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**Beyond Primary Education:
Challenges and Approaches to Expanding Learning Opportunities in Africa**

Parallel Session 6A

**Curriculum for
Post-Primary Education**

**Competency-based curriculum development:
some lessons from other regions**

By Renato OPERTTI (IBE-UNESCO)

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Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA)

International Institute for Educational Planning

7-9 rue Eugène Delacroix

75116 Paris, France

Tel.: +33(0)1 45 03 77 57

Fax: +33(0)1 45 03 39 65

adea@iiep.unesco.org

web site: www.ADEAnet.org

Abstract: Competency-based Curriculum Development

By this document, we wish to show how well-diverse competency-based experiences can provide us with significant lessons to take into consideration, mainly based on the progress made and the difficulties encountered. This piece is particularly intended to contribute to orientate African countries towards positive changes with respect to curricular reforms and help them design and implement sustainable and effective processes of democratization of the learning opportunities.

Following a brief introduction which situates contexts and definitions relevant to such issues, several experiences from different regions of the world will be analyzed. Two experiences, one in Canada and one in China will be briefly mentioned, followed by a more in-depth analysis of two Latin American cases (Guatemala and Uruguay). We believe that the Latin American experiences and their learning contexts, can promote useful inputs to design and strengthen processes of curriculum change competency-based in Basic Education in Africa.

By comparing and contrasting experiences from different regions of the world, we can notice that there are common concerns related to the understanding and respect for diversity by means of inclusive policies and student-centred curricular frameworks, pedagogic practices which respond to students' expectations and needs, and teachers' professional development and support school-based.

There are several key lessons learned from on-going processes of implementing competency-based approaches, principally linked to Basic and Youth Education. They could provide useful inputs to address a comprehensive curricular reform as a key component to effectively democratize Basic Education in Africa, principally with regard to school years 7 to 10.

In overall terms, we can assert that competency-based approaches have contributed to enlarging the aims and objectives of the education systems and to democratizing learning opportunities (typically the case of Latin America). At the same time, they have had a significant impact on the curriculum structure, laying the foundations for extending the concept of Basic Education. However the two main challenges are related to the subject's structures and contents, as well as to its effective development at the classroom level.

Executive Summary: Competency-based Curriculum Development

I. Introduction

This document seeks to comment on the progress made, the obstacles encountered and the challenges to be addressed when implementing processes of competency-based curricular changes. It is intended to reflect the lessons learnt about curriculum development from an inter-regional perspective in the light of expanding and democratizing post-primary education in Africa.

The competency-based approach appears to be an effective answer to the emergence of a new way of conceiving and understanding the role of education today, in different regions of the world. Most importantly, it is an increasingly useful tool that could contribute to further accelerate the attainment of EFA goals¹.

One can identify four areas of debate with regards to processes of competency-based curriculum change: (i) How to envisage the education systems. In general they seem to be undergoing serious difficulties in terms of guaranteeing an effective articulation and a fluid navigability among different levels; (ii) How to address the diversity of learner's expectations, demands and needs in terms of education policies, curricular frameworks, and teacher practices; (iii) Around the concept of competency itself. Most curriculum specialists and developers agree on the need to reach a consensus regarding the legitimacy and acceptance of a concept of competency, as it can be easily misunderstood due to its polemical and polysemic features and; (iv) Concerning the Pedagogy by Objectives (PBO) and its relationship with the competency based-approach.

II. Experiences in different Regions: Progress made and Obstacles encountered

II.1. Canada

A first experience took place in Quebec, Canada, where research was done by ORÈ Institute, led by Philippe Jonnaert. The goal was to reduce the existing gap between what is prescribed in programs of study and what really happens in the classroom. By introducing the notion of “competent action”, researchers show how a competency-based approach can be applied to identify the contents of programs of study, highlighting the idea of contextualization. After several observations, researchers came to the conclusion that the resources needed by people to address everyday problems were not those traditionally associated with school subjects.

Consequently, as a second step, researchers grouped situations into classes and then identified pertinent activities which allowed to work on such situations and on resources to be developed. Finally, they identified the competencies involved. From then on, students have been expected to develop competent actions in different classes of situations. This is thus a good example of how programs can be designed according to a situated perspective.

II.2. China

¹ The six EFA goals refer to the expansion of early childhood care and education, to the provisioning of free and compulsory primary education for all, to the promotion of learning and life skills for young people and adults, to the increase of adult literacy by 50%, to the achievement of gender parity by 2005 and gender equality by 2015, and to the improvement of the quality of education.

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The following experience was introduced by Muju Zhu. The reform was aimed at cultivating student competencies in practical situations in primary and secondary education. The curriculum proposed a nine-year compulsory education focused on fostering students' motivation and ability in lifelong learning. It tried to overcome the traditional subject-centred curriculum which was seen as an effective obstacle for students to find their learning meaningful and to put knowledge into practice. One of the innovations introduced by the reform was the organization of elective courses and cross-disciplinary studies. The senior middle school was organized by fields of study - language and literature, mathematics, humanities and social science, science, technology, physical culture and health, arts, and integrated practice activity. Each subject consists of a series of module courses, which are independent but logically linked to each other.

II.3. Latin America

From the nineties onwards the Latin American region has been undertaking relevant curricular transformations, principally in Primary and Secondary Education, in a vigorous and dynamic process of educational reforms intended to address the complex and interdependent issues of equity and quality.

II.3.1. Guatemala

Guatemala has been implementing a competency-based curriculum in Pre-school and Primary Education (levels 4 and 5, and grades 1 to 6) since 2005, and is currently developing a new competency-based curriculum for the basic cycle of Secondary Education (grades 7 to 9).

In the 1960s, an internal armed conflict began, which lasted more than 30 years. Negotiations were started between the Government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit (UNRG) in the middle of the 1980s and culminated in 1996 with the signing of the Agreement on a Firm and Lasting Peace. The various agreements signed in the 1990s laid the foundations for a new national agenda for development, recognized the rights of indigenous peoples and established commitments to build a multicultural, multi-ethnic and multilingual country. As a result of this new policy, the monolingual and mono-cultural State gave way to multi-cultural, multilingual State favouring inter-ethnic relations on an equal footing.

The agreements that serve as reference for *educational reform* are the Agreement on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples (1995) and the Agreement on Socio-Economic Aspects and the Agrarian Situation (1996). In 1998, the Joint Committee on Educational Reform issued its *Educational Reform Plan*. This plan identifies seven policy and strategy areas for educational reform: social mobilization, financing, curriculum change, human resources, equity, multicultural and intercultural approaches, and restructuring and modernization. The new curriculum paradigm is based on new concepts of nation, citizenship and education, and it promotes the existence of a common curriculum framework for Primary and Secondary Education based on an expanded concept of basic education aligned with a holistic approach to EFA goals.

