stronger institutional anchoring becomes visible. This indicates that full-time employment with older adults is indeed possible – albeit rare – and requires specific conditions: large-scale facilities, comprehensive programs, and coordinating responsibilities.

Does age influence the decision to work with older adults?

The respondents' age at the time they began working with older adults ranged from 22 to 62, suggesting that engagement in older adult education is not confined to any particular stage of a professional career. These differences reflect broader biographical trajectories, revealing diverse motivations, entry points, and outlooks for the future.

Participants who began working with older adults early in their careers (e.g., Gabrysia, Ola, Aleksander, Marlena) often view this engagement as a space for professional experimentation – a formative experience as they seek their place in the labor market.

A markedly different path is observed in mature professionals entering older adult education, such as Ewelina, who took up this work after concluding her primary career. For her, this engagement is not merely a new chapter but a recontextualisation of earlier caregiving and professional roles.

Those who began working with older adults in their thirties or forties (e.g., Antosia, Andrzej, Ewa, Martyna, Michał, Marta) frequently interpret this involvement as a redirection of professional energy, stemming from personal reflection, shifting priorities, or life changes affecting close relatives. Most of these individuals had already achieved a degree of professional and personal stability that enabled them to embrace new challenges.

Thus, the decision to work with older adults may result from both external circumstances and an internal redefinition of one's professional role. While age is not a determining factor, it serves as a context within which particular life strategies and social sensitivities are shaped.

How long do educators work with older adults?

As with age, seniority in working with older adults does not easily lend itself to a uniform classification.

Although most respondents have less than five years of experience, their narratives reveal a more nuanced picture – not only in terms of duration but also in the way this work is experienced and valued.

For many (e.g., Zbyszek, Ola, Aleksander), less than two years of experience does not imply a lack of professional competence, but rather that working with this age group is still a relatively new domain. In these cases, a shorter tenure serves as an initiatory phase – a first contact that may evolve into long-term commitment or remain a temporary episode.

More rooted experiences are found among those with 3-5 years of experience (e.g., Ewa, Martyna), who are beginning to develop a sense of competence and their own methodology. They describe their work with a growing sense of agency and impact. A longer tenure (5-10 years), especially when coupled with original program development, becomes a space for both routine and the deliberate cultivation of specialisation.

The longest tenure – over 20 years – is represented by Agata, who almost exclusively engages in this work as a volunteer. Her experience transcends the category of 'professional' in the institutional sense, yet it testifies to sustained and committed social involvement in a rural setting, focused on preserving local cultural traditions.

Across this spectrum, clear qualitative differences emerge: novelty does not always mean lack of experience, and long-term practice does not necessarily equate to reflexivity. What appears to drive sustained engagement is rather the degree of identification with the

role of educator, the sense of influence on the community, and the opportunity for autonomous activity design.

What paths lead to the role of educator for older adults? Career trajectories, transitions, and decisions

The professional biographies of individuals who lead educational courses for older adults show that entering this role is not the result of a single scenario, but rather the outcome of diverse and multi-step pathways – often unexpected and repeatedly redefined. In this analysis, we examine how these trajectories unfold, what motivations lie behind them, and how professional and life experiences have influenced the choice to work with older people.

'It started with a substitution…': Side jobs and exploration

For some respondents, stepping into the role of senior educator happened by chance or on a temporary basis. Ola, a vocal coach, recalls: 'It started with a one-time substitution at a community center, and then they offered me regular courses.' She notes that she accepted the additional group only because it didn't conflict with her schedule, and she saw it as an opportunity to enrich her professional experience. Similarly, Wojtek – a trained IT technician working daily in a financial company – was 'drawn' into senior education by a friend: 'One day, he told me they needed someone to run a classes.… He suggested I try, and everyone liked it.' Initially, Wojtek treated it as an additional source of income: 'It's not big money, but I feel like I'm doing something really nice and fulfilling, and I enjoy it.' What began as 'accidental' part-time work turned into a conscious commitment that allowed him to fulfill values, develop skills, and explore new professional areas.

