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Competent uses of competence: on the difference between a value-judgment and empirical assessability

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the concept of *Competence* as applied to educational theory and policy, and illuminates the possibility of significant variations in meaning. Referring to Wittgenstein's distinctions between transitive and intransitive uses of notions and Holland's description of mastery, the article argues in favour of two senses in which someone can be described as *being competent*: i) as expressive of a value judgment; and ii) as pointing to a person's (formal) qualifications. While the latter opens a path towards different forms of measurements of competence, *being competent* as a value judgment eludes any such treatment. Making this distinction, it is argued that competence is a less illuminative theoretical term than, for example, the pair of concepts *Bildung* versus *Ausbildung* ((self-)subjectivation vs training), that has been used in the Continental tradition in order to describe a similar distinction. With examples from educational contexts, the article demonstrates that the moment educational theory is using one word for two meanings, this central distinction in education is either concealed or forgotten. Focusing on competence purely as an empirically assessable notion risks playing into the hands of instrumentalising education.

Introduction

Discussions about educational policy, educational processes, efficiency, and comparative analyses have become increasingly global. Yet the desire to compare educational processes globally demands a high level of shared theoretical conceptions about what education is, both in general and in detail, about what education aims for, and how it is organized in relation to other societal institutions. This has led to a growing theoretical awareness of different conceptual frameworks in quite distinct academic traditions, between national contexts and linguistic communities (Siljander et al., 2012; Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017). Besides other notions, *Competence* has been introduced and explicitly promoted as a useful and necessary concept to bridge the gap between different theoretical positions and to help articulate a shared ground for education (Illeris, 2013, p. 38; Koeppen et al., 2013, p. 171).

In the following, I want to go beyond the theoretical discussions of the past three decades in which scholars from different disciplines and with different purposes have tried to find and establish an accurate definition of the notion of *competence* (for an overview, see Schaffar, 2019). There, I have argued, that the confusion about how competence can and should be defined emerges from the notion's various linguistic, semantical and etymological roots. There are

convincing arguments for both a broader understanding of the concept, and a more detailed appreciation of it, so that even very different methodological approaches can be argued for in the discussion about competence.

Instead, I want to point towards a feature in the concept of competence that is relevant beyond the discussion about how to define it. I will argue that the same notion can have different meanings depending on how it is used, and in different contexts. Neither the meaning of a concept nor the significance of its relevant context are predefined, given or fixed. While this does not imply the possibility of randomly choosing or stating what meaning a word has, it leaves room for individual and collective interpretation, judgment, negotiation or disagreement. What concepts we choose to describe the circumstances of a situation also has a bearing on how the situation will be perceived; and vice versa, acting in a certain way may reveal a specific understanding of the concept used, while other possible, meaningful implications are set aside (Hertzberg, 2001).

Referring to Wittgenstein's distinctions between transitive and intransitive uses of notions (Wittgenstein, 1965) and Holland's description of mastery (Holland, 1980), I assert two distinct interpretations for someone as *being competent* depending on context: i) as expressive of a value-judgment; and

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ii) as pointing to a person's (formal) qualifications. While the latter opens a path towards different forms of measurements of competence, *being competent* as a value-judgment eludes any such treatment. Making this distinction, I argue that competence is a less illuminative theoretical term than, for example, the pair of concepts *Bildung* versus *Ausbildung* ((self-) subjectivation vs training), that has been used in the Continental tradition in order to describe the distinction between the evaluative judgment and strive for an ideal goal in education (*Bildung*), and the pragmatic necessity of assessable outcomes in specific educational processes (*Ausbildung*). Using only one term for both meanings, there is the risk of displacing the meaning of *being competent* within the same theoretical texts and policy documents. One slips from competence as a value-judgment to speaking of it as a factual judgment. In philosophy, this type of mistake is commonly discussed as Hume's guillotine; we cannot derive statements of value or *what ought to be* from factual statements about *what is*.

With examples from educational contexts, I describe that the intransitive value-judgment of the notion is easily left aside. The moment educational theory begins using the same word for both terms, the central distinction in education between the value-laden aim of our educational endeavours, and what can be measured and assessed empirically is either concealed or forgotten. In this case, the focus on competence as an empirically assessable notion risks playing into the hands of instrumentalising education, for example, for neoliberal purposes and promotes non-democratic developments.

