Introduction to the dossier
"Competence-based" approaches as "traveling" reforms: Ideas, trajectories and practices in implementation

Kathryn ANDERSON-LEVITT*, Stéphane BONNÉRY**,
Sarah FICHTNER***

What is "competence-based" education all about?

Since the 1990s, many countries have adopted educational reforms that seek to introduce "competence-based" approaches to teaching and learning (often called competency-based education or CBE in English) into the curriculum.

We should clarify at the beginning what we mean by these terms. In fact, although terms like "competences," "competence-based education," or "competence-based reforms" are found in many countries, the diffusion of this terminology does not indicate uniformity of the ideas behind the reform programs nor of the realities observed in schools. Rather, the ideas and practices are so varied that we refer to "competence-based approaches" in the plural in this *dossier*, with the goal of highlighting first certain commonalities and differences behind these uniform labels.

----

* Adjunct Professor of Education, UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles), Professor Emerita of Anthropology, University of Michigan-Dearborn
** CIRCEFT-ESCOL, Université Paris 8
*** Chercheure associée à LAM, Sciences Po Bordeaux et à Institut für Sozial und Kulturanthropologie, Freie Universität Berlin

Among the commonalities is that promoters of these reforms often emphasize that they no longer focus pedagogy on the transmission of knowledge, which they associate with simple memorization and mechanical application. Rather, they aim to place pupils in situations in which knowledge is "integrated" and the pupils must "construct" that knowledge, that is, discover it, understand it, and then decontextualize it so that it can be used in other situations. Thus these approaches explicitly call for active learners, whereas earlier teaching methods are said to have been satisfied with the "passivity" of learners who simply recited lessons. This dossier shows that this "observation", about active versus passive learning, which has been offered repeatedly by a number of governments and experts, leaves much to be questioned, to begin with regarding the way it is applied in countries whose educational histories and contexts are very different.

Furthermore, the articles in this dossier point to a variety of official objectives linked to what has been called "competence-based education". In addition, the reforms involve a number of changes, some of which can hardly be attributedto the logic of competences. For in the case of France—and it would be necessary to verify whether this observation is generalisable—analysis of textbooks over time shows that rising expectations of pupils emerge not only from the introduction of competences, but also from the increasingly abstract nature of disciplinary knowledge in the curriculum (Bautier, Bonnéry & Clément). Moreover, diffusion of competence-based approaches, through a variety of international organisations, has been connected to other ideas, from lifelong learning to comparative evaluation (Clément, 2013).

While articles in this issue do not examine higher education and do not all focus on the same aspects of reform, they invite us to question what the label of "competence-based approaches" actually means: It is less a notion with an agreed-upon definition than the institutional name for a range of reforms studied here.

Analysing the trajectories of the reforms

It is the existence of these reforms in various countries which motivated the compilation of a dossier on their emergence at different moments and their trajectories, as well as the similarities in their conceptualization and their implementation. This goal implies not only the need to trace the development of these reforms in time and space across the planet (this is the object of Anderson -

Levitt's article), but also to provide a theoretical framework for thinking about these movements.

In fact, "competence-based" approaches to teaching and learning have served as frames of reference for many pedagogical/curricular reform projects worldwide. The conditions under which these approaches have circulated between different countries and particularly—promoted by international development programmes—between countries of the Global North and the Global South, has thus led us to question the nature of these reform dynamics within the analytical framework of "policy transfer" (Cowen 2009; Dolowitz & Marsh 2000) and more precisely of "policy borrowing and lending" in education (Steiner-Khamsi 2004, 2012). This analytical framework, neutral with respect to the motives for and results of these transfers (unlike the often normative concept of *policy learning[1]*), allows us to focus on promoters, mediators and recipients of these reforms, but also on the political, symbolic and economic dimensions of how policies circulate and get negotiated. The spatial and temporal configurations within which they operate influence the forms of transfer, translation, implementation of and resistance against the "travelling reforms" that emerge in different parts of the world (Steiner-Khamsi 2012: 3).[2] This dossier focuses on these different aspects of reform, drawing on the example of competence-based approaches.

Up to this point, the literature on competence-based approaches has consisted mainly of case studies of various countries or regions (Europe, the Maghreb, sub-Saharan Africa) that emphasise either analysis of policies (Ben Sedrine *& alii*, 2015) (or "political economy" – Charton, 2014), or analysis of the development of programs (or their parts: curricula, textbooks, teacher training, tools of or standards for evaluation), or yet again analysis of their implementation, often considered only "partial" (Agbodjogbe *& alii*, 2014; Bernard *& alii*, 2007; Fichtner, 2015; Lauwerier & Akkari, 2013; Pires-Ferreira, 2014). A major part of this literature has been produced at the instigation of international organisations or States which are promoting implementation of competence-based approaches, invoking the judgment of experts invited to evaluate the application of political mandates rather than to reflect on them. But researchers

---

1 A kind of educational policy developed on the basis of a normative diffusion of instruments and piloting (Normand, 2011).