Younger participants, such as Gabrysia and Marlena, also started working in senior centers due to organisational opportunities, such as an institution expanding its offerings. Gabrysia, a Zumba instructor, admits: 'It wasn't my choice, but I'm glad I tried.' Similarly, Marlena, a fitness instructor, emphasises that the 'opportunity' was supposed to be just a temporary phase, but over time she realised she could combine her passion with her work.

Although in these cases the initial impulse was external, for many respondents working with the elderly has become a new field of professional expression, an important, though still peripheral one. Coincidence can also set in motion a process of gradual transformation of incidental involvement into conscious professional activity.

From working with children and youth to educating older adults

For a significant portion of the respondents, working with seniors was a continuation of previous educational roles – particularly those involving children and adolescents. This applies to individuals such as Zbyszek, Gabrysia, Ewa, Antosia, Aleksander, Andrzej, Ola, Marlena, and Magda, whose education and work experience stem from fields such as pedagogy, early childhood education, cultural animation, or art therapy.

Magda, a teacher, simultaneously worked at a preschool and conducted art courses for children and youth at a local cultural center. When the opportunity arose to work with older adults, she saw it as an extension of her pedagogical toolkit, not a shift. She clearly emphasises her passion for working with people and her desire to use and further develop her skills in a new area.

Aleksander and Antosia similarly exhibit continuity – both have pedagogical backgrounds and experience with younger age groups, and seniors became a new field for professional expression rather than a break with the past. This path shows that senior education often results from a smooth transition, not a radical change.

Turning points, career changes, and professional reorientation

For other respondents, the decision to start working with seniors was clearly tied to a need for change – stemming from burnout, dissatisfaction with previous work, or desire to redefine their professional role.

Antosia, a teacher and creative thinking coach, at age 39, consciously decided to 'try something new. Her previous work with younger groups no longer offered enough room for growth. She hasn't given up working with children but notes that educating older adults provides her more freedom in designing lessons and more opportunities to pursue both new passions and business goals.

Similarly, Aleksander, who runs courses at a community center as a secondary source of income, sees senior education as an opportunity that opened the door to a new audience. For Zbyszek, also a teacher, taking on such work in midlife is a way to find greater job satisfaction.

Adam, an IT instructor, left teaching 10 years ago and moved to a city-funded computer lab, gaining a stable job. His transition was smooth because before radically starting a new professional chapter, he was already involved in educational programs for various groups funded by grants. Engagement in senior education was not his original career goal but a life opportunity.

Zbyszek, who had previously linked his career to the service industry, began studying pedagogy after the birth of his child, seeing many benefits and new opportunities in the teaching profession. Working with older adults became a stage in his newly redefined professional path. Although his journey as an educator began with younger groups, the next stage – another 'test' of his skills and sensitivity – turned out to be a senior club.

Continuing an earlier path: Passion, profession, and continuity

Some respondents – like Michał and Magda – present a completely different model: senior education as a natural continuation of a career path, aligned with prior education, passions, and experiences. Michał, the manager of a senior center, emphasises: 'The idea for this profession came to me during my studies. It started with a few groups, and now I run around 70 courses weekly.' His story clearly shows educational and professional coherence – studies, internships, family and professional observations that all come together. Similarly, Magda – a therapeutic and pedagogical professional – moves smoothly from working with children to working with seniors, pointing to the universality of art therapy methods and the continuity of her skills.

Another interesting category includes individuals from artistic sectors. In Anna's case, the career change is more complex. Working with older adults was not her main goal but fits into broader social and artistic engagement throughout her career. 'I've learned a lot about working with people,' she notes, emphasising that her work with people experiencing homelessness, disabilities, and addiction provided a strong foundation for her current role and empathetic approach to older participants. Her career naturally evolved through transitions between various people-focused fields (while maintaining skill continuity).

