

## TALKING ABOUT COMPETENCIES IN EDUCATION

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### **Abstract**

*The last decades have taken into discussion the issue of competence as a central one in education. Nobody denies that this concept is an appropriate one and the focus on the development of competencies is a proper approach in education. The confusion appears in the moment when the concept of competence is to be defined. It seems that nowadays it is a kind of fashion to use the word competence if necessary or not. Thus, term competence is used both in scientific context and in everyday language, but with a variety of meanings in each of these contexts. The everyday language uses the word competence as an attribute of a person or within an institutionalized context the term is used for defining an area of right of decision according to a status: competence of decision. Thus "competence is usually an attribute used for individuals, social groups or institutions, when they possess distinctive qualities, or demonstrate their capacity to accomplish appropriate results, according to important and specific demands.*

**Keywords:** *competence, education, curriculum*

### **1. The opportunity of the topic**

The last decades have taken into discussion the issue of *competence* as a central one in education. Nobody denies that this concept is an appropriate one and the focus on the development of competencies is a proper approach in education. The confusion appears in the moment when the concept of competence is to be defined.

A significant number of professionals, especially those anchored within vocational fields, consider competence as a mirror of the verb "to do". Thus, according to them, a competent person knows to do something in a proper manner. But it is difficult to think that something can be properly done if the person doesn't have at least the basic knowledge about what it is supposed to be done. Thus the verb „to know” is involved explicitly or implicitly.

On the other part, there are a lot of humans who know and are able to do things but the results of their actions are, if not dangerous, at least not on a high qualitative level. What is the root of this situation if not the humans' specific involvement in the action, their motivation, and their attitudes against the work? Here one can find the involvement of another verb „to be”.

Other times, the same human, with the same knowledge, capacities of action, and good attitudes does not obtain the same qualitative results in case of a new context because of a simple reason, the human cannot adapt his or her answer to the new context.

It happens so because the human is not able „to become” as the new reality asks.

Only when a human being is able to connect into a functional synergy the four verbs: to know, to do/make, to be and to become one can say that it is about a genuine competence.

Talking only about *knowledge* means to highlight the contents without seeing that outside of action (mental or physical), knowledge have negligible value. Talking only about *action* means to forget that nothing is possible without content (knowledge). But talking only about both of them, *knowledge and action*, means to forget the essence: the quality given by the direction and the aim of the action based on knowledge, the genuine competence.

Unfortunately, a lot of official European educational documents define competence only having as anchors the content and the action; they totally forget about the engine of quality: human being's features of personality, the attitudes and the proper involvement based on positive values. More than unfortunately, the education itself seems to forget that the students are not only *minds* to be developed, *bodies* to be strengthened but *souls* to be enriched and fortified.

It is interesting to notice that the attitudes, the motivation, the degree of involvement are blamed when the students are criticized. But the real question is *what the educators do in order to properly develop their students' soul, their attitudes, and their personality as a whole?*

In my opinion, only the proper focus on all these means to have an education centered on competence.

There are some aspects to be considered when it is about competence: (1). the used term (especially when it is about of translation from English to languages with Latin roots); (2) the structure of competence; (3) the competence evolution along ontogenesis.

## 2. Some considerations on the used terms

As there are a lot of definitions of the competence concept, one can find a multitude of terms used in connection with it (Lawson, C., 1999).

It seems that nowadays it is a kind of fashion to use the world competence if necessary or not. Thus, term competence is used both in scientific context and in everyday language, but with a variety of meanings in each of these contexts.

The everyday language uses the word competence as an attribute of a person or within an institutionalized context the term is used for defining an area of right of decision according to a status: competence of decision. Thus "competence is usually an attribute used for individuals, social groups or institutions, when they possess distinctive qualities, or demonstrate their capacity to accomplish appropriate results, according to important and specific demands" (Niculescu, R. 2010: 95).

For the reasons of this paper, in which the role of education in developing competence is the core issue, the focus will be fixed on the meaning of the *competence* concept connected to individuals, attempting to highlight the role of education in developing competence-competences and competency-competencies. This approach has two main reasons: (1) education is the most important factor of developing competence; (2) this term in education of nowadays is so fashionable that it almost became empty of content while it has generated an impressive number of sterile contradictions.

The *competence* word is used in different scientific works but with a remarkable wide area of meanings, connected to a significant number of words that are usually translated into Latin languages with an even wider number of words: ( Portuguese: *competência, habilidade, suficiência, alcance*; French: *compétence, capacité*; Italian: *competenza, capacità*; Spanish: *aptitud, capacidad habilidad posibilidad oportunidad capacidad física*). On the other side, the term *skill* means usually competence in other languages, and a significant tendency of synonymy between *capacity* and *competence* can be found when translating.

