TEACHERS IN THE LATE PHASE OF THEIR CAREER

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ABSTRACT

The text presents selected results of a questionnaire investigation focused on identification of several factors in the work of basic school teachers aged over 50, particularly subjectively perceived changes in the selected factors forming self-concept – in the sense of security, responsibility, usefulness, success and satisfaction. Attention is paid also to the reflection of the changes in relationships and motivation for continuance in the profession from the point of view of the addressed teachers.

Keywords: Older teachers, teacher self-concept, teacher satisfaction, teacher motivation.

INTRODUCTION

The nature of the teaching profession is associated with a number of demands and difficulties related particularly to coping with stress, handling relationships both in and out of school and increasingly more significantly these demands are related to the need of keeping up with innovations and adapting to changes. It certainly is not easy to become a true professional and maintain high quality of work and motivation for it throughout the whole career. Therefore, the teaching career and its transformation legitimately attract attention of a considerable number of experts in various research fields (Huberman 1989, Hansez a kol. 2005, Levin 2003, Steffy et al. 2000 and many others). Researchers are generally interested in problems of novice teachers and conditions for their professional development till the stage of teaching "mastery" or "expertise", while significantly less attention is paid to teachers in the late stage of their career, that is those who can represent an invaluable resource of knowledge and experience, however, on the other hand, their performance (often negatively affected by fatigue and many professional frustrations) is surrounded by myths and prejudice. The significance of the projects focusing on senior working population (between 55 and 65 years old) is growing especially over the last few years due to the frequently quoted phenomenon of social ageing. The consequences of gradual ageing of the population are reflected also in the demographic representation of workers in various professions and thus in teaching too. Both Czech and international statistics indicate a high percentage of elderly teachers at all levels of education (cp. Sledování 2008, Age 2008). The questions arising are: How do senior teachers perceive themselves in the professional context? How do they perceive the changes in their own performance of the job? What motivates them? What type of support do they perceive and expect? The questions are related primarily to the professional self-concept of teachers and their job performance. These and other aspects of professional performance of teachers over 50 were examined in the research project Teachers in the late stage of their career. In this text we present selected results of a questionnaire investigation conducted in 2009 where we looked at how lower secondary school teachers aged over 50 perceive their position in school and changes in job performance. We turn our attention to the question of change in professional self-concept, changes in relationships and other aspects of professional stability as seen by the addressed lower secondary school teachers.

SELF-CONCEPT AND TIME

Self-concept is a psychological concept present in many personality descriptions; it is defined differently depending on the construction of the given personality theory. Therefore, there are a number of definitions of

self-concept, they particularly stress the organisation of the conscious traits, expectations, attitudes and relationships, that is those that an individual attributes to oneself (Smékal 2002). Professional self-concept of a teacher then analogically includes e.g. opinion of oneself as a worker, feelings associated with one´s performance, the perceived professional position and role, personal experience and story related to work etc. Although it is a relatively permanent concept of oneself, still it is more or less significantly transformed due to life experience and age. Findings of developmental psychology provide convincing evidence that despite the nearly intimate nature of self-concept of each individual it is possible to generalize its transformation with age at least in some of its aspects.

