

WORKSHOP 3

Quality Education and Competencies for life

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www.ibe.unesco.org (Organisation/Workshop 3).



WORKSHOP 3

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Introductory video:

Workshop 3 A and 3 B: « *Life skills: a pillar of education?* » (Finland)

Following the OECD Pisa assessment surveys, Finland has become the destination for « educational pilgrims », determined to find out the source of success of its school system. Focusing on the highly developed life-skills component in the Finnish education programme, this film traces the student life in Helsinki and Mäntsälä secondary schools. Furthermore, the video raises the question of whether the Finnish success is really a miracle or simply the outcome of a sound, student-centred instruction.

Discussion Paper

In this world where knowledge and technologies are being renewed at an accelerating pace, and where migration within countries and across countries leads most societies to become increasingly more multicultural, a global consensus regarding the need for secondary education to equip young people with competencies for lifelong learning has developed. The World Forum for Education in Dakar (2000) also addressed this issue through Goal 3: “*Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life skills programmes*”.

For some years, there has indeed been growing awareness that general secondary education is often too academic and is not preparing young people adequately for the world of work and responsible citizenship (International Expert Meeting on General Secondary Education in the Twenty-First Century, 2001; Oman International Conference on Secondary Education for a better future, 2002). When attending secondary school, young people often still discover a universe of knowledge fragmented into many subjects (languages, mathematics, history, geography, natural sciences, social sciences, etc.). What do they really learn? And is that useful for entering into active life, the world of work and society?

Since the mid 90’s, case studies in European countries and worldwide, show that progress has been made towards responding better to the education needs of young people. This 47th ICE workshop, not underestimating the complexity of the topic, hopes to examine a few key-issues, providing a forum for discussion and for sharing experiences and good practices, and how these could be transferred elsewhere. In other words, how can education respond better to education needs and existing expectations of adolescents so that they can develop all their talents, live better, rise out of poverty, enter active life and take part in development?

1. Contemporary dilemma: Competencies for life or competencies for work?

Some decades ago, the term '*life skills*' emerged in relation to the need to address in the curriculum and education the knowledge, values, attitudes and skills, that could help learners to cope with risks, decision-making, emergency situations and survival strategies. '*Life skills*' also addressed the need to foster learners' personal development, help them unfold their potential and enjoy an accomplished private and social life. These skills are often referred to as psychosocial skills. More recently, the term '*life skills*' tends to be associated with '*competencies for life*', understood in a broader sense as 'capabilities' (knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, behaviours) to successfully address the challenges of daily life: private, social and professional and to face exceptional situations.

Trying to define, categorize and list relevant competencies or skills offers particular challenges. For the sake of this document and the discussion that will take place during the workshop, we propose to refer to a broad working definition in reference to what is mentioned in the Dakar framework of Action: "*all young people and adults have the human right to benefit from an education that will meet their basic learning needs in the best and fullest sense of the term, an education that includes learning to know, to do, to live together and to be*". This conception encompasses psychosocial as well as vocational skills.

Competencies for life in this sense should provide the tools to transform societies, and help to achieve "*globalization with a human face*". It relates as such to an effective application of all forms of knowledge by individuals functioning independently and in relation to others, in order to help people see themselves as the main actors in building their own future and the future of society.

With this perspective in mind, technical and vocational education is given importance in many countries as a way to prepare the youth for occupational fields. This branch of education, however, is often criticized as not responding sufficiently to the changing labour market's needs; consequently, many parts of the world are undertaking reforms. In order for general education or technical and vocational education to meet the challenge of the globalized economy and the changing requirements of the workplace, one needs to acquire both the functional skills associated with specific occupations and broader generic skills, such as entrepreneurial skills and attitudes, the ability to work in a team and communication skills, which can be transferred from one field to another.

However, development of competencies for life should definitely not be limited to preparation for an occupational world but should also enhance the capability of young people to cope with the various risks (e.g. HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, violence), challenges and tensions they face in their societies and in their daily lives. Key questions to be addressed include:

- Q1. *What could be the goals of competencies-based education? For education systems? For learners? For society?***
- Q2. *Is it possible, or desirable, to define a set of generic competencies that is common for young people all over the world? Who should decide what constitutes key competencies? And what is the role of education in defining needs in terms of competencies and strategies to respond to those needs?***

- Q3.** *To what extent should formal education prepare young people for work and provide them with skills and competencies to cover their own needs for survival and for income-generating activities? To what extent should it respond to the labour market's expectations? Wouldn't this be to the detriment of other learning experiences that the world of work cannot provide?*

2. Expanding role of education

A competencies for life approach implies a paradigm shift regarding the idea of education since to some extent it is due to the changing role of the family and communities, who were previously the providers of these competencies and values. Schools, when providing such competencies, were doing so mostly in the hidden part of the curriculum. The following questions may be asked regarding this new role of schools:

- Q4.** *Will schools alone be able to achieve the goals of competencies-based education?*
- Q5.** *How can synergies and partnerships be created between formal education and other community resources?*
- Q6.** *The teaching of these competencies has implications for other sectors. How can these sectors best be involved e.g. health, legal, social, police?*

3. Delivery of competencies for life and life skills education

Transferring competencies from curriculum objectives to educational practice presents a serious challenge. An operational definition is needed that may drive political action and have an impact on life in schools as well. Pedagogic considerations must be taken into account. The pedagogy required for internalisation of new values and behaviours is time-consuming, since students need to practise their new skills in order to acquire them and to role-play, and have opportunities for classroom discussion and personal and collective reflection to identify with their new values.

Competencies-based curriculum objectives are not compatible with learning by rote. They thus imply totally renewed teaching approaches and have implications for teacher training. Competencies-based education requires highly skilled teachers and adequate preparation of educators, pre and in-service, as is the case in any education reform. Since all teachers cannot be transformed overnight, there is a strong suggestion that selected teachers should be trained first to introduce competencies for life and life skills education into schools, especially where there are crises such as HIV/AIDS or the need for reconciliation after conflict.

Competencies have to be relevant to students' future life, and also to their present daily life. In general, some features of a very recent study carried out by the IBE on the basis of national reports submitted by Member States at the last session of the International Conference on Education, show that in the definition of general objectives in education, there is a high level of consensus on the concepts of "personal and

emotional development”, “equality”, “national identity”, “citizenship”, “employability” and “democracy”.

The delivery of competencies for life will have implications for the curriculum and teaching methods. What are these implications?

- Q7.** *Could more be accomplished if the contents of secondary education had a stronger emphasis on competencies for life and life skills education?*
- Q8.** *What would be the most practicable methods of effectively introducing competencies into the curriculum? How can secondary education ensure the imparting of competencies in a holistic and balanced manner? (psychosocial skills and vocational skills?)*
- Q9.** *How can these competencies be provided throughout life in a rapidly changing society?*
- Q10.** *What are the implications for teacher training in general? And for teachers with special responsibilities in this psychosocial and life skills area? How can it be ensured that the necessary reforms are undertaken to guarantee successful teaching of these competencies?*

4. Competencies for life and the school environment

In addition to qualified and inter-disciplinary skilled teachers, other mentors from the society will also be needed. Not only traditional materials, but also hands-on methods or experience-based learning approaches will be necessary. Moreover, a competencies-based approach does not merely amount to a set of fragmentary and separated elements. As a consequence, participatory process of external world in schools and in non-formal education, will be needed in order to combine every aspect of knowledge and experience encompassed by a competencies-based approach.

Clearly any move to emphasise competencies for life needs to be developed in consultation with all stakeholders. This will include employers and representatives of the various groups in society. In many sectors of modern and developing economies, the competencies of communication, cooperation, conflict resolution, citizenship and so on are seen in general as helping achieve greater productivity.

The process of curriculum renewal to use a competencies-based approach, or the decision to strengthen the competencies element in an existing curriculum, will require major efforts not only on the part of education managers and teachers, but also from students and parents who will also need to readjust their expectations and will have to adapt to a new approach. The following questions may be asked:

- Q11.** *Would this effort be worthwhile in terms of benefits to society as well as to individual students? And will it be attractive to potential employers and unions, or is it possible that employers might in some circumstances prefer less skilled workers (to pay them lower wages, for instance)?*

Q12. Is there a risk that education that focuses on psychosocial and vocational skills could be seen as having lower status than academic subjects? Could it be seen as remedial or “second-rate” education, compared to more academic subjects?

Q13. Could these programmes on the contrary be seen as luxuries in some countries, particularly the poorest, even though students in these countries are particularly at risk of HIV/AIDS, or hard hit by poverty

5. Assessment of learning outcomes

Experience shows that if competencies for life are not assessed, they will not be taught properly. Competencies-based education is also criticised as it may reduce accountability of schools regarding learning outcomes, as assessment is often not (yet) being implemented or required.

New evaluation studies on adolescents and young people (in particular up to age of 15 or 16) aim to measure acquired skills and competencies rather than knowledge amassed. Scales to assess competencies are being developed. They are applied in different contexts, but evaluate “outcomes” that ought to be similar. They have not yet been applied in the poorest countries of the world. Key questions to be addressed include:

Q14. What are the best ways of assessing these competencies? How can existing systems to assess competencies for life be improved and transferred to other education systems?

Q15. Should they perhaps also be applied to out-of-school youth?

Q16. How can a better understanding be gained of the real level of young people’s educational attainment in relation to the challenges of globalization and other contemporary social, economic and cultural developments?