Abstract

The article deals with a particular aspect of the competencies-based approach in the curricula of basic and secondary education: the role of complex situations in learning. What should their role be so that education systems gain both in effectiveness and equity? Many research outcomes have shown that it is important to stress first and foremost complex “post” situations in learning knowledge, know-how and life-skills. It is a matter of complex situations (integrative pedagogy) in which the pupil is invited to use the knowledge, know-how and life-skills already acquired, not as ends in themselves, but as resources that the pupils employ to confront the complexity of their environment. It shows to what extent using the problem-solving approach to inculcate knowledge and know-how, in other words using complex situations for “prior” learning, represents a less suitable innovation.
Introduction

For around a decade vast educational reforms have been under way in the majority of countries, both in the North and South. This movement is undoubtedly the most important one since the curricular changes that had been introduced at the time of the adoption of the “objectives-based learning” approach. While these new reforms generally claim to be inspired by the competencies-based approach, the movement appears to be less uniform than it was at the time of the introduction of objectives-based learning – for several reasons. First of all, despite the impact of globalisation, education systems show a considerable degree of diversity (Halaoui, 2003), both with respect to the teaching languages used, the number of years of study, the level of teacher training or the manner in which the education systems are structured – to speak only of the most obvious variables. Even today, this variety continues to make each curricula context specific.

But there are also other reasons, related to the very orientation given to reforms said to be competencies-based. The debate centres around two primary questions. The first concerns the use of the concept of “competency” in education. This is a superficial controversy, which masks the second – a much deeper one – related to the priorities to be defined with regard to the learning process.

THE CONCEPT OF COMPETENCY IN EDUCATION: A SUPERFICIAL CONTROVERSY

From one individual to another, competency in education and, hence, the competencies-based approach, is variously understood. For some, it consists in grouping several specific objectives into disciplinary competencies, retaining the aspect and form of specific objectives, and which are evaluated as specific objectives. This is the “skills” approach to competency. For others, the competencies-based approach is synonymous with the development of “life-skills”, meaning the development of people’s capacity to actively exercise their role as citizens, to protect the environment, and to safeguard their own health and that of others. Still others see the competencies-based approach as a means of making learning more end-driven, oriented towards social integration and professional life. Others, lastly, see the competencies-based approach to be associated with interdisciplinarity, consisting of breaking down the disciplinary structure of school curricula, deemed to oversimplify the complexity of life.

Such diversity of representations is normal for a polysemic, multi-facetted concept, such as that of competency. It is nonetheless symptomatic of a number of misconceptions that need to be clarified if its introduction in the classroom is to be a genuine source of progress.

Competencies-based approach and action

One of the largest misconceptions with regard to the term “competency” comes from its narrow association with a certain kind of “knowledge to act”: mechanical, limited