An ageing individual experiences changes in self-concept or self-image, particularly as concerns **self-esteem** and **self-confidence;** an elderly person has lower self-confidence, is more cautious and often does not "dare" to start new projects or reject usual stereotypes (Stuart-Hamilton 1999, Ward 1977). A senior teacher is continually confronted with flexibility of younger colleagues, who enter the profession with a different knowledge and experiential basis. The changes in self-concept which are a consequence of "comparing what can not be compared" can even lead to negative self-presentation, learned helplessness and scepticism. Ageing and long-term employment bring about a tendency to an increase in subjective **health problems**, which can be both the cause and a consequence of changes in self-concept. Some authors refer to increasing doubts about oneself and loss of self-confidence in teachers with 20 to 30 years of practice (cp. Daniel, Sarmány-Schuller 2000, Huberman 1989). The social status of a teacher and their position in school play a significant role in the transformation of professional self-concept. Hansez et al. (2005) e.g. mention complaints especially of elder teachers about the problem of "devaluation of the profession", which is boosted, among others, by "the methods that the younger colleagues employ"and the changes in norms of behaviour. Owing to ageing the **relationship to the profession** changes as well as its subjective significance for a person. Elderly people usually do not care so much about ambitions although their work can take various forms, from excessive effort to the loss of the sense of meaningfulness of own work (cp. e.g. Alan, 1989). According to Huberman (1989) a typical feature of teachers in the late stage of their career is increased reflectiveness associated with lower ambitions and investments into the finishing career. Although it might seem that the expected changes in self-concept due to ageing hinder rather then improve performance, there are authors of empirical studies (as well as people in school practice) who agree that senior teachers **can not be regarded as second-class teachers** and empirically no clear relationship was found between the length of practice and pupils´ results or the level of educational work (e.g. Huberman 1989). Self-concept and professional self-concept are intertwined and intimate and unique to such extent that it is apparently more relevant to examine them by **autobiographical stories** without an ambition of generalizing knowledge. Nevertheless, we attempted to include several selected aspects forming the concept of professional self-concept into our questionnaire investigation which was broadly focused on some aspects of senior teachers´ work. Due to the complex nature of the concept and difficulties with transforming it into concrete items (for the purpose of a quantitative investigation) we selected for examination only closely defined categories (forming individual items in a questionnaire), which, in our opinion, can be principal for the performance of teaching.

QUESTIONNAIRE INVESTIGATION

The respondents of our questionnaire investigation focused (not only) on professional self-concept were lower-secondary school teachers aged over 50. The items in the questionnaire were organised into the following areas: professional self-concept, profession and personal life, professional joys and troubles, cooperation with colleagues and school management and receiving support. In the part of the text dealing with professional self-concept we asked about the current situation as well as changes in the selected factors: professional security, responsibility, sense of joy, usefulness, success and satisfaction. The questionnaires were handed over to the representatives of 165 basic schools (in cooperation with the Association of Basic School Headmasters), questionnaires from 53 schools were sent back by mail. We processed in total 173 questionnaires from teachers over 50, out of those 34 were men (i.e. there were 19.8% of male teachers and 80.2% of women

teachers). This distribution approximately reflects common representation of men and women in basic schools in percentage term (Sledování 2008).

ON THE CHANGES IN PROFESSIONAL SELF-CONCEPT

Comparing the individual factors of professional self-concept with each other, it is apparent that teachers feel above all **great responsibility** (the variance for this item was low), the lowest average value refers to the **feeling of success**, however on average it is above the middle scale value (Tab. 1). Fewer than 30% of teachers feel fully successful, nearly 40% of teachers feel completely satisfied, about 10% of them admit they are not satisfied at work.

