

”COMPETENCE” UNDER THE MICROSCOPE: ANALYSIS FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: *This paper is an approach to the competence both as a concept and as a core issue of the curriculum design and curriculum implementation. This approach could be considered as an application of existing knowledge so as to generate new nuanced understandings of the competence concept. The ongoing process of competencies' development during the different phases of ontogenesis is synthetically presented. The important place and role of the formal curriculum design and of curriculum implementation for the quality of the process of competencies' development are explained. At the same time, it is emphasized the idea that the curricular design starts with the formulation of the prefigured competences as expected results, while the curricular implementation is finalized with the achievement of these competencies, in a greater or a lower level of quality. The presentation uses metaphors (the “metaphor of the forest” and the “metaphor of the building”) for a more suggestive argumentation of the exposed ideas. The paper is part of the series of publications focused on the thorny issue of curriculum theory.*

Keywords: *competence-competency; competent personality; evolving competencies; concrete competencies in practice; curriculum design;*

1. Competence/ competency concept and implications within the curriculum context

It is imperious necessary to understand and to accept that the educational process starts on the way of the ontogenetical evolution from the very beginning of the great entrance in life through the birth gate, if not even before this moment according to specific and interesting researches. (Niculescu, 2014: 243).

The developmental process of the students' competencies is situated on the crossroad of the top-down approach of curriculum design and the down-top route of curriculum fulfilment. The curriculum design establishes (prefigures) the expected outcomes in terms of competencies, as synergetic effects of three components: knowledge, skills (or, more specifically capacities /abilities) as operators, and attitudes based on values, as vectors. This meaning of the concept of competence/competency makes difficult to understand the definition given for competency in the Romanian Education Law in 2011. Here the competence is seen as a multifunctional and transferable assembly of knowledge, skills (defined with a term in Romanian focused on the automatism in action)/abilities, and aptitudes. The aptitudes as operational components of the human personality are premises for a higher development of the abilities, but the definition seems to have lost the attitudes as vector components, extremely important for the quality of the entire construction.

The Draft for Curriculum of Early Education keeps, unfortunately, this definition inside the text, as a referential one (2017:11.), even if the glossary of the same document presents another definition for competence, more complex and complete, but still keeping the Romanian expressions coming from the traditional pedagogy next to new concepts. In fact, as I have suggested in a previously published paper (Niculescu R.M. 2017) it is a kind of keeping the use of ”mermaids” in the pedagogical language, unhappily mixing traditional terms with modern ones, often in a tautological manner. This lack of consistency (existing within a lot of official documents) creates difficulties for what it is called perceived

curriculum, meaning the way of decoding the requests of the official curriculum by the actors of curriculum implementation. The perceived curriculum represents an important starting point for an effective implementation of curriculum in the practical field of education.

Another source of influence for understanding the competence concept is the document: Recommendation 2006/962/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competencies for lifelong learning (OJ L 394, 30.12.2006, pp. 10-18) where the competencies are defined as *a combination* of knowledge, skills, and attitudes appropriate to the context. Key competencies, as core concepts of the quoted document, are those which all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion, and an effective integration as an employee. This is a more complete definition except that, essentially, a competence is not a combination of elements but more a *synergetic effect* of them.

2. The evolution of competencies along ontogenesis process

The previously published paper (Niculescu, R.M.2014) speaks about the long way of developing competencies with a special attention for the first stages of the ontogenesis. In the actual context, a presentation from another perspective is intended. The presentation is rooted in a published book (Niculescu, 2010:99) where the subchapter VII.2.3. put into discussion the idea of “The birth and life of a competent personality”. The idea of the continuous and complex process of development of the competencies in ontogenesis is highlighted.

The focus, this time, is not on the different meanings of the concept of competence/ competency (a thorny issue widely presented in the literature) but on the using of the singular and the plural of the concept competence connected to the adjective competent, and the plural of the concept: competences with their alternative competencies, coming from the word: competency. These multi-meanings of different words are specific for the Anglo-Saxon languages and they appear less in Latin languages, especially in French, where the concepts *compétence/ competences* are well and interestingly addressed.

The use of term competencies is considered in the day to day language as its meaning connected to the adjective competent/ *compétent*. That is probably why the use of the term competencies in the first part of the ontogenesis is considered less appropriate.

A clear distinction should be done: the distinction between “a competent adult/ professional/ personality (*personnalité compétente*)” on one side, and the competencies developed during a long-term process from the birth to the maturity, on the other side. Only a mature human can be defined as a more or less competent personality (*personnalité compétente*), but a human being reaches this level after a continuous process of development of the own competencies

During this long-term process the competencies pass through a complex development from simple competencies, specific for the early year, combined and integrated gradually into more, and more complex competencies, developed in different areas and turning into transferable key competencies; these are further detailed or completed by the so-called specific competencies with peculiar application within defined areas of activity.

