

The conceptual treatment of professional competences an approximation

Abstract

At the present time, a widely used term is that of “professional competences.” Therefore, research on the conceptual treatment of this category becomes decisive, while science with its social function allows preventive, corrective and retroactive measures to be taken to guide the correct interpretation and perception of the phenomena that occur in social life. This article briefly analyzes the conceptual treatment of the category “professional competences”; significant issue for the training of professionals in various contexts, issue that requires the participation of the scientific community as guarantor and dynamic element of the development of these competences and of the global society as a whole. It is concluded that although there are advances in the conceptualization of the term, the investigation remains open not reaching consensus on this problem.

Keywords: research, conceptualization of professional competences, culture of the profession, educational development

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About “competence”: some definitions

Some authors consider that the emergence of the use of the term “competence” comes from the workplace, especially in the business sector, during the 1980s, and that it has transcended to other areas, such as: business, public affairs, staff development and education.¹⁻³ In the educational framework, it has such an impact that some researchers argue that “a worldwide wave accompanies second-generation educational reforms in quality policies: the competences approach” (4: 3).⁴ The problem of the research of the development of professional competences, in the educational framework, has its own evolution from the end of the 20th century until today. Along with the widespread use of the term “professional competence”, multiple meanings have been given to this category.

Research issues while defining professional competence

The term “professional competence” in the educational field is relatively new; however, its use reflects multiple senses, sometimes asymmetric according to the use and approach used by the authors, which reflects a certain degree of confusion in their definition. In addition, it has been defined in different ways; It is considered a complex concept that includes other concepts.^{2,4} The predominant conceptual frameworks include, among others, three extended problems, as a background: a) the term “competence” is assumed to define professional competences; b) there is digression in matching the etymological and epistemic connotation of “professional competence” with “professional competences”; that is to say, the same scope and limits of the conceptual treatment to two different manifestations of the phenomenon are identified, in a particularized framework of a competence to that of its expression in multiple ways.

To illustrate these criteria, two definitions of professional competences are taken: Bunk, states that: “... has professional competence: who has the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to practice a profession, can solve professional problems autonomously and flexibly and is trained to collaborate in their professional environment and in the organization of work” (5:9).⁵ While Arbeláez et al argue that: “Competence is the ability to perform integrated knowledge, know-how, being and knowing how to live together. It

refers to the convergence of knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes, values and feelings, to recognize a problematic situation and solve it properly” (6:50).⁶

The wealth and dissimilar views raised by these conceptual irruptions, and others that could be cited, reflect that in the educational field the notion of competence has been used from multiple paradigms given the various treatment approaches assumed; in addition to the mixture from different theoretical fields, including: philosophy, psychology, linguistics, sociology, economics and job training. The problem of conceptual plurality regarding how to define “professional competence” can be understood as a weakness but also as a strength with respect to the heuristic and epistemological possibilities of the concept and the possibilities of exact application thereof, since each conceptual framework contains the theoretical references in which they have seen their need, interest or possibilities of application, but at the same time it reflects weaknesses in theoretical construction as it has become a concept of interdisciplinary lending or denotes a certain lack of definition. For all above stated and other arguments that will be discussed later, some authors affirm that: professional competences rather than an operative concept “... is a concept in the process of manufacturing”;⁷ that is to say, it is an open concept, which has a historical-concrete content because the meaning in question takes as reference the context in which it arises and develops.

That is to say, the term “professional competence” or “professional competences” is a polysemic word used too often as a noun, without paying attention to the features that really characterize it, which causes confusion and errors of use between the ontological relationship of the term and its practical concretions and applications. Given the organic nature of this problem, it requires a clarification of the conceptual approaches of the term and an analysis of the practical implications derived from each of them.

The use of the term professional competences reflects the necessary relationship, of dependence and interdependence, between the evaluation procedures of learning formulated in terms of the needs of the professional and work world; This is reflected in the interpretation and richness of the definition of the same process, since the manifestation of the same phenomenon is not the same in all educational realities or at the level of a specific nation.

The undeniable thing about “professional competences” is that it has become a subject of the current moment due to the many influences received by the various societies today; in particular, due to the characteristics imposed by a globalized economy where the productivity of the different countries regardless their level of schooling places workers and even professionals in permanent comparison of their abilities encompassed under the term competencies,⁴ therefore the conceptual accent in that category.

On the other hand, the multiple definitions reveal the different positions assumed by the authors and educators regarding the criterion of the need or not to incorporate this category into the field of education; some reject it because of the sense of the human in the person. In addition, the use of the word also refers to the assumption of objectives related to the quality and content of education; both by governments and by the various educational actors, it is worth going to Eslava, when he expressed: “Another group of objectives refers to the quality and content of education. To this category belongs the assurance of acquisition of basic competences, education in diversity, consolidating learning during and for a lifetime and guaranteeing the suitability of direct intervention agents in the classroom: teachers” (8:232).⁸

Such is the existing digression that some researchers choose to use the term “notion” when referring to professional competences and not “concept” because they believe that it is “... far from having a precise, operational and minimally agreed definition of the concept of competence” (9:77);⁹ criteria shared by the authors of this work. In this sense, the authors of this article do not intend to offer a conceptualization of the term “professional competences” but do wish to elucidate their position regarding what they understand by professional competences, without sticking to a specific definition, since they assume that the treatment of said concept is under construction. In this direction we consider necessary to clarify the pertinent and concrete features that point to the identification of what we understand by “professional competences” according to the characteristics of the Latin American context.

