Vocational Teachers' Experiences in Enacting of Competence-Based Curricula in Lithuania and Italy

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is the enactment of competence-based VET curriculum in Italy and in Lithuania from the point of view of VET actors. It is based on qualitative semi-structured interviews with vocational teachers and trainers and administration staff. In both countries orientation of VET curricula on competencies remains the core curriculum formation principle. CBE approach is in particular salient in Lithuania. In the paper we explore teachers' practices in curriculum making, training and learning organization, instruction and assessment and present their challenges. We also give first insights into the emerging broadening teachers' competencies demands.

Keywords

competence-based education, curriculum, enactment

1   Introduction

Competence-Based Education (CBE) is a leading paradigm for Vocational Education and Training (VET). In many countries VET programmes rest on the principle of CBE where predefined competencies guide curriculum formation and to lesser extent instructional and assessment practices (Mulder, 2019). Competence/learning outcomes-based approaches in VET are being promoted by the European Union through the European Parliament and Council recommendations coupled with a call for a greater autonomy of VET providers in adapting to labour market changes (European Union, 2020).

Since 2015 Lithuania has entered a new stage of VET curriculum reform, the main feature of which is the transformation of VET programmes into modularised structures where each module is oriented towards concrete competency defined in the sectoral qualification standard. VET programmes are designed nationally with VET institutions having the flexibility to adjust 20% of the programme according to their needs and to decide about the interpretation of learning outcomes.

CBE is also a characteristic of Italian VET system where VET institutions design their programmes in accordance to the national and regional professional profiles repository.

This contribution aims to explore the enactment of CBE curriculum in Lithuania and in Italy and addresses the following research questions: 1) what vocational teachers' practices

enact competence-based curriculum and 2) what challenges vocational teachers perceive in relation to renewed competence-based curricula enactment?

2 Theory

Realisation of CBE principle is viewed to result in the agreement about competencies expected from learners, what would lead to more appropriate training programmes, more authentic and attractive education and better preparation of graduates (Biemans et al.; 2004, Mulder, 2019; Sturing et al. 2011). A number of authors criticise a concept of CBE as a too narrow/behaviouristic approach, atomising skills and knowledge, with prevailing focus on technical proficiency, unable to accommodate theoretical knowledge and acting as a tool of surveillance and control over teachers, learners and workforce (Billett, 2016; Edwards, 2016; Hodge, 2016). Moreover, it has been said to undermine teachers' creativity and restrict teachers' choice of experiential instructional approaches (Billett, 2016).

Building on the ideas of Ball et al. (2012), enactment of the curriculum is a complex process covering the interpretation of competency texts and their translation into institutional documents and instruction practices. Professional judgement and creative interpretation of competencies' texts are key in operationalising competencies, however, if competencies' texts represent imperative/disciplinary policies they tend to construct a passive policy subject with little reflexive judgement (Ball et al., 2012; Billett, 2016; Hodge, 2018). As far as instructional practices are concerned, CBE enactment implies integration of theory and practice, coordination of learning in diverse meaningful and authentic environments, development of learners' transversal skills, coaching and guiding of students (Billett, 2016; de Bruijn, 2012; de Bruijn & Leeman, 2011; Sturing et al., 2011).

3 Methodology

The paper is based on qualitative semi-structured interviews performed in Lithuania (*N*=28) and in Italy (*N*=20) with vocational teachers (trainers in Italy) and administration staff. The interview guide covered four CBE curriculum enactment stages as well as questions about competencies needs experienced by vocational teachers.

Interviews were analysed using qualitative content analysis and deductive-inductive approach of category formation assisted by the NVivo software (Mayring, 2014). A system of subcategories and categories was developed after reading interviews. The smallest component of the text to which a category was formulated was a meaningful portion of text (a sentence or a short narrative). Sub-categories were formulated from data and augmented further as data was coded. Until the creation of a stable category system we revised it several times.

4 Findings

CBE curriculum enactment framework entails four stages: school and teacher level curriculum making (interpretation and translation of prescribed texts), training and learning organization, instruction and assessment. Since the analysis and comparison of findings is ongoing, below we present the preliminary findings related to all four stages.

