

AFFIRMATION OF THE CONCEPT OF NEW PROFESSIONALISM IN THE EDUCATION OF PRESCHOOL TEACHERS: CROATIAN EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

Contemporary scientific cognizance on the development of children and the possibilities of their education has altered the image of the child to such an extent that the majority of scholars speak of a New Paradigm. This paradigm defines the child as a unique, singular, complete and complex being who realizes his personality through self-construction as a developmental action, and who is a key factor in this process. These cognitions are significantly reflected upon the issues of the cultivation, socialization and education of children in early childhood and of preschool age. With due consideration to the fact that we are dealing with complex multivariable factors, much attention is paid to the role and relevance of the adult as a creator of an encouraging environment in which early childhood is realized. Attention is also paid to institutional childhood and to the educator as a professional, a representative and a key predictor of the quality of educational influences. We consider that each educational action in early childhood and preschool education requires a competent approach based on a high level of professional responsibility. Therefore we are affirmatively determined to the idea of new professionalism as a qualitative breakthrough in the contemporary perception of the profession of an educator in early childhood and preschool education. We strive towards achieving an educational profession as defined as a complex profession that implies reflective thinking, a continuous professional development, autonomy, responsibility, creativity of research and personal judgment. This idea is realized with the creation of a new concept of initial education, a concept that applies a competency approach as a new paradigm in which theoretical and practical dimensions are balanced in the function of achieving a quality educational action. This aim is achieved in the manner of educating educators as critically-minded intellectuals and contemplative, reflective practitioners.

Keywords: competency approach, new professionalism, initial education, educator, early childhood.

1 INTRODUCTORY VIEWS

The humanist and social constructionist paradigm of care in early childhood and preschool care demands a different role from the kindergarten educator, one of a significantly higher complexity and with a larger responsibility, with the educator becoming not only a researcher of educational practice, but a reflective researcher. In accordance with this, research within this paradigm is mainly focused on this matter: which conditions, situations, rules and mode of organization created by the educators, the children and all other participants in a childcare institution are the most favorable for the quality of life of children and their education. From this perspective, modern scientific cognizance on children's development and their educational potential have altered the image of the child to such an extent that most scientists refer to it as a new paradigm. Contemporary neurological brain research (Gopnik et al, 2003) has particularly contributed to this, while its results have yielded a new field of science – developmental neuroscience. The child is defined as a unique, singular, complete and complex being who realizes his personality through self-construction as a developmental action, and who is a key factor in this process. Thus also views on the context in which the development and education of children is realized have inevitably changed, with the creation of an optimal environment for learning and education within institutional conditions becoming the focus. It must be stressed that this is one of the key prerequisites with which a better and more quality understanding of the child, its capabilities, interests, needs and wishes is achieved, as only through understanding the child can we act appropriately. On a theoretical level, similar footholds can be found in various theories on preschool education and education in early childhood from around the world (for example, Reggio pedagogy), but also in experiences of the applied practice we have been exploring and developing in the kindergartens of Croatia for about ten years.

For these reasons, the heaviest emphasis is placed on creating a suitable educational environment and atmosphere in which the child can achieve various interactions with its material and social environment as a subject, and not the object of its own education. In doing so, learning is viewed as a mutual action, that is, learning is perceived as the result of the child's interaction with other materials and persons, without defining the temporal and substantial dimension of the process. Forms of supporting the child's learning that encourage it to independently explore, think and problem solve ("learning-by-doing") are particularly developed as suitable forms of supporting the development of the various competencies of children, as tailored to their individual particularities, different developmental characteristics and different learning styles. It should be stressed that the educator is expected to generate creative situations, focus on organizing opportunities (means and stimuli) that will encourage the child to co-construct and create, and not only execute predefined tasks and aims.