Table 1
Professional self-concept (averages, scale 1-5)
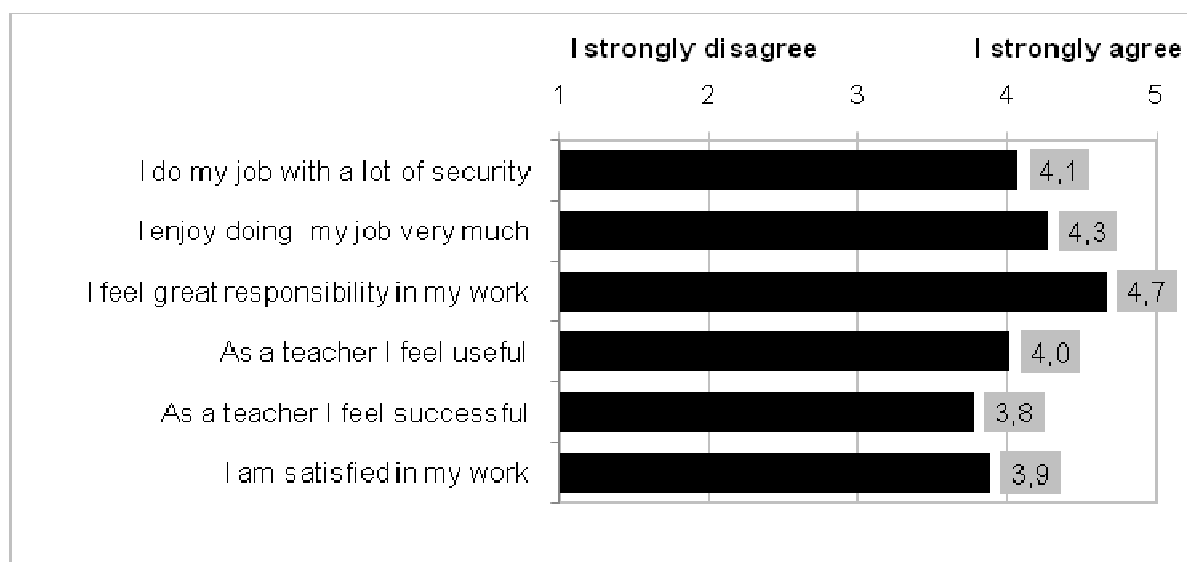
When asked to evaluate their feelings and perception of themselves in the profession in the course of time, most often teachers incline to the statement that the time spent doing the profession and therefore also practice and experience bring higher security and perhaps also responsibility, but do not arouse a sense of usefulness, satisfaction or success. As far as the perception of changes caused by age is concerned, the averages of values are not representative as the feeling of change is given with a significantly higher variance than expression of current state. That means that teachers rather disagree when expressing the change in professional self-concept, with the exception of the perceived change in the items security and responsibility, where they reach fuller agreement.

Table 2
Changes in self-concept (in trichotomy of a five-point scale)
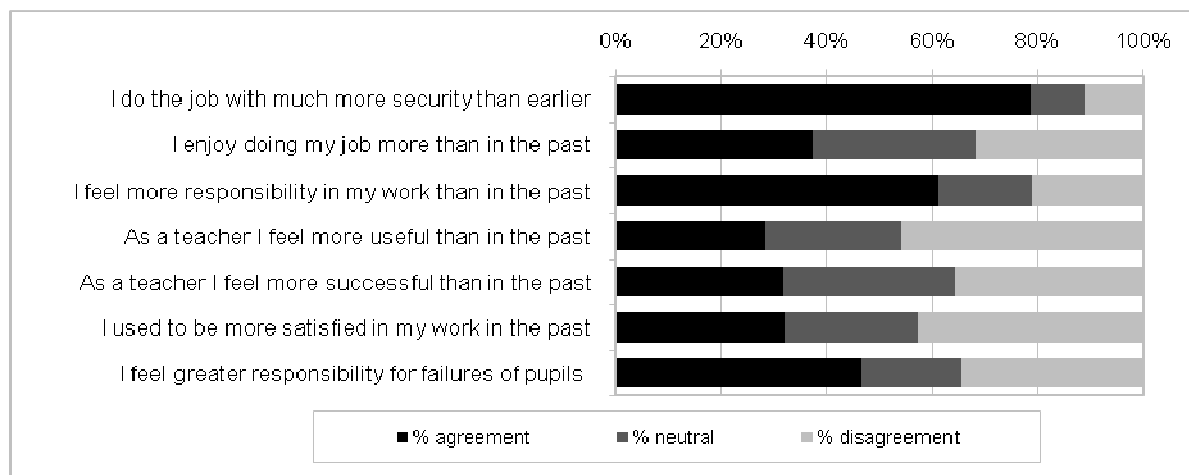
The questionnaire included a number of open questions as we intended to capture also some opinions and attitudes which we did not feel competent to predict and we did not want to "induce" our own ideas and expectations. The responses were categorised and we present them in nominal values (to make it apparent how many responses we received).

