

**Two-week workshop:**

**SKILLS TO DEVELOP A COMPETENCIES-  
BASED CURRICULUM**

**Republic of Mauritius**

**13-24 February 2006**

**WORKSHOP REPORT (A)**

**(General workshop overview)**

**by**

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## Dakmara Georgescu – Workshop Report



## Workshop context and scope



Group work

The education system of the Republic of Mauritius is currently undergoing a series of profound changes with a view to enhance learning outcomes in students and cater for a ‘world class education’ in schools all over the country.

The concept of ‘world class education’ is central to the Government’s programme of promoting quality education for all and support successful integration of learners in today’s increasingly interdependent world. It has in view, on one hand, the full development of students’ potential and, on the other hand, the formation of elite in the country who should assume leadership in the realm of various social, political, cultural and economic areas.

In November 2005 the Ministry of Education and Human Resources (further referred to as MEHR) initiated a large process of public consultations with regard to the scope, priorities and strategies of the pre-tertiary education reform. As an outcome of the debates in the context of the national kick-off conference in November 2005 three major goals of the upcoming curriculum reform have been identified:

- Relevance
- Equity
- Capacity of the curriculum to unlock the potential of the Mauritian Learner.

The competencies-based approach is seen as one possible response to the need of improving the quality of education for all. It is also expected to cater for more equity in the system, while providing the ground for effective participation of students in the learning process.

The MEHR intends to start in 2006 a comprehensive process of curriculum change and improvement in both primary and secondary education. Owing to its foundational character priority will be given in 2006 and 2007 to primary education while also addressing in parallel general and vocational secondary education.

In order to enhance the capacity of curriculum specialists and decision makers to deal with processes of curriculum change and improvement professionally, the MEHR has

had the initiative of organising a two-week workshop in co-operation with the IBE<sup>1</sup> as the UNESCO Institute specialised in curriculum development (selection and organisation of learning opportunities and experiences).

Mauritius and the IBE have already collaborated in the framework of the IBE- led project “*Curriculum and poverty alleviation in nine sub-Saharan countries*”<sup>2</sup> whose aim is to explore links between curriculum and poverty with a view to inspire curriculum changes that could influence positively the capacity of individuals and communities to fight against poverty and social and economic exclusion. In general, the nine countries participating in the project eye competencies-based approaches as a promising model for curriculum change and improvement while acknowledging, at the same time, the difficulties and risk related to such and endeavour.

Building on previous exchanges on competencies-based approaches in modern curriculum development in the context of the project mentioned above, the MEHR intended to provide more opportunities for the in-depth exploration of advantages and challenges of a competencies-based approach with a special focus on possibilities to introduce such a competencies-based approach in primary education.

In order to respond to this demand, the MEHR and the IBE jointly planned for a two-week workshop for 90 Mauritian education specialists that are in charge with curriculum development and implementation, especially for primary education (members of subject panels, inspectors, textbook authors, ministry officials, school principals).

The main goals of this workshop were set as follows:

- To explore with the participants the concept of competencies-based approaches in modern curriculum development;
- To identify, based on hands-on activities, possibilities of integrating a competencies-based approach into the Mauritian primary education curriculum (especially transversal competencies);
- To develop skills for the designing and writing of a competencies-based curriculum;
- To analyse the consequences of integrating competencies-based approaches for assessment and evaluation, teacher training and school- and classroom management;
- To discuss strategies for curriculum evaluation;
- To provide the grounds for the development of a Curriculum Framework for primary education, as a first stage of the overall curriculum reform impacting primary and secondary education;
- To explore possibilities for follow up especially with regard to the improvement of curriculum processes in Mauritius based on coordinated work of all institutions involved and on effective participation of all relevant stakeholders.

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<sup>1</sup> IBE: International Bureau of Education – UNESCO’s Institute in Geneva specialised in learning content and methods.

<sup>2</sup> 2004-2005, and continuing in 2006.

