

# **Official discourses in the educational systems.**

## **Competencies: the new curriculum password?**

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### **1. Introduction**

The utility of knowledge has always been assumed as one of the essential and structural questions in any curricular narrative, whatever the moment or the moment to be considered. It is one question, whose answers have always originated different designs for the educational and formative systems.

Knowledge, being built in the educational systems, originated from the mainstream culture, presented as an “*accumulated capital for a future time or cultural ornament*” (Beane, 2002:19), shaped, sequentially arranged in a compartmentalized way, and so often far away from the local everyday life context of the individuals, frequently appears as a present need for a, certain or eventual, future need.

On the other hand, there has always been a hierarchical relation among three of the vertex of that complex polyhedron that defines learning: contents (what), time (when), utility (what for). To a longer chronological durability and structural capacity in the building of individuals of the contents of a more social and cultural origin, a greater tendency for the contents of a more technological and operational nature to perish in time, seems to correspond. This existing difference between these two categories of knowledge has always been at the basis of a distinction of social status of those ascending to them. This ancestral difference of social status of the different kinds of knowledge and consequent moment of their utility, which is at the basis of a, equally old taming impulse of education to the purposes of thought and the action of the economy. The concept of competence was born at the centre of this tension, and has been developing there, and there is to be rebuilt.

### **2. From qualification to the lonely responsibility of individual education**

Nowadays, a little all over the geographical, political and social latitudes, the frequency of schooling formal learning contexts is currently associated to motivations directly aimed to employment and productivity (Sarmiento & Ferreira, 2006:331).

As a matter of fact, the growing pressure for labour survival, on the part of a growing group of individuals with also growing levels of qualifications and, on the other hand, the continuous needs of qualified human resources, on the part of businesses and institutions, has been determining the erosion of the axiological basis the progressive vanishing of the cultural purposes of school education. The more instrumental dimensions of learning have been settling in the political thinking, in the curricular designs and in the didactic instruments, as a counterpoint. This reality has contributed a lot for the interesting debate of the so called *crisis in education* or *school crisis*. Some authors even defend that *the crisis in education* does not refer to the *school model* but to a *legitimacy crisis of the school institution*, believing there is a certain decline of that very institution, leading to *the deinstitutionalization of the socializing processes and to growing individualization movement* (Dubet & Martucelli, 1996; Dubet, 2002, quoted by Sarmiento & Ferreira, 2006:333).

In the school model associated to the Taylor-Ford model followed for decades (till the 60s and 70s, in some countries, but still strongly present in Portugal), we assist to a valuation of the passive transmission of knowledge and to an overvaluation of the acquisition of diplomas granted by the formal school institutions, to the detriment of knowledge built through individual experience in the multiple life contexts (personal and professional). Its logic “*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, 2006:806).

This former perspective is yet contradictory in itself, once the bureaucratic content with which learning concretizes in itself, has created a growing distance between the school learning and the necessary knowledge and skills for the adequate integration and production of the individuals in their labour contexts, in spite of translating a *Ford approach* of the educational issues. This aspect was, otherwise, one of the main reasons appointed for the weakness of the social and economic performance of the country and was also clear in the results shown by the Portuguese students, at the time of their, recurring weak performance in international assessment procedures.

We are, thus, already too far away from Freinet, when he defended the existence of a school system which allowed the building of a *personal identity* to the individuals, taking part at the same time in the construction of a *collective identity*.

In Freinet’s perspective, school should assume itself as a “*school for the formation of the citizen*” (Souza & Dantas, 2006: 993). This idea reinforces itself in the

most critical perspectives, particularly in the thought of Freire, when it points the need for each one, as a citizen, to assume himself in relation to his rights and duties and develop himself as an autonomous and responsible human being, in a process of conscientiousness, through that exercise (Souza & Dantas, 2006:987).

The school model tends to be more and more questioned in the field of education, from the 90s on. The changes and the social, economic and technological development demand the workers formation with new capacities, knowledge and skills, possessing a diversity of essential competences. The concept of qualification approaches itself of the structuring circumstances of the concept of citizenship and begins to be a reality more and more present in the educational systems, since that conceptual relation provides “*a citizenship structured on an order, where the educational and qualification systems legitimate the existing differences*” (Alcoforado, 2000:114).

