

Being a Teacher – A Lifelong Learning Process

Edda Polz¹

Abstract

This paper introduces aspects of the teaching professionalization process in Lower Austria. It portrays concepts of competencies and concepts of lifelong learning in general and with a specific focus on the ongoing professionalization of teachers. Distinctions are made between further education and continuing education, which are the two main settings that provide teachers with opportunities for personal and professional development.

Furthermore, this paper gives an overview of the studies and training courses that are currently offered at the University College of Teacher Education in Lower Austria (PH NÖ) in the context of further and continuing education, and outlines the relation between the topics and content featured and the competencies regarded necessary in the lifelong learning process of teachers.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag zeigt Aspekte der Lehrerprofessionalisierung in Niederösterreich und erörtert Konzepte zu Kompetenzen und Lebenslangem Lernen mit Blick auf den Professionalisierungsprozess von Lehrkräften. Dabei wird zwischen Fort- und Weiterbildung unterschieden, welche die beiden vorherrschenden Settings darstellen, in denen Pädagoginnen und Pädagogen Möglichkeiten der persönlichen und professionsorientierten Weiterentwicklung nutzen.

Des Weiteren bietet der Beitrag einen Überblick über die gegenwärtigen Hochschullehrgänge der Fortbildungs- und Weiterbildung an der PH NÖ und untersucht die Verbindung zwischen den angebotenen Themen und Inhalten und den Anforderungen in Bezug auf Lebenslanges Lernen von Lehrkräften.

Keywords:

Key Competencies
Lifelong Learning
Teacher Education
Further Education
Continuing Education
Professionalization

Schlüsselwörter:

Schlüsselkompetenzen
Lebenslanges Lernen
Lehrerbildung
Fortbildung
Weiterbildung
Professionalisierung

1 Introduction

In today's fast developing world, alteration is an enduring part of our life (Lenz, 2013). Knowledge is constantly growing, information technology is advancing, legal regulations are changing, and the demands of society on school are increasing. Educational institutions are continually confronted with challenges such as globalisation, migration, and the prevention of violence which demands innovativeness and flexibility (Kraker, 2011).

As the half-life time of expert knowledge is steadily decreasing, competencies acquired during initial teacher training do not suffice the entire teaching career (European Commission, 2010). Hence, teachers need to continue learning and upskill themselves regularly in order to stay up-to-date and be able to master challenges expertly.

This question arises of what competencies teachers need for successful lifelong learning in a world of constant change and in what way these competencies are featured in the context of teacher professionalization?

¹ Affiliation of author: Pädagogische Hochschule Niederösterreich, Mühlgasse 67, 2500 Baden.
E-mail: edda.polz@ph-noe.ac.at

In an attempt to tackle these questions, the following provides an overview of the concepts of competencies and lifelong learning and take a look at the courses offered in further and continuing education as part of teacher professionalization in Lower Austria.

2 Competencies in the Context of Lifelong Learning

Acquiring and teaching competencies is pivotal in the teaching profession and requires a continuum of learning. Besides being proficient in their specific domain, teachers need to develop professional awareness and personal mastery, they have to differentiate, share knowledge, and be productive and cooperative (Schratz et al., 2007). Ideally, teachers do not only possess, apply, and convey expert knowledge they are also experts for learning and teaching competencies needed for life.

2.1 The Concept of Competencies

Since the early 1970s, there is an ongoing debate amongst educational scientists on what exactly the term “competency” comprises. Roth (1971), for example, distinguishes technical, personal and social competencies, and considers these aspects to be highly connected to pedagogical responsibility and maturity. Weinert (2001) defines competencies as the individually available or learnable abilities and skills needed in order to successfully solve problems in various situations. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development states that “a competency is more than just knowledge and skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilising psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context” (OECD, 2005, p. 4). Furthermore, it distinguishes key competencies which are divided into three categories. Category one includes the ability to use language and apply tools of technology to communicate with the environment effectively, category two comprises the capability to interact and collaborate with individuals from diverse backgrounds, and category three features the aptitude to act and live independently, responsibly, and mature (OECD, 2005). Richards and Rogers define competencies as “essential skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours required for effective performance of a real-world task or activity” (2011, p. 144).

Although it is acknowledged that competencies comprise more than knowledge and skills, in accordance with Baumert and Kunter (2006) it is assumed that knowledge and skills are central and indispensable components of the teaching profession. According to their model of capacity for professional action and knowledge, teachers need five fields of knowledge in order to be professionally competent. These fields comprise pedagogical knowledge, subject knowledge, subject didactical knowledge, organisational knowledge, and consultancy knowledge (Baumert & Kunter, 2006).

