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Teachers' citizenship competences: a comparative research

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Abstract

Education represents an important aspect in the development of 'skills for a life' of democratic citizens in diverse democratic societies. The teacher's role and competences become a crucial element in the development of children and their capacity to exercise citizenship in the most constructive way, preparing them to be democratic citizens, for their future world of work and for the development of their personality (Pestalozzi Programme of the Council of Europe, The Professional Image and Ethos of Teachers, 2014). The Council of Europe's Parliament adopted Resolution 1849 (October 3, 2008) recommended the promotion of a culture of democracy and human rights in schools through teacher education. The necessary teaching competences involved would include aspects as the ability to create learning environments beyond the classroom, allowing community to engage in partnerships and making learning more significant. Moreover, the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council (2006/0962/EC) on the eight key competences for Lifelong learning stressed that the social and civic competences should be acquired by all students through schooling. How are teachers integrating cognitive, ethical and action-related competences in their practice as Citizenship educators? And how are the students experiencing this teaching? These are some of the questions that our research aims to answer. The research combines quantitative and qualitative approaches, comparing perceptions of both teachers and students on Citizenship Competences in three European countries: Poland, Italy and Portugal (Poland has recently joined the research group). The article presents initial findings from a sample consisting of primary and secondary school teachers and students (219 Italian, 235 Portuguese, and 3572 Italian teachers and 315 Portuguese students) and students.

Keywords: citizenship education, teachers' competences

Theoretical considerations from previous similar research

The research presented in this paper arises from long lasting cooperation amongst several countries from different continents which began in 2005. Previous results about the professional status of teachers were published in 2009 (Chistolini, 2009). Keywords like empathy, collaboration, inclusion and participation were the core of our descriptive analysis in order to understand the meaning of competences in school contexts. According to European Commission key competences and qualifications for teachers in Europe should include the ability to work with others; to work with knowledge, technology and information; and to work with and in society. International studies quoted in the research in Cyprus underline how learning can be influenced by different and many educational factors which include students' perceptions of the situations of the learning environment; styles of teaching; methods and models of teaching; design of lessons and the difficulty

level of the academic tasks. Investigation on students' perceptions provides important information for understanding students' cognition and classroom processes. Empathy, as the ability to express concern and take the perspective of a student seems to help educators in order to facilitate positive interactions among students. There is a strong correlation between students' positive perception of their teachers' empathy and academic motivation (Koutselini et al, 2014).

It has been asserted that competence-based training/education emerged in the 1960s in the USA, in the field of teacher education and in the 1990s related to student learning (Pratas, 2014). This has generated much debate. In Romania, for example, this reflected concerns over the effectiveness of the educational system and the quality of the teaching staff. 'The teacher's action can have permissive, stimulating valences, but can sometimes be disturbing, even obstructive, too. The teacher's conduct represents one of the most important catalysts for permanent learning, for shaping the students' personality in their efforts to adapt to the changes imposed by the knowledge society. Not infrequently, the teacher's behaviour becomes the standard to which the generations of disciples relate to' (Secui et al, 2014). In Italy, cultural debate about the professional status of teachers reveals fundamental questions concerning the nature of the professional status in the system of education, which still depends on the Taylor concept of education, shared between targets of school competences, family education, and local agencies. Problems are associated with: social expectations, educational needs of the students; the ability to give reasons for the learning process; organisational dimension; divulgation of knowledge; experience and reflexivity; research attitude; communicative ability; professional deontology as regards freedom and responsibility of teaching. The improvement of schools is based on widely accepted and shared educational models as well as the commitment to redefining an own way of teaching, which takes three fundamental concepts of pedagogy into consideration: the person, culture and society.

These three concepts concern the historic, social and cultural process that a person implements when interacting in society. The more the living situation is defined, the more it is possible to act to reach increasingly higher development goals. The continuity between the classics of modern humanistic thought and the current phase of theoretical-conceptual interpretation is given by the close interdependence between the value of the person and attention to the phenomena of his/her psycho-social growth. Education is the dependent and independent variable in the interaction midst person, society and culture. It is a dependent variable when it encompasses bearing the influence of society and culture. It is an independent variable when it diverges from the *status quo* and the preservation of the existing order, and avoids compromises affected by consumerism and mass conformism. The situation of balance between fact and non-fact and the already defined and the not yet defined is what concerns pedagogy. To educate is the promise of continuity of values and the commitment to generate new prospects of social development. In order to promote the culture of recognition, it is necessary to give sense to the ethics of human relationship, on which we build the society, in which teachers take care of the pupils and pupils show solidarity towards the teachers. There is a lively cultural debate going on in Italy about the preparation of secondary school teachers. Increasingly more questions arise concerning strategies for uniting university training with school-based training. The initial hypothesis placed emphasis on the identity of the teacher hanging in the balance due to the evident contradiction between the preparation acquired and precariousness of the job. This

