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New Dimensions of the Role of the Teacher in a Knowledge-based Society

Abstract

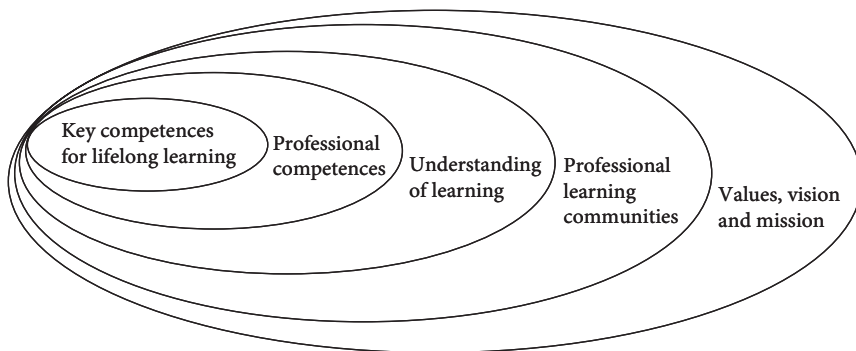
The core of interest in the article concerns the new dimensions of teachers' roles. It is considered in the context of the concept of the knowledge-based society. The authors consider the nature of the relation between personal and professional competences and how they contribute to effective teaching as well as participation in professional learning communities. The main assumption is that personal competences pre-empt professional ones and enable teachers to fulfill the roles which are perceived in the different dimensions.

Key words: *key competences, teachers' competences, knowledge-based society, professional growth.*

Introduction

The significant aim of preparing children and teenagers to live and take the opportunities provided by information and knowledge-based societies has led to increased interest in the so-called key competences. Education systems have an important role to play in providing people of all ages with equal and open access to high-quality learning opportunities, and to a variety of learning experiences. Consequently, education systems, especially curriculum standards, must be revised and attuned to new principles. The Member States of the European Union should transform formal education and training systems in order to break barriers between different forms of learning. Heads of States and Governments stated that "not only a radical transformation of the European economy, but also a challenging programme for the modernization of social welfare and education systems" is needed to achieve

Scheme 1: Dimensions of the new role of the teacher.



Source: based on Persson (2006, p. 21)

this goal (eurydice.org). The Eurydice network follows this need and launched a survey to distinguish these key competences. The main purpose of the research was to seek the opinion of the member countries on how the key competences are recognized in their education systems and what is done to strengthen them.

The Ministers of Education of the European Union States agreed on three major goals to be achieved by 2010 for the benefit of the citizens competences and the EU as a whole:

- to improve the quality and effectiveness of the EU's education and training systems;
- to ensure that they are accessible to all;
- to open up education and training to the wider world.

To achieve these ambitious goals, they decided on thirteen specific objectives covering the various types and levels of education and training (formal, non-formal and informal) aimed at providing conditions for learning. Systems have to improve on all fronts: teacher training; basic skills; integration of Information and Communication Technologies; efficiency of investments; language learning; lifelong guidance; flexibility of the systems to make learning accessible to all, mobility, citizenship education.

To develop the key competences, first of all education must expand its offer: curriculum, information, methods. If teachers are the ones to play a crucial role in educating people they will need substantially more diverse knowledge and skills. On that basis it can be agreed that their work is much more demanding but challenging: they do not simply pass on information but:

- frame problems;
- investigate, integrate and synthesize information;

- create new solutions;
- learn on their own;
- work co-operatively (Persson, 2006, p. 21) .

The core of teachers' roles in the 21st century is composed of at least five key competences which must be included in the educational process. Each of the competences adds a new feature to the teacher's role which must be perceived holistically. All of them are connected and follow one from another: from the basic key competences for lifelong learning through professional competences, understanding of learning, finally to the creation of professional learning communities and ensuring values, vision and mission, as can be seen in Scheme 1.