Close relationships with older people as an impulse – care, empathy, identification

For Andrzej, a history teacher and later a school librarian, a turning point was caring for his mother after her retirement: 'I was looking for something for her, because retirement was a tragedy. […] That's when I first encountered such a place, and surprisingly, I stayed.' In his case, the decision was not strategic, but rather the result of concern for a parent, institutional changes (job reduction), and an unexpected job offer. Entering the role of educator was thus the result of a biographical constellation of circumstances in which personal sensitivity and life situation created space for an entirely new professional role.

Ewelina, an accountant by profession, worked for many years as a casual carer on social welfare. After retiring, she became involved in senior education. She believes that in her new role, she is more of a community initiator than a formal educator. She points out that as a senior herself, she shares generational experiences with the participants: 'I'm a senior myself, so I understand their needs.' She sees her entry into this professional sphere as a natural transition. Her professional identity is not ruptured but reinterpreted – her previous experiences (in social work), reinforced by empathy and a willingness to share, become the foundation for authentic relationships.

Michał, in turn, points to both his university internship in a care home and family observations: 'Grandpa in front of the TV, grandma too,' 'they didn't do anything in their free time.' These experiences, combined with academic knowledge, shaped his belief that his role goes beyond service provision – it is a form of social intervention addressing issues like loneliness and lack of activity.

Agata, active in a rural environment, notes the impact of local demographic context: 'In our village, young people move to the city, so it's just older people who stay.' She explains that her involvement in senior education does not stem from formal job responsibilities, but rather from the natural presence of seniors in daily life.

Antosia, fascinated by cognitive training, identifies caregiving for relatives as a source of reflection: 'Those moments showed me how important it is to fill time with meaningful activities.' In her case, the impulse was personal observation, although she notes that the decision to continue in this field also had a pragmatic dimension: expanding her professional offerings and a source of income.

In these stories, biographical closeness to older adults leads to a deep identification with their situation – often crossing the boundary of professional distance. Education becomes an extension of personal care, not just the execution of institutional tasks.

Civic-mindedness and local embeddedness

For some respondents, involvement in senior education does not stem from professional necessity but from a deeply rooted need to act for the benefit of the local community. Agata, a long-time volunteer, does not see her activity as work but as simply being in the world: 'I really enjoy being active and taking initiative. […] It's pure pleasure, not work.'

A similar attitude is shown by Ewelina and Marta – even though they are formally employed, their narratives are driven by a sense of mission and civic engagement. In their case, relationships with course participants are based more on neighborhood and generational ties than on formal structures. Thus, the identity of an educator is formed through action and relation to the community, rather than institutional legitimacy.

Senior education in this light becomes less of a profession and more of a form of presence in the local social space – a way to maintain relationships, stay active after retirement, and find personal satisfaction.

What are educators' career plans and attitudes toward work in the sector?

An analysis of respondents' statements reveals that decisions regarding continued engagement in the field of education for older adults are complex and ambivalent. These decisions are shaped by both individual aspirations and institutional working conditions, levels of job satisfaction, as well as a sense of meaning and belonging. Within these diverse narratives, there is a noticeable tendency to reflectively weigh professional choices in light of daily experience, biographical life stage, and available alternatives.

Among those who express a desire to remain in the sector are Marta, Martyna, Magda, and Adam. Despite often working under unstable conditions (e.g., lacking permanent contracts), they report a strong sense of attachment to their current workplaces and to the participants they work with. Even in the face of low remuneration, they value the stability and meaning derived from interpersonal relationships. Their professional identity is hybrid – they develop across multiple domains simultaneously. Nevertheless, they articulate an intention to continue working in their current environment and do not anticipate career changes. Their broad perception of their professional role leads them to seek growth within the cultural and educational sector, without limiting themselves exclusively to older adult education.

A different case is Michał, the only respondent employed full-time in a senior-focused institution. Although educational activities are secondary to his organisational duties, he demonstrates a commitment to deepening his knowledge and competencies – completing courses in andragogy and occupational therapy. Similarly, Marta, a visual artist, notes that her postgraduate studies in gerontology were not institutionally mandated but undertaken on her own initiative. She emphasises that she considers working with seniors as part of her long-term career plan.