Pedagogy of Integration (PI) and a pilot experience in Guatemala

The Pedagogy of Integration (PI) is a way of implementing a competency-based approach, first by mobilizing learning resources and secondly applying them in integrative learning situations. It presupposes that the curriculum design and its development are based upon the student exit profile that any education system aims to attain. The teacher develops an integrative learning situation

(requiring the mobilization of a variety of learning resources) preferably every four to five weeks, which leads to the attainment of core competencies by the students.

Scope and content of the pilot project:

In November 2006, the IBE came to an agreement with the Vice Minister of Education of Guatemala, Ms. Floridalma Meza Palma, that the Pedagogy of Integration would be tested in six primary schools (Department of Guatemala) in the school year 2007. The Ministerial request was motivated by the opinion, shared by policy makers and curriculum specialists, that competencies were defined in terms of the macro-structure of the Primary Education Curriculum (general and cross-curricular competencies) and of the organization of the subjects in the curriculum, but not in terms of learning situations that could be applied in the classroom.

First impressions concerning the implementation of the pilot project:

The ministerial group in charge of the pilot project has produced a follow-up report on the initial implementation of integrative learning situations (May 2007). The report highlights the following points: (i) The Pedagogy of Integration helps teachers reflect in-depth (in theoretical and methodological terms) on the learning difficulties of their students; (ii) Teachers stated that the evaluation criteria used are fairer and provide better learning opportunities for the students, since they have three independent opportunities to resolve a situation and have to succeed in only two of them; (iii) The provisioning of learning materials (teacher handbooks and student notebooks), to support both teachers and students, facilitates the understanding, sharing and implementation of a competency-based approach; (iv) Teachers feel at ease using integrative learning situations in the classroom and students enjoy integrative learning situations.

II.3.2. Uruguay

Legitimizing the need for change

During the middle of the 20th century, Uruguay universalized primary education and facilitated access to secondary education in a significant process intended to increase social mobility. In the mid-nineties, an effort to reform and democratize the education system led to extending universal compulsory education through grades 7 to 9 of secondary education. In the beginning of this century, the reform of upper secondary education (grades 10 to 12) was conceived as a way of complementing and reinforcing the reform of grades 7 to 9. It was the first experience of developing a curriculum based on competencies.

The case of the Uruguayan upper secondary (grades 10 to 12) education reform, which started with the 10th grade in 2003 as an experimental stage, illustrates the dual challenge of questioning a traditional system predominantly elitist in its way of thinking and acting, and introducing significant changes aimed at democratising quality learning opportunities for all.

The multiple roles of the competency-based approach

The competency-based approach is conceived as the main focus of curriculum design and implementation, from the aims and objectives up to the evaluation of school and classroom practices as well as student outcomes. From the very beginning of the reform process, both curriculum and competencies have been key concepts.

Curriculum is defined as a political and technical process that expresses and reflects the values, attitudes and feelings of a society towards its own well-being and development. It is not seen as a study plan resulting from the mere sum of the various disciplinary programmes of study. The emphasis on curriculum as a process is based on the conceptualization of four dimensions (Gimeno S.; Pérez G. 1993): (i) What is prescribed and regulated within the political and administrative realm; (ii) What is designed for teachers and students; (iii) How it is organized in a school setting, the curriculum as it unfolds ‘in action’ in the classroom; and (iv) The attained/evaluated curriculum.

The concept of *competency* is the mainstay of curriculum development and the driving force behind the process of change. The process of defining competencies, either the more general ones or those related to specific knowledge domains, implies the articulation between an effective and comprehensive appropriation of knowledge and the development of thinking skills

The competency-based approach can be regarded as a first stage when trying to break away from the strong disciplinary ethos that has traditionally predominated as the foundation of the curriculum

III. Final Reflections

There are some key lessons learned from on-going processes of implementing competency-based approaches, principally linked to Basic and Youth Education. They could provide useful inputs to address a comprehensive curricular reform as a key component to effectively democratize Basic Education in Africa, principally with regard to years 7 to 10.

It is important to understand the enrichment of the competency-based approach as a critical orientation for both the development of subject programmes as well as the renewal of school and classroom visions and practices. Likewise, understanding the conceptualization of learning situations as both a strategy and an instrument for truly implementing a competency-based approach is essential: As Jonnaert clearly states: “the situation is both the origin and the criterion of competence”.

There is a need to clarify the relationships between resources and situations and their compatibility and integration within a learning sequence

It is also critical that competency-based reforms of basic education consider, from the very beginning of the planning process, the changes that are deemed needed in teachers’ profiles and roles as well as in their pre-service training and professional development

In overall terms, we can assert that competency-based approaches have contributed to enlarging the aims and objectives of the education systems and to democratizing learning opportunities (typically the case of Latin America). At the same time, they have had a significant impact on the curriculum structure, laying the foundations for extending the concept of Basic Education (mainly from six years of compulsory schooling to between nine and twelve years). However, the development of competency-based approaches that focus on changing subject programmes and school and classroom practices remains more of a dream than a reality.

Introduction

This document seeks to comment on the progress made, the obstacles encountered and the challenges to be addressed when implementing processes of competency-based curricular changes. It is intended to reflect the lessons learnt about curriculum development from an inter-regional perspective in the light of expanding and democratizing post-primary education in Africa. We provide insight and evidence about good practices in different regions of the world which can set examples of how competency-based approaches can be developed and applied. Pending challenges and obstacles encountered are also substantial issues that the reader will encounter throughout this document.

As a principal theoretical and empirical reference, we have taken five articles of the journal “Prospects” vol. XXXVII, n° 2, June 2007² and some documents written by curriculum specialists Xavier Roegiers³ and Philippe Jonnaert⁴.

I. Areas of debate around the competency-based approach

The competency-based approach appears to be an effective answer to the emergence of a new way of conceiving and understanding the role of education today, in different regions of the world. Most importantly, it is an increasingly useful tool that could contribute to further accelerate the attainment of EFA goals⁵. The emergence of this supposedly new paradigm makes it clear that education is a societal matter involving multiple stakeholders grounded on a political and technical vision of the curriculum as encompassing processes and outcomes.

Specialists have enriched the discussion around competencies by introducing challenging perspectives and key concepts. Undoubtedly, the competency approach can help students find their learning experience meaningful, bring real life situations into the classroom, recognize diversity as

2 The five articles are: “From Competence in the Curriculum to Competence in Action” by Philippe Jonnaert, Domenico Masciotra, Johanne Barrette, Denise Morel and Mane Yaya, “Curricular reforms guide schools but where to” by Xavier Roegiers, “The process of developing a new curriculum for lower secondary education in Guatemala” by Linda Asturias de Barrios and Verónica Mérida Arellano, “Recent Chinese experience in curriculum reform” by Muju Zhu, “ and “Analysis of the 2nd E-Forum on approaches by competencies” by Leticia Perez.