Interviews revealed a generally favourable teachers' attitude towards curriculum orientation at concrete competencies in both countries. Such an approach means a shift from "from disciplines to competencies" to "from competencies to disciplines (or modules)". Recognition of this change is observable in both countries, however its realisation has progressed more significantly in Lithuania. Analysis of transition from prescribed to school curricula has revealed a mainly non-critical interpretation of prescribed curriculum texts into school curriculum in Lithuania. When analysing VET actors' attitudes towards renewed CBE curriculum in Lithuania four patterns are emerging: standardised-disciplinary, opportunistic-pragmatic, creative and

critical. Echoing Ball et al. (2012) schools administration and teachers play different roles in curriculum making, the most evident of which are narrators of reform and new curricula, entrepreneurs, enthusiasts, translators, receivers and critics.

Since in Italy VET institutions are responsible for their own school curriculum, a more critical reflection to prescribed competency statements, which appear sometimes to be distant from workplace and school realities, is observed. At individual teacher level interpretation and translation of competencies' and learning outcomes' statements into instructional practices tends to be a more enthusiastic and creative process at both countries with more evidence of peer collaboration in Lithuania.

An interesting research revelation is an advocacy of teachers of the idea of national curriculum in Lithuania. We could identify several reasons for it. Firstly, we notice a lack of conceptual discussions among policy, research and practice about general approach to curriculum making in VET. Secondly, respondents refer to the past school curriculum making experience where VET institutions had the autonomy in developing their programmes resulting in significant variations and curricula quality among different schools. And thirdly, we admit a weak social dialogue among schools and their partners at local level resulting in lack of motives and inspiration for adjusting prescribed curriculum to local needs.

Both countries represent strong school-based VET systems and in organising learning in such a context a priority is given for creating learning conditions within school that would simulate and represent authentic workplace and would help learners to connect theory and practice. Schools are equipped with modern laboratories and workshops, sectoral practical training centres and hybrid learning and working environments (such as canteens, school beauty salons and car repair workshops). One common concern is limited authentic learning at real workplace. In Lithuania, learning at a workplace in the modular curriculum is limited to the final module of 5 or 10 credits (110-220 hours) and systemic sequenced learning at workplace prior to this module is rare. In Italy a period spent at workplace is more extensive and apprenticeship during 4th year of VET programme is becoming more popular.

In both countries, application of active, learner-centered, experiential instructional methods and peer-learning is prioritized. Teachers are increasingly using mentoring techniques. These methods help to connect theory and practice and retain learners' interest and motivation to learn. The latter is an issue for both countries. In Lithuania, CBE approach also challenges formation of vocational knowledge and key competencies since teachers obviously prioritize practical professional skills training.

Modularisation of curriculum in Lithuania has resulted in closer teachers' cooperation in planning and delivering training. Teachers cooperation is observed at all stages of curriculum enactment framework. The reform in particular has affected the teachers who previously were responsible for theoretical subjects or subjects of key competencies. In modular curriculum they are required to contextualize and thematically coordinate their training with other teachers. Italian respondents have also noted the increased demand for teachers' cooperation in CBE curriculum implementation and notice it to be challenging for some teachers.

Finally, learners' competencies assessment is an issue, especially in Italy where instruments are being created and piloted. In Lithuania formative and summative assessment are combined, however, concerns are raised about integrating the assessment of professional and transversal competencies.

5   Discussion

This paper examines the way in which competence-based curriculum is enacted in two countries of strong school-based VET system tradition and with low VET status. In both countries the concept of competence is evident in discourse on curriculum making and curriculum enactment.

Our findings support the significance of the phase of policy (including standards and curriculum documentation) interpretation and translation in curriculum enactment (Ball et al., 2012; Billett, 2016; Hodge, 2018; Hodge et al. 2020). Due to several stages of working practice recontextualization, a partial representation of competence will be constructed in this type of policy documents. There is also a risk that narrow and instrumental competence framework will be unable to capture knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for future work and societal transformations (Mulder, 2019). Therefore, it is important that teachers would be delegated and prepared for reflexive curriculum making and enactment decisions and would maintain a 'hermeneutically aware' stance (Hodge et al., 2020).

A major concern in both countries is the development and connection of vocational knowledge and practical skills with limited access to learning at a real workplace. It is questionable to which extent intended competencies will be experienced when learners receive and construct fragmented tacit knowledge and have limited possibilities of trying and utilizing knowledge, skills and attitudes at real workplace. How such restrictions affect teachers' competencies and what strategies do they use to compensate for these limitations?

Finally, the study points to the changing competence profile of teachers. For example, in Lithuania, CBE policy has constructed a vocational teacher subject as a universal teacher of theory and practice, responsible for the development of learners' occupation-related and transversal competencies. Older teachers in particular resist such a transformation. This is yet less obvious in Italian context, however we can presume that the trend of broadening of vocational teachers' competencies will continue.

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