contradiction is represented by a strong part, explained by the conviction of the necessity to possess the indispensable competences for doing the job at school well, and a weaker part, given by the awareness of the uncertainty of a timely, permanent introduction into the profession. First of all, the fundamental questions concern the nature of the professionalism within the broadest educational system, still tied, in some ways, to a Taylorist concept of education, divided between the duties of teaching at school and duties of upbringing reserved for the family and other territorial organisations. Secondly, as a consequence, the essential issues refer to the competences required in light of differing expectations as well as the connection with students' high social expectations through learning. The pedagogic-didactic literature on this subject points out the nodal points concerning the teaching role, for example: increase of discretionary power through the teaching autonomy of institutions, coordination of teaching and learning, capacity to diagnose the educational needs of the students, capacity to stimulate learning, investment in knowledge and competences, and professional ethics, such as the freedom and responsibility of teaching. A professional attitude emerges, which is no longer executive, but constructive, creative, innovative and responsible, and professional competence to intermediate between needs originating from daily activities and various types of knowledge - theoretical, practical, from experience – with a view towards the best possible solution.

Within the field of education, competence, as a quality of excellent performance, follows the same phenomenology present in every other working environment. There is a difference between competence and performance and the debate is still open about a common definition. Behaviourist approaches, aspiring to total objectification and assessment, still prevail for those that use the process to advantage and propose the valuation of a task linked to practice. The essential problem of competences in school education thus becomes the identification of indicators compatible with the vision of the professional role, task and/or practice, which cannot disregard knowledge accrued through exercising the profession. One particular aspect of this issue concerns competence concerning citizenship, that is, citizenship in the profession and educating towards active citizenship (Chistolini, 2014).

From the perspective of democratic education, the research in Berlin and Lüneburg in Germany shows how 'competences in secondary-school is much about individual skills that are based on the so called *Gestaltungsfähigkeit* (ability to create) which has a strong implication on Education for Sustainable Development. In this discourse collective approaches such as democratic structures and equal rights in the classroom are not strongly mentioned. Moreover students with a migration background tend to be excluded and forgotten in the German school system with its strong *Habitus* on German language. Teachers mention democratic principles are taught in the curriculum and the extra teaching programs but are difficult to live in a hierarchic and administrative school system. Pupils complain about different attention to their learning skills and motivation. Thus highly motivated students from a family background that is open to intellectual education are much better assisted than others' (Wagner, 2014).

In Portugal, the essential competences for basic education are the outcome of a wide-ranging debate which took place between 1996 and 2001. The process of defining these essential competences involved schools, higher education institutions, specialists and

researchers, educational associations and movements and civil society in general. This led to the curricular reorganisation for Basic Education implemented by Law 6/2001. Some essential transversal competences were introduced in the National Curriculum and that is the case of Citizenship Education whose broad conceptual definition was loosely structured including a set of topics to be introduced in all subject areas: democracy, social cohesion, diversity, intercultural awareness and education for peace, environmental sustainability, human rights, equity, and others. Though its importance and the political intent to involve different curricular areas in the development of school projects aiming to promote student autonomy and civic awareness - critical for the development of active citizens - the gap between the rhetoric of educational policies and its practice in schools is still wide.

In Poland there is also a debate how to engage young people to active participation in social and political activity. Polish people are characterized by low level of interpersonal and institutional trust, low level of social capital, low level of participation in elections, small number of people active in local organizations and foundations. Polish schools rather teach about democracy (young people have a big level of knowledge about such topic) then educate to active participation in democracy (Dolata et al, 2004). Unfortunately there is no national policy concerning citizenship education, some initiatives are taken mostly by universities and non-profit organizations. Promoting teachers' and students' citizenship competences is then a task of big importance.

Methodology

The original Italian questionnaires (Chistolini, 2014), one for students and another for teachers, were translated into Portuguese and Polish language adapted to regular cultural usage.

There are some discrepancies in the number of the items among the countries due to small adaptations to each context. The items provided an answering five-point agreement Likert-type scale. All the items were analysed and the mean score calculated. For the purpose of data discussion, the scores 1 and 2 3 were considered as low and those scored as 4 and 5 were considered as high.