3 Mr. Roegiers is Professor of educational science at the Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium, and Director of the BIEF. A civil engineer, primary school teacher, and doctor of educational science, he is currently working with his team in supporting processes of curriculum design and development in around thirty countries in five continents. He collaborates with the Organization Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF—International Organization of French-speaking Countries), UNICEF, and UNESCO. For five years he has headed a pool of African educational science experts of the OIF.

4 Philippe Jonnaert holds a doctoral degree in educational studies from the Université de Mons en Belgique; was a professor at the Université de Louvain-la-neuve in Belgium and the University of Sherbrooke in Canada; a visiting professor at the Université René Descartes, Paris 5, Sorbonne; is currently full-time professor at the Université du Québec à Montréal; director of the Observatoire des réformes en éducation; and consultant to various international organizations on issues related to curriculum development with an intensity activity in Africa.

5 The six EFA goals refer to the expansion of early childhood care and education, to the provisioning of free and compulsory primary education for all, to the promotion of learning and life skills for young people and adults, to the increase of adult literacy by 50%, to the achievement of gender parity by 2005 and gender equality by 2015, and to the improvement of the quality of education.

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an opportunity for enhancing learning and be aware of teachers' relevant mission and role as co-designers and co-developers of inclusive policies at school and classroom levels.

We outline four areas of debate with regards to processes of competency-based curriculum change.

From a macro perspective, a first area of debate is how to envisage the education systems. In general they seem to be undergoing serious difficulties in terms of guaranteeing an effective articulation and a fluid navigability among their different levels. An education system made by the sum of parts which are disconnected institutionally, pedagogically and from a curricular perspective, the transition between Childhood and Primary Education and between Primary and Secondary Education will probably reflect an incoherent and deficient system instead of a logical and integrated one. This would clearly jeopardize student learning opportunities, in particular for poorer students. In this regard, competency-based approaches can provide solid epistemological and methodological foundations for developing the curriculum framework of an enlarged basic education made of Childhood, Primary and Youth Education. The learning situations are the principal axis of the proposed framework.

A second area of debate focuses on how to address the diversity of learner's expectations, demands and needs in terms of education policies, curricular frameworks, and teacher practices. It seems to be increasingly understood that no effective change is possible if diversity is disregarded. A broadened concept of Inclusive Education, (Operti, R., 2007) based on the premise that children and young people should have equivalent learning opportunities, regardless of their cultural and/or social background or differences in abilities and capacities, could be visualized as a way of deeply understanding and actively responding to diversity (the promotion of inclusive settings in all types of schools),

In line with this, one of the key concepts of the competency-based approach is the promotion of significant learning by using a vast repertoire of pedagogical strategies. Students are different in the way they learn, and, by implementing a competency-based approach, we can be better equipped to motivate and engage them in learning processes. Experiences from different regions of the world seem to prove that the competency-based approach could be a valid option to contribute to the attainment of an inclusive curriculum and to the effective democratization of basic education.

A third area of debate is around the concept of competency itself. Most curriculum specialists and developers agree on the need to reach a consensus regarding the legitimacy and acceptance of a concept of competency, as it can be easily misunderstood due to its polemical and polysemic features. This proved evident at the Second E-Forum on Approaches by Competencies carried out in November 2006⁶. Several questions can be raised: Are we talking of skills, capacities or more globally, of how we can mobilize and integrate different learning resources – for example, knowledge, know how, attitudes, values and skills – in order to address and respond to different real life situations by assuming an active role in diverse societal contexts?

A fourth area of debate – also observed in the above mentioned 2nd E-Forum – is one concerning the Pedagogy by Objectives (PBO) and its relationship with the competency based-

⁶ Organized by the International Bureau of Education (IBE-UNESCO), the Second E-Forum on the Approaches by Competencies took place from 20 November to 15 December 2006. A total of 174 educators from 46 countries participated.

approach. Controversial questions are raised: can both approaches be compatible? Are reforms really placed around competencies if they ignore contextualization? According to ORÉ researchers' opinion, the response is definitely negative. They assert that some programs of study based on competencies do not go beyond some varieties of the PBO (conceptualized objectives as competences), using a hybrid vocabulary and mixing concepts of pedagogy by objectives with those based on competencies. In contrast with the ORÉ researchers' point of view, Xavier Roegiers shows a different perspective. He agrees on the importance of contextualization and significant learning but he does think that both approaches can be complementary. He is convinced that there is no antagonism between an organization by objectives and by competencies.

II. Experiences in different Regions: Progress made and Obstacles encountered

This section is intended to describe processes of curriculum competency-based in quite distinct national contexts. We briefly mention experiences from Canada and China and analyze in more detail two Latin American cases (Guatemala and Uruguay). We believe that the Latin American experiences can promote useful inputs to design and strengthen processes of curriculum change competency-based in Basic Education in Africa.

II.1 Canada

This experience took place in Quebec, Canada, where research was done by ORÉ Institute, led by Philippe Jonnaert. The goal was to reduce the existing gap between what is prescribed in programs of study and what really happens in the classroom. By introducing the notion of "competent action", researchers show how a competency-based approach can be applied to identify the contents of programs of study, highlighting the idea of contextualization. Working on general basic adult education, they analyzed the actions of students in context as well as the resources they used to perform such actions. Researchers call it "competent action in situation".

As a first step, they built a bank of situations by means of a survey of the target population (those who would be affected by the reform), who had to identify real-life situations. As a result, "the situations identified revealed a significant gap between the learning content traditionally specified in the programs of study and the situations for which the target population wishes to develop competency" (Jonnaert, P. Masciotra, D., Barrette, J., Morel D. and Yaya, 2006). People identified relevant situations that are not included in traditional programs of studies. Researchers came to the conclusion that the resources needed by people to address everyday problems were not those traditionally associated with school subjects.

It is important to highlight that a bank of situations cannot remain static. It should be continuously updated because people's needs and demands are continuously changing. This idea of time is an important factor to take into consideration and was also an interesting issue addressed in the above-mentioned Second E-Forum of Approaches by Competencies. Indeed, Cuban colleagues, Gaspar Barreto Argilagos, Ramón Blanco Sánchez and José Manuel Ruiz Socarras from Camaguey, stated that, if students are trained within present concrete situations, their education might be obsolete by the time they graduate.

Teachers were restricted to what was written in the programs, working on virtual competencies. Consequently, as a second step, researchers grouped situations into classes and then

identified pertinent activities which allowed to work on such situations and on resources to be developed. Finally, they identified the competencies involved. From them on, students have been expected to develop competent actions in different classes of situations.