Teachers agree that what boosts their security is mainly: experience and practice (54 times), changes in personality associated with age (e.g. detached point of view, distance, wisdom, others – 20 times), the influence of continual self-education and thorough lesson planning (15 times), the influence of school background and and good work climate (7 times), relationship to children and love for the profession (5 times) etc. On the other hand, what diminishes their security is especially underachievement of pupils, their lack of interest and misbehaviour (38 times), the situation in the school system, constant changes and red tape (18 times), personal changes associated with ageing such as decrease in confidence, fatigue, problems with voice, memory and health in general (17 times), attitudes and "arrogance" of parents (14 times), the image of teachers in society in general, deterioration of morals (10 times), then the inability to keep up with the modern age and technology (8 times), intergenerational problems and relationships on the workplace, hypocrisy" (3 times), etc.

Responsibility is understood mainly as concern about pupils´ safety, children´s future and their achievement. The positive transformation of usefulness and success is then related chiefly to better methodological work ("...it is not easy to capture pupils attention nowadays...") and a better ability to adapt teaching for the needs of children with educational problems. Some of the respondents (13 times) openly point out the lacking sense of usefulness due to the problem that teachers and their work is undervalued. All the variables referring to self-concept were analysed by means of correlation analysis and additive indexes measuring the given concept were designed whereby three new concepts were developed, entailing variables with mutual dependency: the concept of self-realization entails three mutually dependent variables: enjoyment of work, responsibility, usefulness and satisfaction. The concept self-confidence entails mutually dependent variables: security and success. The concept change of self-concept entails mutually dependent variables: growing enjoyment of work, growing sense of usefulness and growing sense of success. While we identified relative agreement in the first two concepts, the third one expressing the feeling of change is characteristic by a greater variance of attitudes.

ON STRONG AND WEAK POINTS OF TEACHERS OVER 50

In the questionnaire we encouraged the teachers to write about the strong and weak points of senior teachers – the formulation of the question carried an assumption of projection. There was space to name three factors and rank them in order of importance. The mentioned factors were categorised, marked (3 points for the factor ranked first, 2 points for the factor given as second and 1 point for the factor ranked third) and we added the points for individual categories of factors. The respondents consider the strong points of senior teachers particularly those related to:

- experience and practice; these are broad concepts with unspecified content, nevertheless they were given in vast majority of cases in the first place and without any comment (420 points),
- personality competence; particularly judgement, wisdom, detached point of view, generosity, authority, dignity and other values (177 points),
- expert competence; particularly expertise, security, professionalism, knowledge, methodological skills (73 points),
- interpersonal competence; particularly the ability to act, foster relationships, empathy, patience (60 points).

The respondents consider the weak points of senior teachers particularly those related to:
- physical health, sensory and cognitive functions; health, vision, hearing, voice, memory (306 points),
- the ability to adapt to changes and learn; technology skills, the inability to innovate, "...they can´t keep up with the trends..." etc. (124 points),
- psychological changes; heightened sensitivity, nerves, lacking self-confidence and sense of humour, cautiousness and heightened responsibility (93 points),
- flexibility and energy; indolence, stereotype, conservative opinions (does not concern skills but loss of energy and enthusiasm), burn-out (65 points),
- transformation of relationships and social transformation; generational gap, lack of understanding for young generations, different opinions from the young, the loss of illusions about values and behaviour of the young (50 points).

These findings merely illustrate general knowledge from developmental psychology and results of researches on teachers´ health and undoubtedly deserve closer explanation or understanding of specific context in qualitatively conceived research.

On the transformation of relationships

The teachers did not reach much agreement when judging transformation of relationships either; some state that they experience great transformation in relationships (especially with pupils and parents), others do not experience any changes or are not very sure (Tab. 3). The analyses showed great variance in responses, therefore the average values are not representative.

