

RETHINKING TEACHERS' LIFELONG LEARNING: FROM LIFE SKILLS TO COMPETENCES FOR DIDACTICS

RIPENSARE L'APPRENDIMENTO PERMANENTE DEGLI INSEGNANTI: DALLE LIFE SKILLS ALLE COMPETENZE PER LA DIDATTICA

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ABSTRACT

The educational sphere, within which the exchange between elements of teaching and learning takes place, includes a linear structure of knowledge transmission and a circular dimension of personal development and evolution of skills, which imply a proneutrality that spreads within the school walls. Thus, effective didactics will have to work on different aspects and at different levels, so that the individual can strengthen his or her ability to regulate and self-regulate his or her own skills and potential as appropriately as possible, while simultaneously fostering the conscious development of personal, relational, and social attitudes. In this sense, this work aims to analyze the skills and competences that can foster the new generation in their self-actualization.

L'ambito didattico, entro il quale si esprime lo scambio tra elementi di insegnamento ed apprendimento, include una struttura lineare della trasmissione delle conoscenze ed una dimensione circolare dello sviluppo e dell'evoluzione personale di competenze, che implicano una progettualità non dissipata all'interno delle mura scolastiche. Una didattica efficace dovrà quindi operare su più fronti e più livelli, affinché l'individuo possa arricchire, in maniera adeguata, le capacità di regolare ed autoregolare le proprie abilità e potenzialità, favorendo parallelamente lo sviluppo consapevole di attitudini personali, relazionali e sociali. In tal senso questo lavoro ha lo scopo di analizzare le competenze e le abilità atte a favorire le nuove generazioni nella loro autorealizzazione.

KEYWORDS

teaching skills, learning, special pedagogy.
competenze didattiche, apprendimento, pedagogia speciale.

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Introduction¹

School has an important didactic, pedagogical, and relational function that proves essential for the growth and development of the new generations. It provides an important context for enriching oneself from a conceptual and cognitive point of view, as well as for growing from an emotional and social one. School is not only the place where various disciplines are learned, but it is also a space within which each student could experiences and progressively shift the focus of his or her social relationships from the family to the outside world, from his or her family unit to the world of peers (Nasheeda, Abdullah, Krauss, & Ahmed, 2019).

Every teacher is responsible for fostering the cognitive and emotional development of his or her students by establishing relational modes that enhance and support bonds of trust and reliability with his or her learner. In this sense, the teacher can become a real reference figure, not only for conveying disciplinary knowledge, but also for developing his or her students' psychological well-being, helping them have confidence in their own potential, abilities, and skills.

The educational element, therefore, finds its maximum expressiveness within the school walls, which constitutes a place where subjects can satisfy their need to feel protected and autonomous, as well as to discover their own peculiarities and abilities, thus having the chance to explore and learn about themselves and the world in general. School is identified as a fundamental context for cognitive, affective, and relational development, a privileged area of experiential research and experimentation with individual autonomy (Sulam, Syakur, & Musyarofah, 2019).

As a place of education, school accompanies the subject throughout his or her growth, thus becoming a particularly significant space for everyone, from early childhood to adulthood. This environment performs the important and complex function of guiding the subject through the succession of different developmental stages that, over time, build and define each subject's individuality, personality, and skills. The school environment, as a place of growth and training, can therefore represent an opportunity for realizing one's needs and goals by building and rebuilding oneself and one's skills. Thanks to school, everyone may have the opportunity to develop and increase aspects enabling them to *know how to do things* and to *know how to act* (Le Boterf, 2008) within their life contexts and relationships. Therefore, the school environment should work on different and varied dimensions, encompassing all the elements necessary for understanding, supporting, and sustaining, which are essential for the growth and education of each individual. School is an educational environment, and as such, stands as a

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place where to enhance and increase skills, abilities, and competences in the personal, relational and cultural spheres. Such an educational-formative space makes it possible to analyze and understand what one needs, with interventions that may take a tangible and pragmatic form on the one hand, and a critical and intellectual configuration on the other, with respect to the manifestation of certain needs and specific changes that our society and our natural evolution inevitably impose (Vroom, Massey, Yampolskaya, & Levin, 2020).