## Working methodology and activities



### Sharing with the larger group

The workshop was conducted based on interactive strategies in the context of plenary discussions and group work that aimed at combining theoretical and practical aspects linked to competencies-based approaches in curriculum development. The participants were also engaged in individual study and reflection based on hand-outs and other reference materials that were distributed to them.

Concrete examples from other countries have been considered extensively<sup>3</sup>. In order to enhance coordination between different subject groups and consistency of approaches throughout the curriculum, the curriculum developers for different subjects worked together forming mixed subject groups.

The work was carried out hands-on as much as possible, with a view to develop with the trainees draft models of subject curricula reflecting a competencies-based approach.

A comprehensive Handbook will be developed as follow-up of the workshop, combining theoretical aspects, conceptual clarifications, examples from other countries of competencies-based curricula and hands-on activities/exercises reflecting participants' views and contributions.

The ten-day programme allowed for a series of conceptual clarifications in relationship to practical activities embedding and reflecting a competencies-based approach, as follows:

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<sup>3</sup> i.e. Curriculum Frameworks from Norway, Sweden, Ireland, Romania, Kosovo, New Zealand; syllabuses from Ireland/Science education; Australia/NSW: History; Canada/Ontario: Canadian and World Studies, Citizenship and Heritage; USA/Massachusetts: Language Arts Framework; other materials on competencies, such the OECD DeSeCO study, The IBE published booklet on Competencies (Rychen & Tjana, 2004).

Day	Plenary activities and Conceptual clarifications	Practical activities & Group work
<b>Day 1 – Monday, 13 February 06</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Official introduction to the workshop and inaugural speeches of his Excellency, Mr S. K. Gokhool, the Minister of Education and Human Resources of Mauritius, of Mr Santosh Kumar Mahadeo, Curriculum Directorate, and of Mrs. Dakmara Georgescu, IBE-UNESCO programme coordinator and resource person for the workshop;</li> <li>• The issue of education quality and the role curriculum plays in the process of overall quality assurance;</li> <li>• Trends in modern curriculum development and possibilities to balance ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ approaches meaningfully;</li> <li>• Curriculum evaluation and its role in promoting quality education in primary and secondary education.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participant’s expectations for the workshop;</li> <li>• Definitions of education quality relevant to the Mauritian context;</li> <li>• Exploring links between context and quality in Mauritius (what is specific);</li> <li>• What is traditional and what is modern in the context of the Mauritian education system;</li> </ul>
<b>Day 2- Tuesday, 14 February 06</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Criteria for curriculum evaluation</li> <li>• What changed so far in the Mauritian primary education curriculum?</li> <li>• The issue of learning outcomes as students’ competencies: recent debates and implications for quality curriculum development</li> <li>• Linking competencies with life situations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Criteria for developing a quality curriculum</li> <li>• Linking competencies with life situations: what competencies could students need in order to face challenges and opportunities successfully?</li> </ul>
<b>Day 3 – Wednesday, 15 February 06</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A comparative analysis of how the competencies approach impacts on curriculum development internationally</li> <li>• Selecting and organizing general (basic, key competencies) and specific competencies for primary education</li> <li>• Consequences of a competencies-based approach for curriculum change and improvement in Mauritius: What possibilities do exist? What model of change to choose?</li> </ul>	<p>Hands-on activities related to the usage of competencies in problem-solving situations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abstract general competencies from a list of sub-competencies (based on the Irish Science Education curriculum/Junior Certificate)</li> <li>• Provide a comparison between the letter and spirit of Mauritian curriculum documents and curriculum documents (syllabuses) from Ireland, USA, Canada, Australia, etc.: identify what is similar and what is different.</li> </ul>
<b>Day 4 – Thursday, 16 February 06</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transversal competencies</li> <li>• Cross-curricular issues and dimensions</li> <li>• Fostering transversal competencies through civic education and language</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defining competencies in relationship with daily-life situations and problem solving</li> <li>• ‘I’ and ‘We’ – activity/citizenship</li> </ul>

