Difference in Policy and Politics: Dialogues in Confidence
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Abstract: This paper reports on a process of engagement with administrators and Government Ministers in dialogue about diversity that was informed by Disability Studies in Education, a discipline that critiques existing ways of thinking about disability, actively promotes more positive constructions and representations of disabled people's lives and challenges conventional or traditional notions of normalcy. It took place within a project, initiated by Council of Europe, *Policies and practices for socio-cultural diversity* and involved the development of a framework of teacher competences for socio-cultural diversity. The paper charts the process of developing the framework and reports the dialogue that took place. The Ministers and administrators were encouraged to view teaching as a dialogue and to recognise teachers' competence in responding to diversity, following Levinas (1969; 1996), a philosopher who addresses questions of ethics, as a continuing responsibility of teachers to their students.

Key Words: disability studies, education, diversity

Introduction

This paper reports on the engagement of politicians and policymakers in dialogue about difference and identities that was informed by Disability Studies in Education. This discipline critiques existing ways of thinking about disability, actively promotes more positive constructions and representations of disabled people's lives and challenges conventional or traditional notions of normalcy. The dialogue took place within a Council of Europe Project, *Policies and practices for socio-cultural diversity,* and involved top level stakeholders, including education Ministers and administrators of Education across Europe (Council of Europe, 2008a & b; 2009; 2010a & b). Key ideas from Disability Studies in Education (principally informed by the work of Derrida, 1992a & b; 1993, and Levinas, 1969) were infused within the dialogues with the Ministers and administrators. These ideas involved Derrida's notion of aporia, a double contradictory imperative, as an alternative way of thinking about policy questions and Levinas's ethics, used to reframe teaching as a more explicit relationship of continuous obligation towards and responsibility for students. The ideas were used as strategies for interrupting the hegemony of difference as deficit, whilst working within a familiar (and possibly obligatory) context of teacher competences. The engagement with these ideas and strategies, and the administrators and politicians' responses to them, are recounted in this paper. The outcomes suggest an openness and receptiveness to rethinking difference and identities and a recognition of the importance of assisting student teachers in becoming confident in responding to difference, rather than training them to manage difference competently. The relative success of the dialogues provides great optimism for the capacity for Disability Studies in Education to support and direct dialogue with administrators and politicians in positive and productive ways.

The Council of Europe *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue: "Living Together as Equals in Dignity"* (2008b), whilst underlining the common responsibility among us all for fostering intercultural dialogue, identifies educators at all levels as playing an "essential role" (p.

32). This role places obligations on teachers to promote tolerance and understanding among diverse populations and to challenge negative attitudes. Yet, as the social capital theorist Robert Putnam (2007) has argued, diversity produces fear and leads people to disconnect from one another. He contends that diversity is a threat to democracy, citing evidence that in areas of high levels of ethnic diversity, people desist from associating with others and "hunker down—that is, to pull in like a turtle" (2007, p. 149). For beginning teachers, diversity produces significant fear and they see themselves as needing to acquire highly specific and narrow skills in order to address the perceived deficits among their pupils and manage diversity in their classrooms (Allan, 2008; Gallagher, 2010; Rizvi, 2009). Many of the textbooks on special education available to beginning teachers reinforce such expectations (Brantlinger, 2006; Sleeter, 1987). The segmented way of presenting particular 'conditions' within the texts and the absence of any regard for the intersections of disability with class, race, gender, sexuality or any other aspect of diversity inevitably limits student teachers' understanding and sense of capability (Connor, 2006; Lewis & Armstrong, 2011). The realities presented in the special education textbooks bear little resemblance to the children whom the student teachers encounter and the certainty that they command makes them irresponsible (Allan & Slee, 2008; Brantlinger, 2006). The World Report on Disability (WHO, 2011), in reporting the problems of poor health, low educational achievements, and high rates of poverty faced by disabled people, identifies a lack of teacher capacity to teach inclusively as a key factor that contributes to these deficits.