The ambiguity of the notion of competence

During the last 20–30 years, an immense volume of literature has emerged that seeks to define what competence is, how it is structured, and how it can be developed and assessed (Schaffar, 2019). It can be seen that the notion of competence has a complex structure of different meanings, both in different languages and within the same language (Allais, 2014; Brockmann et al., 2008), that can be traced back through a long etymological history of the word (Schaffar, 2019). Very roughly, one can say that today's German, French and Dutch notions of *Kompetenz, compétence* or *competentie* are used in a broad, generic sense, while the English word *competence* describes an individual's abilities in a rather narrow, technical sense (Cedefop, 2009, pp. 19–20). In English, the notion of *expertise* is used when referring to a person's broad capacity, for example, for high performance as a professional (Addis & Winch, 2017, p. 558). Despite these general linguistic aspects, the global discussion about educational policy and theory has over time led to a spectrum of uses and

meanings of central notions. Allais (2014) points out that sometimes different notions, for example, *competence, learning outcome* and *qualification*, are treated as distinct from each other, but that just as often they are used synonymously (Allais, 2014, p.xxvi).

Depending on the perspective one wishes to take, we can say that we either see an openness in, or a confusion about, what central educational conceptions like *competence* mean and what role this notion should play in the global educational discussion. In their study *The shift to learning outcome. Policies and practices in Europe* (Cedefop, 2009), Cedefop tries for example, to 'address the need to create bridges between different parts of the educational and training system', and therefore wants to introduce a *common language* that would make it easier to communicate (Cedefop, 2009, p. 1). After a closer conceptual examination, they come to the conclusion the 'problem is that the term competence (as well as competences and competencies) lacks a clear, standard meaning both in the English language and across European language traditions. Once we introduce the term competence, definitions become fuzzy at best, and there is no way to place a single discipline or definition on it' (Cedefop, 2009, p. 18).

While Cedefop prefers to use the notion *learning outcome* in their studies and policy-documents, we find elsewhere, studies that explicitly promote *competence* as the notion that will serve as common ground. Koeppen et al. (2013), for example, write in their description of a six-year '*priority program*' on *Competence models for assessing individual learning outcomes and evaluating educational processes*, financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG) that several international large-scale assessments 'have recently drawn increased public and scientific attention to educational outcomes and their assessment'. This has led to 'an increasing focus within educational systems on defining and evaluating the goals to be attained by schools. In many cases, however, adequate assessment procedures are still lacking as are procedures for analysing and reporting the results'. In order to respond to this theoretical and methodological deficit, they point out that 'the concept of competence is increasingly considered as *an anchor point* in this discussion' (Koeppen et al., 2013, p. 171, my emphasis).

From yet another angle, Han also attributes the notion of *competence* as having a central role in today's educational discussion when he calls competence the 'new DNA in the world of education' (Han, 2009, p. 57). In a chapter on competence as a commodification of human ability, he writes: 'The dominant force of the societal learning system has been slowly relocated from the arena of state politics to that of market exchangeability. [...] The game of education and the game of economics had

been clearly distinguished, linked only with blurry connections for school to work transition, at least until neoliberal social politics swept the world of social policies from the 1990s'. Han says that major social policies including education, medical services, and social welfare 'were redirected to fit into this framework' under this new trend. Especially, the education sector was 'heavily targeted to reformulate a new learning market as a major carrier of the emerging knowledge economy'. He points out that the 'notion of *competence* in this context had the spotlight' (Han, 2009, p. 65).

These diverging discussions of competence paint an ambiguous and confusing picture. On the one hand, we find several scholars who criticize the notion of *competence* for being used in an inflationary manner (e.g. Granberg, 2009, p. 104; Späte, 2011; Ott, 2010) and who show awareness of the risk that without a uniform definition researchers tend to follow 'their own approaches in defining and classifying competence in line with their respective research tradition' (Haasler & Erpenbeck, 2008, p. 766). On the other hand, there might not be any other phenomenon in the social sciences that garners as much attention as *competence* in the development of instruments for measuring outcomes of educational processes (Cortina, 2016, p. 30).

While this confusion is commonly seen as the result of insufficient stipulations about what competence *is*, I want to leave the search for clarity of definition aside, and rather look for perspicuity in how differently a notion such as '*competence*' *can be used* in one and the same text and line of thought. This will help to analyse the source of this ambiguity and shed light on central distinctions within our common, and more theoretical, understanding of what is central in education, and to discern how these play out in discussions of what it is to be competent.

