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Sense of career success in the experiences of seniors

Poczucie sukcesu zawodowego w doświadczeniach seniorów

Introduction

Work is a very important component of life. Through professional activities, people develop their personality and social competences and grow in different areas of social functioning. Professionally active individuals meet both their fundamental and higher needs. Work accompanies people for most of their lives. Today, an individual's status and social position are determined by affiliation with certain occupational groups.

The career which sets the development path for employees is an integral aspect of work (Pikuła, 2016a, pp. 161–164). As noticed by A. Paszkowska-Rogacz, in its common meaning, 'career' means the mobility of an employee who achieves higher and higher professional status (see: Paszkowska-Rogacz, 2002, pp. 13–14; Słowik, 2006, p. 82). At the same time, this combines with the fact that financial and material benefits increase with the change of positions, and this constitutes professional prestige. The professional career of each

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person is “individual and unique, and depends on many factors, including the choices made. It combines not only professional matters but also the ability to integrate professional roles with those of the person’s family, society or leisure patterns. It often expresses the personal and natural desires of each individual striving to achieve certain goals or a place in the social and professional hierarchy” (Pikuła, 2016, p. 162).

Donald E. Super points to the compatibility of a career with social roles adopted by people. He says that career is “the course of life events; the sequence of professions and other roles in life which combine the commitment to work in its overall pattern of development; the pay-as-you-go series includes, from youth to pension, the role of students, the staff or pensioners and their complementary professional, family and civic duties, and the role of employees and pensioners. Careers only exist when people pursue them; they are centered on people” (Super. . .). Career is, thus, understood as an “individual’s professional and life path, or simply a biography covering different aspects of one’s lifespan, lifelong development and maturing” (Guichard, Huteau, 2005, p. XV). As a subjective phenomenon, the career has both objective and subjective elements. “Objective elements of careers are occupational statuses, unique competences, responsibilities, roles, activities and decisions. Subjective elements are an interpretation of work-related events such as aspirations, expectations, values, needs, satisfactions and emotions related to professional experience” (Bańka, 2009, p.4). The process of continuous learning and accumulation of the career capital lasts throughout a life span. The labor market verifies them, which is reflected in employment history, the realization of professional and life goals of feeling successful or personally fulfilled.

The goal of the paper is to investigate and describe the career success of teachers from the perspective of retired professionals and identify the main categories defining career success.

Career success

Success is defined as a “positive outcome of an undertaking, triumph, achieving a goal, especially if it outruns the previous accomplishments and achievements” (Sobol, 2005, p. 973). It is a complex phenomenon which can be associated with occupational or personal life and analyzed in different contexts and from different perspectives. According to Joanna M. Michalak, “objective criteria for success are particularly difficult to establish due to the subjective

nature of this concept and its links with the individual value systems of people. Nevertheless, there are widely shared perceptions of success, especially life success, in the social consciousness. Research into life needs and aspirations, value systems, and life career patterns of members of a given society serves to explore these. The researcher may be tempted to derive relatively objective criteria of success on the basis of recognition of this common image of life success” (Michalak, 2006, p. 60).

According to Zygmunt Wiatrowski (2000, p. 375), career success is connected “first of all, with results obtained at work and achieving mastery in a profession.” Krzysztof Markowski (2003) says that success does not depend on luck, is determined genetically and is not a reward. It is the result of a series of actions, an effectively pursued goal. Not every positive outcome of every activity is a success (for example, doing shopping is not). Success occurs if something has required significant effort, creativity, endurance, time and overcoming different obstacles. In addition, as Markowski says, success is not granted, which means that one can never be completely sure that the goal set will be fully met; however, one must be convinced that it is attainable. Success is accompanied by a sense of satisfaction and fulfilment.

Career success can be understood as a “process of recognizing and accepting own professional activity” (Kupczyk, 2006, p. 11), that is, satisfaction not from a goal reached but rather from everything that has led to it. This suggests that activities taken to reach the goal can also bring satisfaction if they are accepted and considered necessary. Referring to psychological theories, Henry Murray’s personality theory is worth mentioning. It says that one of the various needs is the need for achievement, which is connected with the sphere of professional life. David McClelland was one of the first researchers who focused on this need (John W. Atkinson also investigated this problem).

The need for success or the need for satisfaction is described as “the inspiration to achieve goals which meet the excellence standards in competitive setting” (Guichard, Huteau, 2005, p. 53). It is “dreaming about a behavior which does not change one’s status but rather brings inner satisfaction from individual achievements” (Krzysztofek, Szczepański, 2002, p. 44). This is particularly important for those taking stock of their lives, i.e. the elderly who are the subject of this publication.