2 See also the related concept of *travelling models* (Behrends et al., 2014) or of *travelling ideas* (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1995).

have also been busy deconstructing the underlying rationales for the introduction of competence-based approaches in various countries or regions, such as France (Clément, 2013), Belgium (Hirtt, 2009) or Quebec (Boutin & Julien, 2000; Boutin, 2004).

Studies in the francophone world in particular, have pointed out business leaders' interest in competence-based reforms, as contributing to the knowledge economy, to the development of skills specifically needed by employers without letting future employees master the knowledge that would let them not only *do*, but also understand what they do (Hirtt, 2009; Laval *& alii*, 2012). Our review of the scientific literature also shows the need for more studies of this sort by researchers in other language zones where competence-based approaches have been adopted. Publications in English, aside from several normative works by promoters of competence-based reforms, tend to presentbroader critiques of the OECD seen through the lens of its competence-based programs (Meyer, 2014; Sellar & Lindgard, 2014; Takayama, 2013) rather than close studies of competence-based reforms and their origins; one of the few exceptions is a study on the reshaping of the notion of "competence" by Sweden (Nordin&Sundberg, 2016).

Between the two extremes of evaluation and critical research, there are other authors on this subject, whose arguments are highly normative, whether they be business representatives promoting "the spirit of enterprise" or pedagogical experts, whose writing does not necessarily derive from an institution's request to evaluate a competence-based reform, but who little distance themselves from these mandates by virtue of their involvement in the reasons behind the new programs, or by their concern for innovation and a break with the most common practices.[3]

Moreover, there are sociological works on the "paradigm" of competence in the world of education, focusing in particular on its import from vocational training (Ropé & Tanguy, 1994). Others examine the Taylorist and behaviourist conceptions of the reorganisation of the capitalist mode of production that prevailed when this paradigm first appeared (Bernard *& alli*, 2007; Hirtt, 2009), or the more global political context in which the emergence of the "New Right" in Western countries sought to break with egalitarian educational projections in favour of individualised approaches (Normand, 2011), or yet again the

---

3 Cf. for example, issues of pedagogical journals (CRAP, 2011).

paradigm's heterogeneous or contradictory borrowings from different currents of the psychology of learning (Boutin, 2004; Crahay, 2006).

This précis of the state of publishing on the subject explains some of the choices we made in putting together this dossier. We have thus privileged articles that take some distance (critical or not) from official conceptions of competence-based reforms, in order to contribute to shifting the most common perspective, often influenced by normative logics and the framings of expertise and evaluation.

The various contributions in the dossier aim neither to justify nor to devalue competence-based approaches (even if their conclusions might contribute to such a move): their common objectiveis above all to explain the emergence of these reforms and their implementation, while also identifying themodels or recommendationsthat inspired them as well as the influences that the reforms have had in turn on other policy and educational contexts.

Thus the empirical analyses in this dossier contribute to explaining not only the "epidemic" (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006: 665) of competence-based approaches, the spatial, temporal and ideological links that facilitated their "travel" across domains (business, vocational training, educational systems) and across regions and countries (see the article by Anderson-Levitt), but also the evolutions, transformations, even abandonment of these projects, particularly as seen through their chronologies.

The articles in the dossier

The dossier brings together articles that, when taken together, offer a panoramic perspective on both the common points and the heterogeneity of the reform projects, their trajectories, and their practices for implementing official and real curricula. It also identifies the actors (institutions and individuals) behind these transfers, prescriptions and adaptations, both those that contribute to convergence and those that dissent in particular countries. Thus it makes visible the diversity, indeed the contradictionsin theobjectives of the reform as in its implementation, and behind the seemingly homogeneous label of "competence-based approach" that promoters and subsequent education actorsusually give the reforms.

These articles evoke different countries: France both with respect to compulsory schooling (Bautier, Bonnéry & Clément) and vocational education (Paddeu

& Veneau), Senegal (Chnane-Davin & Thiam) and Mexico (Portilla). In addition, one article adopts a more cross-cutting international comparison to describe the development of competence-based reforms in different countries in almost every continent: Europe (France, Belgium, England), Africa (Guinea Conakry, Benin, South Africa, Botswana, Algeria), North America (Canada, the United States, Mexico), Japan, Australia (Anderson-Levitt).

Two articles concern France. First, in the realm of compulsory schooling—that is elementary school and *collège* (the lower secondary level called "middle school" in many other countries), in the article by Bautier, Bonnéry and Clément. The authors show that the "*socle commun*" ("common base") reform of 2006, which systematised use of the notion of competence in the curriculum (where it had earlier been introduced), resulted in the convergence of different kinds of actors who traditionally had opposed one another ("utilitarian" entrepreneurs, conservative educators seeking a return to what they considered the "basics", pedagogical innovators keen on child-focused education and on knowledge integrated into complex situations): their different understandings of "competences" can be found in the actual curriculum, analysed as it appeared in textbooks and in their use, wherein competences of high cognitive level and low coexist, addressed selectively depending on the pupils" social origins.

