Professional and transversal competences of future teachers for preschool and primary school education

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Abstract

Through the HRD strategic project "Development of an operational system of qualifications in higher education in Romania" (DOCIS), there were conducted several activities, including the implementation of the National Higher Education Qualifications Framework (NQF) through the specific scale description of qualifications and operationalization of the National Register of Qualifications in Higher Education (RNCIS). The project aimed, among others, the development of a competence scale for Education Sciences, major Pedagogy of Preschool and Primary School (PPSP). Through this article, we want to present the process of conceiving a specific grid for major PPSP and the result of this process. The development methodology for PPSP competence scale had several stages - a framework grid conceived by the management team experts, research, working for a draft document, consulting of the institutions involved in pre-service and in-service teacher training, the beneficiaries of these processes (school inspectorates, teachers' professional house, schools, kindergartens, professional organisations etc.), trade unions, researchers and practitioners with expertise in education. After all these, it was a stage for re-designing the grid by consulting the partners, another step to align the grid to the project requirements, such as statements of three common professional competences to the whole education area and then it was the validation stage. Finally, the grid was integrated into RNCIS. The grid contains six professional competences and three transversal competences, accompanied by level statements for each competence and standards of minimum performance for the assessment of each competence.

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1. Introductive aspects

The fundamental requirements for quality teaching are relatively clear: thorough knowledge of arts and sciences, good theoretical knowledge of taught disciplines, of the skills which have to be formed to students, of the curriculum requirements and of the materials which organize and structure the teaching contents; knowledge of teaching and assessment methodology, general and specific to each discipline; knowledge of students and of human development process; skill of teaching students from different environments efficiently as well as skills, capacities and predispositions to use wisely this knowledge to serve the students' interests.

This feature shows how complexes the requirements are for quality teaching but it does not stress the difficulties, dilemmas or uncertainties the teacher encounters. The teacher's theoretical training is based on knowledge acquired constantly, although, it does not always offer enough support to the teacher.

The ethical dimensions of teaching also differentiate it from other professions. The teaching staff is required to carry out ethical standards. Other ethical requirements are derived from the teaching staff's role as a model of an educated person. Teaching is a public activity, and the teacher works in front of his/her students daily, and the fact that they together carry on an activity makes the teacher have a special type of behavior. The human qualities, the theoretical knowledge and the teaching skills, as well as the teacher's involvement, body and soul, in the educational process offer the excellence measure of this profession.

Numerous researchers have paid attention to the quality criteria and indicators used to establish what the efficient teaching is, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world. Syntheses of their results have been presented in reference works called "Handbook of Research on Teaching" (Gage, 1963; Travers, 1973; Wittrock, 1986; Richardson, 2001). Generally, their works place themselves in the process-product paradigm. They try to emphasize the teaching staff's observable characteristics which have a direct effect on the students' learning quality. These researches stressed, among other thin Since 1990s, the developed countries (the USA, Great Britain, Australia, New Zeeland, Canada, Switzerland, and Belgium) have shown an increasing interest for competence referentials, called professional standards by Anglo-Saxons. Generally, these are lists which describe families of professional situations the teaching staff have to cope with by assuming some specific working tasks. These referentials, or standards, have several usages, among which, the most important is the reference one for the teaching staff's professional assessment.

2. Aim of the study

Regarding the fact that a graduate student of the fundamental domain Social and political science, having as study domain Education Sciences and as study programme Pedagogy of Preschool and Primary School, has to achieve specific professional and transversal competences, there were conceived two grids for assessment of a pre-service teacher training program through university level.

Through this article, we want to describe the process of conceiving a first grid of qualifications for major PPSP (description and operationalization of the National Register of Qualifications in Higher Education - RNCIS) and the specific result of this process (the general and transversal competences needed to be acquired by the student as future teacher).

3. Defining terms

Teaching competence is about knowledge (knows what), skills (know how) and attitude (know why). Ph. Perrenoud (1996) states that professional competence assessment implies active co-operation of all those interested and it cannot be accomplished with those who don’t want to be assessed.

From our point of view, during the pre-service teacher training and first years of teaching there is occurred the cognitive knowledge, corresponding to the lowest two levels of professionalization which are about what teacher knows and knows how.

