

The Importance of meaning in educational Work with adult Migrants

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Abstract:

This article deals with the experience of meaning of employees in educational work with adult migrants. Based on the work of Schnell (2016) and Rosso et al. (2010) factors for meaning in the workplace and fulfilling work design are presented. The answers given by interviewed adult educators are then highlighted as examples. The subjects were asked about the meaning they attach to their work. They should name meaningful moments or positive events that have particularly stuck in their memory in their current work. As a result the formulated specifics (Schnell, Rosso et al.) in relation to meaning are also transferred to adult educators who work in the professional field of training and further education for migrants.

Introduction and presentation of the term "sense"

The author of this paper is researching adult education workers who work with adult migrants. What meaning these adult educators see in this work has not yet been empirically researched. The following questions arise:

What expresses a sense of meaning for what they do in the daily work of learning facilitators? What are meaningful moments that can then in turn act as motivators for the work? Is there any time at all in the everyday life of adult educators for questions of meaning? Do some things even seem meaningless? In the course of this paper, we will first look at "meaning in work" and then at "meaningfulness and volunteering". Afterwards, the answers of interviewed adult educators will be presented in order to show their experience of meaning and to give the professional group space in the scientific discussion.

"Meaning" is a complex construct and has many meanings that cannot be discussed further in this article. "Meaning" is attributed to actions, intentions and activities, events, facts and norms. The attribution of meaning is a cognitive-judgmental function that is linked to emotional experience and to behaviour and action (cf. Tausch, 2008: pp. 97-113). According to Schnell (2016), meaning is "[...] the taking of a path, the decision for a direction that determines meaning or meaninglessness. Implicit is a dynamic quality of meaning. Meaning is not definable. Meaning is the path, not the goal" (Schnell, 2016: p. 6).

Regarding the topic of meaning in work, she notes that there is a "love of work" (Schnell, 2016: p. 152), which can express itself in flexibility, availability and self-commitment, even self-exploitation. Yet this love does not have emotional backing, as the Gallup Engagement Index finds every year. In 2014, 85 per cent of Germans said they had little or no attachment to their employer (cf. Schnell, 2016: p. 152). Despite this, the majority of employees say they are satisfied with their employment relationship (cf. Hammermann & Stettes, 2013: p. 1). Quick notes that this contradiction can be explained by the fact that very few people can choose between different jobs. Without these choices and in the awareness of impending unemployment, one is more likely to agree with the given, i.e. to be satisfied. Earning money is in the foreground, from

which the meaningful potential of work suffers (cf. Schnell, 2016: p. 152).

In principle, it is about "professional fulfilment of meaning", which Schnell defines as "individual experience of meaningfulness, orientation, coherence and belonging in the context of the current work activity" (Schnell, 2016: p. 155). "Meaningfulness" refers to the perceived benefit and impact for other people, "orientation" refers to values and other guidelines for professional action, "coherence" refers to the coherent interplay between the levels of meaning construction, i.e. whether the activity harmonises with the work goals and the outlook on life, and "belonging" refers to the emotional-cognitive anchoring in and identification with the company (cf. Schnell, 2016: pp. 155-156). On the basis of his own and other empirical studies, Schnell derives "predictors" for the assessment of "occupational fulfilment of meaning" from these components, namely "meaningfulness of the activity", "socio-moral climate", "self-transcendent orientation of the company", "job fit" and "person" (Schnell, 2016: p. 157).

These "predictors" will be briefly described below:

Schnell states that the (1) "meaningfulness of the activity" easily fades into the background as long as growth or other economic metrics are in the foreground. This meaningfulness can be what newcomers to the profession expect from the specific activity, e.g. nurses who want to provide good care, construction site workers who want to help construct buildings they can be proud of, or medical practitioners who want to heal people. "When quantity takes precedence over quality, the "real" meaning of work is forgotten" (Schnell, 2016: p. 158). Therefore, it can be helpful for workers to remember why they chose the particular profession. Employers can make the significance of the work activity visible to others, e.g. through an "open day" (Schnell, 2016: p. 158).