Also in France, Paddeu and Veneau study the domain of vocational education for older pupils through the case of training for electricians. The authors show the reduction of official teaching objectives down to that which is observable and hence assessable. Yet the teachers in these tracks resist the evaluation grids while reappropriating them, and show little interests in their practice in the notion of competence.

Chnane-Davin and Thiam study secondary education in Senegal, more precisely the difference between the official curriculum and the actual curriculum for French as a second language. They distinguish competences required for comprehension and expression, and for oral and written performance, as well as cultural competence and the competence to self-evaluate. However, they notice a mismatch with classroom practices because of over-crowded classes and lack of teacher training and appropriate teaching materials: the objectivesmay be higher since the competence-based reform (for instance requiring pupils not only recite, but also to formulate conclusions themselves), but pupils are not learning better.

In the case of Mexico, Portilla likewise shows that behind the apparent consensus in official texts, there is a mismatch with the actual curriculum, parti-

cularly because of resistance by teachers, which has even been expressed in social movements and alternative programs. The author moves from the case of the competence model exported to Mexico to a more general investigation of the different kinds of transfers between countries and their effects, from the more or less "vertical" transfers (effected through direct constraints or through soft power) to more "horizontal" transfers.

It is likewise on transfers of educational concepts and reforms that Anderson-Levitt focuses. In fact, she shows points of commonality and difference in uses of the notion of competence within official reform texts of various countries. These variations are studied as they develop over time and across space (in diverse countries of different continents) so as to capture the larger picture of what is circulating under the name of "competences," of the various institutional actors behind these movements, of the borrowing and lending of these reforms.

Sources and underlying logics of the notion of "competences"

Use of the plural to designate educational reforms related to competence-based approaches enables us to underline the multivocal character of this catchall notion. Theoretical referencesbehind the notion can be found in two major streams that are *a priori* opposites and yet that co-exist in an "epistemological bricolage" (to use Portilla's phrase), or that certain actors try to combine: namely, a behaviourist origin on the one hand and a constructivist origin on the other.

The first theoretical perspective on "competence", as a Taylorist notion associated with behaviourism and with fragmented learning objectives, still persists, although it is probably less explicitly supported these days. For example, although the OECD is committed to the constructivist conception of competences, its PISA program (Program for International Student Assessment) so far assesses only competences that are easy to evaluate. It is in this sense that Takayama highlights "a reductive interpretation of the PISA results" (2013: 75) in Japan and elsewhere.

Moreover, international evaluations and particularly PISA aim not only to evaluate pupils, but to evaluate national systems of education on the basis of the performance of their pupils (at least the performance that PISA claims to evaluate with its criteria independent of the nation's social and pedagogical contexts): its stated concern with the "competent pupil", present in all the texts on reforms

said to be competence-based, is clearly linked to the postulate that schools are presumed effective if the pupils are competent. The contexts for teaching the skills on which pupils are tested are not taken into account (Bautier *& alii*, 2006), nor are national education histories—such as how long schooling has been common in a country, which affects whether family socialisation is close to the school's form of socialisation (Vincent, Lahire & Thin, 1994). Since PISA evaluates pupils at the age of 15, the pressure for results weighs especially heavily on school for this age group. This is the case for vocational education in France (Paddeu & Veneau), where children of the popular classes are concentrated because most of them have been eliminated from the race for academic secondary studies (*lycée*). It also the case for secondary education in countries of the South: PISA and other assessments (TIMMS, for example) decry teachers' lack of effectiveness without taking into account the social and historical contexts within which competence-based approaches have been introduced (Chnane-Davin & Thiam focus on Senegalin this dossier and confirm earlier findings in relation to other African countries: Cros *& alii*, 2010).

Finally, the influence of behaviourism as learning theory can be noted in the reduction or minimisation of some portion of learning objectives to simple tasks within delimited situations. This is the case first for a conception of learning as whatever can be evaluated through multiple-choice tests common for an objectives-based pedagogy (Paddeu & Veneau for vocational education in France). The same influence can explain the logic behind "back to basics" rhetoric (inspired by educational ideas of the "New Right" in the West—Normand, 2011; Clément, 2013). This discourse appeared notably in the introduction ofthe "*socle commun*" (common base) in 2006 in France, in the sense that a portion of the expected competences are simple and fragmented, linked to very specific contexts and thus not very transferable, allowing pupils to simply repeat standard procedures. These objectives are above all assigned to students judged to be "weak" (in this dossier, see Bautier, Bonnéry & Clément), permitting in France an unacknowledged deviation away from the historic goal of equal objectives for all in the common school (Bonnéry, 2015). This idea of differentiating objectives, linked to a desire to return to the basics, explains the support offered by educational conservatives for this reform, which was nonetheless simultaneously supported by another traditional "camp" in educational debates, called by the press the "pedagogues" and which drew on very different theoretical bases of the notion of "competence" (Laval *& alli*, 2012).