This is thus a good example of how programs can be designed according to a situated perspective, which implies a substantial change in the way subject programs are designed methodologically and also a step forward in getting closer to a student-centered educational proposal.

II.2. China⁷

Curricular transformations based on competencies have taken place in China. To work on a competency-based approach implies to overcome the vision of curriculum as a prescriptive top-down reference, mainly based on closed disciplinary identities and obsolete organization of areas of knowledge. In line with this, we refer to the Chinese experience introduced by Muju Zhu.

The reform was aimed at cultivating student competencies in practical situations in primary and secondary education. As explained by Muju Zhu, the Ministry of Education issued the “*Programme on Reform of Basic Education Curriculum (Experimental)*”. The curriculum proposed a nine-year compulsory education focused on fostering students’ motivation and ability in lifelong learning in order to achieve all-round and balanced moral, intellectual, physical and aesthetic student development and advanced character building, through the cultivation of competencies. It tried to overcome the traditional subject-centred curriculum. In this sense, the new curriculum implies a new idea of education dynamically adapted to the demands of a Chinese society influenced by the advent of the knowledge explosion and new technologies.

Before the reform, there were few experience-building courses. Cultural tradition is now considered in the new curriculum as well as compulsory experience-building courses based on integrated practice activity. The aim is for students to gain personal experience in the fieldwork, effectively exercise a responsible citizenship, solve real-life problems and cultivate personal qualities.

A subject-centred curriculum was seen as an effective obstacle for students to find their learning meaningful and to put knowledge into practice. One of the innovations introduced by the reform was the organization of elective courses and cross-disciplinary studies. The senior middle school was organized by fields of study - language and literature, mathematics, humanities and social science, science, technology, physical culture and health, arts, and integrated practice activity. Each subject consists of a series of module courses, which are independent but logically linked to each other.

Muju Zhu uses the example of a science lesson for junior secondary students (grade 7) to illustrate the situation. In studying the phenomenon of earthquakes, the teacher divided students into three groups to collect information during after-school hours, on three relevant topics. In a week’s time, each group was asked to finish its assignment, compile detailed text and illustrations, and prepare a presentation that was to last three to five minutes.

Some obstacles were nevertheless encountered when working on this new curriculum. First of all, China’s huge population impels middle and primary schools to put far more students in a

⁷ This section is partially based in the article written by Muju Zhu for the June Number of Prospects already mentioned.

class than, for example, their European counterparts would. Another issue was encountered within Chinese culture and tradition regarding the role of teachers who are considered moral and intellectual authorities. This situation sometimes affects the teacher-learner relationship. These difficulties are however being progressively overcome, principally regarding the attainment of more equal and just relationships between students and teachers.

II.3. Latin America

From the nineties onwards the Latin American region has been undertaking relevant curricular transformations, principally in Primary and Secondary Education, in a vigorous and dynamic process of educational reforms intended to address the complex and interdependent issues of equity and quality (Operti, 2007). This wave of reforms is not an expression of the latest fashion or a mechanical replication of models imported from outside the region. It is rather the reflection of a profound will to change the role of the education system as a critical factor in fostering national development, achieving equal access to and fair distribution of opportunities, and establishing the conditions for a decent international integration based on solid competitiveness.

The various reform processes have been carried out according to very diverse ideas, frameworks, strategies, and partnerships. While in overall terms, the reforms share common concerns and challenges, they differ in their agendas, their policy frameworks and decisions as well as their implementation strategies. Diversity and specificity are two distinctive features of these reforms.

A good number of them view the competency-based approach as a way of conceptualizing and implementing significant changes in educational policy, curriculum vision and content, as well as teachers' education and professional development. Although much of the discussion and debate surrounding competencies have been intense, more political than pedagogical, replete with biased conceptions and weak in theoretical support and empirical evidence, they have opened the door to an overall questioning of the education system. A central issue is that traditional ways of viewing the curriculum and the teacher's role, which are very much embedded in conservative disciplinary identities mixed with corporate interests, tend to exclude more than include potential and real learners.

II.3.1. Guatemala

II.3.1.1. National context, curriculum change and competency-based approaches in Guatemala⁸

Guatemala has been implementing a competency-based curriculum in Pre-school and Primary Education (levels 4 and 5, and grades 1 to 6) since 2005, and is currently developing a new competency-based curriculum for the basic cycle of Secondary Education (grades 7 to 9). This process of curriculum reform is embedded in the on-going expansion and democratization of learning conditions and opportunities. These elements are seen as crucial factors in fostering a peaceful society, attaining decent levels of cultural and social integration, and overcoming high-levels of marginality and poverty.

⁸ This section is partially based on an article written by Linda Asturias and Veronica Merida for the June Number of Prospects previously mentioned.

Guatemala is a Central American country covering an area of 108,889 km² with a population of over 11.2 million people. This population is made up of 25 linguistic communities: 22 different Maya plus Xinka, Garífuna and Spanish-speaking communities. The Mayan population, which is of pre-Hispanic Central American origin, accounts for more than 40% of the country's total population.

In the 1960s, an internal armed conflict began, which lasted more than 30 years. Negotiations were started between the Government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit (UNRG) in the middle of the 1980s and culminated in 1996 with the signing of the Agreement on a Firm and Lasting Peace. The various agreements signed in the 1990s laid the foundations for a new national agenda for development, recognized the rights of indigenous peoples and established commitments to build a multicultural, multi-ethnic and multilingual country. As a result of this new policy, the monolingual and mono-cultural State gave way to a multi-cultural, multilingual State favouring inter-ethnic relations on an equal footing.

The agreements that serve as reference for educational reform are the Agreement on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples (1995) and the Agreement on Socio-Economic Aspects and the Agrarian Situation (1996). In the first agreements, the Government initiated a reform of the education system, with a series of declared aims including:

- Decentralization and regionalization;
- Community participation in the definition of curricula and school timetables on the basis of proposals by teachers;
- Integration of the educational concepts of indigenous peoples;
- Expansion of intercultural bilingual education;
- Reinforcement of national unity, subject to the recognition of cultural diversity;
- An increased budget for education.

It was also decided that a joint planning committee on educational reform would be established, consisting of representatives from both the Government and indigenous organizations.

In the Socio-Economic Agreement, the Government undertook a number of commitments, including the following:

- An increase in the financial resources devoted to education;
- Adjustment of educational content in the light of the findings of the Joint Committee on Educational Reform;
- Extended coverage, including the offer of intercultural bilingual education;
- Support for literacy in indigenous languages; development and implementation of a programme of civic education for peace;
- Effective community participation; vocational training; and education for women.

In order to develop and implement this educational reform, the Ministry of Education set up its own advisory committee.

