

SŁAWOMIR OLSZEWSKI

In search of special educators' well-being – 'Professional Identity' conception proposal

Keywords: well-being, motivation in work, professional identity, special educators

Abstract

The issue of well-being of special educators became the starting point of considerations in this article. Well-being is a factor closely related to intrinsic motivation, and therefore also affects the effectiveness of the professional activities undertaken (well-being may lead to well-doing and well-working). The Special Educators' Professional Identity (SEPI) conception proposal is also presented. It allows to see in professional identity an important factor conducive for building of space necessary to flourish well-being. The article is concluded with a list of principles for shaping professional identity created by Jane Danielewicz.

Introduction

Reflections on well-being in people with disabilities should take into account the well-being of people creating their life space. The well-being of parents, teachers, therapists, special educators may be shaping the well-being of their children, students, co-workers.

In this article I would like to focus attention on the well-being of special educators, especially well-being originated from the professional space, from working environments. Also, taking advantage of this opportunity, it is worth to highlight of importance of special educators in the process of rehabilitation. Special educators are a more important part of the system of rehabilitation than best prepared procedures are.

The profession pursued by special educator belongs to the group of caring professions, the so-called professions with a social mission. Like the teaching profession, it can be perceived as one of the impossible professions, pursuit of which involves accomplishing goals that are impossible to be fully attained. Like the teaching profession, the profession of special educator is also constituted by the compulsion to create, formed on the basis of acting in unpredictable situations the uniqueness of which necessitates activity based on individuality,

also manifested through the uniqueness of events and people. However, this is also a profession that requires carrying out actions of a very burdensome character due to the complexity of such actions, as well as the responsibility and onerousness that are involved in them (cf. Kwiatkowska 2010, pp. 68–74).

Effectiveness of actions in the profession of special educator depends to a large extent on the person that pursues this profession, on the aptitudes they have. Therefore, in the context of the information referenced above, it is worthwhile to give some consideration to the construct referred to as well-being; well-being not only seen from the hedonistic point of view as satisfaction with life (not always favourable to activity, frequently being a source of stagnation), but also in terms of the eudaimonic aspect, as a characteristic that favours activity, development, living a valuable life.

Well-being and motivation

According to Martin Seligman's theory (2011, pp. 33–39), well-being is composed of five measurable elements that free people choose as goals in themselves, things that they seek in life. These are:

- positive emotion – happiness, satisfaction with life, being able to look positively at the past, present and future;
- engagement – the state in which we are engrossed in activity, engaged to the maximum extent in performing activities;
- meaning – synonymous with a sense of belonging to something that we deem greater than ourselves, willingness to serve the same (ibid., p. 34), related to the actions taken, to human existence;
- positive relationships – social relationships and connections constitute one of the most essential aspects of human life. Positive relationships with other people may make a facilitating factor in actions;
- accomplishment – conviction that something has been achieved as a result of one's own efforts, the resulting sense of success and accomplishment is another goal of human endeavour.

Satisfaction of the above-mentioned needs fosters the achievement of well-being. By increasing positive emotion, engagement, positive relations, meaning, and accomplishment you can increase flourishing, also in professional space, during vocational activities. The awareness of the goals referred to, the striving to achieve them, involves revealing one's intrinsic motivation to act. The pursuit of well-being may be a factor that motivates to take up activity. Hence, emphasising identical elements in motivation theories, especially those

that concern intrinsic motivation, does not raise any doubts. Reference can be made here to the Self-Determination Theory and Motivation 3.0.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) was developed by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan. It can be summarised by means of three premises (Deci, Vansteenkiste 2004, pp. 23–24):

1. Humans are inherently proactive with their potential to act on and master both their inner forces (such as drives and emotions) and the external forces they encounter.
2. Humans, as self-organizing systems, have an inherent tendency toward growth development and integrated functioning.
3. Optimal development and actions are inherent in humans but they do not happen automatically. People require nutrients from the social environment.

SDT assumes that people have three innate psychological needs that they seek to satisfy: the need of competence, relatedness, and autonomy.

The need of competence is the desire to sense one's own efficiency in actions in one's environment and to experience a sense of meaning in the actions taken. Human being, thanks to this need, is interested in their own activity and is open to new experiences and willing to learn new things. According to the need for competence "people engage their world in an attempt to master it and to feel the sense of effectance when they do" (Deci, Vansteenkiste 2004, p. 25).