We refer in the latter case to the second theoretical perspective, often loosely referred to as "constructivist" in pedagogical and technocratic jargon, there by amalgamating theoretical supports that might be thought contradictory (inherited from Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner, etc.). We use this adjective not to claim the affiliation of one psychologist or another with these reforms, but simply to designate what the term means in this context: the idea that learner-centred education implies that knowledge must not be presented to pupils but rather that they must "construct" it. To this purpose, teachers following this approach, have to put their pupils into particular situations to enable them to be "active" and "participatory" (Bautier, Bonnéry & Clément).

If the theoretical perspectives are different or indeed conceptually opposed, they often coexist within the prescribed reforms, and in fact are combined with other notions as well.

Thus constructivist ideas are often cited along with task types that are meant to resemble "authentic" or "ordinary" life situations (a form of utilitarianism not limited to a future job or profession), putting into play "integrated" knowledge (Bernstein, 1975a), that is, non-decontextualised knowledge. Since 1975, Bernstein emphasised the implicit character of new, integrated pedagogical requirements (Bernstein, 1975b): he studied the potentially inegalitarian effects of such pedagogy, which presumes that pupils are relatively familiar with academic expectations (that they know, for example, that every situation is the occasion for some kind of learning expected by the teacher, that they find within it the hidden knowledge they need, etc.). Yet one finds these ideas in "project-based learning" (*pédagogies de projet*), which claim to cut across disciplines, or again in what Roegiers calls "pedagogy of integration" (la pédagogie de l'intégration) (Roegiers, 2001), which was introduced into many countries of Africa.

What's more, building on the already existing literature, several articles in this dossier confirm the continuation of utilitarian discourses. These lean sometimes towards the requirements of the "knowledge economy" that workers be able to work autonomously on interdisciplinary projects, implying "high level" skills. Simultaneously and conversely, other utilitarian discourses may call for curtailing school curricula because theyaim for employability in very specific jobs, for a more modest level of training. This is particularly the case for vocational education, with the example of France (Paddeu & Veneau in this dossier).

Within the constructivist and "integrated" pedagogical tradition, there are many variations of specific definitions of "competence" (hardly mentioned in official policies), as can be illustrated from the work of three prominent theorists.

Jonnaert synthesised seven definitions, including his own and that of Perrenoud (1997), in this way: "Competence" refers to a set of elements (knowledge, know-how and knowing how to be; resources; capacities, etc.] that the subject can mobilise to address a situation successfully" (2002: 31[4]). Perrenoud himself offered as a first approximation that "a competence" is "a capacity to act effectively in a specified type of situation, a capacity that depends on knowledge" (1997: 7), but he added that people really draw on "several complementary cognitive resources, among them various kinds of knowledge" and that they have constructed these resources "through experience and education." Meanwhile, Roegiers offered a similar definition, but one placing more emphasis on context through reference to situations: "Competence is the possibility, for an individual, to mobilise in an internalised way an integrated set of resources for the purpose of resolving a family of problem-situations" (2001: 66). Central ideasin all of these definitions are the notion of **being able to act** by mobilizing or using **knowledge and know-how**, very broadly defined, to **manage non-standardised situations**.

These two theoretical perspectives, their variations and their combinations echo the difference noted by Rey (2014) between two types of competences observed in curricula and classroom practices. One of these types refers to"high-level" competences dealing with non-standardized situations and integrated knowledge: knowing how to deduce, how to mobilise knowledge to analyse documents and topics for debates, etc. This translates into a raising of curricular standards. The other type of competence, present in the education programs for a long time, is of a lower level with more repetitive tasks in standardised situations requiring simpler cognitive activities: repetition of knowledge or procedures for solving similar problems, etc. (Rey, 2014).

Notions of competences in official and actual curricula in the Global North and the Global South

Each of these two types of competences, drawing on different theoretical inspirations, can predominate in a prescribed or official curriculum (official programs of study and mandates) and in the actual curriculum (classroom

---

4 All translations are ours.

practices) in countries having adopted a competence-based reform. Nonetheless, the scientific literature shows that the "constructivist and integrated" idea predominates in official programs. This is the case, for example, in Mexico, where the competence-based reform could focus on the requirement for "quality" of "cognitive development" and no longer only on "quantity," since nearly all children were now in school (Portilla). In several countries of the Global South, with more recently developed mass education, where studies comparing official and actual curricula exist, they show similar tendencies. Thus, in our dossier, Chnane-Davin & Thiam in Senegal show a gap between the prescribed and the actual in programs for French as a second language in secondary school, findings similar to those from other African countries (Cros *& allii*, 2010; Fichtner, 2016): high-level competences in the programs are reduced in class to repetitive procedures with a limited cognitive horizon.