To date, the ways of understanding didactics represent a change and a distancing from the usual learning-teaching paradigm that change and transform the concept of knowledge and understanding, requiring deep consideration to the ways of "doing education" in all its nuances and dimensions. It is therefore necessary to frame the structuring of schooling within a type-two change framework, as understood by Bateson (1977), thus within a deep, intense and global change, and not an illusory one that inevitably leads to a time-bounded, superficial and limited acquisition.

Bateson's doctrine invites us to reflect on the importance of preparing and structuring knowledge, skills, and competences according to greater flexibility and adaptability, thereby averting behaviors that respond in a simple and mechanical way to a single and unique event. The concepts of preparation, practice and experience, which are unfolded within school walls, need to be considered and evaluated through a perspective that moves away from a circumstantial and situational modality, shifting its focus toward a complex and comprehensive view. In this sense, the competences possessed by the subject cannot be reduced to a single performance, but involve the activation of a range of behavioral, relational, and emotional resources mobilizing multiple levels and dimensions and cannot be reduced to mere performance and/or function (Huang, Chen, Jin, Stringham, Liu, & Oliver, 2020).

The notion of competence, therefore, requires going beyond what can be observed through behavior and by focusing primarily on the individual's inner qualities and peculiarities. The development and enhancement of individual competences, in any educational context, should then aim at making the subject able to apply knowledge, skills, and abilities responsibly and autonomously in the relational and social spheres, as well as to employ his or her personal and emotional qualities congruently and effectively.

1. Key competences and life skills

The concept of competence in the educational sphere allows starting a reflection on possible training goals, which, in addition to providing pragmatic and situational knowledge and skills, should include and imply a dynamic vision between *knowledge*, *know-how* and *know-how-to-be* (Dewey, 1949) in any context, thus requiring a comprehensive and all-encompassing approach. In fact, personal

skills enable responding appropriately and congruently both to one's own needs and requirements, as well as to the needs and demands arising from different situations.

The combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes that are appropriate and adequate to one's needs and requirements in given circumstances leads us to the notion of key competences, which stands for a set of elements that contribute to fulfillment in both the personal sphere and in the social one thanks to inclusion and employment (DeSeCo, 2006). Eight key competences have been identified, among basic knowledge and soft skills, which can enable people to cope with situations and needs related to the evolution of society, from a lifelong learning perspective. The identification of such competences turns out to be fundamental in order to be able to understand how important it is to contemplate learning and growth referred not only to cultural and personal elements, but also to the fact that such growth can support the individual throughout his or her life journey, which is not limited to the educational-school territory. The development of key competences allows individuals applying knowledge to achieve results, enabling them to cope with unfamiliar or totally new situations. It is certainly clear that, as a basis for lifelong learning, key competences should be developed starting from childhood, in educational settings that focus on the individual and his or her needs, rather than on the accumulation of merely notional concepts.

The concept of key competences intersects and connects with another fundamental notion in education, namely that of life skills, defined as those competences that go beyond simply learning a content and belong more to the aptitude, predisposition, and ability to learn and to connect appropriately and congruently with the surrounding context (WHO, 2003). Life skills encompass and represent all the abilities of an individual to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. They represent an individual's ability to maintain a state of mental well-being by implementing adaptive and positive behaviors while interacting with others and within certain contexts or environments. Such psychosocial skills play a particularly important role in promoting physical, psychological, and social health in their broadest and deepest meaning. In particular, the support and enhancement of certain skills allow improving and optimizing aspects related to dysfunctional behaviors that show a subject's inability to deal effectively with stressful events and critical situations.

Interventions directed at promoting life skills aim to develop and increase the subject's coping strategies, personal and social skills. School design, aimed at increasing and training such resources, must be therefore built through the dissemination, education and training of behavioral perspectives aimed at purposefulness, autonomy, and growth (Newman, 2020). Life skills may cover many skills and can be differentiated by culture and context. In each case, however, what emerges is the existence of a core set of skills that underpin initiatives aimed at

promoting health and well-being in children, adolescents, and young adults. The core set of life skills identified by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2003) include:

- Decision-making;
- Problem-solving;
- Creative Thinking;
- Critical Thinking;
- Effective communication;
- Interpersonal relationships;
- Self-awareness;
- Empathy;
- Emotion management;
- Stress management.

