Wild competences: Challenging the neoliberal frame in adult education through collective actions

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Abstract

The article examines the concept of competences from a critical perspective. The authors begin with an analysis of the dominant competences discourse, highlighting its limitations in times of polycrises. They propose the concept of wild competences, acquired through collective actions. These competences are both individual and collective in nature. Unlike traditional competences focused on adaptation within neoliberal frameworks, wild competences are subversive, enabling social actors to destabilise hierarchies, challenge the status quo, and initiate transformative actions. The analysis explores three aspects of wild competences: their foundation for reflexive action, their role in the laboratory of emancipation, and their contribution to reconstructing social orders. Wild competences thus provide alternative pathways for societal change and democratic engagement.

Keywords: wild competences, social movement learning, collective action, polycrisis

Introduction

The competences fostered and reproduced within the educational system fall short in times of crisis. This paper seeks to revisit the discourse on competences and examine those aspects of acquired competences that usually are neglected, both in mainstream educational narratives and in critical approaches. We introduce the concept of wild competences – knowledge, skills and attitudes that arise rather outside the frame of formal education settings. These are competences that we can acquire in alternative learning spaces, e.g., within social movements. These are subversive competences that disrupt the

status quo through radical imagination understood as 'the ability to imagine the world, life and social institutions not as they are but as they might otherwise be' (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014, p. 3), and collective reflection, paving the way for new forms of action and societal transformation.

We are currently facing a polycrisis (Hausner & Krzykawski, 2023) or even a systemic crisis (Kliman et al., 2011). The 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath exposed this fragility (Gilbert, 2013; Kotz, 2009). We are also contending with the climate crisis (Verlie, 2022; Stimm & Dinkelaker, 2024), highlighted by activists warnings (Bendell & Read, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped lives across multiple dimensions (Bengtsson & Van Poeck, 2021), while growing concern surrounds the crisis of liberal democracy and the eroding trust in its institutions (Carpenter et al., 2024). Wars further complicate efforts to manage the polycrisis (Coetzer et al., 2023), forcefully reminding us that violence is one way to reduce complexity when confronting 'wicked problems' - systemic issues that defy simple or rational solutions (see Head, 2008; Bendyk, 2020). As Eschenbacher and Fleming (2021) note, the global and individual dimensions of these crises are deeply interconnected.

We understand crisis as the experience of a breakdown of established frameworks of understanding and action. It exposes the underlying rules of life, which - whether formalised or rooted in tradition, ritual, or custom lose their validity and applicability (Ratajczak, 2020). These crises are not neutral in their impact. As Servant-Miklos (2024) aptly observes, 'patterns of oppression continue to play out: people already marginalised by socio-economic forces, gender, ethnicity, disability, among other factors, feel the brunt of the pain and have the least resources to cope' (p. 1). This unequal distribution of harm is one of the key reasons why we consider grassroot mobilisations central to understanding and responding to polycrisis dynamics. Crisis is an existential experience, a suspension of meaning that compels action and the creation of a new order. Overcoming a crisis requires seeking alternatives and authentic foundations for change. When existing rules lose their coherence, collective action becomes essential (Ratajczak, 2020). While systemic crisis confronts communities with previously unimaginable scenarios, such as national bankruptcy or adaptation to extreme temperatures, the sense of dread remains individual. These are therefore liminal situations that demand a collective response – a shift away from the past's 'obvious reality'. At global, group, and biographical levels such disruptions, where unexpected situations force social actors to reflect, provide opportunities for learning (Alheit, 2021; Eschenbacher & Fleming, 2021; Biesta, 2007).

In this text, we identify competences that may be overlooked in times of relative peace but become crucial during crises. We begin with a critical examination of the concept of competence and its limitations. This reveals a key, often overlooked aspect: competences are not only acquired individually, in service to the system, but also collectively, e.g. within social movements, through engagement in protest. Furthermore, beyond the competences recognised in formal education, activists possess something additional. This surplus, combined with the informal potential for learning, constitutes the so-called wild competences, which we explore in this text.

The competency discourse and its limits

There is no single definition of competence. Most commonly, competence is understood as a category encompassing knowledge, skills, attitudes, and performance abilities, which collectively translate into action in the world (e.g., Bielska, 2014; Queeney, 1997). Competences have become a framework for interpreting contemporary education, posing

challenges for both practitioners and theorists, as not everything important in education stems from formal teaching (e.g., the disposition to learn and socialisation). Commonly, a competent individual, group, or organisation is capable of responding adequately to various situations, which reflects an adaptation to the changing context of life (Solarczyk-Szwec, 2017). In educational practice, competences integrate both academic and upbringing objectives.