Regarding teaching profession, Heitger (2008) questions whether the essence of teacher education may be reduced to a sum of skills and tasks formulated as competencies and argues it would be wrong to power down philosophical approaches even if they may not be quantitatively measurable and controllable. In this connection, Allabauer (2009) poses the question of how university colleges may prepare teachers for their careers optimally and what characteristics and abilities are essential to meet current and forthcoming challenges. The European Commission (2010) declares a sound teacher education in connection with lifelong learning, mobility, and the support of educational stakeholders to be the indispensable principles for improving teaching and learning in Europe. In this context, being ready to cooperate and collaborate, apply knowledge and use technology effectively, and work within a diverse society are considered to be key competencies of teachers (European Commission, 2010). In respect to the ever faster evolving challenges of the new millennium, the term “21st century learning skills” was coined. It refers to the competencies regarded necessary for successful living and learning in an environment of constant change. In this concept, the core competencies of teachers are regarded to be pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, and technological knowledge. In addition, it emphasises the necessity of transformative learning, which requires the development and cultivation of higher order thinking skills such as perceiving, abstracting, patterning, embodied thinking, modelling, and synthesizing (Mishra, Koehler & Henriksen, 2011).

Though the aforementioned concepts may differ in terminology and categories, they coincide in the notion that competencies include the application of skills in varying situations. In summary and in view of lifelong learning, competencies may be regarded as the use of intellectual, social and linguistic abilities that are crucial for a successful life in a rapidly changing inclusive multicultural society.

2.2 The Concepts of Lifelong Learning

Generally speaking, lifelong learning “comprises what an individual learns throughout life” (Sinanovic & Bećirović, 2016). Each learning process is different and largely depends on the environment, individual experiences and preferred learning styles (Mašić, Polz & Bećirović, 2020). Learning may take place anywhere, anytime, and distinctions are usually made between formal, non-formal and informal learning. While formal learning refers to education received at school, college, and university, which leads to officially recognised qualification, non-formal learning may take place within or outside educational institutions, and informal learning involves all kind of non-institutionalised learning activities (Sinanovic & Bećirović, 2016; Statistik Austria, 2013).

Although lifelong learning may occur in a great variety of forms and settings, the notion of learning seems to be fundamentally connected with the concept of competencies. In 2006, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union published recommendations on eight key competencies for lifelong learning aiming to outline skills regarded necessary to successfully deal with challenges of globalisation and life in a knowledge society. These key competencies comprise the ability to communicate in the first language and in further languages, skills in mathematics, science and technology, digital competencies, social and civic competencies, initiative and entrepreneurship, sensitivity for culture, as well as competencies on how to learn (Recommendations of the European Parliament and the Council, 2006). Lately, flexibility and the capability to adjust to different situations and conditions have become increasingly important which is why the recommendations for key competencies have slightly changed. Council Recommendations issued in 2018 have, therefore, taken the place of the recommendations enacted twelve years previously. The new recommendations mainly focus on key competencies such as promoting lifelong learning strategies, inclusion, and increasing the levels of skills featured in 2006. Furthermore, they highlight “personal, social and learning to learn competence to improve health conscious, future oriented life management” (Council Recommendation, 2018, p. 4).

3 Lifelong Learning in Teacher Education in Lower Austria

According to Lenz (2013), it is one of the main tasks of educational systems to foster and facilitate individual and social learning processes throughout life. Individuals need to have the chance to further develop their competencies in order to be able to actively and consciously participate in social processes. Within the educational system, teachers play a crucial role which is why teacher education is of utmost importance. In Austria, university colleges of teacher education do not only provide initial teacher education for primary school teachers and those who want to pursue special needs education, in accordance with their legally determined tasks they also offer further and continuing education courses for all teachers to further develop and strengthen their professionalization (Polz, 2019). In this context, Rauscher (2008) emphasizes the necessity of creating a continuum between initial teacher education and further and continuing education to foster lifelong learning. The distinction between further and continuing education is necessary as further education (Fortbildung) only requires participation which is neither assessed nor awarded with ECTS credits, while courses of continuing education (Weiterbildung) involve a certain workload which is both assessed and awarded with ECTS credits, and in some cases, even with an academic degree.