In 1998, the Joint Committee on Educational Reform issued its *Educational Reform Plan*. This plan identifies seven policy and strategy areas for educational reform: social mobilization, financing, curriculum change, human resources, equity, multicultural and intercultural approaches, and restructuring and modernization. The area of curriculum change itself comprises six policies: enhancing comprehensive training in democracy, the culture of peace and sustainable development;

curriculum renewal; improving the quality of education; curriculum decentralization; improving out-of-school education; and development of values. The curriculum renewal policy aims for an “in-depth review of all parts of the curriculum with a view on incorporating aspects related to the different areas of educational reform”.

Eight years after the publication of the *Educational Reform Plan*, the Ministry of Education has already made headway with its policy of curriculum renewal. A core national curriculum has been developed for Pre-School and Primary Education, each with its own guidelines for further curriculum development. These guidelines adopt an integrating methodology and allow teachers to interpret the curriculum. The new curriculum was gradually implemented in Pre-School and Primary Education. In 2005–2006, with the support from UNESCO, GTZ, the Population Fund and UNICEF, a curriculum proposal was prepared for lower Secondary Education (known as the “*ciclo básico*”, equivalent to the seventh, eighth and ninth years in other educational systems). In addition, a core national curriculum was developed for primary school teachers.

The Guatemalan government has concentrated efforts on expanding its school system. After the signing of the Peace Agreements in 1996, the total enrolment in the education system has grown by 74%. This growth in enrolment resulted in a significant increase in the net rates of schooling in all education levels. It is important to highlight the growth observed in the net rates of schooling of the two first education levels (pre-school and primary), where there was an increase of 18.2 and 21.7 points respectively between 1996 and 2006.

Regarding efficiency, according to data provided by MINEDUC, an analysis of the repetition and dropout percentages in all the education levels reveals that the main challenges lie in primary education, especially with respect to the repetition rate. In this respect, it is also important to point out that the high repetition rate observed in primary school and the enrolment of older students in the first grade result in dramatic over-age percentages. Furthermore, the high repetition and drop-out rates have a negative impact on the graduation rates and the possibilities for Guatemalans to gain access to higher education levels.

The new curriculum paradigm is based on new concepts of nation, citizenship and education:

- Guatemala is a multi-ethnic, multicultural and multilingual State;
- The aim is to promote policies and actions intended to eradicate stereotypes and cultural practices promoting discrimination;
- Guatemala is a country where all individuals are guaranteed to enjoy the full exercise of their human rights and freedoms;
- The categories of stakeholders concerned by the curriculum include students (active participants), teachers (commitment to train free, responsible individuals), communities (they must bring the school closer to daily life), parents, educational advisers, school administrators, educational administrators and decentralized technical teams;
- The new curriculum is flexible, open to improvement and renewal, participative, comprehensive, focused on learning, organized around competencies and centred on the human person (instead of being rigid, disconnected and out of context, as the old one).

The reform strategy for lower Secondary Education is governed by the following principles:

- Links between the Lower Secondary curriculum and the curricula of both Primary and Upper Secondary Education;
- Equity in the supply of and access to quality education;
- Education-for-life based on multicultural, inclusive citizenship;
- Quality education, based on evaluation standards and culture;
- Cultural relevance and diversity;
- Promotion of bilingualism and gradually - where feasible -multilingualism (e.g. linguistic competency in three languages);
- Information and communications technologies as tools for learning;
- Participation of the educational community and various actors.

Macro and cross-curricular competencies are common to the current curriculum of Primary Education (grades 1 to 6, in place since 2003) and the proposed curriculum for the basic cycle of Secondary Education (2007). It is important to highlight the existence of a common curriculum framework for Primary and Secondary Education based on an expanded concept of basic education aligned with a holistic approach to EFA goals. Moreover, considering the fact that the current enrolment in grades 7 to 9 does not exceed 30% and that 80% of the students attend private schools, the process of designing a new curriculum proposal can be seen as a significant pioneer effort to lay the foundations for a public Secondary Education system in Guatemala.

II.3.1.2. Pedagogy of Integration (PI) and a pilot experience in Guatemala

Some brief background information regarding IBE's involvement in the process of educational reform in Guatemala is as follows: The Technical Vice Minister of Education (Ministry of Education of Guatemala – MINEDUC), Mrs. Floridalma Meza Palma, attended the start-up seminar of the worldwide Community of Practice in Curriculum Development (July 2005⁹), in which Mr. Xavier Roegiers gave a presentation on the competency-based approach entitled "The pedagogy of integration." On that occasion, Mrs. Meza Palma requested of the IBE the assistance of the Belgian Institute BIEF, headed by Mr. Roegiers, to help the MINEDUC developing and evaluating competencies at the classroom level through learning situations.

This request was motivated by the opinion, shared by policy makers and curriculum specialists from the MINEDUC and universities, that competencies were defined in terms of the macro-structure of the Primary Education Curriculum (general and cross-curricular competencies) and of the organization of the subjects in the curriculum, but not in terms of learning situations that could be applied in the classroom.

Brief description of the Pedagogy of Integration

The Pedagogy of Integration (PI) is a way of implementing a competency-based approach¹⁰, first by mobilizing learning resources and secondly applying them in integrative learning situations. It presupposes that the curriculum design and its development are based upon the student exit

9 In July 2005, the IBE, in conjunction with curriculum specialists from different regions of the world, set up the Community of Practice in Curriculum Development, which is understood as a national as well as an intra- and inter-regional space where the issues of curriculum change can be jointly discussed and implemented within the framework of a holistic approach to determining and implementing the goals of Education for All (EFA). Up to now, the community of practice is made by 730 members from 90 countries. See www.ibe.unesco.org/cops/Focal_Points/focal.htm

10 For a more detailed description, see www.ibe.unesco.org/cops/Competencies/competencies.htm and http://www.ibe.unesco.org/cops/seminars/Guatemala/Guatemala_06.htm

profile that any education system aims to attain. The profile is defined through complex learning situations belonging to a family of situations, aimed at responding to the expectations and needs of students. The disciplinary content of each subject is conceptualized and defined on the basis of the student profile and the set of learning situations associated with it.

The resources, such as knowledge, skills and attitudes, are introduced, practiced in several applications, and finally reinvested several times in learning situations. Reinvestment in a situation differs from mere application in the sense that it is contextualized and meaningful to the student, and, most importantly, because it requires the use of several types of resources which the student must identify and articulate. Indeed, he/she does not automatically know which resources are to be mobilized and must discover them alone in accordance with the situation presented. This approach thus has a cognitive origin. The knowledge acquired is operationalised, becomes stable over time because it is internalized, and is ready to be mobilized for and in action.

