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## Official Discourses in the Educational Systems

Competencies—The New Curriculum Password?

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The utility of knowledge has always been assumed to be one of the essential and structural questions in any educational and curriculum narrative. In fact, the utility of knowledge frames different designs for educational systems.

Knowledge, as presented in public education systems, originates in the mainstream culture as an "accumulated capital for a future time or cultural ornament" (Beane, 2002, p. 19). It is shaped and sequentially arranged in a compartmentalized way that often is far removed from everyday context of students. Moreover, knowledge is frequently framed as being needed for a certain or eventual future requirement.

Historically there has always been a hierarchical relation within the formal structure of learning, involving contents (what), time (when), and utility (what for). The traditional difference in social status of the different kinds of knowledge and their utilities is connected with the way education emerges institutionally, as well as the demands of the economy. The concept of competence was born at the center of this tension and has been developing there, and there it must be rebuilt.

## From Qualification to the Lonely Responsibility of Individual Education

Nowadays, across all geographic, political, and social latitudes, school attendance in formal learning contexts is associated with motivations directly related to employment and productivity (Sarmiento & Ferreira, 2006, p. 331).

In fact, the growing pressure to survive in the labor market for a growing group of individuals with an increasing level of qualifications, combined with the ongoing need among businesses and institutions for qualified employees, has been determining the erosion of the cultural purposes of education. This reality has contributed to an interesting debate about the so-called crisis in education. Some authors defend the idea that this crisis does not refer to the school model but to a legitimate crisis of the school institution, believing there is a certain decline of that very institution that is leading to "the deinstitutionalization of the socializing processes and to growing individualization movement" (Dubet & Martuccelli, 1996; Dubet, 2002, quoted by Sarmiento & Ferreira, 2006, p. 333).

The school model associated with the Taylor-Ford model was followed for decades—until the 1960s and 1970s in some countries, and it still used in Portugal. The educational system in Portugal (and in too many other nations in the European Union) values the passive transmission of knowledge and overvalues the acquisition of diplomas from formal educational institutions, to the detriment of knowledge built through individual experience in multiple personal and professional life contexts. Such a model "is the one of the diplomas and not the one of knowing how to mobilize the knowledge, the skills and competences in new situations" (Warschauer, 2006, p. 806).

This perspective is contradictory in itself, once the bureaucratic content with which learning concretizes itself has created a growing distance between school learning and the knowledge and skills individuals need to be productive in labor contexts. This is identified as one of the main reasons for the weak social and economic performance of the country. It was also clear in the Portuguese students' recurring weak performance on international assessments.

We are, therefore, already too far away from Freinet, who defended the existence of a school system that allows individuals to build a personal identity even as they take part in the construction of a collective identity. From Freinet's perspective, a school should perceive itself as existing to guide "the formation of the citizen" (Souza & Dantas, 2006, p. 993). This idea is reinforced in the most critical perspectives, particularly that of Freire, where it points out the need for

each citizen to define himself in relation to his rights and duties and to develop himself as an autonomous and responsible human being, through a process of *conscientization* (p. 987).

The school model has been widely debated in the field of education since the 1990s. Social, economic, and technological developments require workers to develop new capacities, knowledge, and skills, and develop a diverse set of essential competencies. The concept of qualification is associated with the current political circumstances of the concept of citizenship and is an increasing reality in educational systems, as that conceptual relation provides "a citizenship structured on an order, where the educational and qualification systems legitimate the existing differences" (Alcoforado, 2000, p. 114).

Some scholars including Reinhold and Breillot (1993) defend the idea that the qualification of citizens classifies individuals within the existing hierarchy, revealing differences that "serve socially as...[a] basis for employment, salary questions and attribution of responsibilities" (Pires, 2005, p. 280). Access to employment and a salary is based on this model—whether or not a person has a diploma.