Dahlberg i Moss (2006) deliberate on the institutional development of education in early childhood in the context of altered circumstances within the family (social, economic) that have, among other things, also yielded the process of institutionalizing childhood. In accordance with these circumstances, children arrive at early childhood educational institutions and an increasingly early age, thus the increasing need for the observation, careful examination and research of such institutions and the educational processes unfolding within them is justified. One of the most important questions thus posed is the matter of which competencies a child of the 21st century must possess. Thus, accordingly, arises the question of structuring (physically, organizationally) early childhood educational institutions as truly in accordance with the nature of children and capable of developing a readiness for the times to come: an entrepreneurial spirit, flexibility and a capability to adapt to new situations and a continuous readiness for learning. In those way new questions for children, the family and the community are opened, questions that are no longer only of importance to those immediately involved in early childhood educational institutions, but also of importance to politicians, economists and businessmen. The role of the educator is viewed as the skill of creating all the conditions necessary for the quality of life, education and learning of the child, that is, the skill of creating a quality educational context in a kindergarten, whose equally valuable parts are: the quality of the interaction between the child and the learning materials, the quality of the relationship and the interaction between the educator and the children, and the quality of the communication of children between themselves.

On the other hand, insight in recent European documents (Children in Europe, Policy paper 2007; OECD, 2006; UNICEF, 2008 and similar) shows that early childhood and preschool education has been gaining attention in public and political life during the last few decades. This implies the construction of an entirely new approach to education, one in which the educator does not represent a deliverer of static knowledge, but an organizer of conditions in which children are capacitated to construct and organize their knowledge themselves and control the process of their own learning.

The creation of modern educational policies is unthinkable without the acknowledgement of professionals in early childhood education. They are (along with teachers) attributed as the key factors in the promotion of a Europe of Knowledge as an integral cultural, social and educational context. They are the ones who, with the strength of their professionalism, significantly contribute to preparing the future citizens of United Europe, developing and furthering the human capabilities with which they respond to the challenges put forward by the society of knowledge, preparing them for actively participating in this society and for independent lifelong learning. ("Education & Training 2010" the Success of the Lisbon Strategy Hinges on Urgent Reforms). In the creation of educational policies, many European countries are increasingly firm in their advocating professionalism in early childhood and preschool education, particularly relating to the question of the quality of an educator's work in the context of creating educational policies that stimulate further development of his profession (Key Competences for Lifelong Learning – A European Reference Framework, The European Parliament and the Council of The European Union, 2006).

Therefore the main goal of this work is to consider the following questions: How to think out concepts of professional development that will allow lifelong learning for teachers, educators and practitioners? How to ensure quality professional training and establish links between the initial education of an educator, his apprenticeship and the encouragement of continuous professional development? In facing these challenges, a new range of competencies in the context of planning and developing study programmes is demanded from teachers.

2 TOWARDS ESTABLISHING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE INITIAL EDUCATION OF PRESCHOOL EDUCATORS AND THE LABOUR MARKET

A traditional educational system that functions as a means of transmission and an orientation towards factual knowledge, and is based on curricula that represent a corpus of knowledge that every teacher must adhere to, has the goal of responding to the question: "What shall be taught?". A shift from the transmission of knowledge to the development of competencies signifies a turn in the approach and the method of planning education, whilst putting emphasis on a different question: "What should a student know and what can he know, what skills, competencies and viewpoints should he and is able to develop?". The emphasis of the approach directed towards the student is in determining teaching aims as measurable learning outcomes. In tertiary education, learning outcomes are defined as competencies that the student ought to develop during the duration of his study. Such an approach also implies shaping a curriculum based on competencies as the new paradigm in education (Previšić, 2007), which aims to attain a constructive connection between learning results, content, learning and teaching approaches and the students' workload.

