

GENERAL EDUCATION IN THE FUNCTION OF LABOUR MARKET NEEDS AND/OR PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE NOTION OF LITERACY

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***Summary** - The notion of literacy has broadened in the last decades and now incorporates a whole range of different and new key competencies. The consequence is a change in the goals and subject matter of literacy programmes, language and literature teaching, and general education as a whole. This article presents the dilemma about the role of general education in modern society, or, more precisely, asks whether we are facing a situation where learning and education as a basic human right have given way to learning and education as a means of economic and social development. Some international documents are discussed from this point of view. The paper concludes that the dilemma can be resolved, but only provided that we read international documents interactively and take into account the social heterogeneity of groups and the autonomy of the individuals in them.*

***Key words:** general education, lifelong learning, literacy, key competencies, national literacy strategy.*

Introduction

Literacy has long stood for more than mere reading and writing skills that occasionally also include reading comprehension. The project within the OECD DeSeCo framework broadens the issue of literacy to incorporate a whole range of key competencies, representing a departure from the hitherto common concepts of general education and topics supposed to establish the criteria for the achievement of educational goals in the area. This, however, is not only about the knowledge concept being replaced by the competencies concept, since there is a shift taking place within the competencies concept itself. The shift concerns a change in the goals and subject matter of literacy programmes, language and literature teaching, as well as general education as

a whole. It is, of course, not entirely clear whether such a shift really means a development path that is in the interest of each individual's development as a human being whose value is not simply defined by his/her position in the labour market and his/her participation in social life.

Education in the function of economic development

Even when ignoring the doubt expressed in the Introduction (which will be discussed in more detail further on), the fact remains that reading literacy and the competencies that it presupposes are the foundation for the development of other kinds and levels of literacy, especially where they are related to the key competencies according to DeSeCo (Key competencies, 2003):

- interacting in socially heterogeneous groups;
- acting autonomously; and
- using tools interactively.

The development trend with regard to replacing conventional diplomas, certificates, and qualifications with the competencies concept is based on the economic policies pursued by the European Union. These place education explicitly and directly within the function of capital and its growth. Accordingly, the European Council held a special meeting in Lisbon in March 2000, and in its conclusions set the following strategic goal for Europe for the next decade: "To become the most competitive and dynamic, knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion", particularly emphasising that to reach the goal "a radical transformation of the European economy" was not going to suffice; rather, "modernising social welfare and education systems" is also required (Lisbon ... 2000).

The policies of the European Union in the area of education have turned decidedly in the direction of stressing the function of education for economic development. The principal document proving this is the "Memorandum on Lifelong Learning" that – within the framework of the so-called "Lisbon Strategy" and its later variants – sets the main goals for the education policies and strategies delineated by the processes of economic reproduction and development. The Memorandum specifies two goals that education policies in the Union should follow: promoting active citizenship and employability. The Memorandum in this area reads:

Active citizenship focuses on whether and how people participate in all spheres of social and economic life, the chances and risks they face in trying to do so, and the extent to which they therefore feel that they belong to and have a fair say in the society in which they live (Memorandum ... 2000, p. 5).

For much of most people's lives, having paid work underpins independence, self-respect and well-being, and is therefore a key to people's overall quality of life. Employability – the capacity to secure and keep employment – is not only a core dimension of active citizenship, but it is equally a decisive condition for reaching full employment and for improving European competitiveness and prosperity in the “new economy” (ibid.).

Both goals clearly underline the striving of contemporary societies for economic prosperity and social cohesion but, as T. Vidmar argues:

the definitions and goals entirely lack lifelong learning in the function of personal development and the growth of the individual. ... Even if active citizenship is understood as personal development, the concept of lifelong learning as conceived of by the European Union nevertheless remains somewhat questionable. The two goals can, namely, coincide and even support each other, but there is a possibility that the component or function which is pragmatic, utilitarian, and driven by economic interests will prevail. Nowadays, there exists a strong likelihood of the reduction of the goals related to the individual's personal development and growth (Vidmar 2006, p. 32).

We now find ourselves in a situation where learning and education have become imperatives that subordinate the individual to a double logic: the logic of employability and the logic of “social integration”, with the foregrounding of a socially well-fitting individual. This process works towards the individual's subordination to the logic of the economy and social development.

A harsh critic of contemporary movements in the field of education, C. Laval describes this situation as a new paradigm of the cognitive society where

no space can be separate from the world of employment and devoted exclusively to academic knowledge. In fact, there no longer exists an “arbitrary space” which would not spring from a totalising category of learning. There can only be “passages”, “learning networks”, “adaptable itineraries” ... This “new paradigm” is intent on “making citizens aware” of their duty to learn. Instead of addressing the needs for autonomy and personal success, this paradigm utilises the pedagogisation of existence to assure survival in the labour market (Laval 2005, p. 70).

