



## COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION: A STEP TOWARDS PEDAGOGICAL RENEWAL?

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**Résumé:** Le présent article repositionne la réforme entreprise depuis 2003 dans la perspective qui a été mise en exergue par la ministre de l'éducation nationale, en l'occurrence, celle du changement pédagogique. L'hypothèse avancée dans cette réflexion c'est de faire de l'application de l'approche par les compétences, l'APC, une simple étape dans le renouveau pédagogique annoncée par les autorités et non l'objectif ultime de l'éducation nationale. Par ailleurs, l'article développe d'abord une approche critique de l'APC, une explicitation du concept de compétence plus affiné en langue anglaise (dichotomisation compétence vs. competency), ainsi qu'une mise en garde contre une implémentation par trop mimétique de la dite approche. Ainsi, une pratique de classe sans cesse renouvelée et une attitude réflexive de tous les instants de l'enseignant, permettront à l'APC de satisfaire les besoins de formation des élèves et de mieux répondre à la demande sociale pour une éducation de qualité.

The Minister of National Education has unceasingly stated what the new challenges of the sector were in the overall development strategy of the country, in particular to upgrade the human capital, *'to dam up the intra and inter-wilaya disparities to improve the rate of schooling, to reduce double-shift, to achieve the generalisation of pre-school education, and in this way raise the overall cultural level, and to improve the work conditions of all'* (in *EducRecherche*, n° 9 2014: 6). Dr. Benghabrit has indeed forcefully indicated what the new shift in the education policy was by underlining what she considers to be of primary importance to the cohorts of pupils leaving for the university or following other forms of training, namely the pedagogical reorganization in line with the more and more competitive global economy. She has stated that her aim was *"the building of a process fostering the emergence*

*of quality education"*. Among the challenges, she has identified innovation of pedagogy as one of the key parameters that can help the system to meet the challenges of the new century. The pedagogical reorganization consists mainly in the strengthening of competency-based education (henceforth CBE) for a more adequate management of the learnings.

Our concern in the present paper is, on the way to answering the question about the renewal of pedagogical practices, the clarification of the much acclaimed notion of CBE and the rekindling of pedagogy. The questioning of this concept seems unavoidable because of the education community's over-reliance on its tenets to do away with the ills and problems the sector is suffering from. Besides, administrative and pedagogical decision-makers alike seem to hang on too much to CBE as the unique

magical formula, as if it were an undisputed dogma, and not like an instrument to be diversely employed according to the realities of the considered contexts.

As a preamble, one feels that three questions need to be answered for understanding the background of the implementation of CBE:

- ① What is the relevance of the expected changes towards the strengthening of the education system in the face of the challenges of the 20st century that awaits it?
- ② What is the degree of adaptability of the tenets of CBE to the Algerian context?
- ③ How efficient is CBE in bringing about all expected changes to the overall system?

The first question probes the relevancy of CBE to bring changes to a system that needed restructuring, not only because of its enduring inadequacies and malfunctioning, but also because of the necessity to evolve with world alterations. A world that has moved decisively towards the twenty-first century. Three phenomena seem to be guiding the evolution of the education system: **globalisation** (cross-border trade, internationalisation of education, free-market economic systems, reductions of barriers to commerce and migration, development of information technology, improvement of transportation, increase of intellectual interchange for knowledge dissemination, all this towards international integration), search for **quality-education** (translated into the pupils' adequate learning outcomes, cognitive and emotional development, and the promotion of the society's values), and finally, **emergence of a learning society** (education, whether formal or informal, is considered as a key parameter for the development of a country to ultimately help promote the 'world education culture'). Potentially, CBE helps achieve congruency between education and the workplace as a way to preparing pupils if they leave school early to find in their education the necessary skills to be efficient in a given job. Furthermore, it promotes quality-directed training by establishing standards that can serve for

guaranteeing quality education to a system in a dire need for such a qualitative advancement. Indeed, in theory, CBE instils in the pedagogical partners an interest to competitiveness and efficacy, to avoid visions of homogeneity to classrooms that inevitably bring together mixed-ability groups. Learner-centredness, a key notion in CBE, is to be practised and not simply made a slogan.