In Italy, the sample group of 219 teachers was selected in the 12 schools, in Rome. In Portugal nine secondary schools in Lisbon were selected to run the survey and its suburban areas. The student sample was comprised of 27 items and 318 students, aged 14 - 18 years old, responded. To the 39 item teacher questionnaire there were 109 respondents. Poland is joining the research team and the article presents some first Polish results received.

Teachers' questionnaire

Through 39 structured and closed sentences and two open questions, an endeavour was made to reveal the representation of the teachers in their professional activity, taking three types into account, developed afterwards to enable a layered comment on the results obtained. Each level has seven categories of analysis.

First level: descriptive

- a) the psycho-educational impact on the students 3- 8 (question's number)
- b) the pedagogic-didactic dimension of teaching 2-7-10
- c) the socio-cultural factor of education 4
- d) the intellectual investment 5
- e) the interpersonal, human experience 6
- f) relationships with external persons, referring to family and people outside the school 1-9
- g) relationships with persons inside the school, referring to colleagues, the headmaster 20-26-32

Second level: interpretative

- a) motivation 11
- b) educational strategies 13-14-16
- c) development 12
- d) responsibility 18-28
- e) ethics 34
- f) democratic principles 38
- g) internal and external organisation 17-22

Third level: evaluative

- a) communication and interaction 15-21-29
- b) relations 23-25-27
- c) valuation techniques 19-30
- d) anthropology 24
- e) documentation 31-33-39
- f) respect, impartiality 35-37
- g) adjustment 36

Comparison of the three levels, descriptive, interpretative and evaluative, with the relative maximum and minimum reply percentages, allows for an overall reading of the data collected.

Students' questionnaire

The 27 closed questions below allowed for describing the sample group according to the following types related to the competences the students attribute to their teachers.

Social interaction competences allow for dialogue, questions 3 (question's number) maintain discipline in the classroom, 9
 feeling of restlessness in the classroom, 17
 put themselves in the students' shoes, 19
 involve families, 21
 Ethical competences
 do not always respect the students, 1
 admit to their own mistakes, 4
 respect their commitments, 5

do not change, 6
 allocate values, 7
 Disciplinary competences
 explain, 8
 do not motivate, 16
 know the material, 22
 interrelate the topics, 23
 outside connections, 24
 Methodological competences
 have no study method, 10
 use suitable tools, 12
 few indications, 15
 discuss things suitably, 18
 very little comparison, 20
 do not adapt the contents to the class and students, 25
 alternate methods, 26
 support materials, 27
 Assessment competences
 favour some students, 2
 subjective evaluation, 11
 evaluate without giving criteria, 13
 comment on the evaluations, 14 (Chistolini, 2014)

Discussion of the results

Research with teachers revealed that in each country there are similarities. Teachers scored (very) high in almost all of the items. The first impression suggested by such results was that teachers manifest a very positive self-image of themselves, evaluating highly their teaching competences in range of three levels: descriptive, interpretative, evaluative. They presented themselves as professional, responsible, reflective and well organised persons. Analysing teachers' understanding of descriptive level of their competences one could say they felt rather high competent in their didactical work, conscious impact on their own and students' engagement, understanding psycho-socio-cultural contexts of teaching but they were much less aware of the role of good cooperation with an outside-school surroundings (students' families, local society). Italian, Polish and Portuguese teachers are not open enough for building relations with people, institutions, and organisations located in the neighborhood of school and in the entire society. Polish teachers admitted they don't have sufficient engagement in connecting their professional experience with activities outside the school. They declared much better involvement in their interpersonal relations inside school, than in external ones. School relations refer mostly to 'regular' cooperation with colleagues-teachers in range of effectiveness of their common pedagogical work but less - active engagement in sharing experiences concerning their discipline of knowledge.