Schnell's working group was able to prove advantages of a good (2) socio-moral organisational climate:

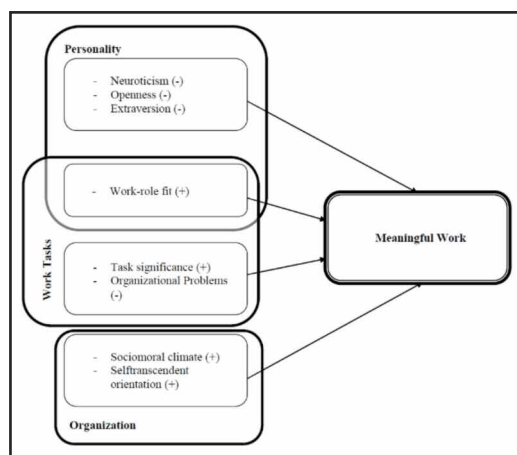
Through open, appreciative and participative interaction, workers show more empathy, reliability, helpfulness and solidarity both with each other and with their superiors and the company as a whole. They feel more committed to the company, which promotes motivation, engage-

ment and ultimately productivity (Schnell, 2016: p. 160).

Schnell refers to an alternative concept called the "fourth sector" (Schnell, 2016: p. 160) as (3) "self-transcending corporate orientation". "Distinguished from the public, private and social sectors, according to Sabeti & Fourth Sector Network Concept Working Group (2009), this sector refers to initiatives such as 'corporate social responsibility', micro-financing of e.g. micro-loans, sustainable business or social entrepreneurship. If values are lived out in this way that go beyond the self-preservation of a company, then companies can expect the employees' professional sense of meaning to grow" (Schnell, 2016: p. 161).

Schnell states that (4) a good "job fit" in terms of education, interests and personality is important. However, this is rather the exception, as a study by Schnell et al. (2013) shows. Here, a quarter of the employees stated that their job and personality were not a good match. The consequences of this "mismatching" include under- or over-demand, overuse and stress. The consequences are physical or psychological complaints such as pain, sleep disorders, irritability, nervousness or dejection (Schnell, 2016: p. 162)

Figure 1 Predictors of meaningfulness at work at personality, activity and organisational level



Source: (Schnell et al., 2013, <http://www.sinnforschung.org/archives/1609>, accessed 28.07.2022)

For the employed persons (5), according to Schnell, "occupational fulfilment of meaning" is specifically reflected in high commitment to work, job satisfaction, performance and loyalty to the employer (cf. Schnell, 2016: p. 164). In contrast, "occupational emptiness of meaning" can be equated with a "crisis of meaning" in general (Schnell, 2016: p. 164). Occupational emptiness of meaning can derive, for example, from burnout, a clinical picture characterised by extreme exhaustion. The causes of this in turn lie in "work intensification" and "loss of control" (Schnell, 2016: p. 165).

Rosso et al. (2010) constructed a theoretical framework model considering the most important components of occupational sense-making.

Accordingly, two central factors of life are the person's agency and the community. On the one hand, it is given to being human to be self-active, i.e. to lead, to construct and to be artistically active. On the other hand, however, there is the need for connection and contact with other persons. Occupational sense fulfilment feeds from both areas. The perception of meaning in working life varies depending on the direction of action. One's own person (self) is confronted with others. Furthermore, the sense of meaning depends on whether the experiences are perceived as intrinsic or extrinsic.

Rosso et al. further identify individuation, contribution, self-connection and unification as essential to the experience of meaning. It is assumed that work experiences that satisfy more than one of the four areas lead to a stronger experience of meaning and thus function cumulatively.

In relation to the experience of meaning in the teaching profession, the conclusion is that a teacher experiences maximum meaning when self-efficacy, autonomy, competence and authenticity are satisfied, a contribution is made to others and she can identify with the values of the teaching institution.

(cf. Rosso et al., 2010, pp. 113-115).

Figure 2 Four paths to meaningful work: a theoretical framework model

Source: own illustration based on Rosso et al. 2010: p. 114

Research shows that it is precisely volunteer work that is described by employees as most meaningful (cf. Schnell, 2016: p. 170). Several characteristics support the meaningfulness of this type of activity. It is highly meaningful, is chosen on the basis of personal interests, abilities and time opportunities, and can thus be integrated coherently into personal life. Volunteering often takes place in community, which promotes the development of belonging (cf. Schnell & Hoof, 2012: p. 35).

