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**TOWARDS A MORE
EQUITABLE EDUCATION:
FROM RESEARCH TO CHANGE**

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INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNITIES: ADVANCING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY THROUGH COMMUNITY LEARNING

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Introduction

Senior education in Serbia has seen positive developments with the recognition of lifelong learning as a valuable concept for older adults. Universities of the Third Age (U3As) and government initiatives have played significant roles in generating educational opportunities for seniors. However, continued efforts are needed to address funding challenges, expand course offerings, and ensure equitable access to education for all seniors. While equality in senior education focuses on sameness and equal treatment, equity takes into account the diverse needs and circumstances of older learners, aiming to provide the support and resources required for their fair access to educational opportunities and benefits. Equity recognizes that fairness may require different approaches for different individuals to ensure equal access to educational benefits. This paper aims to present the educational work of the Intergenerational Volunteering Center (IVC) as an example of good practice in terms of fostering equity in educational endeavors in the field of adult and community learning.

Senior Education in Serbia Between State Support and Democratic Empowerment

At the policy level, senior education provision in Serbia is mostly promoted by the government in the form of an institutional state-supported model based on public adult

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education provision, intervention by the welfare state, and an emphasis on providing second chances and lifelong learning for all. Apart from the social care sector and its daily clubs for seniors, the most prominent representatives of this model are U3As organized by AE institutions within the non-formal sector (Medić, 2004). These stand in contrast to the democratic emancipatory model, in which democratic participation and a critical approach to education are of paramount importance to learning activities at an older age, evident in the popular form of community education provided by the IVC.

The new paradigm of intergenerational learning is linked to the concept of community education, which is characterized by active participation for the common good, social and collaborative learning, empowerment, community renewal, solidarity and social equity, cohesiveness and inclusion, active citizenship, and social capital (Kump & Jelenc Krašovec, 2014). The goal is to establish ties between the young and the old in the hope that one or both groups would benefit. This can take the form of the young helping the elderly, the elderly helping the young, or reciprocal intergenerational help or learning. Here, the community entails both similarities and differences, with a focus on relationships (Tett, 2010). According to Kump and Krašovec (2014), intergenerational learning programs have an influence on both program participants and the local community.

The IVC embodies community education by opening its door not only to older people but to all generations of learners. Its open calendar approach involves daily, weekly, and annual activities proposed by the community itself, including but not limited to drawing workshops, art colonies, and community theater. Program units cover arts, digital literacy, and recreation. Its organization is rooted in equal participation, volunteering, and providing free programs, allowing members to take on leadership roles. The IVC advocates for ecological living, adapted care, and intergenerational cooperation, thus addressing the quality of life in later years.

Lima and Guimarães (2011) explain that the institutional state-supported model sees adult education and thus senior education as a civil right and supports the integration of non-formal education into the public education system, seeing education as a means of promoting equal opportunities and chances among different age groups. According to the same authors, the democratic emancipatory model sees adult education as a sector characterized by heterogeneity and diversity, which promotes the ethical and

political dimensions of learning, with the aim of democratization, transformation of power relations, social change, and empowerment. It is often characterized by action research and participatory projects, the educational nature of action, and taking actions with a deep appreciation of collective knowledge and experience.

This study compares the two approaches to senior education and learning – U3As and the IVC – in relation to educational equity. The analytical framework employed the two approaches to contrast democratic participatory education with the institutional state-supported model, focusing on the authors’ reflections and experience in collaborating with the aforementioned organizations.

The Role of the IVC in Promoting Equity in Senior Education

Given the failure of welfare state education to offer sustainable learning for senior citizens, self-organized community centers like the IVC may represent a viable future in senior education. Community learning significantly promotes educational equity by addressing the diverse needs of senior learners. Here is how the IVC enhances educational equity:

1. Accessibility: Located in a local neighborhood, the IVC mitigates travel-related barriers, enhancing accessibility for individuals who might face difficulties traveling to distant educational institutions due to injuries, illnesses, or time constraints. Despite the U3A network’s aim to promote accessibility, the lack of adequate support has led to the stagnation and decline of newly established U3As, while centers like the IVC have managed to sustain community engagement.

2. Customized Curricula: Community-based programs like the IVC allow for curriculum co-creation and the selection of culturally relevant courses, making education more engaging for diverse learners. Unlike predefined U3A programs with a required minimum number of participants, IVC programs evolve based on participants’ expressed interests, providing a more personalized learning experience.

3. Flexible Schedules: While U3As have fixed morning schedules, the IVC offers flexible timetabling, including evening and weekend timeslots, accommodating learners with varying commitments. Despite room availability being a factor, flexibility is maintained through smaller, adaptable groups and optimizing available spaces.

4. Affordability: U3A programs aim for affordability through lower fees or financial aid. The IVC takes this a step further by offering completely free, volunteer-based programs, ensuring access for everyone and encouraging volunteer teaching. This approach removes financial barriers for the majority of the retired population, thus promoting inclusivity.

5. Lifelong Learning: By enrolling older individuals as students and offering specialized educational programs tailored to their needs, U3As have successfully achieved the fundamental objective of adult education, which is lifelong learning (Živanić, 2004). The IVC also emphasizes lifelong learning, recognizing that education is not limited to the traditional age ranges. This includes adults seeking to improve their skills or change, their family members who occasionally participate in activities, teachers who volunteer, members of the community who engage occasionally, students, and various professionals supporting the organization of programs and activities.

6. Intergenerational Learning: The IVC promotes intergenerational learning opportunities where older adults can share their wisdom and experiences with younger generations. This fosters a sense of belonging and mutual respect. At U3As, the young learn from older adults and vice versa on special occasions. Conversely, intergenerational learning at the IVC is based on reciprocity and cooperation between generations along the way.

7. Inclusivity and Diversity: Community-based education at the IVC fosters a sense of inclusivity and diversity, bringing together individuals of various ages, abilities, and backgrounds (Grummell, 2007). This promotes a more inclusive and enriching learning environment as opposed to the U3A tradition of homogeneity.

8. Local Resources: IVC members often leverage local resources, including partnerships with schools, universities, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies. These collaborations expand educational opportunities and resources available to learners. Additionally, this promotes practical skill development, which goes far beyond certain program learning outcomes.

In summary, community learning at the IVC contributes to educational equity by removing various barriers to education, customizing educational experiences, and actively engaging with the diverse needs and backgrounds of learners within a community (Sparks & Butterwick, 2004). This approach ensures that education is accessible, relevant, and inclusive, ultimately promoting equal opportunities for

all members of the community to pursue their learning aspirations. Without senior education, the world is at risk of facing the dependency and exclusion of senior citizens (Nikolić Maksić, 2006). Intergenerational learning can enable seniors to lead fulfilling lives in late adulthood and continue to play an active role in social and community development.

Keywords: intergenerational cooperation, community learning, seniors, educational equity

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