The need of relatedness is fulfilled through interactions with other people, a sense of belonging, as well as experiencing care, concern and interest from other people. Fulfilment of this need takes place through a variety of activities, e.g. building and maintaining relationships or helping others. As a consequence, beside gaining social support and acceptance, an individual develops self-confidence.

The third need – need of autonomy expresses the universal human aspiration to control the course of one's own life, to be the cause of events. To create these events taking into account personal values. At the same time, autonomy does not exclude dependence on other people. "To be autonomous does not mean to be independent of others, but rather it means to feel a sense of willingness and choice when acting, whether the actions are independently initiated or are in response to a request from significant others" (Deci, Vansteenkiste 2004, s. 25).

According to the SDT, conditions promoting individual experience of autonomy, competence and relatedness favour high-quality forms of motivation and engagement in activity, increased performance, perseverance and creativity. In the SDT, autonomy, competence and relatedness constitute

a necessary medium for shaping well-being. The experience of satisfaction of these three basic needs leads to well-being understood as an expression of vitality and self-fulfilment, the opposite of anxiety and depression (Ryan, Deci 2000, p. 323).

Similar to the SDT presented above, the concept of Motivation 3.0 was described by Daniel Pink (2012). According to this theory, motivation is induced by three main components: autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Satisfaction of the needs represented by them also constitutes a factor that both increases work performance and is necessary for professional development.

Daniel Pink (2012, p. 100) assumes that people should possess autonomy with regard to the tasks being carried out (what they do), the time they have (when they do it), the technique being used (how they do it), and the team they work in (with whom they do it). An element that motivates to work is also mastery – the desire to be increasingly better in accomplishing the actions that are undertaken. Mastery is understood as a way of thinking but at the same time as effort and pain. Pursuit of mastery is visualised by an asymptote that indicates the impossibility of reaching the fullness of mastery (ibid., pp. 127–134). In the Motivation 3.0 concept, the goal is a factor intensifying human activity, purpose maximisation is a much more essential element than profit maximisation. As Pink (2012, p. 140) puts it: “The most deeply motivated people [...] hitch their desires to a cause larger than themselves”.

This brief outline itself, and also the summary of elements essential for the theory of well-being, as well as theories relating to motivation (Table 1.) draws attention to the similarities between the elements that define well-being and the factors cited as ones building intrinsic motivation in professional activities.

Table 1. Well-being concept and motivation theories (SDT and M3.0) – comparison

well-being concept	motivation theories
–	autonomy (SDT, M3.0)
relationships	relatedness (SDT)
meaning and purpose	purpose (M3.0)
accomplishment	competence (SDT); mastery (M3.0)
positive emotion engagement	–

The elements common for both the concept of well-being and the theories of motivation, their core elements, are relationships with others, the sense of (meaning) purpose, as well as achievements, competences and mastery. Being one of the basic conditions for well-being, achievements lead to an increase in

the sense of competence and thus reinforce the striving for mastery. Thanks to this striving, man triggers the motivation to act that underlies the achievements.

Autonomy, which only appears in the motivation theories, is (like the other elements of these theories) perceived as a condition for a fuller engagement in activity, and effectively a source of positive emotions that are essential determinants of well-being.

It should be noted that there are multifaceted interrelations between the elements presented, often feedbacks. It can be assumed that well-being is a favourable factor in triggering motivation to act; and the activity undertaken contributes to an increase in man's well-being. Having a sense of well-being is of key importance for the professional development, while professional work, due to the opportunities that it creates, is an essential area in the pursuit of well-being; it can play a significant role in approaching it. On the other hand, well-being may lead to well-doing and to well-working. This is confirmed by studies that point to the relation between well-being and effective use of working time, increased quality of work, improved interpersonal relations at work and increased innovativeness (cf. Ford, Cerasoli, Higgins, Decesare 2011).

Attaining well-being at work, understood as a space favourable to development, and not stagnation (when it is not reduced to the hedonistic dimension, i.e. work satisfaction), its improvement, is a long-term process that requires reflexivity, a systemic approach and interaction of many factors. D'Angel et al. (2017) mention some of them with reference to the work of a teacher:

- a culture of support at school, the purpose of which is to improve teachers' working conditions and provide adequate time and place for collaboration. In fact, it is collaboration that incorporates mutual support, opportunities to take active part in making decisions with regard to the school, as well as trust based on shared values. The culture of support is made up of positive atmosphere at school, concern for autonomy, collegiality, mutual trust and proper manner of exercising administrative leadership. This set of factors might include (Pyżalski 2010) such elements of work environment as social support on the part of the superiors, concern for good relations within the teaching team, support for teachers starting work, as well as taking advantage of other sources of support (e.g. colleges, universities);
- professionalisation of teachers. Education of teachers provides them with a solid foundation for their well-being and is essential in the context of retention of teachers in the profession. Continuing professional development

may play an essential role in increasing teachers' performance, engagement, and work satisfaction;

- positive teacher-pupil relations. Positive relations between teachers and pupils are a necessary condition for teachers' well-being. It is so because they enhance teachers' intrinsic motivation.

