

## **E-Forum on the approaches by competencies 14<sup>th</sup> of November – 7<sup>th</sup> of December 2005**

### **Key aspects**

#### **I. Introduction**

One of IBE main effort is to try to promote, generate and facilitate conditions, opportunities, settings and resources so as to really foster processes of collective thinking and doing around curriculum change within the holistic vision of Education For All (EFA) goals. Through the sharing of visions, experiences, information, research, training and cooperation among curriculum specialists and developers we can certainly contribute to provide useful inputs in order to broaden our visions and perspectives about educational changes as well as enrich and strengthen the complex processes of implementing innovations.

Within this framework, the e-Forum on the approaches by competencies organized by IBE between the 14<sup>th</sup> of November and the 7<sup>th</sup> of December 2005 (see [www.ibe.unesco.org/COPs.htm](http://www.ibe.unesco.org/COPs.htm)) was visualized and conceptualized as a response to the expectations and needs of the Community of Practice members. At the international seminar held in Geneva (6-8 July 2005), where the Community of Practice was established (see Educational Innovation and Information, Number 119-120, April- August 2005), curriculum specialists from the five UNESCO regions agreed on the necessity of promoting substantial debates around the approaches by competencies due precisely to the fact that many countries, developed as well as developing ones, are currently engaged in fostering educational transformations based on approaches around competencies. It has progressively become a relatively universal core issue well embedded in the agendas of educational transformations.

Aimed at facilitating and generating conditions for fruitful and constructive discussions, we initially formulate this question: **"The approach by competencies can be a promising reality for developing countries or an unreal utopia?"**. We assume that this question is wholly open to debate and can be enriched by the plural sharing of perceptions and experiences coming from varied cultural, political, social and educational settings. The very process of progressively getting basic agreements around an agenda of competencies issues, much in the sense of clarifying concepts and of evaluating pathways and alternatives as well as taking into account the interfaces between design and implementation, can be seen as a dynamic tool so as to help regions and countries tackle the complex challenge of achieving sound and feasible implementations of educational innovations.

#### **II. Synthesis of the E-Forum discussion done by the BIEF Institute ([www.bief.be](http://www.bief.be))**

The following synthesis proposes a selection of the main subjects developed, logically excluding those without further response. The debate in the e-forum has been axed around 3 main subjects that have been developed by different participants and appeared simultaneously in several "branches" of the exchanges.

a) The global view/philosophy of the Competencies approach, mainly based on the document elaborated by Xavier Roegiers from the BIEF Institute (see 1.2. A.). It comprises 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 point to the fact there is not really an antagonism 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 ongoing 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 "situations of integration" was early evocated. Questions have been raised about the kinds of competencies to be developed, their finality, the profile of student to pursue and, eventually, the kind of social project this approach aims at in comparison to the traditional educational systems.

**Key words: Active pedagogy, life competencies, integration.**

b) 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) have highlighted the achievements of this view, as well as the obstacles and resistances found through the process. Agreement has been globally found among those involved in these experiences, that the approach cannot be implemented without the articulation of at least 5 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 (life-long learning needs have also been added to this topic). Some or most of those factors have been missing in many national experiences and could explain the incomplete success, in spite of the motivation and the involvement of key stakeholders of the project and of the implementation achievements so far. This initial subject also derived into analysing the resistance to pedagogical change and the strategies to be considered, as well as the priorities to proceed. Detailed information has been exchanged in this branch of the forum, enriched by several academic and administrative documents being provided (available in the IBE website [www.ibe.unesco.org](http://www.ibe.unesco.org) under the service section "Community of Practice").

**Key words: Change, political involvement, life-long learning.**

c) 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 "situations of integration" and the "family of situations" elements in the pedagogical integrative process. It doesn't seem clear the origin, the frequency and the

underlying necessary criteria for their elaboration. Questions have been raised also about concrete examples of implementation of the method in real cases and the attained results, specially the transfer of what is called the "basic" competencies approach to other educational levels, secondary or higher education. Even though the genesis of it is clearly linked to the basic or primary education levels, Roegiers emphasizes the transferability of the approach to other levels, provided the underlying logic of preparing students to real life complexity through the development of the adequate competencies be respected. Concerning the methodological aspects of the implementation itself, it has been stressed the importance of not imposing the pedagogical approach in a drastic manner. Successful experiences in Africa have shown that through a progressive but structured device organized around the moments of integration (one week every 6 "normal" ones to start), very relevant progress is achieved in terms of quality and quantity results. Some positive evaluation results have also been mentioned in terms of equity within the group of students (slow students progress is increased).