Competence as the oppression of education

Competence is generally understood as the result of teaching or training (Cornford, 2005). In this view, it is reduced to the level of school-based knowledge and skills, treated as a value in itself (Męczkowska, 2004).

According to Jurgiel-Aleksander and Jagiełło-Rusiłowski (2013), competence functions in discourse as the language of 'educational administration'. They argue that framing competence as the management of knowledge and skills reflects a neoliberal economic order that confines education to serving the labor market. Within this framework, knowledge is seen as a means to make individuals 'active citizens of the knowledge society and labour market' (Jurgiel-Aleksander & Jagiełło-Rusiłowski, 2013, p. 67). The appeal of this discourse stems from the belief that in a globalised, turbulent world, education fails to deliver its promises, leaving graduates unprepared to meet challenges (Gilbert, 2013). Such an approach to structuring educational objectives results in situations where a competence deficit identified in an individual can be administratively matched with educational offerings.

The term competence is frequently encountered in the discourse of lifelong learning, particularly in European Commission documents on education. Foundational reports by UNESCO, OECD, and the EU define *lifelong learning* as 'any learning activity with an objective, undertaken on a continuous basis and aimed at improving knowledge, skills, and competences' (Comissão das Comunidades Europeias, 2000, p. 3).

Over time, the competence model has subordinated the traditional qualification model (Barros, 2012), which became significant in Western societies in the late 1940s. Qualifications served two main purposes: supporting collective bargaining systems that ranked and classified occupations, and structuring vocational education to focus on knowledge acquisition and certification. The concept of qualifications organised the labour market, operating at three levels: (1) knowledge and skills gained through vocational training; (2) standard job requirements; (3) opportunities for promotion and salary adjustment within professional   hierarchies (Barros, 2012). The qualification-based model was highly structured to the extent that people believed attaining the appropriate level of qualifications would correspond to achieving a specific social status. People trusted that gaining qualifications guaranteed specific jobs and predictable financial compensation, as well as clear conditions for career advancement. This predictability fostered stability, making work a foundation for collective workers' identity. Thus, a trained shipyard electrician entering the workforce knew in advance what wage s/he would receive, what tasks s/he would perform, and how s/he could progress to a supervisory position. The qualification-based system functioned as an implicit contract between workers and employers, stabilising expectations and reinforcing occupational hierarchies.

The category of competence shifts attention to the individuals and their personal resources. It is linked to action, with individual experience taking centre stage (cf. Jurgiel-Aleksander, 2013). This shift is rooted in neoliberal culture, which has transferred the responsibility for people's life success from institutions and organisations, including trade

unions, to individuals. This transition offers flexible forms of employment and differentiated wages but requires individuals to invest time and energy, develop personal strategies, and continuously learn and grow throughout their careers (Nilsson & Nyström, 2013). According to Barros (2012), the concept of competence

> appears to be deeply instrumental and applies overwhelmingly to key benchmark skills that underpin a logic of educational results (meaning productivity gains for companies, and competitive empowerment for employees). (p. 127)

From a critical standpoint, the competency discourse is seen as objectifying education by subordinating it to political and economic goals (Nicoll & Olesen, 2013; Fragoso & Olesen, 2017). Currently, being 'competent' means being a 'well-adapted one, whose personal action is reduced to the sphere of their positive professional commitment and their positive performance as a consumer' (Barros, 2012, p. 130). Following its colonisation of education, the competency discourse extended its reach to domains beyond vocational goals, giving rise to areas like intercultural competences (Leung et al., 2014) and civic competence (Biesta, 2009; Solarczyk-Szwec, 2017; Cramer & Toff, 2017). It has also been employed not only to describe but to design futures (OECD, 2019). In this context, transformative competences have emerged, aspiring to shape the future for better lives. These involve 'creating new value, reconciling tensions and dilemmas, and taking responsibility' (OECD, 2019, p. 4). Transformative competences aim to help individuals navigate various situations and are highly transferable across different spheres of life. Interestingly, this framework stresses learners' engagement with the moral and ethical consequences of their actions. Such competences can be incorporated into curricula and may also 'be acquired at home, in the family, and in the community, during interactions with others' (p. 5). The creation of new value is largely intended to serve 'economic growth and social development that addresses urgent global challenges, such as demographic shifts, resource scarcity and climate change' (p. 5). These competences align with the contemporary neoliberal understanding of civic competences (Solarczyk-Szwec, 2017), yet they also humanise the lifelong learning discourse (Jurgiel-Aleksander & Jagiełło-Rusiłowski, 2013).