The teacher develops an integrative learning situation (requiring the mobilization of a variety of learning resources) preferably every four to five weeks, which leads to the attainment of core competencies by the students. Both certificate and formative evaluation is essentially focused on the mastery of integrative learning situations at a given level, corresponding to the expected profile.

Scope and content of the pilot project

During 2006, the IBE, in conjunction with the Central American Education and Cultural Council (CECC, an intergovernmental body), the Ministry of Education of Guatemala (MINEDUC) and the UNESCO Office in Guatemala, organized a series of three training workshops in Guatemala City on the Pedagogy of Integration for a group of educators and curriculum specialists from all Central American countries.

In November 2006, the IBE came to an agreement with the Vice Minister of Education of Guatemala, Ms. Floridalma Meza Palma, that the Pedagogy of Integration would be tested in six primary schools (Department of Guatemala) in the school year 2007. A ministerial group of four specialists in the areas of curriculum design, research, teacher training and evaluation, was set up in order to lead the pilot project. The BIEF institute supports the follow-up of this experience.

The main objective of the pilot project is to test the Pedagogy of Integration in six selected schools as a way of supporting the implementation of the Basic National Curriculum of Primary Education (as it was said, a new curriculum is in place since 2005), mainly related to the design and evaluation of competencies at the classroom level by employing learning situations. The selection of schools was made according to the following criteria:

- The school as a whole should have been involved in training activities organized by the Ministry of Education of Guatemala (MINEDUC) related to improving the quality of education;
- The school principal should have participated in training programmes;
- The principal and the teachers voluntarily agreed to participate in the pilot experience; and
- Schools were selected from both urban (four) and rural (six) areas.

The pilot experience has been limited to the competencies of Math and Communication and Language as these are considered the core areas of knowledge in the new curriculum. Out of a total of nine competencies that are respectively defined in the curriculum for Math and Communication

and Language, three were selected for each area. It was agreed that three integrative learning situations would be developed for each competency. The ministerial group is in charge of coordinating the design and implementation of the learning situations.

Twenty-nine (29) teachers, 15 from grade 1 and 14 from grade 3, are working on the development and evaluation of the Math and Communication and Language competencies. There are 463 students in grade 1 and 375 students in grade 3 participating in the pilot experience. Two training workshops were given at the school level, supported by documentation on the concept and utility of integrative learning situations, a self-directed learning unit on the evaluation of competencies, concrete examples of the definition and evaluation of competencies in Communication and Language and guidelines on the evaluation of learning situations that can be applied during the school year.

The sequence of learning activities was established as follows:

- Weeks 1 to 3: mobilization of learning resources;
- Week 4: trial of one integrative learning situation for Math and Language and Communication respectively;
- Weeks 5 to 7: further mobilization of learning resources;
- Week 8: three integrative learning situations for Math, and Language and Communication respectively, used on three consecutive days.

On the first day of the integration week (learning situations), students in groups work on the integrative learning situation (each teacher decides on the size of the group) and evaluate themselves, guided by the teacher. On the second day, students work individually on the integrative learning situation according to the teachers' guidelines and evaluate themselves, again guided by the teacher. On the third day, students work individually on the integrative learning situation with the teacher's support. The teacher evaluates the situation and in the following week implements remedial/compensatory measures.

Teachers' handbooks have been developed pertaining to the development and evaluation of competencies (through integrative learning situations), and contain information about the following topics: the significance of the competency selected, a profile of the family of situations, instructions for the integration of learning resources and the design of integrative learning situations, criteria for evaluating students and a plan for supporting them. Taking as a reference point the teacher's handbook, student notebooks have also been developed that include integrative learning situations.

The follow-up and evaluation of the pilot project has involved:

- A pre-test comparison of experimental and control schools, using an assessment instrument in Communication and Language (April 2007);
- Implementation of the integrative learning situations related to the three competencies in Math, and Communication and Language respectively, undertaken in May, July and August 2007; and a post-test assessment comparison that took place in October 2007.

First impressions concerning the implementation of the pilot project

The ministerial group in charge of the pilot project has produced a follow-up report on the initial implementation of integrative learning situations (May 2007), which was presented at the 4th. Meeting of the Central American Community of Practice in Curriculum Development in a regional

workshop entitled “Competency-based curriculum design” (San Jose, Costa Rica, June 25-28, 2007). This meeting was attended by the group of educators who participated in the above-mentioned three training workshops on the Pedagogy of Integration (Guatemala City 2006).

Based on classroom observations and interviews with teachers, the report highlights the following points:

- The Pedagogy of Integration helps teachers to reflect in-depth (in theoretical and methodological terms) on the learning difficulties of their students. It also enhances their understanding and helps them to develop approaches tailored to their students’ needs. This approach could favour a more inclusive approach to education (UNESCO, 2005)¹¹ as it tries to respect and address the specificity and uniqueness of each learner.
- Teachers stated that the evaluation criteria used are fairer and provide better learning opportunities for the students, since they have three independent opportunities to resolve a situation and have to succeed in only two of them. As Francois-Marie Gerard has said (2006), these criteria preclude the possibility of students failing on the basis of a single error. It is important to emphasize the coherence that teachers seem to see between a student-centred educational approach and the criteria and instruments used to address their learning situations and to evaluate them.
- The provisioning of learning materials (teacher handbooks and student notebooks), to support both teachers and students, facilitates the understanding, sharing and implementation of a competency-based approach. Although these materials are mainly produced by the ministerial team in charge of the pilot project, in the medium term the teachers will produce their own materials and will thereby become co-developers of the curriculum and not solely implementers.
- Teachers feel at ease using integrative learning situations in the classroom. They perceive them as concrete tools to effectively implement competency-based subject programs. The big change apparently lies in going from mobilizing and applying learning resources to real life situations to the effective articulation of learning situations as the locus for mobilizing, integrating and applying resources.
- The students enjoy working on integrative learning situations. They perceive them as more responsive to their motivations and interests than the traditional didactic situations, and as positive challenges to cope with. Students also feel more comfortable and less encumbered by the evaluation process. Apparently, in the Pedagogy of Integration approach, the concept of evaluation as a process and not as a reward/punishment is perceived positively by students.

II.3.2. Uruguay

II.3.2.1. Legitimizing the need for change

¹¹ UNESCO defines inclusion “as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education”.

Uruguay, a tiny country composed of 3.3 million people, has been historically recognized as a leading regional reference in fostering a social welfare State in the early 20th century.¹² One of the pillars of this initiative was the development of education, principally primary and secondary education, as a powerful means of social and cultural integration, taking into account the large flow of immigrants, principally from Italy and Spain. During the middle of the 20th century, Uruguay universalized primary education and facilitated access to secondary education in a significant process intended to increase social mobility.

