The dilemma of teachers' competences: a Portuguese survey

Florbela Sousa[1] and Maria Helena Pratas[2]
[1]University of Lisbon (Portugal), [2]Instituto Superior de Educação e Ciências (Portugal)

Abstract

This paper reports on the Portuguese sample of a comparative study of competences concerning the expectations of students and perceptions of teachers, in secondary schools in Cyprus, Germany, Italy, Portugal, and Romania. In the Portugal sample, the students seem to appreciate their teachers' professional competences, mainly in what concerns their subject knowledge. They believe the teachers are consistent and responsible. Both teachers and students stressed the importance and centrality of subject content knowledge in the education process. Concerning a cluster of ethical items, the students consider that the teachers respect them and allow them to state their opinions openly. Teachers are seen as coherent with their values and actions. The students´ responses seem to indicate a separation between the teachers' personal and the professional identity. They feel that the teachers are, somehow, distant and not open to new challenges or to explore the learning opportunities outside of the school walls. This indicates a need to include citizenship competences in teachers' lifelong learning professional development education.

Introduction

This paper reports the study developed by the Portuguese team after the data collected with two questionnaires applied in five European countries (Cyprus, Germany, Italy, Portugal and Romania). The common project aim was to explore and compare teachers' perceived professional competences and practice, with the students' awareness of their teaching. The underlying assumption is based on the need to understand the pervading phenomena resulting from this interaction, in need of stronger efforts and commitment from teachers and the setting up of open communication, participation and involvement of children and young people in the social, cultural and democratic life of schools.

Particularly critical, in times of major changes in schools and society resulting from global mobility, increased immigration and economic changes, is the importance of improving the quality of teacher education and the teaching profession since it will be reflected on the schooling experience of the students and their individual needs and development also affecting the school structures (EU resolution of September 23, 2008).

Theoretical Background

At the core of any theoretical framework for teacher professional development lays the concept of competence. However, the conflicting perspectives on its meaning, dimensions and practical approaches and its virtually unlimited field of outlining possibilities, already exposed by many different authors in endless lists of constructs intended to be developed by teachers, are highly contradictory and dilemmatic. Nevertheless, all authors and recommendations seem to agree that competences provide

a useful framework to improve education since they include the relevant dimensions for lifelong learning: the cognitive, the ethical and the action-related competences.
It is generally asserted that competence-based training/education first emerged in the 1960s in the USA, in the field of teacher education and spread to other professional training fields (Houston, 1980). The concept of competence re-emerged in the field of education in the 1990s related to student learning, teacher education and general professional training.

How are they developed? Which are the most important in teacher performance? Can competences be assessed? If so, how? Indeed, what are we talking about when we mention competences? These are some of the issues at the heart of many discussions, nowadays, on the professional action of teachers in relation to their students, teacher education and teacher career management (Esteves, 2009, p 38).

Competences also vary a lot from an author to another. Burke, for example, considered a set of twenty four criteria for describing and assessing Competency Based Programmes (Burke, 1989). On the other hand, Perrenoud developed a list with ten competences for teaching in Basic Education: to organise and lead learning situations; to manage learning progression; to conceive and develop differentiation devices; to involve students in the learning of their work; to work in a team; to participate in the running of the school; to inform and involve parents; to use new technologies; to face up to the ethical duties and dilemmas of the profession; to manage one's own continued training (Perrenoud, 1997).

Training courses geared towards the development of competences consider that the knowledge provided by the curricula is of no value per se, but as a potential help in developing the competences of each individual towards action. However, Eraut examined the relationship between knowledge and competences, and concluded that professionals profited only a small part from any programme aimed at the development of competences (Eraut, 1996).

European Perspective on Competences and Citizenship Competences

According to the Council of Europe, competences is defined as a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes which permit a person to solve the specific problems of a given social, cultural and political context (Glăvan, 2008). The Common European Principles for Teacher Competences and Qualifications (2005) states that teachers should be able to: work with others, with their fellow human beings, learners, colleagues and other partners in education; work with knowledge, technology and information; and work with and in society, at local, regional, national, European and broader global levels.

And what about Citizenship Competences? In a recent report presented at the Council of Europe, Glăvan says that

> What is generically understood through "citizenship competence" or "civic literacy" is the totality of knowledge, skills and attitudes which permit exercising the rights and responsibilities in a specific "polity" (public sphere). As for teachers' professional competences, they are in fact a set of specific competences enabling them to carry out certain educational activities in the

field of citizenship, human rights and diversity education. They comprise: pedagogical competence; subject-based competence; social and civic competence. Civic competence include certain skills and attitudes such as: capacity to incorporate Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (EDC/HRE) principles into teaching practice and subjects; knowing how to implement rights and responsibilities in specific contexts; respect for the rights of learners and sensitivity to their needs and interests; ability to promote a positive classroom climate; co-operative learning skills; team work; taking shared responsibilities; coping with conflicts; intercultural mediation; emphatic communication; participation in collective decision making; capacity to develop projects and create non-formal learning opportunities; capacity to manage situations arising from discrimination, injustice, racism, sexism and marginalisation; ability to bring up and discuss openly the problems imposed by hidden curriculum; ability to adjust teaching styles to a variety of learners; capacity to stimulate active participation within the school community; capacity to take part in public debates; ability to encourage exchanges, openness and interaction (Glăvan, 2008)

The limited description above is an example of the complexity and extension that have the perverse effect of discrediting the value of this approach to teacher education.

The competences approach in Portugal

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 its 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. The culture of schools is ever more competitive for academic success and teachers are pressured to become immersed in their own subject matter specialisation and cross-curricular competences such as those required for citizenship education tend to become implicit, fragmentary and less evident in the classroom (Sousa and Carvalho, 2007).

