

THE CONCEPT OF COMPETENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF EDUCATION REFORM IN LATVIA

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Abstract. *The word competence is a key concept of ongoing education reform in Latvia - the ESF project “Competency approach in the curriculum” (hereafter: Project). The implementation of the idea of competence-based curriculum is related to significant changes in the structure of school and pre-school curriculum, the system of evaluation of learning outcomes, teacher education etc., which are widely clarified and discussed in expert groups and public space.*

Participating as experts in the development of a Project, the authors of the article find that the Latvian educational space lacks a common understanding of the meaning of the concept competence. Often the pedagogical terminology used by educators even contradicts the innovative meaning and essence of the reform.

The aim of the article is to clarify the inconsistency and contradictions related to understanding of the concept competence in the context of Latvian educational reforms.

Research question: How to use the pedagogical terminology related to concept competence to reflect the innovative approach correctly and deeply, but at the same time - simple and understandable for the teachers, parents and children.

To find it out, the article analyzes the essence of the competence approach in theory and compares it with the actual situation in practice. The research data were obtained in 34 written students’ reflections after study practice and 9 interviews with experienced teachers of general education schools in different regions of Latvia.

The content analysis of the interviews was proceeded, the dimensions of holistic understanding of concept competence was marked and types of contradictions – generalized.

Results: The analysis revealed discrepancies between terminology used in the framework of educational reform, and educators’ understanding of its meaning. These findings can develop educators’ common understanding of concept ‘competence’.

Keywords: *competence, dimensions of competence, curriculum reform, teacher’s perceptions.*

Introduction

To achieve the overarching goal of Latvian education policy - qualitative and inclusive education for personality development, human well-being and

sustainable state growth, education content reform in Latvia is going on (Izglītības attīstības pamatnostādnes 2014-2020, 2014). The basic declared principles of the reform are - human-oriented education; education for sustainable development; knowledge-based society-promoting education. The concept competence is very important in context of these principles. However, the pedagogical terminology used by educators and politicians in the context of reform is often contradictory. Lack of common understanding of such concepts as transversal skills, meaningful learning, value dimension, virtues and habits, complex life situation, great ideas, message for the child, passport of a topic, etc. (Izglītība mūsdienīgai lietpratībai: mācību satura un pieejas apraksts, 2017), risks to degrade a well-thought-out idea, creating such interfering believes as:

- competency approach is an absolute innovation and nothing from teachers' previous experience and knowledge is valid;
- competency approach is much more difficult to implement in practice than traditional learning (whatever they are understood);
- competency approach is too complex, non-practical, theoretically, with questionable theoretical grounds.

The fact is that the materials developed in a framework of Project seem not to be well understood and easy-to-use for all parties involved - new education standard and program makers, researchers, teachers, pupils' parents, authors of teaching aids, students of pedagogical programs and pupils.

The problems marked above relate to a wide range of contexts – education science, practice, police and management, communication, psychology, social anthropology. We will explore the appearance of competence approach in teacher's perceptions, linking together educational and linguistic perspectives.

The aim of the article is to analyze the different meanings of concept *competence* in the theory and practice with a purpose to develop a common understanding of Latvian teachers and experts in the context of education reform, without pretending to develop a thorough terminology audit from the linguistic point of view.

To achieve this goal

- the purpose and content of competence-oriented education from the perspective of different theoretical approaches are analyzed;
- the different types of teachers' understanding about the qualitative pedagogical process to promote pupils' competence are indicated;
- recommendations on how to identify competence approach in everyday teaching practice and teacher education are summarized.

Methodology

Concept *competence* has different explanations in educational theory, what depends on the socio-cultural context. The aim of the "traditional" education system was declared to prepare a person to be "fit" for the life in certain circumstances, in a given society, at a particular workplace. For this purpose, the behavioral explanation of competence - a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to make or do a certain thing productively, namely "expertise" is appropriate (Kegan, 2002; Le Deist & Winterton, 2005; Mulder, 2017; Patricia, 2017; Cahn, Tuck, et al., 2017).