In the mid-nineties, an effort to reform and democratize the education system led to extending universal compulsory education through grades 7 to 9 of secondary education. Although repetition and dropout rates have decreased, principally within the most deprived social sectors, they are still high, which reveals problems of social and pedagogical exclusion. Likewise, in the beginning of this century, the reform of upper secondary education (grades 10 to 12) was conceived as a way of complementing and reinforcing the reform of grades 7 to 9. It was the first experience of developing a curriculum based on competencies.

The case of the Uruguayan upper secondary (grades 10 to 12) education reform, which started with the 10th grade in 2003 as an experimental stage, illustrates the dual challenge of questioning a traditional system predominantly elitist in its way of thinking and acting, and introducing significant changes aimed at democratising quality learning opportunities for all. Supporters of the traditional system tend to believe that the attainment of quality education is severely jeopardized by increasingly “overcrowded” secondary enrolments. They do not link the reform to the democratization of learning opportunities.

From the onset of the reform process and, as a result of findings from quantitative and qualitative studies,¹³ the focus has been on addressing the problems and pending challenges as a way of informing the development of public policies. The old secondary education system was criticized on the following grounds:

- It was mainly conceived as a steppingstone to university studies, and hence its mission was essentially propaedeutic
- It lacked proper aims and goals as well as common concerns and approaches throughout the curriculum structure
- It was composed of traditional disciplines, based on an outdated orientation to knowledge, rigidly compartmentalized with few links among the parts and in which content was principally selected to respond to corporate demands and arrangements
- The prevailing teaching profile and style consisted of transmitting information in accordance with teacher-fronted methodologies and concerns about preparing students for exams

¹² It is principally related to the set of social reforms instigated by former Uruguayan President Jose Batlle y Ordoñez (from 1903-1907 and 1911-1915) based on a social democratic approach.

¹³ A series of studies was published as Working Papers, which were disseminated to principals, directors and high school teachers as well as to members of Parliament, political parties, NGOs, the media, professional associations and relevant representatives from diverse fields.

- It seemed to satisfy the expectations and demands of the middle and higher social classes, especially families in the professional sectors whose children are most likely to attend university.

The discussion was opened to multiple stakeholders from inside and outside the education system and the results of the studies were widely disseminated by the media (television, radio and the press).

The findings clearly revealed the elitist nature of the upper secondary education system and its discontinuity with the on-going process of democratization in lower secondary education. Certain critical evidence confronted the education system, its institutions and actors, with a cruel reality that is often concealed by a widespread, rhetorical and reiterative discourse that places the blame for all problems on the lack of adequate financial and human resources.

Four elements were highlighted as core reasons to reform the upper secondary curriculum:

- It excludes more than it includes young people and students, as it was shown that within the cohort of students who entered 7th grade in 1996, only one out of five was attending 12th grade in 2001. Moreover, it was estimated that one third of the students who attended 10th grade did in fact reach 12th grade (ANEP/MEMFOD, 2002). The pass rate on compulsory exams in grades 11 and 12 was nearly 50 per cent, with little differentiation observed between humanities and sciences. A significant consequence of this perverse situation has been the emergence of a strong market for private classes, which cover almost one third of the students attending grades 11 and 12.
- The social gap evidenced in learning outcomes reveals a fractured society in terms of equality of opportunities. It was estimated that the probability of completing 12th grade is 0.29 in the first quintile as opposed to 0.78 in the fifth quintile (ANEP/MEMFOD, 2004).
- Based mainly on teachers' and students' opinions, which were well documented through a series of qualitative studies, the reform team concluded that the syllabi of grades 10 to 12 do not adequately prepare students to handle their personal lives, to assume their role as citizens, to pursue tertiary studies, or to enter the labour market. Even the propaedeutic role, which has been the cornerstone of these syllabi, was severely questioned by numerous stakeholders - mainly universities - on the grounds that they do not equip students with necessary minimum competencies for success at the tertiary level. Universities' concerns do not essentially relate to insufficient disciplinary knowledge on the part of students, but rather to their poor Language and Math skills (ANEP/MEMFOD, 2002).
- The curricular design and its implementation has been based on subject content and an outdated epistemological organization of areas of knowledge, as well as on the predominance of teacher-fronted methods that leave no room for substantial interaction with and among students and that fail to consider emotional as well as cognitive dimensions. Students have been considered simply as recipients of knowledge and information, which are supposedly essential for passing exams. Consequently, or so it is argued, they should be familiar with this type of evaluation if they are to be "prepared" for university (Lopater A. and Oldan R., 2005).

All the data gathered through 30 studies published as working papers¹⁴ reveals a harsh reality of which everyone was supposedly aware, despite the lack of any public discussion on the matter. The facts and perceptions confirmed in research reports that reached every public secondary school and that were also disseminated by the media, put the whole education system into question and laid the foundations for a growing consensus on the need for change.

The findings were basically discredited by opponents of the competency-based approach, as mere justifications for “blaming” outcomes on teachers and developing a “second class education” with low standards (for example, alternative assessment methods to exams, such as projects and portfolios) and well suited to the mandates of international loan bodies, mainly the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank. The findings were discounted as being sociologically biased in perspective and data, opponents arguing that numbers cannot fuel a substantial discussion on educational and curricular issues, ignoring the fact that a considerable body of qualitative research had been carried out. In general terms, there was little consideration on how the curriculum structure, syllabi, and ways of teaching and evaluating students are main factors contributing to low outcomes, principally among the most disadvantaged social sectors.

II.3.2.2. The multiple roles of the competency-based approach

The competency-based approach is conceived as the main focus of curriculum design and implementation, from the aims and objectives up to the evaluation of school and classroom practices as well as student outcomes. From the very beginning of the reform process, both curriculum and competencies have been key concepts.

Firstly, curriculum is defined as a political and technical process that expresses and reflects the values, attitudes and feelings of a society towards its own well-being and development. Its societal nature and the joint involvement of institutions and actors within and outside the education system are considered critical sources of its legitimacy, pertinence and durability. It expresses the spirit of the former IBE Director Cecilia Braslavsky’s definition of curriculum as “a dense and flexible contract between politics/society and teachers” (IBE/UNESCO, 2005). In order to foster this conception, it is necessary to find adequate and dynamic combinations of solid universal concepts that substantially support operational procedures (density) as well as clear and real opportunities to choose between options to be implemented (flexibility).

Secondly, the curriculum is not seen as a study plan resulting from the mere sum of the various disciplinary programmes of study. The aims, objectives, learning strategies and evaluation criteria common to all subjects as well as the curriculum structure and its organization are clearly highlighted. The role of each subject is seen in the light of the objectives pursued by the curriculum as a whole. This view stands in opposition to the widespread image of teachers working in isolation to deliver specific programmes and subject knowledge in a classroom. Philippe Jonnaert and Moussadak Ettayebi’s (Jonnaert P. and Ettayebi M., 2007) definition of curriculum clearly supports this distinction between curriculum and study plan, asserting that the curriculum is composed of a set of elements that are to be put together and coordinated in order to design an effective pedagogical working plan for the education system.