Decision-making can be defined as a mental, cognitive, and emotional process supporting our experience and enables us to make a choice that determines and defines our way of acting, thus choosing among different options or alternatives. Every decision-making behavior has specific consequences, so everyone should think actively about his or her decisions and operate dynamically on his or her actions. *Problem-solving* allows us to deal constructively with the difficulties in our lives. An analytical and rational approach leads the subject to solve a problem, by aiming at a goal. Although many individuals are naturally more predisposed to problem-solving, it should not be forgotten that this skill can be acquired. *Creative thinking* is associated with both decision-making and problem-solving, as it makes it possible to respond adaptively and flexibly to everyday situations and circumstances. It stimulates and guides the individual toward observing and exploring the world through alternative points of view, thereby averting the reiteration of behaviors that are not always particularly functional and constructive for the individual. *Critical thinking* is the ability to analyze information and experiences objectively and impartially. It allows being able to analyze information, situations and experiences, distinguishing reality from one's own subjective impressions and prejudices. It represents a responsible and autonomous attitude (Borah, Ahmed, & Kollipara, 2020).

A further skill is represented by *effective communication*, which identifies one of the most significant behaviors of human beings. Thanks to communication, everyone could connect with the outside world and to be understood and included in his or her context. To communicate means "to pool", to relate to the other in an exchange of interaction that takes the shape of reciprocity. *Interpersonal relationship* skills help us relate functionally to the people with whom we interact, thereby recreating appropriate relationships that are a fundamentally important

element in our psychological and social well-being. *Self-awareness*, a core skill for the individual's growth and training, can be defined as the ability to recognize one's abilities, strengths, and weaknesses. Developing self-awareness can help us identify our state of mind and emotions (Pearson et al., 2021). It is a substantial prerequisite to be able to apply effective communication and develop empathy toward other individuals. *Empathy* is the ability to put oneself in the other person's shoes, perceiving what that person may be experiencing. This ability leads and defines the meaningfulness of every human relationship, activating cooperation, sharing and a sense of belonging. Empathy can help us understand and accept the other, in his or her diversity and peculiarities. *Emotion management* involves recognizing emotions in ourselves and others, making us aware of our feelings and enabling the subject to master these perceptions congruently and appropriately. Strong emotions such as anger, sadness, or sorrow, can have negative effects on our health if we do not react appropriately. Finally, *stress management* involves recognizing all those elements that can cause tension and worry; it is the ability to react to complex and problematic events to overcome obstacles and difficulties (Kwauk, 2022).

The above-mentioned personal skills allow us to understand and ascertain how important it is for school education to be based on the training, increase and enhancement of these elements, which are fundamental to the individual's path of growth and evolution. The school context must therefore support and promote all those actions, behaviors and ways of thinking aimed at supporting processes aimed at enriching and fostering all those essential skills for the subject's best possible evolutionary adaptation.

2. Learning, methodologies, and competences

In contrast to the cumulative and mechanical conception elaborated within behaviorism, cognitivism explains knowledge acquisition as a constructive and strategic process. According to this approach, the individual learns by mentally processing the acquired information, organizing, and recalling it as a guide for his or her behavior. Therefore, learning does not mean simply recording information or mechanically responding to a stimulus, but rather expresses the ability to process information and make connections with previously acquired knowledge.

Knowledge is stored in memory through organized structures, recognized as a script or schema. This notion was introduced by Bartlett (1932) to denote a principle of organizing past experiences, a data structure of generic concepts stored in memory. The concept of competence can be a valuable orientation tool in order to redefine and reconsider learning processes and methodologies in education and training. Learning emerges as something punctiform and articulated, a process that has always been of particular interest not only with respect to the educational sphere, within which it is expressed and manifested, but likewise, for the

understanding of its mechanistic and functional aspects, in the scientific and experimental sphere. Throughout history, several attempts have been made from multiple perspectives to analyze the mechanisms related to learning, and in this sense, research has made it possible to generate didactic models employable within educational contexts (Sala, Punie, Garkov, & Cabrera, 2020).