At the end of the 20th century, another understanding of competence was introduced, where competence is attributed not to the any professional activity or position, but to the person (Mulder, 2017; Patricia, 2017; Cahn, Tuck, et al., 2017). Hoskins & Fredriksson (2008) notes the OECD DeSeCo Program *competence* definition, which emphasizes that competence is the ability to act successfully in a complex situation, mobilizing psychosocial resources in a given context, including both cognitive resources and other factors influencing individual behavior as attitudes, emotions, ethical considerations and values, and motivation (Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations, 2003; Hoskins & Fredreksen, 2008).

This view is rooted in the ideas of social constructivism, which analyzes learning not as a purely cognitive phenomenon, but as part of an individual's personality structure and life and culture contexts (Выготский, 1991; Kron, 2004). In a systemic view, the competence category is used to describe the person's disposition of self-organization, ability and experience to perform an activity. Competence is not a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes, but the ability to "handle" them, use them and improve them (Maslo, 2006; Tişla, 2005). Holistic understanding, as opposed to behavioral, links competence with the use of the basic attributes of an individual's personality - knowledge, skills, attitudes and values in a given context (Knowles, 1998; Griffin, Holford, & Jarvis, 2003; Tennant, 2006). The result of education - a high level of competence – is intended as the effectiveness of the personality, i.e. the maximum involvement of the individual's potential and experience in the activity. For example, if students get lost if the knowledge needs to be transferred from one subject to another, or if they have forgotten after the summer holidays, what they knew in the spring, that is, learning has been superficial, it has not contributed to personality changes, the pupil has not seen the point of keeping them in mind.

In social constructivism education studies, competence emerges as a complex outcome of learning rather than the sum of separate knowledge and skills. Its complexity, according to Kron, consists of three domains:

- **Professional** (accumulation of professional knowledge, solving complex professional tasks, productive, effective and professional performance).
- **Individual** (involvement of individual mental resources - individual abilities, high level of thinking and metacognitive skills, learning to learn).
- **Context** (new / unknown situations, culture, society, life) (Kron, 2004).

In Barnett's studies, these three dimensions are described as "knowing – doing - being" (Barnett, 1994, 2003), but in the context of social-cultural learning studies I. Tiļļa uses terms "education culture - learning culture - interaction culture" (Tiļļa, 2005).

Viewing competence as a way of being ensures that learners can act collaboratively in any context (Mulder, 2017; Patricia, 2017).

Another way how to analyze the complexity of competence can be found in Stefan Sterling's representation of six levels of knowing (Bohm, 1992; Sterling, 2010). Doing (skills) and theory (knowledge) are the closest to the surface of a model. The rightness, amount and range of knowledge, skills and partly the third level – implementation of the norms – are objective, easy visible and measurable. So, these three levels of knowing are comfortable for implementation in different stages of education (student has solved a task in math, written an essay and done it correctly and carefully). The deeper levels of knowing related to person's individual capacities, experiences, perceptions, believes, values and worldview - are not visible directly (how many creative combinations of solution have student tried, how personally meaningful questions have he analyzed in his essay etc.). If the competence approach pretends to involve the whole person together with uncountable individual combinations of abilities, experiences, believes and cultural backgrounds, the qualitative levels of knowing must be included in curriculum. From it follows, that in education, a shift from dominance of quantity to dominance of quality in content, process, results and assessment needs to be provided.

Project leaders agree, that the complexity of competence – it cannot be reduced to particular skill or set of knowledge – is especially challenging for educational reform, in order to develop new curriculum (Oliņa, Namsone, & France, 2017).

In order to allow teachers and school managers, as well as teacher education program students, to assess their activities – how the theoretical principles of competence approach are realized in practice, it makes sense to develop an instrument for recognizing them in valid and simple way.

For this purpose, the experiences and opinion of practitioners of education were collected and analyzed qualitatively with a question: how is it possible to

identify the theoretically substantiated competence approach in teaching practice in general education school.