Ironically, in contemporary times, a competent citizen is not supposed to be overly engaged in challenging or revealing social injustice. Instead, they are meant to adapt to the existing capitalist reality. In this perspective, the earlier concept of transformability largely pertains to adaptation within a shifting context. Implicitly, however, this adaptation is expected to occur within existing structures, namely liberal democracy and economic growth as the primary socio-political framework. It could be said that the competences discussed earlier are designed to uphold the status quo, or system.

Competence as a potential change

Educators prefer to view competences in a way that extends beyond mere adaptation. They see competences as outcomes of informal learning across diverse contexts (Solarczyk-Szwec, 2017) without reducing those contexts to instruments for achieving specific objectives. In this broad view, competences are dispositions acquired by a person throughout their life through learning (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 1994). These dispositions include knowledge, experience, skills, values, motivation, attitudes and style of action. They become vital in the face of rapidly evolving life conditions and the crises that challenge individuals and societies alike.

This broad approach of competences encompasses not only the skills necessary for the labour market but also the abilities for reflection, critical thinking and identity-building – dispositions that are shaped through social interactions, often independently of formal power relations or hierarchies (cf. Bernstein, 1996; Męczkowska, 2004). From this perspective, competences are seen as resources for individuals and groups, fostering creative social participation and the ability to adapt to evolving circumstances. Bernstein (1996) argues that competences are naturally creative and develop mainly in informal social interactions, independent of hierarchy or power. According to him, while everyone has the potential to acquire competences, not everyone has equal opportunities to realise them, because social circumstances influence who can use them effectively. Bernstein's concept of competences emphasises that demonstrating them requires creativity and adaptability rather than mere passive acquisition of knowledge. For educators, this view is significant as it shifts attention to the dynamic and applied aspects of competences, focusing on their utilisation rather than solely on their delivery through teaching. It stands in contrast to the administrative discourse of competences, which ties their demonstration to employment contexts and frames the challenge as equipping individuals with them for the workplace.

Building on Bernstein's approach, which emphasises creativity and adaptability in the process of realising competences, Męczkowska (2004) extends this perspective to the dispositions of adults engaged in processes of social transformation. According to Męczkowska, the competences not only help individuals adapt to new conditions but also encourage reflection on transforming the social and political environment to freely realise their potential. This raises the question of 'creating the individual potential of individuals and communities for active and creative participation in social life' (Męczkowska, 2004, p. 135) arises.

This perspective on competences shifts the focus from adaptation to actively shaping the conditions of social life, bringing pedagogical discourse closer to a critical reflection on the existing order. This position is sharply opposed to the administrative discourse of competences, which insists on adaptation and subordination to institutional objectives. Thus, education not only equips individuals with skills but also raises awareness of the need for social change – leading us to the concept of wild competences, a proposal that transcends the limitations of this critically reconstructed clash of competence discourses.

Both the understanding of competences as a form of educational oppression and as a driver of potential change assume their instrumentalisation and focus on the individual. This aligns with Biesta's (2009) critique. He notes that the construction of active citizenship, as promoted by the modern competence discourse, leads to its depoliticisation, reducing civic education to forms of socialisation (Biesta, 2009). This limits the democratic potential of individuals, shifting the focus from ongoing processes of democratisation to the notion of democrats as individual attitudes (Bielska, 2014). Biesta argues for a renewed focus on those aspects of education that can break away from the consensual model of democracy, thus addressing a gap in the existing discourse on civic education.

Wild competences and collective action

We introduce the concept of 'wild competences' that are not legitimised by formal education (cf. Weinert et al., 2019). These competences are not purely individual in nature; instead, they facilitate both the creation and obstruction of actions by others, making it difficult to associate them strictly with effectiveness. Wild competences may be individual (acquired by specific individuals), but are primarily collective (acquired by

social groups or communities). They are inherently linked to collective action. It is the emphasis on action that distinguishes the context of social movements from education, whose pinnacle of achievements is the aforementioned critical reflection on the social order. We talk about collective competences because the effectiveness of rebellious collectives depends on how individuals are incorporated into them rather than on how those individuals adapt, since they can withdraw from the movement at any time.