**Key words: Situation of integration, family of situations, integrative methodology.**

### **3. Advances and challenges for an inter-regional agenda on competencies**

The E-Forum has been for IBE a wonderful, valuable and enriching experience of getting together and working collectively on discussing ideas, approaches and perceptions as well as on sharing knowledge, information and documentation with deep generosity and an open predisposition to share and learn from each curriculum specialist. It proves to us the significance of a Community of Practice focused on Curriculum Development as a tool to foster processes of collective thinking and doing around debatable issues in an inter-regional scale. After participating in the E-Forum we appreciate more the need of being part of a collective learning process based on a profound and transparent dialogue with no frontiers and no barriers, being ideological, political, social, cultural or educational ones.

As often happens in educational debates, we don't arrive at a conclusive response to our original question: "The approach by competencies can be a promising reality for developing countries or an unreal utopia?" Nevertheless, we hope to have opened promising windows in order to better understand and visualize the approaches by competencies as an instrument for curriculum development very much embedded in the complex interfaces between society, politics and education, and endorsing a comprehensive vision of curriculum as both processes and results. We can't discuss competency issues, its significance, its meaning and its implications, devoid of a profound analysis about educational visions and objectives and how they support and inform the pathways to eventually follow within a competency approach. For example, if we don't have a clear and understandable conceptualization of competencies, it will be very difficult to really evaluate them at the classroom level. No competency approach can avoid asking itself about how it visualizes the societal well-being, the role of education as a public policy and the way curriculum informs the processes of learning and teaching.

The discussion around competencies reminds us of some key points of the educational debate:

a) the changing, uncertain, complex and contradictory nature of today's societies is well reflected in the notorious difficulties that are encountered by national educational systems in order to establish visions and goals for the long-run, and consequently to position the competency approach selected within a clear educational mandate.

b) the multiple ways we conceptualize and define competencies certainly indicate that we are in a rich stage of experimenting ideas and models around a polysemic concept at a worldwide scale but at the same time we are in need of clear and concrete answers to carry out educational reforms based on this approach. Uncertainty and confusion as well as superficiality and ingenuity do a lot of harm to the legitimacy and durability of educational reforms.

c) the styles and ways around which the educational systems are organized and functioned often impede the development and the consolidation of curriculum changes at the school and at the classroom levels in an effective and productive manner. Many times the enormous gaps between the intended and the implemented curriculum provoke a loss of meaning and legitimacy of the processes of educational transformation and a worrisome apartness from their original finalities and objectives.

d) the hesitations and confusions around a curriculum conception 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 in themselves are devoid of substantial meaning and implication.

e) a teaching body, that is many times distrustful of top down reforms highly prescriptive, that remains very attached to their traditional subject ethos and that doesn't sufficiently visualize the potential positive effect of the changes being proposed, is far from having the conditions, the timing and the training opportunities for understanding and getting acquainted with the approaches about competencies. One big challenge is to establish the links and a progressive nearness between teachers' expectations and desires of improving their practices and the quality of education and the usefulness of the approaches by competencies in order to contribute to their fulfillment. Permanent training highly orientated towards supporting changes at the classroom level is a big issue needed of useful academic guidance made by principals, supervisors and related staff.

f) most important of all, to deeply 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 younger generations, and certainly we must be opened to recognize that curriculum changes and educational models are instruments, not ends in themselves, in order to foster noble societal objectives.

We can provisionally conclude that changing towards a tailored approach by competencies in any of our national societies necessarily implies the recreation and the renovation of the educational system widely open to society and its stakeholders in a reciprocal and constructive way. Also we can agree that the mastering of 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 aren't taken for granted; quite the contrary they are processes of social construction whose intentionality and meaning is defined by each actor that is involved in relation to different pertinent societal contexts. What we may need is a more comprehensive and profound reflection on the epistemological, methodological and pedagogical sustainability of the approaches by competencies, which can provide a deep justification for a whole array of concepts and definitions that currently support educational transformations.

IBE next step is to create an inter-regional group of curriculum specialists on competencies that taking into account the issues that have been raised on the e-forum discussion and in other related discussions, conceptualize and define basic agreements around competencies as well as an agenda for doing capacity building activities primarily targeted at curriculum developers. The objective of the group is to elaborate a document that can be discussed with curriculum experts in an inter-regional basis, and after successive elaborations and adjustments, can become an institutional reference for IBE on the 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 few but substantial agreements.

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