A conceptual alteration that suggests an eventual change of paradigm seems to have occurred in the last three decades of the twentieth century with the slow devaluation of the school model based on qualification—all due to the shift in the job field, the growing valuation of knowledge, and the real-world capacities of individuals as opposed to the simple linear and repeated execution of certain tasks in specific contexts. A contrasting new concept occurs concomitantly—the competencies.

### Inside the Conceptual Perimeter

As we reflected on these concepts, we could not help but consider what we deem the perspective of a prison of educational thought. The Portuguese educational system is substantively paced by the instrumentality of what the students learn.

The competencies are defined as the "capacity to mobilize the necessary knowledge to solve a problem which appears in the performed activity" (Gongalves & Fernandes, 2007, p. 14), never appearing in isolation, but only in connection with other competences. If, as we referred to previously, the concept of competence frequently appears connected to the notion of qualification, then there are competencies that may not qualify. In reality, an individual's qualification may not be synonymous with his competence, although the omni-

site is also true (Alcoforado, 2001, pp. 78–79; Gonçalves & Fernandes, 2007, p. 14; Imaginário, 2007, p. 9).

There is a new approach to what individuals should learn, since they must always be able to respond adequately to permanent social change. There is a constant need for the qualification, development, and updating of competencies. This continuous quest to gain the qualifications to respond to the job market appears in the literature as a “process of merchandising of education” (Fidalgo & Fidalgo, 2007, pp. 53–59). Ávila (2008) refers to the Zarfian competence model as “a performing way in relation to the strong competitiveness and consequently to the permanent need for innovation” (p. 97).

The competence model associated with a capitalist economic paradigm is based on the importance of the knowledge, capacities, and skills transfer that although acquired in specific contexts can be used in other similar situations (Santos & Fidalgo, 2007, p. 83). When what we know is applied to a certain situation, it means that “the passage to the competence realized in the action, took place” as Le Boterf notes (1994, p. 16; cited by Alves et al., 2006, pp. 255–275). On the other hand, this new approach also leads to the development of new capacities and competences (the new worker profile), to new institutional organizational forms, and to personal, educational, labor and social relations (Alves, et al. 2006; Canário, 1996).

The new worker profile associated with the permanent need to update knowledge has some less positive aspects, such as greater individualization and competitiveness, especially in the so-called qualification centers and workplaces. There is a personal dimension that includes adaptability, employability, and informed citizenship (Alcoforado, 2001, p. 76) that is extremely important because, in our view, it is where an individualized perspective of education strands out. In reality, the building, maintenance, and reinforcement of an individual’s productive capacity, employability, and adaptability seems more than ever to be a personal problem and circumstance that must be resolved by the individual himself. At present, individual autonomy and issues of freedom are paradoxically among the greatest dangers to exercising the right to education, because the fundamental collective responsibility and unavoidable social interest in the education of each citizen is being diminished by growing individual responsibility.

In this context, and taking these complex considerations into account, any attempt to define the competence concept is a biased process, in our opinion, because it expresses the axiological and political filters in which the different points of view on these definitions stand. In this context, Perrenoud (2005) has identified what he calls the three controversial but classical views:

1. the view that the competencies depend fundamentally on contextual factors—i.e., they are acquired and thus they depend directly on factors such as access to education and experience;
2. the view of the relationship between knowledge and competencies—some affirm that the overvaluation of the competence model affects the transmission and acquisition of knowledge; others, including Perrenoud (who emphasizes the need to apply multiple cognitive resources to discussion of the concept of competence), contend that the competencies are based on knowledge;
3. the existing notion of competence in the business world, which demands a new worker profile and new organizational forms, as we have discussed.