3.1 Further Education

With reference to § 29 and § 43 of teacher’s public services law (Landeslehrer-Dienstrechtsgesetz), Austrian teachers must strive for advancing their education and are required to successfully complete a minimum of 15 teaching units per year in further education courses.

3.1.1 Facts and Figures

In the academic year 2018/19, Austria had a total of 129.358 pedagogues teaching in general education and vocational training schools. Out of this total, 23.274 were teaching in Lower Austria (Statistik Austria, 2020). The University College of Teacher Education in Lower Austria (PH NÖ) recorded a total of 56.255 registrations for further education courses in 2018/19. According to the knowledge transfer map (Wissenstransferkarte) compiled by Hanny, Lošek & Schmiedl (2020), these courses were offered in diverse settings and covered a multitude of

subjects. Regarding organisation, most of them were regional courses (31.1%), 27.8% took place within and across schools and 16.1% across school types. Only 5.6% were interdisciplinary courses and even fewer (0.5%) were organised on international level. E-learning courses made up 0.4% and virtual courses 0.1%. Although the detailed figures for 2019/20 are not available yet, it may be expected that the number of E-learning courses and other virtual courses have considerably increased and take up high percentages due to the situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.1.2 Topics and Contents

Concerning content, the courses on offer can be subsumed under one of four topics, which are

- digitalisation,
- diversity,
- current educational and pedagogical developments, and
- sports and health.

In detail, most courses, namely 871, focused on didactics in the specific subjects such as German English or Mathematics, 449 featured digitalisation, E-learning, and media education, 422 had an emphasis on health, 421 courses promoted quality management and 382 conflict management. The next most frequently offered courses, i.e. 326, dealt with challenges encountered by novice teachers. Other popular topics were sports (278), mathematics (241), competency-oriented education and individualisation (211), German (194), technology (146), educational standards (146) and learning (126). Few courses featured language-sensitive teaching (23), autism (21), inclusion (17), French (10), Spanish (10), and Italian (8). 8 courses presented Information Technology and 2 gave prominence to competencies and evaluation of students' performance (Hanny et al., 2020).

Taking a look at the concepts of competencies and recommendations described above, it is concluded that further education in Lower Austria offers a great variety of course that feature competencies regarded necessary for teachers in the context of lifelong learning. The stipulations of the European Commission concerning the use of technology and the ability to work in a diverse society seem to be reflected in the main topics digitalisation and diversity. Furthermore, courses on current educational and pedagogical developments, as well as sports and health correspond to recommendations by the European council to foster individual learning skills and healthy living.

However, assigning the courses to the model compiled by Baumert and Kunter (2006) it becomes obvious that further education mainly targets on promoting pedagogical knowledge, subject knowledge, and subject-didactical knowledge, while organisational knowledge and consultancy knowledge seem to be under-represented (Table 1). It is important to note that the attribution to the specific categories is provisionally, as many courses may comprise more than one category of knowledge.

Pedagogical Knowledge	Subject Knowledge	Subject-didactical Knowledge	Organisational Knowledge	Consultancy Knowledge
Challenges encountered by Novice Teachers	Digitalisation E-learning, Media Education	German English Mathematics	Quality Management	Conflict Management
Competency-oriented Education and Individualisation	Health Sports	French Spanish Italian		
Learning	Technology	Information Technology		
Language-sensitive Teaching	Educational Standards			
Inclusion				
Competencies and Evaluation of Students' Performance				

Table 1: Classification of Further Education Courses with Respect to the Five Fields of Knowledge by Baumert & Kunter (2006)

3.2 Continuing Education

Unlike further education which is mandatory for teachers, continuing education is voluntary. However, many teachers are interested in continuing education courses as they often grant additional qualifications which are usually the basis for better salary.

3.3 Facts and Figures

Currently, the PH NÖ offers 71 training courses that are worth 5 to 90 ECTS credits. Prerequisites for admission vary. While some require certain pre-studies as well as an active employment status as a teacher, participation in other courses needs to be approved by the employer. Upon successful completion, all training courses offer a certificate. While courses starting at 30 ECTS credits and above require the payment of a student tuition fee, those below 30 ECTS credits do not require any payment. Out of the 71 training courses, five comprise 90 ECTS credits and are awarded with an academic degree (Master's of Education, MEd).

In the winter term of the academic year 2020/21, a total of 2093 teachers are registered for continuing education courses at the PH NÖ. Most of them, namely 1443 attend a course between 5 and 29 ECTS credits. 159 pedagogues have decided for a course between 30 and 59 ECTS credits and 239 have registered for a course worth 60 ECTS credits. 252 aspire a master's degree and have enrolled a 90 ECTS credits course.