We must clarify that we use the term “professional competences”, from an educational profile, but from a multidimensional and comprehensive perspective of learning; that is to say, we do not reduce the scope of professional competences to the design of qualifications, training or work performance, but we conceive these competences, in general, as a process that includes the understanding, judgment and mobilization of various cognitive, affective resource and personal, social and ethical attitudes to learn to apprehend. The authors use the term “professional competences” to identify the process that articulates a set of elements, among which we find: knowledge, skills, attitudes that are integrated according to personal particularities among which are highlighted the capabilities, motives, interests, needs and character based on personal and professional experiences and contexts manifested through certain behaviors in the professional context.

Given the procedural nature granted to professional competences, by the authors of this work, they are given a changing and evolutionary character,¹⁰ with which we recognize the strategic value of education in health care, as a level of basic education to achieve lifelong learning, prioritizing the humanization of life and social development against the labor market (employability) and excessive individualization. On the other hand, we assume that the treatment of the word “professional competences” cannot be direct since, due to its complexity and scope, a specific conceptualization is incapable of revealing all the richness

and breadth that such a phenomenon entails; but its approach must be done by linking it with other concepts, including: qualification, training, skills, abilities, habits, tasks, knowledge, requirements, procedures, aptitudes, activities, skills, operations.

In addition, in this article we include, as components of professional competences, both formal and informal capacities and procedures, that is, those developed by means of oriented means and by the ways that a certain subject adopts self-learning. It does not mean the authors avoid providing terminological concreteness about “professional competences” but that they assume the criterion of not enclosing in an abstract or unique definition the heuristic and epistemic possibilities of a term we consider polysemic.

In addition, to us the concept of professional competences refers to the set of knowledge, decisions and strategies that can allow a given subject to successfully face the problems, conflicts, tasks and difficulties that are presented daily or contingently or emergently during your professional practice. As can be seen, from our conception, the leading role of professional competences is shifted to the identification and analysis of those professional, prototypical and emerging problems that a given subject must face; but does not get exhausted with this matter, he goes further; because it is difficult to deal with its generalization due to the permanent nature we grant to the teaching and learning process.

In this same sense, we must highlight the impossibility of finding or elaborating a definition of “professional competences” that can count on the instrumental capacity to apply to all contexts and professions because there are multiple professional profiles, each with its own physiognomy and not all professions demand the same cognitive, affective or behavioral abilities; Moreover, it is complicated and ambiguous to encompass all professional activities in a single term. For all the reasons above expressed, the authors of this article have obviated to stick to a definition. We consider it more fruitful to reveal the phenomenological richness and the explicit and implicit content in the word “professional competences”.

We synthesize that we assume, when addressing professional competences, that they imply knowing how to do in context, the central core of all competence; around which gravitate the other knowledge: know, think, be, live, feel, share, etc. For example, if an academic program of health sciences considers that its graduates must learn to contribute to the health and safety of people and their environments (know how to do), then they must learn to analyze, interpret and argue (think) knowledge related to health, safety and the environment, and propose alternative solutions. They must also learn to be sensitive, to share with their colleagues (teamwork) and to commit to the solutions to the problem posed.¹¹ The issues addressed in this article, and others that cannot be addressed by the limit of space established in every publication, reflect that there are multiple definitions about what to understand by professional competences that is why it is a polysemic term; also focused from different visions. It is interesting to note that the perspectives on professional competences have as a common denominator the necessary requirements to perform a given profession effectively. According to the object of study of the work, we grant, to professional competences, a permanent “process” approach. The evolution of the search for a complete definition of the term “professional competences” shows significant theoretical contributions, despite which the problem of the system of accumulated knowledge in this regard cannot and should not be considered closed, so it is essential to continue conducting theoretical and applied studies that contribute to the solution of the current conceptual problem.

Conclusion

Although there are advances in the conceptualization of the “professional competences” category, research remains open, with no consensus being reached on this issue. In the analysis carried out on this conceptualization, the existence of a conceptual indetermination regarding the term is observed, since there is a wide disintegration in its etymological content and plurality of meanings, which prevents a consensus in the use of its meanings or designations. In the analysis found, a descriptive and abstract vision predominates, which limits the heuristic possibilities of the “professional competences” category, by outright its manifestation in the handicrafts professions, which demands, for research, the construction of new definitions, which include the perspectives that emerge from the various professions and spheres of social life, in addition, that are exercised by individuals and collective subjects.

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