A narrow view of teaching as involving the management of diversity is unlikely to enable teachers to foster intercultural dialogue and could lead to discrimination and exclusion (Oliver, 1996). The White Paper's authors, acknowledging the impossibility of prescribing dialogue across cultures and ethnicities in law, offer the White Paper as an "open invitation" (p. 5) to engage in "open debate about the future organisation of society" (p. 5). The framework of competences for teachers that was developed within the Council of Europe project, with its emphasis on values and teacher capacities to respond to diversity, rather than on discrete skills, was a positive response to this invitation. The framework also provides a response to the enjoinder, issued by Lewis and Armstrong (2011), to:

> "…Accept the responsibility to help the field progress from mere documentation and description of the problem of disability disparities toward the research outcome of developing, identifying, and promoting strategies that will begin to effectively address, and eventually ameliorate these challenges." (p. 4)

The Council of Europe project represents a response to the White Paper's invitation that is interpreted, following Levinas (1969), as an ethical responsibility. The project and the subsequent dialogues with Ministers and administrators were ethical, through their focus on the teacher's relationship with their students, and responsible, through the emphasis on strengthening and intensifying that relationship. The status of being both ethical and responsible represents an important departure from approaches to teacher education for diversity that are concerned merely with helping teachers to manage difference.

The *Policies and practices for socio-cultural diversity* project commenced in 2006 and was co-coordinated by the Council of Europe's Head of the Division of Citizenship, Human Rights and Diversity and Secretary to the Steering Committee for Education, within the

Directorate of Education and Languages, Villano Qriazi, and chaired by Anne-Lise Arneson, from Norway. Researchers from Scotland (author), Austria, Bulgaria, Estonia Cyprus, Greece and France participated. The project was undertaken in three phases and began with a survey of teacher education programmes within Europe, examining how well all aspects of diversity were covered. Phase 2 developed an analysis of concepts, principles and challenges for teacher education for diversity and the project concluded, in Phase 3, with the establishment of a framework of competences for diversity. The framework was taken on the road to a series of national consultation tables, held in Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus and Estonia and involving member state officials, government officers, teacher educators, managers, researchers, principals, teachers and students. Following discussion in each of these consultation tables, the framework of competences was revised and refined.

The survey, carried out in Phase 1, found that in many parts of Europe initial teacher education did not adequately prepare beginning teachers to cope with the diversity which they met in their classrooms (Council of Europe, 2008a). In analysing the concepts, principles, and challenges for teacher education the project participants identified a number of problems which made the development of effective teacher education for diversity a complex task (Council of Europe, 2008a). One key issue was the increasing complexity and diversity of European societies and the limited, partial and outdated understandings of these societies, the needs and issues of particular groups within them, and the appropriate educational responses (OECD, 2005; Rizvi, 2009). A second issue concerned structural causes of inequalities and exclusion, including inadequate educational policies and legal frameworks. These were understood as being important in underlining responsibilities and obligations towards building diverse democratic societies but may themselves produce inequalities and exclusion or place constraints on the development of diversity within countries. Participants recognized that if these structural barriers were not addressed by member states, too much of a burden would be placed upon teacher education to support beginning teachers in responding effectively to diversity. The capacity of teacher education institutions to develop teacher competences was identified as a problem: the survey of teacher education institutions found that the experience and expertise of the teacher educators themselves was limited and there was a lack of relevant institutional policies.

Whilst these issues clearly made the task of improving teacher education in relation to diversity a significant challenge, the project team viewed it as one that could be taken up. There was an expectation, from within the Council of Europe, that the response to the challenge would take the form of the establishment of teacher competences for diversity, which could "serve as a common denominator" (Council of Europe, 2009, p. 12). The project team viewed competences, and governments' and organizations' attraction to them as part of a complex "governance turn" (Ball 2009, p. 537; Ozga, 2009), catching teachers and teacher educators in a web of accountability which emphasises proving rather than improving (Ball, 2000). We envisaged scope for reframing and reorienting competences. This was undertaken in relation to ethics and is discussed below.

Becoming Competent, Becoming Ethical

The origins of the term competence can be seen in the Greek notion of *arete*, meaning excellence, in the sense of being the best, and the Latin term *virtus*, a kind of moral excellence. It

can be attributed to individuals, social groups or institutions, and the words "competence," "competency" or the plural form "competencies" are often used interchangeably. The term has a large variety of meanings, and it can be captured by the terms "ability," "aptitude," "capability," "effectiveness" and "skill" (Weinert, 2001). Competence can be attributed to individuals, social groups or institutions possessing or acquiring attributes that enable them to meet demands presented by the external environment (Weinert, 2001). However, the notion of competence and its plural, "competences," have, in recent years, been replaced by the narrower version of "competency," or the plural form "competencies," denoting discrete skills and activities which individuals can perform.