Ewelina and Agata view their continued involvement as a form of civic participation. Their accounts are rooted in an ethos of 'being needed' and a sense of belonging to the local community. They clearly state that they have no plans to leave their roles, as long as health and circumstances allow them to continue – for as long as possible. Ewa, Zbyszek, and Andrzej – although not employed full-time with older adults – do not intend to abandon this activity, even if their involvement has no clearly defined timeframe.

Some educators perceive the sector as offering potential for professional development. Although their current roles are part-time or temporary, they view the field as a possible future career path. Wojtek, previously employed in the IT sector, is considering a career change. He plans to settle permanently in a new location to overcome stagnation in his previous work, in which he says he felt 'stuck': 'For a year now, I've seen that there's some potential here for me,' he says, adding, 'I'm even thinking about looking for another place where I could run similar courses.' His identification with this new path is growing along with his experience and increasing satisfaction in the role. Similarly, Aleksander, who leads courses within a ne wly launched senior education program, hopes for continuity: 'Discussions are underway to make these courses a permanent feature at our institution.' Both express a clear desire to turn this 'experiment' into a sustainable career direction, while also voicing concerns about the lack of institutional guarantees and financial insecurity.

Marlena and Antosia also express a desire to expand their professional activity in this area. Marlena sees movement-based classes as 'a chance to gain a foothold in the profession' and is considering obtaining additional qualifications. While she has no concrete long-term plans, she identifies a niche in the market that motivates her to pursue this direction. Antosia plans to develop her own program for cognitive training workshops incorporating elements of art therapy. She states, 'I feel like this is the perfect moment.'

She perceives this step as a move toward professional independence and plans to extend her competencies in methods for activating older adults.

However, not all participants intend to remain in this role. Anna, despite being employed full-time, expresses reservations: ‘It’s not entirely within my area of interest, I must admit. The topic is interesting, but I’m still unsure if I want to continue down this path.’ She also confesses, ‘I’m not sure if I’m starting to feel stuck here,’ revealing a tension between team loyalty and personal aspirations. Although she enjoys considerable autonomy, Anna sees her job at the community center more as a source of stability than fulfillment.

A similar attitude is shared by Gabrysia and Ola, who do not see their future in this role or institution. Ola openly expresses frustration with working conditions: ‘I don’t know if I’ll continue doing this,’ emphasising that ‘you can’t make a living working in culture’ and that the need to ‘chase hours’ across multiple institutions hampers her engagement. Gabrysia plans to focus on developing skills in dance movement therapy and psychology. She views her current work as a temporary solution within her broader career trajectory.

Job satisfaction plays a significant role in decisions about continuing this work. Michał speaks of seniors as a group who ‘know how to be grateful for every little thing.’ Magda, Ewelina, and Marta also stress the importance of relationships and the sense of impact on participants’ lives. They frequently mention a sense of meaning and reciprocity in these relationships – the awareness that their work is not anonymous but recognised and felt by those they serve. According to them, satisfaction often serves as a form of compensation for a lack of job stability or financial shortcomings.

Nonetheless, alongside positive experiences, there are challenges that may weaken motivation. Wojtek points to the irregular attendance of participants: ‘Sometimes they lack consistency,’ Anna highlights ‘negative and demanding’ attitudes among some seniors, while Martyna notes a lack of dynamism: ‘Working with seniors is calmer, but sometimes I miss the pace and energy that come with working with youth.’ There are also infrastructural and institutional challenges. Wojtek mentions a lack of equipment, and Andrzej points to difficulties in balancing this work with other responsibilities.

These narratives indicate that remaining in this role depends not only on passion or a sense of mission, but equally on real opportunities for development, the quality of institutional support, and a subjective cost-benefit evaluation. The career paths of educators working with older adults emerge as a space of ongoing negotiation – not of ready-made choices, but of dynamically formed responses to evolving conditions and personal needs.

