Part 2

Pre-Service and In-Service Teacher Training & Learning and Teaching Styles

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COMPETENCE-BASED APPROACH IN THE EDUCATION OF PEDAGOGUES – COMPARATIVE VIEW

Abstract

The paper presents some of the findings of a comparative qualitative study conducted at University of Ljubljana, Slovenia and University of Belgrade, Serbia. It discusses the findings related to the opinions and experiences of the university professors about the role of competences in the pedagogy study programmes. Competence-based approach has been introduced with the Bologna process and raised many dilemmas and controversies among the university teaching staff. Many respondents are critical about the mainstream competence discourse, and associate it with narrow behaviouristic concept. They however express the stance that holistically conceptualized competence-approach could positively influence the students' ability to use theoretical knowledge and research skills when dealing with complex occupational challenges.

Key words: competences, pedagogy, teacher education, pedagogue education, Bologna process

Introduction

Departments of pedagogy and andragogy at universities in Ljubljana and Belgrade follow their more than century old tradition in the education of prospective pedagogues. The study of pedagogy is widespread in most of the Continental European countries, and is associated with the education of pedagogical professionals, i.e. professionals who in different educational organizations (typically schools, kindergartens) and other professional environments (such as pedagogical institutes, ministries) support teachers in their pedagogical activities, help students, develop new pedagogical models, or work on educational policy issues (more on that Ermenc et al., 2013; Spasenović et al., 2010).

Pedagogy is considered a fundamental science, yet not solely theoretical science which develops generally valid theories and explains general laws in the area of education, but also an applied and normative science which forms practical guidelines and defines good pedagogical practices (Biesta, 2011; Ermenc et al., 2013; Medveš, 2010). Such dual nature of pedagogy has always raised many

questions also in the area of education of prospective pedagogues. These debates have spurred in the last decade with the introduction of the Bologna model. Participating in the Bologna process, both countries underwent considerable reforms of their higher education systems, including the introduction of the competence- and learning outcomes-based approaches.

The paper draws on the comparative qualitative study which was conducted in November and December 2014 in the leading Slovenian and Serbian universities, University of Ljubljana and University of Belgrade. The paper discusses the opinions and experiences of the university professors about the role of competences in the pedagogy study programmes.

Competences in teacher and pedagogue education

The concept of competence-based approach in education has been a topic of numerous studies and heated debates (Laval, 2005; Štefanc, 2006). In Slovenia and Serbia the issue has been often related to the question of initial teacher education and training and teacher professional development (Cvetek, 2004; Korać, 2012; Marinković & Kundačina, 2012; Muršak, Javrh & Kalin, 2011; Peklaj, 2006; Peklaj et al., 2009; Plevnik, 2005; Razdevšek Pučko, 2004; Stojanović, 2008; Vranješević & Vujisiić, 2013). Many of the researchers support the idea that modern teacher education and teacher professional development need to be based on competences, as they are supposed to help re-direct the focus of teacher education to the development of practical skills (Razdevšek Pučko, 2004, p. 71), and skills that enable teachers to keep pace with constantly changing circumstances (Buchberger, Campos, Kallos & Stephenson, 2000; Peklaj et al., 2009, p. 9).

Supported by European financial mechanisms, many applicative projects have been set up to deal with the concept of competence in teacher education. Many of them have produced lists of teachers' competences, which are supposed to serve as the basis for teacher education. For instance, in such a project at University of Ljubljana (Peklaj et al., 2009), researchers identified 39 competences. They have grouped them into five categories, or five "core competence areas" (Peklaj, 2009, pp. 15-16): (a) effective teaching (includes competences such as the command of the subject; lesson planning, implementing and evaluating; the use of interactive teaching methods and didactic strategies etc.); (b) life-long learning (the use of different strategies for increasing student motivation; the development of ICT literacy; the development of communication and social skills; psychological resilience etc.); (c) leadership and communication (the creation of disciplinary guidelines, based on mutual respect; the creation of encouraging learning environment; equal support of all students; the identification of students with special needs; successful coping with conflicts and violence etc.); (d) formative and summative assessment (the appropriate usage of different modes of learning outcomes assessment; the ability to provide constructive feed-back; formulation of the assessment criteria etc.); and (e) wider professional competences (such as the ability to work in teams; being open to cultural differences; paying regard to ethical principles).