Competence surfaced as a concept within teacher education in the early 1990s and has become firmly embedded within standards frameworks for the accreditation of teachers. However, these standards have been recognised as being problematic. Roy (2003) argues that they envelop the student teacher within rigid stratifications, which deny complex thinking and firmly entrench their novice and incompetent identities. They have been viewed as invalid indicators of good teaching (Smyth & Shacklock, 1998; Mahoney & Hextall, 2000) and as part of the "struggle over the teacher's soul" (Ball, 2003, p. 217). When the standards have been applied to diversity, the effects have been sinister, pushing the new teacher towards the management of, rather than engagement with, difference. Teachers merely have to perform the diversity-related standards, without necessarily committing to the values associated with them. And since there has been little attempt to specify what effective engagement with diversity might look like, it is inevitable that scrutiny of these particular standards will be "light touch" compared with the attention given to those associated with the more visible aspects of teaching such as classroom management. Such a framing of competences is irresponsible because it makes few demands on beginning teachers to engage with the diversity in his or her classroom other than by problematising it and seeking to limit its impact. This problematising of diversity creates, as Critchley (1999) suggests, a forgetfulness of the Other and produces inequality and injustice.

The White Paper takes up competences as a necessity for promoting intercultural dialogue but suggests that these competences "are not automatically acquired: they need to be learned, practised and maintained throughout life" (Council of Europe, 2008b, p. 29). The paper identifies three key competence areas: democratic citizenship, language, and history. These are detailed as important areas of experience both in and out of school, but what is not made clear is the nature of teachers' competence in order to facilitate these. However the warning against using history teaching as "an instrument of ideological manipulation, of propaganda or…for the promotion of intolerant and ultra-nationalistic, xenophobic, racist or anti-Semitic ideas" (p. 30) gives some indication of what teachers are expected *not* to do.

Disability Studies in Education opens up possibilities for thinking about – and rethinking – diversity that were taken up within the Council of Europe project, *Policies and Practices for Socio-cultural Diversity*. The contribution and potential of Disability Studies in Education, in spite of its relatively short existence, has been significant and extends beyond disability to all aspects of diversity as well as offering exciting prospects for intersectionality (Connor, 2006; Erevelles, 2006). Whilst there remains some debate about the precise nature of this field of scholarship, what is useful here is the delineation of what it *does*. First of all, Disability Studies

in Education offers critique of existing ways of thinking about disability, for example as a deficit or a medical condition. Second, it actively promotes more positive constructions and representations of disabled people's lives, often, as Connor (2006) points out, by reclaiming pre-existing knowledge that has either been silenced along with the voices of disabled people or left out of historical commentaries. Third it challenges conventional or traditional notions of normalcy by altering the space in which disabled people are represented and by subverting how this is done (Kuppers, 2003), actively altering the power relations and making a different kind of engagement possible. These achievements have been possible through strong argumentation (Sleeter, 1987; Valle and Connor, 2010, by the use of evidence from the previously subjugated voices of disabled people (Kliewer, 2006; Ware, 2001) and by engagement with a multiplicity of theoretical resources from the philosophers of difference (Allan, 2008; Kuppers, 2003; Tremain, 2008).

Levinas' framework of ethics (1969, 1999) has a particular value that was used to help to trouble the 'stuck places in our thinking about difference' (Ferri, 2006, p. 304). His ethics makes it possible to rethink the notion of teacher competence for diversity as a relationship of responsibility, directed at all students within the classroom. Such an ethics, constituting a reorientation to human subjectivity, stems from disappointment at the failure to be responsible for the Other, and at the forgetfulness of that Other, especially that Other who is different in some way, and aspires to "be able to face and face down the iniquities of the present" (Critchley 2007, p. 88). An ethics has as its core an absolute responsibility to the Other and the relationship is experienced, because of an inadequacy in the face of the Other, as asymmetrical (rather than as one of equals, which the White Paper advocates) and as not benign, but as a responsibility that "persecutes me with its sheer weight" (Critchley 2007, p. 59). This produces an absolute imperative towards the Other which is a "gratuitous and non-transferable responsibility, as if they were chosen and unique—and in which the other were absolutely other, i.e…still incomparable and thus unique" (Levinas 1999, p. 170). The responsibility, according to Levinas, is inescapable:

> "…To be a "self" is to be responsible before having done anything…I am not merely the origin of myself, but I am disturbed by the Other. Not judged by the Other, but condemned without being able to speak, persecuted." (Levinas, 1996, p. 94)

The responsibility to the Other is both "indeclinable" (Levinas, 1998, p. 134), so we cannot say "no" to it, and infinite:

> "The idea of the infinite consists precisely and paradoxically in thinking more than what is thought while nevertheless conserving it in its excessive relation to thought. The idea of the infinite consists in grasping the ungraspable while nevertheless guaranteeing its status as ungraspable." (Levinas, 1969, p. 19)

The responsibility that one has to the Other operates at three levels: responding *to* the Other; responding *for oneself* to the Other and responding *for the other,* by substituting oneself for the other person in his or her responsibilities (Hutchens, 2004). And whilst these are heavy responsibilities, as Butler (2004) reminds us, being disturbed by the obligation of the Other is a vital part of what it is to be human: "Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if not, we're

missing something" (p. 43). Biesta's (2008) notion of "pedagogy with empty hands" (p. 198) is an extremely useful way of thinking about education from an ethical point of view. It requires teachers to approach students within their classroom without ready solutions or "tricks of the trade" (p. 208), derived from textbooks, research or elsewhere, and to ask "what do you think of it?" (p. 208). This notion of constant readiness is something of a departure from the idea of a teacher whose lessons, activities and outcomes are planned ahead and whose actions in class can be predicted. It does, however, appear more likely to enable teachers to respond to diversity in whatever shape or form it surfaces.

In considering the competences required by teachers for diverse democratic societies within the project, we posed the questions, 'What do we want our teachers to understand? To be? To do?' We suggested that teacher competence for diverse democratic societies could not reasonably be viewed as consisting of fixed amounts of knowledge, skills or behaviours to be acquired by teachers, but that it must be responsive to the changing nature of the society in which the teacher works and subject to the teacher's continuous reflection and adaptation. This representation of the competent teacher in relation to diversity met with a positive response from the participants in the consultation tables, especially the teachers, teacher educators and students, and indeed one teacher from Estonia offered us an image of the teacher as gardener. This kind of teacher, she explained, had to be always ready and adaptive to the different demands of the various species in her classroom. She had to be prepared to provide different amounts of water, nourishment and protection to each individual and to recognise that they would flourish in different ways. Above all, the teacher had to love each one of her charges. The image of the teacher as gardener resonated well with the development of competences which were ethical and which principally concerned the relationship between the teacher and his or her learners.

The framework, in its final form, contains three clusters of competences. In the centre, and central, is *Communication and Relationships*. The competences within the clusters which flanked *Communication and Relationships—Knowledge and Understanding* and *Management and Teaching*—would, we argued, be of a second order to, and developed from, the acquisition of competences in, *Communication and Relationships*. Fundamentally, we argued, these competences were not finite skills that could be demonstrated, but required continuous development and review. Table 1 outlines the teacher competences for diversity.

Insert Table 1

The framework was published in the third of the project's reports (Council of Europe, 2010b) and is now in the public domain. The essence of the ethical approach informed some of the advice in support of the 23rd Council of Europe Ministerial Conference, *Teacher Education for a Sustainable Democratic Society*, which took place in June 2010 in Ljubljana, Slovenia. Ministers were invited to consider teacher competences alongside the status and conditions of teachers and partnership working. Acting in the role of Expert Adviser to the Council of Europe and taking responsibility for teacher competences, I conveyed the ethical approach to competences to the Ministers. Although it was not named it as such, Ministers were introduced to the notion of a continuous obligation by teachers to each child and to each new form of diversity as it presented within the classroom. The inappropriateness of a developing a fixed notion of skill for the purpose of managing difference was justified as unsustainable and the