Table 3
Change of relationships (in trichotomy of a five-point scale)
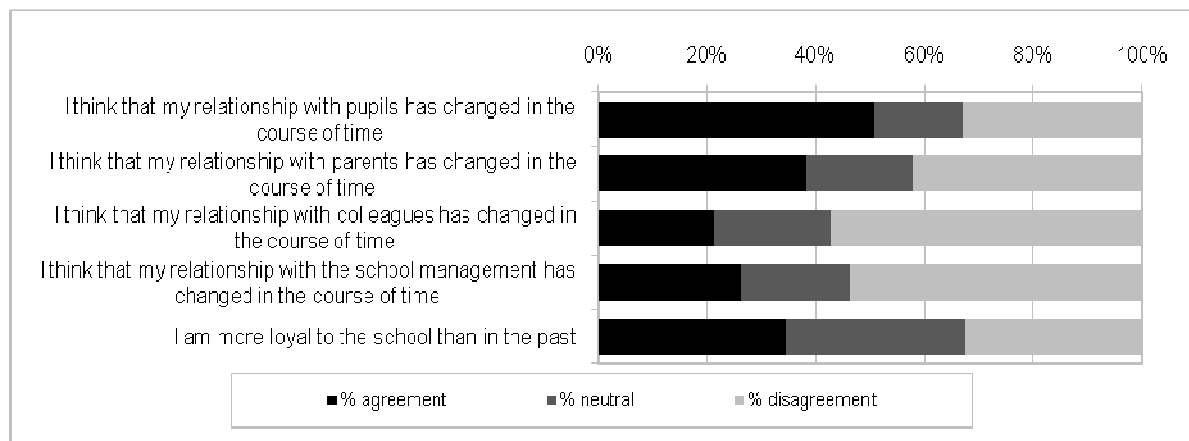
We wanted to find out in which way primarily the relationship to pupils, parents, colleagues or the school management has changed. As the changes in relationship with pupils and parents are subjectively considered more obvious, in this text we will focus exclusively on them. The teachers mention transformation of relationships which can be organised around two bipolar criteria: leniency – strictness, understanding – misunderstanding:

- greater leniency; some of the teachers (actually the majority) consider themselves more lenient, tolerant in the course of time, they relax their requirements on pupils´ behaviour and achievement (30 times)
- greater strictness; on the other hand some mention more strictness and consistency towards pupils (6 times),
- greater understanding; some teachers consider a significant feature of the transformation in relationships with pupils greater knowledge of pupils´ personalities and thus also understanding (25 times),
- less understanding; on the other hand some teachers consider the relationship with pupils to be worse and mention problems with intergenerational misunderstanding "...I don´t understand them" (7 times).

Further, the teachers mention higher concern and worries about pupils, a greater sense of responsibility, higher sympathy etc. (15 times). It seems that concerning changes in relationships there is little agreement among the teachers, although most of them point out that there is more leniency and lower requirements on pupils. However, it is not absolutely clear whether that is due to "the pressure of the time" (schools compete for every pupil and therefore the standard is lower and more tolerance is necessary for the behaviour of pupils) or if it is because personal changes bring about a more detached point of view and tolerance, but maybe also resignation and loss of interest ("sparing one´s nerves"). The expressed better understanding prevails over the negative attitude; however, it is necessary to take into consideration the questions who actually are our respondents. We can assume that they are rather those active, open, willing and positively thinking teachers who were willing to share their experience. Thus, there might be more negativism, dissatisfaction and scepticism than we are able to reveal in a research conducted in this manner.

As far as the change in the relationship of teachers over 50 with parents is concerned, neither here is much agreement and they can be classified into several groups according to their responses:

- teachers who have developed understanding: "... we have more empathy, understanding, patience, generosity and helpfulness,.... we have/had children too..." (18 responses),
- teachers who have developed scepticism: "... they do not cooperate, are unwilling, are not authority for their children, unreliable, don´t respect school nor the teachers..." (11 times),
- teachers who have developed superiority: "... we are stricter, more critical, we are not afraid of them, I give them advice, teach them responsibility, treat them as pupils..." (10 times),
- teachers who have adopted tactics and strategies: "...you have to deal with them with care, I know how deal with them, I know what they are like...") (10 times),
- teachers who have developed optimism: "...we are striving for partnership, cooperation...." (4 times),

Some teachers (apparently mainly in small towns) point out that they know whole families – the parents were once their pupils and therefore the relationship is rather specific.

