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The Nature of Competences and Limitations in Intercultural Education of Elementary Education Teachers

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT

Competence is a complex concept – it is difficult to precisely define and describe its essence. Competences are characterised by multidimensionality, overlapping scopes, limiting the possibility to operationalise, contextuality, transferability, gradability and subjective nature. In case of intercultural competences, their complicated nature makes them difficult to shape, especially in the affective and behavioural dimension. Similar difficulties are related to the evaluation of that area during which a researcher should be conscious whether he/she diagnoses external and observable signs of competences, or just a subjective sense of one's competence of a subject, which is not always compliant with its objective level.

The explanation of concepts essential for the topic discussed here, in the introduction to the text, plays a double role. First, it compels the author to an in-depth reflection and clarification of his own reasoning, and thus to taking full intellectual control over the accuracy of the argument. Secondly, it provides the basis for communication with the reader, i.e. it allows the recipient to recognise the manner of referring to the discussed issues and their interpretation, and consequently leads to a deeper understanding of the meaning of the whole statement intended by the author, and a personal reference to what is presented – consent or a critical attitude. As a result of the definition of terms, the language used becomes both a means of efficient communication and a kind of tool of thinking for both parties working with the text.

Competences, a sense of competence – recognition of their nature

It might seem that authors dealing with the issue of competence are not bound by this duty as this concept has been functioning in many fields of science and in social life for many years. Its commonness and considerable freedom in use do not, however, mean that it is well understood, and that the established meaning corresponds to the real one. What is worrying above all is the excessively simplified identification of competence with instrumental efficiency of action. Among others, Maria Dudzikowa, writing about competence as a primarily intrapersonal construct, indicates that the concept goes far beyond such association. According to the author, it is a cognitive structure composed of specific abilities based on personal experience and knowledge, and a belief that it is possible and worthwhile to use these abilities for the effective fulfilment of a specific type of tasks in compliance with implementation standards (1994: 206). In the definition proposed by Maria Czerepaniak-Walczak, we can find a similar meaning which takes into account external signs of competence. The author writes that competence as a subjective feature expresses itself in the ability to behave adequately to the situation and social standards with the responsible awareness of needs and consequences of this behaviour (1997: 87-88). Both definitions provoke us to a deeper reflection on the nature of competence.

One of the key properties of competence is multidimensionality understood as the dependence of the whole on the relationship between the co-complementary dimensions: knowledge, skills and attitudes. Each of these dimensions can be considered and described separately, but in a specific situation, in action they merge into a homogeneous whole with hardly distinguishable components and not easily identifiable power of influence. Motivation activates and serves to maintain a certain type of activity at

an optimal level, knowledge (both explicit and implicit¹) directs it and strengthens or leads to withdrawal from the decisions made, implementation skills decide about the possibility of embodying beliefs entrenched in knowledge, efficiency of action and its ultimate effect. Consequently, the limited possibilities of their operationalisation should be considered a feature of competences. Even significant circumscription of the area to which they refer does not reduce the difficulty in determining their directly observable and measurable indicators. The first reason is the non-physical nature of its components and the limited – in favour of inference – possibility of making them, in the full meaning of the word, the subject of observation (Łukaszewski 2009: 167). Although this term was introduced with the intention of referring to observable behaviours (Czerepaniak-Walczak 2004: 129), competences and action which is their visible result are, in fact, the effect of the coexistence of unobservable and often unconscious factors. They are built not only, and not primarily, on conscious declarative knowledge, but also on the complementary dimensions of procedural knowledge that is difficult to verbalise, implicit or hidden knowledge not easily subjected to control, as well as the difficult-to-measure volitional and emotional dimension (see Włodarski 1996; Nęcka, Orzechowski, Szymura 2007; Łukaszewski 2009). The other reason is the specific complexity and inexhaustibility of the domain of competence, which makes it almost impossible to distinguish, as a result of the operationalisation of the register, sufficiently reliable, i.e. accurate and exhaustive indicators.

