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## Individual competencies and the demands of society

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### 1. Introduction

During the past few years *competence* has become a very frequently used word in educational literature. The reason of this is, I think, in the fact that the meaning of the world competence emphasises *real capacity to apply knowledge*. A person is competent if he or she *has the knowledge* and, at the same time, is *capable to use* it. Knowledge, from this respect, is less than competence.

It is not surprising that the world competence was emphasised first in curriculum theory. Curriculum specialists have always stressed that we have to make a difference between learning and knowledge, on the one hand, and knowledge and competence, on the other. Learning makes sense only if it produces knowledge, and knowledge make sense only if it produces competence. The ultimate goal of education is the development of competencies in the individual. Education is successful if it produces people who are competent, that is they can *take responsibility for action in a given field*.

It is even less surprising that politicians particularly welcome this approach of curriculum theory. Society maintains schools not for making pupils learn but for making them know. And society wants pupils to know not only because knowledge is valuable in itself but because it enables us to act, to produce values, to create products, to solve problems. Society needs not simply educated people but competent people. Politicians who

are more and more worrying on how efficiently schools work are especially interested in the concept of competence.

Teachers, educationalists and politicians working on the realisation of the European idea are right to raise the question: what competencies European society need. What competencies schools have to develop in our pupils if we want them to become members of a European society. And, the question which is perhaps the most delicate one: how these competencies can be developed.

## **2. European needs**

The question this symposium has to answer or, to be more modest, has to reflect on is: whether we can define particular competencies needed by the future European society.

When the aims of the project „A secondary education for Europe” were set one of the key questions was how far we can speak about *European society*. The term „European society” is, I think, a metaphor. It is probable that, in the foreseeable future, we shall not have a European society in the same sense as we have French, German or American societies. Europe is a federation of countries which will keep their sovereignty, their cultural identity and their particular national goals.

On the other hand, it is clear that the already existing similarity of European societies allows the common definition of needs. The common definition of needs becomes unavoidable with the increasing number of issues dealt with at European level.

Many issues could be mentioned here. Environment protection, for instance, cannot be dealt with any more only at national level and, at the same time, it needs education policy answers. The human or minority rights issue is a similar one. It is a common interest of all European nations that these rights are respected in each country, and this also requires actions in education policy. For those European countries which open their labour market to others a certain level of co-ordination of their vocational-technical training policies becomes indispensable and this naturally has repercussions on general education policy. If European higher educational systems become more and more interrelated and an increasing number of students spend part of their time studying in another country higher education entry and leaving requirements will have to be harmonised. This also has direct impacts on school education.

We all know that Europe is necessarily multilingual and multicultural. Our common cultural heritage and common responsibilities cannot hide the fact that we have come from nations with significant cultural differences. Europe is created by states and nations with strong and different cultural traditions. As members of the community of the European nations they have to develop a new culture of co-operation which is without examples. They have to do much more than what they have traditionally done in international contacts. Traditionally international co-operation was concentrated on activities like, for instance, the elaboration of general agreements or the solution of acute problems, and only a restricted circle has been involved in them. Now, an increasing number of people with very different cultural backgrounds have to work together intensively and efficiently on common projects on a daily basis.

### **3. Social and economic challenges in Europe**

It is a commonplace that the social and economic context of education is rapidly changing and that the pace of this change is faster than ever in history. The rapidity of the changes makes it extremely difficult to identify the future demands of European societies and economies of the next decades. There are, however, a number of values shared by all European nations and there are some well identified challenges which have direct implications on what competencies education should develop in our pupils.

#### ***3.1. Preserving open societies***

Europe is the community of open, democratic societies. This leads to two major challenges that have serious educational implications. On the one hand, the preservation and the protection of an open society requires permanent efforts. It also requires individuals who are willing and who are able to make these efforts. On the other hand, to live in an open society puts serious burdens and responsibilities on the individual. School education has to play a major role in developing those individual competencies that enable us to bear these burdens and these responsibilities.