We propose the following definition: assessing the professional competences of the teaching staff means evaluating their capacity to perform a number of professional tasks using an organized ensemble of knowledge, abilities and attitudes. This assessment implies confronting the assessed person with a variety of professional situations, in various contexts, which can give him/her the possibility to emphasize the level of his/her professional
The assessment of professional competencies, at the same time implies taking into account three fundamental elements:

- The types of situations which emphasize the mastery of competence;
- The resources that this competence mobilizes, theoretical and methodological knowledge, attitudes, skills and abilities, action schemes, and the perception, evaluation, anticipation and decision ones;
- The nature of thinking schemes which allow the challenge, mobilization and administration of pertinent resources in complex situations and in real time, the role of an initial quality professional training in order to get good results with students.

According to the reference system, an assessment may be norm-referenced or criterion-referenced. Norm-referenced assessment compares one individual's results with those of a group to place him/her in a well-defined group. In this case the results at an exam are compared with the results of a target group which serve as comparison and are called norms.

In contrast, criterion-referenced assessment compares the results with a criterion. In this case the purpose of the assessment is not to place an individual in a group or to compare him with the others, but to establish how well he/she has learnt what he/she was supposed to learn. Thus, the assessment criteria are no longer represented by the results of a target group, but by the learning objectives given to each component of the group (Raynal & Rieunier, 1997).

An assessment criterion is an information element, defined in an assessment system, which allows establishing if the assessed object owns or does not own a certain quality. A criterion is generally formed by several indicators; in some cases just one indicator is sufficient to take a decision - this can create confusion between criterion and indicator.

Indicator (reference, index/clue) is a "significant element, found in a data base, allowing the assessment of a situation, of a process or a product. An indicator is always connected to a criterion." (Raynal & Rieunier, 1997).

"The notion of indicator is utilizable if two conditions have been met:
1. To place ourselves in the logic of a theoretical conception which assumes that certain psychic processes express themselves through behaviour;
2. To have a precise and already tested model of the implied phenomena.” (Raynal & Rieunier, 1997)

According to Linda Allal “an indicator is any behaviour which gives information about the presence of a competence.” (apud Cardinet, 1988:135)

Using one or several indicators means to make an observation. In pedagogic, observing a situation, a behaviour, a product or a process, is not possible without defining some lecture indicators, they themselves corresponding to a decision criterion. In fact, indicators allow decoding the information in order to get a precise significance.

As far as the didactical profession is concerned, researchers have pointed out the existence of several levels of professional performance: 1. the level of singular working skills - when the teacher, usually a student-probationer, is capable to achieve only isolated tasks with the students; 2. the level of reproduction of some given complex action schemes; 3. the level of the proper pedagogical competence, when the teacher is capable to adapt the action schemes creatively depending on the context (Gliga, 2002:33).

The assessment of a professional training activity, initial or continuous, presents several levels:

- assessment of the probationer's satisfaction, using interviews or questionnaires;
- assessment of the probationer's acquisitions during or at the end of the training course;
- assessment of the acquired competences, on the spot, after the training course;
- assessment of the effects at the trainee's working place (Champy, 1994).

A main problem concerning the assessment of teachers is „what exactly is being evaluated: the teacher as a person/ personality or the way he/she teaches? A teacher's personality includes an entire system of cognitive, moral, affective, volitive temperamental etc. elements. Therefore, it is necessary for us to specify what and how exactly are we assessing in the context of this system” (Niculescu, 1996: 212). The didactical behaviour is itself determined by the teacher's personality, by the actual circumstances of the teaching act, and not in the last analysis, by the students.

When a teacher is evaluated, information about his/her qualities has been gathered and they are compared with
the expected ones. These expected qualities vary depending on the implied public: students, parents, teaching staff, head masters, inspectors, authorities etc.

It would be ideal to be able to build a type-profile of the competent teacher, but the present-day researches have emphasized the fact that this thing is extremely complicated, everything depending on the privileged criteria. Nevertheless, one of the central criteria is unanimously accepted: teaching quality assurance. In this respect, several questions can be asked: what are the specific activities of quality teaching? What are the quality criteria? What are the relevant clues of quality teaching? (Paquay, 2004:15).