In a representative study from 2009, Hoof & Schnell proved "that the sense of meaning of volunteers is higher than that of the normal population" (Hoof & Schnell, 2009: 8). The method was used to determine whether volunteers "deviate in the nature and extent of their life meanings from a representative German comparison sample" (Hoof & Schnell, 2009: p. 413). The study was able to show that the volunteers had a significantly higher sense of fulfilment than the general sample.

For volunteering to be experienced as meaningful, the best possible fit between person and activity is necessary. In a study with 168 volun-

teers, Schnell & Hoof found "that volunteers in hospices are characterised by their high spirituality, while in organisations such as the Red Cross or the volunteer fire brigade, the experience of fun and the exercise of power are more pronounced" (Schnell, 2016: pp. 170-171).

Object of research, research question and methodology

The research subject of this article is adult educators who are involved in the further education of migrants. In 2018-2019, the author selected people who work with migrant adults (e.g. in language courses, integration projects, counselling) and have a pedagogical, adult education or a degree in education or further education. The spectrum was deliberately kept broad to ensure that people from diverse areas of education and training would come forward for a guideline interview. The plan was that these education professionals would be able to provide information about their everyday work and their views on motivations, stressors, coping strategies and experiences of meaning. An information letter was prepared to recruit the interview partners. This

was sent by email to potential actors and institutions in refugee aid in the Rhine-Main region. The project was also made known verbally. There were 18 responses, but 4 people were not involved in adult education but in practical support for migrants. There were two appointment cancellations.

In the following, the interviewees are briefly introduced in the selected profile:

- 1 Ms G.: employed, asylum coordinator, political scientist, DaF teacher, 38 years old
- 2 Ms B.: voluntary, secondary school teacher, integration teacher, 59 years old
- 3 Mr B.: voluntary, bank manager, retired trainer, 69 years old
- 4 Ms W.: voluntary, PhD in German studies, language teacher, 75 years old
- 5 Ms S.: employed, B. Sc. physiotherapy, M.A. adult education, headmistress of physiotherapy school, 50 years old
- 6 Mr. Ba.: employed, M.A. Anthropology, employee Bildungswerk, 53 years old
- 7 Ms N.: voluntary (refugee work), employed, B.A. nursing pedagogy, head of rescue service school, M.A. adult education, 32 years old
- 8 Ms T.: employed, M.A. Marketing, language teacher, 33 years old
- 9 Ms. F.: employed and voluntary, teacher nursing, M.A. adult education, 58 years old
- 10 Ms D.: employed, 1st service examination in education, DaF teacher, 70 years old
- 11 Ms O.: voluntary, primary school teacher, VHS teacher, 68 years old
- 12 Mr R.: civil servant, police teacher, graduate administrator, coordinator of intercultural competence/diversity management, 34 years old.

The respondents were asked, among other things, about the meaning they attach to their work. They were asked to name meaningful moments or positive events that they particularly remembered in their current work.

After transcription, the interviews were analysed by means of qualitative content analysis based on categories in order to draw conclusions about the employees' experience of meaning.

Results

For most respondents, the purpose of their work is to integrate people, be it integration into European norms and values or integration into the world of work. Thus, all participants in the survey want to help migrants arrive and move on in German society. This entry should take place, for example, through language work, support in finding work and through the cultural integration of the refugees. Ms. B. (101)¹, Ms. S. (289-298), Mr. Ba. (126) and Ms. T. (53-59) mention their joy when a refugee has achieved a school or vocational qualification or found a job. The following quote exemplifies the joy of an adult educator:

"Of course, positive events are every placement in training, every placement in work, but also small steps. Yes, we talked about it earlier, the young lady from the last course who could neither read nor write in her home language, taught herself everything, could then read and write in German, who has now gone to a placement where she can catch up on her secondary school leaving certificate and gets the whole thing financed and also receives pocket money. These are moments when I say 'Yes, great. That was very worthwhile. Of course, the big moments for me are when a certificate from Darmstadt is recognised and the door opens for training. We have to wait three months, three months plus, and then at some point the day comes. The certificate is there. Great joy." (Mr Ba. 114-126)