European societies are open also in the sense that they are permanently exposed to cultural influences coming from other societies. No European nation can prevent the penetration of intellectual, cultural or linguistic influences of other nations. The number of contacts with other cultures, directly or through the different channels of telecommunication is already extremely high and will further increase. Every culture has to have

the capacity to absorb the foreign influences without being threatened by disintegration or loss of identity. This capacity is partly a social one, but it depends mainly on capacities possessed by individuals. Individuals living in Europe have to possess the competencies that are needed for life in a milieu of cultural diversity. These competencies are partly of psychological nature: only persons *with correct self-perception and confidence* are able to appreciate cultural diversity.

### ***3.2. The challenges of multilingualism and multiculturalism***

Probably we do not exaggerate if we say that the biggest challenge of European development is connected to multilingualism and multiculturalism. We all know that language is the most important „carrier” of culture. Some kind of simple common culture can probably be created even without spoken language but the common spoken language is a fundamental condition of our cultural richness.

In European communication we use mainly English or French. Most of us have learnt these languages in school, and the language skills of many of us put serious limitations on our communication. The number of misunderstandings and misinterpretations is inevitably much higher in our foreign language communication than when we communicate in our native language. When we are communicating in a foreign language we express ourselves, in general, in a reduced way in order to help understanding. We need more feedback, more repetition, more clarification. But, nevertheless, communication has to have the same level of efficiency, that is it has to produce the same results: precisely formulated agreements or contracts, clear texts of regulations, accurate instructions for users etc. These have to have the same quality as if they had been produced by communication in the native language.

In the emerging European networks and organisations people coming from different cultures and speaking different languages have to *analyse problems, elaborate practical solutions, evaluate results of actions and formulate plans for execution*. They face *conflicts that have to be solved together* and they face *situations of emergency when rapid action is needed*. If we want European organisations to work in an efficient and reliable way people working in them will have to master special skills. A new type of competency will have to be defined. I would call it: *efficient co-operative work in a multilingual context*.

A number of questions arises here. How extended is the circle in which the need for this new competence really appears. Is it only the very

limited number of people who are actively involved in international projects or is it much more extended? How far are our schools prepared to develop this new competence? How teachers, who themselves have rarely had experience in co-operative work in a multilingual context, will be able to do this job? How far are our schools equipped with appropriate pedagogical instruments for developing this competence?

### ***3.3. Economic challenges***

An attempt to identify the possible directions of economic and labour market development and their implications for education policy was recently made at the meeting of the OECD Education Committee at ministerial level in last January. The preparatory documents of the meeting, the discussion and the conclusions have been strongly influenced by the results of a study OECD has recently completed on labour market changes (the so called *Job Study*).

A major conclusion was that given the rapidity of economic changes and, as a consequence, those of the labour market the traditional forms of education cannot meet any longer social and economic demands. No one can spend his or her whole life doing the same work: technological changes and economic restructuring due to global movements capital cause frequent alterations of work conditions.

Due to the rapid changes of economy and labour markets shorter or longer periods of unemployment may occur in the life of everybody. Our capacity of getting out of this situation may determine our life chances. Not only every child has to learn that periods of unemployment are the normal feature of life, but they also have to possess the skills that are needed for finding a new job.

The development of information technology has a tremendous impact on our everyday life. We have arrived in an era where without a basic knowledge of information technologies we cannot solve our everyday problems, like having money from a bank, paying taxes, obtaining benefits from social security or expressing our political wishes. This has, of course, far-reaching consequences on education: the basic elements of information technology have to be taught for everybody, even for those who leave schools relatively early and those who never think of higher studies. We have to take seriously the word *computer literacy*. The lack of basic competence in computers will have the same impact on the life of the individual as illiteracy could have at the beginning of this century: marginalisation and impoverishment.

The dramatic increase of the quantity of information that reaches us every day can paralyse us if we are not able to select and to structure it. Anybody having thirty TV channels in his home - which has already become a reality also in the less developed countries - or having access to computer networks and data banks all over the world finds himself in a desperate situation if he or she is not able to separate the valuable information from that without value. The huge mass of information that reaches us every day contains both value and rubbish, both true messages and misinforming lies. The competence of selecting and evaluating information has and will have a determining impact on the life of individuals. This has again serious implications on school policy.

