

## THEORETICAL-CONCEPTUAL DILEMMAS OF TEACHER EDUCATION: BETWEEN CROATIAN AND EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK

### TEORIJSKO-KONCEPTUALNE DILEME KOD OBRAZOVANJA UČITELJA: IZMEĐU HRVATSKOG I EUROPSKOG KVALIFIKACIJSKOG OKVIRA

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#### *Abstract*

Establishing the idea of Europe as a joined area, as well as the society of knowledge or learning society, several questions have been brought up about integrational processes whose focus is on the harmonization of Croatian highschool educational system with educational systems of developed societies. Embracing European experiences, we are making an extent in which we outline changes in the educational system, as well as in the subsystem of education teachers in Croatia. The main goal of this paper is analyzing and problematizing current questions about conceptualization of Croatian qualification frame in the context of planning and developing the programme. Referring to the context, the authors are doing their best for accepting the competent approach based on educational outcomes and The Concept of key competence, as intrinsic elements of pedagogical transformation, or, in other words, new paradigm on which the processes of planning and developing modern study programmes / curriculum for teacher education.

#### **1. Starting points**

By the recognition of the idea of Europe as a common space and knowledge society, i.e. learning society, the questions of integrative processes have been initiated in the centre of which is harmonizing the national higher education system with educational systems in developed countries. In an effort to approach the developed Western European countries within the European integration process and general process of globalization, Croatia and other transitional countries are being faced with

#### *Sažetak*

Afirmacijom ideje Europe kao zajedničkog prostora i Europe kao društva znanja, odnosno društva koje uči, potaknuta su pitanja integracijskih procesa u središtu kojih je harmoniziranje hrvatskog visokoškolskog obrazovnog sustava sa sustavima obrazovanja u razvijenim zemljama. Pogled prema Europi važan je okvir u kojem se konceptualiziraju promjene u odgojno-obrazovnom sustavu, pa tako i u podsustavu obrazovanja učitelja u Hrvatskoj.

Osnovna intencija ovoga rada je analiziranje i problematiziranje aktualnih pitanja konceptualizacije Hrvatskog kvalifikacijskog okvira u kontekstu planiranja i razvoja programa. U tom se kontekstu autorice zalažu za prihvaćanje kompetencijskog pristupa temeljenog na ishodima učenja (Outcomes Based Education) i kompetencijama (The concept of competence / The concept of key competences) kao intrinzičnim elementima pedagoškog preokreta, odnosno svojevrsnoj novoj paradigmi na kojoj se mogu utemeljiti procesi planiranja i razvoja suvremenih studijskih programa/kurikuluma za obrazovanje učitelja.

significant difficulties relating to the way, dynamic and content of reforming their educational systems as well as the subsystems of teacher education. Despite these uncomfortable circumstances of overcoming the current diversities and numerous barriers when realizing reform interventions, it needs to be stressed out that, recently, some important right moves have been made in Croatia directed towards the European integrational space, particularly in the context of applying the principles defined by the Lisbon strategy. We are talking about an extremely important strategic document

aimed at Europe becoming the most dynamic and competitive world economy by 2010, based on knowledge and capable of sustainable economic growth, with more and better jobs, and greater social cohesion. Along with its effective orientation on the aims, the revised Strategy has also pointed out certain priority areas and introduced new instruments of implementation on the European spring summit in 2006. They are concentrated on concrete measures and national action plans in three key areas where the most prominent is greater investment in knowledge and innovations through the promotion of policies and measures that aim at the realization of what was agreed. The creation of national programmes for the reforms based on the recognition of such policy is the key instrument of the implementation of what was defined. Looking into future, one fact is being recognized at the same time implying that, in this ever-changing world, there would be a permanent need for adapting higher education system aimed at European space to remain competitive and able to effectively answer more and more large challenges of globalization /1/. What does all the mentioned mean for Croatia? Although, as a candidate country, it does not have the obligation to make the national programme of reforms, Croatia has been intensifying processes by which it wishes to reach political and economic criteria for the membership what, among other things, also implies the acceptance of contents, principles and political aims of all acts the Union is based on. With regard to the assessment of readiness of single candidate country for joining the European Union, it is certain that a significant role will be given to the evaluation of the implementation of the Lisbon activities that could be considered as priorities within the European, i.e. pre-accession partnership (along with full appreciation of the specific starting position of a country). In this sense, overall activity directed towards the gradual acquisition of the stated aims is rather important, especially with regard to their incorporation into the national politics on which reform interventions are based. There are examples that show that Croatia had successfully established the system of indicators and measures in some areas, and it has been presented as such in the reports of some European Commission members. The evaluation of the state after the London Conference was optimistic. We are all witnesses to the raised awareness of a large part of political and academic public, and also public opinion on the need for creating the Europe of knowledge as an irreplaceable factor of social and human development as well as an important component of securing and enriching the affiliation to Europe that is able to prepare all its citizens for