Wild competences consist of specific knowledge, skills and attitudes, which are particularly relevant during times of polycrisis. We conceive of knowledge as inherently critical, action-oriented, and instrumental in addressing urgent crises, serving as the bedrock of social action (e.g., Crowther, 2006). However, it is not merely technical knowledge ready for reproduction in any situation or context. Rather, it is cognitive - processed and constructed through rational engagement. It is also embodied (Butler, 2015; Hirai, 2015) and situated, manifesting in the structures of social movements, the scenography and props used in collective action, and the small-scale architecture of protest camps. This knowledge is not just spoken or written; it is enacted - expressed through rhythmic synchronisation, performative imitation ('fake it till you make it'), and emotional intensity, which fuels collective momentum and identity. Constantly evolving, such knowledge resists articulation through conventional academic discourse. Yet, far from being merely elusive or tacit, it is also inherently risky. Articulating it can expose activists to legal threats, corporate retaliation, or even violence, as seen in struggles against powerful institutions, from environmental defenders in the Amazon rainforest (Domosławski, 2024) to whistleblowers in global labour movements. Thus, while this knowledge is often communicated forcefully to mobilise resistance, it must also be strategically concealed to protect those who carry it. As McDonald (2004) notes, contemporary social movements increasingly rely on embodied knowledge, making it a crucial source of resistance and a foundation for what we term wild competencies.

Skills serve as essential resources for activist individuals and groups. These include organising skills, task delegation, communication abilities, stress management, etc. Within wild competences, such skills are significant as they foster a sense of empowerment and reinforce the belief that change is possible through grassroots collective action (cf. Van Dyke & Dixon, 2013). Activist skills often defy conventional definitions of expertise. Many are developed through direct action and clandestine practices, where authorship is deliberately erased in favour of collective ownership. These skills frequently blend practical and artistic dimensions while operating outside formal recognition frameworks. Some forms of public expression, like street art or eco-art, are practiced in legally ambiguous conditions, where legitimacy is determined not by official qualifications but by the willingness to take risks in a given context (Walter & Earl, 2017). Others are highly specialised, such as shareholder activism, where campaigners conduct corporate-standard analyses and pose strategic questions at general meetings to block harmful investments. Whether informal or highly technical, these skills remain integral to movement strategies, reinforcing collective power in the face of systemic opposition.

The construction of knowledge and the acquisition of skills are central to shaping activist attitudes. For instance, they contribute to sustained engagement in future activism (Van Dyke & Dixon, 2013). At the same time, possessing specific knowledge and skills would be futile without the right activist mindset.

What gives knowledge and skills their transformative potential is the mindset that directs their application. Wild competences prioritise imagination (Castoriadis, 1994; Zielińska et al., 2011), which becomes more vital than knowledge in circumstances demanding radical social and institutional transformation. Radical imagination is the competence in the sense that:

It is the courage and the intelligence to recognize that the world can and should be changed. But the radical imagination is not just about dreaming of different futures. It's about bringing those possible futures 'back' to work on the present, to inspire action and new forms of solidarity today. (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014, p. 3)

The prominence of imagination emerges in extended, often collective reflections on possible scenarios, typically initiated by 'what if' questions (Ruitenberg, 2008). These competences differ both directionally (e.g., aimed at dismantling and removing obstacles) and morphologically (where radical imagination takes precedence over structured knowledge) from those prevailing in periods when the obviousness of once-established solutions and institutions merely required maintenance and transmission. In a crisis, the competences required to salvage parts of the system or adapt to changes are not the same as those once considered essential for reproducing and sustaining liberal democracy. This difference alone highlights the subversive potential of wild competences. While they bear similarities to the already mentioned concept of 'transformative competences,' their trajectory and associated values differ.

Imagination alone is not enough, it must be oriented by care (e.g., Santos, 2019). While radical imagination enables envisioning any future, care provides its direction, anchoring it in concern for others and the world. This distinction is key in differentiating between movements that aim to change the conditions under which power operates and those that merely seek to replace individuals in positions of authority.

This distinction mirrors broader theoretical debates on power and empowerment. Some movements see power as a zero-sum struggle over control, aligning with Weberian perspectives that focus on seizing influence. Others, drawing from Foucauldian understandings, emphasise the democratisation of decision-making and the creation of participatory structures (cf. Cheater, 2005; Steinklammer, 2012). Wild competences, in this view, do not fit neatly into one ideological category (the left or the right one) but emerge wherever collective agency is cultivated through radical imagination and care, shaping struggles that transcend simple leadership transitions to challenge the very mechanisms of power.