The second question concerns the adaptability of the principles of CBE to the realities of the country. Thus, the much heralded learner-centredness seems to be highly improbable in a sector dominated by the frustrating and disarming image of the teacher as the 'Sheikh', the all-knowing wise teacher who never fails nor makes mistakes and is the central and quasi unique actor of the learning experience, far away from the reassuring role of the guide or facilitator he has to embody in the new pedagogies. Furthermore, learner-centredness in classroom situations is still a thing rarely practised because of the persistence and survival of traditional methodologies (e.g., rote learning) because of the lack of a systematic training scheme for the old and new hands in education. Learner-centredness is still in the realm of the quasi illusory.

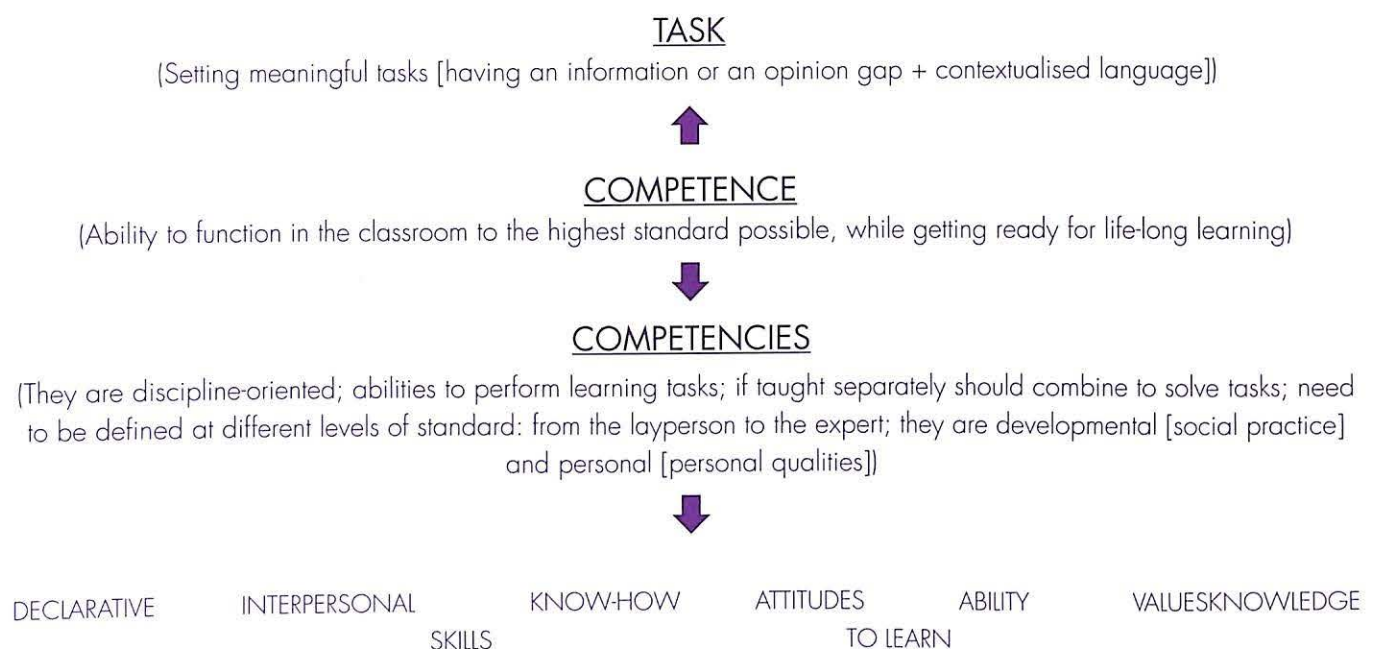
The other problematic issue is the not so evident change from the very archaic approach to teaching practised at times unconsciously, focusing on knowledge-giving, the volume of knowledge to be transmitted, and on the regurgitation of course-contents, to a methodology that pushes the learners to mobilize, adapt and/or integrate a given knowledge, a particular skill while developing a certain attitude or representation of the tasks performed. The change of paradigm concerns the shift from the quantitative aspect of learning with a strict application and realisation of the whole curriculum. The new reform aims more at the competences to be developed. However, pedagogical practices are wrongly pushing at the back of the proscenium the necessary skill and the much needed attitude, while stressing knowledge-giving and its regurgitation.