It is worth adding that the necessary agreement to omit some of the components of the analysed field also results from the general characteristics of the operationalisation process. In this process, as Czerepaniak-Walczak observes, special simplification of meanings occurs as a result of the fact that ‘the theoretical concept is reduced to the total, numerical enumeration of elements that make up the description of the reality a slice of which it is the designatum.’ As a result, “the binder of these elements, the »space« between them, disappears from the visual field (and consequently from the analysis). All that remains is the conjunction *and*, deepening the impression of the sum of the elements and the static nature of the being it defines.” As the author stresses, “this phenomenon refers to the operationalisation of every concept and expression, but it is particularly important in the process of defining the term »competence« because it has been introduced to the language of the sciences about education as a term clearly referring to observable behaviours” (2004: 129).

The actual presence and level of competence is revealed in practice in natural situations in which the impact of many variables must be examined and considered

¹ According to cognitive psychology, explicit knowledge is basically accessible to consciousness, and when the need arises it is easily updated, verbalised and used, while implicit knowledge (tacit knowledge) gets out of control and verbalisation, although it affects the processes of information processing and decision making (Nęcka, Orzechowski, Szymura, 2007, pp. 144, 145, 147, 148, 660).

both before and during acting. Therefore, contextuality can be considered one of the properties of competence. The adjudication about whether someone can be considered – according to objectivised criteria – competent, requires referring to his actions taken somehow *ad hoc* in contact with a specific fragment of reality. We find a good example of this referring to the teacher's professional activities. Here, given the situational variability and particular unpredictability of the shape of various factors (e.g. organisational ones, or related to the possibilities and needs of students), the teacher's objective, methodical, pedagogical and psychological knowledge (both in its declarative and operational form) is supposed to serve the organisation of current didactic situations in a way that would bring the expected results.

The ability to use competences not only in typical situations in which “mastering” and specific transfer play a significant role, but also – and above all – in surprising and new situations, allows us to express the belief that one of their essential properties is transferability, i. e. the possibility of positive and non-specific transfer of skills. As Czerepaniak-Walczak suggests, an attribute of competences, which are cognitive constructs, is the special generativity or the possibility of transferring them “to other situations, to other reference systems” and new tasks (2004: 129-130).

The recognition of the given features of competence is connected with the perception of their dynamic and developmental character, which determines their gradability. The quoted author notes that “according to the emancipatory theory of education, competence is the subject's ontogenetic property which can be developed” (ibid.), and as such it can be improved primarily in the course of conscious and rationally acquired skills, as well as those assimilated intellectually and in action. Maria Kielar-Turska draws attention to this property of competences emphasising that their development is cyclical and concentric, and achieving a masterful level enabling undertaking creative activities requires prior mastering of reproductive activities, as well as going through the phases of behavioural and transformation competence (2003: 279-280). One can speak about the gradability of competences, also taking into account the sociological perspective, noting that as a specific whole they are available to the society (social groups) rather than to individuals. Depending on the nature and intensity of cooperation of people within larger teams, competences are revealed at various levels.

Including dynamics as a feature of competence also allows us to go beyond the personal dimension because, in response to the requirements of the modern world, changes in competences as such occur. In this sense, we can say that their content evolves – some of their areas become anachronistic and are no longer relevant, others are modified by incorporating new elements or strengthening the meaning of those already present, and yet others appear as a kind of novelty. It is easy to see such changes in the area of teachers' competences: an increase in importance and widening

of the scope of diagnostic and media competences, or even intercultural competences that are interesting from the perspective of the subject matter of this study.

Another feature of competence that is worth considering is their relative separateness. As knowledge, skills and attitudes merge in the activity, also the dispositions attributed to different areas of competence converge in it. This shows that their ranges overlap in practice, and gives the appearance of arbitrariness to ordering attempts of creating their typologies and characteristics. A good example illustrating this property can be the complexity of mutual relations between communication and social competences, or in the case of the teacher's professional duties – psychological and pedagogical competences.