	arts	<p>education: transversal competencies (i.e. communication; constructive management of diversity, self-expression; team spirit)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘Prejudices and stereotypes in stories for children’/language education: transversal competencies (i.e. critical thinking; open-mindedness; capacity to work in groups; intellectual skills: conceptual transfer, links with real life);</li> <li>• ‘Advertising for...’ /transversal competencies (using various means of self-expression; creativity; persuasion; campaigning; personal skills)</li> </ul>
<b>Day 5 – Friday, 17 February 06</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curriculum integration: how to foster integrated learning and transversal competencies based on various possibilities to integrate the curriculum</li> <li>• Fostering transversal competencies through science education</li> </ul>	<p>Looking for transversal competencies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Light: is it good or bad for human life? (How to improve the Science textbook, Standard 6)</li> <li>• Sound: exercise about listening (How to improve the Science textbook, Standard 6)</li> <li>• Simulation activity: Writing a diary (How to improve the History and Geography textbook, Standard 4)</li> <li>• Evaluation of the first week</li> </ul>
<b>Day 6 – Monday, 20 February 06</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The concept of learning and its impact on improving the content, structure and format of curriculum documents, such as the Curriculum Framework, textbooks and teacher guides</li> <li>• Fostering transversal competencies through mathematics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defining general competencies for primary education</li> <li>• Developing transversal competencies through mathematics: Sets: how to redesign the chapter in the light of a competencies-based approach (Mathematics, Standard 5)</li> </ul>
<b>Day 7 – Tuesday, 21 February 06</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Textbook development and improvement</li> <li>• How to write Curriculum Frameworks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identifying major components of a Mauritian Curriculum Framework for primary education</li> <li>• Providing outlines of different parts of such a Framework</li> </ul>
<b>Day 8- Wednesday, 22 February 06</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessment of student results: how to assess competencies; What should change in the present assessment system</li> <li>• Fostering transversal competencies through other learning areas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication and conflicts: citizenship education as transversal concern (language skills; communication skills; negotiation skills; personal development; social skills, etc.)</li> <li>• Decoding messages and formulating messages efficiently (relationships between messages and audiences; managing media messages constructively)</li> </ul>
<b>Day 9 – Thursday, 23</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curriculum evaluation: how do we know our curriculum is good?</li> <li>• Open discussions: questions and</li> </ul>	<p>Activities envisaging the development of transversal competencies in other curriculum areas (i.e. sport and health</p>



<b>February 06</b>	answers regarding the topics discussed during the last two weeks	education; artistic education; civic and moral education) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Miming civic concepts</li> <li>• Cooking as an intercultural activity (how to develop lesson plans)</li> </ul>
<b>Day 10 – Friday, 24 February 06</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overview of the workshop outcomes</li> <li>• Plenary debate with representatives of the ministry of Education: follow-up and next steps</li> <li>• Final evaluation of the workshop by participants</li> </ul>	

### Workshop outcomes and recommendations



**Simulation activity:  
competencies to solve daily  
life problems in Mauritius**

- The present curriculum was generally judged as rich, solid and functional, although somehow overloaded and too much content-based. While curriculum documents<sup>4</sup> are quite good, rich and inspiring, the main concern of the participants in the workshop relates to curriculum implementation and classroom practices. Why the spirit of the curriculum is not fairly translated into classroom practices stays further as a topic for research and debate, followed by necessary actions to improve the learning environment and the learning and teaching strategies.
- One possible cause for the situation mentioned above resides probably in the fact that the education system in Mauritius is too much examination oriented. Students have to pass a very important exam at the end of Standard 6, which provides them access into secondary education. Thus students are streamed quite early, and in average only 60% of primary students succeed to make their passage to secondary education. The 40% of students who fail twice the CPE (Certificate of Primary Education

<sup>4</sup> Such as textbooks, syllabuses for primary education and the Reference guide for assessment ('*Learning competencies for all*', Mauritius Examinations Syndicate, Oct. 1002)



examination) are registered in the so-called pre-vocational schools without the possibility to re-enter the general secondary stream.