'Being competent' as a transitive and intransitive notion

To the later Wittgenstein many of our philosophical problems about grasping the meaning of words originate in a failure to make clear to ourselves how those words are used in everyday language (cf Agam-Segal, 2018). Thus, he often reminds us of a possible gap between how we are initially inclined to define a word in our philosophical thinking – what we want something to mean – and the meaning of a word as it emerges in its actual use in language. One such distinction that he returns to in several discussions, is the distinction between transitive and intransitive uses of a word (Wittgenstein, 1965). He borrows this distinction from linguistics, but applies it in a broad way to

clarify not only a rather superficial grammatical difference, but to show the constitutive role our ways of speaking about something have for our understanding of what kind of object it is.

Some verbs can be used with or without an object, for example, thinking or waiting; I am thinking (intransitive) versus I am thinking of something (transitive), or he is waiting (intransitive) versus he is waiting for X to happen (transitive). In these cases, we use the same verb, but the predicate is different. Wittgenstein expounds the importance of this difference in relation to understanding the concepts in question (Wittgenstein, 1965). In this article, I will use Wittgenstein's distinction as a reminder that allows me to analyse the way we speak and theorize about competence. I will not provide an exegetical discussion of Wittgenstein's work on related notions, such as *ability, learning,* or *knowledge.*

If we apply the distinction between transitive and intransitive uses to the notion of *being competent*, we can see a similar structure, although, unlike Wittgenstein's examples, *being competent* is not a verb. This difference between a transitive and intransitive use of *being competent* is not as apparent as in the cases of *thinking* and *waiting* where we can see the different predicate directly (x *is thinking* versus x *is thinking of something*). Rather, 'She is definitely competent' might be uttered in a meeting when choosing someone for a certain job. The difference will be in the way the predicate *being competent* is used. 'She is definitely competent' could refer to the formal papers that are required for the job that confirm, attest and verify the competence that she possesses. This would be a transitive use. On the other hand, we could imagine that she has just left the room after her interview and one of the interview panel utters spontaneously, 'She *is definitely* competent'. In this case, *being competent* is used in an intransitive way. It is an expression of appreciation rather than a reference to her portfolio with all the formally required papers.

On the surface, the sentence 'She is competent' has the same grammatical structure in both cases, but looking at the way in which the sentence is being used, *being competent* has two different propositional contents. When used in a transitive way, it takes the form of a factual proposition – the interviewee is holding a certain set of competencies (the object in the transitive use). These competences have been achieved, measured and confirmed in a formalized situation. The intransitive use, however, is not pointing to something specific in the person's knowledge, that is, there is nothing, no object that one could point towards – it is rather a judgment of value regarding the person as a whole.

Think, for example, of situations where two formally competent individuals are compared in relation

to their performance of a certain task. Both might get the job done, but only the latter is doing it in a way that satisfies the customer, that is, both are competent but only the second one in a transitive as well as an intransitive sense.

Being competent in the sense of this second person might remind us of Hilary Putnam's discussion of *thick concepts* (Putnam, 2002). It is possible to think of the words 'S/he is competent' as both descriptions and evaluations at the same time, and of the attribution of *competence* to someone as *entangled* with the evaluation of this as something to recommend (Putnam, 2002). Here, the case of this second person, who is competent in both the transitive and intransitive sense seems to follow the attributions of *generosity* and *cruelty* to an individual. The description of someone as *generous* or *cruel* depends for its sense on understanding these features of their behaviour as something that is valued as good or bad (Putnam, 2002), as behaviour we can or cannot recommend. However, as seen in the case of the first person, there are uses of *competence* where the factual descriptions of someone having the formal competences for a position can be disentangled from the evaluative judgment that the person is someone, the person making the judgment, would recommend. Therefore, I do not want to argue that the factual and the evaluative are *always* entangled, as one would do in calling *competence* a thick concept in Putnam's description of it.[1]

These discussions remind us that the distinction between transitive and intransitive uses contains the well-known difficulty of how judgements of value and propositions of facts are related to each other. As it is often argued throughout the history of philosophy, it is problematic to try to describe value judgements as a series of factual propositions. Holland, who is following Wittgenstein's line of thought, argues in his essays: *Against empiricism* (Holland, 1980) that appreciating someone for being competent *as a whole*, as formulated above, can easily be misunderstood in a factual way. But *the whole* is not a list of everything that can be known and done; it is not a reference to something complete. It is rather, what Holland describes as *mastery*, an open-ended concept. 'What it focuses upon is an ideal and not an actual resting place' (Holland, 1980, p. 56). According to Holland, *mastery*, and in our case the intransitive meaning of competence,

> is an achievement that never annihilates the task. It is a finding in which an essential part of what is found is that there is more to seek. The reason why mastery has this property is that the achievement is not external to the task. Hence that combination of unbowing independence with humility towards the subject which noticeably characterises the mastery. (Holland, 1980, p. 56).

