

## The teachers' call for active opposition to a competence- based approach in schools – from elementary schools to university

### **Presentation :**

The “competence” is now entering schools – and universities. A large number of teachers are, as is known, hostile to neo-liberalism and its irruption into schooling. How does it make sense that no strong front is opposing the competence? When the word “competence” is used in front of them – or, when they are told to use it, what do the teachers who are hostile to neo-liberalism say or do?

This call is made with the goal to enable an oppositional rhetoric in all schools (from elementary schools to universities). This oppositional rhetoric is to be capable of drawing a clear enough line around this “concept”; because the implications of the competence entering schools are definitely non-neglectable. The competence itself is seen as a resource and works through the exploitation – or mobilisation – of resources. Through it, the student and the future salaryman alike become resources; and the world itself (if it only is useful to acquire or have someone acquire competences) becomes a resource.

We, co-signatories, elementary school, primary school, secondary education (middle school and high school) and higher education teachers (universities and grandes écoles), jointly state our firm and solemn opposition to the “competence approach”’s arrival in our classes and lecture halls: we recuse this approach as a violent gesture towards the education we need to provide; we recuse it as it noxiously changes the relation needed, in this education, between us, our students, and the world we inhabit.

The competence is a notion coined in the management of man by man, with destructive effects in all parts of society. In the last twenty-five years, education sciences have contributed to acclimating this notion into the pedagogical field: by pretending to bypass polemics, they claim to have built a concept of “pedagogical” competence unrelated to its management origins. In doing so, education sciences have dulled our vigilance; above all, they organised immense confusion (using that same word). However, which reading imposes itself? In Parcoursup <sup>1</sup>? In the assessments that await our students throughout their schooling, or even throughout their life? Is it so clearly the pedagogues’ reading? Is it not (also) (more so) the human resources’ manager’s reading? Even when acclimated to the educational field only and claiming to be cut-off from its management roots (through the advice and efforts of possibly sincere pedagogues), the notion of “competence” cannot be disconnected from the neo-liberal blueprint with which it is linked: the individual at the centre; and the logic of self-improvement (improving one’s self as a resource)...

The competence is a concept (it is not just a word). One cannot relay it innocently.

Therefore, the problem with the competence is not only that it can be of use to neoliberal management (and that the competences in official educational texts are in fact meant to become, almost without a glitch, the competences required in a neo-liberal employment market); the problem with the competence is the competence itself. This notion, in fact, encompasses a reversal and a subversion or a destitution of teaching.

To say it in a few words: by teaching with competences, we cease to deliver (designate) a world to our students (a world given each time through the means of the discipline or disciplines we are teaching); in place of it, we have the

1. the platform through which students apply for higher education programs.

mission of arming a small and self-centred individual with “capacities” (abilities, skills <sup>2</sup>) to defend themselves in a “life” (possibly hostile, complex, competitive and anxiety-inducing). However, this is not delivering a world; it is only the reproduction of life (enable the petty self’s survival in a more and more hostile environment). Teaching with competences necessarily implies that one encounters the world only in a second phase; the world, the objects of the world (the poem, the theorem, the small animal), now only come into the classroom as materials to be used in the acquisition and honing of the competences of the petty selves. The objects taught do not come into the classroom for their self and because they deserve to be seen, shown, taught, welcomed... but to be put to use in the accumulation of my skills, of my resources. The competence approach has the world’s oblivion as its background. Teaching’s goal is completely different. And it is dual; because teaching does not aim to arm the individual with what could possibly lack in them (to live or survive) within an environment and in a world; teaching’s goal is to give the world to the student; and to continue the existence of this world (it is fragile) (it disappears if it is not transmitted). The competence pedagogy negates the intentionality of teaching. In this aspect, it stands opposite to any and all teaching.

But, with the competence approach, a second and consequential problem arises. As soon as one stops conceiving teaching from the discipline, but thinks of teaching and its end from an institutionalised set of external and cross-disciplinary competences, the question ensues of the instance, the institution provided with the overwhelming power to decide the competences needing to be acquired by the student population. It can now be assessed that the standards of the different schooling systems in European countries are reiterations of recommendations given by the OECD or the Council of Europe; and similar standards, slightly different or locally adapted, apply throughout the world. In other words, it is the political power (the respective governments of different countries) that has hold of the standards; and that can modify them (and modify them following the whims of its current worries: emergence of health competences, citizen, informational, emotional, psycho-social, etc., competences depending on the crisis to be controlled). Is it necessary to say why such a system represents a danger?

On the contrary, when one teaches with a disciplinary focus (i.e., in the framework given by school subjects), what is taught is “guaranteed” and

2. in English in the text.