Discussion

This study offers a significant contribution to the still rarely explored reflection on the professional group of educators working with older adults in the non-formal education sector. It is one of the first national papers attempting to capture the complexity of motivations, entry points, individual trajectories, and determinants of professional decisions made by teaching staff – individuals who perform this work on a daily basis.

In line with previous research on adult educators (Hansen, 2021; Ioannou, 2023), educators of older adults also constitute a heterogeneous group – a professional mosaic diverse in terms of age, experience, and formal preparation (e.g., Jacob et al., 2023; Luppi, 2009). Most Polish educators are women, often with higher education and experience working with other age groups. This profession attracts people of various ages – from young professionals to those nearing the end of their careers (Malec-Rawiński & Bartosz,

2017). Education for older adults is rarely their main form of professional activity; it is often an addition to other work, treated as an episodic or hobby-like activity, or as a supplementary source of income.

The career paths of educators working with older adults also reveal a complex mosaic of motivations, decisions, and biographical transitions. The study's findings allowed us to distinguish three models of entering the profession: adaptive, pragmatic, and mission-driven. While this typology is not exhaustive, it organises the empirical material and enables interpretation of educators' diverse biographies, pointing to dominant patterns and mechanisms of professional engagement. Identifying these patterns helps better grasp the logic behind their career decisions.

The **adaptive model** pertains to educators who began working with older adults in response to external circumstances – such as the need to fill a staffing gap, institutional reorganisation, or a temporary substitution offer. Their decision was not the result of previous career planning but rather a response to organisational needs, unexpected life changes, or a consequence of seizing a professional 'opportunity'. This aligns with observations by Hallam et al. (2016, p. 6), who described the 'headhunting' of educators in the context of staffing shortages. It also parallels the 'Plan B' described by Andersson et al. (2012, p. 111), referring to a career direction shift due to labor market realities or other events. This path is also confirmed by Rushbrook et al. (2014), who discussed external pressures. Although adaptability is often a survival strategy, it does not exclude the development of commitment – some participants discovered new meaning in this work and chose to stay in the profession longer.

The **pragmatic model** includes those educators who take up work with older adults as a rational choice that complements other forms of professional activity – due to an additional source of income, the opportunity to use prior competencies, flexible working hours, or a convenient location. Their decisions are well-considered and result from active career management – balancing competencies, working time, and finances. Many educators lead only a few classes per week, which forces multitasking, employment in multiple institutions simultaneously, and combining various income sources (e.g., working in schools, cultural institutions). Flexibility, resource optimisation, and the ability to juggle roles are characteristic of this group, consistent with findings by Rushbrook et al. (2014), who emphasised the ability to operate in conditions of professional uncertainty. Often, this is a result of an evolution of previous activities – a natural, 'organic' entry into new roles (Brown et al., 2012). Such career management strategies were also described by Hallam et al. (2016). From the facilitators' perspective, working in senior centers turned out to be a flexible module, allowing the combination of many roles while aligning with existing skills. It is worth noting that the motivations of educators in this group may evolve – from purely instrumental toward those linked with a sense of satisfaction and value realisation. Pragmatism, therefore, does not exclude engagement but requires navigating between multiple commitments. However, the 'dual-professionality' typical of this model may also result in a sense of alienation or limited institutional identification.

The **mission-driven model**, although the rarest, is characterised by the strongest professional identification. Educators in this category are guided by a deep sense of purpose, social commitment, and a strong belief in the value of working with older adults. Their motivations are often linked to personal experiences, family history, or a desire to share their own resources with others. Working with older adults is seen as a calling – frequently situated at the intersection of professional work and volunteerism – providing a sense of community and fulfillment. Similar mechanisms have been described by Hallam et al. (2016), who emphasised the opportunity to share one's passion as a key

driver for entering the profession. Research by Malec-Rawiński and Bartosz (2017) also highlights that empathy, the need to share experience, satisfaction derived from relationships with course participants, and a sense of purpose play significant roles in the decision to engage in work with seniors. It is important to note that the mission-driven approach does not always come with formal recognition or professional stability, which can create tensions between commitment and the lack of institutional support.