Ministers were instead treated to the Estonian teacher's image of the teacher as gardener. The choice of language was important and was influenced by Solis and Connor's (2006) warning that much of the conversation within disability studies is inaccessible outside of academe. Although many of the Eastern European Ministers had a background in education, it was important not to assume this and it was a significant challenge to find words that provided solidity and reassurance within a familiar discourse of competences but which also conveyed a sense of openness and responsiveness to difference. Derrida's (1992a) notion of an aporia - a double contradictory imperative - was deployed as a strategy whereby Ministers were encouraged to understand that decisions were not necessary resolvable or reducible to one single choice and indeed that it was the very process of keeping two apparently oppositional questions open that was at the heart of justice. Derrida (1992b) argues that it is the point at which decisions are made, when only one option is selected, that closure is created and injustice is produced:

> "When the path is clear and given, when a certain knowledge opens up the way in advance, the decision is already made, it might as well be said that there is none to make; irresponsibly, and in good conscience, one simply applies or implements a program . . . It makes of action the applied consequence, the simple application of a knowledge or know how. It makes of ethics and politics a technology. No longer of the order of practical reason or decision, it begins to be irresponsible." (pp. 41-45, original emphasis)

Questions were thus framed and presented to the Ministers as aporias, for example asking them to consider how, on the one hand, student teachers might learn to develop as autonomous professionals, and on the other hand learn to depend on others for support and collaboration; or how new teachers might work to maximise the achievement of students, with an eye on performance profiles and at the same time ensure that all students improve and that no student is excluded.

The Ministers were advised that although the challenge of developing competences for diverse democratic societies was both enormous and complex, there was clearly much that member states could do which was not dependent on vast amounts of resources, specialised technical knowledge or personnel, but which involved finding ways of simultaneously creating opportunities and removing barriers to dialogue and participation. Their response was one of recognition and desire and although such formal events can be more memorable for their ministerial platitudes than for their evidence of transformatory thought, there was a proliferation, in the dialogue with the Ministers, of a terminology of balance and of acting with two hands, "on the one hand … and on the other hand …" a frequent refrain. The subsequent declaration which the Ministers' signed up to expressed a significant commitment to, and responsibility for, the Other and an intent to remove barriers to intercultural dialogue:

> "RECOGNISING that, in times of global economic crisis, European societies are facing many challenges such as increasing inequality and social exclusion, which threaten the fundamental principles of socially sustainable societies including equal opportunities and social justice.… CONSIDERING that all teachers and other education professionals are one of the essential pillars of the process of building sustainable democratic societies and need to develop the necessary transversal competences; these are interrelated knowledge, skills and attitudes enabling teachers

to model democratic and participatory processes based on respect for human rights, diversity and human dignity." (Council of Europe, 2010a, pp. 2–3)

Beyond the formal language of the declaration, the Ministers can be seen highlighting the centrality of teachers as agents of intercultural dialogue and signaling the importance of teacher education in equipping teachers effectively and appropriately—enabling them to *be* democratic citizens in order to cultivate these values and attributes among their students. Ethics, even if they were just implied, had been invited along to the ministerial dialogue and appeared to have been a welcome guest.

<div align="center">Conclusion: Infinitely Competent?</div>

[Ethics] being utopian does not prevent it from investing our everyday actions of generosity or goodwill towards the other: even the smallest and most commonplace gestures, such as saying "after you" as we sit at the dinner table or walk through a door, bear witness to the ethical. (Levinas, 1986, p. 32)

Levinas invites us here to find ways of recognising the Other in the everyday and in the smallest of encounters. The Council of Europe's invitation is on a larger scale and is concerned with the inequalities produced by an education system that insists that "everyone do better than everyone else" (McDermott, 1993, p. 274). The pathologising and naming of individual deficits within that system represents what Thomas (2008) calls a "closure on learning" (p. 7), which produces and reinforces disabled, ethnic, class and gendered identities as failures and, as Gillborn and Youdell (2000) have documented, there is a channeling (and rationing) of educational support away from these individuals and towards those most likely to benefit. Beginning teachers, through no fault of their own, lose sight of the Other or, worse still, become afraid of the diversity that the Other brings and are forced to think of diversity as a problem to be *managed* within the classroom.