The typical prediction of the seventies saying that the time we spend in work will decrease for the benefit of leisure time seems to be denied by the development of the eighties and nineties. Data from the above mentioned OECD documents indicate that in many countries people - at least those who have a job - work more than one decade ago. The increase of leisure time is a challenge mainly for those who get unemployed. However, since this is something that may happen to everybody, the preparation for using leisure time is an important task for our schools. This requires again the development of special individual competencies.

### ***3.4. People, labour market and workplaces***

Labour studies demonstrate that the composition and nature of workplaces is rapidly changing. The number of places where people have to work in an autonomous way, without permanent and direct external control is increasing. Less and less people work in companies organised according to the traditional Taylorian model where mechanical operations dictated by machines or strict work procedures were typical. An increasing number of people work with consumers or other types of clients.

Autonomy at the work place requires special competencies. A person working in such a workplace has to *identify problems*, to *elaborate creative solutions* to these problems, to be able to *manage his/her time* and, in general, to have a *stronger feeling of responsibility*. Working with clients or consumers also requires special skills, like *empathy*, *understanding*, *politeness*, *communication skills*, *individualised application of general rules* etc.

Workplaces are dramatically transformed also by information technology. In an increasing number of companies computer knowledge is required even in relatively simple jobs. The lack of competence in this

field, as mentioned, is more and more likely to put people on the margin of the labour market.

Technological development can transform the whole nature of work. In my country, Hungary, which is in the less developed part of Europe, a few years ago telephone was a scarce commodity and computers were also rare. Today many people have home computers with a modem connecting them to others. We can see people using mobile telephones everywhere.

Teleworking, that is working at home and exchanging information with the workplace through computers linked with telephone lines is expected to develop very fast in the near future. According to OECD forecasts between 1994 and 2000 the number of teleworkers will increase from 0.6 millions to 12 millions in Europe and North America.

### ***3.5. People, organisations and our life***

Our societies are composed of complex organisations: companies, offices, hospitals, schools and many other types of institutions. In these organisations every day millions of decisions are taken by millions of human beings. The quality of our life, our economic well being and our cultural development depend on the *quality of these decisions*.

Decisions are taken by individuals, groups or communities. And the quality of the decisions depends necessarily on their competencies. It depends on how far they are able to *analyse and understand complex situations*. It depends on how far they are able to *elaborate appropriate answers* to the problems they face. It depends on how far they are able to *communicate their answers to others* and how far they are able to *persuade others* on the correctness of their answers.

It is our vital interest that the quality of the decisions taken by people working in the thousands of organisations surrounding us are of good quality. We can influence this by developing their individual capacities and competencies.

### ***3.6. Educational implications of economic changes***

The documents of the mentioned OECD Educational Committee meeting give us a rich selection of those intellectual and behavioural competencies that will be needed by people who want to be employable in European and North American economies in the next decades. A particular emphasis is put on competencies required by modern economy influenced by *information technology*.

The most frequently quoted competencies are *mathematical-analytical skills, scientific ways of understanding and applying technological knowledge* including information and communication science, *the understanding of civics, economic science and arts, health and environment awareness, and moral reasoning and action*. Since the future development of economies depends very much on their capacity of adaptation the most frequently mentioned competencies are connected with the capacity of the individual to renew his or her knowledge, that is, the *capacity of life-long learning*. The capacity for life-long learning depends on competencies like the *possession of appropriate learning techniques*, the *capability to organise information* and the *ability to work independently*.

Since life-long learning occurs in most cases in groups, *social and co-operative skills* are also extremely important. Learning as an adult member of a group requires *critical self-awareness, capacity to co-operate, capacity for self-expression*, the *democratic exercise of rights and duties* and the *tolerance of other's opinion*.