For the successful conduction of educational work in early childhood and preschool institutions competent educators are necessary, the ones that will act as reflective practitioners qualified for conceptualizing and executing, while at the same time also monitoring and self-evaluating, their own work. Thus, the education of students to become such educators cannot be solely a mechanic or technical transmission of knowledge from a theoretical to a practical level. In order for a student to become a competent future practitioner, individual, group and critical learning in an educational situation are all necessary, in the context of an institution "as a place in which we reflect upon what has been occurring in the kindergarten, reflecting and self-reflecting upon the quantity of learning opportunities offered to the children, parents and the educators themselves" (Rinaldi, 2001, 44). The competency of getting by in new situations is acquired only through practice. Students consider practical work a valuable part of their professional education, and for that reason it is exceptionally important to ensure that they have a sufficient amount of quality practice during which, and after which, their practical knowledge is constructed; that is, theory is tested in practice through a dynamic communication, one that creates individual and collective thought and participates in the construction of knowledge in which the group represents support to the development and the initiative of the individual.

In other words, it is necessary to deliberate upon the new competencies of future teachers, which relate to simultaneous work in three areas that overlap: work with information, technologies and knowledge; work with one's colleagues (teamwork) and work that demands a sensible and refined linking of pupils and an educational institution with society at large (Zgaga, 2007). Among the new competencies of the European teacher are also developing one's identity and democratic citizenship, strengthening linguistic competencies, multiculturalism, "European knowledge" and new professionalism. The key words that define the teacher of the future are: "a researcher and reflective practitioner that must be able to "galvanize" a large amount of knowledge and situations" (Roldao, 2007). It is assumed that the teacher must become a member of a large "learning community", the one to continuously adapt and modify existing practice into a new practice, and even "theoreticise practice", holds the same author. He should be allowed not only to be a practitioner, but also to theoretically discuss his practice (Niemi, 2007). Or, as Dahlerbg et al. (2003) stress, theory can be of great use to practitioners as a tool to aid them in understanding and improving their practice. In this reversal, practitioners can have an important role in the development and emergence of theory or, as Rinaldi says, "all of us are theoretical practitioners" (2005, 74). Fullan (2005) calls practitioners "theoreticians in action" who have to be capable to translate theoretical concepts to concrete action (practice), otherwise theory is of no great importance (for practice). It remains its own purpose. In other words, solutions need to be both theoretical and practical. In accordance with this view, those who work with real problems in the transformation of a real system and real culture are dubbed new theoreticians or theoreticians in action. For, who would "buy", or what would an institution do with a theory that does not function in practice, the same author stresses. We wish to stress that the development of a reflective approach to practice and the creation of reflective practice are a new methodological and conceptual approach to practice, one predominantly based on action research as an approach to research as an improvement of learning and teaching processes, and which appears as an opposition towards the technical and rational (traditional) model of preparing practitioners (Zeichner i Tabachnick, 2001; Hammerslay, 2002, Schon, 1990; Elliot, 1990 and many others). From a social constructivist perspective, learning is a social and personal process in which the student adapts

his ideas and beliefs towards a new knowledge and understanding within an interactive dialogue. According to Fullan (2007), this bears the implication of engaging future educators in the process of professional development, thus improving their readiness for changes and for understanding one's own learning processes. This marks a shift from the traditional concept that of education based on knowledge, towards social constructivist learning aimed towards the idea of new professionalism as a qualitative breakthrough in contemporary views of the educational profession in early childhood and preschool education.

The competency approach is based on a complex system of learning outcomes and competencies and has, in the last decade, achieved significant affirmation in the theory and practice of planning curricula, particularly in their developmental dimension. The changes in European tertiary education, initiated by the Bologna Declaration which, above all, focused on the question of establishing quality assurance and improvement systems and finding mechanisms to support them, had a crucial role in this. The creation and adoption of a general qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the formulation of general descriptors for each educational level are certainly one of the most significant elements on which the recognizable, modern quality assurance and promotion systems were built.