- Access to secondary education is granted only based on the CPE results, without taking into consideration the students achievements during the first six years of primary school. Current, internal assessment of students is almost totally lacking, thus summative assessment is predominant in the detriment of formative and progress assessment.
- Acknowledging the need to improve the quality of education for all students, the MEHR is keen to promote a large-scale curriculum reform in primary and secondary education, with a view to cater for a ‘world class education’ in all school establishments across the country. This should be done by tacking into consideration two major aspects: (a) more support for students with learning problems and for students from disadvantaged areas and (b) more support for talented/gifted students who are supposed to take over leadership positions in the society.
- The MEHR also acknowledges the importance of developing in learners competencies for life in order to help them cope successfully with the opportunities and challenges of the today’s and tomorrow’s world. Learning should not be seen any more as connected only to examinations, but it should be tackled as learning for life.
- While acknowledging the need to put more emphasis on a competencies-based approach, the MEHR is also considering the need to tackle curriculum processes of change and improvement realistically and timely. The workshop was thus also meant to allow for a collective reflection upon what is possible, how and when.
- As many participants stated in their evaluations the workshop helped clarifying the concept of competencies in education, and of competencies-based curriculum development. Competencies are seen as complex systems of capabilities, involving the efficient *mobilisation* of knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, patterns of thinking and behaviours/procedures, in order to solve problems and face challenges and opportunities *productively* and *independently*. Competencies are not just skills, since they encompass also knowledge, attitudes and values. While skills, values and attitudes are extremely important, the concept of competencies also embeds the knowledge dimension in both its’ aspects as declarative and procedural knowledge. Some key-words in understanding competencies are ‘action-oriented’, ‘system of capabilities’, ‘activation/mobilisation’ of knowledge, skills, attitudes in order to function effectively in daily life. Competencies are proven in action, not just in examinations.<sup>5</sup>
- Traditional curricula were usually more content- and objectives- based (which is also the case in Mauritius). A competencies-based approach

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<sup>5</sup> A list of such general and specific competencies the participants developed during the workshop that are relevant for the primary system in Mauritius is to be found in the comprehensive Report of participants’ contributions (Workshop Report B).

poses several problems, such as how far to go in reforming the curriculum and how to keep a good balance between traditional and new approaches. In general, there are three possibilities to introduce a competencies-based approach:

1. The curriculum changes radically – All efforts to select and organise learning start from the students' needs and from defining broad competencies (including transversal ones) and more specific competencies. Traditional subjects may disappear or may be integrated into new learning/curriculum areas. Traditional time allocation and assessment procedures change also significantly. Implications are huge in terms of teacher training, assessment procedures and class- and school management.
  2. The curriculum changes partly – While the subject division is still present, more curriculum integration could be provided in line with focusing more on promoting interactive learning that is well connected with student's experiences. Curriculum documents change, as to reflect the new philosophy and guide teachers and evaluators in applying a more student-centred approach. Teachers are trained to use interactive methods and inspiring activities that foster transversal competencies. They also learn how to evaluate such transversal competences, including attitudes, higher-level intellectual skills, social and personal skills, etc. Assessment plays also a very important role in promoting competences, since more focus is given to progressive and formative assessment that encourage students to learn and to overcome their learning problems.
  3. The curriculum stays the same, but teachers are encouraged to apply new teaching and learning strategies. For instance, new teacher guides are developed that inspire the usage of activities promoting transversal competencies and reinforce the links between different learning areas and subjects.
- The MEHR should discuss and decide as soon as possible what kind of curriculum changes are possible in Mauritius on the short-, medium- and long term. Probably the second model is more appropriate to the present conditions in Mauritius. While it implies a series of curriculum modifications these changes can be provided while preserving a good part of the current curriculum. If it is not possible to change all syllabuses and textbooks, new models of syllabuses and textbooks could be developed that ought to be used in teacher training sessions and in pilot projects at school level. In addition, substantive changes in the teacher training system and in the assessment and evaluation system should be provided in order to avoid incoherencies and confusion. At present examination (CPE) is targeting rather lower-level intellectual skills and students are under a lot of pressure to memorize content and reproduce it accurately, while

other competencies, such as creativity or self-expression and team work skills are neglected.