Wild competences are grounded in critical thinking and reflexivity (cf. Brookfield, 2005). They enable individuals and groups to question the conditions under which they live and act, breaking free from the mechanical reproduction of established orders. Their critical capacity is directed at systemic issues. Wild competences find expression in questioning processes of democratisation, which are central to citizenship. In this sense, wild competences extend beyond the social dimension, assuming a political character that 'supports modes of political action and civic learning committed to a more critical and more political form of [...] citizenship' (Biesta, 2009, p. 146). Emerging spontaneously, sometimes in response to conflict, wild competences demonstrate how individuals and groups learn throughout their lives, transitioning from formal education to critical and creative actions within the realm of civic activity.

Examples of social practices that cultivate wild competences include the collective action of activists and activist groups, such as street protests. Collective action occurs when 'a certain number of people unite and act together with a shared purpose. It can take various forms, ranging from short-term, focused efforts to long-term, disruptive activities' (Fernández Torres, 2015, p. 67). In addition to voicing political demands crucial for democratisation, collective action 'may also take the form of the direct production of collective goods, through a broad range of actions that stretch from the communitarian enactment of alternative lifestyles to various forms of mutual help and

service delivery' (della Porta & Diani, 2015, p. 3). Activists' actions and the learning derived from them, take place through engagement in various types of dissent (including resistance to authority), observing the world, reflecting on their actions, and understanding their place within a broader context (e.g., Szczygieł, 2022). Activists are both mobilised and mobilising actors, who, through collective action, not only respond 'in the heat of the moment' to current crises but also demand that authorities take proactive measures to address problems. Focusing on the emergence of competences within collectives, including those perceived as destructive, is valuable for understanding social movement learning because it highlights what can be transferred beyond social movements and their struggles (cf. Choudry & Kapoor, 2010; English & Mayo, 2012).

Wild competences as shaped within social movements can be understood from the perspective of the basis for reflexive action, engagement in the laboratory of emancipation, and the condition for reconstructing the social order.

Wild competences as the basis for reflexive action

This aspect of wild competences is accompanied by the assumption of the inseparability of thought and action, rooted in pragmatism (Dewey, 2009). Within this perspective, intellectual and practical elements are integrated, based on the belief that action is one of the ways of thinking (Męczkowska, 2004). Thinking, in this view, is oriented towards solving specific problems, often of an ethical nature. Here, action in the context of wild competences is not synonymous with the adaptation of social actors to relatively stable external conditions. Instead, it represents a pursuit of change. The shifting context necessitates the reinterpretation of existing conditions, which may lead to innovative forms of activism and, consequently, to the transformation of previously learned ways of thinking and acting. Reflexivity, therefore, forms the basis of the activity of both individual and collective agents. Competence serves to address problems, including cognitive ones, which are practical in nature and arise in changing conditions.

Various activist practices illustrate this point: discussions in General Assemblies (Min, 2015; Monge Lasierra, 2017), internal debates, setting objectives, and coordinating actions through social media (Bendyk, 2020), as well as ensuring the use of appropriate language at protests and effective communication overall (Steinberg, 2014).

A particularly vivid example of wild competences emerging through reflexive collective planning is the five-finger tactic used during the 2007 G8 summit protests. Developed by the BlockG8 alliance and rehearsed in protest camps, the tactic involved splitting a mass of 5,000 people into smaller 'fingers' capable of bypassing police lines through coordinated divergence and re-convergence. As protesters approached a police blockade, 'they split according to pre-established <<fingers>> and this way trickled the police line' (Scholl, 2012, p. 106). The tactical learning was explicit and pedagogical: 'Don't run straight at the cops; aim for the gaps!' (p. 106). Such actions illustrate how reflexivity functions not only in the moment but through prior rehearsal, anticipation of constraints, and embodied spatial intelligence. The resulting disruption, 'colorful lines of protesters [...] with a policeman once in a while looking on rather helplessly' (Scholl, 2012, p. 106), demonstrates that reflexive action in activist contexts is both strategic and aesthetic, learned and performed.