The last competence property described in this study is their subjective nature emphasised in definitions. The fact that competence is always “someone's,” does not seem to require justification. However, it is worthwhile to devote more attention to this feature because of what could be defined as the relationship between objective and subjective existence of competence. The point is to emphasise that competence can be understood – in a way detached from its external manifestations – as a personal resource, a bunch of personality properties, the specific potential of a person (Tucholska 2005: 19), which is not always revealed, but always creates the ground for undertaking and effective fulfilment of specific tasks. The point is also to note that the subjective sense of one's own competences is no less important than objective indicators. Senses, including the sense of competence, are hard to define, specific states of consciousness (Łukaszewski 2008: 89) that are a source of particular strength impelling to the fulfilment of specific roles and related tasks. The sense of competence as a subjective effect of the process of “reading” oneself in a task situation, both thanks to self-reflection combining expectations with achievements, as well as the feedback obtained, begins to clearly form at a younger school age. In the course of life, it undergoes qualitative changes and a sort of “splitting” into various areas, but it always includes: the subject's conviction about his own suitability to perform specific tasks and about their and his own value, the cognizance of his professionalism and insight in the field, the knowledge of his strengths and weaknesses, and a sense of acceptance and recognition on the part of the social environment (Appelt 2005: 260-261, 298, 301).

The picture of a competent *self* consists, among others, of self-confidence and the sense of effectiveness, cognitive curiosity and openness to experience, tenacity in pursuing goals and resilience to failure, a problem-solving attitude and the ability to take risks (Smith cited in Tucholska 2005: 19). The sense of one's own competences – even if not fully congruent with the objectively interpreted level – allows the individual to have high expectations and aspirations. The former, as psychologists argue, are “a premise for stronger engagement in performing tasks” and lead to high results

“regardless of the initial assessment of chances of success.” The latter are “a sufficient condition to trigger causative behaviour” (Łukaszewski, Doliński 2004: 447) with courage, curiosity about the new and a specific “disposition to fulfilment” (Kolańczyk 2009: 47). As a result of such an understanding of the sense of one’s own competence, it is possible to regard it as a component of the “sense of subjective power” in which Piotr Sztompka (2010: 566) sees one of the characteristics of modern personality as well as a good predictor of professional development.

Development and evaluation of teachers' intercultural competences – limitations and difficulties

The 1990s in Poland were a time of multidimensional dynamic transformations, especially on the economic and social levels. This was the time of opening to new ideas and discovering previously inaccessible areas of operation. One of the manifestations of these novelties was the appearance of content in the field of multiculturalism and interculturalism in education curricula, also at the academic level in pedagogical faculties. More and more is said and written about the development of intercultural competences, and their level in students and teachers is diagnosed. Do we, however, have a full picture of what we shape and study? An affirmative answer is not obvious here.

The complicated character and essence of competences generate numerous difficulties noticeable during various stages of intercultural education. Problems with unambiguous and precise defining of intercultural competences occur already at the beginning. The reasons for the problem can be found in the aforementioned multidimensionality of the concept and the limited possibilities of its operationalisation.

Characterising intercultural competence, many authors describe them as a classic triad of knowledge, skills and attitudes. This solution can be found, among others, in Elżbieta Jastrzębska’s list (2005). In declarative knowledge, the author distinguishes socio-cultural knowledge and intercultural awareness (sensitivity); in the field of intercultural skills: noticing relationships and mediating between one’s own and foreign culture, dealing with intercultural misunderstandings and conflicts resulting from them, and overcoming stereotypes, and within attitudes – openness and interest in other people and communities, and the tendency to relativise one’s own cultural point of view.

Jolanta Szempruch and Marietta Błachnik-Gęsiarz suggest a similar division (2018). In their approach, in the cognitive area, intercultural competence encompasses the knowledge about the cultural diversity of the world and one’s own surroundings; the awareness of how cultural differences determine human behaviour; the knowledge of values, norms and hidden cultural patterns; the knowledge of the causes of

misunderstandings in verbal and non-verbal communication (the meaning of words, the tone of voice, gestures), and the readiness to solve misunderstandings; the knowledge of one's own cultural conditions and their impact on the perception of the world and behaviour, as well as the awareness of the limits and subjectivity of one's own cultural norms. In the area of intercultural skills, the authors enumerate: the flexibility of behaviour and the ability to adapt it to the cultural context, the ability to cope with ambiguous and problematic situations; the ability to interpret, explain the manifestations of foreign culture, and relate them to the native culture; the ability to establish and build positive intercultural relationships, listening skills; the ability to act in intercultural groups and the ability to diagnose mechanisms of one's own prejudices, beliefs and principles. In the sphere of attitudes, they emphasise the tolerance for ambiguity and "otherness of others;" the respect for diversity, the readiness to get rid of prejudices; cognitive curiosity, the willingness to learn and get familiar with cultures and learn from intercultural encounters.