Authors like Reinbold & Breillot (1993) defend that the qualification classifies and hierarchies the individuals, showing differences which “*serve socially as agreement basis for employment, salary questions and attribution of responsibilities*” (Pires, 2005:280). Access to employment, to a job and to a salary is done based on this model: the existence or not of a diploma.

A conceptual alteration which seems to introduce an eventual change of paradigm, seems yet to occur in the last three decades of the XX century: with the alterations in the job field and the growing valuation of the knowledge and the real capacities of the individuals (and not just the simple linear and repeated execution of certain tasks in specific contexts), a slow devaluation of the school models based on qualification is beginning. An opposite movement of valuation of a new concept occurs concomitantly: the competence.

### **3. Inside the conceptual perimeter**

At this moment of our reflection, we could not help paying a visit to what we consider to be a certain prison perspective of the educational thought, when submitted to the determining presence of the instrumentality of what we learn.

The competence translates itself in the “*capacity to mobilize the necessary knowledge to solve a problem which appears in the performed activity*”, never appearing isolated, but “*net*” connected with other competences (Gonçalves &

Fernandes, 2007:14). If, as we have already referred previously, the concept of competence frequently appears connected to the notion of qualification, there are competences that, as a whole, may not constitute qualification. In reality, the qualification of an individual may not be a synonym of his competence, although the contrary may also occur (Alcoforado, 2001:78-79; Gonçalves & Fernandes, 2007:14; Imaginário, 2007:9).

There is a new approach in what the individuals should acquire and learn, since they must always be able to answer correctly to permanent social change. There is constant need for qualification, formation and updating of competences. This continuous quest for answers of formation and qualification to respond or be adjusted to the job market appears in literature as a *“process of merchandising of education”* (Fidalgo & Fidalgo, 2007:53-59). Ávila (2008:97) refers to the Zarifian competence model as *“a performing way in relation to the strong competitiveness and consequently to the permanent need for innovation”*

The competence model associated to a determined capitalist economic paradigm stands on the importance of the knowledge, capacities and skills transfer which although acquired in specific contexts, can be used in other similar situations (Santos & Fidalgo, 2007:83). 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 (1994:16) cited by Alves et al, (2006:255-275) refers. This new approach also leads to the development of new capacities and competences (new worker profile) and to new organization forms of the institutions and the personal, educational, labour and social relations, on the other hand (Alves, et al 2006:257-259; Canário, 1996:55).

A new worker profile associated to the permanent need for knowledge updating has brought about some less positive aspects, such as a greater individualization and competitiveness, specially found in the qualification centers and working places. There is a standing personal dimension such as the adaptability, the employability and the informed citizenship (Alcoforado, 2001:76). This aspect is extremely important because in our view, it is here that an individualized perspective of education stands. In reality, at the moment, the building, maintenance and reinforcement of the productive capacity, of the employability and of the adaptability (in short, of the labour individual circumstance) seems to be, more than ever, a private question, a personal problem and an individual circumstance, which must be thought, decided and realized by the individual himself. At present, in what concerns the qualification issues, the individual

autonomy and freedom are paradoxically one of the greatest dangers to the exercise of the right to education because, the fundamental collective responsibility and the unavoidable social interest about the education of each citizen, is being diminished to the growing individual responsibility.

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

- a. the one that states that the competences depend fundamentally on contextual factors, i. e., they are acquired and so they depend directly on factors as the access to education and to experience;
- b. the relation(s) between knowledge and competences. Some affirm that the overvaluation of the competence model affects the transmission and acquisition of knowledge. On the contrary, others defend that the competences are based on knowledge, as it is the case of Perrenoud, who emphasizes the idea of the need to apply to *multiple cognitive resources*, about the concept of competence;
- c. the existing notion of competence in the business world, which demands a new worker profile and new organization forms, as we have previously referred to.

One of the previous visions emphasizes not only the value of experience, but also the access to the formal systems of education, as factors which contribute to the building of competences. In reality, the equality of opportunities defended in the contemporary societies, is a value concretized among others, in the access to the formal education and qualification systems, which in turn, must provide the access to knowledge to all. The ancestral (yet not very far in the memory of the Portuguese) knowing how to read, write and count is manifestly insufficient nowadays. In the complex and entropic information ocean in which we are plunged, each individual is demanded, much more than that infrastructure, not to resume himself to collecting and accumulating knowledge and capacities to the ones he already possesses and transports, but he must be able to “*transfer, use, reinvest and consequently, integrate that knowledge into competences*” (Perrenoud, 2005:69). Roldão (2003:15-16) comes to the point of affirming that we are facing a phenomenon of “bombardment” such are the different origins and references to

the concept. Being more competent is in his opinion, “...*being more able to use knowledge adequately...*” in the different areas of knowledge and life spheres.