A key component of reflecting on activist actions is engaging in counter-actions (Eyerman, 2006; Kotarbiński, 1965) or prefigurative actions in support of values (Habersang, 2024). Moving from thought to action is a key element of citizenship, understood as 'the active participation of citizens in public life, arising from their own initiative' (Gierszewski, 2017, p. 46). Activists often emphasise the importance of their

actions, strong motivation, and a focus on values and goals, both personal and communal. This is activism mediated by reflection on the state of the world, the community, or representative democracy (Ishkanian & Glasius, 2016). While formal education allows for stepping outside individual interests and adopting a broader perspective – local, communal, and global – social movements often demand quick, even provisional, decisions to draft an 'action points' list and move towards (cf. Bolton, 2017).

Activists communicate their desire to create an alternative reality and improve social and political conditions, both locally and globally. Their tool for achieving these goals is exerting influence on politicians. As Bendyk (2020) notes, 'they draw on this accessible and widespread knowledge, putting politicians in a difficult position by exposing their hypocrisy' (p. 88). Such actions require systems literacy competences - the ability to read, analyse, and critically interpret the conditions in which activists operate to effectively pursue collective goals.

Competence, pragmatic in nature, is not only the foundation of effective action. Action serves as a source of knowledge, forming a continuum of the subjects' experiences (Męczkowska, 2004). The reflexive nature of action supports the reconstruction of both individual and collective experiences, establishing competence as the foundation for understanding oneself and the world. The reflective aspect of wild competence emphasises the relationship of the individual or collective subject with the world (cf. Męczkowska, 2004). This aligns with the concept of socio-cultural learning theories, within asserts

> learning is a natural and indispensable element of an individual's participation in the world of practice. Participation, through engaging in interactions with others, carrying out shared tasks, resolving emerging contradictions, etc., requires continuous negotiation and renegotiation of the world. (Malewski, 2006, p. 45)

Wild competences, when viewed through the lens of reflexive action, emerge as both a source and an outcome of learning processes that reconstruct aggregated and collectively negotiated experiences. Each subject, with their unique experiences, acquires distinctive competences, such as being part of a people's microphone (Steinberg, 2014), which are difficult to standardise and measure. Yet, the outcomes of collective activist efforts remain assessable (Szczygieł, 2022). The knowledge and skills generated by activists are thus reflexive, dynamic, and rooted in practices such as procedures for listening, decision-making, and integrating different perspectives (cf. Jaster & Young, 2019).

Wild competences as engagement in the laboratory of emancipation

Wild competences exhibited by activists reveal the potential for social change of an emancipatory nature. Potentially, emancipation is achievable through communication and is scalable - what works for a small group can inspire societal transformation on a larger scale. Męczkowska (2004) explores the emancipatory aspect of competence, drawing upon Habermas's (1988) social thought. This philosopher critiqued social relations based on objectifying dynamics, which restrict individual freedom. According to Męczkowska, competences serve as resources enabling the negation of the social order, which, ideally paving the way for a democratic society based on communication. Emancipation entails liberating individuals and groups from prior constraints and unfavourable social dependencies, often framed as 'freedom from'. Liberation, even if temporary, manifests both individually and collectively, through the acquisition of awareness about various entanglements (Męczkowska, 2004). Competence is a subjective construct with a

collective nature. Habermas links the micro-social development of individuals to the macro-social development of societies, emphasising the importance of emancipatory communicative action (Męczkowska, 2004). Such communicative emancipation emerges from the development of the competences among active participants (cf. Brookfield, 2010). Habermas (1988) identifies three different types of competence: instrumental (adaptive), communicative, and critical (emancipatory). Wild competences particularly resonate with the latter two, as they are integral to various collective actions of activists.

Communicative competences are utilised in practices 'focused on reaching agreements with others through a jointly constructed system of meanings' (Męczkowska, 2004, p. 147). The literature on activism and collective action is rich with discussions on activists' struggles with communication processes, debates, exchanges of views, and clashing opinions (Steinberg, 2014). These activities often reveal tensions, including: (1) considering the voices and opinions of a diverse group of participants, which highlightes the challenge of opening up to multiple discourses; (2) agreeing on a unified narrative and making provisional decisions about specific actions; and (3) crafting a coherent message that resonates with an audience beyond their activist 'bubble'.