Key competences for lifelong learning

Lifelong learning encompasses learning for personal, civic and social purposes as well as for employment-related purposes. It takes place in a variety of environments in and outside the formal education and training systems. Lifelong learning implies raising investment in people and knowledge; promoting the acquisition of basic skills, including digital literacy; and broadening opportunities for innovative, more flexible forms of learning.

The idea of lifelong learning has been present in pedagogical and educational concepts approximately since the middle of the 20th century. Nevertheless, the attention paid to educating people during their whole life span has been specially exposed since the 1970s due to J. Delors's report: *Learning: the treasure within*. Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty – first Century.

In Polish pedagogical thought we must mention B. Suchodolski's theory (Suchodolski, 1973). We use at least two terms: *edukacja ustawiczna* (permanent education) and *uczenie się przez całe życie* (lifelong learning).

Dynamic socio-cultural changes, the constantly accelerating development of technology and the uncontrolled flow of information, mean that lifelong education is currently even more relevant and important than ever. With reference to these changes the European Union reports define the knowledge-based society as a target of progress within the next few years. This aim encompasses three aspects of life: the cultural, social and human capital. Such an attitude directly influences education and educational goals: people should have an urge to learn as knowledge and abilities can easily get old and education must help them to 'evoke and meet this 'urge'. It can be assumed that on the one hand education is a component of lifelong learning and on the other it should prepare for it.

The lifelong learning competences refer not only to teachers' skills but also to all citizens. They should be developed through education at all stages (from compulsory education to adult education) and not only in schools but also in other forms (courses, trainings, self-education). Lifelong education is not only related to professional and civic but mainly to personal development. It goes without saying that there should be educational conditions for lifelong learning for people with special educational needs (disabled people, gifted people) and those at risk of social exclusion (maladjusted).

The attempt to provide people with key competences is based on an assumption that they contribute to **personal fulfilment, social inclusion and employment in a knowledge-based society**. That is why lifelong competences should be the core—a crucial factor in educating people to live and act in a knowledge-based society.

Among the key competences for lifelong learning we can point out eight major competences, namely:

- Communication in the mother tongue: skills to use the language, text, symbols, information/knowledge interactively. They include the ability to express and understand thoughts, feelings and facts not only verbally but also non-verbally. Vocabulary connected with social, political and cultural context enriches communication competences.
- Communication in a foreign language: the same abilities as above, but in a foreign language.
- Mathematical literacy and basic competences in science and technology: these competences have universal application as they help to explain and describe reality. They are employed to understand the natural world and modify it according to human wants and needs.
- Digital competences: this group of competences involves using Information Society Technologies (such as the Internet, electronic media, banking machines etc.). They are related to retrieving, assessing, storing, producing and exchanging information. They comprise competences necessary to communicate and participate in networks via the Internet.
- Learning-to-learn: this is a broader attitude towards gaining knowledge. Knowledge is not the final purpose of education. What matters more is the way it is acquired and if it can be internalised (Okoń, 1999). Learning-to-learn competences can be perceived from two perspectives: on the one hand it is managing one's own career path and on the other it is the ability to organize and regulate the process of learning (to manage time, solve problems, evaluate and assimilate new knowledge). Learning-to-learn should improve the quality of one's life by applying new knowledge and skills.
- Interpersonal and civic competences: interpersonal competences refer to these

abilities and skills which enable to efficiently and constructively participate in social life. They help to solve conflicts in social life and interactions, not only on a personal basis but also in public. Civic competences are broader than the above ones and are associated with participation in civic life.

- Entrepreneurship: has two components. The first one is an ability to act innovatively (an active component), the second ability to welcome and support innovation (a passive component). They are connected with creativity, planning the future professional career, motivating and implementing new ideas.
- Cultural expression competences: enable active participation in cultural life, not to be just an “addressee” of pop-culture but also a conscious interpreter of “high culture”. Due to these competences people can gain a creative attitude towards culture, especially art, music, literature, film, theatre. Finally they enable selective usage of media (Persson, 2006)

Summing up it can be noticed that all these competences involve an active and reflective attitude towards oneself and one's environment.

