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The Teacher as Reflective Practitioner

Professional roles and competence domains

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Abstract. All teachers are increasingly confronted with classes of considerable cultural and linguistic diversity. The huge difficulties encountered in teaching these classes have been known for quite some time. This contribution first elaborates on the notion of the teacher as a reflective practitioner. Subsequently, the teachers' professional roles and required competences are discussed. This results in a trellis with 16 competence domains. The trellis is explained for the topic of language management.

Keywords: Teacher training; competences; cultural diversity; language diversity; curriculum development; role identity theory

1. Introduction

Schools as learning organizations should be sensitive to the context within which they function. Since learning environments are dynamic and change rapidly, educators (teachers and management) should be open to adjusting to situations evolving in the classrooms at school. They should apply their knowledge of teaching and organizational issues in the current teaching situation and adjust their approach accordingly. Furthermore, they should take into account the background of students. Teachers and school management are responsible for arranging social interaction in such a way that all students can profit, irrespective of their background. In this respect, the teacher as a reflective practitioner [1] is crucial in dealing with the ever-changing multicultural and multilingual environment. Functioning as a reflective practitioner not only requires special knowledge but also a specific attitude. The relationship between a dynamic learning environment and the teacher as reflective practitioner is illustrated in Fig. 1.

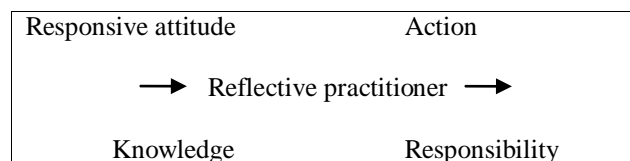


Fig. 1: The teacher as reflective practitioner: knowledge and attitude.

Fig. 1 illustrates that an effective learning environment (i.e., reaching the goals set) is based on different competences that can be structured along the cognitive dimension (i.e., knowledge necessary to be able to respond in a sensitive manner to changes in the teaching situation, and the attitudinal dimension (i.e., being prepared to introduce necessary and desirable changes in one's approach. The reflective practitioner combines all competences needed to create an optimal learning environment and atmosphere that is tailor-made for the specific situation, that is, the content to be learned, the diversity of the school population, and the facilities offered.

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2. Professional roles

Teachers have different professional roles associated with different social agents in a school context. According to role identity theory [2], roles only exist in relation to other contracting roles. Goals, meanings and expectations associated with a specific role constitute a set of standards that guide behaviour. The four roles of the teacher that can be distinguished are determined by the following four ‘actors’: students, internal partners (i.e., the colleagues and the school management), external partners (i.e., the other schools, the local area/district, the industries, the government), and the parents.

Many of the meaningful activities involved in the teacher role are governed by the control of available resources (social power, prestige, knowledge, and competences). Seen from this perspective, the influence of parents is very different from that of external partners. Other teachers are similar in power and status, as is the management of the school.

3. Domains of competences

A specific social role pre-describes the main characteristic of each of the competences. In consequence, the different social roles of the teacher enable us to specify general teacher competences for the following domains: interpersonal domain, organizational, evaluative, and professional.

3.1. The interpersonal domain: collaborative networking

In order to cope with the multilingual and multicultural environment, teachers should develop skills to communicate effectively in culturally diverse social situations. They will need collaborative networking skills to deal with the different agents involved in school life. The overall aim is to strengthen the engagement and involvement of all actors in the school: students, teachers, parents, and other educators.

The central idea is that schools are players in an open and living system within a local or regional environment whose work in education is interconnected with external partners in the form of all manner of social networking activities. The structures of cooperation will not be defined from a static institutional point of view but from a progressive functional one. This viewpoint has its roots in tasks, conditions, and needs of the environment that the school is part of. In this perspective, the boundaries of an organization are more or less permeable. Its stability as well as its quality and effectiveness depend to a large extent on the level of permeability: only an open school system is able to engage in this collaborative conversation with the students as well as with internal and external partners. And only an open school will reflect an open society.

Ordinary reforms do not normally bring about long-term changes because they have no impact on the particular school cultures, opinions, and attitudes that drive the actions of the teaching staff. However, if networking with all educational partners (as stakeholders) is taken seriously, the school culture will adapt and an open, receptive attitude will be encouraged.

3.2. The organizational domain: planning in heterogeneous school settings

Teachers need planning competences that range from classroom activities to general school management tasks and that are coherently integrated in a school development plan. Classroom management requires teachers to be flexible in their teaching activities, to be able to deal with the increasing heterogeneity of the school population. The organizational domain is not focused on methods but on the framing aspects of classroom management. Examples are dual language education (i.e., team teaching by teachers using different languages) and coordination of the language configuration (national language, foreign languages, mother tongue instruction).

Teachers and other experts involved in a school development plan constitute the school “inclusive team”. Preparing the learning plan across subjects for each learner with different language learning needs is one of the team’s central responsibilities.