Along the person's genesis process, we could use the term of *evolving competencies*, explicitly developed during all the school years through the formal curriculum, and completed by the influences of the non-formal and informal curriculum. When the development of the human has reached maturity, we could talk about a *competent personality* (meaning that the human has already enough transferable/key competencies and specific competencies for a professional/ working area, to be able to support himself/herself independently and to support other people. The level of the personal competence is different and unique as the human

personality is unique, as well. It depends on very specific personal factors, starting to heredity towards all what it meant personal life and individual conditions of development.

Another important issue should complete the previous presentation. The process of evolution of the personal competencies is not finished when they become parts of a competent human personality, as a professional or social person. They are constantly modulated, completed, and sometimes even substantially changed, as the person's active life unfolds. Thus, they can be named on this sequence of the human's life as *concrete competencies in practice* (fig. 1)

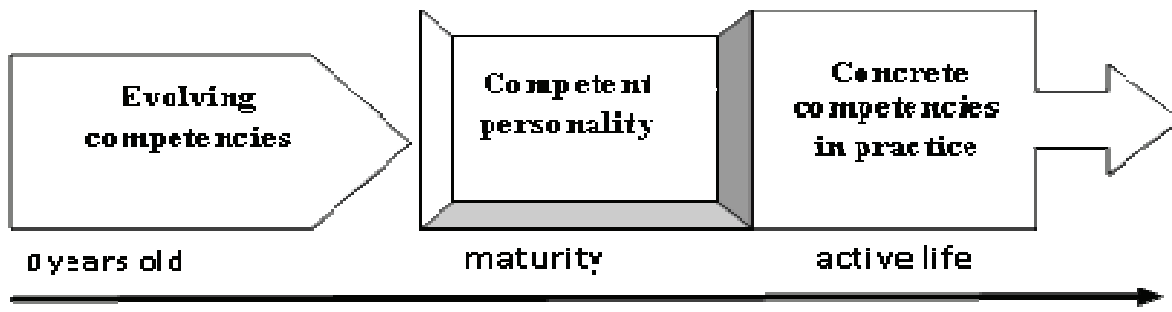


Fig. 1: “The birth and life of a competent personality”

Metaphorically speaking, from seed, through seedlings in nurseries, to forestation is the path of evolution towards maturity. The forest, once already born, from her youth until the end of her existence, gives the green, shade and the freshness of the air to what the environment asks for. But the forest's green, shade, and freshness do not remain the same along the passing of time. Leaving back the ancient periods, since there was a formal intervention in the forests' evolution, humans exist beyond it, aiming to help this evolution.

And just like in this long way of evolution of the forest, the HUMAN PERSONALITY 's development (within formal, non-formal, and informal contexts) keeps hidden the professionals with different educational roles. These hypostases of humans accompanying the long way of competencies development and transformation are represented in the process of human evolution by the parents as educators, the professional educators, and, later, the humans themselves that lead as masters the fabulous symphony of their own development during the so-called life-long-learning.

3. The effectiveness of curriculum management on strategic and tactical levels – a condition of the achievement of high levelled competencies of the students

A reiteration of a core idea is necessary: competencies should be seen both as anticipated and desired expectations as core elements of a curriculum design and final obtained results after the implementation of a designed curriculum. It is obvious that the qualitative results of the implementation (the obtained competencies) depend on the quality of the curriculum design. A paper published in 2016 (Niculescu, R.M) presents the metaphor of curriculum design as a harmony block, pleading for the necessity of keeping the National curriculum design as a well-defined unit characterized by logic, harmony, and continuity.

The metaphor of the building has been presented in the mentioned paper, expressing the unity and the solidity of a curriculum design. The analogy of the building with a different number of floors presumes a defined number of levels according to each national educational system. In the context of this paper, this metaphor is to be seen from the point of view of

competence/ competencies, as finalities (put into analogy with the wellbeing of the people living on each floor and within the entire building).

The metaphorical building was considered having as starting point the right dimensions of the digging for the future foundation, and the foundation solidity; these could represent the early education in the broad sense that includes everything the child did before entering the school system where the play is the main context of the learning process. The first specific educational level where *voluntary learning* becomes step by step dominant versus the *play* starts with late pre-school and become important during the primary school levels. This is generally the case in the world, regardless of the age at which the first grade is placed in the local education system, at about six / seven years.