the challenges of the new millennium and that raises their awareness of common values and affiliation to the same social and cultural space. The goals of European education are well-known. Their purpose is to influence the activities by which the quality of human capital is improved and the importance of raising the quality of education, its accessibility, openness and efficacy is respected. Great attention is being given to finding the mechanisms of support aimed at these goals and their as qualitative accomplishment as possible. The creation and adoption of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for the European space of higher education and also the creation of general descriptors for each level of education are one of the most important elements upon which Europe builds recognizable, modern, compatible and mutually understandable qualifications systems.

## **2. EQF as reference framework for creating national, i.e. Croatian Qualifications Framework (CROQF)**

In April 2008, the European Union formally gave a recommendation on the establishment of the EQF obliging the member countries to harmonize their national qualifications frameworks with the European one by 2010 in order to compare qualifications gained in different countries more easily. What is it all about? If we accept the Decree on the EQF as the common European reference framework that links national qualifications systems, we can give it the significance of translation tools that provides easier understanding and 'reading' of the qualifications across different countries and systems in Europe. In fact, it is a matter of the systematic description of qualifications of the educational system of a country through the levels of education attained using mutually connected and measurable indicators. In this connection, qualification is most commonly interpreted as the acquired degree (or diploma) issued by the authorized body and confirming that certain learning outcomes have been accomplished after the successful completion of a recognized study programme. The basic characteristics of the EQF are recognised on the basis of the description of a qualification for each level. The differentiation between them has been done through the following characteristics: application of knowledge and understanding, judging, communication, and the skill of learning /2/. In this way the descriptors are obtained, i.e. statements that comprise three levels of study on the basis of competencies that a student should gain during each of the stated qualification levels. They comprise a set of

common principles, procedures and guidelines for different forms of cooperation with the emphasis on organizing the system of quality ensuring and development. Therefore, it is a matter of reference data by which the taxonomy and framework for defining the relations between qualifications are established. Every single descriptor points to the general outputs of the given qualification level. In this sense, the defined quality of learning outcomes needs to be the same or comparable with the same one in the given framework of qualifications. By the acquisition of starting bases for creating the Croatian Qualifications Framework (hereafter CROQF), Croatia follows the stated developments. The CROQF is based on Croatian educational tradition, current state in the society and its development, needs of the economy, an individual and society in its entirety, and the EQF determinations. It is an instrument for establishing qualifications gained in the Republic of Croatia which provides the bases for clearness, approaching, porosity, gaining and quality of qualifications. Its aim is to connect the learning outcomes gained through all educational institutions and to bring them into correlation in the Republic of Croatia and in an international exchange. It is the basis for setting the clear criteria for the quality of gaining the set of competencies which a participant in education is expected to have after completion of education for the qualification of certain level and volume. The CROQF represents a unique system that provides opportunities for learning outcomes to be measured and compared with one another has a simple basic structure and comprises a whole and minimal number of basic elements /3/.

### 3. Learning outcomes as instruments for establishing harmony between European and national qualifications systems

An important characteristic of the EQF is its referentiality achieved by a competent approach based on the complex system of learning outcomes and competencies. In the last decade, such an approach met with significant affirmation both in the theory and practice of educational curriculum planning, particularly regarding its development dimension. The EQF recognizes its basic humanistic dimension visible, in the first place, through the process of shifting the focus from the content to personality. With regard to literature, it is possible to observe various approaches and interpretations of the determination of competencies itself as well as their relation to learning outcomes.<sup>12</sup> The definition and also interpretation of the meaning depend on many factors: certain differences in

the selected epistemological approach (Pate, Martin and Robertson, according to Winerton, J., Delamare-Le Deist, F., Stringfellow, E., 2003) as well as cultural, linguistic and social circumstances in the context of which the term is being defined.<sup>13</sup> A significant contribution in both the interpretation of competencies and determination of relative relations with learning outcomes was offered by a programme called