In turn, sociologist Jonas Stier (2006) proposes a model in which intercultural competence encompasses content competence (*know that-aspects*), such as historical facts, language, non-verbal codes, behaviour patterns, tradition, social roles, values, norms, customs, taboos, symbols and processual competences (*know how-aspect*), divided by the author into intra- and interpersonal competences. The intrapersonal ones include: decentration, perspective alternation, entering into social roles, problem solving, as well as openness and reflexivity, and interpersonal ones: detecting and interpreting differences in non-verbal behaviours, recognising the emotional context of communication, mastering verbal and non-verbal codes, cognizance of interaction styles, and situational sensitivity to the message.

Similar lists can be multiplied. In most of them, individual dimensions are treated equally, but there are situations in which a certain aspect of the competence is highlighted. It is discernable in definitions of intercultural competence formulated from the perspective of didactics of foreign language teaching. In the literature in this field, the mentioned competence is often presented as a set of internalised skills of functioning in communication situations taking place in the context of multiculturalism. An interculturally competent person establishes and maintains contacts with the representatives of other cultures, avoiding misunderstandings and smoothly mitigating any complications arising during the interaction (Aleksandrowicz-Pędich 2005; Myczko 2005; Mihułka 2012). Of course, in this approach, the multidimensional character of the discussed competence is noted, however, its communication aspect is stressed. At the same time, specialists in the field of language pedagogy raise a very important issue, often overlooked in other pedagogical publications, namely that intercultural competence cannot fully develop in isolation from a foreign language. For example, Krystyna Mihułka stresses this when she writes:

While knowledge about foreign and one's own culture can be acquired in the mother tongue and attitudes can be shaped in isolation from language only on the basis of experience and knowledge gained so far, the combination of knowledge and attitudes, and their use in the course of interaction in an intercultural context, is practically impossible without the use of communication strategies, communication patterns, effective ways of resolving conflicts, etc. appropriate in a given situation. Without the knowledge of a foreign language, a participant of communication might, at best, use and correctly interpret only non-verbal and paraverbal signals, which are an important part of intercultural communication, but cannot replace verbal communication (Mihulka 2012: 35).

The multidimensional descriptions of intercultural competence presented above show it as an extremely wide phenomenon. The list of 320 concepts, created by Brian H. Spitzberg and Gabrielle Changnon (2009: 36-43), characterising its individual areas: knowledge, skills, attitudes/motivations, expressiveness, self-control and understanding of the context, can testify to the almost unlimited possibility of distinguishing its operational indicators. On the basis of this list, Mariusz Korczyński proposed a slightly more synthetic approach to the six nodal intercultural competences containing, as the author emphasises, 25 "most relevant and valid" indicators. His set is as follows:

- communication competences: knowledge of foreign languages; communication competences; wit; communication efficiency; smiling; listening carefully;
- emotional intelligence: interpersonal flexibility; coping with feelings; adaptation and flexibility of behaviour; empathy;
- understanding the behaviour of culturally different partners: the ability to understand others; cultural interaction; cooperation, participation in culture; openness to new information;
- openness to otherness: positive attitude; openness to others; tolerance; politeness/sociability;
- conflict resolution skills: interaction management; the possibility of adapting to different cultures; the ability to cope with stress; rules of politeness;
- the ability to deal with uncertain situations: the ability to establish interpersonal relationships; awareness of oneself and other cultures; involvement.

Aneta Rogalska-Marasińska presented yet another, original way of operationalisation of intercultural competence. According to the optics adopted by the author, it is an unstructured inventory comprising 19 elements, among which there are: honesty; truth; openness; the respect for one's own culture; the knowledge of another culture; the respect for the interlocutor; the focus on the dialogue of equal partners; the community of goals; overcoming difficulties; developing the skills of precise and

interesting expression of one's thoughts; an assertive attitude; responsibility; listening to yourself and others; control over emotions; tact; curiosity; joy; partner relations; the belief in the benefits of establishing intercultural relations (Rogalska-Marasińska 2013: 226-228).

