Peklaj, C. (Ed.) (2010). *Teacher Competencies and Educational Goals*. Aachen: Shaker Verlag. 171 p., ISBN 978-3-8322-9661-2.

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The monograph, written by a group of five Slovenian experts: C. Peklaj, J. Kalin, S. Pečjak, M. Puklek Levpušček and M. Valenčič Zuljan, from the fields of educational and developmental psychology and teaching methods (didactics), deals with an area that is enjoying increasing attention, the area of teacher competencies. Teachers are regarded, perhaps too optimistically, as "a driving force of social development". One of the central problems is the question as to which competencies teachers need in order to promote students' overall development, enabling them to prosper in the complex world of tomorrow. Thus the main goal of the monograph is to contribute to a better understanding of the intricate relations between teachers' competencies, student achievement and their socioemotional development, through interrelated variables such as teaching methods, classroom climate and management.

The study starts with an integrated view of these complex relationships in the form of a theoretical model, continues with the presentation of theory and empirical findings in specific areas (student assessment of teachers' classroom management and teaching methods, student motivation and learning behaviour, the development of students' psychosocial skills) and finally tries to integrate the results into a unified picture.

The study is based on theoretical models stemming from previous research on variables that can influence students' achievement, beginning with teaching methods and including socio-motivational processes. Lately, the central concept of teacher competencies has been widely promoted in the European context, as well as in the Slovenian context (see pp. 43-47). Perhaps the text could also have mentioned some voices of dissent and critique of this concept if understood in a narrow and formalistic sense. There are fears that lists of obligatory competencies or "standards" could lead to an excessively bureaucratic control of teachers' work. On the other hand, the concept of

competencies, if taken seriously, reminds us that knowledge itself can not guarantee good teachers, as competencies are "complex action systems which include emotional and motivational areas" (p. 40) as well as attitudes and values.

Clusters of competencies most important for quality teaching have been defined and empirically verified in previous studies in Slovenia and abroad, studies that have included teachers, student teachers, teacher educators and school heads. Areas of better developed and less developed competencies have been identified, with serious implications for teacher education. The text reminds us that there is still great diversity among EU Member States in approaches to defining teachers' competencies, in spite of attempts to define a common reference framework as a basis for teacher education. Therefore, empirical studies like the present one can contribute to a common understanding of teachers' competencies important for achieving good results in the cognitive domain as well as in the overall development of students.

The empirical part of the study is a good example of an integrated approach to the investigation of the effects of teachers' competencies. It approaches this complex area by combining the students' perspective (how they perceive the competencies their teachers manifest in everyday teaching and interpersonal behaviour) and some student traits, such as motivation and classroom behaviour, as viewed by the teacher. The main problem was to identify their relation to student achievement (in maths and Slovene language).

The study is based on a solid methodology regarding sampling, instruments and statistical analysis. Questionnaires *for* students and *on* students (completed by the teachers) were used, all with good reliability and other characteristics. These questionnaires were partly taken from other studies and partly constructed for the purpose of this study. The sample consisted of 470 students from the 7th and 8th grades of primary school and 473 students from the 3rd grade of general secondary school - gymnasium (the term "primary school" in this context can be misleading as students are 14 years old – in other school systems, this is "lower secondary school"). The teachers of these students were also included – 13 teachers of maths and 14 of Slovene language in the "primary" school and 10 maths teachers and 10 teachers of Slovene language in the secondary school.

The main results are presented and interpreted in a clear and systematic way. Only some of the more interesting results will be mentioned here. Some of the results give a fairly good picture of prevailing

teaching methods as viewed from the students' perspective. Items characteristic of transmission teaching (clear presentation, giving good examples, allowing clarifying questions) get relatively high average grades by the students, whereas those aiming to activate students (project and group work, classroom discussions) hardly exceed 2 points on a 4-point scale. About one half of students believe that teachers rarely or never connect teaching with real life experiences or encourage connections between subjects. The situation in primary school is better than that in secondary school, and the situation in Slovene is better than that in maths.