Also professional identity and concern for its appropriate shaping may become a factor promoting the achievement of well-being.

The Special Educators' Professional Identity (SEPI) conception proposal

The conception of special educator's professional identity* described in this paper provides that professional identity is one of the subsystems of human identity, one relating to the area of professional work. It can be understood as thinking of oneself in the profession. It is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that exerts influence on various spheres of human life and is at the same time subject to their impact. Professional identity can be perceived as definitions of self-constituting dimensions (frames) thanks to which, or through which, employees construct views, create concepts 'how to be', 'how to act' and 'how to understand' one's work (cf. Sachs 2005, p. 15). This is the way in which people define themselves within the space of their profession, for themselves and for other people (cf. Lasky 2005, p. 901). In addition to the set of these professional self-definitions, other constituents of professional identity might also include 'professional interpretation framework', i.e. general ways of perceiving and interpreting situations related to the profession practiced, sets of definitions of situations – being concrete explanations related to the specific phenomena occurring in the course of the professional career. They are first absorbed from the milieu and, along with increased experience, created independently. The third and last constituent of professional identity is a repertoire of interaction strategies: the ways that enable effective accomplishment of professional tasks and coping with problems occurring in the course of the professional career (Marciniak 2010, pp. 187–188).

The concept of special educators' professional identity presented herein is based on an identity concept described by Étienne Wenger (2008), which is a part of the 'Communities of Practice Theory'. When applying this concept

* Special Educators' Professional Identity (SEPI) Conception has been more extensively presented in the book *Usłyszeć polifonię. Tożsamości zawodowe pedagogów specjalnych pracujących z osobami z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną [Hearing polyphony. Professional identities of special educators working with people with intellectual disability]* (Olszewski, 2017).

to professional identity it should be assumed that it ought to be presented and considered as:

- A result of negotiated experience. Professional autodefinitions are shaping in participation and reification*. We define who we are by the ways we experience ourselves through participation, as well as by the ways we and others reify ourselves.
- Community membership – we define who we are by indicating similarities and differences, as a result of which we identify ourselves with e.g. a specific professional group.
- Learning trajectory – we define who we are by where we have been and where we are going. This trajectory shows its shape and is at the same time shaped e.g. the path of career we follow, the current working conditions, aspirations and motives, in which the needs of the particular individual manifest themselves.
- Nexus of multimembership – we define who we are by the way we reconcile our various forms of membership (also previously experienced) into one identity. Professional identity is one of the subsystems building human identity. It is first in relation with other subsystems, e.g. sex, national or cultural identity, that it affects the shape of human life and is at the same time subject to their influences.
- Relation between the local and the global – a synthesis of relations between human being and the world. We define who we are by negotiating local ways of belonging to broader constellations; belonging is defined globally but experienced and expressed locally.

Professional identity is highlighting positive aspects of special educator's functioning, her/his subjectivity, agency, it accents the ability, and also obligation, responsibility for shaping working space. Also, it may become the cure for the lack of reflection, for escaping from responsibility forward strict and sorted procedures. It helps in risky situations.

* Engagement in social contexts involves a dual process of meaning making. On the one hand, we engage directly in activities, conversations, reflections, and other forms of personal participation in social life. On the other hand, we produce physical and conceptual artifacts – words, tools, concepts, methods, stories, documents, links to resources, and other forms of reification – that reflect our shared experience and around which we organize our participation. (Literally, reification means “making into an object”). Meaningful learning in social contexts requires both participation and reification to be in interplay. Artifacts without participation do not carry their own meaning; and participation without artifacts is fleeting, unanchored, and uncoordinated. But participation and reification are not locked into each other. At each moment of engagement in the world, we bring them together a new to negotiate and renegotiate the meaning of our experience. The process is dynamic and active. It is alive. (Wenger 2010, p. 180).