In this situation of the reappraisal of knowledge and the importance of learning, Laval also notices a problematic replacement of knowledge as the goal and concept of a classical education system with the aim of competencies development. Such a replacement furthermore brings about the devaluation of classical knowledge and the meanings that are the carriers of traditional cultural values. Laval describes the contradictions of the new tendency by posing the question of

how to mobilise the intellectual activity of pupils and students and simultaneously devalue scientific and cultural disciplines and lead pupils and students to believe that spontaneous and “informal” practical experiences, contract work, and charitable intentions belong to the same order as school studies, as well as the physical and cultural education provided by such studies (Laval 2005, p. 81).

What does the concept of lifelong learning bring?

The concept of lifelong learning brings additional changes in regard to the transmission of cultural values and the classical models of intellect cultivation. It conceives of the emphasis on learning throughout one’s life as a restructuring of the educational goals known in one’s youth. It leads from the individual’s formation of comprehensive knowledge of the existing culture, the world, and life – “the ways of the world”, so to speak – to the goals that ought to allow the individual’s continuing learning as a means of adapting to the needs and imperatives of the existing economic, social, and cultural environment. The classical position implies an individual being educated in order to gain the critical position of a more or less independent intellectual whose knowledge and familiarity with tradition help him/her maintain a critical distance and establish him/herself as well as his/her place within society and culture through serious reflection. As a result, such an individual can successfully oppose the manipulations and challenges of the contemporary economy. The newly enforced demands, on the other hand, represent the voluntary acceptance of a position where an individual’s value is only that of a potential consumer of economic and political marketing in the function of a well-working economic and social system. This logic is reflected directly in UNESCO’s definitions of key competencies as described above.

Interestingly, education in youth remains a key factor in an individual’s development also within the concept that is being scrutinised in this article. Expectations about how it is possible to compensate later in adulthood for what was missed in youth are quite unfounded, not to say mistaken. The more important the part of lifelong learning/education taking place in adulthood is as regards an individual’s development, social and working participation, the more important – possibly even decisive – is the education that he/she received in youth. So-called “compensatory adult education” (Krajnc 1979) in its function of doing away with education deficiencies has not lived up to expectations from the second half of the twentieth century. Quite the opposite, it has become evident that individuals with education deficiencies originating in their youth also participate less in education later in their lives. Adult education therefore increases, rather than reduces, social inequality based on the different participation of the youth in education. In view of that, data for Slovenia show that

in 1998 among those with tertiary education, 72% were educationally active, whereas the share of those who had completed from 5 to 8 years of primary school education was only 11% (Udeležba ... 2001).

A comprehensive analysis carried out by P. Kelava (2003) reveals a paradox:

Education differences increase as individuals with higher starting education participate in adult education much more (their starting education is in all probability a result of their initial education) than the individuals with lower starting education. Not only do those with higher education educate themselves more, education also seems to be closer to and easier for them (self-education is not alien to them, they do not shirk from independent resource searching on topics they are interested in, etc.). Furthermore, learning habits often prove “contagious” among family members (Kelava 2003, p. 99).

The concept of lifelong learning has evolved in accordance with the above-mentioned intellectual shifts: from a broadly-defined idea of education as a liberating activity which also gives “a second chance” (discussed above) to the increasingly narrow concept of learning in its pragmatic function. The considerable debate on the issue that took place in France showed that

in the European Union economic logic prevails: learning is a means of company competitiveness and individual employability that neglects continuing education as a global vision. ... It can be observed that learning as “a human right” gave way to learning as “a means for economic and social development”. In the same manner as learning has been reduced to an “applicative aspect of the humanities” and is no longer perceived as “an important experience in relation to basic human needs” (Ardouin 2006, p. 155).

What about the role of cultural capital?

The amount of cultural capital accumulated in the family and generated during education in youth is also crucial for the individual’s development later on in life. Moreover, in Lavalian discourse, it also defines the consumption of cultural goods that are on offer in the increasingly globalised market of cultural values. We cannot expect the mechanisms discussed above in relation to adult participation in education to be significantly different from participation in cultural life.

The importance of social circumstances and the related cultural capital for success in the education system in youth was shown by recent research on a representative sample of children in Slovenia (Doupona 2006). The research was based on the international study of reading literacy PIRLS 2001

(cf. Doupona 2004), and it compared the results of the international study of reading literacy with the school performance of the children participating in the study. The correlation between the two variables was as expected very high ($r = 0.60$) (Doupona 2006, p. 29). School performance and reading literacy are interrelated in the majority of children. The research demonstrates that on average children from better-off families get better reading and school results, which proves once again an already established fact known from professional sources.