In grappling with these challenges, activists frame their efforts in terms of learning (Foley, 1999; Crowther, 2006). They highlight outcomes such as improving their ability to articulate messages, actively listen, engage in discussions, and recognise shared struggles and demands (Ahmed, 2024). These communication-based learning outcomes seem aimed at fostering consensus when action is required. However, achieving consensus is rarely straightforward.   It clashes with the nature of liberal democracy, which thrives on tensions and contradictions and often resolves disputes by outnumbering the opposition. For activists, dealing with diverse perspectives and inevitable conflicts becomes essential. In a social movement, one cannot simply 'outvote' others without risking their disengagement. Thus, preserving collective unity demands addressing conflicts collaboratively. From a communicative perspective, embracing difference and accepting diversity may play a greater role than reaching consensus within the emancipatory process. This creates a competence for navigating communication under conditions of ongoing disagreement or the perpetual absence of full agreement. From a more radical perspective, it could even be said that activists raise issues rather than ease or resolve conflicts (Carpenter et al., 2024).

Activists in social movements often face communication challenges such as misinformation, internal disagreements, and the need to reach diverse or marginalised audiences. To navigate these difficulties, they develop competences that allow them to translate complex social problems into multimodal, affective, and publicly resonant forms of expression. The Chilean feminist collective *Las Tesis* exemplifies this through their globally echoed performance *Un violador en tu camino*, in which participants chanted the same words in synchrony, embodying a collective voice. By combining choreography, music, and a sharp critique of systemic gender violence, the collective bypassed the constraints of institutional media and created a form of protest that was both accessible and powerful. (Gutierrez Valdez, 2024). Such interventions demand not only artistic and performative skills but also strategic awareness and readiness to face further exposure to repression.

Wild competences among activists are an aspect of critical (or emancipatory) competences, as a dynamic readiness acquired through diverse interactions, of both individuals and collectives. This readiness is expressed in recognising limitations and deprivation, as well as boldly expressing dissent (Czerepaniak-Walczak, 2007; Ahmed, 2024), deciding on ways to overcome them (Min, 2015; Monge Lasierra, 2017), and achieving new realms of freedom and rights. This can be described as consciousness

raising and constructing knowledge of a 'revealing' nature, a topic frequently explored by critical scholars of adult education as one of its core tasks (cf. Brookfield, 2005). Activists in this context mention the ability to distinguish between people, theories, and ideologies; learning about the complexity of social problems; identifying injustices; and practising critical thinking (English & Mayo, 2012; Zhu, 2023). All of these issues are of great importance in the emancipation laboratory of social movements, which requires motivation and commitment to collective effort (Gierszewski, 2017), despite the inherent risks involved (Bendyk, 2020).

Wild competences as a condition for reconstructing the social order

Another aspect of wild competences can be framed within a post-critical approach to education (Hodgson et al., 2018). This perspective moves beyond emancipation understood as freedom 'from' constraints and shifts towards emancipation 'to', emphasising the potential for reconstructing the social order on new foundations.

Competence as a potential for change and reconstruction of the social order expresses itself in the willingness and ability to support individuals and groups, to endorse ideas, beliefs, or actions, and to foster a sense of community that reaches beyond the status quo. It also manifests in grassroots activism focused not only on exposing domination and revealing relations of power, but on taking action driven by a sense of care, duty, and justice. Participation in large mobilisations, like Occupy Wall Street, leaves a lasting imprint on how individuals perceive the world and social relations. As Graeber (2013) notes, those who have once felt the spirit of true democracy become unable to return uncritically to hierarchical structures, recognising them as absurd limitations. These 'veterans' of mobilisation bring the spirit of change with them into institutions they march through - sometimes almost mechanically introducing new practices and raising questions that challenge the status quo. These actions of various scales become 'events' with the potential for novelty and transcendence (Badiou, 2007). The components of such an event, its specific location, and everything it brings together, reside within the activist community. And when, every now and then, something extraordinary is achieved through mobilisation, its very occurrence makes it permanently possible in the future.

In the context of wild competence as a potential for change and reconstruction of the social order, the role of community is pivotal – it offers support, fosters identity, and facilitates learning. Within such a community, people support each other during transformative actions, creating bonds and relationships in the process. They collaborate and learn from each other. Their goal may include voicing the position of their community, making shared values public and living by them.

The content of learning related to this competence includes learning to construct communities, foster citizenship, solidarity, and tolerance through participation in collective actions. It also involves understanding that others can self-organise and act – appreciating their potential rather than their deficiencies. The pre-designed self-organisation of activists highlights the potential of people, especially on a micro-scale, such as within neighbourhoods. This potential is realised during social gatherings, where grassroots initiatives and autonomy are central values (Mansilla López, 2015). Cooperatives have often been referenced in the literature as spaces that shift economic thinking, rooted in the realities of labor. They are not simply opponents of capitalism but sites where autonomy, equality, and solidarity are actively produced (Fragoso & Olesen, 2017). Another significant source of activist competencies is the squatter movement, where individuals develop a range of skills, including breaking and building techniques, organizational strategies, and strategic manipulation. These also include legal knowledge

on defending occupied spaces and a readiness for acts of bravery (Kadir, 2016). The practice of identifying and reclaiming abandoned buildings represents a post-critical response to the overwhelming power of capital in urban areas. Rather than stopping at critique, it transforms disused spaces into sites of resistance and self-determined living.

