

Approaching competence as a *situational construct* and its impact on learning

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Abstract

The present paper deals with the problem of competence, as it is found in the specialty literature in the area of educational sciences. There are analyzed various perspectives which can contribute to the clarification of the problem tackled and to the identification of different traits displayed by this major concept of postmodern pedagogy.

The author highlights the specificity of the process of integrating the concept of competence from the labor area in the school context and its impact on the traits the concept is to present in this new context. There are identified and analyzed several explanatory theories of competence and the ways they can be integrated into a convergent view on competence relevant to the educational field

Key words: *competence, PSR skills, mobilization, ability construct*

Introduction

In our contemporary, postindustrial and global society, the raise of the exigencies and expectancy regarding the outcomes of educational systems and of students learning leads to a serious discussion about the complex issues of the concept of *competence*. Education cannot anymore be analyzed only through the quantity of the *specialized knowledge* a person has in different domains, but, more often, it is raising the questions about *competences and life skills*, about alphabetization, adapting to problematic situations etc.

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The aims of the educational systems must go beyond the intentions to develop only academic skills in different specialized scientific domains, but to integrate more often the development of such basic skills like learning to learn, understanding, arguing etc. They must include objectives about acquiring personal knowledge and actions, civic, social, moral, intercultural etc., and skills like Shavelson calls *personal and social responsibility skills – PSR skills* (2007, p. 1), skills that must be considered as important as the intellectual or academic ones, but more important for individuals to succeed in life.

The way the competence entered in the educational contexts – through the economic sector – will lead to keeping its specific significance from the initial context. In this case, the competence is defined as representing the *unique, individual capacities* that allows the person to adapt to new work situations (Rey B., et all., 2012, p. 17).

This approach can lead us toward identifying several fundamental characteristics of the competence that tries to gain some space in the educational contexts:

- a) *Individuality*, defined as the individual specific of somebody's competence, strictly linked with its personality and experience,
- b) *Mobilization*, as the way of combining the specific knowledge and skills to solve new situations,
- c) *Adaptability*, defined as ones capacity to efficiently act in a new situation,
- d) *The product*, defined as the indicator/effects of the competence.

These fundamental characteristics, linked to its initial context tend to suffer some changes when the competence is introduced in the educational contexts. Because the aims of the school is firstly to develop individual competences and only after doing that is to identify the existing competences that the person already has – and also only to identify the possibilities to develop the new competences using the existing ones – the concept of competence tends to present

itself in standardized formulas, independent from the person that must be developed in the new educational context.

This way, the new fundamental characteristics of the competence, influenced by the specifics of the instructional process will be represented by the following:

- a) *Standardization*, defined as the procedure that the student must apply,
- b) *Mobilization*, defined as the person capacity to mobilize the learned acquisitions to solve standardized or new situations,
- c) *Adaptability*, defined as the person capacity to solve a new and unspecific situation,
- d) *Observability*, defined as the observable indicator of the competence.

In this context, Rey B. (2012, p. 18), identifies one of the main challenge of defining the concept of competence and, that is, the avoidance of opting for one or another from the following ways to define the competence:

- a) the will to explicitly describe the *procedures* that students must be able to apply, when asked, at the end of a learning cycle, the competences being standardized,
- b) the will to guide students in such a way that they will be able to answer to *new situations*, the competences being complex and manifesting through the students initiatives in a designed situation.

Defining competence

As Weinert stats (1999), the competence must be defined by linking it to the *area of the situations and tasks* that must be mastered by students, and the evaluation will be done by putting them to solve such simulated or real situations.

E. Klieme and D. Leutner (2006, *apud* Hartig J. et all, 2008, p. 9) are realizing a working definition of the competence as representing a set of *context specific cognitive dispositions* that can be acquired through learning and necessary for success in a series of situations or tasks in different specific domains. They propose a *pragmatic approach* of competence that allows analyses

regarding the productivity of any educational systems or processes. Thus, competences does not reduce themselves to the *abilities* linked to school success, but covers a wide range of *dispositions* that are necessary for future success in social and professional-vocational contexts.