The researchers paid special attention to two subgroups of children: those with good reading literacy achievement and poor school performance (called “losers”) and those with poor reading literacy achievement and good school performance (called “winners”). The two subgroups were compared in relation to their parents’ education, their financial statuses, and the education of each parent. The results were surprising: the so-called “losers” come from families with poor financial circumstances (39% of them belong to the lowest group, and only 11% belong to the three highest groups – out of a total of six groups; their parents’ education is also lower than the education of the winners’ parents); a significant share of the “losers”, furthermore, consists of children of immigrants. The “winners”, i.e. those with poor reading literacy achievement and good school performance, are the opposite: they come from better-off families with parents, especially the mothers, having higher education, and fewer of them come from immigrant families. “All the available data suggest that the ‘losers’ really are a deprived social group. They are generally poorer, less educated, they usually have immigrant parents, and even though they can read better than their peers, they do not regard themselves as good readers” (Doupona 2006, p. 44).

At least two points from the research are important for our argument:

- a) the correlation and interdependence between the development of general competencies (such as reading literacy or reading competency) and the social circumstances of the individual. This is not a new discovery, but it needs to be taken into account more seriously when discussing general competencies and their development in adults; and
- b) even when certain competencies are developed (as seen in the example described above), there is a high probability that those from privileged socio-cultural backgrounds will achieve better results – in correlation with the level of their development. What is more, the correlations and interdependences originating in youth are likely to increase to an even greater extent in adulthood.

National education strategies

Efforts to improve reading literacy have become the main strategy of national policies, including the Slovene one, regardless of all the findings dis-

cussed above. The policies are largely circumscribed by labour market demands, which are contradictory in themselves, as employers require an ever more specialised individual on the one hand, whereas, on the other hand, there exist more general demands for individuals to possess a growing number of “transversal” skills, not linked to any specific classically defined professional qualification. The Master Plan for Adult Education in the Republic of Slovenia and the National Literacy Strategy are two documents that approach the two demands differently.

The Master Plan for Adult Education is an official document adopted by the parliament which outlines the bases for the annual planning and distribution of public funds for the purpose of adult education. The document defines three priority areas:

- a) general education and learning of adults;
- b) education to improve education levels;
- c) education and training to meet labour market needs.

All three areas are financed through public funds in proportions of 65% (the ministry responsible for labour) to 35% (the ministry responsible for education), not taking into account the resources provided directly by employers. Adult education is thus mostly intended to satisfy labour market needs and, above all, to combat unemployment. It also has to be added that the second priority area – except for primary school for adults – is entirely devoted to vocational and technical education, which is also primarily meant to fulfil labour market needs.

The National Literacy Strategy, having been ratified by the Collegiate Board of the Ministry of Education on 12 December 2005 and approved by the expert committees for basic education, vocational education, and adult education, is in the process of being adopted. It justifies the need for a strategy in the following way:

The government wishes to invest more to develop literacy of all the residents of Slovenia in order to help create opportunities for creative and efficient strategies to cope with the fast global, economic, technological, social, and cultural developments. The goal is high social inclusion, economic growth, and a sustainable development of the Slovene society (Nacionalna ... 2005, p. 6).

Even though the Slovene strategy reiterates the ideas found in various EU documents, especially in the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, particular emphasis is placed on the development of reading literacy at all educational levels, including adult education. The strategy departs from labour market needs and employment, and remains at a general and principled level of developing reading competencies without a direct relation to specific labour market needs, which could be understood as a somewhat more autonomous position

of the strategy. What is different from the Master Plan for Adult Education is the lack of financial construction that would guarantee at least minimum resources to carry out the part of strategy which is not related to the changes in the formal education of the youth, which are financed by public funds anyway. There is another distinctiveness of the document: it leaves the classical notion of literacy with its emphasis on reading literacy largely intact. It only mentions other dimensions of literacy in passing. This is another point that distinguishes the strategy from the dominant trends in EU documents and strategies. We can appreciate this as another relatively autonomous position of the document, as reading literacy does seem to remain the fundamental form of literacy that underlies all other types of literacy.

Key competencies, reading literacy, and teaching literature

As literacy, and in particular reading literacy, is a key competency which is the basis for all other types of literacy and a precondition for the development of key competencies, it means that teaching it is becoming the groundwork. It can thus be assumed that it lies under the most intense reformist pressure, mainly when it concerns teaching literature. According to DeSeCo and its three basic areas of key competencies mentioned at the beginning, knowing and studying literature and literary texts is unquestionably less important than understanding standard texts, laws, regulations, and general, non-literary texts that relate to the practical use of language. This confronts literature teaching methodology with a dilemma about whether to subordinate itself to the utilitarian use of language and neglect its aesthetic expression, or to find a way of holding onto that dimension while also developing those aspects of the practical use of language that are critical to various analyses of reading literacy and are to be found in the instruments for its surveys as developed by the IALS/ALL (Key competencies ... 2003, pp. 151–158).

