

ARE COMPETENCIES AND COMMITTED LEARNING STYLE CONCEPTS TO BE CONNECTED TO EARLY EDUCATION?

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents a plea for the need of professionalization of human resource involved in early, pre-school and primary education. The necessity of a continuum interrelationship of a professionalized educator, child and family along a wider period of time during the first ontogenesis stages is also explained and argued.

The issue of real and fake controversy in the literature on modern curricula emphasis is brief overview.

*The opportunity to use the concepts of **competencies** for the early stages of ontogenesis is also substantiated, by highlighting the developmental process of these competencies until the crystallization of the competent personality and further the refinement and development of practical skills.*

The need of grounding in early childhood what would later become an effective learning style, committed learning is explained. The adults' insertion in the social and professional life of our millennium depends on the level of development of this learning style.

The end of the article summarizes the experience of an interesting Masters program (PERFORMER) aiming to train based on a new curricular model the human resources for early, preschool, and primary education teachers.

KEYWORDS: *committed learning; competencies – competence; professionalization of human resource involved in early, pre-school and primary education.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Education theoretical area became more and more a contradiction field for theoreticians and an implicitly rejected domain for the practitioners of education. Unfortunately, this truth is not explicitly accepted because of a kind of fashion to discuss theory in all the important meetings but to not take seriously it into account when the education becomes a genuine practice.

Contradictory considered approaches are found in the literature: CBC (competency based curriculum) vs. OBC (Objective based curriculum), or, in other terms: CBE vs. OBE, where the term curriculum is replaced with the term education are lingeringly analyzed. These approaches are put in connection with different psychological theories about learning as behaviorism, constructivism and others. Such analyses have undoubtedly their importance and contribution

for an in depth understanding of the complexity of the educational process within the onto-genesis context. The proper reconsideration of teaching – assessing components focused on the effective students' learning process is based on a correct understanding of the aim of education. But the effort to find contradictions where they do not genuinely exist and sometime even to invent them for the debate sake does not appear as an effective approach for practice in education field. It remains a sterile attempt to theorize without proper effects in developing positive experience in educational practice.

Only one genuine contradiction is to be considered among the mentioned terms: the contradiction between so called *teacher centered curriculum and student centered curriculum*. The others (competence centered-action centered, objective centered) are all focused on a learner who follows the sets of the learning situations designed by the educator. This learner, within a student centered curriculum is an active one, accompanied along his or her learning process by the teachers aware about their designing, monitoring and assessing role. The educators firstly settle expected outcomes for their students, named with different words according to the languages: aims, goals, objectives (in English) or finalities with specific categories (in Latin languages). They all have in common the same differentiation among their degree of generality. The educators design then learning situations, putting together within a synchronic structure contents, teaching and assessing methods all considered inside of a specified time; a following moment is that of implementing the designed learning situations following the route towards the competences designed as expected outcomes. The objective centered curriculum follows in fact the same philosophy but the accent is put on defining atomized objectives on very concrete behaviors with an openly declared intention to find measurable behaviors. This philosophy met a strong criticism but particularly for this focus on measurement based on too devised behaviors not because of the intention to establish the outcomes for the students involved within the educational process.

All the considerations above do not mean that the theory of education or curriculum is considered obsolete, on the contrary. I would highlight that generally the theoretical fundamentals for practice no matter the field considered are extremely important but as fundamentals, not as fields of battles for theoreticians who sometime contemplate the practical field through the windows of the academic tower of ivory.

2. THE LONG WAY OF DEVELOPING COMPETENCIES

The topic of professionalization of the educators who work in early education (with a special focus on 0-3 years old age of their "learners") involves some necessary discussion about several theoretical issues, in terms already emphasized, not for the theory sake but for a genuine understanding of what a formal curriculum for this age should mean.

A first concept to be analyzed is the terms of competencies-competence. It is not my intention to extend the analysis to the details of the connected and contradictory meanings of these two concepts as they appear in the literature. But a debate about the appropriateness of using these concepts when one speaks about early education is necessary. I do not believe that one can use the singular form of competence when it is about a baby or a toddler. This singular form should be connected to the concept of personality as an attribute of an already developed personality. But even in the moment of establishing the APGAR score the deep meaning of competencies is involved.