Defining competence as an assembly of *cognitive pre-conditions* necessary for the adjustment to a specific area of situations, J. Hartig (2008, p.70) stresses the idea of the intrinsic link between *competence and context*. The defining of context, of area of situations always foreruns that of competence. Unlike other traditional constructs, competence is linked to a very specific context (area, types of situations). Unlike other personality traits (intelligence, extraversion) which affect the individual in a broad area of situations, competence constructs manifest in a very specific area of situations, but, at the same time, it aims at a more complex behavior.

Therefore, in Hartig's opinion, competence is mainly operationalized by the significant, relevant *situational context* and not necessarily by the cognitive theories related to the differences between individuals' performance.

The link between competence and specificity of the context should be capitalized in the process of competence evaluation and tests designing. The contents of the evaluation tests should properly reflect the area of life situations.

Therefore, any instrument of competence evaluation should refer to the link between the individual abilities which are to be measured and the demands specific of the situations to be solved.

A similar opinion can be found in the international studies conducted by the group of researchers coordinated by Rey Bernard (2012, p. 18-20), according to which there is a unity (in diversity) of definitions offered to the concept of competence at the level of specialty literature. Most of the definitions usually stress the idea of *acting and realizing* in relation to a *task*, competence leading necessarily to an efficient product (cognitive, emotional, psycho-locomotion etc.) and being, to the same extent, the product of a functional action (with a purpose). The task is nothing but a human action aiming at a goal – it is a functional unity

with a clear finality. It provides *homogeneity, unity and relevance* to the pursued competence. Competence can be defined, in this context, both by the tasks / families of tasks which contribute to their development, and by the psychophysical processes which must be activated during the task; it is *heterogeneous* by the elements which define its structure and homogeneous by its technical and social finality. Regardless the *partial* or *global* character of the task, it is always a finished activity.

That is why the process of detailing the competences or the derivation of specific competences cannot go any lower than the functional unity given by a certain task projected as to achieve a goal. It is the area in which the objective centered pedagogy has failed because it decomposed the activity run by the student to the level of manifesting the observable behavior in the area of segments of the tasks.

In the opinion of the above-mentioned authors, efficiency always requires an analysis of the pursued goals and obtained results. Thus, it is an action which aims at a goal, therefore an intention, going beyond the strict behavioral interpretations which highlight the observable behavior displayed without the necessity of pursuing a goal.

On the other hand, tasks have a purpose and fulfil social functions, which offer them relevance within the school syllabus. No competence can be defined, developed or evaluated within some tasks which are not socially validated, but at a level of specificity given by a certain scientific or professional area. The development of competences aims at involving students in solving those tasks relevant in the context in which they activate and whose functionality is obvious for all those involved.

The discussion about competence can be realized within the context of the more and more obvious social importance of the process regarding the development of human resources and the questions related to the productivity of educational systems. In specialty literature there are identified three categories of

explanatory theories of competence (Klieme E., Hartig J., Rauch D., 2008, p.4.).

They are:

- a) the generic approach (Noam Chomsky),
- b) the normative approach (Heinrich Roth),
- c) the functional-pragmatic approach (David McClelland).

A) The generic / generative approach of competence

This type of approach of the concept of competence is to be found in N. Chomsky's works. He delimits himself from the linguists of his time, adepts of linguistic behaviorism – according to which language is represented by the observable patterns of sounds and sentences – pinpointing the idea according to which (cf. E., Klieme, 2008), if we want to understand the way of using and acquiring language, we have to study the cognitive system, the knowledge and beliefs acquired in pre-school stage and which are interacting to a multitude of issues that determine the type of behavior which can be observed. We have to isolate and study the system of linguistic competence which lie at the basis of the behavior but which are not, simply and directly, represented / changed into behavior (Chomsky N., 1968, p. 4).

Therefore, in this perspective, competence is that assembly of factors which lie at the basis of the type of behavior / performance manifested by the students in a certain situation. Measuring student's competence is not as necessary as understanding the factors which lie at the basis of language acquisitions and which are common to all individuals. The individual manifestations are explained through performance, as a hypostatization of competence (achievement of competence) influenced by personal and situational factors.

