

## Domains of teachers professionalism



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### Introduction

The quality of teaching plays a central role in current debates on reform initiatives, yet it are the teachers who develop schools and introduction. As a consequence, the professionalism of teachers is a vital prerequisite for improving and fostering the learning processes of our children.

The Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, the Arts and Culture has commissioned a special task force called EPIK (*Entwicklung von Professionalität im internationalen Kontext*, i.e. Developing Professionalism in an International Context) to address issues of professionalism of teachers in Austria from and through international perspectives. In so doing, EPIK has created a model based on five domains or fields of competence which determine a teacher's everyday professional life irrespective of school type or subject. The five domains make scientific findings generally accessible while also providing practical support and tips for day-to-day teaching. They define both individual competences and configuration(s) of system structures.

By providing impulses and curricula, the five domains of teachers' professionalism enable a school to become a "learning school", one that thrives on the learning efforts of all the people involved. They highlight the expertise of the individual teacher as well as organisational level aspects of the school system, and they whet each participant's appetite for mutual learning and teamwork.

### REFLECTION AND DISCOURSE:

#### Sharing knowledge and skills

*"How did you cope with 3b?", subject coordinator Lisa N asks her colleague Bernhard K upon entering the staff room. "Well, I'm not quite sure what to say. Basically I feel I'm in charge, but the pupils' efforts at the board were really bad. Are they always this weak?" "What do you mean, weak?", Lisa N asks. Bernhard K, though, was unable to answer this question satisfactorily – not even for himself. With this question in mind, in the following lessons he began to try to find out the cause of such "weaknesses" in the performance of his pupils. Thus, the journey began – and together with Lisa N he embarked on a trip of discovery, exchanging practical experiences and discussing aspects taken from educational literature.*

Not only do socially competent teachers pay closer attention to the teaching of others, they are also more perceptive of their own teaching. They have the ability to take a critical distance from their own actions, and in so doing are able to judge their own teaching. It is this ability to take a step back from their own practice that enables them to develop self-observation strategies. Having distanced themselves from their own practice, they are able to engage in reflection, a skill which makes it possible to recognise both the specific nature of a situation (an exception to the rule) and the general truths lying behind the case in point (potential generalisations). Teaching focussed on learning outcomes is based on the *reflection* of the respective processes

and products. New knowledge and understandings are gained which inform future practice. Reflecting upon experiences and drawing conclusions from them leads to forward-thinking for the next situation with the goal of having a larger repertoire of choices.

Alternatives for future practice are, however, not only the result of self-reflection. Often we realise that we only perceive things in a new way or think of good ideas if we talk over a situation, the phenomenon or the problem with a colleague. This necessary verbalisation here is healing, because it forces us to concentrate on a thought in order to articulate it and through articulation we gain greater clarity. To engage in such processes of reflection and learning over the long term, “teacher talk” (discourse) of this kind necessitates a common language which is shared collectively and enables differentiated discussion.

The ability to regard oneself and one’s environment from a critical distance, to develop self-criticism and to engage in and create discourse are thus the characteristics of a professionalism in the teaching profession. Discourse ability as a development factor of pedagogical professionalism emerges from a highly developed professional language, which is the prerequisite for a differentiated understanding of the complexities of professional issues and challenges. Discourse ability is required of teachers on several levels: when communicating with the learners as knowledge participants; when discussing with colleagues as part of a professional learning community (across disciplines), when making use of supervision options in discussions with superiors or school authorities, when consulting with parents or guardians, and – as members of the entire profession – when engaging in public discourse.

The professionalism of teachers can also be seen in the way teachers manage to justify their work, in their own eyes and also in the eyes of colleagues, pupils, parents, as well as the public. (Self-)critical reflection that is based on one’s own experience as well as on scientific findings, and the exchange of ideas in professional discourse – along with the other dimensions – form the basis of pedagogical professionalism.

## PROFESSIONAL AWARENESS

### The self as expert

*At the parent-teacher evening the teacher presents her syllabus for the current year and explains the methods she is planning to use. Some parents express doubts as to the success of these methods. The teacher states that it is not necessary to exert pressure on the pupils as the curriculum leaves enough scope for using more than one method and instrument. Thus, she will be able to assist every single one of her class to reach the learning goals.*

**T**he teacher is not swayed by the parents’ remarks. She perceives the problem of seemingly contradictory needs and refers to her own ability and knowledge that provide her with confidence and trust. She maintains the stance of an *expert on learning processes* who knows the children’s different starting points and uses these as the basis for defining both the aims and focus of her work. She is also aware of the great variety of methods which she use to appropriately meet the needs of her children in different learning situations, she documents the children’s learning progress, reflects on her own

practice and prepares and carries out future learning processes accordingly. The teacher is aware that pedagogical action requires being able to cope with complex and contradictory situations. She is aware of the scope of instructional authority, which is a prerequisite for her professional work.