Another important function of the team is to provide opportunities for consultation between teachers and the school’s support staff where this is applicable. The team also decides on ways to deploy other responsibilities associated with the integration of students. Furthermore, the team evaluates its own work and identifies the needs of the staff for in-service training or consultation with external institutions.

3.3. The evaluative domain: assessment

Evaluation is an integral part of the planning cycle within a school. Working for the benefit of individuals entails a major shift in the approach to designing courses as these are to be tailored to the needs of individual learners. The language learning needs of learners have to be identified carefully and it is on this basis that individual learning and teaching plans are to be designed. The main objective of these tailor-made curriculum plans is to arrive at a successful integration of the individual into the classroom through the acquisition of the necessary competences in the school language.

Schools and teachers should be given autonomy to plan assessment specifically suited to the individual learner, that is, according to the expected learning outcomes. This is especially important in systems where realization of the attainment levels is linked to progression from grade to grade. There are two main types of assessment in school systems: summative and formative.

Summative assessment takes place at the end of a period of learning, for instance at the end of an academic year or at the end of a course. This kind of assessment takes the form of an examination or a standardized test. The main purposes include verifying the attainment level realized by the student, certification, ranking of individual students, assigning students to levels and courses of study, and gate-keeping (for example, accepting or rejecting applicants for specific study programs or jobs).

Formative assessment is concerned with student learning in a more pedagogical sense and the outcomes are not used for reporting purposes beyond the classroom. Formative assessment can be carried out in the classroom as part of teacher-student interaction through talks while working on subject content, as part of a teacher's written feedback on students' written assignments, as part of students evaluating one another's written work or classroom discussion/presentation (peer assessment), or as part of students' self-evaluation of their own progress

Formative assessment by the teacher requires one to be explicit about what is to be learned in terms content and language. By asking content-relevant questions in the classroom and by reading students' written work, teachers can establish what students have learned and what they may need to learn to make progress. With the help of this information, teachers can provide individual feedback to separate students and collective feedback to all to help them to move on or up to the next level of learning.

3.4. The professional domain: counselling

Successful school attendance and achievement requires an open teaching habitus that regards counselling as a standard procedure of schooling. The professional domain demands a readiness to be counselled by others, i.e., by students, colleagues and parents. Counselling can also take place through peer coaching, analyzing language data, informing each other about the different language tests, new teaching methods and so on. The following three types of counselling are distinguished: Applying current methodologies (language teaching, testing and the like), designing new applications of current and new teaching activities, and Investigating one's own teaching activities (self-evaluation, self-reflection)

4. Trellis of competence domains

Crossing the four domains of competences with the four teacher roles results in a trellis of 16 competence domains (see Table 1). Within each competence domain, a distinction is made between attitudes, knowledge and skills. These notions will be explained briefly for the topic of language management [3].

Table 1. Trellis of teacher competence domains.

Co-acting roles Competences for	Student	Internal partners	External partners	Parents
Interpersonal domain: Collaborative network				
Organizational domain: Planning school setting				
Evaluative domain: Assessment				
Professional domain: Counselling				

4.1. Attitudes

General attitudes include things like language awareness, cultural empathy, open-mindedness, social initiative, and reflectiveness [4]. Effective communication with actors of diverse language and cultural backgrounds requires cultural empathy as well as an open attitude making it possible for one to interact in an unprejudiced manner. Social initiative, frequent cooperation and networking with these actors strengthens the engagement of all actors in the school. An attitude of reflectiveness ensures that teachers are constantly aware of their teaching performance so that they can adapt their practices to the needs of the culturally diverse teaching context. Teachers review their work from the point of view that it is embedded in the overall context of the school and the surrounding community.

4.2. Knowledge

Key areas of useful knowledge that might be applied include a sound knowledge of successful conditions, methods and strategies of communication, cooperation, and implementation of innovative elements in the areas of language education policy, parental participation and language-based further training.

4.3. Skills

With the communicative skills necessary to interact effectively in social settings related to the educational context, teachers are able to select the appropriate communicative repertoire given the cultural background of the other actors. In addition, teachers need to develop organization and planning skills that will eventually result in the creation of a solid 'school language plan' functioning as a central axis in the school's curriculum organization: this may include realizing some form of fine-tuning between the classes offered for each official language, minority languages and foreign languages in the overall plan. The skills necessary to engage successfully in organization, evaluation and counselling are closely bound up with the extent of the cooperation between language teachers and teachers of other subjects, which is essential. Linked to this, is the ability to select the appropriate methods of language assessment and language diagnostics in multilingual settings in the implementation and evaluation, carried out individually as well as with the assistance of experts.