The narrative data were analyzed qualitatively, in two steps. At first, content analysis was performed by using already theoretically substantiated categories - three dimensions of competence. Another step – hermeneutic analysis, was performed for selected cases. These teachers' reflections were read through by three researchers as openly as possible, by generating the subjective units of meaning and marking them with new codes. Findings were discussed between researchers; the new codes were compared, grouped and generalized, thus revealing new meanings and categories essential for the competence approach.

The limits of the study. As the study is based on teachers' narrative without the examination of their teaching practice, it can say something about teachers' perceptions and awareness about the topic. It means, that the results of study are oriented towards discourse – how is it possible to reflect and think about competence approach.

Results and Discussion

The data were collected from the 43 narrative responses to the question “how do I implement the competence approach in teaching activity?” There were 34 written part time students' reflections in free form on their school practice and 9 interviews with expert teachers.

In the first step of analysis, the manifestation of the structure of competence- its three dimensions – professional (P), individual (I) and context (C) was marked in respondents' reflection.

For example,

“I do not work with the book, it is difficult to link the content of books to issues that are important to students. In mathematics we, for example, draw, measure, model, according to the problem-related life situations defined by the pupils“ (P, I, C).

“I prepare differentiated teaching materials by myself (P), suitable for each child, including children with special needs” (I).

“The pupils had an opportunity to evaluate how they were doing their tasks” (I).

„I think the teacher should follow the era, analyze and talk about the actual events of real life events” (C).

After initial analysis, reflections of the students and teachers in which all 3 dimensions of competence were recognizable - a total of 14 cases - were selected. In the remaining 29 cases, only one or two dimensions of competence were identified; they were included in type A as such where no competence approach can be identified.

As a result of second step of analysis, different new categories emerged, which can be marked as positive or negative, that allowed to divide this group into two more different types B and C (see Table 1).

Thus, as a result of the second step of analysis, 3 types of teachers' understanding of competence could be defined: B and C - with different understanding of competence, which can be differentiated as mechanical and organic.

We can conclude, that for understanding the competence as holistic, organic, complex phenomenon besides the involvement of all three dimensions of competence such categories as *fluency (flow)*, *openness*, *situativity*, *creativity*, *playfulness*, *problemsolving*, *critical analysis* are useful. The real life contexts there are *mostly initiated by students*, *ambiguously*, *contradictious*, *problematic*, *discussed from different points of view*, but deep and active learning can be described as *mutually respectful relationships*, *student's voice*, *student's choice*, *personally meaningful activity and awareness*.

Table 1 Understanding the Dimension of Competence - Types B and C

Categories	Teachers' expressions Type B	Teachers' expressions Type C
Learning for life	<i>Life skills are a priority; that is why I integrate, for example, mathematics and science. It is important, that students develop their life skills... and use them in different situations. Learning is a key for success in future. I integrate different subjects.</i>	<i>Including personally meaningful issues for pupils. They can use the conflict-solving steps in everyday situations. We discuss, how to use maths in poetry. I do not work with the book, it is difficult to link the content of books to issues that are important to students. In mathematics we, for example, draw, measure, model, according to the problem-related life situations defined by the pupils. In math, we measure, draw, model, according to student-defined life-related issues.</i>
Categories	Teachers' expressions Type B	Teachers' expressions Type C
Situativity	<i>Teacher needs to follow the era, analyse, talk about...</i>	<i>Linking the math content to the specific life situation, mathematics is in nature, culture, surrounding world, folklore etc.</i>
Flow	<i>Students must perform, read, work... Teachers' task is to ask a questions, motivate for work, must keep in mind.</i>	<i>To let - to give expression, to make the lessons fun, easy, playful, and meaningful. Well organized, impeded process of learning.</i>