Such professional awareness means realising what makes a teacher's job a profession in its own right drawing a boundary based on what distinguishes it from other (social) professions. At the same time, professionally aware teachers regard themselves not only as part of their national and regional educational landscape, both influencing it and being influenced, but also as members of an international profession. They are open to change, regarding it as a challenge for both the school as an organisation and their own teaching. In addition, they pursue continuing education, expand their professional knowledge and apply it in their practice as needed. In cooperation with other teachers, they explore new teaching models and co-create the institutional framework of their profession.

Professionally aware teachers have the ability to distance themselves from themselves and from the immediate reality, to regard themselves and their professional position from an outside perspective. They regard the conditions of their profession as something which has developed over the course of history and consider it critically. They are *confidently* aware of the freedom of their chosen profession as well as its restrictions and the danger of self-exploitation it can pose. They set boundaries against unrealistic demands – both others' and their own. They recognise *self-critically* how they are affected by their professional work with and draw a clear line between professional demands and their own individual selves.

Finally, professional awareness means knowing one's own knowledge and skills in a clearly defined field and seeing oneself as an expert. Such knowledge engenders *self-confidence* and the empowerment to act for the good of pupils, parents, and others involved.

## **PERSONAL MASTERY:**

### **The power of individual prowess**

*During an oral English test, Hannes does not even know the simplest answers. His classmates are starting to make fun of him, even though their teacher tells them that this does not help Hannes at all. Therefore, she hands out slips of paper and tells them: "Write down what you think would help Hannes better to fulfil the task given him."*

*The pupils are surprised that they are called upon to do some work now and start to write down their own ideas. The teacher then collects the slips of paper and gives them to Hannes. He reads them out, one after the other, and with the help of the class, selects the ones that are most useful for him.*

**T**he teacher assesses the situation systemically: She involves all of the pupils in the process of helping Hannes to move his attention from the problem to the solution by finding or inventing new options from the pupils' perspective. The pupils are expected to share the responsibility rather than to poke fun at someone. The teacher's individual mastery lies in her making use of a situation that normally carries negative connotations

and creating a social learning opportunity for the entire class which should help Hannes learn.

For teachers – and this also applies to pupils – it is not merely knowledge (*know what*) or skills (*know how*) that are important in teaching; rather, professionalism reveals itself especially in the way knowledge and skills are used effectively in a given situation. Knowledge without application remains static, while simple (re)acting blinds us to higher-level contexts (*know why*). How knowledge and skills are linked depends on a teacher's *personal mastery*.

In addition to the ability to successfully implement professional knowledge, personal mastery refers to the way one deals with the self. This also means regarding one's self as a learning assignment, to learn from mistakes and find (or invent) the new.

Individual prowess, therefore, does not result from a – mechanically defined – “good education“. Rather, it is much more the result of an individual educational process, which is guided by the will to find one's own way effectively to have a positive impact on the learning processes of every single pupil in a variety of situations. If pedagogical knowledge is not to remain static, i.e. if it is to be transformed into pedagogical prowess, teachers must undergo a specific process of acquiring such knowledge and making it their own.

Those teachers who are open to the *new* and test it in specific situations to determine how it can be applied competently and professionally in practice are the guarantors of expert knowledge and ability. It is manifested in the resonance which occurs between teachers and learners. Finally, *personal mastery* is revealed in the extent to which teachers “do the right thing“ based on their own experience and professional judgement. in a specific situation.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Senge (1996).

## **COLLEGIALITY: The productivity of cooperation**

*It is just after 2 p.m. In some classes work is still being done, but most rooms are empty, with the chairs already placed neatly on the desks. In a classroom on the first floor, a group of teachers is involved in discussion. Clara S., German teacher at this secondary school, has proposed the topic of this meeting as she has just taken over a 5<sup>th</sup> form and noticed big differences among her pupils in her subject. Now she would like to get some help and ideas from this group of colleagues on how to deal with this situation professionally. For two whole hours they exchange different opinions, and think of various courses of action. One colleague offers to sit in on one of the following German lessons and observe the class. Another meeting is then scheduled to discuss the results of this measure. Clara S is happy with this outcome. Her colleagues make her feel she is a valuable member of their group, and they have provided some solutions to her problem.*

**S**imilar examples of *collegiality* do occur in the teaching profession – spontaneously and informally, however. This form of dialogue must still be anchored in many places as an integral and self-evident professional activity – namely in teachers' individual awareness as well as professional awareness. The new demands (e.g. opening up of schools) and also the new organisational school forms (school development) have made

this type of collegiality an essential aspect of “job satisfaction”. While traditionally isolation and “lone rangers” were afforded by the structures, which to some degree even fostered such a stance, the ever-changing demands of the “new school” render “going solo” unproductive. Collegiality, therefore, is for some colleagues no longer merely a question of courtesy or optional virtue – it is a question of (professional) survival. Such collegiality requires a new form of community-building from all colleagues.