The old pedagogy have usually used the term skill as the specific word for the automatized capacities, ability as a qualitative side of capacity, but the contemporaneous literature realizes a genuine mix of all these terms. In Fact, everybody is free to use what word is preferred but a condition has to be

accepted and implemented: the prior definition of the meaning when a term is used, in order to facilitate the process of decoding of the used concept.

English literature uses two words involving two distinct concepts: *competence* and *competency*, without a real consistency of their meaning; sometime they are used exactly in opposite or even contradictory ways. This paper will use the term competence (singular form) as an attribute of a mature personality, an aim of the educational process itself. This on-going process is structured into four direction of the educational action: (1) the development of a flexible and functional knowledge thesaurus (based on understood/ decoded and internalized information); (2) development of an enough wide set of capacities/ abilities ready to help the personality to do/make what it is asked to be done/ made in different moments of the existence); (3) development of a set of attitudes based on positive values, energized by an intrinsic or, at least, a positive motivation and by positive feelings, capable to follow the way of changes in life, without losing the quality of their essence.

The plural of competence as competences is used to refer to a multitude of manifestations of a human personality, already defined with this attribute of competence, within different social and professional contexts in which a wide spectrum of requests appears.

The dyad competency- competencies is considered as defining the concrete aspects of the manifestation of competence –competences; this dyad is connected to specific areas of action.

### **3. The structure of a competence or competency**

For both of the previously mentioned dyads the structure of the concepts keeps the same idea of the synergy of knowledge, capacities and attitudes based on values as it is highlighted in the second edition of the action *Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations* (DeSeCo) that has brought about the issue of the *key competencies* for a successful life and a well-functioning society (Rychen, D. S., Salganik L. H, 2005: 4). This source defines competency as being: *”more than just knowledge and skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilizing psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context. For example, the ability to communicate effectively is a competency that may draw on an individual’s knowledge of language, practical IT skills and attitudes towards those with whom he or she is communicating”*.

A long and quite fierce debate was produced by the adequacy or not of using these terms from the beginning of ontogenesis. It is not my aim in this context to describe or comment this debate, but a brief opinion may be worded.

The dyad *competence - competences* is connected to a mature, already crystallized, personality with its manifestation within socio-professional contexts; thus, these concepts cannot be appropriately used for the early stages of the ontogenesis. But, the dyad *competency – competencies*, as it was previously defined, may express different levels of development of human behavior with adequate degrees of performance on each stage of human being's developmental stages.

#### 4. Competence – competency evolution along ontogenesis

Two types of competencies may be highlighted: (1) evolving competencies along the first developmental stages leading toward the mature personality crowned with a degree of competence, depending on heredity, the quality of education and environmental influences; they are concrete and in an obvious evolution; (2) concrete competencies involved in social- cultural- professional practice; they are the results of crystallized competences put into concrete contexts but also flexible in terms of to be nuanced.

If we imagine human development as a mountain ascent and descent, on the climb side the evolving competencies are placed and constantly developed; on the descent side the concrete practical competencies act, but their presence and action are not possible without touching the top of the mountain: the competence as attribute of the mature personality. The descent part means learning as well, but under the wisdom of the competent personality that is able to decode the subtle life' s demands and to build nuanced behavioral answers.

#### **competence/ competences as atribut of the mature personality**



Fig. 1. The metaphor of the mountain

## 5. Why a curriculum focused on competencies?

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It is not here the context to develop a debate about curriculum term, this being another thorny topic, but to talk about curriculum centered on competencies may be an issue to discuss about. The necessity comes from other fields of debate concerning the necessary focuses of curriculum according to different theoretical approaches.

The Figures nr. 2 includes eight perspectives upon curriculum: (1)curriculum as an ideal (2)curriculum as a product (3) curriculum focused on competencies; (4)curriculum focused on objectives; (5)curriculum as praxis; (6)curriculum in context; (7)curriculum focused on content; (8)curriculum as an on – going process.( Smith, M. K. ,1996, 2000)