The capacity of Disability Studies in Education to disrupt, trouble and subvert, through teaching and research has been ably demonstrated by Ferri (2006), Erevelles (2006) and Valle and Connor (2010) and many others. Here, the success, if I might claim such a thing, was evidenced by Ministers using the language of aporias to describe double responsibilities; calling for shifts in thinking, for example from needs to rights; an apparent willingness to experiment with difference; and undertakings to promote inter-cultural dialogue in Ministers' own Member States. It was achieved by working from a Disability Studies in Education perspective, gently steering the administrators away from assumed knowledges about both students with diverse backgrounds and what their teachers need to manage them. Disability Studies in Education enabled a repositioning of diversity as interesting and as something for teachers – and indeed governments – to be curious about. This reorientation to difference as positive was experienced, not as disruptive, but as inviting and the notion of decisions being multiple and, in Derrida's sense, aporetic, came as something as a relief to the Ministers and administrators. Furthermore Levinas' ethics allowed for a rethinking of the relationship between teachers and students *as a dialogue. The Ministers and administrators remained unaware of the way the pushing of their thinking had been informed by Disability Studies in Education and there was never any mention of either ethics or the aporia. Nevertheless, they became taken with the idea of teaching as a*

dialogue and with how diversity, within such a dialogue, becomes a central and inevitable element and something that the teacher must be ready—and eager—to respond to.

Teacher education, in cultivating the beginning teacher's readiness, inevitably also has to take the form of a dialogue within which they can articulate anxieties and questions, rather than rehearse the dogma of tolerance. It was possible to introduce a Levinasian ethics into the process of establishing a framework of competences through a series of contingent elements. First, there was the Council of Europe and its commitment to dialogue beyond a rhetorical level. The Council of Europe's relative lack of power compared with the European Union is its strength, as it leaves it free to guide in a more ethical and responsible way. Villano Qriazi successfully managed the project as an intercultural dialogue, enabling it to develop along these ethical lines, whilst also having regard for the expectations of the Council of Europe and a detailed knowledge of how best to communicate complex ideas to policymakers and politicians. The researchers who participated in the project, whilst not all familiar with Levinas' ethics, brought a commitment to helping teachers towards greater recognition of, and confidence with, diversity. Thus, an ethical approach was possible, within the structure and ethos of the Council of Europe and through a dialogue that was itself intercultural and, above all, responsible.

The ethical framework of competences were presented as far from being a solution to the *problem* of diversity; rather, diversity itself, and teachers' relationship with it and with the Other, was its own solution. Re-presenting competences as ethical, using the recognisable language and structures of the competences themselves, appears to have engaged the policymakers and politicians, then redirected that engagement, in more responsible ways. It remains to be seen whether this particular competence framework will be *used* in the way we have intended, and as Levinas has suggested, to develop a teaching relationship in which the teacher, as well as the student, is taught. One might hope that it can provoke, among teachers and teacher educators, a dialogue that has responsibility at its heart.

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Table 1: Framework of teacher competences for diversity

Knowledge and understanding	Communication and relationships	Management and teaching
Competence 1 Knowledge and understanding of the political, legal and structural context of socio-cultural diversity	Competence 7 Initiating and sustaining positive communication with pupils, parents and colleagues from different socio-cultural backgrounds	Competence 13 Addressing socio-cutural diversity in curriculum and institutional development
Competence 2 Knowledge about international frameworks and understanding of the key principles that relate to socio-cultural diversity education	Competence 8 Recognising and responding to the communicative and cultural aspects of languages used in school	Competence 14 Establishing a participatory, inclusive and safe learning environment
Competence 3 Knowledge about different dimensions of diversity eg ethnicity, gender, special needs and understanding their implications in school settings	Competence 9 Creating open-mindedness and respect in the school community	Competence 15 Selecting and modifying teaching methods for the learning needs of pupils
Competence 4 Knowledge of the range of teaching approaches, methods and materials for responding to diversity	Competence 10 Motivating and stimulating all pupils to learn individually and in co-operation with others	Competence 16 Critically evaluating diversity within teaching materials, eg textbooks, videos, media
Competence 5 Skills of inquiry into different socio-cultural issues	Competence 11 Involving all parents in school activities and collective decision-making	Competence 17 Using a variety of approaches to culturally sensitive teaching and assessment
Competence 6 Reflection on one's own identity and engagement with diversity	Competence 12 Dealing with conflicts and violence to prevent marginalization and school failure	Competence 18 Systematic reflection on and evaluation of own practice and its impact on students