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Towards a human-centred education:

7 priorities for the revision of the Key Competences Framework

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ECSWE welcomes the ongoing revision of the European Framework for Key Competences for Lifelong Learning as an opportunity for a profound shift in paradigm towards holistic and human-centred education.

Since the adoption of the European Framework for Key Competences for Lifelong Learning in 2006, many European countries have undertaken policy reforms to introduce competence-based teaching and learning in formal education. To adapt the framework to the manifold societal challenges in the political, social, economic, ecological and technological field and to ensure its sustainability, the framework is currently under review. Once that revision is complete, we may well expect a similar follow-up at national level.

We are convinced that a revised and well implemented key competences framework may contribute to both educating healthy and happy children and establishing and sustaining a thriving civil society. This would require a true shift of paradigm towards a learner-centred and holistic pedagogical approach that emphasises social and civic competences, values and nurtures the arts and crafts, supports the development of creativity and allows each individual to unfold and develop its unique personality and potential.

To make the most of this process, ECSWE would like to suggest the following 7 priorities for a human-centred key competences framework:

1. **Commit to a holistic approach:** Holistic education seeks to address "heads, hearts and hands". To this end, physical and emotional capacities are nurtured alongside purely mental and intellectual abilities. A revised framework should put more emphasis on health, wellbeing, arts & crafts and social capacities. Furthermore, we suggest a redefinition of the mathematical and scientific competence and communication in foreign languages according to our proposals (see annexes 1, 2 & 3).
2. **Make personal development a priority:** Not even cognitive competence can be installed in students from outside. Concepts must be given the chance to arise in each student individually, just as plants only grow from seeds in watered soil that is warmed and lighted by the sun. Warmth of soul, the light of inquiry and the flow of conversation can tend the soil of personal development within the classroom. As proponents of a development-oriented pedagogical approach, we wholeheartedly support the idea of transforming the competence "learning to learn" into a broadly defined competence on personal development.
3. **Emphasise the importance of relationships:** The ability to build meaningful and healthy relationships with others is an important life-skill that should be supported by highlighting it as an important aspect of personal development and social competence.
4. **Ensure an age-appropriate and critical media pedagogy:** In contrast to others calling for an early introduction of digital technology to foster digital competence, we believe that the promotion of creativity, the strengthening of the will and the thorough acquisition of basic skills such as literacy and numeracy, combined with the ability of critical and independent thinking, are important preconditions for making meaningful, conscious and selective use of digital technology. We therefore call for an age- and developmentally appropriate implementation of the digital competence.
5. **Make more room for arts and creativity:** The competence "cultural awareness and expression" should better explain how practicing art like painting, sculpting, music, drama or literature and poetry can become an important means of self-expression but also of acquiring important competences. Many beneficial side effects are also ignored: The creation of a piece of art requires persistence, a strong will and focus, and gradually reinforces these important skills and capacities through regular practice. Moreover practicing art can develop the important competence of acting adequately in new and unexpected situations.
6. **Ensure pluralism in assessing the key competences:** Standardised tests are not the right tools to assess the key competences holistically, as they measure at best a narrow range of traditional competences, and give incentives to merely teach to the test. They are therefore not suited for exploiting the full potential of the framework. A variety of different assessment methods, and in particular formative assessment, should be further explored and used. Assessment should become a tool for personal growth and development that gives insight in one's learning processes and allows for critical reflection and self-reflection.
7. **Allow for flexible implementation at school level:**
   One of the strengths of the key competences framework is its general character that allows for adaptation tailored to the local contexts. We therefore recommend its flexible implementation respecting both the principle of subsidiarity and school autonomy.

Annexes (see page 2):

- ANNEX 1: Proposal for a rewording of mathematical competence
- ANNEX 2: Proposal for a rewording of scientific competence
- ANNEX 3: Proposal for a rewording of communication in foreign languages

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ANNEX 1: Proposal for a rewording of mathematical competence

Definition:

Mathematical competence is the ability to create and perceive in an inner space of imagination quite independent of anything in the everyday world. The emphasis must be on process and activity, from which knowledge can arises through individual acts of insight. Formulas, models, constructs, graphs, charts need to be developed out of individualised understanding. Mathematics must dawn on students. Once a strong mathematical intuition is developed, it can also be applied to problems in everyday situations.