- The participants all feel that the Curriculum Framework for primary education should be developed as soon as possible for it will set the basis for a unitary approach in the Republic and for coherent approaches that take into account a more competencies-based orientation. They have worked on designing a possible structure of the Framework that should include issues such as<sup>6</sup>:

The new education and learning philosophy  
General aims and objectives of primary education  
Learning outcomes in terms of students' competencies at the end of each primary cycle and at the end of primary education  
Selection and organisation of learning content (what learning areas/subjects; time allocation; cross-curricular issues)  
Teaching and learning methodology & Usage of learning resources  
Assessment and evaluation of student achievements  
Home work and extra-curricular activities  
Learning environment

The new Curriculum Framework will set the basis for changing and improving syllabuses, textbooks and the assessment and evaluation system in Mauritius. It has to be also connected with foreseeable changes in general secondary education and vocational education.

- During the last years several important changes have been introduced into the Mauritian system, such as a more competencies-based approach in pre-vocational schools and in ZEP<sup>7</sup> schools. The new curriculum Framework should take into account such changes and incorporate valuable experiences from Mauritius and from other countries.
- The new Framework should not just state new 'rules' for the education system (primary education) but should promote a new learning and education philosophy that is learner-centred and aims at supporting quality learning for all in a sustainable way.
- In order to work effectively and cater for effective and sustained changes of the curriculum, the MEHR should improve the working structure for primary education development. A coordinating committee should be established who should monitor the work of different subject panels. This committee should also deal with more general issues concerning the content and structure of the curriculum, and should make proposals to the MEHR in this respect (for instance, how should the subject structure change and why; how should time allocation change and why; how should

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<sup>6</sup> See more details in the comprehensive report of the participants' contribution to the workshop (Workshop Report B).

<sup>7</sup> ZEP : Zone d' Education Prioritaire

the syllabuses look like; how should textbooks be improved in order to promote a more competencies-based approach).

- This coordinating committee should work closely with the MEHR, but it should also coordinate the process of public consultation and the effective participation of all relevant stakeholders.
- The members of different subject panels should further work together, as it was the case during the workshop, and not isolated from one another and focusing only on their own subject. They need more training, exposure to relevant literature<sup>8</sup> and to work based on a system of regular meetings, with clear objectives and clear deadlines.
- All participants agreed that in order to develop the Framework for primary education there is a need to tackle some very important policy questions, such as how to change the present evaluation system; how to improve teacher training and how to provide better incentives to teachers, how to link schools and communities better, and how to cater for sustainable changes based on sound curriculum development, implementation and monitoring.
- Based on the new Curriculum Framework, new learning materials should be developed this year and piloted in schools as to prepare country-wide implementation of a new primary curriculum in 2007 and 2008.
- While the concept of a competencies-based curriculum is appealing to the MEHR and its specialists, it might be that it will also face resistance. The MEHR should thus take into consideration the need to widely explain its reform concept and engage stakeholders and media in this endeavour.
- A competencies-based approach should not be inspiring fears of turning the system up-side-down. The MEHR, in collaboration with stakeholders and the media, should focus on presenting the advantages of a competencies-based approach in the context of preserving a good balance between what was traditionally the case and the new approaches focusing on competencies.
- It would be extremely detrimental to emphasis a competencies-based approach in primary education while further preserving the current system of assessment and evaluation. This would confuse everybody and will further contribute that teacher put pressure on students to memorize the content of the textbooks and reproduce it accurately while neglecting a whole range of other intellectual, emotional, social, practical, aesthetic, etc. competencies.

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<sup>8</sup> Many participants have stated that it would be important to have access to a well-equipped curriculum library including textbooks from other countries and other relevant materials. Access to Internet would also be an asset.

- Since timing is quite tight, the MEHR should finalise a first draft of the Curriculum Framework by June 2006 in order to submit it to public discussion and finalise it based on taking into account the contributions of relevant stakeholders.
- Curriculum documents are not exhausting the meaning of curriculum, but they play a very important role in orienting teachers, students and parents. Thus much emphasis should be put on the quality of new documents, in terms of content, structure and layout.