3.4 Topics and Contents

Courses between 5 and 29 ECTS credits cover topics such as autism, peer learning, German as a second language, gifted education, learning guidance, conflict management, migration, outdoor pedagogy, social learning, special needs, prevention of addiction, transition from kindergarten to primary school, sports, health and nutrition, early language development, career guidance, school development, and many more. Training courses that are worth between 30 and 59 ECTS credits include subjects such as giftedness, learning assistance, recreational pedagogy, education of students with hearing impairment, pedagogy for children and young adults with emotional and social needs, didactics for social care professions. Moreover, courses on job-related English as a foreign language at vocational schools, German and communication at vocational schools, further teaching qualification in movement and sports at vocational schools, ethics, cultural education, digital basic education, ICT (information and Communication technology), and mentoring of novice teachers are offered. The five continuing education courses on master's level grant qualifications regarding giftedness, inclusion, mentoring of novice teachers, career guidance, and school management.

With respect to the concepts of competencies and recommendations outlined above, it is reasoned that similarly to further education, continuing education in Lower Austria complies with the recommendations of the European Commission. Generally, courses feature competencies considered relevant in the process of lifelong learning and support teachers in their efforts to stay up-to date. In particular, they promote competencies related to communication, health, inclusion, and digitalisation, which are regarded essential for a successful life in today's fast-paced time.

Regarding the five fields of knowledge, it appears that the emphasis is again very much on pedagogical knowledge and subject knowledge (see Table 2). Furthermore, there is a wide range of courses featuring consultancy knowledge, which was not the case in further education. Subject-didactical knowledge and organisational knowledge is only prominent in few courses, which are, however, awarded with comparatively high amounts of ECTS credits. It should be noted that the following classification is by no means considered rigid, as it is acknowledged that there will be an overlapping of knowledge fields in many courses.

Pedagogical Knowledge	Subject Knowledge	Subject-didactical Knowledge	Organisational Knowledge	Consultancy Knowledge
Peer Learning	German as a Second Language	Autism	School Development	Learning Guidance
Gifted Education	Sports	Education of Students with Hearing Impairment	School Management	Conflict Management
Outdoor Pedagogy	Health and Nutrition	Didactics for Social Care Professions		Migration
Social Learning	Job-related English as a Foreign Language at Vocational Schools	Ethics		Prevention of Addiction
Special Needs	German and Communication at Vocational Schools			Career Guidance
Transition from Kindergarten to Primary School	Movement and Sports at Vocational Schools			Learning Assistance
Early Language Development	Cultural Education			Mentoring of Novice Teachers
Recreational Pedagogy	Digital Basic Education			Career Guidance
Pedagogy for Children and Young Adults with Emotional and Social Needs	Information and Communication Technology			
Giftedness	Digitalisation			
Inclusion				

Table 2: Classification of Continuing Education Courses with Respect to the Five Fields of Knowledge by Baumert & Kunter (2006)

4 Conclusion and Outlook

The analysis of the current situation regarding further and continuing education in Lower Austria implies that many teachers engage in lifelong learning. The number of participants and courses offered suggest that most teachers are enrolled in at least two courses per academic year. Referring to the competencies deemed necessary for teachers in the context of professionalization and lifelong learning, it is concluded that both, courses in further and continuing education offered at the PH NÖ are very much in line with the stipulations of the European Commission. With regard to the five fields of knowledge (Baumert & Kunter, 2006), it came out that in both, further and continuing education, pedagogical and subject knowledge is prominent, while organisational knowledge is scarcely featured. While there is only one course in further education focusing on consultancy knowledge, it is notably represented in continuing education. Generally, there are few courses promoting subject-didactical knowledge which may be explained by the notion that this field is expected to be most important in initial teacher education training.

Although this paper gives an overview of the range of competencies currently featured in teacher training, it also throws up many questions. Future studies, therefore, could focus on identifying aspects that make teachers engage in lifelong learning and circumstances that may be possible hindrances in this respect. In accordance with Allabauer (2011), it is concluded that learning and education is more than acquiring competencies and that lifelong learning requires, above all, skills such as learning aptitudes and innovativeness. It could be subject to further research to determine how these skills can best be learned and taught in schools as well as in teacher training and in what way they are featured in school syllabi and curricula in teacher education.

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