4. Description of the professional and transversal competence scales for future teachers in kindergarten or primary school education

Through the HRD strategic project "Development of an operational system of qualifications in higher education in Romania" (DOCIS), there was conducted several activities, including the implementation of the National Higher Education Qualifications Framework (NQF) through the specific scale description of qualifications and operationalization of it to the National Register of Qualifications in Higher Education (RNCIS). The project aimed, among others, the development of a competence scale for Education Sciences, major Pedagogy of Preschool and Primary School (PPSP) - work for which we were selected as experts.

The development methodology for PPSP competence scale had several stages:

1. A framework grid, for all study domains - was conceived by the management team experts;
2. Research (a large bibliography was consulted);
3. Working for a draft document;
4. Consulting of the institutions involved in pre-service and in-service teacher training. There were consulted university professors who teach to major PPSP from Bucharest University, Babes Bolyai University of Cluj, Bacovia University of Bacau, Stefan cel Mare University of Suceava, Danube University of Galati, Transylvania University of Brasov, Aurel Vlaicu University of Oradea.
5. Consulting the beneficiaries of these processes (school inspectorates, teachers’ professional house, schools, kindergartens, professional organizations etc.), trade unions, researchers and practitioners with expertise in education. There were consulted teachers from over a hundred schools and kindergartens in Iasi, Bacau, Botosani, Suceava, Neamt, Vaslui, specialized inspectors and inspectorates methodists and directors of schools and kindergartens in the same counties, and representatives of trade unions.

After all these, it was a stage for re-designing the grid by consulting the partners, another step to align the grid to the project requirements, such as statements of three common professional competences to the whole education area and then it was the validation stage. Finally, the grid was integrated into RNCIS. The grid contains six professional competences and three transversal competences, accompanied by level statements for each competence and standards of minimum performance for the assessment of each competence.

The grid no. 1, build on the first phase of the project, refers to the description of the domain/study programme through professional and transversal competences through the Bachelor of Arts as qualification level in Pedagogy of Preschool and Primary School. Therefore, in this document it can be found the possible occupations, the professional and transversal competences, level descriptors of the structural elements of the professional and transversal competences and minimal performance standards of these competences.

The initial structure of the grid proposed by the experts was the next:

Table 1. Initial structure of the grid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of qualification:</th>
<th>Possible occupations:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Qualification level: LICENCE</td>
<td>Proposals:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C1 C2 C3 C4 C5 C6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level descriptors of the structural elements of the professional competencies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KNOWLEDGE/LEARNING</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Knowing, understanding of concepts, theories, and essential methods of the domain and of the specialization area; appropriate use of professional communication
The use of basic knowledge for explanation and interpretation of various types of concepts, situations, processes, projects, etc. related to the domain.

SKILLS

3. The application of the basic principles and methods for problem/well-defined situations solving, typical for the domain.

4. Appropriate use of the criteria and standard evaluation methods, in order to appreciate the quality and process limits of the programs, projects, concepts, methods and theories.

5. Development of professional projects with the use of principles and methods used in this domain.

Minimum performance standards for the evaluation of competencies:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level descriptors of the transversal competencies</th>
<th>Transversal competencies</th>
<th>Minimal performance standards for competence evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>TC1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>TC2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>TC3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The possible occupations of a graduate student of this study program are: teacher for preschool education; teacher for primary education; research assistant in pedagogy; education advisor; education expert; education inspector; education professional reviewer; mentor; school counsellor; and other occupations, like itinerant teacher for primary and pre-school education; support teacher for primary and preschool education; documentarian teacher; teacher for primary education in special schools; methodist teacher at Teachers House; director/manager of pre-university educational institutions; consultant for early education programs.

The professional competences that give the right to apply for a job into kindergarten or primary school education system are: (1) designing training programs or programs adapted for different age levels/training and target groups; (2) accomplishment of educational activities in primary and preschool education; (3) assessing learning outcomes and progress of preschool/young school children; (4) managerial approaching of preschool class, teaching process and activities for learning/social integration related to the specific age of the target group; (5) counselling, guidance and educational assistance to various categories/educational groups (preschool/primary school students, families, teachers, employees etc.); (6) self-assessment & constant improvement of professional practices and career development.

As mentioned above, this scale contains three transversal competences for kindergarten teacher: (1) application of the principles and norms of professional ethics, based on the explicit values, specific to the specialist in education sciences; (2) effective cooperation in professional and interdisciplinary working teams, specific to the development of projects and programs development in the field of education sciences; (3) using effective methods and techniques for lifelong learning, in order to achieve pre-service and in-service professional development.