The characteristics of intercultural competence presented above enables us to make certain summaries in the context of the signalled difficulties in shaping it in future elementary education of teachers. First of all, the examples cited here show univocally that the authors enumerate a wide range of knowledge, skills and attitudes in order to accurately and comprehensively depict its essence. Intercultural competence, therefore, appears to us as a structure made of tens or even hundreds of elements, most of which require awareness and shaping – separately and in correlation with others, and the final list of components seems to be still open.

In the structure of professional competences, as Waldemar Furmanek (2007) notes, hard competences, identified with specialised professional knowledge, co-exist with soft competences – personal and interpersonal ones. They are often a basis of effective action and distinguish people who achieve above-average results in their work, from those who meet only minimum standards (Smółka 2008). Moreover, the acquisition of intercultural competence, as Kazimiera Myczko (2005: 29-30) emphasises, is largely determined by personal predispositions, which in some cases will support, while in others limit the possibility of developing this competence. Thus, while the acquisition of declarative knowledge in this field may seem a relatively simple or even interesting task, gaining competences in the behavioural and volitional-emotional dimension is a complicated and long-term process – almost a lifetime task.

One of the features of competences mentioned at the beginning of the considerations is that they are contextual. If we assume that adjudicating, according to objective criteria, on whether someone can be considered competent, requires referring to his/her actions taken in contact with a specific fragment of reality, we must assume that the development of intercultural competence of future teachers should take place, at least in part, in a culturally diverse environment. It is not impossible, although difficult, to organise and it is not done frequently. In addition, it should be noted, as has already been mentioned, that in such contacts, the interlocutors would be required to speak the same language fairly fluently, and it would probably not be the Polish language.

Difficulties with the definition as well as the breadth and multidimensionality of the concept create difficulties not only in the course of developing, but also in the evaluation of intercultural competences of teachers. How can we properly assess the level of something that is not fully determined or partially unobservable? How to reliably examine openness to others, the ability to communicate and act in international groups, or the ability to cope with intercultural misunderstandings if the diagnosis

takes place in a culturally homogeneous environment? In such a case, referring to one of the properties of competence, which is their subjective nature, the study of the subjective “sense of one’s own competence” can be a certain compromise. Assuming that competence can be treated, somehow in isolation from its external manifestations, as a person’s personal resource and specific potential which, even when not disclosed, creates the ground for effective performance of specific tasks, the sense of intercultural competence can be understood as the effect of “reading oneself” in culturally conditioned situations. The sense – even if not fully congruent with the objective level of intercultural competence – is a conviction about one’s own causative abilities based on the knowledge and cognizance of being versed in this area, at the same time being aware of one’s strengths and shortcomings. From the perspective of the researcher, such an approach warrants that he does not examine something “exaggerated” but is conscious of the existing limitations and tries to name them in an appropriate way.

Conclusion

As a result of the multicultural reality, once distant, and today – thanks to the opening of borders and social media – being an integral part of our everyday life, the range of competences necessary to master in the process of socialisation is expanding. In academic conditions, the answer to the existing conditions is the launch, at the end of the previous century, of classes in intercultural education whose main goal is to develop the intercultural competence of future teachers. This task, as has been shown in this short study, is not easy. The extent and the interdisciplinary nature of content in the cognitive dimension means that building knowledge in this area requires constant expansion and updating. The complex nature of competences themselves, especially their contextual feature, generates severe limitations in the process of their full development in the affective and behavioural dimensions, as it requires the creation of conditions for communication in a multicultural environment for students. Difficulties also arise in the evaluation of this area, during which one should be especially aware of whether one is able to diagnose external and observable manifestations of the competence or only the subject’s subjective sense of one’s own competence, which is not always fully consistent with its objective level, although more perceptible and examinable in academic conditions. For all of these reasons, intercultural education of future teachers – important, necessary and being a response to the “signs of the times” – can be treated not only as a task, but also as a challenge.

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