The third question expresses a doubt as to the attainment of the expected outcomes. One must

state that the reform has been introduced in a way that did not help the decision-takers to facilitate the whole educational community to adhere wholly to the philosophical and educational vision behind CBE. Indeed, «... *the officials of the ministry of national education have exercised a big discretion concerning the implementation of the first actions of the reform of education* » (Toualbi-Thaâlibi, 2006: 19-20). Furthermore, the decisions were geared towards a micro vision of the reform (mostly textbook writing) instead of the more logical and realistic approach to reform changes, viz., a systemic consideration for educational matters. However, today's vision of the educational officials is more in line with such an approach because it considers the training of teachers as another important and complementary variable for the success of the reform. This is true when one listens to teachers who use indiscriminately notions and concepts without a clear understanding of each: situation of integration, competence, pedagogical project, etc. The Minister herself stated that “*on the spot, one must say that CBE is but a slogan. One cannot put this down to the incomprehension or the refusal of change but rather on the sensitization, on the training and on the support which have not been dealt with correctly before the implementation of the reform*” (2014: 25).

As a matter of fact, though theoretical knowledge may not be of an extreme necessity, it could still provide an extra help in solving pedagogical problems, but it is classroom practice that is more beneficial. Therefore, a more pragmatic approach to teaching through hands-on experience is by far better than lecturing endlessly on the theoretical ins-and-outs of concepts and their semantic values, something that the whole community of teachers did not get either. And even so, everybody is talking about competence (the qualifications acquired to perform a classroom activity or task) and rarely about competency, i.e., the components of competence shown during the performance of an activity related to a task (in the form of knowledge, skill/s and attitude/s demonstrated). Besides, this also includes the attainment of certain standards expected in the classroom from the pupils, and efficiency in performing the tasks. These are the parameters missing in the teachers' perceptions today. It would be fruitful to complete the curtailed appreciation of teachers of the notions that are central to the practice of CBE. The following diagram tries to summarise what is needed by teachers in the way to understand CBE:

Even if the implementation of CBE is not a total success, it has partially reversed the pedagogical focus



from curriculum to learning. Besides, if mainstream pedagogy is still aiming at the design of programmes and syllabi criticized as being overloaded, two other complementary components seem not to have received enough attention from the educational authorities: the **project-based learning** that brings together knowing and doing by solving authentic problems that lead to concrete results/solutions, and the **differentiated pedagogy** dictated by the necessity to face the heterogeneity of the learners by catering for all the individuals' capacities, learning modes and preferences, motivations, levels, personality and cognitive development. The fact remains that, at the level of the functionality of the methods, one wonders about the translatability of the pedagogical differentiation in the teaching practices, and the implementation of individualisation of school teaching.

CBE reform needs more time to be applied adequately by all stakeholders, outside and beyond sloganeering. There is no doubt that a lot remains to be done at the level of teacher training. The younger generations of teachers need longer practical initial training to help practitioners deal with everyday didactic actions. As with the European Union, one suggests that the Ministry of National Education sets a framework of key competences such as: communication in languages (native or foreign), ICTs, numeracy and competences in scientific subject-matters,

entrepreneurial spirit, interpersonal skills, and last but not least learning to learn.

Reform is progressing despite the lack of proper training and the shortage of human and material means. However, one still thinks that there are missing parts in the overall puzzle of the reform. The curricular approach has been insufficient because the reform enterprise is far more complex than believed. Incantations alone cannot help launch the innovative approach to pedagogy. Besides, National Education needs more than name-dropping exercises taken on out of fashion or mere mimicry of what the internationalisation of education dictates. Yet, CBE has opened the door to more active, more autonomous learning, far away from copy-paste practices. With the help of project-based learning, it will do away with full-frontal knowledge giving instruction that reduces the role of the pupil to that of a minor companion. Surely CBE has allowed more participation<sup>1</sup> and freedom to the pupil (if he is trained, and if the teacher is willing). And this is already revolutionary in the realm of pedagogy considering the quasi undisputed reign of traditional instruction. Besides, even if classroom practices seem to display surface-level changes, reforms cannot take place overnight because it is first and foremost a question of revolution in the stakeholders' mindsets. And National Education is not yet there!

## References

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## Notes

1. « ... lui donner une place d'acteur, et non de consommateur » (Roegiers, 2006 : 74) ; translation : « ...give him a place as an actor, and not of a consumer ».