For countries of the Global South, the most common explanations mentioned by authors lie in material conditions (lack of teaching materials, over-crowded classes) and professional conditions (lack of teacher training, persistence of earlier teaching habits), or in fact in the inappropriateness of teaching materials, which propose situations that, supposedly authentic or close to everyday life, are in fact disconnected from the cultural reality of children in that country.

This collection of articles invites us, perhaps, not to contest this interpretation but to round it out. For retranslation of high-level competences (defined above by Rey) from official curricula into lower requirements in actual curricula also happens in countries of the Global North, as the French case shows—but in this case it happens only for some pupils, those judged to be weakest (Bautier, Bonnéry & Clément). However, in this case the authors see the translation not only as a case of "adaptation" by the teachers, but also as one of ideas and mandates that co-exist in the reform and that distinguish the common base (teachable to everyone) from the rest of the program (which becomes optional, thus breaking with the objective of equality): high-level competences for those who have more "facility," that is, familiarity with academic expectations due to their early socialisation; "low-level" competences for those who start from further back. This differentiation of objectives could be one possible explanation of the pattern shown by PISA between 2000 and 2015 for France: simultaneous improvement by pupils at lower levels (from 15.2 % to 21.5 %) and by pupils at higher levels (from 8.5 % to 12.5 % - Fumel *& alli*, 2016).

More generally, this dossier invites us to pursue above all comparison: does what researchers consider high-level competences in the study of a particular country's curriculum correspond to what is considered high-level competences in studies of other countries' curricula?

Such comparative questions ought also to take into account the question of knowledge (*savoirs*). Several articles in our dossier show in effect that one ought not to "believe" what official texts say. In fact, again in France, systematisation of a competence-based approach has not rendered knowledge irrelevant; even if official instructions treat it merely as "associated knowledge" serving only as resources for a task (Paddeu & Veneau), or merely as "available information", to be mastered on the spot by those who have the competence, acquiring knowledge remains among the actual objectives of learning, and it even shapes competences that are not really "cross-cutting" after all: depending on the particular disciplines and the knowledge in question, specific cognitive activities are very different (Bautier, Bonnéry & Clément).

The diversity of realities across curricula behind the term competence comes, then, partly from different co-existing conceptions of competence. It is also explained by the diverse trajectories of the notion.

Trajectories of the notion of "competence"

The concept of competence has been applied in several domains of education, and its history is different in each. Competence-based models for workplace training, which came from industrial psychology, first developed in the United States in the early 20th century. They led to competence-based vocational education in a number of countries (Argüelles, & Gonczi, 2000; Ropé & Tanguy 1994). Several other countries and regions like Australia, Belgium, Switzerland and Quebec later introduced these approaches into general education programmes, particularly into the primary sector (Boutin, 2004: 28; Rey 1996). The original links to vocational training helped in casting the development of competence-based educational approaches as a response to the main political, economic and social challenges of the day, supporting the training of a flexible workforce, proactive and entrepreneurial, all the while promoting, in discourse around the approach, egalitarian and democratic principles (Laval *& alli*, 2012). Despite the reductive nature of the alignment of educational and industrial rationales

(Boutin, 2004: 29), these links contributed to popularizing and legitimizing these reforms while increasing their policy attraction (Phillips, 2004).

In the domain of teacher education, there was a strong movement for behaviourist competence-based approaches in the United States during the 1970s (Houston, 1985), whereas later competence-based teacher education in the Francophone world has taken a constructivist approach (e.g., Perrenoud, 1994). In the realm of higher education, the Bologna declaration of 1999 encouraged European universities to develop competence-based approaches (Koenen, Dochy, & Berghmans, 2015), while in the United States, a few institutions currently use competence-based approaches to grant university credit for life experience, particularly in the realm of online higher education (Blumenstyk, 2014). Finally, lifelong learning or adult education has been an important focus of competence-based approaches, particularly as encouraged by Unesco.

While articles in this issue address competence-based approaches in the domains of primary and secondary education (Bautier, Bonnéry & Clément; Chnane-Davin & Thiam; Portilla) and vocational education (Paddeau & Veneau), they do not examine teacher education, higher education, or lifelong learning. Future works could compare conceptions of competence across these different levels in various countries, their points of commonality and the variations related to the sources and modes of borrowing that prevailed when their competence-based programs were introduced.

The actors involved in borrowing and lending reforms represent one of the crosscutting themes of this dossier. International organisations play a decisive role in the diffusion of competence-based approaches (Unesco, OECD, USAID, OIF, Confemen, European Commission): their zones of influence complement one another or overlap, and their conceptions of competences usually converge, but it would be useful to interrogate taken-for-granted ideas about each one, particularly considering that the United States has not much implemented competence-based models in compulsory education (Anderson-Levitt). Business organisations have likewise pushed for adoption of competence-based approaches, finding governments and leading administrators willing to break with the current curricula, and also finding willingness among pedagogical actors (depending on the country: school inspectors, teacher trade union representatives, pedagogical movements, disciplinary associations, etc.): these convergences, in various configurations, can be found in different countries and at the international level (Anderson-Levitt; Bautier, Bonnéry & Clément; Portilla).