All the competencies that have been listed are of cross-curricular nature. They cannot be developed in traditional classroom activities concentrating on subject teaching. This leads us further to the question of how to achieve the goals. I shall come back to this at the end of this paper.

## **5. Modern and conventional competencies:**

All what was said about the competencies needed by modern European societies and economies raises a vital question: how general and how urgent is the development of them?

I think we have to accept that social and economic development is and remains unbalanced. The rapid development and transformation characterising the leading sectors of economy do not influence equally all sectors and all social groups. There are and there will be sectors that are less exposed to the changes. We have to think of these sectors of society as well. Although our schools have to concentrate their efforts on the development of capacities needed by modern European societies and economies, conventional or traditional capacities should not be neglected.

In a period of rapid social and economic change we cannot forget the need for the preservation of *social cohesion* and *stability*. This requires the acquisition of the traditional values of *equity, solidarity* and *compassion with the socially disadvantaged*. It requires the development of conventional competencies like *the capability of distinction between the*



*just and the unjust, the capability for moral judgement, and the understanding of others' difficulties.*

## **6. Social aspects**

When we talk about new competencies needed by European societies we usually think in general terms without making distinctions between people or groups who have different positions in society. We cannot avoid, however, to reflect about the real relevance of the different new competencies for the different social groups.

I think we should make a distinction between at least three types of competencies. First we could speak about *general basic competencies* that have to be developed in every individual living in European societies. These are the competencies without which any person would find him or herself on the margin of the modern society. We can mention basic numeracy, literacy and co-operation skills but in fact, the basic competencies are broader and more numerous than these in our days. As mentioned, even the basic daily functions of life require complex capacities. In our societies where everybody uses plastic cards for paying, where everybody has to use complicated computerised systems for buying simple train tickets and where everybody has to understand complex messages in different daily situations even the most fundamental capacities are highly complex. The capacity to learn can be mentioned here again as a basic competence, needed by everybody.

Second, I think, we should distinguish *advanced or higher level general competencies*. These competencies, by nature, cannot be developed in every individual but they have to be mastered by everybody having broader responsibilities with longer term implications. Those who take decisions with lasting impacts on others' life, those who are responsible for the efficient and correct use public goods, those who communicate with larger communities or entire societies and those who produce and operate technologies that have an impact on many people need special competencies. These competencies are necessarily more complex and higher level than those who are needed by people responsible only for their own life.

Finally, I would distinguish those *special vocational competencies* that are needed by people practising given vocations. There is, perhaps, one element which should receive a particular emphasis here. The special competencies needed by different vocations may be very different. There are, nevertheless, many common elements that have to be developed in

everybody independently of the special vocational field he or she enters. These are related partly to behavioural capacities like, for instance manual skills, communication skills, reliability, accuracy or predictability, and partly to cognitive capacities like logical thinking, linguistic coherence or analytical skills. Most of these competencies, although they have direct vocational implications, can be the best developed in the framework of general education.

## **6. Achieving the goals**

After setting the *goals* our reflection must be directed to the *instruments* which make it possible to achieve the goals. The definition of the competencies should be followed by the definition of the tools to be used for their development in our pupils. This reflection should lead to concrete proposals and recommendations for education policy

The modernisation of curricula, textbooks and teaching programmes is naturally the main instrument education policy can resort to. It is obvious that in the process of developing the relevant competencies *teachers are the key actors*. The greatest difficulty is that many teachers do not possess themselves the competencies they are supposed to develop in their pupils. The role of initial and in-service teacher training is logically often stressed in this respect.

Although schools have to play a determinant role in developing the relevant competencies, they cannot achieve the goal alone. It is not surprising therefore that the role of *other partners* like civil organisations, representatives of industry or the media is also often emphasised. Competencies needed by modern European societies should be continuously expressed by these partners and communicated by them towards teachers and schools.

Finally, after defining the goals and choosing the appropriate instruments there is a need for *evaluating* the process and the results. We can hope that schools will devote sufficient attention and efforts to the development of the new competencies only if their assessment becomes part of the general system of educational evaluation.