Motivation	Students complete a task, in order to understand a topic, students are interested in learning the topic, Motivation – students will present the result of this task to others. Questions about previous topics. Teacher motivate students to work.	Open questions and sharing the experiences motivated pupils to involve the learning. The more favourable relations, the more effective learning.
Effective learning	Most of the pupils understood... It's important – to promote skills, self-regulation etc.	I try to realize maximum program in classroom Variability of different methodological techniques to encourage students to find the appropriate way of learning.
Critical approach/ problem-oriented learning	Talking about the topic, setting questions related to previous topics, Talking about actual events. Implementation of skills.	To express and percept/ respect different points of view. Students themselves definate the problems, we look for solution together.
Students' voice/ student as equal partner	Teacher tells/ talks about the topic, ask the questions, highlights, Students complete a task	Provide the opportunity for students to share their experiences. We discuss together, we are talking ... To invest in mutually respectful relationship
Teacher's openness and creativity	I tell, ask, accent, motivate, try, believe. I prepare differentiated teaching materials indepenently.	I invest, search, variate, I'm fascinated by their ideas and point of view. I learn from my pupils.

In another way of understanding the competence teacher is aware of the unity of professional, individual and context dimensions of competence, but in his statements expressoin of need is dominant, the words *must be taken care, must be taught, motivated* are often used. The content of these statements shows the evidence of teacher's dilligence, his efforts to implement the competence approach, but it does not necessarily confirm his confidence and deep understanding. That teacher takes care about students' *life skills*, but do not listen to their oppinion and experiences. The *life contexts* are chosen by teacher; he try to follow the daily actualities, relate them to learning issues and promote *talking about* them, without analysing and solving the real problems.

Recommendations

For the reflection and evaluation of pedagogical activities, teacher, school manager or teacher education program student can use several questions.

Is there a holistic structure of competence?

All three dimensions of competence – implemented, in my teaching: 1) rich professional content as theories, concepts, rules and relations; 2) individual mental resources and activities (cognitive skills, creativity, problem-solving, communication, self-regulation, awareness etc.); 3) social and cultural contexts (life experiences, events, cultural values, believe critical evaluations)?

Do I help students to learn deeply? It means not only specific knowledge and skills of the subject field, but also awareness of one's capabilities, interests and learning and awareness of the sense and meaning of the learning for culture, society and actual life. The most difficult aspect there is a sphere of context. If the development of student individual potential is also declared in traditional education, it is not common for teacher (like every other member of the society) to ask questions about the meaning – why do my activity/ learning makes sense?

Do I see, feel and understand how smart my students are?

They know a lot about what teachers have never imagined. Often they solve deeper problems than the formal learning process is affected. Therefore, it is more important for the teacher to help structure everything that the students already know to understand what information they need to find, what to do to get answers. The teacher does not need to know everything (if someone still thinks it is time to say goodbye to such illusions), the teacher is neither the Internet nor the robot. He cannot know everything. But even without knowing everything, you can ask the student: How do you know it?

Do I encourage students' reflection?

In competency approach, a fundamental difference from traditional educational requirements is a deliberate reflection. Without it, it is not possible to involve in a learning process a sense of meaning, values experiences, personal significance and development of students' individual potential. Moreover, without a multifaceted reflection, they cannot be improved.

How do I as a teacher offer reflection to my students in order to help them?

To be open and sensitive to percept the world directly, to see what is going on, what are my activities and their consequences.

To notice my presence in any learning activity, my interest and responsibility.

To reveal, implement and develop student's individual potential.

To analyze a context of learning – what makes sense to learn particular content.

What does our school culture looks like?

What are our traditions, symbols, rituals, perceptions, conceptions and values and human relationship in our school (Fullan, 2011). We does not pay attention to it everyday life, but school culture has a significant impact on pupil growth (Hattie, 2012). Are they oriented towards development, deepness,

relationship or rather to competition, perfection, labeling students etc. Knowing this, it is worth for the teacher to ask himself: how do I feel / what am I sure, are the pupils worthy of respect and trust, or not, whether the child has to fulfill what he has said; or a teacher is responsible for everything, or can I accept different values, goals and understanding of meaning, etc. without condemnation, or not?

The ability or habit of the teacher to reflect / see his / her perceptions from different points of view is a way to improve the pedagogical culture, both by better realizing its potential and by promoting pupils' learning and competence.

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