In a related essay: *Education and the spirit*, Holland further develops the idea that when we are describing someone as doing something with spirit, we are obviously uttering 'judgements of value' (Holland, 1980, p. 63). But, he stresses, *spirit* should not be taken 'to be the name of a class of invisible substances' (Holland, 1980, 63–64). Rather, it is 'non-discursive' or 'non-theoretical', by which he means that it is

> unformulatable in discourse of the kind which by a series of statements expounds a subject in an itemising, orderly, argumentative way. One could equally use the term *non-propositional*, especially in so far as one thinks of propositions as vehicles of factuality, bald specifications of states of affairs. (Holland, 1980, p. 64)

In this quotation, Holland provides his version of Hume's guillotine, the notion that judgements of value cannot be derived from judgements of facts. He can also be seen as spelling out the implications of Wittgenstein's distinction between transitive and intransitive uses of concepts. The gist of these arguments is that the uses of a notion as a value-judgment cannot be reduced to a set of factual propositions, even if it would be a very complex set of propositions.

Throughout the history of knowledge and education, we find sophisticated descriptions and analyses on this distinction. In education for example, the Continental tradition has distinguished between the notions of *Bildung* and *Ausbildung* in order to be able to communicate this central difference (Schaffar and Uljens, 2015). Bildung could be described in Holland's words as the strive for the ideal of mastery, 'an achievement that never annihilates the task', an ongoing movement of searching just in order to find that 'an essential part of what is found is that there is more to seek'. However, the Continental tradition was at the same time aware of the pragmatic necessity in educational processes, and distinguished the strive for Bildung from discussion about when educational relationships and processes should come to an end, what (assessable) level of knowledge and skills are required in order to receive an exam and to be called qualified for certain civic and professional tasks in society. Here, the notion of Ausbildung was used. With two distinct terms, it is feasible to keep apart these different foci in educational theory and practice (cf Horlacher, 2015, p. 123).

Still, by using the notion of competence, educational theory and policy is able to refer to both, the overarching, never-ending strive towards an ideal, and the search for pragmatic solutions for concrete educational processes. It is not surprising that in the discussion about competence, we find voices who recognize the problems involved in reducing intransitive uses of *competence*, which in our case imply

a value-judgment, to transitive, factual propositions, as well as those voices that describe and handle the situation by just asserting the immense complexity of competence, but still suggest that this complexity can be captured in factual propositions.

From one voice, we find Illeris, 2013, who describes difficulties of assessing some features of competence that rather belong to generic competences (creativity, problem-solving, flexibility, personality or attitudes). Without referring to distinctions like those between transitive versus intransitive, or value-judgements versus factual propositions, he points out that 'a complete assessment of competencies is not possible' (Illeris, 2013, 137, my translation); assessments of someone's real competence, that is, what s/he is able to do in a certain situation, should always be understood 'as assessments of just limited parts and elements of competence' (Illeris, 2013, 137).

Among other voices, however, we find the methodological discussions of how to assess and empirically measure competence, for example, in regard to the increasing amount of large-scale national and international assessments (cf TIMSS, PISA, IALS, ALL).[2] Here, measuring competence is treated as very complex and multilayered, but in principle still a manageable, empirical task. Koeppen et al. (2013), for example, write 'The new focus on competence has shifted attention from the measurement of general cognitive abilities to more complex ability constructs related to real world contexts. Sophisticated models of the structure and levels of these complex constructs need to be developed' (Koeppen et al., 2013, p. 171); or 'The difficulties and complexities of assessing learners' baseline competencies and learning gains are often underestimated in educational policy and practice. Developing appropriate measurement instruments that can be used for different purposes is a time- and resource-intensive undertaking' (Koeppen et al., 2013, p. 172). In these quotations, competence is seen as something that in principle can be described by a complex set of measurable features. What follows in the educational literature after descriptions like this are detailed discussions about different theoretical definitions and models, and about the validity and reliability of different psychometric tests and scales. But the willingness to measure competence at any price disguises the central problem, namely that an open-ended concept like Holland's description of mastery, or the intransitive use of *being competent*, cannot be translated into empirically measurable units.

Wittgenstein's point in bringing out the distinction between the transitive and intransitive use is not to put one over the other, but to alert us to the difference in use that changes the meaning of the word in a concrete case. The same awareness can be accomplished when using two different words in order to keep the two necessarily different discussions apart. While the intransitive use as a value-judgment cannot be reduced to empirical propositions, the transitive use invites us to use the concept in just such a way. The problem I want to highlight in the following section is that when the same word is used for these very different educational meanings, the central distinction between what is empirically measurable and what is not, becomes invisible.