3 LEARNING OUTCOMES AND COMPETENCIES: A PEDAGOGICAL TURN IN TERTIARY EDUCATION

There have been many attempts at defining learning outcomes. In the majority of European documents (Tuning Project 2004., Joint Quality Initiative 2004.), they are interpreted according to the broader definition of the term and are always expressed through competencies. There is a consensus that these are *statements on the expectations of what a student ought to know, understand or be capable of doing at the end of the learning process (education)*. This is, thus, more or less a definition pertaining to *competencies*, which in this manner become the focal point in determining learning outcomes. This is why learning outcomes are of particular importance – because they represent an intrinsic element of the pedagogical turn in tertiary education that has been potentiated by the Bologna Process. The programme *Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations* (DeSeCo) has offered a significant contribution in the explication of competencies and their relationship with the learning outcome. Its purpose is to set a general conceptual framework – references for the identification, analysis and interpretation of competencies, in order to facilitate mutual understanding of those important for OECD member countries. This is the so-called functional, external approach that approaches competencies from the position of their influence on the successfulness with which a society functions as a community.

A certain variant of the functional approach is given by Boon and Van der Klink (in Štimac, 2006), as they establish a link between competencies and the social context (the labour market), defining competencies as *a specialized system of achievements, professionalism or abilities (the KSA concept: knowledge, skills and attitudes) that are indispensable in order for the individual to successfully complete certain tasks*. Boyatzis (Boyatzis, 1982; according to Kurtz, Bartram, 2002.) is also close to this viewpoint, defining competencies from a position of successfulness as *the basic characteristic of a person that is efficient and/or superior in the execution of work...this can be a trait, motive, skill, an aspect of one's self-image of social role, or a corpus of knowledge that he or she utilizes*.

Furthermore, Dale and Iles (in Štimac, V. 2006.) distinguish professional abilities from psychological and social characteristics. Accordingly, the term *competence* signifies *skillfulness in relation to specific work activities and according to a predetermined and predefined standard*. Thus the proposition of professionalism is thus a proposition on the standard of the achievement, that is, in relation to it. In so doing, standards represent *a demonstration of attaining a specific level of skill on a wider range of competencies*.

The authors Kurtz and Bartram (Kurtz, Bartram 2002.) have an interesting approach, one that builds a semantical difference upon the terminological difference between the terms '*competence*' and '*competency*'. *Competence* is defined as professionalism, through a specification of necessary knowledge and skills, while *competency* is defined as the behavior that supports the successful execution of particular work activities, therefore *how* these skills and knowledge are used in accomplishing work activities within the context of the specific demands of a job.

An approach that views competencies from the aspect of qualifications or standards is also largely present in literature. In these cases, competencies are defined as *an aggregation of behaviors, knowledge, thought processes and/or viewpoints that are probably reflected in a work performance that achieves elementary, basic and high standard levels* (Warr, Conner 1992.).

Also, it is possible to define them according to the criteria of the subject that estimates a qualification. In the situation of an academic community, competencies are usually determined by the learning outcomes and the necessary skills. If this is done by "service users", therefore, employers that are practitioners, then the definition is oriented towards the level of knowledge, skills and abilities necessary for performing within a particular field of work. In any case, a ratio of these elements is always in question: academic elements (a strong general education), a good knowledge of science and a particular discipline and professional skills, knowledge and abilities (Spodek, Saracho, 1990.).

A detailed analysis and a comparison of approaches in defining competencies was carried through by Weinert (Weinert, F. E. 2001.), who based his interpretation on a psychological approach and, in doing so, attempted to bridge the gap between the psychological and pedagogical interpretation of competencies on one side, and the sociological interpretation on the other. He concluded that there is unanimity within particular scientific disciplines on this matter, apparent in the fact that competencies are usually defined as a specialized system of abilities, professionalism and skills indispensable for accomplishing particular tasks. This approach develops a relationship of sorts between the personal achievements of the individual and his contribution to the quality of life of a social community, as is particularly evident in the definition of competencies as *actions in a social situation* (Weinert F. E., 2001). Competencies are not limited only to the attainment of a certain level of skills, but are interpreted as comprehensive achievements that allow the individual to successfully face the challenges of modern society at large, in relation to a particular social context, but also to face a specific life situation he has found himself in. In this manner, the individual is enabled to responsibly and critically face the problems before him, successfully overcome them and thus progress in his development.