Essential knowledge, skills and attitudes related to this competence:

Necessary knowledge in mathematics arises from a sound understanding of number systems, algebraic systems abstracted from such number systems, the ability to conceptualise geometrically and the ability to frame such an understanding within a chain of arguments.

Skills to solve mathematical problems and to apply basic mathematical principles and processes in everyday contexts at home and work are best developed when education does not attempt to thrust mathematics knowledge on people with finished thought forms. Following other people's mathematical thinking is much more difficult than to (re-)invent mathematics from scratch. The best mathematical textbook is blank and gets written by each student as a learning diary. Dialogic teaching methods that base what the teacher does on the take-up of each student through frequent feedback loops are much more effective for the development of mathematical skills – such as reasoning mathematically, understanding mathematical proof, communicating in mathematical language and using appropriate aids – than traditional teaching methods.

A positive attitude in mathematics arises from the experience of an inner sense of beauty within self-generated thought forms that are lifted into an area of universal validity.

ANNEX 2: Proposal for a rewording of scientific competence

Definition:

Competence in natural science comes from using the methodology employed to describe and to understand the natural world. Natural science is always based on observations and/or experiments, with the aim of developing concepts suitable for describing the phenomena and their interrelationships, identifying questions in the process and drawing evidence-based conclusions. Competence in technology is viewed as the application of that knowledge and methodology in response to perceived human wants or needs. Competence in science and technology involves an understanding of the changes caused by human activity and the responsibility of an individual citizen.

Essential knowledge, skills and attitudes related to this competence:

For science and technology, essential knowledge comprises fundamental scientific concepts, principles and methods, technology and technological products and processes, as well as an understanding of the impact of science and technology on the natural world. These competences should enable individuals to better understand the advances, limitations and risks of scientific theories, applications and technology in societies at large and also in relation to decision-making, values, moral questions, culture, etc.

Skills include the ability to engage in careful observation, to conduct experiments, to reach an evidence-based decision or conclusion, to develop and to understand theories on the basis of scientific data, to critically reflect such theories, to apply scientific concepts in understanding technological tools and machines. Individuals should also be able to recognise the essential features of scientific inquiry and have the ability to communicate the conclusions and reasoning that led to them.

Competence includes an attitude of curiosity, an interest in ethical issues and respect for both safety and sustainability (in particular environmental sustainability and sustainable development) and a critical appreciation of scientific and technological development in relation to society. In the light of global environmental, social and economical challenges, the competent use of technology should always be conscious and selective in the sense of making an informed choice.

ANNEX 3: Proposal for a rewording of communication in foreign languages

Definition:

Communication in foreign languages broadly shares the main skill dimensions of communication in the mother tongue and is also best learned through natural participation in authentic social practices: it is based on the ability to understand, express and interpret concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts and opinions in both oral and written form (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in an appropriate range of societal and cultural contexts (in education and training, work, home and leisure) according to one's wants or needs. Like mother tongue literacy, foreign language literacy develops out of orality. Learners should therefore be skilled in orality before learning formal literacy. Communication in foreign languages also calls for skills such as mediation and intercultural understanding. An individual's level of proficiency will vary between the four dimensions (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and between the different languages, and according to that individual's social and cultural background, environment, needs and/or interests.

Essential knowledge, skills and attitudes related to this competence:

Competence in foreign languages requires knowledge of vocabulary, functional grammar and an awareness of the main types of verbal interaction and registers of language. Knowledge of societal conventions, and the cultural aspect and variability of languages is important.

Essential skills for communication in foreign languages consist of the ability to understand spoken messages, to initiate, sustain and conclude conversations and to read, understand and produce texts appropriate to the individual's needs. Individuals should also be able to use aids appropriately, and learn languages also informally as part of lifelong learning.

A positive attitude involves the appreciation of cultural diversity, and an interest and curiosity in languages, intercultural communication and narrative empathy, the ability to tell the story of the Other.