*'Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations'* (DeSeCo) initiated under the auspices of OECD in 1997. Its purpose the creation of the general conceptual framework – reference for identification, analysis and interpretation of competencies aimed at providing mutual understanding of those that are important for OECD member countries. It is a matter of the so-called functional, external approach because it approaches competencies from the position of their influence on the successfulness of functioning of a society as a community, emphasizing firstly those characteristics and social demands put in front of an individual when faced with the demands of social life. The DeSeCo concept<sup>14</sup> regularly points out the need implying that such an approach, orientated by such demands, needs to be supplemented by the conceptualization of competencies as inner mental structures in terms of abilities, capacity or disposition of every individual. In an attempt to determine relative relations of learning outcomes and competencies in the context of the general qualifications framework, the accepted definition is the one according to which *competencies are dynamic combination of knowledge and understanding of skills and abilities, attitudes and responsibility that describe learning outcomes of an educational programme*. A learning outcome is a clear definition of competencies, skills and/or attitudes that a pupil/student should gain during certain period of learning. In an academic context, it means the definition of standards by describing the point of qualification using the terminology of generic and specific competencies, i.e. achieving certain learning outcomes after the successful completion of a

12 Because of the nature of this paper, we will focus only on some selected sources

13 An interesting question is the one of the intercultural transfer of competencies initiated by Sparrow (Sparrow, 1997). The author suggests that, in different countries, the same behaviour does not need to point to the same competence, neither do all sorts of behaviour need to be equally relevant.

14 DeSeCo approach accepts the determination of competencies defining them as the ability of facing demands or their successful realization; it also points out that a task successfully contains both cognitive and non-cognitive dimension.

recognized study programme. This is particularly important having in mind common points of reference for different scientific disciplines because it offers non-prescriptive reference framework for an academic community and achieving the high level of qualification comparison /4/. The research results (Reichert, S. and Tauch, C., 2005) show that, when creating new study programmes, a large number of higher education institutions across Europe are familiar with or apply the concept based on learning outcomes, i.e. competencies. The acceptance of such basic orientations has reflected in the need for modifications and reforms of teacher education. Namely, the creation of contemporary educational policies is inconceivable without the appreciation of teachers who are often given the significance of the key factors with regard to the promotion of the Europe of knowledge as a whole cultural-social-educational context. Teachers are those who, by the strength of their professionalism, contribute significantly to the preparation of future citizens of the united Europe, the development and improvement of their human capacities by which they answer the challenges of the knowledge society, active participation in the same society and independent lifelong learning ("Education & Training 2010", the Success of the Lisbon Strategy Hinges on Urgent Reforms). For all these reasons, the tendency of treating teacher education as an area of special social interest has been empowering in almost all European countries, and therefore it almost everywhere represents a part of the development economic and social policy.

#### **4. Towards European dimension of teacher education: Croatian teacher – European professional**

A view towards Europe is an important framework within which changes in the system of teacher education are being conceptualized in Croatia taking into account the following question: how to stay current with the processes of integration and globalization and preserve your own national, traditional and other specific qualities and values at the same time? There are many open questions discussed in the Croatian Academic Community within the context of the process of 'tuning' teacher education according to the principles of European professionalism. We single out some of them as follows:

1. It has been known that Europe unites on the Common European Principles for Teacher Competencies and Qualification. Some proposals have been brought aiming at supporting the development of new strategic policies in education

on all the levels (national, regional, etc.) that have been applied on the basis of the goals pointed out by the Lisbon Strategy. The role of teachers, their lifelong education and professional development have been set as the priority goals in national reforms of educational systems.

As it has been pointed out, a *European teacher* does not only educate future citizens in their own country but also future citizens of a united Europe. Looking from this perspective, the European dimension assumes many different aspects that are, on the one hand, deeply rooted into the socio-political and cultural context of European society growing as a new qualitative unity, while on the other hand, can be found at the national levels of all its constituents. In this sense, the value dimension of national identities has always been specifically emphasized in a way where European dimension always represents certain balance between national and transnational values when creating educational policies /5/. When establishing national reference points for a new system of teacher education, the discussions on establishing relative relations between a 'national' and European teacher are being intensified. In doing so, lots of energy is spent on allaying the fear of treating an European professional as a 'supra-national teacher' while orientating on the main components of this term that are potentially important at both individual and common level of the European educational space. It is a matter of genuine mobilization within teacher profession through such education that would provide every teacher with the possibility of entering the classrooms in each of the countries of a united Europe.