The European Council has developed a universally accepted concept that largely acknowledges Weiner's approach (Key Competencies 2002), and according to which competencies are defined as *general abilities based on the knowledge, experiences, values and dispositions that each person should develop during the educational process*.

In an attempt to determine the relationship between learning outcomes and competencies in the context of a general qualifications framework, the definition according to which competencies are *a dynamic combination of knowledge, the understanding of skills, abilities, viewpoints and responsibilities that describe the learning outcomes of an education programme* was accepted. A learning outcome is a clear definition of competencies, skills and/or viewpoints that the pupil/student should acquire during a set learning period. Thus it also affirms the approach (Tuning Project 2004) according to which the following elements of the term "competencies" are strongly supported: knowledge and understanding (theoretical knowledge at an academic level; capacities for understanding and knowledge); knowledge on how to act (a practical and operational application of knowledge to particular situations); knowledge on how to be (value dimension) .

In this sense, the following differ:

1. general academic competencies (instrumental, interpersonal i systematic) that all students should possess at the end of a particular education level.¹ They are used to describe transferrable abilities as independent from the scientific disciplines in which they are observed (e.g. literacy, communication skills, problem solving skills, IT skills etc.)

¹ It should be noted that the first typology of generic competencies (KSC) was developed by Bloom in his renowned and acclaimed taxonomy already in 1976. It was used in the creation of concepts of learning outcomes in the manner that Bloom's basic idea on the achievements attained after an educational process, as described with the terms knowledge, skills and abilities, was adopted. The categories in each domain are viewed as levels that precede the following level, and may thus be conditionally applied to the principle of educational levels.

2. professional, subject specific competencies that are defined for each profession or area of study.

The European Qualifications Framework has accepted the competency approach in its entirety, recognizing its basic humanist dimension that is evident primarily in the process of shifting the focus from content to personality. In this sense, Green (Green, 1999.) stressed an orientation towards *behaviors desirable and crucial to an organization in giving personal specifications instead of job descriptions, and that are used for the operationalisation of competencies and allow for clear communication between selection standards, work behavior, teaching and training.* In an academic context, this means defining a standard by elaborating on generic and specific competencies, that is, particular learning outcomes achieved after the completion of a recognized study programme.

Dublin descriptors, though they leave many questions open (e.g. modifying the relationship between generic and specific competencies to the particular context of a chosen taxonomy, inconsistency in terminological definitions, the question of the substantial validity of behavioral indicators and the constructional validity of dimensions i.e. competencies (Gonzales, Wagenaar, 2005.)), represent an exceptionally significant qualitative breakthrough because they affirm the competency approach as a new paradigm of sorts. This is particularly significant when it comes to common reference points between various scientific disciplines, as in this manner an unprescriptive reference frame for the academic community is offered (Vukasović, 2006.) .

4 THE PEDAGOGICAL INVERSION IN PLANNING AND DEVELOPING STUDY PROGRAMMES

Research results (e.g. Reichert, S., Tauch, C 2005.) show that a large number of tertiary institutions around Europe are acquainted with or apply a concept based on learning outcomes, i.e. competencies, in the creation of new study programmes. The conclusions of the Bergen Conference (From Berlin to Bergen 2005), in order to honour the transparency principle, recommend that all study programmes, regardless of level or quality, be defined through learning outcomes.

Following this line of thought has the Tuning Project and Methodology template been accepted. This template commences with defining generic and specific competencies, bestowing upon them the importance of fundamental components of modern curricula and a powerful instrument for accomplishing thorough changes in the educational process. This potential of learning outcomes emanates primarily from the new educational philosophy that implies a shift in focus: from the process of teaching/classes to the process of learning. This is a change of paradigm of sorts, shifting the focus from a staff centered approach to a more learner oriented approach to education.