From value-judgements to factual statements

Wittgenstein's discussion of transitive and intransitive uses calls attention to the possibility of theoretical imprecision, that might cause confusion and misunderstanding when used in the global discussion about educational goals and measurements. At its worst, it enables the possibility of rhetorically misleading narratives in current educational discussions.

Intransitive formulations are often mistaken as just less accurate expressions of seemingly similar transitive applications. Wittgenstein discusses, for example, the transitive and intransitive differences between longing, waiting, wishing, being afraid, and so on, and writes that there is a temptation to conceal the differences between transitive and intransitive uses by saying, 'The difference between the two cases is simply that in one case we know what we are longing for and in the other we don't' (Wittgenstein, 1965, p. 29). But, as he continues, the expression 'I am longing' is neither the same as 'I am longing, but do not know what I am longing for', nor 'I am longing, but not for something specific' (cf Wittgenstein, 1965, p. 30). The same can be seen in the discussion above. The value-judgment that is involved in *someone being competent* cannot be completely translated into a list of detailed factual propositions. With these inaccurate translations from intransitive to transitive forms, the intransitive use risks being pushed to the background in favour of the seemingly more detailed and precise transitive descriptions (Agam-Segal, 2018; Wittgenstein, 1965). Let us keep this risk in mind and have a closer look at how the notion of competence is used in two examples.

As sketched above, the notion of competence has been presented and promoted as a possible core notion for educational theory and policy since the early 1990s. Earlier notions like knowledge, ability, qualification or, as mentioned, the Continental notion of *Bildung* have become increasingly sidelined (Horlacher, 2015, p. 124). It is interesting to take a closer look at how competence is introduced and argued for as a necessary notion precisely for our time.

Knut Illeris, for example, has written extensively on competence. In numerous texts, he writes that

competence refers to a person's broad capabilities, something that is increasingly needed in 'this modern, ever-changing world'. This is why it is 'a modern expression' for what a person is actually able to do or to achieve (Illeris, 2009, p. 83). Illeris applies the following definition:

> The concept of competence refers [...] to a person being qualified in a broader sense. It is not merely that a person masters a professional area, but also that the person can apply this professional knowledge – and more than that, apply it in relation to the requirements inherent in a situation which, in addition may be uncertain and unpredictable. Thus, competence also includes the person's assessments and attitudes, and ability to draw on a considerable part of his/her personal qualifications. (Illeris, 2009, p. 84)

Illeris emphasizes that the importance and appeal of the notion lies in the insight that it 'involves the ability to deal appropriately with future and unforeseen situations. [...] The ability to immediately make the professionally proper judgements and decisions in all new situations that constantly arise in working life' is the crucial quality of a competency (Illeris, 2009, p. 84).

Illeris begins his account of competence by describing it as a notion relating to very high expectations. Someone who is able to *appropriately* deal with *any kind* of future situation by making *professionally proper* judgements and decisions is beyond any possible critique. This description relies essentially on value judgements. Competence is not only about being able to deal with future complex situations, but to deal with these situations appropriately. Or, in other words, the assessment is not only about making judgements and decisions, but about being able to judge and decide in a professionally proper way. It is Holland's notion of the open-ended mastery – 'an ideal and not an actual resting place' – that Illeris aims for in his definition of competence. Here, *being competent* is used in an intransitive way.[3]

The first step in introducing the notion as the one needed for today's educational discussions, therefore, is to describe competence as an ideal everyone is to approve of and to affirm as the ultimate aim for any educational endeavour. No educational theory, no educational policy maker or practising teacher can possibly have objections against this description as worth striving for. Already in 2003, Bramming critically noticed that competence is '*a plus-word*', a word that can only be understood in a positive way. 'We cannot imagine a person, a company or a public institution that seriously would say "Development of competence, no thanks – I know enough" or "We will have no use for competent employees in the future"' (Brammig, 2003, p. 18, my translation). Quite

correctly, she notices that it is not possible to argue for a reasonable point of view opposed to this. That means, at this stage of the discussion, the reader is already entangled in the argument; it is competent people that our society needs, that our educational institutions should strive for and that our academic educational discussions should provide the means for.

In principle, the same goes for the notion of Bildung, as described above. It is a *plus-word* by which we indicate the goal to strive for. Still, a difference from the notion of competence is that discussions about the need to strive for Bildung were easier to maintain as questions with open answers, due to its distinction from the pragmatic discussions about Ausbildung.