According to Auber *et al* (1993:19-20, cited by Pires, 2005:263) the different approaches to the competence concept have derived from three levels of analysis: the individual level (Psychology and Education Sciences); the group/society level (Sociology, Social Psychology) and the business level (Law, Economy, and Management). This multi-subject approach is developed by Pires (2005).

On a first approach, we will refer, by the importance they assume, the works of Noam Chomsky, who in the 60s, centers the analysis to the concept under the linguistic point of view, understanding 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, 2005:264-266). Chomsky considers that the notion of competence sends us to an internal dimension and not only to the external, more visible, but so frequently, less structuring. With that, Chomsky (1969, cited by Ávila, 2008:93-94) establishes a distinction between competence and performance:

*“the first corresponds to a group of non observable rules, (...) in which a possibility of language development lies; the second remits explicitly for the behaviours, that is, for the language expression and use”.*

In the area of Labour Psychology, we seek to define competence, by distinguishing it from other close and *neighbour* concepts, as it is the case of aptitude: “*The competences cannot be developed without the support of the aptitudes, but they are not resumed to them*” (Pires, 2005:267). In this epistemological context, the local dimension of the competence is important, since a direct relation is established between what the competence is, the contexts and organizations in which these very competences are built and the circumstances of the reality in which they are operated. The competence is then considered in the scope of a construction in which it is necessary to mobilize instruments and strategies in the cognitive field and not only from the point of view of what is observable through the individual performance ( a manifestly behaviourist position). The social/collective dimension is above all emphasized in the Vygotsky theory, since the individual learning concretizes itself in the social context, with the others, in the collective.

In the areas of Education and Qualification we find several definitions of the concept of *competence*. In these fields, it is particularly visible, since the 60s/70s (in the English word, *skill*), through the implementation of the called Pedagogy by Objectives (Gillet,

1998 e Rey, 1998, cited by Pires, 2005:276). Focusing his attention on the notion of objective, this reality reveals itself in the relation between three aspects, as Arénilla *et al* (2001:106) refer: “*The individual possibilities (postulated competences), his results (observable and measured competences) and the pedagogic action*”.

The transferability and the mobility of knowledge also characterize the concept of competence, because it always builds itself in the connection to a context and they may be afterwards transferred to other circumstances. The application/usage of what we know is a synonym that the passage to the competence has occurred, which realizes itself through action, as Le Boterf (1994:16) refers.

In reality, the competitive performance of an individual nourishes on the capacity to act in the situations, by mobilizing a group of resources (capacities, knowledge, learning, attitudes and values) acquired in a determined context but placed afterwards at the service of different tasks, requests and contexts (Le Boterf, 1994; Perrenoud, 1997, in Rodrigues & Peralta, 2006:233; Gomes *et al*, 2006:33; Rens, 2001:55; Ávila, 2008:95).

If Perrenoud (2000:19-31) assumes competence as “*the capacity to mobilize a group of cognitive resources (...) to solve a series of situations with pertinence and efficiency*”, competence is primordially, “*a learning in use*” (Perrenoud, 1995, cit. by Roldão, 2003:20), that is, an effective capacity that the individuals possess to use that learning in different situations. This learning is not about theoretical contents with little value from a practical point of view, but is applied in concrete actions.