One of the previous views emphasizes not only the value of experience but also access to formal education systems as factors that contribute to the building of competencies. In reality, the equality of opportunity defended in contemporary societies is a value concretized in, among other things, access to formal education and qualification systems, which in turn must provide access to knowledge for all. The ancestral (yet not so old in the collective Portuguese memory) knowledge of how to read, write, and count is manifestly insufficient nowadays. In the complex information ocean we have plunged into, each individual is required to go beyond the reductive ways of producing knowledge, but he must be able to “transfer, use, reinvest and consequently, integrate that knowledge into competences” (Perrenoud, 2005, p. 69). Roldão (2003) affirms that we are being “bombardeado” with different origins and references to the concept. Being more competent is, in his opinion, “being more able to use knowledge adequately” (pp. 15–16) in the different areas of knowledge and life spheres.

According to Auber et al. (1993, pp. 19–20, cited by Pires, 2005, p. 263), the different approaches to the competence concept have derived from three levels of analysis: (1) the individual level (psychology and education sciences); (2) the group/society level (sociology, social psychology); and (3) the business level (law, economy, and management). This multi-subject approach was developed by Pires (2005).

We first refer to the works of Noam Chomsky, who in the 1960s centered analysis within the linguistic point of view. He understood it as “a generic faculty, as a potentiality with a distinct significance of performance... a generative, transverse power, with a capacity which allows the adaptation to new situations” (Pires, 2005, pp. 264–266). Chomsky argued that the notion of competence sends us to an internal dimension as well as the external, which is more visi-

ble but often less structured. With that, Chomsky (1969, cited by Ávila, 2008) established a distinction between competence and performance: "The first corresponds to a group of nonobservable rules...in which a possibility of language development lies; the second remits explicitly for the behaviors, that is, for the language expression and use" (pp. 93–94).

In the area of labor psychology, we define competence by distinguishing it from other related concepts such as aptitude: "The competences cannot be developed without the support of the aptitudes; however it is not just related with aptitudes" (Pires, 2005, p. 267). In this epistemological context, the local dimension of competence is important, because a direct relation is established between what the competence is, the contexts and organizations in which it is built, and the circumstances in which it operates. The competence is then considered within the scope of a construction in which it is necessary to mobilize instruments and strategies in the cognitive field, and not only from what is observable through the individual performance (a manifestly behaviorist position). The social/collective dimension is emphasized above all in the Vygotsky theory, because individual learning concretizes itself in the social context, along with the others in the collective.

In the areas of education and qualification we find several definitions of competence. It has been particularly visible in these fields since the 1960s (in the English word *skill*), through the implementation of what was called pedagogy by objectives (Rey, 1998, cited by Pires, 2005, p. 276). Focusing this attention on the notion of an objective reveals the relation between three aspects: "the individual possibilities (postulated competences), his results (observable and measured competences) and the pedagogic action" (Arenilla et al., 2001, p. 106).

The transferability and mobility of knowledge also characterize the concept of competence, because it always builds itself within a certain context and they may be transferred to other circumstances. As Le Boterf (1994, p. 16) explains, the use of what we know indicates that the passage to competence has occurred, having been realized through action.

The competitive performance of an individual is nourished by the capacity to act in certain situations by mobilizing a group of resources (capacities, knowledge, learning, attitudes, and values) acquired in a specific context, but placed subsequently in the service of different tasks, requests, and contexts (Le Boterf, 1994; Perrenoud, 1997 in Rodrigues & Peralta, 2006, p. 233; Gomes et al., 2006, p. 33; Rens, 2001, p. 55; Ávila, 2008, p. 95).

If, as Perrenoud (Genile & Bencini, 2000) assumes, competence is the capacity to mobilize a group of cognitive resources to solve a series of situations

with pertinence and efficiency, then competence is primarily "learning in use" (Perrenoud, 1995, cited by Roldão, 2003, p. 20)—that is, an individual's capacity to use that learning in different situations. This learning is not about theoretical content with little practical value but learning applied in concrete actions.

Let us now consider the different categories of competencies. Of the four that seem most significant, the first is presented by the European Industrialists Roundtable, which distinguishes five types of competencies: (1) technical and technological; (2) methodological and creative; (3) social, communitarian and relational; (4) participative and ethical; and (4) self-learning (European Commission, 1995, cited in Alcoforado, 2000, p. 137).