In presenting competence as the notion that is needed in our societies today, the step that follows is crucial. From this unquestionable value-description of competence, the next questions to appear in a theoretical and public policy debate are about competence in the transitive sense. If competence is what we need today, then the question is what precisely should be done to reach competence for as many people as possible in society? What follows are analyses and discussions about *what* competence *is* in detail, that is, the discussion shifts to the transitive use of *being competent* as *holding a set of competences*.

In Illeris' and many other theorists' cases, we find at this stage of the presentation a thorough discussion about how precisely competence is internally structured, and an analysis of its different components (Illeris, 2013). Theorists distinguish between different competences (now in plural), which leads to questions of their internal relationship and hierarchy (e.g. generic competences vs specific competences). Further, it is analysed how to enable the most effective learning process for the desired competencies through different arrangements in school-settings as, according to the above presented goal, our shared interest is to guarantee the existence, emergence and stability of competence.

These are all important questions, but they differ in character from the intransitive use. It is Ausbildung that is investigated, when *being competent* is understood as a (complex) set of items, and not as a person's quality. It is the attempt to 'itemise the unformulatable into a series of statements' (Holland), and for this purpose the concept in question has to be imagined as consisting of factual properties. As a concept that refers to a set of items, questions and discussions about their factual properties are now understandable and meaningful to pose. The concept of *being competent* is *used* in a transitive way, and thus its meaning has changed. Now it is meaningful to ask how *being competent* could be attested, defined, assessed, measured and compared,

that is, how it could be empirically assessed. *Being competent* has received a 'resting place' (Holland), while the intransitive, open-ended meaning of the concept at the beginning of the argument is always dynamic and never fixed.

Illeris describes this problem explicitly, when he writes that we 'have to take it very seriously that quantifications and comparisons of these measurements inevitably leads to prioritizing those assessable elements at the expense of what is not measurable. This again leads to a one-sidedness that the notion of competence precisely wanted to overcome' (Illeris, 2013, p. 137, my translation).

Still, it is not enough to mention this risk. We have to understand the conceptual structure of the notion *being competent* that allows us to use the same word to mean both the value-judgment and the assessable factual statement depending on the different contexts of our argument in order to prevent the domination of transitive use.

Another example of the possibility of silently shifting between intransitive value-judgements and transitive factual assessments can be seen in the articulation of the urgent need for the project that Koeppen et al. suggest. Here, the shift between intransitive and transitive uses is not as obvious as in Illeris' case. Rather, their argument that we need more sophisticated models and tools for competence assessment is made via a constant pointing towards the intransitive meaning of competence without spelling out, as Illeris did, the details of what this implies. For example, they start their article by stating 'Social change, social cohesion, and opportunities for social development are all dependent on the educational level of the members of a society' and continue by underlining the problem that the results of large-scale international assessments, have 'identified huge gaps between the competencies attained, on one hand, and the goals of the educational system, on the other' Further: 'There has been an increasing focus within educational systems on defining and evaluating the goals to be attained by schools'. (Koeppen et al., 2013, p. 171). In these quotations, they acknowledge a distinction to be made between *attained competencies* and *the goal of educational systems* as such, and state that 'the concept of competence is increasingly considered as *an anchor point* in this discussion' (Koeppen et al., 2013, p. 171, my emphasis).

It might not be as explicit as in Illeris' case whether they are referring only to specific measurable cognitive goals in relation to specific school-related tasks when they talk about competence or to wider societal questions and phenomenon. But the relevance of their project relies on the immediate link between the measurability of competence that they aim to develop and competence as the central indicator for societal enhancement. These (assumingly) valuable

strives for *social change, social cohesion and opportunities for social development* indicate that the intransitive use of competence is at work when 'Current discussions in educational research emphasise the importance of the products of educational processes' (Koeppen et al., 2013, p. 171). In their formulations, they essentially build on value-laden goals, but give the impression that the solution will be found in a sophisticated model of competence and a complex measurement tool-box.

These examples illustrate, that the notion of competence enables us to blur a central distinction in educational theory, viz the distinction between what the value-laden aims of our endeavours in education are, and what can be measured and assessed empirically. On the surface, we are using the same words, but the meaning of them is shifting depending on the context of argument and discussion. Both uses are meaningful and necessary in educational discussions, but it is important to keep their characteristics distinct. As Gert Biesta puts it: 'It is always advisable to use factual information when making decisions about what ought to be done, [but] (my insertion) what ought to be done can never be logically *derived* from what is the case' (Biesta, 2010, p. 12). By conflating both uses, the risk is we present the transitive use as a solution to specific intransitive aims, and without further notice, the value-laden and *not-measurable* meaning of competence is set aside or forgotten.