The question arises if "list-of-competences" approach, which focuses on teacher's behaviour (*techne*), can produce teachers who are able to make theoretically and morally sound decisions and act accordingly. Kroflič (2007) argues

that successful teacher education cannot be assured by listing competence, no matter how detailed such a list may be. On the contrary, drawing on authors such as Carr, Korthagen and Csikszentmihalyi, Kroflič (2007) argues that we have to focus on teachers' personal attitude in pedagogical relationships, and think about the attitude in terms of arreatic virtues such as honesty, equity, modesty, courage, empathy and other virtues of character. Arreatic virtues are about teachers' attitude toward students and pedagogical process, and both need to be based in the layer of teachers' personal mission, identity and fundamental beliefs. Students can be brought up as ethical beings only through relationship with other people. Therefore teacher education has to be based on Aristotel's concept of *phronesis*, concludes Kroflič.

Many definitions of competences exist. Widespread is the DeSeCo's definition of competences, which says that "A competence is defined as the ability to successfully meet complex *demands* in a particular *context* through the mobilization of psychosocial prerequisites" (Rychen & Salganik, 2003, p. 43, the authors' emphases), and continues: "The primary focus is on the results the individual achieves through an action, choice, or way of behaving, with respect to the demands, for instance, related to a *particular professional position* […]" (Rychen & Salganik, 2003, p. 43, the authors' emphasis). This definition implies that educational programmes – if they are to be competence-based – need to be based on a clear explication of 'professional positions' for which they are designed for. This may not be such a difficult task when one has a teacher's profile in mind. The issue becomes more complex and controversial when a professional profile of a pedagogue is in question. In the territory of former Yugoslavia, the profile of a pedagogue has historically changed considerably and even today there is no wider consensus on its nature. There is however one characteristic which is typical for the majority of programmes in the whole territory: ever since 1970s when the school counselling services in schools and kindergartens were introduced[1], their introduction has had a crucial effect on the study of pedagogy. The profile of a (pre)school pedagogue decisively influenced the formation of pedagogy study (Medveš, 2010, p. 104).

In spite of the fact that the profile of school pedagogue influenced the study of pedagogy considerably, an equation between the study and the profile cannot be made. A comparative study on study programmes in Belgrade in Ljubljana universities (Spasenović & Ermenc, 2014) revealed that the programmes are still conceptualized in a much broader manner, giving more focus to the study of science than to the training of future (pre)school pedagogues and other professionals in the educational field. Competence-based approach is reflected in the programmes, but not very pronounced. The profile of (pre)school pedagogue has remained the central focus of the programmes, but also other professional position have been taken into consideration, those related to posts in administration, leadership and research. Since the above-cited study was limited to the analysis and the comparison of organization and structure of the programmes, their general goals, and the types of educational activities, these conclusions are less reliable, which is why we have studied them further.

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[1] In the territory of former Yugoslavia elementary, secondary schools and kindergartens employ (pre)school pedagogues or (pre)school counsellors whose task is to support teachers, principals, and students.

Method

The aim of the empirical research was to examine the opinions of university teachers at the Departments of Pedagogy and Andragogy at Ljubljana and Belgrade universities on the competence-based approach which was introduced within the framework of the Bologna process. We asked them how they understand the approach, how they evaluate it, and how it influences their work.

We have conducted a qualitative comparative study, and chosen a technique of research interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The sample includes eleven teachers, six from the Department of Pedagogy and Andragogy at the University of Ljubljana[2] (who lecture History of education, Theory of education, Sociology of education, Didactics (2 professors), Vocational pedagogy), and five from the Department of Pedagogy at the University of Belgrade[3] (who lecture History of education, General pedagogy, Didactics (2 professors), Preschool pedagogy). We have selected interviewees based on three criteria: they all have at least ten-year experience working as a university teacher in the field of pedagogy; they teach one of the fundamental pedagogical courses, and have taken part in academic discussions (oral or written) on the issues about the nature and identity of pedagogy.

Semi-structured questionnaires were used. In order to find the categories for the analysis of university teachers' answers we have used an inductive approach to develop categories based on analysis of original data (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtle, 2006).