Professional competences

These key competences form the basis of teachers' professional competences. Professional competences reflect essential qualities indispensable for high quality performance and achievements in teaching and learning. The professional competences embrace (Persson, 2006):

- Personal and social competences: nowadays we pay great attention to personal competences of the teacher, assuming that they contribute to effective teaching. Some Polish researches state that personal competences are the core of teachers' abilities (Kwiatkowska, 2003). Among others some features appear most often, they are: open-mindedness, flexibility, creative thinking, self-esteem, leadership, sociability etc.
- Interpersonal competences focus on skills which once mastered, help one to interact and be in accord with others: emotional intelligence, ability to share, to motivate, to negotiate, to coach, to peer and to consult. Applying interpersonal competences establishes relations with pupils, students, parents and other teachers. They play an essential role not only in the professional context but also in the public one. In addition, they enable communication as well as collaboration, which strengthens the processes of personal development.
- Learning competences: refer to learning-to-learn competences and involve gaining knowledge, skills and attitudes leading to an understanding of the

learning process. They are crucial in the perfection of teaching methods, the process of diagnosis, transferring knowledge and creating the teaching environment. Needless to say, they engage teachers in a process of continual development.

- Research competences: observing, measuring, assessing and concluding entitle the teacher to be a researcher. Plenty of pedagogical research takes place in schools – it is called action research and its results can improve school practice. Due to action research teachers gain knowledge about pupils, their abilities, needs and process of learning.
- Holistic view competences: in Polish pedagogical thought they are called reflection (Gołębniak, 1998). These competences contribute to increasing consciousness of acts and context: observing, re-planning, adjusting work actions. Reflection helps to foresee the consequences of decisions. Of even greater importance is that a holistic view adds to the broadening context of teachers' work (politics, culture, science) and to perceiving relevance in it.
- Networking competences: arise from technological development and enable global and borderless cooperation. These competences lead to exchanging experience, knowledge and finally to evolving the knowledge – based society.
- Change agency competences: bound to performing innovative and creative solutions to the teaching process and education (Schultz, 1980). Problem solving and creativity skills enable one to bridge the gap between what is and what ought to be, and produce a novel idea, and then turn it into a practical one.

The understanding of the learning process

The competences in this dimension refer to the teacher as a leader of the learning process and encompass abilities to carry out the cycle of conceptualising → understanding → transferring → advancing learning. Mentoring leads learners through all these stages. The effective teacher should fully understand the learning process, and especially be aware of prior knowledge in learning, learning for understanding and meta-learning. Such an approach can be found in the concept of “constructing knowledge” (Kwieciński, 1991), which recognises the learning process not only as remembering knowledge but mainly as constructing, transferring and creating. The understanding of the learning process consists of:

- Conceptualizing: connected with usable knowledge and socio-cultural context. The idea of usable knowledge suggests that information should be organized in groups and referred to context where applicable. It must be emphasized

that teaching – learning take place in social, cultural and individual contexts. The construction of knowledge is influenced by language and other cultural symbols. The mediation of knowledge, to become refined and coherent, should take place between the teacher and pupil.

- Understanding learning: contributes to awareness of factors influencing learning. Such an attitude requires working with prior knowledge (understandings and conceptions which pupils or students have before). The second approach to understanding learning involves meta-cognition and enables students to control the process of learning: finding goals and progressing. Moreover, it strengthens self-assessment and reflection. Of course, factual knowledge, understanding of facts, ideas and context are required.
- Transferring learning: arises from the presumption that knowledge should have practical implications. The main goal of the learning process is to prepare learners for adaptation to new contexts. Through instructions and creating new situations teachers can verify how well pupils transfer their knowledge. According to M. Persson (2006, p.24) transfer can be explored at some levels: from one set of concepts to another, one school subject to another, one year of school to another and finally across school and everyday activities.
- Advancing learning: is the final and the most comprehensive stage of the learning process. By previous steps learners are encouraged to extend and take responsibility for learning by themselves.