We envision as a place of *dialogue* a group of professionals who have joined forces as a learning community of experts with specific characteristics. The members of this learning community enter into a kind of working agreement, and thus become part of this community. They are willing to reveal their own questions and insecurities and become critical partners for their colleagues. Together they orient their analyses, drafts, justifications and advising to the current knowledge and theory of their profession. This community, whose members learn with and from each other, becomes a group of experts who are not only able to solve pressing problems but also to discuss current issues in teaching and develop new, solution-based knowledge. It might even be possible to sometimes pursue questions such as: How is communication working within our group? How do we treat one another? What patterns do we produce? What roles do we assign or accept?

In order to maintain such a *culture of openness*, however, the community needs space and time, must attend to sufficient accountability and continuity and thereby institutionalise its existence.

At best, contemplating professional issues that are currently relevant to individual members at times become self-reflection of the entire community and increasingly foster the ability and readiness to *distance oneself*, which enables those involved to step out of the immediate intensity of a situation and to observe and understand it (and thus themselves) from a neutral standpoint.

## **ABILITY TO DIFFERENTIATE: Dealing with differences large and small**

*Anna finds it difficult to meet the demands made on her in the course of group work, especially when she is supposed to research and process new information. Often she disturbs ongoing group processes by “being silly”. When the class is asked to form groups by themselves, she therefore is among the last to be chosen. If the groups are formed randomly or by the teacher, the pupils who have to cooperate with Anna protest strongly. When looking for a possible solution to this problem, the teacher remembers the fact that Anna is talented in drawing, which he heard at one of the latest teacher conferences. In the course of the next group assignment, therefore, he asks the groups to illustrate their results with drawings.*

**E**ach day teachers are faced with the challenges that result from their pupils’ different learning needs. What some already can do at the beginning of the school year, others must yet make great effort to learn. What some find interesting, others finding boring. Tasks that pose no problem for the group, as in the example above, can seem an insurmountable hurdle for a single member. Teachers experience more than just a discrepancy. Should they demand the pupil(s) to adjust or respond to the individual,

should they foster differences and try to balance them out? Should they work on the children's deficits or focus on strengths, like Anna's teacher who decided in the concrete situation to use the available potential in order to strengthen Anna's positive self-concept, which is essential for further learning processes, and foster acceptance of her in the group?

*Diversity* in learning groups makes it possible to learn from one another, to clash with one another, to resolve conflicts, to develop together but also to consciously set boundaries. Much of this happens without any active contribution from the teacher during breaks, in the school yard or on the way to school; some situations require a referee, others a pedagogical intervention, especially if the work in class is affected. Such "facilitation of heterogeneity", however, is institutionally restricted in schools: through age groups, rigid schedules, curricula etc. As a consequence the great number of possibilities beyond institutional boundaries can be obliterated from view. Solutions occur only if a teacher is able to perceive what is different as *difference*. Teachers who are able to differentiate do not base their perceptions on their own image of an ideal pupil or average pupil but rather strive to develop specific individual learning strategies based on "*case interpretation*". They trust and believe that *all* children and adolescents are able and willing to learn, and they plan and design their syllabus with this diversity in mind. It is often small measures which have impact: writing the new letter in the right margin for the left-handed beginner, having a pupil explain her own approach to a calculation to understand her learning problem, or promoting individual learning processes by dropping useful hints.

The ability to differentiate requires *knowledge* of how to deal with different learning, communication and integration difficulties, as well as the skill – wherever appropriate and necessary – to offer individualised and differentiated instructional measures and to initiate self-organised learning processes in order to enable individual paths of learning or to focus content. *Observation and empathy* are essential prerequisites for dealing with differences, which is also reflected in the ability to accept differences as they are and recognise when pupils should not be handled differently or when too much differentiation in light of the group would be counterproductive. Therefore, the ability to differentiate means that a teacher makes use of the opportunities inherent in a heterogeneous group of learners, embraces the challenge, accepts the limitations upon the desired or ideal goal and recognises the limits of possibility. To be able to deal with this area of tension constructively, teachers need to have knowledge of the institutional framework and their own potentials and limitations as teachers in addition to clear understanding of the group of learners and its individuals.