Professional identity can be considered as a response to the threats, challenges that arise in the realization of this profession and as the nucleus of the project of professional and personal development.

This is a dynamic, multidimensional and reflection-based phenomenon, never fully-recognized, always underconstructing (Breen 2014, p. 33). It is the result of autoreflection caused by varied challenges in professional functioning. Through reflection professionals can explore self-concept and become more aware of their own strengths and limitations, understand the nature and demand of the professional task and adapt to new ways to become better at what they are doing. Then, how can we help special educators in shaping their professional identity?

Shaping professional identity

A starting point in the quest for an answer to the question of possibilities of shaping professional identity can be the principles created by Jane Danielewicz (2001, pp. 141–176). Adopting these principles can transform how a person teaches, though how much things change will depend on personal philosophy, experience and inclination, plus the individual methods already in place. These principles are entirely open-ended, they are not methods, rather notions that ought to motivate, inspire, inform, and animate practices. Danielewicz (2001) mentions five structural and five performative principles. The structural principles describe general properties that should characterize the curriculum, shape the classroom environment, and inform the teacher's approach to course design and methods

The structural principles (how things are arranged) are as follows:

1. Discourse richness and openness

Discourse constitutes self and experience through discourse, acts of language that communicate and connect with others we help each other shape our identities (reciprocity). Discourse is universally productive, creating selves and reality. We need student-centered, student-selected and not dictated (like interview) discourse.

2. Dialogue and dialogic curriculum

Dialogue and dialogic curriculum ought to weave together language and social interaction, should consist of utterance and answer (Bakhtin). We speak in order to be answered. Meaning is created where two or more voices contact. It is worth to mention that each utterance is incomplete until it is answered. It generates knowledge or understanding, and constitutes

the “other”, shared meaning arises. Dialogue and dialogic curriculum needs to have open structure (like letter writing).

3. Collaboration

Collaboration should be understood as a joint effort, shared goals, collective responsibility, in space of commonly held social values. Students work together in small peer groups to accomplish tasks set by teacher. It works best when it is carefully planned and structured. A collaboration outcome should be exciting and unpredictable.

4. Deliberation

According to John Dewey, deliberation is a process by which “we give way, in our mind, to some impulse; in our mind, some plan”. Deliberation should be dramatic and active. Dewey says that for learning to have consequence, the intuitive, direct and personal processes must be activated, for instance, by simulating real teaching experiences, by creating centers for working together.

5. Reflexivity

Reflexivity should be understood as an act of self-conscious consideration. It arises as a result of thinking that turns back on itself, a re-examination or revisiting of a project or activity, a questioning of motives, frameworks, assumption, working strategies, conclusions, beliefs and actions. It is an intentional means to an end-active analysis of past situations, events, products, with the inherent goal of critique and revision for the explicit purpose of achieving an understanding that can lead to change in thought or behavior. Reflexivity enables us to reinvent ourselves; in this process, by taking into account new ideas or experiences, in such actions as instructor feedback.

In contrast, performative principles concern what individuals do. Everyday actions are performances. These principles focus on person as actors and on the drama of social interaction among them (principles of performance). The five performative (what we do) principles are as follows:

1. Theorizing in practice

Theory should be understood as the account that action gives of itself, reasons we offer prior to action for setting out to do something. Teaching (as action) is embodied theory by such activity as critiquing a lesson brought to class, working on action and connecting it to theory, actively critique it together, asking open-ended questions, etc.

2. Agency

Agency is a quality of an individual that makes doing possible, believing that one’s self is capable of action. It is the will to act based on power

of freedom. Agency depends on state of reflection and understanding of self in a situation such as: demonstrating care – leads to community and willingness to act, tell my article story, collaborative activities that effect the class, community or nation.

3. Recursive representation

Recursive representation means representing the self successfully in whatever forms are available, becoming a teacher in whatever way you can, by being here and working with yourself in a teacher identity, also by being open to the revision of the self, such as: helping students see who they are through any ways of expression (photos, pictures, poems, action, drawing, sculptures).

4. Authority

Authority is power/having power but not being an authoritarian. Activities such as giving students voice, agency, creating space for dialogue, dialogic actions development all can be helpful in shaping authority.

5. Enactment

Enactment should be connected with full investment of self in teaching (person, mind, spirit) alongside students. It is embodying your belief system. The enactment formation includes such activities as: projects based on pedagogy, working to prepare them for exams and testing them on what you have taught, in this situation evaluation becomes authentic.