One critical learning experience tied to building and changing through collective actions is the discovery of creativity. Creativity and the ability to self-organise can lead to concrete actions that re-build a social order of equal citizens (cf. Biesta, 2010). This includes equality in terms of power-sharing within activist groups. Steinberg (2014) writes that: 'Square movements seek to encourage a platform for full participation and the experience of political efficacy, especially among the long disenfranchised, perhaps dissipating the apathy that is the psychological symptom of systematic exclusion' (p. 704).

The potential of horizontal structures welcoming everyone's engagement is evident within post-critical theory, which prioritises the so-called philosophy of responsibility. This philosophy is marked by care, not just for individuals and groups, but for the world as a whole. In this conception, the world is fragile and therefore requires care from all of us – from anyone and everyone, whose turn it is in the relay of generations. Activists, in this light, are characterised by their willingness to inherit the responsibility for the world from previous generations. This is, however, a unique form of responsibility that, firstly, transcends hatred (understood as rejecting parts of the world) and, secondly, emphasises love – identifying what is valuable and worth doing or saving. Activists here are not focused solely on themselves but on the world and the community, guiding others to notice what deserves attention. This perspective applies to many forms of activism. A striking example is climate justice activists, who, despite being aware of the fragility of their achievements (and the ongoing marginalisation), practise an ethic of care for both humans and non-humans impacted directly or indirectly by climate change change (Bond et al., 2020).

Activists' actions revitalise debates, offering alternative modes of governance and decision-making outside the mainstream (neoliberal) framework. Climate justice groups, in particular, reject depoliticisation, instead actively re-politicising their actions (Bond et al., 2020). Thus, their activism, which may initially appear as simply a dissent against policies destructive to the world, is a deliberate and imaginative commitment to take responsibility for the world, paired with a decision to engage in the kind of politics Biesta (2009) described as sorely missing.

While the responsibility and care for the world are not unique to activists and are shared by other political actors, what distinguishes activists' wild competence is their explicit readiness to participate in the repair of the world. At its core, participation in protests represents a declaration of intent to become a resource for efforts that surpass the status quo and strive for positive social change.

Conclusions

The traditional notion of competence – being engaged in public affairs, participating in social and political organisations – versus incompetence, marked by entitlement towards the state and withdrawal to the margins of political, social, and economic life, is no longer relevant when viewed through the lens of wild competences. Wild competences are subversive: they challenge the instrumental logic of the current competency discourse, which prioritises adaptation and efficiency within the framework of the neoliberal order. Instead, they highlight the need for education to recognise how knowledge, skills, and attitudes are generated under pressure, at the edges of formal systems. They point to a

deeper form of resilience, rooted not in individual mastery, but in shared improvisation amid disruption.

Unlike traditional models, wild competences are not subject to certification or standardisation within the formal education system. Their essence lies in the ability to destabilise hierarchies, deconstruct the existing social order, and initiate change through collective, reflexive action. These competences go beyond the individual capacities; their core is imagination and creativity, enabling questioning of the status quo and initiating change through collective engagement and collaboration.

Wild competences, therefore, enable a reversal of the logic of competency identification from a top-down approach (e.g., derived from various documents or curricula) to a spontaneous, grassroots, and organic form emerging through the collective actions of various groups and social movements.

Despite their transformative promise, wild competences are not without limitations. Beyond the obvious challenges of measurement, they often rely on conditions more accessible in the Global North - such as relative freedom of assembly, access to digital infrastructure, and dense activist networks. In contexts marked by repression or limited civic space, the opportunities to develop and apply such competences are severely restricted. Moreover, practices based on wild competences tend to be highly local and difficult to replicate on a broader scale, which limits their impact in addressing global dimensions of the polycrisis. Even within movements, such competences may remain the privilege of a few, vulnerable to co-optation or institutional capture. Finally, activists who initially engage through voice may, over time and due to burnout or systemic failure, shift to exit strategies, withdrawing from sites of struggle and taking their competences with them - thus weakening collective capacity for resistance.

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The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

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