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The attitudinal dimension of the professional competence: old workplace demands, (re-)new educational challenges

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Abstract

In this article, we delve into school-based and work-based supervisors ideas about students' attitudes development as part of their professional competence. We draw on a second analysis of a set of interviews conducted to study school-company's collaboration. The participants are 16 school-based supervisors and 5 work-based supervisors affiliated to Health, Industry, Social Services and, Administration. Data were collected through individual semi-structure interviews, transcript and analysed using procedures of applied thematic analysis. Three main categories emerged: 1) the importance of attitudes, 2) attitudes acquisition process, and 3) attitudes impact on assessment. Our data reveal some supervisors' ideas about how attitudes are developed.

Keywords

attitudes; workplace-based learning; professional competence; school-based learning

1 Introduction

Despite the importance of dispositional behaviours being a long-standing issue (Perkins, Tishman, Ritchhart, Donis, & Andrade, 2000), it is now attracting renewed interest. On June 2016, the European Commission adopted a new and comprehensive Skill Agenda for Europe. Under this new framework, competences are defined as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes. The novelty is the inclusion of attitudes in the definition of each key competence. At the same time, attitudes are defined as the 'disposition and mind-sets to act or react to ideas, persons or situations' (European Commission, 2018). Following Perkins's et al., (2000) seminal work, a disposition concerns not only what people can do but how they tend to invest their capabilities and what they are disposed to do. Some of these traits are for example open-mindedness, reasonableness, curiosity, critical thinking, and readiness.

In the vocational educational field, research has highlighted the need to develop more comprehensive competences that go beyond knowledge-specific domain, such as communication (Kyndt et al., 2014), entrepreneurship (Rocha, 2014) or generic competences (Renta Davids, Van den Bossche, Gijbels, & Fandos Garrido, 2017). While knowledge-specific domain competences are important, research show that generic competences are highly valued among employers (Kyndt et al., 2014) and that social skills are increasingly rewarded by the labour market (Deming, 2015). This poses great challenges to vocational education institutions as attitudes or dispositions are very difficult to teach and assess in pre-defined learning environments.



2 Methodology

Based on this framework, our paper aims to report on partial results of a research about how school- and work-based supervisors can strengthen cooperation between schools and companies. However, in this paper, we delve into the issue of students' attitudes as a dimension of the professional competence. The research did not intend to address this issue as a main goal, but it emerged from the data itself as we analysed it.

A qualitative methodology was employed to investigate the scope and nature of school- and work-based supervisors' roles. The study draws on semi-structured individual interviews conducted with sixteen school-based supervisors and five work-based supervisors engaged in the traditional scheme of VET programmes in Spain (see *Table 1*). Following qualitative methodological guidelines (Creswell 2014), we selected a convenient sample. In addition to the professional fields considered and to the two different roles of the participants, our sample is heterogeneous with respect to gender (11 female and 10 males), age (M=45 years old, SD=8 years old) and job tenure (M=15 years, SD=10 years).

Table 1 Distribution of the participants by role and vocational field.

| Professional Family | School-Based Supervisor | Work-based Supervisor | Total |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------|
| Health | 5 | 2 | 7 |
| Social Services | 4 | 1 | 5 |
| Administration | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Industry | 6 | 1 | 7 |
| Total | 16 | 5 | 21 |

The interview questions were intended to stimulate narrative and argumentative discourse to allow the participants to express their experiences and views on the object of the study. We defined the same questions to both groups of interviewees (school- and work-based supervisors), adapting them to each participant's profile. The interviews lasted between 50 and 70 minutes. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

We applied an exploratory approach to the data analysis (Guest et al. 2012). Following this approach, the researchers carefully read the transcripts while identifying keywords, trends, themes, and ideas to help outline the analysis. It involved the following steps: 1) read verbatim transcripts, 2) identify potential themes, 3) compare and contrast themes, identifying structures between them, and 4) build a model while continually validating it against the data (Guest et al. 2012).

3 Results

We coded a total of 29 fragments from our second analysis of the interviews on the topic about supervisors' ideas on students' attitudes. Three main categories emerged from our analysis: 1) acknowledgement of the importance of attitudes, 2) process of attitudes acquisition, and 3) attitudes in the assessment process.

Table 2 shows the categorical scheme applied. Following, we describe the categories and sub-categories and provide excerpts of each one as examples. We selected these illustrative excerpts on the following criteria: they convey a general meaning of the category or show a particular nuance of it.

Table 2 Categories and subcategories.

| Categories | Subcategory | Number of coded excerpts |
|--|--|--------------------------|
| Acknowledgement of the importance of attitudes | | 15 |
| Attitudes acquisition process | | |
| | Attitudes are acquired through maturing | 5 |
| | The workplace as a space to acquired attitudes | 3 |
| | Attitudes are foster at the school | 3 |
| | Hopelessness | 1 |
| Attitudes in the assessment process | | 2 |
| Total | | 29 |

3.1 Acknowledgment of the importance attitudes

In this category we include fragments where school- and work-based supervisors explicitly acknowledge the importance of having positive attitudes as part of the professional competence.