ON MOTIVATION AND CONTINUANCE IN THE PROFESSION

Motivation for work and high performance is closely associated primarily with professional satisfaction. Among the most important factors of professional satisfaction teachers rank the atmosphere at the workplace, good climate, cooperation with colleagues (62 times) and good relationships with the school management, "decent management", "personality of the headmaster" (23 times). Professional dissatisfaction often results in resignation from the profession. Research proves that there is a higher percentage of resignations among teachers within the first five or seven years after entering the profession, then in middle-age the situation is stabilised and at the end of the career the number of resignations increases again, however this is probably mainly due to early retirement (e.g. Ingersoll 2001). Out of our research sample 21.1% of teachers never changed their workplace, 20.5% changed a workplace once, 26.3% twice and 32.3% of teachers changed their workplace more times. 78% of the addressed teachers have never worked outside the school sector. The most frequent tendencies to change jobs are apparent in men, only 14% of men have never changed jobs and 47.1% of men changed jobs more than three times, 30.3% of men as compared to 20.1% of women have had a job outside the school sector.

The teachers were also asked if they ever in their career got a feeling that they had to give up the teaching profession. Nearly 45% of teachers disagree completely or partly (i.e. they never wanted to give up) while approximately 40% of the respondents fill in the opposite. We can get an insight into these tendencies by looking at the open questions. As reasons for the considered resignations the teachers mention firstly fatigue caused by the enormous amount of work and duties, health problems, the burn-out syndrome etc. (22 times), misbehaviour of pupils, their lack of interest etc. (14 times) and also conflicts with the school management and relationships among the staff (13 times). The presented reasons for continuance in the profession separate the teachers into two equal groups: those who continue because of the profession (they enjoy doing the job) and those who would leave immediately if they came across a better opportunity providing at least the same life security.

If the teachers were to choose once more whether to enter the same profession then nearly a half of them would choose teaching again (81 out of 166 responses) and the other half would either hesitate (i.e. would choose teaching under certain conditions or they do not know – 37 out of 166 responses) or would reject the possibility (48 out of 166 responses). Some of the rejections were very decisive and apparently entailed certain disillusion: "Certainly not! No, never!!! No way!" etc.

CONCLUSION

The results of the questionnaire investigation indicate that the pillar of professional self-concept of senior teachers is a sense of great responsibility and ageing brings about primarily higher security in the profession.

The sense of security is then closely linked with the sense of success. The teachers consider their strong points especially experience, personality changes such as "a detached point of view and distance" etc., on the other hand, what hinders their work is mainly health problems and fatigue together with misbehaviour and lack of interest of pupils. These findings in principle correspond with previous foreign and Czech researches conducted in this area. It is remarkable that the teachers repeatedly complain about the red tape, which worsens their fatigue. Questioning the teachers about the changes of self-concept involves relying on their memory and ability of self-reflection – their experience in this respect varies. If the teachers are able to reflect on some kind of change then it is in almost all the items. They notice changes particularly in better methodological work and regarding the relationship with pupils they take the role of more "understanding and lenient" teachers. The changes in the relationship with parents are not perceived so distinctly: the teachers admit superiority, critical attitude as well as the need of strategic conduct. Teachers are typically strongly attached to their profession and are motivated by good relationships among the staff rather than by work itself, an important role is played by the school management too. It seems that creating favourable climate in schools remains a great challenge for the school managements. A matter requiring attention is undoubtedly also the relatively high percentage of completely unsatisfied teachers (Is one tenth of completely unsatisfied teachers too much or little?) and those who consider their choice of the profession a life failure. A more detailed insight into the problem was enabled partly by the teachers´ responses to the open questions, greater understanding of some of the developmental changes will be gained from the case studies conducted within our research project.

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