The level descriptors of the structural elements of the professional competences are structured on two components of the competence according to the professionalization development: knowledge and skills. Knowledge aims to knowing, understanding of concepts, theories, and core methods of the domain/major area; adequate use of professional communication and using a basic knowledge for explanation and interpretation of various types of concepts, situations, processes, projects, etc. related to the domain. Skills are about applying the basic principles and methods for solving-problem/well-defined situations, typical for the domain; adequate use of the standard criteria and assessment methods, in order to appreciate the quality and process limits of the programs, projects, concepts, methods and theories; and development of professional projects by using principles and methods specific to the domain.

Further, for each professional competence there is described how should be assess the minimal performance standards. So, for the first competence (designing training programs or programs adapted for different age levels/training and target groups) it is necessary that student could develop projects for learning activities using the concepts, theories, paradigms, principles and methodologies specific to the education sciences domain. Competence no. 2 (accomplishment of educational activities in primary and preschool education) is achieved when a student can support educational activities using adequate strategies and resources to various educational contexts, specific to preschool or primary school education. Competence no. 3 (assessing learning outcomes and progress of preschool/
young school children) is regarding the development and application of assessment tests for kindergarten activities/ disciplines taught in primary school, their appreciation and interpretation of results, and the argumentation for the choice of methods, techniques and evaluation tools used. The professional competence no. 4 (managerial approaching of preschool class, teaching process and activities for learning/ social integration related to the specific age of the target group) is achieved when the student can analyze the documents/ given educational situations and elaborate proper managerial decisions, and can outline at least two concrete situations of his own activities, which shows various managerial teacher roles. The minimum standards of the fifth competence (counselling, guidance and educational assistance to various categories/ educational groups: preschool/ primary school students, families, teachers, employees, etc.) is about a developmental plan to support the policy of the given school institution, including strategies to prevent behavioral disorders, and the development of a plan to support the creativity or to promote preschool or primary school children with high-ability including strategies for affirmation, promotion and support of it. And for the sixth professional competence (self-assessment and constant improvement of professional practices and career development), the minimal standard is about the elaboration of a professional written resume/report regarding an assigned educational theme/ situation, and argumentation of the structure and the choice of methods and tools.

Also, to each transversal competence for future kindergarten and primary school teachers there are presented the level descriptor and minimal performance standards. So, the level descriptor for the first transversal competence (application of the principles and norms of professional ethics, based on the explicit values, specific to the specialist in education sciences) is about the responsible execution of professional duties, under conditions of restricted autonomy and qualified assistance; and the minimal performance standards refer to providing timely tasks for the design and evaluation of instructive-educative activities in conditions of restricted autonomy and qualified assistance. The second transversal competence (effective cooperation in professional and interdisciplinary working teams, specific to the development of projects and programs development in the field of education sciences) has as level descriptor the familiarity with the roles and specific teamwork activities and distribution of tasks to subordinate levels; and minimal performance standards target to the solving simple tasks, specific to teamwork, for designing, organizing and conducting educational programs; and to the expression of team spirit, honesty, tolerance, empathy and respect in the communication and interaction with other educational partners. And the third transversal competence (using effective methods and techniques for lifelong learning, in order to achieve pre-service and in-service professional development) consist in awareness of the need for in-service training; efficient use of resources and techniques for learning, for personal and professional development, as level descriptor; and the minimal performance standards are regarding to elaboration of a career development plan in medium and long term, display of a positive, active, creative, reflexive and critical attitude towards the teaching profession and in-service education; and contribution to promote the image of the institution and the profession through involvement in various educational projects/ programs.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The project continued with developing the grid no. 2 that is about the establishment of correlations between professional and transversal competences, content areas, subjects of study and allocated credits. This phase consisted of rebuilding the syllabus of major PPSP so as the subjects taught should cover during the three-year of pre-service training the all six professional and three transversal competences.

It is very important to continue the idea of this project through another one in which there should be develop appropriate tools and methods for assessing these professional and transversal competences.

Also, it requires a periodic assessment of the syllabus for determining the effectiveness of teaching subjects and a rehabilitation of the educational plan of study.

References