The main perspectives that have addressed, explained, and described learning processes and functioning include the behaviorist perspective, the cognitivist perspective, and the ecological perspective. These perspectives characterize learning, respectively, as a relationship between stimuli and responses, as stored and processed information, or as a universal process connected to its context. These theories, along with others, help us discover the complexity of framing learning within a universal concept and allow us to understand the significant intellectual evolution this process has undergone over time (Morris, 2019). According to the behaviorist perspective, the best way to be able to explain a subject's behavior and his or her learning patterns involves describing the functioning of this mechanism according to a process of association between stimulus and response. The leading exponents of this stream of thought, such as Pavlov, Thorndike, and Skinner, recognized that a mental process might also be involved in learning processes, but they considered this to be particularly elusive and ambiguous for arousing interest and attention. According to this approach, learning consists of the acquisition of behavioral patterns established by the associations between stimulus and response, and observable through the study and analysis of the connections between these two elements. Considered as a black box, our mind cannot be subjected to any kind of observation, and therefore, it is not a focus of interest or attention (Alam, 2022). The behaviorist perspective is primarily recognized by means of two learning processes identified as classical conditioning and operant conditioning. The former describes a pattern whereby a stimulus that does not evoke any behavior manages to elicit a response after being associated, over several tests, with a different stimulus that already evoked a response. The well-known experiment carried out by Pavlov explains and clarifies this procedure: the presentation of food to the dog, which evokes a response in itself (salivation), is associated with the ringing of a bell, which generally does not evoke any kind of behavior-reflex (no salivation). The consistent association over time between the two elements, namely food (unconditioned stimulus) and bell (conditioned stimulus), generates a response (salivation) upon merely hearing the bell. Therefore, this type of connection allowed recreating learning by association, a pairing that evokes a similar and indiscriminate response for both stimuli. The other process, which is also based on the mechanistic concept of association, states that the consequences of an action (response) are what increase, or decrease, the chances that it will be produced again (Bouton, Maren, & McNally, 2021).

Didactic, educational, and teaching models related to this learning perspective focus on the conditioning of the learner's behavior by the teacher. The latter plays a central and active role in training, giving the learner the task of assimilating and associating a given type of behavior/stimulus with a given behavior/response. In this sense, the learner represents exclusively an individual reacting to a stimulus, assuming a completely passive and inoperative role. This crystallization in role asymmetry can generate a total absence of exchange, growth, and evolution. This can lead, on the one hand, to recognizing the role of the teacher as merely a trainer rather than an educator, and on the other, to considering learners as subjects who only receive and collect the information conveyed, thus recreating an overfocus on the product of learning, without assessing the magnitude and complexity of this process (Valverde-Berrocoso, Garrido-Arroyo, Burgos-Videla, & Morales-Cevallos, 2020). Therefore, according to the cognitivist perspective, learning represents the ability to interrelate knowledge and develop progressively more accurate representations.

The post-constructivism innovation, introduced by cognitivism, was welcomed quite positively in both the didactic and educational spheres. Teachers and educators recognized this perspective as a guide for innovating didactic practices from its roots, and as an alternative to traditional teaching and learning modalities. A new perspective that emphasizes the need to link new knowledge to previously acquired knowledge, and to place it in relational and social contexts so that it can gain greater meaning and significance. The emphasis on developing awareness and training typically cognitive processes, such as planning, predicting, hypothesizing, and evaluating, are emblematic of such theoretical thought (Pradana, Mahfud, Hermawan, & Susanti, 2020). Such didactics, therefore, does not aim merely at conveying and imparting content; on the contrary, it focuses on the ways in which notions can be encoded, stored, and processed. Learning is valued as a complex element based on mechanisms of understanding, not on mechanical memorization. Through learning, the subject in the educational setting experiments with strategies for approaching reality, namely with forms of organizing knowledge, which he or she partly develops independently and partly acquires through the educational interaction. Cognitivist-style didactics is thus shaped through an organizational modality based on strategy, that is, through the subject's ability to arrange and organize knowledge content autonomously and meaningfully (Mystakidis, 2021). In short, this educational model is based on ideas and concepts that make it possible to emphasize the importance of the subject's active participation by both processing information and using strategies. The individual is seen as an unavoidable and essential protagonist of his or her own formative and educational process.