Each of the described professional trajectories – adaptive, pragmatic, and mission-driven – reflects a broader trend of nonlinear, multi-phase, and often precarious career paths typical of the contemporary adult education sector. The study's findings confirm earlier observations by Rushbrook et al. (2014) and Brown et al. (2012), noting that entry into this profession rarely results from long-term career planning. More often, it is a response to external circumstances or life turning points that redefine personal and professional priorities. The process of 'becoming' an educator in this field is shaped by learning through practice and the gradual accumulation of experience, rather than by the consistent execution of a predetermined professional development path (Acomi et al., 2021).

The study also reveals important structural features of the working environment of senior educators – common to both the Polish and broader European contexts – such as employment fragmentation, the dominance of temporary work forms, and low levels of institutional embeddedness (Hansen, 2021; Ioannou, 2023; Nuissl, 2009). Employment is often based on civil law contracts or project-based collaboration, lacking long-term stability.

As in previous studies (Hallam et al., 2016; Koutska, 2024), most respondents in this research did not possess formal qualifications for working with older adults. Their professional preparedness was most often the result of experience with other age groups and informal learning, which further confirms the absence of a clear path to professionalisation in this area (Ioannou, 2023). While some universities offer specialisations in gerontology or andragogy, these initiatives remain fragmented and uncoordinated with national education policies concerning the training of educators in the non-formal sector (Chabior et al., 2021; Jakimiuk, 2020).

In contrast to some Western European countries (e.g., Spain and Italy), in Poland, access to the profession of senior educator remains open, unregulated, and dependent on local employment practices (Acomi et al., 2021; Ioannou, 2023). This profession is not formally defined in legal regulations nor subject to qualification requirements, resulting in dispersed competency standards and limited development opportunities. Consequently, the socio-professional status of this group remains ambiguous (Acomi et al., 2021; Chabior et al., 2021).

From a broader analytical perspective, this study not only reveals the diversity of individual career paths among senior educators but, more importantly, highlights their entanglement in systemic deficiencies: the lack of professional formalisation, inconsistencies in recruitment mechanisms, and limited frameworks for skills development. This points to the need for a renewed perspective on the role of the educator in non-formal education and a deeper reflection on how institutions and public policy can better support the professionalisation of this essential, yet still underappreciated, occupational group.

Research limitations

This study is based on the experiences of 17 practitioners working in ten senior centers managed by local governments, cultural institutions, social welfare centers, and housing

communities. Only one participant was employed in the commercial sector (tourism services). The exclusive focus on public programs limits the generalisability of the findings to a broader range of services and types of activities. A deeper understanding and more detailed analysis could be achieved by increasing the sample size and including a wider diversity of research contexts, such as various types of activities and their specific characteristics.

Conclusion

This study offers a new perspective on the professional situation of senior educators in Poland, shedding light on their career trajectories, motivations, and work within a sector that – despite its growing importance – remains poorly recognised and institutionally undefined. The collected empirical material shows that the career paths of senior educators are more diverse, dynamic, and context-dependent than previous adult education literature has suggested.

Senior education is not currently a clearly defined or structured career path. Work in this field often results from incidental entry into the profession, adaptive strategies, and personal commitment. There is a lack of coherent institutional frameworks and formal support mechanisms, and educators operate at the intersection of multiple professional identities.

The study provides an analytical framework that can serve as a foundation for more in-depth research on learning facilitators for older adults – both in Poland and in a broader international context. Although the findings confirm phenomena already known from the literature (such as lack of preparation, diversity of paths, and lack of regulation), they offer insights into the challenges faced by a small group of educators working with older adults. They also highlight the urgent need to professionalise this occupational group – through public policy, academic education, and a certification system.

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