However, other actors influence the reforms and their implementation besides those who want to see competence-based approaches put into effect. Studies show how acts of resistance and power games have taken place during the decision-making process (between traditionally opposed actors who came together for this reform: Bautier, Bonnéry & Clément) and during implementation. There can be resistance carried to the point of outright conflict, as Portilla reveals in the case of Mexico, where radical factions of teachers' movements demonstrated and promoted alternative pedagogies, which aligns with similar observations in Benin (Chabi, 2010; Fichtner, 2010, Yessoufou, 2012). Resistance can even lead, as in the case of South Africa, to abandonment of a competence-based approach (Anderson-Levitt; Chisholm, 2015). Opposition can also be more hidden, as in the weak interest in the notion of competence teachers manifest in their actual practices, or as in the systematic misuse of the observation grids imposed by the institution to evaluate competences (Paddeu & Veneau).

The variety of these actors and their motives explains why the competence-based approach is on the way to being generalised in a great many countries, even though this does not mean that the concept is "globalised" (Anderson-Levitt): in fact, these conceptions of competences, as we have seen, vary quite clearly, which is also explained by the different economic, social and cultural contexts of each country (Chnane-Davin & Thiam). Indeed, it is precisely these contexts which are hidden by the way notions of competences are actually used, notably in evaluation programs like PISA(Bautier *& alli*, 2006), even though one reason for the wide diffusion of competence-based approaches is that such evaluations have promoted them: with their pupils being evaluated according to these criteria, many countries have tended to align their official curriculum with competences and build the rationale into their teaching. But other rationales remain hidden behind official discourse, and are not always uniform from one country to the next. Sometimes national decision makers hide behind externalisation (Anderson-Levitt), arguing for the reform not so much by citing their real reasons as by touting it as an example from elsewhere worth emulating. In other cases, motives behind the reform are never made visible, for several reasons.

In some cases, financial assistance is allocated by international organisations to implement these reforms, which may be one of the factors that weighs on the choices made by governments in countries where educational budgets are low.

Decision makers can sometimes consider employers' interests as beneficial for everyone. This is what the Mexican case shows: "The choice of such an

approach is never presented by promoters as a political or economic choice, but always and only as a choice dictated by pedagogical concerns and the interest of the pupil" (Portilla). In other cases, it is for example impossible for the French government to explicitly renounce equal educational objectives for all in discourse on individualisation of instruction, in the same way that it is easier to promote the "adaptability" of future workers than to emphasise the interests of the business leaders who are agitating for adoption of a competence-based approach (Bautier, Bonnéry & Clément). Furthermore, arguments about effectiveness are often put forth in a seemingly depoliticised way, since the actual new objectives connected with the teaching reforms are never clearly debated. "Best practice" is thus promoted (Anderson-Levitt) independently of the contexts and political objectives discussed, with extensive use of statistics that in fact is problematic (Normand, 2011): thus so-called "soft power" is in fact very constraining.

The articles in this dossier confirm that, in contrast with "expert publications", it is worthwhile to analyse the topic of competence-based approaches while distancing oneself from official discourse, for the articles show that behind the apparent consensus there are contradictory interests as well as resistance (Portilla; Paddeu & Veneau) and that introduction of competences can renew or strengthen academic inequalities even in countries where the reform is officially presented as remediating them (Bautier, Bonnéry & Clément). These findings show the need for further international cooperation to compare educational system reforms in different countries.

References

AGBODJOGBÉ (B.), ATTIKLÉMÉ (K.), & ATOUN (C.), 2014, « L'implémentation des nouveaux programmes par compétences en EPS au Bénin : une analyse des contenus enseignés », *Questions Vives*, n° 22, en ligne http://questionsvives.revues.org/1579, consulté : 12.5.2015.

ARGÜELLES (A.), GONCZI (A.), (dir.), 2000, *Competency based educationand training: a world perspective.* Mexico City, Grupo Noriega Editores.

BAUTIER (É.), CRINON (J.), RAYOU (P.) & ROCHEX (J.-Y.), 2006, « Performances en littéracie, modes de faire et univers mobilisés par les élèves : analyses secondaires de l'enquête PISA 2000 », *Revue française de pédagogie*, n° 157, pp. 85-101.

BEHRENDS (A.), PARK (S.-J.) &ROTTENBURG(R.), 2014, « Travelling Models as an Analytical Concept », *in* A. Behrends, S.-J. Park, & R. Rottenburg, dir.,*Travelling Models in African Conflict Management. Translating Technologies of Social Ordering*, Leiden/Boston, Brill, pp. 1-40.