Further consequences

Wittgenstein's interest in elucidating the difference between transitive and intransitive use is mainly philosophical or conceptual. It is, however, important to recognize that the blurring of this central distinction in education is not only a theoretical failure of characterizing the different uses of the concept correctly. While on the surface, the notion of competence might seem to bridge a gap between different theoretical schools and educational cultures, neglecting the possibility of this dual use rather conceals the central educational distinction between what the value-laden aim of our educational endeavours is, and what can be measured and assessed empirically. This might not have caused, but has at least tolerated confusions and misunderstandings in the public, political and professional discussion of education, which in some cases might explain why the notion has become so popular, despite – or maybe even because of its lack of theoretical accuracy.

For example, it has been widely analysed and argued that neoliberal shifts in national and international policy making forces education increasingly into a new self-conception (Ball, 2012; cf Dovemark et al., 2018; Parreira do Amaral et al., 2019). At its

core, education is pushed into the logic of economic phenomenon, a logic that is fundamentally based on a transitive understanding of competence. Han points out, that it was through the discipline of Human Resource Development (HRD) that the concept of competence gained attention in the educational realm, through the reduction of the intransitive use to the transitive. He writes,

> While HRD investigates the nature of human experience and its maxim *development*, human competence is a "displayed characteristic of expertise, not the expertise itself, but very behaviour-specific, definable, and measurable subsets within an individual's domain of expertise". [...] If considering that current HRD presupposes capitalism and market system as fundamentals, the characteristics of competence interpreted as the *measurable*, the *definable*, and the *manageable* are directly linked with monetary forms of marketable goods or *human capital* in a capitalist society. (Han, 2009, p. 58)

In the logic of capitalist economic processes, education is taken to be similar to most other production processes. Since only measurable, assessable units, processes and outcomes, are tradable, it is only those parts of our educational discussion that are seen as relevant in a dominant capitalist view of education. Here, the transitive use of competence is in focus when competences are imagined and conceptualized as something that can be given a price, can be traded, owned, bought or sold. The intransitive use of competence (or the perspective of Bildung) is falling out of sight, and literally losing its value, as it is the perspective on education that cannot be nailed down to factual propositions. Consequently, because it is not available as an object for monetary evaluations, the intransitive perspective appears to be not valuable, not useful and thus not at all worthy of consideration.

The possibility of treating the notion of *being competent* as a set of items with definable and measurable (factual) features, and with comparable, assessable and manageable smaller units (competences), while at the same time still echoing a desirable overarching goal in society, might have been an important factor in facilitating the commodification of competences. The notion of competence might not have caused this development, but the lack of theoretical accuracy and precision has at least not helped to restrain the growing one-sidedness of the educational discourse. The use of two distinct notions, like the concepts of Bildung and Ausbildung, might have helped to highlight that the commodification of education is only focusing on the assessable, pragmatic questions about education.

Gert Biesta's book *Good Education in an Age of Measurement* (Biesta, 2010) reminds of yet another problem that is related to the imprecision of the

notion of competence. Although he is not directly discussing the notion of competence, his main analytical line of thought is the relation between discussions about quality on one hand and what is measurable on the other. He describes education as a process with a direction and purpose, which makes it necessary to constantly pose the question about quality, what education actually is for, and what we mean by aiming for *good* education. But, he writes:

> The problem is not only that the question of good education seems to have disappeared. I also believe that in many cases the question of good education has been replaced by other discourses. Such discourses often appear to be about the quality of education – think, for example, of discussions about the effectiveness of education or on accountability in education – but in fact never address the question of good education itself. They rather displace the *normative* question of good education with technical and managerial questions about the efficiency and effectiveness of processes, not what these processes are supposed to be for. (Biesta, 2010, p. 2)

Despite those voices who explicitly presented competence as the salving notion in our struggle to communicate beyond different educational and cultural traditions, his diagnosis of the current problem is rather that 'If there is anything lacking [...] it is first and foremost a *language* or *vocabulary* that allows us to articulate questions about the purpose of education and to do so in a precise enough manner' (Biesta, 2010, p. 4, my emphasis). Biesta criticizes today's educational theory for not being able to express this central strive for good education as an ideal or quality in itself, as it was indicated by the notion of Bildung. Instead, the discussion about quality has shifted and focusses on quality-control of educational process and their outcomes, like it is possible to do in discussions about Ausbildung.[4]