Towards conclusions

Finding ways to implement these principles, by relating theoretical considerations to the specifics of the special pedagogue's activities at a particular workplace should not only be the responsibility of the superiors, not only the educators of future special educators, but also the task of each of the special educators and persons preparing for the profession. In these activities it is worth see a way to achieve well-being.

Constructing professional identity and its development can at the same time be the way to creating and enhancing special educator's well-being, also in conditions that are not favourable for the actions undertaken. Professional identity constitutes the way to achieving well-being, the way that is determined by self-reflection and responsibility for actions, and makes it possible, through positive relationships with other people, to search for the meaning of things, to achieve the state of engagement, to arouse positive emotions and to reinforce the sense of achievement.

References

- Breen M.C. (2014). *Teacher Identity and Intersubjective experience*, [in:] P.M. Jenlink (ed.), *Teacher identity and the struggle for recognition. Meeting the challenges of a diverse society*, Rowman & Littlefield Education, Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Plymouth, pp. 2736.
- D'Angel (ed.), *Europejski Zestaw Szkolny. Dobrostan nauczycieli*, <https://www.school-educationgateway.eu/pl/pub/resources/toolkitsforschools/subarea.cfm?sa=601> [access: 12.2017].
- Danielewicz J. (2001). *Teaching selves. Identity, Pedagogy, and Teacher Education*, State University of New York Press, New York.
- Deci E.L., Vansteenkiste M. (2004). Self-determination theory and basic need satisfaction: Understanding human development in positive psychology, "Ricerche di Psicologia", Vol. 27, No. 1, pp. 17–34.
- Ford M.T., Cerasoli C.P., Higgins J.A., Decesare A.L. (2011). *Relationships between psychological, physical, and behavioural health and work performance: A review and meta-analysis*, *Work & Stress*, Vol. 25, Issue 3, pp. 185–204.
- Kwiatkowska H. (2010). *Nauczyciel – zawód "niemożliwy", ale nieunikniony*, [in:] J.M. Michalak (ed.), *Etyka i profesjonalizm w zawodzie nauczyciela*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź, pp. 67–86.
- Lasky S. (2005). *A sociocultural approach to understanding teacher identity, agency and professional vulnerability in a context of secondary school reform*, "Teaching and Teacher Education", Vol. 21, Issue 8, pp. 899–916.
- Marciniak Ł.T. (2010). *Konstruowanie tożsamości zawodowej: procesy odniesienia i rozróżnienia*, [in:] K.T. Konecki, A. Kacperczyk (eds.), *Procesy tożsamościowe. Symboliczno-interakcyjny wymiar konstruowania ja i nieładu społecznego*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź, pp. 181–195.
- Olszewski S. (2017). *Usłyszeć polifonię. Tożsamości zawodowe pedagogów specjalnych pracujących z osobami z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną*, Oficyna Wydawnicza "Impuls", Kraków.
- Pink D.H. (2012). *Drive. Kompletnie nowe spojrzenie na motywację*, Wydawnictwo Studio EMKA, Warszawa.
- Pyżalski J. (2010). *Czynniki salutogenne (wspierające dobrostan nauczyciela w pracy)*, [in:] J. Pyżalski, D. Merez (eds.), *Psychospołeczne warunki pracy polskich nauczycieli. Pomiędzy wypaleniem zawodowym a zaangażowaniem*, Oficyna Wydawnicza "Impuls", Kraków, pp. 107–116.
- Ryan R.M., Deci E.L. (2000). *The Darker and Brighter Sides of Human Existence: Basic Psychological Needs as a Unifying Concept*, "Psychological Inquiry", Vol. 11, No. 4, pp. 319–338.
- Sachs J. (2005). *Teacher education and the development of professional identity: learning to be a teacher*, [in:] P. Denicolo, M. Kompf (eds.), *Connecting Policy*

-
- and Practice: Challenges for Teaching and Learning in Schools and Universities*, Routledge, London, pp. 5–21.
- Seligmann M. (2011). *Pełnia życia. Nowe spojrzenie na kwestię szczęścia i dobrego życia*, Media Rodzina, Poznań.
- Wenger E. (2008). *Communities of Practice. Learning, Meaning and Identity*, Cambridge University Press, New York.
- Wenger E. (2010). *Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems: the Career of a Concept*, [in:] Ch. Blackmore (ed.), *Social Learning Systems and Communities of Practice*, Springer-Verlag London Limited, London, pp. 179–198.