The second level of teachers' competences - around which our international research was oriented - was the interpretative one. The aim of questions concerning this topic was to examine not only teachers' considerations on very important elements of educational process at school but also to inspire their reflection on their active impact on the quality of

teaching and learning. Analysing this data one could perceive some contradictions. One of them considers rather small acceptance for the statement ‘I generally use various teaching methods (lessons, workgroups, simulation, production of materials, projects, etc.)’. It showed a problem which is well recognized in Polish education ‘suffering’ from rather traditional teaching (Klus-Stańska, 2002; Kwieciński, 2007; Śliwerski, 2012). Also Italian (Chistolini, 2014) and Portuguese research showed a similar tendency: teachers experienced difficulties with the diversification of teaching methods and lack of competences to change their style of teaching. Moreover, Polish teachers admitted they were not so sure if they could effectively motivate their students including those who have learning difficulties. They also doubted (similarly to Italian teachers) in their abilities to mobilise students’ best potential and to promote the development of their autonomy. Our research confirmed the gap indicated by many educational researchers: teachers are not competent enough to adjust their teaching to the demands of changing world, where autonomy is one of the most important conditions of active participation in social life and active citizenship (Aviram, 2010; Wołodźko, 2013).

Data concerning evaluative level of teachers’ competences again showed some common tendencies. In general, teachers from Italy, Portugal and Poland declared considerable respect for students as unique, valuable persons. They presented their pedagogical consciousness and ethics, declaring treating all persons (students) as an aim of their professional activity, never as a ‘means’. With this declaration they also tied a highly confirmed statement about creating equal developmental opportunities for all their students. Teachers stated that they reflected carefully on both their own pedagogical work and their students’ achievements. Students’ evaluation is performed according to clear criteria, about which students are informed. These opinions showed again rather high self-estimation presented by three national groups of teachers.

Other side of our research was to recognise students’ opinions about teachers they worked with. Students estimated teachers’ social, ethical, disciplinary, methodological, disciplinary, and assessment competences (Chistolini, 2014) and they confirmed generally high level of teachers’ competences. They underlined teachers’ professional knowledge, but complained about lack of diversity of didactical methods used by teachers during the lessons. So, students as well as teachers before perceived teachers’ difficulties in organizing educational process in a more attractive way what could explain also teachers’ problems in motivating students to educational activity. Students from each country would also like teachers to understand more their situation (‘to put themselves in students’ shoes’), which was connected with young people’s need to be understood by significant adults.

Polish students indicated especially teachers’ social competences. They expressed the appreciation for their teachers’ big respect given to the students (question 1), equal teachers’ acceptance for students’ uniqueness (lack of discriminations - question 2); cultural behavior and positive attitude towards students (calm voice, self-control in sometimes difficult situations during the lessons – question 6). They appreciated freedom for expressing their opinions but criticized teachers for lack of courage to admit their mistakes and to allow students to formulate some their own proposals to make changes in educational process.

Portuguese results showed that students in general, scored high in most of the items except in the following five, presented in order of mean score from the lowest:

- Item 19 - 2, 29 (Teachers try to be in 'the students 'skin');
- Item 10 - 2, 58 (Teachers help students to develop personal study skills);
- Item 26 - 2, 79 (Teachers change teaching methods);
- Item 15 - 2, 85 (Teachers give opportunity to improve by using different materials);
- Item 24 - 2, 86 (Teachers give opportunity to improve using external cultural activities).

These responses seem to indicate that students feel that teachers distance themselves from the students needs and are not open to new teaching experiences.

Italian students responses showed their top-down perception of social interaction in the classroom - from the teachers downwards and not enough place for the opposite one (bottom up approach) (Chistolini, 2014) what could be a big barrier in students' engagement in educational process. As such a barrier were also perceived teachers' assessment practices – from one side supporting positive climate in the classroom, from the other – ignoring using evaluation as a tool of personal cultural development, of self-verification of teaching, of scientific revelation (Chistolini, 2014).

Conclusions

In general students appreciate their teachers with regard to their professional preparation, teaching ability, responsibility and sense of duty. Teachers feel an understanding towards the students, an openness to human communication, favourable towards dialogue and the equal opportunity principle. They consider the discipline of study only part of their professional role. In general, one could say that our sample confirmed the efficiency of teachers' competences and the complete assumption of their teaching mission.

From the students standpoint, teachers are perceived and accepted as knowledgeable in their main teaching area but not committed enough to change or to explore multidisciplinary approaches. Students find a lack of social interaction in classroom life; teachers are not always aware of the different personalities of the students. In addition, they find teachers unable to offer them sufficient motivation to study. Due to the monotony of teaching methods, the learning process tends to be uniform and school-centred, thereby neglecting the equal opportunity principle and individualisation of teaching strategies.

Very much criticised was the real human relationship between students and teachers: students consider teachers less democratic as regards the offer of equal opportunity education. Social and personal competences are supposed to promote more active, participatory efforts to improve the sense of community that schools still lack. By centring their activities in the classroom teachers are not facilitating the opportunity for students to exercise their citizenship.

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