A strong need for success will probably be connected with the following detailed qualities:

- constant tendency to take the risk while being aware of its consequences;
- tendency to both implement and accept innovations;
- analytical evaluation of the actions taken, both effective and failed ones; tendency to achieve the best results only in competitive settings when the imagined success motivates one to even more dynamic activities (Krzysztofek, Szczepański, 2002, p. 44).

D. McClelland emphasizes the role of socio-economic correlatives of the need for achievement and lists educational methods to support the development of this need. In his opinion, the increased intensity of the need for success preceded economic growth and it was more developed among the middle and higher classes than in the lower class, which is confirmed by numerous studies on ambition. The developed need for success determines intergenerational social advancement.

It is worth pointing out that success is located high in the value hierarchy of modern society. It means that individuals or groups respect success, assign an important role to it in their life and feel urged to achieve it (Szczepański, 1972, p. 97). Contemporary humans function in a culture which expects that they will analyze their whole life and the lives of others in terms of success and self-fulfillment or lack of these qualities.

Professional work takes, on average, at least one-third of the human lifespan. Therefore, it is not surprising that people relatively often associate success with their occupational life and career. Through values, the realization of which becomes the goal and which are integrated into the culture, the life of individuals in the society is shaped, and their psychological profile is created. Not always, however, are these values deeply integrated. Sometimes, while adapting to them, people experience them as imposed and very burdensome.

In the European and North-American cultures, success is individual – contrary to some other cultures where there is the supremacy of the collective over the individual. The personal goals of group members are more important and postulative.

Through their work, people express themselves, put their abilities to use and express their creativity. Personal freedom, independence, and self-realization result from the well-developed individual awareness (Braun, 2003, pp. 229–230).

Because the paper presents the study conducted among retired teachers, it is worth defining teacher career success (cf. Madalińska-Michalak, 2007). According to Beata Jakimiuk,

“Professional successes of teachers are facts which are a transition stage rather than the constant situation in occupational life. Thus, they can be described as a process which has some dynamics, undergoes changes, depends mainly on one’s activity at work and where not only results matter but also the initiatives taken and the way they are implemented. Success makes teachers become who they can be using their whole potential and who they want to become using their will and willingness to act” (Jakimiuk, 2019, p. 121).

She says that the career success of teachers depends on many factors including:

- competencies;
- education;
- diligence;
- ability to develop relations with people met at work;
- good parent-teacher-student cooperation;
- school environment with all its conditions, physical (e.g. premises, equipment) and non-tangible resources (atmosphere, student’s abilities) (Jakimiuk, 2019, p. 122).

The researcher also emphasizes that “the diversity and complexity of teacher success factors make clear evaluation of their work very difficult, as it is usually connected with social expectations towards this profession (for example, regarding students’ results on exams, in competitions, rankings etc.). Thus, the sense of success will be individual for each teacher, as highlighted in the introduction to the article.

Methodological assumptions

A qualitative study was conducted to investigate, describe, interpret and explain the above-mentioned social phenomena from the respondents’ point of view. In qualitative studies, researchers use texts as the empirical material and, starting from the concept of social creation of the studied realities, they focus on the perspective of the respondents, their daily practices and their knowledge of the investigated issue (Flick, 2010, pp. 22–23).

The analyses focused on the sense of career success in the experience of seniors. The goal of the research was to determine how retired teachers understand career success, identify factors connected with the sense of career success among seniors and evaluate the achievements and support of retired teachers in this area. According to the goals set, the following research

problems were formulated: “How do retired teachers describe success in the context of their professional experience?” and: “What factors determine the sense of career success among seniors?”

In order to answer these questions, six in-depth interviews were conducted. The study was performed in 2021. The sample was six seniors, participants of a U3A from the Silesian region. They were retired teachers. The sampling was purposeful. E. Babbie (2003) notices that purposeful sampling is justified when it is impossible or very difficult to make a list of all elements of a population and the data obtained through arbitrary sampling are sufficient to meet the research objectives. The respondents chosen were the best representatives of the population.

Sense of career success among teachers in the light of research results

Individuals who feel that they have achieved personal or professional success are motivated to act and pursue goals to become even more successful. From the perspective of persons in their late adulthood, success is also an important or even key indicator of the positive balance of life. Therefore, understanding success and the way it is experienced in professional life is important for older people not only from the perspective of job satisfaction but also positive evaluation of their life accomplishments.

Table 1. *Understanding of career success*

career success	I think we can talk about successful career when one fulfills their professional duties and, at the same time, is responsible for and engaged in their family life. Work is an important element of life, but one cannot forget about the loved ones.
	We can talk about life success when we pursue and accomplish our life goals and dreams.
	For me, success means to have work according to my interests and education, regardless of the financial aspect.
	Smaller and greater achievements (educational and personal) of students are, in my opinion, the measure of a teacher's success.
	I think, in the teacher's profession, success is a wide concept. We are responsible for shaping and upbringing students in the first place. Education is important but not the most.