This score, introduced in 1953 by Virginia Apgar [Apgar, V. 2014], assesses five important parameters that illustrate the potential of a new born when he or she enter the gate of the life as a candidate for humanity as H. Piéron said [1951]. This gate that should be widely opened, as Helen Key [1910] asked to be for *his majesty the child*, is a first step, and the APGAR score is the first assessment of the competencies specific for a new born, the potential of educability and the basics for the education itself. “The birth and life of a competent personality”[Niculescu R.M. 2010] represents a long and thorny way. It consists further, after the moment of birth, in a consistent process with three main steps: a) a first step of developing of what one can call as concrete evolving competencies specific for each stage in Piagetian terms, through formal education supported by the non-formal and informal hypostasis; this development cover the entire period towards maturity; b) a second step represents the crystallization of a competent personality (with a defined profile consisting in general competencies and specific competencies for a specified professional field; in this statement *competence* word appears as an attribute of the personality c) the last step continues the dynamic of the consistent process of competencies evolution through what one can call as concrete competencies in practice, or applied competencies; their involvement in practical activities means a further and nuanced evolution. Thus, one can say that the competencies evolution is a lifelong continuous process.

I have stated these issues for a very practical reason. It is imperious necessary to be understood that education does not start only sometime in the school period of life for the simple reason that competencies start to be developed from the very beginning of the life; it is important to notice that this moment is nowadays placed even before the birth date in the specific moment of conception).

In these terms it becomes important to know what the early education should do. The outcomes of this period must be the inputs of the next period (preschool education) as well as the outcomes of preschool age must be the inputs of the primary education stage, and so far.

The designing curriculum process must start with establishing the outcomes of the last stage of the education for a mature and professionalized

personality. From this point further, with a top-down route, the outcomes of each stage of education are designed. But the fulfillment of the outcomes has a down-top route and the starting point is the birth moment.

Within the curriculum design process the finalities are presumed and expected outcomes but they are described in terms of competencies through the competency components: *knowledge, skills (or abilities/ capacities) as operators, and attitudes as vectors*. It is no use in this context to detail another long and sometime sterile debated about the right use of these terms especially because essentially the contradictions appears not exactly on a conceptual level but more on a linguistic one, because of a sensible and nuanced meaning used in different languages. The mentioned finalities (a more French term) are usually named as *goals and objectives* with a clear direction showed by *aims* (in English), a conceptual category that states the direction "aiming" to reach the proposed outcomes.

3. COMMITTED LEARNING STYLE A NEED OF THE FUTURE AND A PRODUCT OF THE PAST

The strong demand of the new millennium for education is a genuine change of paradigm. Thus the education turns from a teacher centered paradigm to a child in action and self involvement approach. Consequently, through curriculum and beyond it, in a trans-curricular (or trans-disciplinary) manner the development of the presumed competencies as necessary outcomes becomes an obvious effective aspect of the new paradigm. To have a competent personality when the maturity is installed appears as a "must" nowadays and this involves that the young adult have to be capable to a committed learning approach in order to cope the social and professional challenges. The committed learning must be understood not as an attitude towards the learning process but much more than this: an already functional learning style. Within a learning society as the third millennium human society is considered, this new learning approach appears as strictly necessary.

The committed learning style has several distinctive features: the cognitive capacity of the learners to find new useful knowledge for solving the challenging problems they are confronted with, to engage themselves with intrinsic motivation, curiosity, and inquiry within the complex learning process. The learning process itself is understood as a *studying* process, involving *willingness* and the *awareness* of its dynamic aims. This style implies *activity, practice, co-operation with other learners, a high level of communication and team working skills*. Such a complex learning style is not to be developed only in the last part of the genesis of the human's personality. It needs a long, dynamic, and well designed and implemented way. Perseverance and continuity from babies' and toddlers' age towards maturity is needed.

Otherwise is like one builds a tower block starting to the third, fifth floor or even the six floors. The formal education starts unfortunately at three, four or even five years old in the happiest situations all over the world. This is happening in an era when the adults of a family are more and more both involved within a professional activity while their children need an adequate education. The necessity of a genuine and responsible focus on a formal early education appears as a core demand of the new era generated by this complex context put into connection with the requests of a proper developing of the mentioned committed learning style as a condition of the development of an effective and successful adult.

4. HIGHLIGHTED QUESTIONS

Several questions are to be highlighted.