2. The reflection on the questions dealing with the quality of teacher work has also been problematized, especially within the context of creating such educational policies that stimulate further development of teacher profession. Many European policies are focused on definition and development of the indicators by which the quality a teacher and their education, as well as their social status, has been promoted (ex. 'Education & Training 2010, the Success of the Lisbon Strategy Hinges on Urgent Reforms'). They proceed from a clear orientation towards teacher profession defining it as an exceptionally complex occupation that implies reflective thinking, continual professional development, autonomy, responsibility, creativity of research and personal judgement /6/. On the one hand, the indicators of the quality of teacher profession open the question of criteria upon which they are brought, and on the other, the question of measurable indicators as the reflection where the stated values and attributes describing teacher

profession reflect. This is rather important because the quality of a teacher implies the overall concept that is not consisted of knowledge and skills only, but also personal qualities of their personality, values, attitudes, identity, beliefs, etc. The way in which this is going to be transposed into the indicators of the quality of a teacher reveals the dominant social, cultural, economic and educational policy, the view of a qualitative teacher and care for them /7/. In this sense, national politics remains on clear declarative orientation as for now.

3. The definition of the measurable indicators that promote the quality of the new Croatian teacher is based on the identification of learning outcomes, i.e. competencies. Such an approach has been applied in defining the constitutive elements of the term 'European professionalism' through the inventory-making of the dimensions of learning outcomes that define the volume of teacher competencies that are becoming the starting points in planning and development of study curricula for teacher education. The research results /8/ have been highly appreciated showing that a large number of higher education institutions of teacher education across Europe are familiar with and apply the concept based on learning outcomes, i.e. competencies when creating new curricula. In this sense, the methodological model of their designing has been accepted that was developed within the Tuning project. It is based on several points of reference where the first two (out of six) refer to the need for redesigning generic, i.e. specific competencies of a certain professional profile.<sup>15</sup>

4. The consciousness of the question of relative relations of learning outcomes and teacher competencies in designing has been fully raised. If we refer to the determination of learning outcomes as a *list of expectations of what a student should know, understand or be able to do upon the completion of the learning process*, it is clear that, regarding the same definition, we should also start from a clear definition of learning outcomes. In doing so, we need to direct a lot of energy on departing from the past traditional 'input based' approach orientated on a teacher and the content a student was to master. Instead, we now start from 'the end', i.e. description of the competencies a student should acquire at the end of a certain educational process, taking into account their progress towards certain higher

levels and the possibilities of their employment prospects at same time. Therefore, with regard to the curricular level, learning outcomes need to be relevant for further education and job market and also realizable within the given time and material limits.

5. Regarding the CROQF Draft, teacher education has been placed at the 7th level – university integrated study for a period of 5 years where a student gains 300 ETCS points. In this context, a discussion on the autonomy in realizing tasks that 'allow' teachers to plan and develop their 'own' curriculum of an appropriate level has been encouraged. If this autonomy exists, a question is further raised dealing with the creation of the measurable indicators of learning outcomes that would justify the selected educational level accompanied by the view towards the European qualifications framework aimed at reaching transparency, porosity and mobility. Speaking in the words of the competence approach, it is about the levels of general and specific knowledge, their understanding and application, general skills, communication and other abilities, and their application as the components of educational habit of a European professional in the area of educational sciences. These are the contours of general, generic and specific competencies that represent, as is visible from European experience, basic prerequisites for curriculum planning and development at the selected qualification level for a certain field of work. Despite the stated open questions, the establishment of the CROQF represents an important moment upon which the basis for realization the launched reforms in the overall system of education has been made as well as for the establishment of a quality lifelong learning, creation of strong universities and schools and establishment of a unique system of quality management ([www.mzos.hr](http://www.mzos.hr)). Based on these bases, the redefining of teacher education curriculum has been approached. The cognition that the competence approach based on learning outcomes is the basic element of a curriculum and a strong instrument for essential change of the process of teacher education has also been accepted. This potential also serves as the basis for a new educational philosophy that implies the paradigm change by shifting the focus of teaching from a teacher towards a student. Therefore, learning outcomes are significantly important because they represent the intrinsic element of a pedagogical transformation in teacher education that, as visible, has been given the significance of the key factor in the realization of the learning society based on knowledge. In the same society there is a Croatian teacher, standing shoulder to shoulder with his

15 Due to the respect of the principle of transparency, the conclusions given at the Bergen Conference (From Berlin to Bergen 2005) recommend the definition of all study programmes/curricula based on learning outcomes, regardless of their level and type.

European colleague and taking up their well deserved position due to their significance.

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