“Some companies are more demanding. There are some that they do not care the type of students but their attitudes” (School-based supervisor, Health)

“Students in the middle degree [Segundo Ciclo de Grado Medio] are good enough, technically. But in general they have a problem with attitudes. [...] Students sometimes have problems at the enterprises. They have attitudes problems. Punctuality. Behaviour. [...] In the technical dimension, in the professional dimension, most students [...] have a certain capacities, and as they have been selected by the company, they can do it right. What happens sometimes is that they fail in the attitudinal dimension.” (School-based supervisor, Industry)

“In this specific professional domain, it is very specific, but they have enough specific knowledge, this is in the general training, but, communicative skills? Neither University not the Professional studies teach those... You acquired those on you own, improving... when you encounter yourself with a patient... Sometimes, they [students] do not know how to speak with patients” (Work-based supervisor, Health)

3.2 Attitudes acquisition process

In this category we include fragments where school- and work-based supervisors express how they think attitudes are acquired.

3.2.1 Attitudes are acquired through maturing

Attitude acquisition is a matter of maturing. Students start they studies very young, and as time goes by, students mature and they acquire the correct or the expected set of attitudes.

“Their knowledge is fine and they get adapted well. [...] The truth is that it is a very delicate space [Paediatrics] and sometimes they are very young. And sometimes it depends on the maturity of the students, sometimes they lack maturity.” (Work-based supervisor, Health)

3.2.2 The workplace as a space to acquire attitudes

Attitudes are acquired in the workplace. When students start their practice, they are face with real work, so they must cope with it by acquiring a set of expected attitudes as workers.

“In the school, we try to offer variety, but after in the company, they are trained by the work itself. And they [students] acquired a discipline. Students are very young, and in some cases, very immature. They should accept they have a schedule, they have a boss, they are subject to accountability, and in the end, this is very positive. I value this very positively” (School-based supervisor, Administration)

3.2.3 Attitudes are foster at the school

Teachers can foster and transmit the correct attitudes the future professional should have by teaching them explicitly about those attitudes.

“In Childhood Education, [students] acquire competences in the personal level and in the professional level. Above all, we at the school, the most important, what we try to transmit, above all, are attitudes, values, and norms [...] those are the professional competences that they should develop, but in general, it helps a lot in their personal and professional development the practice module and the job itself.” (School-based supervisor, Social Services)

3.2.4 Hopelessness

Sometimes there is hopelessness. Some students cannot change their attitudes or it is so much about their personality that they cannot change or development the expected attitudes.

“Some students change. Some other do not change. Some students are complete wrong with the studies they have chosen. That is, there are some students who are too shy, too introverted. In a face-to-public job, companies chose the best ones who can sale things. And that is what matters. I have students of whom I think, ‘you want be able to work ever here’” (School-supervisor, Heath)

3.3 Attitudes in the assessment process

In this category we include those fragment in which participants explain how students’ attitudes have an impact on assessment.

“I have failed students because they show lack of interest, lack of motivation, because they did not get involved, because they arrived whenever they want. They do not get seriously [...] they failed their practice and we stop.” (Work-based supervisor, Health)

4 Conclusion

Our data shows a great concern among supervisors about students’ attitudinal behaviours in their professional practice and highlights the need to find strategies to teach and assess the attitudinal dimension of the professional competence. This attitudinal dimension of the competences emerge today as key to allow people to develop good-quality jobs and fulfil their potential as active citizens (European Commission, 2018). But how can these new aspects to competences be described and acquired?

We observed that all supervisors have a certain concern on the need to work on attitudinal competence, and that although students show good knowledge-specific competences, supervisors argue that sometimes they lack good and positive attitudinal behaviour. Most commonly

demanded attitudinal behaviours are communication with others, taking initiative, collaboration, and professional-related ethical issues.

Our data reveal some supervisors ideas about how attitudes are developed. For some of them, gaining the expected attitudes is a matter of maturing. Others believe that by doing the practice module and being involved into a workplace, students would be prompt to develop the expected attitudinal outcomes. Some other school-based supervisors put emphasis on transmitting positive attitudes during the students' training at the school. It called our attention that for one supervisor, some students would not be able to acquire the right professional attitudes due to personality traits. Finally, we observed that showing the wrong attitudes may have a negative impact on the evaluation process, but we did not observe the reverse.

This analysis is not without limitations. First, investigating on attitudes was not the main goal of the research, though it emerged with great strength among research participants. Second, our sample is rather small. Third, further studies are needed to deepen on what pedagogical strategies supervisors can use to foster positive attitudes.

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Biographical notes

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