Source: Author's own research

The interviewed retired teachers think that career success should be understood in the context of balance and fulfilment in both family and occupational life. Maintaining a balance between these two spheres enables a successful career. In order to achieve success, one has to like their job (it has to be in line with one's interests), feel satisfied with it, use it to pursue life goals and dreams and perform well one's professional responsibilities. Thanks to well-performed work and commitment, students learn more effectively and achieve success. This translates into a sense of success, satisfaction with the job and the feeling that it is important and necessary. Thus, the balance between personal and occupational life, passion, commitment and students' achievements are the elements which determine career success, in the respondents' opinion. According to their descriptions, certain professional achievements definitely contribute to it.

Table 2. *Teachers' professional achievements*

professional achievements	I am always distanced from my achievements; it is not my role to evaluate them. But when I meet my former students years later, I can proudly say that they are wonderful, smart and open people. This makes me feel that this hard work makes sense.
	An objective evaluation of my own accomplishments (also professional) is very hard. Along with the satisfaction, there is usually (some time later) the awareness of what could have been done better (differently)... This is also some kind of "success."
	Work performed well regardless of financial gratification.
	My students and their successes. I think that professional accomplishments can be measured by whether students remember us or not.
	The measure of my achievements is promotion. I am satisfied; I started working in a primary school and ended in a high school.
	Students' successes. Their professional careers. That they remember me and that I can count on them in difficult situations.

Source: Author's own research

The respondents view their professional accomplishments mainly in the context of the achievements of their students both in terms of knowledge (successes in competitions, admissions to good schools or universities) and personal development (well-formed personalities – smart, intelligent etc.). Teachers' successes are exemplified in their students' life attitudes who respect

and remember their educators. Another indicator of the professional success of teachers is the possibility to follow certain promotion paths (including certain roles or positions) and the fact that, despite low remuneration, they did not give up their work and performed their responsibilities with passion and commitment.

Table 3. *Facilitators of career success*

facilitators of career success	I think individual predispositions to be a teacher facilitate professional success. Also, good atmosphere and conditions at work. Students and their abilities are also important.
	The main thing is a good atmosphere and conditions at work. Good relations within the team and between teachers and students (partnership while keeping an invisible yet perceptible and sometimes necessary distance) are equally important.
	Predispositions to perform the profession, the atmosphere at work and a good principal.
	Positive environment, support from other teachers.
	Professional predispositions, good education, passion and engaged students, parents, teachers and a good principal – manager.
	Success factors: education, personal qualities, environment (students, fellow teachers, school management), family situation.

Source: Author's own research

According to the teachers, their successful careers would not be possible if they did not have certain personality traits, predispositions to perform their profession, reinforced and developed during university education, and relevant competencies. In addition, good education and treating work as passion, with the support of the workplace environment (school principal, coworkers – other teachers, students, their parents, who contribute to good work atmosphere, favorable work conditions) and family are determinants of success (see Table 4).

A favorable environment is the best source of support in the teacher's efforts to achieve success, as the respondents declared. That is why they mention people they work with: other teachers, the school principal, parents, themselves, sometimes even students, and their own families (see Table 5).

For the teachers, the main measure of success are students' accomplishments and social recognition, respect and gratitude manifested by students and their parents (see Table 6).

Table 4. *Sources of support in pursuing success at work*

sources of support in pursuing success at work	It can be different things. A source of support can be another teacher, school principal or even a parent. Sometimes, the teacher is one's own support and the "driving force." The fact of having the talent given by the Creator himself is not without significance.
	It is a complex problem. Usually, another teacher (or a good school principal) is the source of support. Sometimes, it is a student or their parents. Often the teachers' own family plays that role.
	Positive environment, support from other teachers.
	School principal, teachers, parents
	Sources of support: other teachers, parents, managing authority, pedagogical supervision
	Principal, other teachers, family

Source: Author's own research

Table 5. *Measures of career success*

measures of success	Students and their achievements
	Students and parents, and the respect they show the teacher
	Some are proud and arrogant. The real, great teachers are humble, quiet and liked by their students.
	Respect in the workplace
	Teaching results (tests, final exams), the satisfaction of parents and students
	Respect of others (coworkers, students and parents) and personal satisfaction

Source: Author's own research

Table 6 *Importance of success for retired life*

importance of success for retired life	Satisfaction from well-performed work, which motivates to further social activity and personal development
	It allows one to find satisfaction in professional life
	It gives the courage to take on new challenges
	Satisfaction from work and confidence that one was good at it
	Desire to grow and remain active. Professional work does not need to end with the retirement
	It gives pleasure and satisfaction from the well-performed work

Source: Author's own research

When analyzing their career success from the perspective of time and their present life situation (retirement), the respondents see the importance of success in two areas: life satisfaction and motivation to be active and overcome self (courage to meet new challenges, desire to continue with personal development).