In face of the new requirements, it is uncertain whether both dimensions of the hitherto existing two-dimensionality of mother-tongue teaching – including both language and literature – can reasonably continue to be developed together. At the level of vocational schools, there is a growing tendency towards the distribution of the development of reading competency between all school subjects. This would also bring about a reduction in the amount of time assigned to language and literature teaching, with the subject “The Slovene Language” being renamed “Communication in the Slovene Language” (cf. Izhodišča ... 2001; Vidmar, Muršak 2001).

Such an approach is dangerous on two grounds:

- a) the use of language is reduced to a strictly utilitarian dimension, with language remaining merely a means of communication;

- b) if language is left out of the socio-cultural and artistic context, it will be impossible to develop cultural awareness and a sense of belonging – two prominent dimensions of key competencies.

Despite the fact that international literacy surveys chiefly study the utilitarian and non-aesthetic uses of language, this does not mean that it is possible and sensible to do away with the two-dimensionality of mother-tongue teaching. Both dimensions can be included in the basic goals so that they complement – and do not exclude – each other. Contemporary trends in mother-tongue teaching methodology demonstrate that a sensible combination of the so-called artistic and non-artistic uses of language is by far the most productive. The leading Slovene language teaching expert, B. K. Vogel, calls attention to the following:

It is to be hoped that the two-dimensionality of mother-tongue teaching will be retained and that the extent of literature within it will not be limited for the sake of the functionalist notions of communicative competence. This would predominantly call for the teaching of non-artistic uses of language while artistic uses would become only marginal additions. Also, the contents of (functional) contextual knowledge will hopefully not be dropped mechanically onto some new general subject of “cultural studies” due to the great zeal for the development of “comprehension ability” (Krakar Vogel 2006, p. 69).

With extensive research done in the field, the author demonstrates that such mother-tongue use and teaching are possible (*ibid.*, p. 68).

Conclusion

European documents and international instruments for the comparison and measurement of the development of various competencies and of the school performance of children and adults set the framework that springs from the needs for the creation of a single global world more or less dominated by labour market laws. It is neither possible nor reasonable to oppose this common framework. On the contrary, the key competencies and literacy levels set as a common goal need to be developed and strived for as much as possible. It is not true, however, that this requires reducing systematic learning and education to the simply functional use of language, and developing literacy in a one-dimensional utilitarian direction. Two reasons support this:

- a broader concept of key competencies and their language teaching application clearly show that the use of language as a means of expressing the cultural and artistic dimensions of human existence is a competency that is fundamental to interpersonal dialogue and life in culturally pluralist societies or “socially heterogeneous groups”;

- the functional use of language can be developed through artistic texts just as well as through non-artistic texts, which has been demonstrated by successful language teaching methodology experiments.

Mother-tongue teaching methodologies must cooperate more intensively in the process and fulfil their task which is not to resist globalisation trends and demands, but rather to integrate them appropriately into the development of the capacities for “autonomous action” within the national cultural and working environments and for the appropriate “interactive use of tools”. Moreover, it must be remembered that functionally unreduced language represents one of the most important tools to achieve common goals. In this respect, the dilemma posed by the title of this article can be resolved, but only on condition that we read international documents interactively and take into account the social heterogeneity of groups and the autonomy of the individuals in them.

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OPĆE OBRAZOVANJE U SVOJSTVU TRŽIŠTA RADA I / ILI OSOBNOG RAZVOJA I VAŽNOST PISMENOSTI

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***Sažetak** - Sadržaj pojma pismenosti je proširen u posljednjih nekoliko desetljeća i uključuje veliki broj novih i različitih temeljnih kompetencija. To uvjetuje promjenu ciljeva i sadržaja programa obrazovanja s područja pismenosti, jezika i književnosti, kao i cjeline općeg obrazovanja. U članku autor razvija pitanje nismo li možda suočeni sa situacijom gdje se učenje i obrazovanje kao univerzalno ljudsko pravo povlači i postaje jedino sredstvo ekonomskog i socijalnog razvoja. S tog gledišta autor analizira različite međunarodne dokumente i ističe da se to pitanje može riješiti, pod uvjetom, da se međunarodni dokumenti čitaju međuzavisno i s obzirom na heterogenost društvenih skupina i autonomije pojedinaca unutar njih.*

***Ključne riječi:** opće obrazovanje, cjeloživotno učenje, pismenost, ključne kompetencije, Nacionalna strategije pismenosti.*