At the same time, however, the appreciation of the work is also a frequently mentioned aspect regarding meaningfulness. This is the appreciation that the interviewees experience from the migrants (e.g. Ms T. 142-144, Ms B. 68). In addition, the gratitude expressed by the participants, especially in an immaterial way (thank-you notes, support in class) but also in a material way (invitation to a meal), gives their work meaning (e.g. Ms. B. 123, 70-72, Ms. G.137-138). About a third of the respondents also find their job personally enriching. Here, for example, learning about foreign cultures or training in didactic skills is mentioned (e.g. Ms. N. 139, 190). Thus, getting to know foreign food and languages as well as training in self-reflection is perceived as

¹ Line references of the respective interviews in brackets, available from the author

meaningful (Ms T. 125-126). Mutual profit is also mentioned as an aspect of meaningfulness. There is an opportunity to learn about diversity and to promote it in our society (Ms G., 124-130). Pluralism is seen as good for our society. Both migrants and teachers can benefit from each other's experiences. For Ms G. in particular, this aspect gives rise to the meaningfulness of her work (124-130):

"And um, these stories that you get to know, experience, also the differences in language, because it was often something mutual. I taught them something and at the same time they taught me something from their language and their culture. And I always found that enriching. So that's also what I like about pluralism: you just take what you think is good and leave out the bad. That's nice, you benefit from the experiences of others. (Ms G. 124-130)

Ms D. sees the integration of migrants as a social enrichment (Ms D. 94-100, 102-104). One of the respondents emphasises completely selfless help. Mr B. does not want to receive any gratitude, neither on a material nor on an immaterial basis. He does not want to make any profit of his own from his work and adopts a very altruistic attitude (Mr B. 42-91). The satisfaction of others is more important to him than his own:

"There is nothing worse, I think Oscar Wilde once said, than being constantly grateful to another person. Gratitude in the long run is never, never good and so I don't expect it permanently, but I say I do it on my own initiative and not in order to get some kind of reward, be it financial, that's not the case anyway, or be it immaterial". (Mr B. 86-91).

For Ms N., the meaningfulness lies in the acquisition of intercultural competences. This represents more meaningfulness for her than the gratitude of the migrants. (190, 206-207) For Ms N. (138-139), Ms F. (62-66) and Ms S. (432-433) it is meaningful to reflect on one's own seminar and training contents against the background of people's "being different".

Conclusion and outlook

The sense of purpose in the work seems to be perceived as very high by the respondents of the present study. This is suggested by the diversity of the answers. As presented above, Schnell was able to show that it is precisely voluntary work

that is described as most meaningful by the employees (cf. Schnell, 2016). This can also be seen in the responses of the test persons in this article. Furthermore, it could also be established for adult education with migrants that meaningfulness correlates with motivation. Most of the interviewees see the meaning of their work in the integration of people. They want to make it easier for people to start a new life. Since they help the refugees intensively through their work, they experience a lot of gratitude and appreciation. This positive feedback encourages the education workers and increases the meaningfulness of their work. For their part, they give back empathy and an altruistic attitude. The interviewees also learn through their work in terms of intercultural and linguistic competence and feel this to be a personal enrichment. There is also a further meaning to their work through learning about diversity and the social diversity that arises through integration. Some educators find it meaningful to be able to reflect on their own seminar content against the background of interculturality. One adult educator would like to work through his own migration biography in his work with people. In comparison to the literature presented, there are some similarities. For example, the "socio-moral climate" mentioned by Schnell (2016) also contributes to a sense of meaning in work in adult and continuing education according to the present study. Furthermore, in the essence of the interviews Rosso et al (2010) confirmed that a teacher experiences maximum meaning when self-efficacy, autonomy, competence and authenticity are satisfied, a contribution is made to others and she can identify with the values of the teaching institution.

Overall, more interest should be given to the topic of meaningful work in (voluntary) migrant education. A working hypothesis could be: If the adult educators feel they are doing meaningful work, this will also transfer to the education recipients. This would have to be tested in a further study.

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