The third and final contribution that developed and described the characteristics of learning and knowledge is the ecological perspective, according

to which human development results from aspects that connect each subject's growth to a broader and more extensive dimension that has a purely systemic nature. This interpretation of the individual's development is given by the observation and study of intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships, associated with emotional, contextual, and social elements. Thus, it is a principle based on the idea that the environment and the different contexts of life in which each subject is included can significantly influence individuals' learning and behavior. In this sense, there is a mutuality between the subject, the environment and the relationships that evolve within it, which is why behavior and learning patterns gain meaning in the environment within which they develop (Mollo-Flores, & Deroncele-Acosta, 2021). This type of approach helps us understand that the subject's learning and training process cannot be accomplished in linear terms. It is necessary to consider all the factors and systems to which the subject is connected in order to establish and understand the patterns and mechanisms of learning itself. Indeed, such a perspective proposes a type of learning that is based not so much on notional and information aspects, but rather on learning modalities based on reflection, connection, and meta-learning (Flavell, 1971). Therefore, such a thinking generates an integrated and connected view of learning, seen as a process that is far more complex than a simple acquisition of notions, since it concerns the ability to "know the knowledge". In other words, it facilitates the transition from the understanding of a single experience to the awareness of a real meaning structure, which fosters the development of the ability to connect what one has acquired and go beyond it.

Educational models that address these types of concepts involve training that develops and enhances the mind, by focusing on activities consisting of connections and relationships between elements allowing individuals to grasp and acquire a broader and more global view. According to the ecological perspective, all molecular activities, i.e., all fragmented activities aimed solely at storing and processing information, without recreating and reconstructing a broader sense of things, hinder the subject's development, as they do not employ an ecological perspective of ideas (Bateson, 1977). In conclusion, we can say that from such an approach we can see, on the one hand, a willingness to innovatively devise learning mechanisms, which must be understood in the totality of the contexts and relationships within which they are expressed and developed (school, family, peer group). On the other hand, the ecological perspective favors and supports the development of ways of thinking and reflecting aimed at understanding and being aware of one's own learning processes, allowing for greater fluidity of thought that responds to one's own needs, rather than to vaguely indistinct and impersonal needs.

The concept of learning, as we have seen, has been addressed by different approaches over time, determining and defining different shapes, guises, and expressions for this element. The varied ways of understanding and conceiving this

process allow us to consider the dense network of interactions that make it up, thus stimulating the construction of new and effective didactic intervention tools and methodologies that can seek common paradigms aimed at enhancing the subject's abilities and skills. Therefore, considering learning methodologies that have particularly elective affinities for the development and promotion of personal skills allows focusing attention on the study and structuring of a school that is more interested and involved in establishing a competence-based didactics, which can guide the subject throughout his or her life journey.

Conclusions

Educational intervention, once focused largely toward an essentially notional didactic transmission, has been gradually changing its deepest roots to approach a dimension comprising different elements aimed at recognizing each subject's abilities, skills and potential. Currently, the developmental-educational process has a complex structural framework consisting of a set of elements comprising learning, intellectual growth, relational-emotional development, and the inclusion of the individual within his or her social context. All of this gives rise to the structuring of didactic models that promote and stimulate the development of characteristics and peculiarities essential for being able to achieve a satisfactory and accomplished life course. Therefore, the didactic factor must be accomplished by means of a work program involving an all-inclusive educational pathway, capable of recognizing and identifying a person's potential. Cognitive skills, abilities and competences possessed or acquired allow solving problems, having the motivation, social availability and the ability to use solutions effectively and flexibly in variable situations.

This definition provides not only a description of all the elements that make up the concept and definition of competence, but also includes an outline of the methodological orientation that should be adopted in the educational field to enhance the development of these aspects. In fact, responding to a need, solving a problem, performing a task, carrying out a project and achieving a goal represent the essential and constitutive paradigms of each subject's development. All this implies an overall involvement of the individual, a connection between person, environment, and society, associated with the identification of personal and social meanings, which underlie human action and connote its specific ends.

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Authors' contribution

Author 1 wrote introduction and paragraph 1 and revised the manuscript. Author 2 wrote paragraph abstract and paragraph 2. Author 3 wrote conclusions.

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