In conclusion, understanding of the learning process is not only applicable to students' learning but also to teachers as learners. The competences are fundamental and combined with professional development and increase the efficiency of teaching and learning of all subjects involved in education.

The creating of professional learning communities

Professional learning communities are groups of people who commit themselves to permanent learning. Moreover, they share and support others in professional work resulting in initiating environment improvement as well as innovation.

The domains of these competences refer to:

- Vision and values: created by communities and are fundamental for them as they bind people together, point to the aims and regulate the relationships and undertaken actions. According to Cichoń (1996) values should be the basis on which the educational aims are built as they verify the guidelines of pedagogical work. The importance of values in teachers' work is strengthened if we assume that schools should help pupils to build their set of values. Having

values leads to having a vision. Sharing a vision means not only consent to an idea but also being sensitive to what is important to an individual and to an organisation. Nowadays it is explicit that each school and educational institution should establish their mission. Consequently, values and a vision contribute to working out a good mission which allows them to build strategic awareness.

- Learning in professional communities must be present if they want to develop as a whole and as individuals. Learning stimulates awareness, nourishing the ongoing debate on teaching and learning. Finally, learning communities modify beliefs which help to view the world and improve the organisation. Persson (2006, p.39) uses the term 'mutual learning', which is defined by:
 - understanding of the learning process (meta-cognitive abilities and skills, integration of learning)
 - continuous learning within a professional culture and knowledge base
 - creation, transposing and transfer of knowledge
 - collective inquiry
 - reflective practice
 - action orientation
- Learning relationships: the element of the learning community which would be ineffective if people did not collaborate on a daily basis. Work relationships are meaningful because they influences teachers' attitudes towards work, pupils and colleagues. Each innovation is embedded in the individual's response to the world and if so the relationships and the communication verifies it. Learning relationships are not only important for intellectual understanding but mainly for open communication, trustworthy and caring group of people. In Persson's opinion (2006, p.39) learning relationships are comprised of :
 - creating and collaborative learning environment
 - team-learning
 - developing of professional competences
 - effective, apt and transparent communication
 - peering and coaching
 - connectedness
 - building ownership
 - empowerment
- Sustainability: means conscious, continuous and long-term development of the mentioned dimensions. To support development of teaching staff and initiatives some elements must be implemented: sustaining the collaborative learning environment (e.g. by organising self-educating conferences, proce-

dures for monitoring and assessing performance); sustaining continuous improvement (e.g. by training in group process skills); coherence making (e.g. establishing community goals); motivating, ensuring and maintaining commitment.

Ensuring values, forming visions and responding to missions.

The last and the most complex dimension refers to morality and ethics. On the basis of values a vision is defined and consequently the teacher's mission.

values vision mission

Values and ethics illustrate not only the ability to behave morally but also the embracing of a moral purpose, the ability to apply ethical principles, respect for the intrinsic values of others, safeguarding the well-being of children, understanding and practising honesty, integrity, understanding and appreciation of diversity and ecological thinking (Persson, 2006, p.6).

A vision is created by each educational organisation envisaging aims and efforts.

It is defined as "a positive image of the school future formed on the basis of values and ideas leading to aims and plans" (Oldroyd, Elsner, Poster 1996 s.76). It is indispensable in the process of a school's developing planning.

The mission describes the aims and expectations of all organizations. The mission is strongly connected with the school environment. The mission has two functions: inside – the mission creates the organization's sense and integrates the actions; outside – informs about the school's structure culture and its values, needs and services.

Summary

Each key competence is built on a combination of interrelated cognitive and practical skills, knowledge, motivation, value orientation, attitudes, emotions, and other social and behavioural components that together can be mobilised for effective action. As the key drivers of learners' development, to support the above competences, teachers must first of all be well- educated and prepared for permanent self-education. Among important competences which help them to meet the expectations we can add emotional and social competences enabling us to face everyday school stress and burn-out.

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