BEN SEDRINE (S.), BEN YAOU (M.), VERDIER (E.), & EL YACOUBI (D.), 2015, « Les réformes de la formation des jeunes au Maghreb », *Revue Tiers Monde,* n° 223, pp. 147-164.

BERNARD (J.-M.), NKENGNE NKENGNE (A.), & ROBERT (F.), 2007, « Réformes des programmes scolaires et acquisitions à l'école primaire en Afrique : Mythes et réalités », *International Review of Education,* n° 53, pp. 555-575.

BERNSTEIN (B.), 1975a, *Langage et classes sociales*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit.

BERNSTEIN (B.), 1975b/2007, « Classes et pédagogies : visibles et invisibles », rééd. *in* J. Deauvieau & J.-P. Terrail,dir., *Les sociologues, l'école et la transmission des savoirs*, Paris, La Dispute, pp. 85-112.

BLUMENSTYK (G.), 2014, « For-Profit Giant Starts Competency-Based 'Open College' », *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 3.

BONNÉRY (S.) (dir.), 2015, *Supports pédagogiques et inégalités scolaires*, Paris, La Dispute.

BOUTIN (G.), & JULIEN (L.), 2000, *L'obsession des compétences. Son impact sur l'école et la formation des enseignants*, Montréal, Éditions Nouvelles.

BOUTIN (G.), 2004, « L'approche par compétences en éducation : un amalgame paradigmatique », *Connexions* n° 81, pp. 25-41.

CHABI IMOROU (A.), 2010, « Revendications syndicales et gouvernance du service public de l'éducation au Bénin : discours et pratiques », *in* P. Petit, dir., *Société civile et éducation*, Louvain-la-Neuve, Academia-Bruylant, pp. 147-174.

CHARTON (H.), 2014, « The Politics of Reform: A Case Study of Bureaucracy at the Ministry of Basic Education in Cameroon », *in* T. Bierschenk & J.-P. Olivier de Sardan, dir., *States at Work. Dynamics of African Bureaucracies*, Leiden/Boston, Brill, pp. 249-269.

CHISHOLM (L.), 2015, « Curriculum transition in Germany and South Africa: 1990-2010 », *Comparative Education*, tome 51, n° 3, pp. 401-418.

CLÉMENT (P.), 2013, « Réformer les programmes pour changer l'école ? Une sociologie historique du champ du pouvoir scolaire », Thèse de doctorat, CURAPP, Université d'Amiens.

COWEN (R.), 2009, « The transfer, translation and transformation of educational processes: and their shape-shifting? », *Comparative Education,* n° 45, pp. 315-327.

CRAHAY (M.), 2006, « Dangers, incertitudes et incomplétude de la logique de la compétence en éducation », *Revue Française de Pédagogie*, n° 154, pp. 97-110.

CRAP, 2011, *Les Cahiers pédagogiques*, n° 491, dossier « Évaluer à l'heure des compétences ».

CROS (F.), DE KETELE (J.-M.), DEMBÉLÉ (M.), DEVELAY (M.), GAUTHIER (R.-F.), GHRISS (N.), LENOIR (Y.), MURAYI (A.), SUCHAUT (B.) & TEHIO (V.), 2010, *Étude sur les réformes curriculaires par l'approche par compétences en Afrique. Rapport final*, Centre international d'études pédagogiques (CIEP), Ministère des affaires étrangères et européennes (MAEE), Agence Française de développement (AFD).

CZARNIAWSKA (B.) & JOERGES (B.), 1995, « Travels of ideas—organizational change as translation », *WZB Discussion papers,* n° FS II, pp. 95-501.

DOLOWITZ (D.), & MARSH (D.), 2000, « Learning from Abroad: The Role of Policy Transfer in Contemporary Policy-Making », *Governance : An International Journal of Policy and Administration,* n° 13, pp. 5-24.

FICHTNER (S.), 2010, « A laboratory for education reform or a battlefield of donor intervention? Local debates on primary education and the New Study Programmes in Benin », *International Journal of Educational Development,* n° 30, pp. 518-524.

FICHTNER (S.), 2015, « What's in the gap and what's in a copy? Local practices and discourses of competency-based education reform in Benin », *Revue Tiers Monde,* n° 223, pp. 165-182.

FICHTNER (S.), 2016, « Rituels de compétences et d'apprentissage non verbal de la langue française dans les salles de classe béninoises », *in* F. Montandon & C. Schelle, dir., *Activités langagières, pratiques pédagogiques et rituels dans le cadre de l'école et de la formation. Pays francophones d'Afrique du Nord et de l'Ouest, en France et en Allemagne*, Paris, Tétraèdre, pp. 105-115.

FUMEL (S.), KESKPAIK (S.), SALLES (F.) & VERLET (I.), 2016, « PISA 2015 : L'évolution des acquis des élèves de 15 ans en compréhension de l'écrit et en culture mathématique », *Note d'information*, n° 38, Direction de l'Évaluation, de la Prospective et de la Performance / Ministère de l'éducation Nationale.