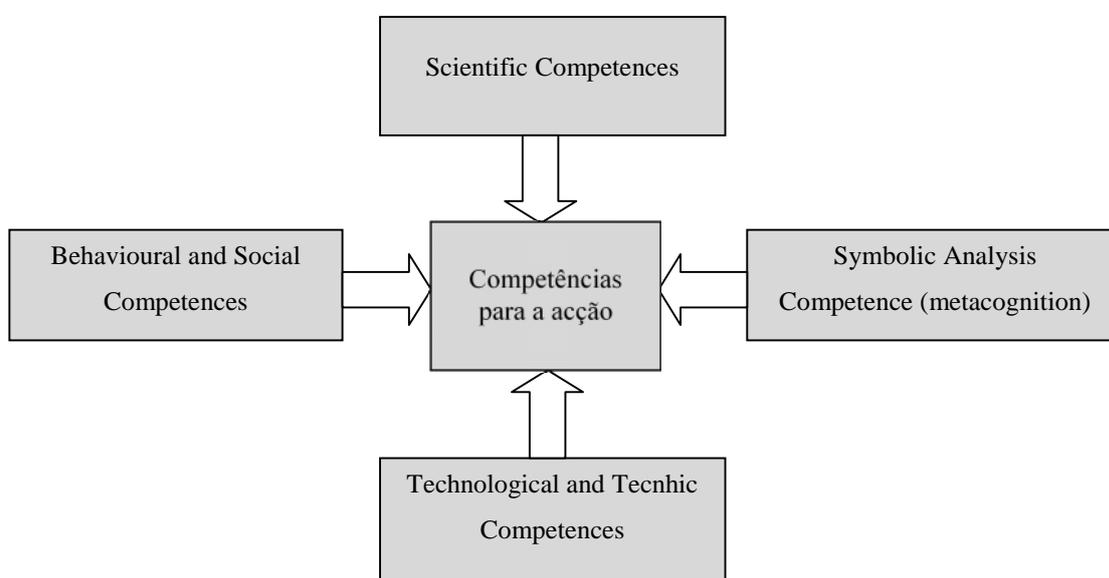
Let us consider now, the different categories of competences. We present the four proposals that seem to be more significant to us:

- i) the first one that is presented by the European Industrialists Roundtable, in which 5 types of competences are distinguished: (a) *technical and technological*; (b) *methodological and creative*; (c) *social, communitarian and relational*; (d) *participative and ethical*; (e) *self-learning* (European Commission, 1995, cited in Alcoforado, 2000:137);
- ii) the second proposal standing on just 2 competence categories: (a) *technical* (connected to the professional performance); (b) *social* (in everyday life and in the interpersonal relations). They are called the key or transverse competences, useful in several contexts and frequently

developed by the Non Formal Education (Gonçalves & Fernandes, 2007:15).

- iii) the third way to approach the competence categories is defended by Trigo (2002:25) who gives us the next competence group developed in the scope of his work in the adult education area, with the creation of the Adult Education and Qualification National Agency (ANEFA), in Portugal (see Picture 1): (a) *symbolic analysis*; (b) *social and behavioural*; (c) *directed to action*; (d) *scientific*; (e) *technical and technological*.

Picture 1: Classification of the Action Competences



Source: Trigo (2002:25)

- iv) the fourth classification (Costa, 2002:189), which assumes three competence groups, according to what was proposed by the project *Definition and Selection of Competences: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundation* (DeSeCo): (a) *operative* (use of text and technologies); (b) *self-oriented* (acting autonomously); (c) *relational*.

#### 4. The instrumental line and the old reproduction

The prevalence of lines of learning in the school systems, anchored to the competence building, in the presumption that that action will adequately lead the individuals to a greater capacity to create, keep and develop his productive capacity, has crashed the

cultural and humanist dimension of the individual and institutional learning histories and has diminished the ancestral school role.

The growing lining out of the school curricula to the growing and diverse needs of the economic system and to the permanent and critical individual worries, in what concerns their individual capacities in securing the respective survival in the labour world, has enlarged the curricular field reserved to the more functional contents, directed to work, and has reduced the more structured learning experiences in the affective, social and axiological individual platforms, to a more and more exiguous part.

The education systems relocate themselves, when they realize this *tectonic* reorientation to the level of their political priorities and consequent pedagogic approaches, in the face of the missions which they are entrusted by the societies nowadays.

Paradoxically, what apparently seemed to be a decisive step in the direction to a greater efficiency in the concretization of the education public service may turn into an eventual civilizational set back. In reality, the education systems “will produce” different functional contents, to which diverse payrolls and distinct levels of public recognition will correspond, when they reorient themselves to the economic instrumentality of their formative action. They will reproduce pre-existing cultural patterns, by acting this way.

At the end of this *competitive* educational line, we will find, in the competence concept, the key word to just (re)discover the *old reproduction* of differences.

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