The active participation of students is not encouraged in the process of assessment either - for example, there is very little student self-assessment. Teachers rarely explain how students can improve their learning, but criteria for individual grades are relatively well explained.

In terms of quality classroom management (supportive learning climate, building mutual trust, etc.) and promoting the overall development of students (encouragement to help one another, to listen to one another, to assume responsibility, etc.), the results show that there is still room for improvement: grades under 3 on a 4-point scale prevail. The teachers received the lowest grades in the competent use of ICT in the classroom; it seems that the younger generation is ahead of them in this respect.

Results show that teachers are well prepared in advance, but not flexible enough and not sufficiently responsive to students needs in classroom situations; they could activate students more and connect teaching with real-life, authentic situations more often. This requires a thorough reflection on subjective theories – is a teacher primarily a presenter of knowledge or a moderator of active learning in their students? Analysis of student motivation shows that they are oriented toward the mastery of subject matter, but high results were also registered regarding test anxiety and the avoidance of mistakes, as mistakes are not regarded as a necessary part of all learning.

Numerous significant correlations were found between perceived teacher management and the desired behaviour in students; an open, supportive classroom climate resulted in less hostile, aggressive behaviour, which again meant better school achievement.

Finally, a path analysis model attempted to integrate all of the results. It confirmed the indirect influence of classroom management on students' achievement - teachers can influence students' achievement

primarily through motivating and activating desirable behaviour. This fact is often overlooked by "academically" trained teachers and teacher educators, who overstress the importance of teachers' subject matter knowledge and try to get better results by direct pressure to higher achievement and setting higher curricular standards. The fact that many Slovene teachers neglect the "relationship" aspect of their role was evident from the results of PISA 2009: student ratings of their teachers were, compared to other countries, near the bottom on items such as: "Teachers do not listen to us", "Teachers do not seem to care about us".

So the main message of this important monograph reads: Yes, academic pressure is important, but in the context of a safe and supportive learning environment, with meaningful and clear structuring of learning tasks and formative feedback, directed towards student improvement and supported by the teacher's belief that the student can learn and achieve; the teaching process has to be focused on the maximal use of each student's potential to learn. By mastering all of these competencies together (which is not easy), the teacher can positively influence the student's self-efficacy and mastery goal orientation – and these characteristics will have a direct influence on the desired social and academic behaviour that leads to better school achievement of students. This is also in line with the message of the recent OECD publication on the nature of learning. Among "core principles" for designing a powerful learning environment are mentioned: "The environment is founded on the social nature of learning" and "The learning professionals should be highly attuned to the learners' motivation and the key role of emotions in achievement". (Dumont et al., 2010, p. 321).

The study also offers an important lesson for preservice and inservice teacher education, which should be centred not only on better subject matter knowledge – as important as this is - and not only on teaching skills in a narrow sense, but also on competencies such as: how to create a favourable group climate, how to listen to and respond to students, how to manage undesirable behaviour and promote learning strategies. These aspects are too often overlooked in teacher training, especially at secondary level, as they cannot be "transmitted" directly but only through reflective practice, good mentorship, collegial learning and inside schools as "learning communities". The Bologna renewal of teacher education curricula gives us an opportunity to improve teacher education, but it cannot in itself guarantee this improvement.

The style of writing is clear and not unnecessarily complicated.

In some cases, terminology could be improved; for example, "team teaching" actually means "group work" of students; "examinations" of students could be replaced by "assessment". The problem of naming 14-year-old students as belonging to "primary school" has already been mentioned. Also, besides the author and subject index, which are included at the end of the monograph, a complete list of references for the whole text would be helpful to the reader, not only lists at the end of each chapter.

The publication is well worth reading by anyone interested in better understanding the intricate role of teachers' competencies and in improving them.

References

Dumont, H., Istance, D., Benavides, F. (Eds.) (2010). *The Nature of Learning. Using Research to Inspire Practice.* Pariz: OECD. (read only edition)

PISA 2009 Report: Programme for International Student Assessment. www.oecd.org/edu/pisa/2009.