HIRTT (N.), 2009, « L'approche par compétences : une mystification pédagogique », *L'école démocratique,* n° 39, pp. 1-34.

HOUSTON (W.R.), 1985, « Competency-based education », *in* T. Husen & T. N. Postlethwaite, dir., *International encyclopedia of education*, New York, Pergamon Press, tome 2, pp. 898-906.

JONNAERT (P.), 2002. *Compétences et socioconstructivisme. Un cadre théorique*, Bruxelles, De Boeck.

KOENEN (A.-K.), DOCHY (F.) & BERGHMANS(I.), 2015, « A phenomenographic analysis of the implementation of competence-based education in higher education », *Teaching and Teacher Education,* n° 50, pp. 1-12.

LAUWERIER (T.), & AKKARI (A.), 2013, « Quelles approches pour réformer le curriculum et l'école en Afrique ? Constats et controverses », *Revue Africaine de Recherche en Education,* en ligne http://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:36968, consulté: 26.2.2015.

LAVAL (C.), VERGNE (F.), CLÉMENT (P.) & DREUX (G.), 2012. *La nouvelle école capitaliste*, Paris, La Découverte.

MEYER (H.-D.), 2014, « The OECD as pivot of the emerging global educational accountability regime: how accountable are the accountants ? », *Teachers College Record*, tome 116, n° 9, pp. 1-20.

NORDIN (A.) & SUDBERG (D.), 2016, « Travelling concepts in national curriculum policy-making: the example of competencies », *European Educational Research Journal*, tome 15, n° 3, pp. 314-328.

NORMAND (R.), 2011, *Gouverner la réussite scolaire. Une arithmétique politique des inégalités.* Berne, Peter Lang.

PERRENOUD (P.), 1994, « Compétences, habitus et savoirs professionnels », *European Journal of Teacher Education,* vol. 17, n° 1-2, pp. 45-48.

PERRENOUD (P.), 1997, *Construire des compétences dès l'école*, Paris, ESF.

PHILLIPS (D.), 2004, « Toward a Theory of Policy Attraction in Education », *in* G. Steiner-Khamsi, dir., *The Global Politics of Educational Borrowing and Lending*, New York/London, Teachers College Press, pp. 54-67.

PIRES-FERREIRA (A. C.), 2014, « Réforme du curriculum et approche par compétences au Cap Vert. Entre injonction internationale et projet national », *Cahiers de la recherche sur l'éducation et les savoirs,* n° 13, pp. 183-210.

REY (B.), 1996, *Les compétences transversales en question*, Paris, ESF.

REY (B.), 2014, *La notion de compétence en éducation et formation*, Paris, De Boeck.

ROCHEX (J.-Y.), 2008, « PISA et les enquêtes internationales. Enjeux scientifiques, enjeux politiques », *Revue française de pédagogie*, n° 164, pp. 81-85.

ROEGIERS (X.), 2001, *Une pédagogie de l'intégration. Compétences et intégration des acquis dans l'enseignemen,* Bruxelles : De Boeck.

Roegiers (X.), 2008, « L'approche par compétences en Afrique francophone : Quelques tendances », *IBE Working Papers on Curriculum Issues*, 7, en ligne http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001595/159545f.pdf, consulté : 18.4.2017

Ropé (F.) & Tanguy (L.), (dir.),1994. *Savoirs et compétences. De l'usage de ces notions dans l'école et l'entreprise*, Paris, L'Harmattan.

Sellar (S.) & Lingard (B.), 2014, « The OECD and the expansion of PISA: new global modes of governance in education », *British Educational Research Journal*, tome 40, n° 6, pp. 917-936.

Steiner-Khamsi (G.) (dir.), 2004, *The Global Politics of Educational Borrowing and Lending*, New York, Teachers College Press.

Steiner-Khamsi (G.), 2006, « The Economics of Policy Borrowing and Lending: a Study of Late Adopters », *Oxford Review of Education,* n° 32, pp. 665-678.

Steiner-Khamsi (G.), 2012, « Understanding Policy Borrowing and Lending. Building Comparative Policy Studies», *in* G. Steiner-Khamsi & F. Waldow, dir., *World Yearbook of Education 2012: Policy Borrowing and Lending in Education*, London/New York, Routledge, pp. 3-17.

Takayama (K.), 2013, « OECD, 'key competencies' and the new challenges of educational inequality », *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, tome 45, n° 1, pp. 67-80.

Vincent (G.), Lahire (B.) & Thin (D.), 1994, « Sur l'histoire et la théorie de la forme scolaire » *in* G. Vincent, *L'éducation prisonnière de la forme scolaire ? Scolarisation et socialisation dans les sociétés industrielles*, Lyon, PUL, pp. 11-48.

Yessoufou (A.), 2012, *Local Actors in Top-down Implementation of Curricular Reform: Benin's Primary Education System*, Cologne, LAP Lambert Academic Publishing.