All the next floors of the building are to be built based on these foundations. They are connected by steps or/and elevators. On each level, there are apartments, connected to each other on the same level and on the vertical plane. The humans' wellbeing (on successive ages) and their functional and effective activities (with the specificity of each level), that implies properly developed competencies (as an analogy), must be the core interest of the design, construction, and, further use/implementation, both for the building and curriculum. The analogy involved by the metaphor of the building with the design and implementation of the curriculum should lead to the understanding of the necessity for curriculum to ensure the right and the functional context for a continuum, consistent, and effective development of the humans' competencies.

The humans climb from a level to another during their school life. Thus, humans' competencies and their quality are deeply influenced by the continuity and the functionality of curriculum design and implementation on the vertical plane: it means that it is necessary to flow without dysfunctional cuts in the electrical system, the water supply or other functional aspects (when it is about the building) and without discontinuity when it is about the continuum of the competencies development. Compatibility, harmony, and functional connections should exist on the horizontal plan as well both between neighbours, and curricular fields, as well.

Retouches and multiple repairs may be required both in the building and on the national curriculum, along with the building process or with the development of a generation subject to education based on it. They are part of the curriculum development process on a tactical level.

When a national curriculum has to be changed, as a whole strategy, the old experience has to be considered both on the work of the architects of the new curriculum and on what the builders will do. But it is essential to consider what the new tenants need (the new generations of the educational system). They are human beings that definitely have the specific features and requirements of a new time, of a new stage in the evolution of mankind.

There will be no re-invented issues, will preserve what has proven positive and introduce what the new tenants/ generations seem to need.

The life of these human beings, when a block is built, the competencies of the students able to make better their lives, when it is about designing and implementing a curriculum should be the genuine focus of both approaches.

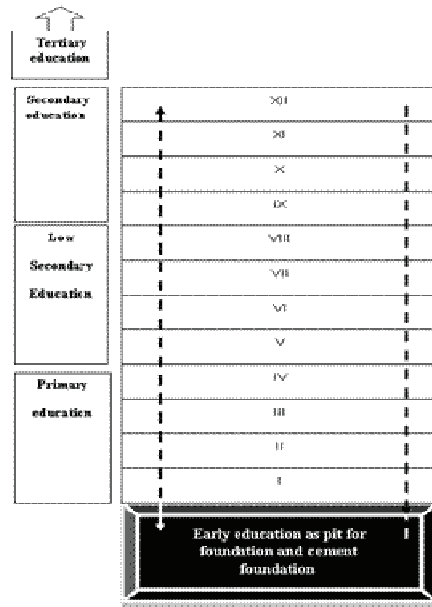


Fig. 2: The metaphor of the building: for the unity and the consistency of curriculum design and implementation

4. The multiple hypostases of the professionals of education within the context of the new millennium.

The “educator”, as a generic term, means anybody and everybody who is blessed to have a (desirable positive) influence on another human being. It would be much to discuss all or each of the educators who leave deep fingerprints on the human beings development as humans: parents, teachers, scholars, and a lot of other adults surrounding the humans during their entire existence.

When it is about the teacher from preschool education toward the university on should discuss a double hypostasis: as managers of the educational process and managers of a group of developing human beings, gathered in a class, a school, a university etc. These two hypostases have many similar/common issues, but they have a lot of differences as well. Both of these two hypostases need a high levelled development of both the key competencies and the specific ones.

The complex process of teachers training must be focused on their development as professionals of teaching but also as managers of humans passing a long and difficult process of becoming. They must have a well-developed *competence profile* as professionals in the field of education specifically because they are highly responsible for the appropriate development of their students’ competencies.

A more serious and responsible concern should be taken into account for the area of teachers’ training in Romania and in the entire world as well. It seems that nowadays this concern should involve a focus on the development of a core curriculum of an international competence profile of a teacher because of the unprecedented mobility of students and teachers across the various meridians of the earth. Specific competencies appropriate for each peculiar national and cultural context can be connected to this core competence profile of the universal teachers, aiming to answer to the very concrete requests. Unfortunately, on the

theoretical level this issue is vaguely accepted and sometimes declared as a wish, but practically, it remains only a dream. The future asks, however, a more obvious effort for turning this dream into effective reality.

The management of the institutions of education, the opportunity of professionalizing this hypostasis is other interesting issues to be debated, analysed and considered as the best practices aiming to rich the genuine quality of education. The different experiences existing worldwide analysed within and outside their social- cultural and political contexts could be an interesting and generous resource.

These all are interesting areas for an in-depth research; they should be considered as fields of interest for an effective research in education. International research projects should be fructified with genuine positive results.

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