Summary and conclusions

The retired teachers who took part in the study analyzed their professional biographies from the perspective of time in order to reflect and define success, its determinants and its meaning for their life and functioning in retirement. The respondents identified success mainly in the category of a balance between family – the most important value, especially for women (the respondents were all female) – and professional work, and fulfilment in both (cf. Piłkuła, 2016, 2017). The attitude towards one's own profession is an important determinant of success: performing it with passion and commitment (in other words, a good choice of profession), focusing on goals and achieving them. Responsibly performing work and owning the tasks resulting from this profession translate into the results which become the measure and the source of success. The teacher's commitment to work translates into motivation and engagement of the students, their development, high results, awards in contests, competitions, etc. All this is the confirmation of the teacher's successful career. Students' achievements and teachers' accomplishments (promotion, development) reinforce the sense of well-performed work and success in the professional field. These results are consistent with the research of Joanna Madalińska-Michalak, who showed that "teachers who are successful in their work with students are to a large extent oriented towards their professional development, the feeling of usefulness, the sense of meaningfulness of their actions, close contacts and developing bonds with others (good relations with students, students' parents, and colleagues), and towards achieving high results in their work and presenting these results to a wider audience. They are, as the results of the study showed, both 'internal' and 'external' goal-oriented individuals. Values such as independence, responsibility, authenticity, trustworthiness, reliability, involvement for the benefit of others, a sense of usefulness and meaningfulness of one's work, and achieving high results at work are of fundamental importance for them in achieving professional success. A particularly important value is responsibility for one's own development, intensive and continuous work on

oneself, on improving oneself and developing one's professional competence" (Madalińska-Michalak, 2016, p. 15, cf. Madalińska-Michalak, 2007). The teachers pointed to the financial (economic) factor of their profession too. Despite low salaries, they had never given up their work; even the opposite, they had always done it with commitment and passion, shaping the attitudes and values among children and youth. The achievements of the students, not only in education (as evident during direct work with the learners) but those observed in their life, accomplishments and behavior when they had already left school, ensure the respondents that they achieved career success. In addition, the social recognition and respect they experience from others and the gratitude expressed by the students and parents when they worked and after they retired confirm the teachers' success. Of course, it was "also determined by personal qualities, predispositions, knowledge, education, competencies and supportive workplace and family environment" (Jagielska, 2020, p. 176) (a good atmosphere, proper work and life conditions, kind and supportive people). The influence of success on activity and development in retirement, revealed in the interviews, is worth particular attention. The retired teachers emphasize that their drive to be active, to develop, and the courage to take challenges in times of professional activity enables them to remain active when retired, motivates them to overcome their limitations, face new challenges, and strive to grow in different areas of their life (cf. Łukasik, Jagielska, 2016). Development of interests translates into a desire to be active and grow in old age. The teaching profession involves self-improvement and investing in own personal and professional development. Teachers who experience career success and satisfaction in retirement do not stop in their self-improvement efforts and also engage in activities to benefit others and their local community.

Given the above, it is worth including self-development classes in the process of teacher education and professional improvement. Such a program would help prospective teachers discover their passions and interests which will contribute to the quality of their work, professional achievements, a sense of satisfaction once they end their professional activity and motivation to make further efforts to develop themselves and others.

Abstract: The research and scientific discussion in the paper focuses on the category of the sense of career success. In the theoretical part, main assumptions referring to this category are presented: work, the value of work, the sense of career success. They determined the direction of the scientific investigation. The study was conducted within the qualitative paradigm. The research questions were answered using the qualitative interview method. The analysis and interpretation of the data obtained led to conclusions regarding the sample interviewed, as well as recommendations regarding further studies of the categories identified.

Keywords: work, sense of career success, teacher, senior

Streszczenie: W prezentowanym artykule podstawą rozważań naukowo-badawczych uczyniono kategorię poczucia sukcesu zawodowego. W części teoretycznej zaprezentowano podstawowe przesłanki odnosząca się do kategorii tj. praca, wartość pracy, poczucie sukcesu zawodowego, co wyznaczyło kierunek projektu badawczego. Badania przeprowadzono zgodnie z założeniami paradygmatu jakościowego. Zastosowana metoda wywiadu jakościowego umożliwiła uzyskanie odpowiedzi na postawione pytanie badawcze. Analiza i interpretacja danych uzyskanych w toku badań uprawniła do sformułowania wniosków w odniesieniu do grupy badanej, a także wskazania kierunku dalszych badań w zakresie wyłonionych kategorii.

Słowa kluczowe: praca, poczucie sukcesu zawodowego, nauczyciel, senior

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