On the same line of thought positions Habermas (1981, *apud* Klieme E., 2008, p. 5), according to whom communication competence symbolizes the rules and socio-cognitive structures which allow the individuals to generate situations of communication. This significance of competence is to be found in the discourses of sociologists and psychologists until the 90's. Following this line,

there is a difference between competence and performance where the preoccupations as regards the extent to which competence can be measured or molded can be associated to those referring to the extent in which it is possible for us to understand, describe and evaluate the functioning way of a cognitive system that *generates* a changeable behavior (performance) while it does not identify with it.

This type of competence approach is not founded on quantitative measurement but are determined from a reconstructive perspective, in a much broader sense. They cannot be identified but with qualitative, hermeneutical case analyses.

B) The normative approach of competence

The normative approach of competence are to be met in the specialty literature belonging to the educational field, starting with the ideas proposed by H. Roth (1971).

In the German tradition, the concept of competence is revealed within the context of an ampler debate around the concept of *Bildung* (development of personality) and the necessity of the individual participation in the human culture, the system of qualifications, by formulating the knowledge and skills relevant for the vocational and social practice.

In H. Roth's opinion, the concept of competence is the only one able to provide the link between the two realities. According to him, the major goal of education is given by *Mündigkeit* (maturity), defined as a competence for responsible action. It represents a trait of the human being subsumed to the concept of *autonomy* at the highest levels and aims at the individual abilities – in terms of dispositions for action and judgement – including an emotional and motivational dimension.

For Roth (1971, p.180), maturity can be interpreted as a competence in three ways:

- *individual competence* – the ability to be responsible for your own actions,
- *professional competence* – the ability to act and judge in a particular profession and to be responsible,
- *social competence* – the ability to act and judge, to be responsible in social and professional areas which are relevant from a social, political, civic perspective.

C) The functional - pragmatic approach of competence

In the psychological literature of the 70's, the specialists interests are related to the ability of the individual to adapt to the challenges of particular situations, and not to the cognitive-generative systems, far from the situations and normative goals of educations, as the facilitations of autonomy.

In this way, the psychologist D. McClelland considers that educational research needs concepts and evaluation procedures which take into consideration the situations and the contextualization of human actions. Competences need to be linked to real life situations and their evaluation should be able to identify the differences in their acquisition. Therefore, competence aims at the attributes necessary to the success in fulfilling various actions (1973, p.10, *apud* Klieme E., 2008).

This perspective is also to be found at A. Bandura (1990, p. 315), according to which there are differences between having knowledge and abilities and being capable of using them in various circumstances, some of them perhaps containing ambiguous, unpredictable, pressing elements.

Therefore, cognitive constructs are generalized at the level of a broad area of situations, while the constructs of the competence type are linked to specific areas. Within this approach, the describing of competence varies depending on the level it can be applied to bigger or smaller varieties of situations.

In this way, Weinert (2001, *apud* Klieme E., 2008, p.7) talks about *key competences* (characterized by the idea of transfer, f.e. communication

competences) and *meta-competences* (that facilitate the acquisition and using the specific competences). The latter ones refer to the cognitive strategies, the learning and planning strategies as well as to knowledge regarding the individual strengths and weaknesses.

Therefore, competences are regarded as ability constructs dependent on a context and can be conceived as results of the learning process through which the individual interact with his environment.

According to this approach, competences represent *dispositions* which facilitate the acquisitions specific to a context which can be obtained through learning (Klieme E., 2008, p. 8).

They are related to situations and demands specific to certain fields belonging to a very specialized or general areas, but always linked to a context and acquired by learning.

Conclusions

The multiple perspectives on competence highlight the complex nature of this major concept in postmodern pedagogy. Either it represents, according to the *generic / generative* approach that assembly of factors which lie at the basis of the type of behavior the student manifests in a certain situation, or we consider the conditioning of the *normative* approach represented by the concept of *maturity*, subsumed to that of *autonomy*, defined as competence for the responsible action or that of the *functional – pragmatic* approach according to which competence represents the individual's ability to adapt to the challenges of particular situations, we witness the configuration of a new educational paradigm (as an explanatory model) with a major impact on the level of curricular theory and practice.

Thus, competence can be defined as an *ability construct depending on the context*, an assembly of *dispositions* which facilitate the acquisitions specific of a context and which can be obtained through learning. It is always linked to situations and demands specific to certain areas, belonging to a very specialized

field or a general one, but permanently linked to a context and acquired through learning.

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