5. Perspective

Good teachers are aware of the importance of (intercultural) communicative competencies, which need to be mastered alongside didactic competencies. In order to reach all the pupils and to really get the learning process going, a school language is indispensable. This is the language that all the pupils can understand and in which they can express themselves. Teachers who are aware of this will talk to their pupils about the content of the lessons in understandable language, without using difficult words.

Appendix I shows a possible way to work with the trellis shape, for the topic of language management. This example is developed in the framework of the EUCIM-TE project (European Core Curriculum for Teacher Education) [3]. Some topics touch on all domains; others are related to certain domains of the trellis.

In this contribution we have attempted to capture the teacher and the school context in roles, competences and even specified domains. Our main aim in this was merely to present a framework for discussion, not to formulate a checklist for teacher standards (nor for teacher evaluation).

6. References

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Appendix I: Teacher Competences for the Interpersonal, Organizational, Evaluative and Professional Domains

<i>Interpersonal</i>	<i>Pupil</i>	<i>Internal partners</i>	<i>External partners</i>	<i>Parents</i>
Attitudes	Openness towards migrant languages and people from other cultures; empathy with pupils; awareness of different registers and genres	Awareness on the part of the entire school staff of the needs of second language learners	Accepting that the help from external partners can be necessary and extremely useful	Accepting the impact of home language and family talk on the language learning process
Knowledge	Knowing what language skills the pupils “import” into school and be aware that there is a gap between their colloquial home language and the school language	Knowing methods to create and to develop a coherent language management plan for their school	Knowing what actors from outside the school can intervene in school to help deal with a complex language situation	Knowing that parents can be a possible resource to be used in language teaching (valorisation)
Skills	Being able to establish a learning environment that is culturally sensitive and inviting and to valorise the mother tongues of pupils	Being able to engage in further cooperation between content and language teachers notably to identify the pupils’ language needs	Being able to create links with and describe the help needed to other people or institutions who can be of help	Being able to involve parents in the language learning activities of the school
<i>Organizational</i>	<i>Pupil</i>	<i>Internal partners</i>	<i>External partners</i>	<i>Parents</i>
Attitudes	Sensitivity to language and culture differences amongst the school population	Organizational skills, culture of discussion amongst colleagues	Presentation and negotiation skills	Presentation and negotiation skills
Knowledge	Knowing which language management strategies and measures will help the school to deal more efficiently with the needs of the pupils	Knowing what language competences are available amongst the staff; knowledge of different forms and aspects of team-teaching, group work, project work, etc.	Knowing how to present and “sell” their language management plan to external partners	Knowing how to involve the parents in the development of the language management plan
Skills	Being able to plan and adapt the instruction according to the pupils’ language and cultural differences; to plan and organize the different measures, methods, etc.	Being able to decide on the most effective form of the different measures inside and outside the classroom (e.g., team-teaching)	Being able to present and negotiate the language management and related financial issues with external partners	Being able to discuss the language management with the parents and incorporating their comments and suggestions
<i>Evaluative</i>	<i>Pupil</i>	<i>Internal partners</i>	<i>External partners</i>	<i>Parents</i>
Attitudes	Competence-oriented approach; concentrating on development rather than on norms	Competence-oriented approach; concentrating on development rather than on norms	Competence-oriented approach; concentrating on development rather than on norms	Competence-oriented approach; concentrating on development rather than on norms
Knowledge	Knowing different methods of language testing (for written and spoken language; knowing the language learning strategies)	Knowing different types of evaluation instruments	Knowing other experts and institutions specialized in language testing	Knowing the home language and the registers mainly used within the families of their pupils
Skills	Being able to apply them to their classroom and to the individual pupil; implement support strategies in the classroom	Deciding on and selecting, together with colleagues, evaluation instruments that fit school needs; analyzing results and developing improvement measures	Involving these experts in their school	Being able to inform parents about language development of their children
<i>Professional</i>	<i>Pupil</i>	<i>Internal partners</i>	<i>External partners</i>	<i>Parents</i>
Attitudes	Acceptance of the pupil’s level; positive attitude concerning possibility of progress	Openness toward colleagues; willingness to cooperate	Accepting that the help from external partners can be necessary and extremely useful	Openness toward all agents directly or indirectly involved in the educational system
Knowledge	Knowing methods of counselling pupils concerning their language learning strategies	Engaging in counselling and accepting being counselled by colleagues; knowing different counselling methods	Knowing which external partner can support the language management of the school	Knowing that parents are important agents to further the learning process; knowing methods that parents can use themselves at home with their child
Skills	Being able to give advice to every pupil concerning the next stage of proximal development whatever the level of language proficiency may be	Being able to help out and give advice to colleagues; being able to accept that counselling may be necessary and useful; being able to inform colleagues on the “creative moments” of language learning	Being able to define the needs of the school and discuss them with an external counsellor	Being able to present and discuss classroom issues; e.g., inform parents about new language tests and teaching methods