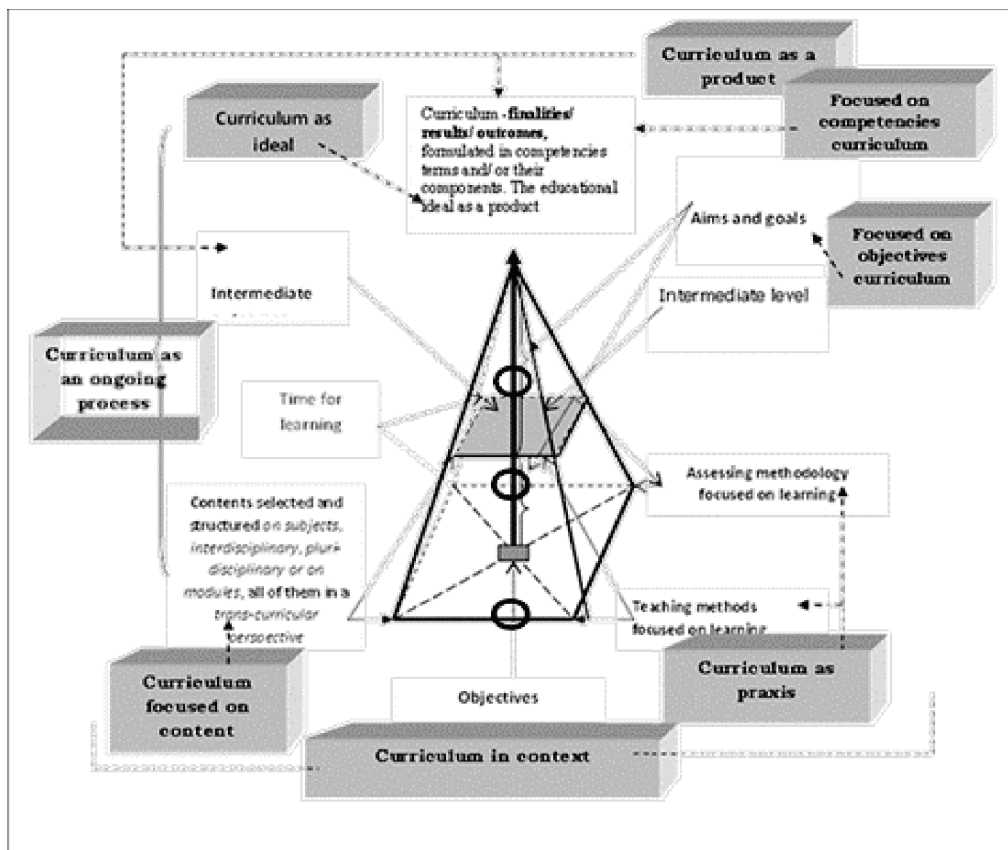


Fig. 2 Different theoretical approaches around the same core issue: curriculum essence and the structure of a learning situation.

Trying to understand in a manner breakaway these approaches is almost impossible at the moment for the development of curriculum theory and practice. The separation is not possible, even if the history of the field tried at different times to highlight a certain perspective.

Education is an ongoing process carried out in field formal, non-formal and informal. Partial products are registered throughout this process, products that do not belong to only one of the forms of education, but they represent the synergistic effect of the action of all those forms, with different emphasis at different times. Both formal and non-formal forms of education benefit from designed expected outcomes.

The design of the products, an ideal expression of the results, is expressed by objectives, with different levels of generality (*curriculum focused on product or on objectives*). They are milestones and supports of the trajectory towards the educational ideal and are formulated in terms of competencies to be developed on the students' level (*curriculum focused on competencies*). These objectives cannot be realized, in terms of achieving the designed competencies, outside of the educational practice (*curriculum as praxis*). The taught contents are involved as means, but not as sterile aims of the educational process (*curriculum as content*). This content is dependent by the context of the educational praxis (*curriculum in context*), and often suffers hidden influences (*hidden curriculum*). An all these are involved within a long term process (*curriculum as an ongoing process*).

Competencies' development, as expected outcomes/ products of the educational process on the students' level, are encapsulated along the educational process in aims, goals, and objectives. They are trained along an on-going process that uses contents, taught and assessed in an adequate methodological manner, within practical contexts. The process follows the path towards an educational ideal with a perpetual dynamic. Here's how all these seemingly separate approaches are connected by an intrinsic logic of this extraordinary phenomenon called education, this phenomenon that transforms the candidacy for becoming a human being in a genuine human, crowned with a unique personality.

Under these circumstances one can say that it is not a fashion to talk about a curriculum focused on competencies but an integrative vision, strictly necessary for an education for the future.

It is not a fashionable expression to talk about curriculum centred on student or on the action because the main actor is the student in action, an action for the student's self-development, for developing of his or her own competencies, being assisted and supported by the team of educators aware

about their new role (Bennetts, C., 2004). They really have a new role but not an easier one, nor more difficult, but different. Times are different and being competent means, inter alia, to be aware about this genuine truth.

The graduate of the future must have an adequate competence profile not for today or for tomorrow but for many days after tomorrow, for an extremely dynamic future. The graduate must be competent in terms of the synergetic effect of the four mentioned verbs: to know, do/make, be, and become/ develop.

Without a clear vision about this necessity any educator cannot effectively honor the educational career, not only in the future but even in the present.

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