The second involves just two competence categories: technical, or connected to professional performance; and social, or occurring in everyday life and in interpersonal relations. They are called the key or transverse competences, which are useful in several contexts and frequently developed by Non Formal Education (Gonçalves & Fernandes, 2007, p. 15).

The third competence category is defended by Trigo (2002, p. 25), who gives us the competence group developed in the course of his work in adult education, including creation of the Adult Education and Qualification National Agency in Portugal (see Figure 1): (1) symbolic analysis; (2) social and behavioural; (3) directed to action; (4) scientific; and (5) technical and technological.

The fourth (Costa, 2002, p. 189) assumes three competence groups, based on what was proposed by the DeSeCo project: (1) operative, use of text and technologies; (2) self-oriented, acting autonomously; and (3) relational.

### The Instrumental Line and the Old Reproduction

The prevalence of lines of learning in the school systems, which are anchored to competence-building based on the presumption that that action alone will lead individuals to a greater ability to create, keep, and develop their productive capacities, has crashed the cultural and humanist dimension of individual and institutional learning history and has diminished the traditional role of the school.

There is a tendency to align curriculum and educational objectives with the needs of the market. Increasingly, the citizens aware that the education system has social validity only if it is geared to the interests of the market. Naturally, the education systems in general and the curriculum in particular exhibit a functionalist structure that almost completely neglects the human and social dimen-

sion of education. When they realize the magnitude of this tectonic reorientation of their political priorities and consequent pedagogic approaches, the education systems resituate themselves in terms of their societal missions.

Paradoxically, what seemed to be a decisive step toward greater efficiency in public education may in fact become a setback for civilization. In reality, the educational system will "produce" different and segregated functional content. Such segregation will correspond to diverse and unequal salaries and distinct levels of public recognition. In fact, what we see is the reproduction of (pre)existing cultural patterns.

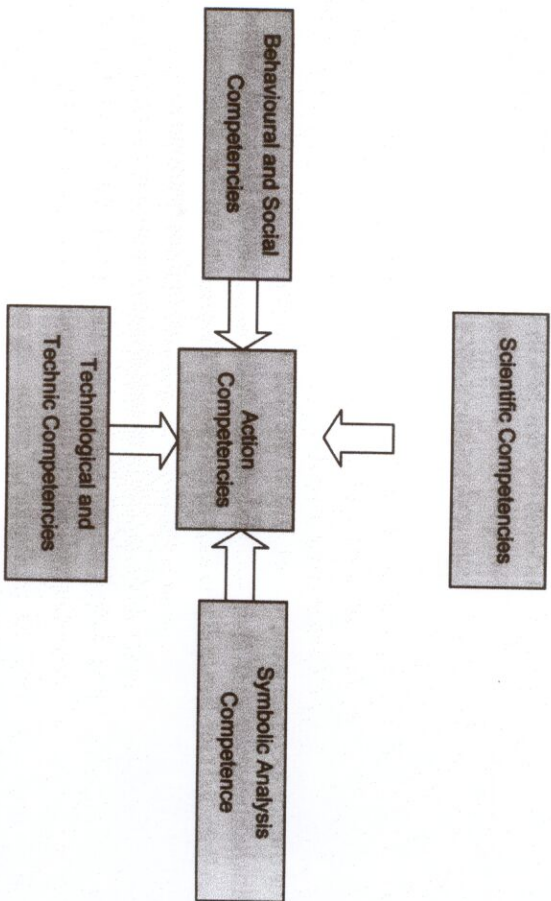


Figure 1. Classification of the action competencies. Reprinted from "Tendencies in People's Education and Qualification," by Maria Trigo, in *Adult Education and Qualification: Development Factor, Innovation and Competitivity*, edited by Isabel Silva et al., 2002, Lisbon: ANEFA. Reprinted with permission.

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