Findings

As the issue of competences is related to the occupational profile of a profession, the interviewees were asked to define the profile and the characteristics of pedagogues. Most of them agreed that pedagogues: (1) Should function as ethical, intellectual, critical professionals (RL1, RB5, RB4); (2) Should have good methodological skills (RL1, RL2, RL3, RL4, RB3); (3) Should be able to read fundamental texts, defend their professional opinion and keep critical distance (RL2, RB5, RB4, RB3); (4) Should be able to function effectively in different occupational positions and situations, and reflect on their decisions and actions, on the decisions of others (RL1, RL2, RL3, RL4, RB4). Less often also these characteristics are mentioned: good communication and social skills (RB5, RB4, RB2, RB3), the ability to work in teams (RB2, RB3), and "pedagogical tact" (RB3).

All respondents in Ljubljana and three in Belgrade agreed that focusing on the occupational position of a (pre)school pedagogue/counsellor would mean a highly problematic narrowing down of the profile. When having occupational challenges in mind, the professors do often focus on the (pre)school pedagogue's occupational tasks and problems, but simultaneously say that the study of pedagogy has always been much more broadly conceptualized, covering topics from the macro-systemic to the micro-pedagogic levels (RL1, RL5, RL6, RB1, RB4, RB5). Moreover, the graduates have always been able to find employment in very diverse organizations.

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[2] Marked as RL – respondents from University of Ljubljana.
[3] Marked as RB – respondents from University of Belgrade.

Therefore a competence-based approach might also hinder – instead of improve – the graduates' employability.

All respondents in Ljubljana and more than half in Belgrade are rather critical about the mainstream competence discourse, and associate it with a narrow behaviouristic concept of competence: "*I understand competences as the integration of academic knowledge, skills, and attitudes* […]. *To avoid academism however, I would not want to transform the pedagogue's profile into a technicistic one.*" It seem that the critique is directed to both, to the narrow behaviouristic notion of competence, as well as towards the global higher education policy which is trying to economize higher education at all hazards (RL3), also by promoting the narrow concept of competence.

Nonetheless, many respondents agree (RL2, RL3, RL4, RL5, RB1, RB2, RB5) that competences can be defined holistically and thus gain more pedagogical value: "*I draw on the concept of competence but in a way I find it appropriate for the study of pedagogy; I understand it as an integration of knowledge, action and reflection. By action I understand mostly methodological skills*" (RL2).

Interestingly, respondent RL3 explains that the concept of competence could be explained in the sense of *phronesis*, but *phronesis* requires a thorough theoretical study which policy does not support. "*You simply cannot comprehend a professional problem without leaning on theory. The issue is not either to choose a discipline-based curriculum model or a practically-based competence model; it is about the integration of the two. Dewey's statement that theorizing is lame and practicing is blind is still valid*" (RL3).

Even the respondent who expressed one of the most critical attitudes about the competence concept (RL4), says that she finds MacBeath's conceptualization useful: "*Students should reach learning aims at three levels: at the levels of knowing, feeling and acting;* […] *each level encompasses the dimensions of understanding, abilities (or competences) and values*" (RL4).

Despite having critical stance toward competence-based approach one respondent (RB4) claimed that insistence on competences in Serbia has challenged the prevailing encyclopaedism in the study programmes and provided a good opportunity to reflect on the essence of the profession.

Conclusion

The study has revealed that the competence-approach is generally much better accepted by respondents from Belgrade than those from Ljubljana. Compared to respondents from Ljubljana University, the respondents from Belgrade University also express slightly more pronounced need for the practical skills development. The majority of the interviewees are however rather reserved and critical to both, competence approach as well as the practical skills development; they fear that in the given political and societal atmosphere competence-approach would lead to its reduction to *techne*.

One must however note that even the harshest critics of the competence concept express the stance that competence approach – if understood holistically and used wisely – could positively influence the students' ability to use theoretical knowledge and research skills when dealing with complex occupational challenges. If anything, our respondents agree that this is one of the fundamental study aims they strive for,

but are only rarely successful at achieving. This is why we believe that it might be useful to further investigate and develop the idea of a competence model, or perhaps, a *phronesis* model that would be suitable for the professional development of pedagogues.

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