

E-Forum on the Approach by Competencies

Introductory statement

Two notions of the approach by competencies

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When approaches by competencies are referred to in the curricula, the impression is given that there is only one approach by competencies. In fact, there are several. Two different concepts may be presented which are not in contradiction with each other, but which call for different priorities. It is proposed to describe them, and to study them through use of the two questions: “For which teachers?”, “For which students?”

A first approach

The first is based on the development at school of transversal competencies. This approach is addressed to students who do not have problems with basic competencies. They consist:

- (1) in re-orienting learning by making it more active: instead of being submitted to learning lectures, the students are invited to resolve problems situations. Learning is based on active methods;
- (2) of taking into account life competencies in learning and in classroom life;
- (3) in promoting an inter-disciplined approach.

This approach is very rich, very ambitious. It can only be put into effect validly and in a durable way by teachers who are very well trained. Furthermore, it requires favorable conditions: reduced groups of students, appropriate rooms, and indispensable materials.

In the poor countries, and in the fairly advanced countries, this kind of pedagogy only works when international organizations (UNESCO, UNICEF...) or non-governmental organizations provide consistent support in terms of supervision, teacher training, contributions in the form of infrastructure and materials.

The consequence is, when this approach is not strongly supported by a government, by international organizations or by non-governmental organizations, it is only installed on a long-term basis in the best schools. In the final analysis, therefore, it contributes to increase elitism. From then on, a contradiction between the goals pursued, the school realities and the on-site realities, has to be faced. In the goals, an attempt is made to develop values of solidarity, autonomy, tolerance and still others. But, in fact, this approach often reinforces the fracture between the circles in better conditions, which have the means to develop this pedagogy, and the disadvantaged circles, which do not have either human or material means.

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Also, the teachers encounter great difficulties in evaluating the experience of their children: how to evaluate the competencies for “respecting his/her environment”, competencies for “information research”, or competencies for “information processing”? A first consequence of this approach is to make the teachers less sure of themselves, especially in the countries where the passage from one year to another is conditioned by the results of an evaluation of student experience. A second consequence, still more important, is that the teacher does not have a concrete basis to bring solutions to students in difficulty, and permit them to make progress. It can be said that the three limits for the approaches by transversal competencies are:

- (1) to require a high degree of teacher qualification;
- (2) to require a favorable environment and adequate start-up conditions;
- (3) to make the evaluation of student experience very difficult and thus prevent remedying in an efficient way the weakest students’ difficulties.

Also, this approach does not bring any decisive response to the problem of student experience quality: reading, writing, calculating, in an efficient way, and in a real life situation. The great majority of students continues to leave school while being incapable of efficiently using what they learned at school and are thus not able to fit into the socio-economic milieu: this is the problem of functional illiteracy, which continues to develop.

A second approach

The second approach is based on the development of basic competencies. It is still called “integration pedagogy” (De Ketele 1996; Roegiers, 2000, 2003, 2004). It seeks primarily to give the students the competencies which, concretely, will permit them to fit into the socio-economic milieu. The competencies of life are also taken into account, but they are a part of the basic competencies rather than being added (who knows where) to program content.

Basic competencies for an 8 year old child are, for example, “Produce a written document consisting of three sentences in a significant communication situation” or even “Solve a problem situation which uses the four basic operations on the numbers 0 to 1000”. These competencies are called “basic” because each student must master them before passing to a higher class. Integration pedagogy is based on the fact of teaching the child very early to manage complexity. This complexity is made up:

- (1) of school experience: knowledge, know-how, how to be;
- (2) of situations in everyday life, contexts that the student will have to deal with;
- (3) of life competencies which he will have to call up to resolve situations.

Concretely, learning leads according to alternating two types of learning: punctual learning and integration learning. For 5 weeks, the teacher develops resources required for competencies: the rules of grammar, conjugation, handwriting, calculation techniques.... This is punctual learning which is done as in habitual teaching. During the sixth week, the teacher stops completely teaching new things to the students. During the whole week, and in all fields, he/she proposes that the students resolve complex situations in which the student must mobilize all that he has learned during the five last weeks (resources). The students are

invited to work alone or in small groups to resolve these situations. Several situations at the same level will be proposed to them: one for practice, another to evaluate their experience and eventually still another to remedy their difficulties or to progress. After this first integration module, there is a return to 5 weeks of punctual learning, and thus the alternation continues four or five times during the school year.

The teacher is thus invited to change his practices in two stages.

In a first stage, he/she introduces resources following his/her traditional methods. Active learning methods are not required. What is required is, for all six weeks, that each teacher proposes to the students' complex situations in which they use what they have learned: not only the knowledge, the know-how, but also life competencies. These are the integration weeks. In general, it takes a teacher two years to habituate him/herself to manage these integration modules.

When the integration modules are in place, the teacher is led to change his/her class procedures: instead of teaching in a lecture format, he/she learns to progressively lead the learning processes in an active way. This procedural change generally takes more time to install it permanently: it should take 5 to 10 years.

In this way, total change is not expected from the teacher in one stage. On the contrary, his/her level of training is respected, his/her habits and he/she is developing gradually. This way he/she is reassured, he/she feels safe.

Evaluation takes place in a logical way during these integration modules and, at the end of the year, the students are given other complex situations to resolve individually. This approach, supported by several international organizations (UNICEF, UNESCO, AIF) has been developed in several European and African countries. The research results carried out in this regard show that:

- (1) they encounter support from all the actors, in particular the parents and the students;
- (2) they obtain a gain in efficiency of the educational systems; in research carried out in 4 countries, the average gain was evaluated as between 10 % and 15 % in the results from students (2 to 3 points out of 20);
- (3) they make all students advance: the strong students advance, but the weak students also advance, sometimes more than the strong students;
- (4) the teachers feel safe; they quickly observe changes in their classes, but they can also introduce innovation at their rhythm.

A difficulty in this method has to do with the material required. If it is to be effective, each student should have supports to resolve complex situations. In a good number of countries where it is being used, the question has been resolved by furnishing the students with a "complex situation notebook", in addition to existing school manuals.

Bibliography

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