Thirdly, the emphasis on curriculum as a process is based on the conceptualization of four dimensions (Gimeno S.; Pérez G. 1993):

¹⁴ We refer to the studies published under “Contributions for reflecting on upper secondary education” headed by the Commission for Transforming Upper Secondary Education

- What is prescribed and regulated within the political and administrative realm;
- What is designed for teachers and students;
- How it is organized in a school setting, the curriculum as it unfolds ‘in action’ in the classroom;
- The attained/evaluated curriculum.

Closing the gaps between the intended and the implemented curriculum is a major concern. Consequently, it is important to understand and support what really happens at the school and classroom levels.

The concept of competency is the mainstay of curriculum development and the driving force behind the process of change. It is defined as “the development of complex capacities that enable students to think and act in various fields of activity [...]. It consists of achieving knowledge in action, the result of a sound knowledge base that can be put into practice and used to explain what is happening” (CODICEN/ANEP, 2002). The main concern has been to understand and use the concept of competency as a way of countering the idea that curriculum is mainly implemented by having students reproduce theoretical knowledge and memorize facts. The application of knowledge to real-life situations informs the development of the new curriculum. These are situations in which students can experience and grasp the feedback relationship between knowledge and reality, as well as the interfaces between theory and practice. Bringing school closer to students’ concerns and expectations, to what occurs in the workplace and to different social realities can help them develop the citizenship competencies required to secure a decent place in today’s world.

One can highlight two main references which inform this conceptualization of competencies:

- Perrenoud’s assertion that the development of competencies is based on knowledge but cannot be reduced to it, since competency is defined as the capacity to act effectively in a particular situation (Perremoud, P., 1999);
- Cecilia Braslavsky’s notion of competency as an internalized procedure that incorporates conceptual knowledge and at the same time is subject to a constant process of revision and improvement, allowing a person to resolve material, spiritual, practical or symbolic problems, and attending to the consequences.

The inexorable link between knowledge and situations is the major focus for curriculum change and a necessary condition for improving classroom practices and student outcomes.

The process of defining competencies, either the more general ones or those related to specific knowledge domains, implies the articulation between an effective and comprehensive appropriation of knowledge and the development of thinking skills. It is aimed at achieving knowledge in action, that is, knowledge that is at once rigorous, practical and capable of being explicitly formulated. This implies the integration of problem-solving skills, creativity and meta-cognition. The competency-based approach can be regarded as a first stage when trying to break

away from the strong disciplinary ethos that has traditionally predominated as the foundation of the curriculum.

III. Final Reflections

The competency-based approach is probably one of the most relevant issues discussed concerning curricular reforms. As stated above, this approach has some controversial edges and consequently, it can be visualized from different theoretical perspectives. Certainly, the discussion around this approach is a solid starting point to rethink educational systems in different regions of the world. We indeed find it necessary to resort to innovative proposals so as to address the universal challenge of attaining a high-quality equitable education.

By this document, we wish to show how well-diverse competency-based experiences can provide us with significant lessons to take into consideration, mainly based on the progress made and the difficulties encountered. This piece is particularly intended to contribute to orientate African countries towards positive changes with respect to curricular reforms and help them design and implement sustainable and effective processes of democratization of the learning opportunities.

Jonnaert and Roegiers emphasise two essential ideas in order to clearly understand the spirit of the competency-based approach: “competent action in situation” and “significant learning”. The first idea was reflected in the Second E-forum on Approaches by Competencies as there was an unquestionable agreement in considering contextualization as an essential element to conceptualize and define competencies. This was evidenced by research done both in Quebec. One of the most important principles of the competency-based approach lies in significant learning. Through this article, we wish to inform the reader on the importance of meaningful learning as a way to allow students to learn to apply knowledge to concrete real-life situations and as a way of introducing complexity into the classroom.

By comparing and contrasting experiences from different regions of the world, we can notice that there are common concerns related to the understanding and respect for diversity by means of inclusive policies and student-centred curricular frameworks, pedagogic practices which respond to students’ expectations and needs, and teachers’ professional development and support school-based.

There are some key lessons learned from on-going processes of implementing competency-based approaches, principally linked to Basic and Youth Education. They could provide useful inputs to address a comprehensive curricular reform as a key component to effectively democratize Basic Education in Africa, principally with regard to years 7 to 10.

- (a) The need for a profound, serious and frank policy discussion about the various competency-based approaches, their status and role. Such discussion need not avoid ideological considerations but should be better supported by information and evidence and contribute to the clarification of concepts and alternatives.
- (b) Understanding the enrichment of the competency-based approach as a critical orientation for both the development of subject programmes as well as the renewal of school and classroom visions and practices, and not only as an important reference point for conceptualizing and defining macro objectives and components of the curriculum structure.

- (c) Understanding the conceptualization of learning situations as both a strategy and an instrument for truly implementing a competency-based approach: As Jonnaert clearly states: “the situation is both the origin and the criterion of competence” (Jonnaert. P., 2006). Up until now, the tendency has been to apply resources, many ways in an isolated way, to the resolution of situations, or what are often called “situational problems”. Methodological proposals such as the Pedagogy of Integration, provides criteria and tools to develop and implement families of integrative learning situations in a structured and rather simple way with a clear focus on the classroom practices.
- (d) The need to clarify the relationships between resources and situations and their compatibility and integration within a learning sequence. The centrality of students’ expectations and needs in the conceptualization and definition of situations is a key component to motivate and engage students, to develop relevant contents linked to real-life situations and to assess students according to just and formative criteria. Students shouldn’t be seen as learning targets but as learning actors.
- (e) The need for competency-based reforms of basic education to consider, from the very beginning of the planning process, the changes that are deemed needed in teachers’ profiles and roles as well as in their pre-service training and professional development, in order to sustain the change process. The institutional, curricular and pedagogical lack of articulation between the reforms of Basic and Teacher Education has had profound negative impacts and is one of the main lessons learned from the reforms that took place in Latin America in the nineties.

In overall terms, we can assert that competency-based approaches have contributed to enlarging the aims and objectives of the education systems and to democratizing learning opportunities (typically the case of Latin America). At the same time, they have had a significant impact on the curriculum structure, laying the foundations for extending the concept of Basic Education (mainly from six years of compulsory schooling to between nine and twelve years). However, the development of competency-based approaches that focus on changing subject programmes and school and classroom practices remains more of a dream than a reality.

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