Biesta links this development to an even deeper problem. The moment we are narrowing the discussion about quality in education to an issue of quality-controlling educational processes, it risks being understood as a question for experts to find solution to, rather than a central question for a democratic public to engage in. Questions about the aims and goals for educating the next generation has always been one of the central tasks for public debate and consideration in democratic societies. What is worth knowing and passing on, what should be improved in society, in short: how do we want our society to be in the future, are central democratic, evaluative questions. However, as can be seen in large-scale assessments, it is assumed to be possible to compare the academic achievements of a certain cohort in any country despite the differences between cultural and historical peculiarities and their national curricula, for example, OECD's *PISA Programme*. The need to

be alert to the specific cultural discussions about what is seen as important and valuable to strive for in education (as the intransitive use of competence or the term *Bildung* essentially depend on), is eliminated as much as possible in the scope of these assessments.

On one hand this is possible, due to the unquestionable aim of *competent people* as the ultimate outcome of our shared educational endeavours. Compare for example, OECD's first report on the PISA results, which was called *Knowledge and Skills for Life*. The foreword is asking: 'Are students well prepared to meet the challenges of the future? Are they able to analyse, reason and communicate their ideas effectively? Do they have the capacity to continue learning throughout life?' (OECD, 2001, p. 3). These are broad and highly valued educational aims that are hard to question – at least at first sight. Here, the intransitive use seems to help overcome different national traditions and cultures and to establish a global vocabulary for discussion.

But on the other hand, this runs the risk of a loss of democratic involvement in educational questions. When the aim of education is conceived as unquestionable and obvious, what is there left to discuss for the public community? This possible shift in meaning, described above, invites us to think that what remains to be done is up to educational experts to manage, plan, conduct, assess and improve the educational processes, that is, to focus on the transitive meaning of competence. In this respect, the foreword to the first PISA report continues interestingly by stating that 'Parents, students, the public and those who run education systems need to know the answers to these questions' (OECD, 2001, p. 3). Here, the democratic public is addressed as passive in relation to the debate; in need of (and having the right) to know, they are waiting for the experts to answer the questions about the educational future, for example, by comparing the achievements in reading, mathematical and scientific literacy of 15-year olds in several countries. Biesta writes: 'Those who should be involved in discussions about what constituted good education – such as teachers, parents, students and society as a whole – [are precluded] (my insertion) from taking part in them' (Biesta, 2010, p. 2). Discussions about the aims of education are increasingly transferred to experts who, as argued above, often rather confuse the question about good education (i.e. about value judgements) by asserting how elusive and complex learning and assessment processes are. Education as a democratic endeavour and a shared engagement in value-discussions (*Bildung*) is at risk in favour of education as a learning-process controlled and operated by experts only (*Ausbildung*).

Conclusion

Given that theoretical considerations and terms should illuminate our understanding of the phenomenon in question, and should provide analytical tools to better understand the challenges as well as offer a language that helps us to communicate with each other to prevent possible misunderstanding, *Competence* must be considered a weak concept for educational theory and policy. At first sight, we might say that educational policy is about translating complex value-laden ideals to practical guidelines and this is precisely what could be achieved by the term competence. But the translation from the value-laden ideal into pragmatic solutions is crucial and should be done as informed as possible. With reference to the pair of concepts Bildung – Ausbildung, that is used in the Continental educational tradition in order to name the two distinct foci in educational discussions, I argue that both perspectives are necessary to be aware of. Using the same word for both sides of the translation-process is rather confusing than illuminating the discussion. While theoretical concepts should help us to understand the complexity in educational questions, the notion of competence, with its varying uses, enables us to blur one of the central distinctions in educational discussions.

Notes

1. As will be demonstrated in the next sections, I aim to show problems in discussions about competence arise because there are situations where the factual judgment can be disentangled from the evaluative judgment. Therein different problems are possible. We can think the evaluative judgment can be replaced by the making of (a complex set of) factual judgements. Or we do not recognize that the evaluative judgements are never fully reducible to the factual descriptions, although we in some situations can explicate what is of value to us in statements that can be considered as statements of fact. These are problems that arise when we, as Wittgenstein says, become 'entangled in our own rules' (Wittgenstein, 1953/2020, § 125).
2. TIMSS: Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study; PISA: Programme for International Student Assessment; IALS: International Adult Literacy Survey; ALL: Accessible Literacy Learning.
3. It is interesting to notice that Illeris is criticizing the notion of Bildung as not appropriate for today's needs (Illeris, 2013, p. 21). At the same time his description of competence is very much precisely what was meant by Bildung as well.
4. For a similar analysis and argument in the field of health care, see Bornemark 2018.

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