

IBE/UNESCO

SYNTHESIS OF THE E-FORUM DISCUSSION

The following summary presents a selection of the main subjects developed, excluding those that did not lead to further discussion. The debate concentrated around three main subjects that were developed by different participants and appeared simultaneously in several of the exchanges.

1. *The global view/philosophy of the competencies approach*, mainly based on the document prepared by Xavier Roegiers from BIEF (see 1.2.A.). It brings together the reflections of several participants on the epistemological efficiency of the approach, the differences among other interpretations of the approach and the link between the 'active pedagogy' and the competencies approach proposition. It seems that most of the opinions emphasize the fact that there is not really any contradiction between these two 'paths'. Moreover, they could be complementary within a more global and pragmatic implementation of this new pedagogical proposal. The relevance of the notion of 'integration', as an on-going process in the pedagogical practice of teachers aimed at establishing a real connection between the contents learned and the current and future real life of students through 'integration situations', was mentioned early on. Questions have been raised about the kinds of competencies to be developed, their purpose, the desirable profile for students and, eventually, the kind of social project this approach aims at in comparison to the traditional education systems. **Keywords: active pedagogy, life competencies, integration.**

2. *Specific and rich examples of implementation of the approach shared by a group of participants* (for example, Mexico, Uruguay and the Health Sector in Africa, among others).

They highlighted the achievements of this view, as well as the obstacles and resistances encountered. General agreement has been reached among those involved in these experiences that the approach cannot be implemented without resort to at least five other factors: political willingness to question the traditional approach; changes in teachers'

practices; changes in the evaluation system; changes in the textbooks accompanying the new curricula; and adequate teacher training systems (lifelong learning needs have also been added to this topic). Some or most of these factors have been missing in many national experiences and this could explain cases of incomplete success, despite the motivation and the commitment of key stakeholders in the project and the degree of implementation already achieved. This initial subject also analysed the resistance to pedagogical change and the strategies to be considered to overcome this, as well as future priorities. Detailed information has been exchanged and enriched by the provision of several academic and administrative documents (available in the IBE website www.ibe.unesco.org under the section Community of Practice in Curriculum Development). **Keywords: change, political involvement, lifelong learning.**

3. *Methodological questions/exchanges around the integration elements considered in the approach.* Specific questions have been asked about the role, relevance and origin of both the 'integration situations' and the 'family of situations' elements in the pedagogical integrative process. The origin, the frequency and the underlying necessary criteria for their preparation do not seem clear. Questions have also been raised about concrete examples of implementation in real situations and the results attained, especially the transfer of what is called the 'basic' competencies approach to other educational levels, such as secondary or higher education. Even though the genesis of it is clearly linked to basic or primary education levels, Roegiers emphasizes the transferability of the approach to other levels, provided the underlying logic of preparing students for the complexity of real-life through the development of adequate competencies is respected. Concerning the methodological aspects of the implementation itself, the importance has been stressed of not imposing the pedagogical approach in a radical manner. Successful experiences in Africa have shown that, through a progressive but structured arrangement organized around the periods of integration (every sixth week at the beginning), relevant progress is achieved in terms of quality and quantity. Some positive evaluation outcomes have also been mentioned in terms of equity within the

group of students (the progress of slow students is increased). **Keywords: situation of integration, family of situations, integrative methodology.**

ADVANCES AND CHALLENGES

For the IBE, the e-Forum has been a valuable and enriching experience of making contact and working collectively, discussing ideas, approaches and perceptions. It also facilitates the generous sharing of knowledge, information and documentation and an open attitude about communicating and learning from others. It demonstrates the usefulness of a Community of Practice focused on Curriculum Development as a tool to foster processes of collective thinking and action around debatable issues on an inter-regional level. After participating in the e-Forum, we have a greater appreciation of the need to be part of a collective learning process based on a profound and transparent dialogue with no frontiers or barriers, whether ideological, political, social, cultural or educational.