The Portuguese study

It is widely acknowledged that teachers play a significant role on the success of any implemented educational policy but, how overwhelming is the increasing pressure and growing expectations for their ability to promote key competences, both in formal and informal settings to combine their knowledge of subject matter and cross-curriculum

understanding so the students may be able to participate effectively in society? This study provides the opportunity to research, in five different countries, whether the teachers' competences are equally or differently perceived by themselves and the students.

The Council of Europe's Parliament adopted Resolution 1849 (October 3, 2008) recommending the promotion of a culture of democracy and human rights in schools through teacher education. The necessary teaching competences to be involved would include aspects such 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 responding to the complex challenges of the knowledge society? How are teachers integrating cognitive, ethical and action-related competences in their practice? And how are the students experiencing teaching? These were some of the questions that the research conducted by the Portuguese team aimed to grasp from the results.

Methodology

The original Italian questionnaires, one for students and another for teachers, were translated into Portuguese and the language adapted to regular cultural usage. Nine secondary schools were selected to run the survey in Lisbon 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. There are some discrepancies in the number of the items among the five 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. The Portuguese team decided to follow a qualitative approach and, for the purpose of data discussion, the scores 1 and 2 (below) 3 were considered as low and those scored as 4 and 5 were considered as high. The items scoring at mean level are not discussed here. Assuming that other countries might present the questionnaires in their symposium papers, the Portuguese team excuses itself from attaching it or describe in detail all its specificities.

Discussion of the results

The data collected from the students responses are discussed first. In general, the students 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 sing 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.

On the other hand, they scored highest in the following items:

> Item 5 - (Teachers respect what is agreed to be done)
> Item 22 (Teachers know their subject matter very well)

These responses indicate that students see their teachers as respectful and knowledgeable of their disciplinary subject. Further discussion will follow after the presentation of the results of teachers' responses.

The same procedures for scoring the 39 responses to the items in the teachers' questionnaire were followed here. Thus, for the purpose of discussion, only the items scoring below and above 3 were considered. In addition, the data was considered attending to gender, two professional experience levels (more or less years of experience) and by subject area (five grouped category: Humanities, Sciences, Technology and Arts).

Surprisingly, there were no significant differences in the mean scores by gender or between the two groups of teachers divided by years of experience. The main differences were found for the Arts teachers who, consistently, scored lower than the other three teaching groups and showing some problems in interacting with the school community. 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.

As a last strategy, the Portuguese team organised the items, empirically, into clusters of competences: pedagogical competencies; practical/didactic competencies; and citizenship competencies. Moreover, two more clusters of items, concerning the teachers' personal and professional identity were identified. As stated before, in general the teachers scored positive and high in most clusters of items. However, the 14 items comprising citizenship competences deserved a closer look, particularly three of those scoring just around the mean score:

> Item 3 (lack of cultural instruments for valuing the students as individual)
> Item 9 (participation in extra curriculum activities)
> Item 27 (capacity to deal with conflict)

Coincidently, these topics were also noticed by the students as areas where teachers were unsatisfactory assessed as less helpful or lacking the ability to leave the comfort of the well-known classroom and explore the possibilities outside.

Concluding remarks

In the Portuguese sample, the students seem to appreciate their teachers' professional competences, mainly in what concerns their subject knowledge. They believe the

teachers are consistent and responsible. Both teachers and students stressed the importance and centrality of subject content knowledge in the education process.

Concerning a cluster of ethical items, the students consider that the teachers respect them and allow them to state their opinions openly. Teachers are seen as coherent with their stated values and actions. The students´ responses seem to indicate a separation between the teachers' personal and the professional identity. They feel that the teachers are, somehow, distant and not open to new challenges or to explore the learning opportunities outside of the school walls. This indicates a need to include citizenship competences in teachers' lifelong learning professional development education.

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. 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. As recommendation for improving the quality of teacher education, the stress is in the need to prepare teachers to engage with diversity which implies the development of socio-cultural competences enabling them to assume a personal responsibility in all school activities.

References

Burke, J. W. (ed) (1989) Competency Based Education and Training. London: The Falmer Press

Éraut, M. (1996) Developing Professional Knowledge and Competence. Londres: The Falmer Press

Esteves, M. (2009) Construção e desenvolvimento das competências profissionais dos professores. *Sísifo. Revista de Ciências da Educação.* 8, pp 37 - 48 in http://sisifo.fpce.ul.pt (accessed 15 May 2010)

European Commission (2005) Common European Principles for Teacher Competences and Qualifications. Brussels: Directorate-General for Education and Culture

Glăvan, S. (2008) For the promotion of a culture of democracy and human rights through teacher education. Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, Committee on Culture, Science and Education, Doc. 11624 5 June 2008. in http://assembly.coe.int/MainDocuments/WorkingDocs/Doc08/EDOC11624.htm (accessed 15 May 2010)

Houston, R. H. (1980) An analysis of the performance-based teacher education movement, in Fardig, G. (ed) *Prospects of Performance-Based Vocational Teacher Education — Proceedings of National Invitational Conference at Orlando, Fla, March 1980*, College of Education, University of Central Florida, pp 1-11

Perrenoud, Ph. (1997) Construire des Compétences dès l'École. Paris: PUF

Shulman, L. (1986) Those who understand: knowledge growth in teaching. *Educational Researcher*.15, 2, pp 4 - 14

Sousa, F. and Carvalho, C. (2007) Educação para a Cidadania. O olhar de professores em formação pós-graduada, in Toldy, T., Ramos, C., Maior, P.V. and Lira, S. (ed) *Proceedings of the International Congress Citizenship(s) Discourses and Practices.* pp 353-361. Porto: Universidade Fernando Pessoa