How is the society of today ready to genuinely focus the attention on the lifelong learning concept, understood from its early roots?

What kind of institutions are the best for an effective enrolment and education of babies and toddlers?

Who the professional of education for these ages are, and how they must be trained?

If society has not any doubt about the need of professionals as pediatricians can one consider as a deep necessity the professionalization for early education as well?

Can we further accept an imbalance of taking care about the body of our children versus the healthy development of their mind and soul?

Can one consider the professionalization for early, preschool and primary education as a genuine necessity as long as it is openly recognized the role of professionals as pediatricians?

The continuum early, preschool and primary education is put into these terms because as the mother must be the only one in the life, the second educator entering into the child's life must have certain continuity. This new educator must accompany the child long enough while the entering of other professionals into the formal educational process have to be a smooth and rational demarche. These are rhetorical questions but they do need a responsible answer.

5. PERFORMER PROJECT A CONTEXT OF POSSIBLE ANSWERS

The project PERFORMER can be considered as a possible answer for some of these questions as a starting point for the thorny process of confronting such a demanding reality.

This project is an innovative approach of professionalizing human resources for early, preschool and primary education, with roots in an interesting Italian experience developed by ISPEF Rome. The adapted model

has been implemented in Romanian tertiary level with a joint effort of three Romanian universities as partners: Transilvania of Braşov, Aurel Vlaicu of Arad and *I Decembrie* of Alba Iulia. The experience of our two years of a new master program and of three years of working under the umbrella of an EU project gives the chance of some interesting conclusions.

1. The considered continuum of early, preschool and primary education seems to be strength at least from two reasons: babies, toddlers and young children who are put into educational institution need continuity in their relation with another educator than their parents. The necessary consistency of the influence of emotions for the cognitive, ethic and psychomotor development of children is not to be argued in this context because it is almost unanimously accepted.
2. A proper training of professionals able to manage the educational process along the first eleven years of ontogenesis would be a plus for an effective partnership between the professionals of formal education and children's parents in the benefit of the kids.
3. The blended approach of the training program of our master seems to offer more opportunities and strengths than weaknesses and threatens.
4. A serious and intrinsic motivation of the people involved (scholars and students) can lead towards exciting and effective outcomes, in terms of new and necessary competencies for the graduates and a nuanced new philosophy for scholars.
5. Unfortunately, the rigors of an EU project have sometimes functioned as a Procrustean bed with threatening and disturbing effects. The need of proofs for everything is done; the burdensome bureaucracy can turn the attention from the essence of the work to appearance, surface leading to superficiality. This is not strength or a condition of a genuine quality. The focus on what must be proved turns the attention from what is necessary and effective to be done. The rush for “surface and evidences” can alter even the relation between educator and learner; devastating effects of the hidden curriculum could become more than dangerous. One of them is a deep decrease of motivation for work.

All these issues are claimed with shyness or only hidden into a decreasing motivation for involvement in this type of projects, and they can be solved with a reasonable and well intended approach for everybody's benefit.

A clear conclusion arises beyond all these difficulties we had to cope with: the PERFORMER PROJECT was a successful one in its essence. This essence is represented by the approach of the human resources training for an extremely important segment of education: the early year's education in a formal context.

6. STUDENTS OPINION ABOUT THE MASTER PROGRAM

One of the items of the evaluation within the context of a curriculum module (*Quality management within the educational institutions*) was focused on the students' meta – analysis of their formative route along the two years of study.

This request was intended as a training itself for the students' thesis structure which is a less traditional one. It asks their focus on a topic belonging to one of the twelve modules of curriculum as a core issue to be developed but not before a reflective pass through the whole curriculum trying to identify the stones offered by each one for the in depth development of the core issue. After the presentation of the main topic a new reflection process is demanded, this time on the openings of the core issue towards the profession or to the fields represented by the curricular modules.

The students' reflection put into the essay has many things in common with the results of the observational research initiated and implemented within the monitoring process of the project. Some core ideas are to be presented within a common paper with an author coming from the students' group.

The question of Antoine de Saint Exupery when reflecting about the childhood role is a remarkable one that highlights the huge importance of this age for human's life. He says: *where come I from? I come from my Childhood as from a country.*

The final idea of this paper stresses the necessity of taking care about the *back country* of each adult: his or her childhood.

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