As often happens in educational debates, we did not discover a conclusive response to our original question: 'Can the competencies approach be a promising reality or an unreal utopia for developing countries?' Nevertheless, we hope to have opened promising avenues in order to have a better understanding and visualization of the competencies approaches as instruments for curriculum development very much embedded in the complex interfaces between society, politics and education. It should also endorse a comprehensive vision of the curriculum as both a process and a product. We cannot discuss competency issues, their significance, meaning and implications without a profound analysis of educational visions and objectives and how they support and inform the pathways that may be pursued within a competency approach. For example, if we do not have a clear and understandable concept of competencies, it will be very difficult to evaluate them at the classroom level. No competency approach can avoid asking itself about how it visualizes societal well-being, the role of education as a public policy and the way curriculum informs the processes of learning and teaching.

The discussion of competencies raises some key points in the educational debate:

1. The changing, uncertain, complex and contradictory nature of today's societies is reflected in the notorious difficulties that are encountered by national education systems in establishing

long-term visions and goals, and consequently to position the competency approach within a clear educational mandate.

2. The many ways that we conceptualize and define competencies certainly indicate that we are in a fruitful stage of trying out ideas and models around a **polysemic** approach on a global scale. Nevertheless, at the same time we are in need of clear and concrete answers to carry through educational reforms based on this approach. Uncertainty and confusion, as well as superficiality and ingenuity, do a great deal of harm to the legitimacy and durability of educational reforms.
3. The styles and the ways in which education systems are organized and function often impede the development and the consolidation of curriculum changes at the classroom level in an effective and productive manner. On many occasions, the enormous gaps between the intended and the implemented curriculum provoke a loose interpretation of the meaning and legitimacy of the processes of educational change and a worrisome divergence from their original purposes and objectives.
4. There are hesitations and confusions about a curriculum concept and practice that oscillates between: (i) endorsing a comprehensive view of educational and curriculum change; and (ii) an excessive focus on 'rapid positive conditions and outcomes', disregarding processes and not paying enough attention to the cultural logic of each peculiar educational change. Results ought to be contextualized and interpreted.
5. A teaching body that is frequently distrustful of highly prescriptive top-down reforms, that remains very attached to its traditional subject ethos and that does not sufficiently visualize the potentially positive impact of the changes being proposed is far from enjoying the conditions, the timing and the training opportunities for understanding and becoming acquainted with the competencies approach. One major challenge is to establish the links and a rapprochement between teachers' expectations and desires for improving their practices and the quality of education and the usefulness of the competencies approaches in order to contribute to their fulfilment. On-going training, highly orientated towards supporting

changes at the classroom level, is a big issue in providing useful academic guidance on the part of principals, supervisors and related staff.

6. It is important to take into account the perceived expectations and needs of girls, boys and young people whose fate is very much related to what we think and do as curriculum developers. Our final responsibility lies in fostering conditions and opportunities for the well-being of young generations. We should certainly recognize that curriculum changes and educational models are instruments, not ends in themselves, in order to foster noble societal objectives.

We can tentatively conclude that moving towards a tailored competencies approach necessarily implies the recreation and renovation of the education system so that it is wide open to society and its stakeholders in a reciprocal and constructive way. We can also agree that mastering a competency implies the mobilization of a set of resources, such as values, attitudes, knowledge and skills, in order to help approach a family of situations and solve, in some cases, a concrete problem. But, independently of the approach we endorse, both the resources and the situations are not taken for granted; they are processes of social construction whose intentionality and meaning is defined by each actor through the co-ordination and mobilization of resources. What we may need is a more comprehensive and profound reflection on the epistemological, methodological and pedagogical sustainability of the competencies approaches, which can provide a justification for a whole array of concepts and definitions that currently support educational transformations.

The next step would be to create an inter-regional group of curriculum specialists on competencies who, taking into account the issues that have been raised during the e-Forum discussion and other related ones, conceptualize and define basic agreements around competencies, as well as an agenda for capacity-building activities primarily targeted at curriculum developers. The objective of the group is to prepare a document that can be discussed with curriculum experts on an inter-regional basis and, after successive improvements and adjustments, can become an institutional reference for the IBE on this matter. The idea is to carry out a strategy that involves curriculum specialists and developers from all UNESCO regions in the

process of discussing and elaborating a consensual document of how to move forward on this theme, based on a few but comprehensive agreements.