“discussed” (sometimes heatedly) by the experts of a given discipline; whether one agrees with the national program finally agreed upon (and there are a thousand reasons to disagree), the decision is taken within a discipline, with its own history, its institutions, its habits, its inertia, its defaults, its grandeurs. And in each discipline, the teacher is free to articulate within their teaching the many contradicting movements coexisting here (because each discipline is alive; mathematics and philosophy, though very ancient, are alive; sociology and economics, though very young, are alive too). Each discipline is shaped by hardship and contradiction. And each discipline, in addition, comes to clash with its neighbours, and dialogs, and discusses with them (interdisciplinarity). (And new knowledge is born from these dialogs, interferences, couplings, – even, sometimes, a new discipline...) In opposition to this, the logic of the competence means to say (from up high) (from above the disciplines) what the disciplines must do, and what their purpose is. The competence approach is not interdisciplinary (as it pretends to be), but extra-disciplinary. It is an abduction of teaching (of the disciplines) by the managerial political power. This fact constitutes an important political danger.

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That the Ministère de l'éducation nationale et de l'Enseignement supérieur has decided to treat its employees (us) with the means and methods of human resourcing (Direction of employees replaced by the Direction of Human Resources; and this is not only a name change, as we are starting to feel daily...), can never entail that the teachers should be forced – for one second – to treat and think of their students within the same frames.

For this reason, we, teachers, signatories of this call, solemnly pledge to:

**1° stop washing out the words from this pedagogy by banishing them from our vocabulary: the word “competence” and the word “resource” meant this way.**

If, for whatever reason, we are still forced (through legal means linked to our status as government workers, temporary workers, contractual workers, etc.) to use these words, then we will do so only by putting them at a distance, through the use of inverted commas for example, or by following them with the disclaimer, in speech or in writing: “...as the rectorates’ pedagogues say”;

or “as they say in human resources”; or whatever disclaimer will inspire us in the moment.

**2° oppose, wherever it is possible and through all the means at our disposal, the progression of the competence approach – and symbolically, never to miss an opportunity to say (in front of the students, in front of the students’ parents, in front of our hierarchy, in front of our colleagues, in front of the elected bodies, in front of our unions, etc.), explaining its reasons, our hostility to the concept of “competence”.**

(And this while claiming for us, if necessary, this common call, titled in the most general manner possible “The teachers’ call for active opposition to a competence-based approach in schools”, so that the local oppositions do not seem isolated, but rather, can come together in a general movement of rejection spreading in the whole country, and in all levels of schooling.)

School teaches, as it always did, knowledges and know-hows. The word “competence” is useless. We will work better without it. (In no way do we mean that schooling should stay as it is; it can and it must change; but the path of the “competence”, happily framing itself as an emancipating change for the students, is in reality the path towards an education of biopolitical and neo-liberal control.)

(And this is not to say either that it would not be necessary and possible to create, as our colleagues in elementary and primary schools do daily, through the means of alternative pedagogies, for example, better ways to help our students, and put forward, when it is absolutely necessary to assess them, more adequate and inclusive ways to do it than the numbered grade. But such efforts do not at all imply the necessity of turning to the “competence”, as education sciences would have us believe for the past 20 years; they do not even imply using this word, which is not ours. In this case, let us use the word “know-how”; and let us approach this problem like a pedagogical problem, i.e., like a problem in relation to teaching – and teaching only.)

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The future belongs not to the competence but to teaching. We will showcase resistance, but also patience. We know that the pedagogy of competence will be gone as the new gadget of education sciences (after the situation families, the objective pedagogy, etc.), but also and mainly as a neoliberal means to ap-

prehend personhood (and so, as a society-destructive instance) when we, in the schools, the middle schools, the high schools, the universities, will continue teaching the Pythagoras theorem, the sexual reproduction of plants, 1859, Pantagruel, Toussaint-Louverture, the rules of verb conjugation, the present perfect, Hegel, the arpeggio, 1792, the curve of the universe, Rimbaud, the joy of long jumping, or of hopping over hurdles.

Because all learning, all teaching is joyous. (And the Competence is an institution of sadness and of the “expected”.)

In Rennes,  
January 2024

PS. We, signatories, express our solidarity to all our colleagues who have been committed to this cause for years now, and who directly, or indirectly (but more and more harshly) are subjected to the backlash from the academy and the rector’s representatives. (Strikingly brutal actions from some rectorates and DESDEN, directed at some colleagues, have been witnessed).

N. B.

– All teachers, whether still active or retired, can sign this call.

– Signing this call can be done in two ways:

1° either through the means of the numeric platform “change.org”: <https://www.change.org/contre-l-entree-de-l-approche-par-competences-dans-les-ecoles-appel>. In this case, the signatory remains anonymous.

2° or by communicating one’s name and institution (for example: one’s teaching place, union, non-profit, etc.) to this address: [comite.action.competence.rennes@gmail.com](mailto:comite.action.competence.rennes@gmail.com). In this case, your name is shared in the list of signatories.

– The call’s text in pdf format, for printing and sharing, can be downloaded at this address: <https://www.pontcerq.fr/appel-des-enseignantes-et-des-enseignants-a-lutter-contre-lentree-de-l-approche-par-competences-dans-les-ecoles-de-la-maternelle-a-luniversite-appel-de-villejean/>.

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