During the construction of the new undergraduate and graduate (3+2) university study of early childhood and preschool education at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Rijeka (Croatia), a concept based on learning outcomes, that is, competencies as described in the Tuning project's methodological template, was used. The curriculum's learning outcomes are relevant to both a basic professional qualification and the labour market, but also for a further education feasible within the limits of given temporal and material restrictions. By doing so, we wish to prepare the Croatian educator for his European future by bringing him closer to the concept of European professionalism through education. The university education of an educator is the beginning of a process of defining and developing the indicators with which the quality of an educator and his education and, accordingly, his social status, are promoted. We commence from a clear stance towards the educational profession, in which we define it as a complex vocation that implies reflective thought, continuous professional development, autonomy, responsibility, creative expression and personal judgment.

In a narrower context, a graduate university course of early and preschool education is a response to the modified role of the educator in the conditions of the modern definition of the institutional context outside the family. As research has shed new light upon the significance of an educator's education and the prerequisites for ensuring the quality of his work, initiated changes lean in the direction of redefining the fundamental goals and tasks of his education. In its foundation is advocating to direct them towards the attainment of basic qualifications, instead of to the results of knowledge. Educating for a profession is defined as a dynamic, open and permanent process based on the demand that continuous professional development and constant professional specialization is an obligation that emanates from professional ethics and the responsibilities of everybody who has chosen to be an educator. From a developmental perspective – the university education of an educator is only a basic

stage upon which, through the processes of lifelong learning, the educator's autonomous, personal and professional competencies will continuously be superimposed.

The structure of the study is based on the 3+2 model, in the manner of reflecting upon the educational qualifications of an educator on each level. These levels are defined by a description of the nub of the qualification in terms of generic and specific competencies that is the results of study accomplished after the successful completion of an approved study programme. Distinguishing between them has been accomplished through dimensions of differentiation of knowledge application and comprehension, judgment, communication and learning skills in the modern context of an area of work.

The initiation of a university graduate study of early and preschool care and education above all ensures a study programme better adapted to the needs of our society, while it also follows the trends of the wider region. In this manner, students that graduate from it will possess the knowledge, skills and competencies needed for contemporary early and preschool education; they will be able to find jobs more easily, which in turn will have a positive effect on the motivation levels of students and their active participation during the entire process of their education.

5 FINAL THOUGHTS

If we remember the determination of learning outcomes from the previous chapter as *expectations of what a student ought to know, understand or be capable of doing at the end of the learning process*, it is clear that, in defining them, we must also commence from a clear definition of competencies. Thus, an entirely new approach is affirmed in the planning and development of study programmes, one that can be dubbed a "pedagogical inversion" of sorts. For, in the process of defining learning outcomes, it is essential to abandon the traditional input based approach focused on the teacher, which is above all apparent in the focus upon the content a student ought to master during a particular study programme. Instead, now we commence from the end, that is, from a description of the competencies a student ought to acquire after the completion of a particular study programme, always taking into consideration his advancement to higher study levels while, at the same time, deliberating upon his employability. This is why learning outcomes at the level of a study programme must be relevant for further education, for the labour market and also be feasible within the limits of given temporal and material restrictions. (Tunning Project, 2004)

As learning outcomes are always formulated through particular competencies, it is exceptionally important to distinguish between these two terms well. The Tuning Project points towards this distinction through particularly highlighting the different starting points of the participants in the educational process: teachers and students. Learning outcomes are always formulated by teachers, in striving to include students on the basis of input based on external and internal support elements. Competencies are, on the other hand, attained or developed by the students during the learning process. Learning results, therefore, do *not* relate to the content or teaching methods, but to what is expected of the student to acquire during his learning, though both are defined on their basis. In doing so it is important to distinguish between *expected learning outcomes* and *desired learning outcomes*. In the first case, a *minimum of competencies* that a student ought to acquire in order to successfully complete a given learning unit is implied, while the latter implies a *maximum of competencies*. Only then is it possible to plan the content, but by also noting the manner in which the students' development will be monitored and assessed whether a given competency (or more of them) has been acquired through adequate methods of marking the students' progress. Finally, it can be concluded that the translation of the concept of new professionalism from theory to practice has been successfully executed through the affirmation of the concept of new professionalism in a competency approach based education of preschool educators.

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