

Global Flows of Competence-based Approaches in Primary and Secondary Education

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This essay reviews the recent history of competence-based education policy (*l'approche par compétences*) and related reforms in the domain of *primary and secondary curricula*. In it, I attempt to place the discourse on competence-based approaches in a global context and thereby to cast new light on what will be a familiar story to some readers. In the essay I examine the claim that competence-based education is a “global” reform, and in particular clarify the US role or lack thereof in the domain of primary and secondary curriculum.

My interest began with a puzzle. When I read Sarah Fichtner’s fascinating account of the operation of non-governmental organizations in Benin’s educational sector (2012), two details gave me pause. First, she described Benin’s 1998 competence-based reform as nearly synonymous with learner-centered instruction, which surprised me because I associated “competences” with behaviorism and did not know their meanings had stretched to include constructivist perspectives. Second, she described the competence-based approach as “stimulated by ideas from Canadian and US consultants” (p. 45). I was surprised by the reference to US support, since the idea conflicted with my own experience when doing fieldwork in Guinea Conakry in 1998 (e.g., Anderson-Levitt & Alimasi, 2001). At that time in Guinea, experts from the Pedagogical Institute were working with consultants from CÉPEC (Centre d’études pédagogiques pour l’expérimentation et le conseil), based in Lyon, France, to develop *les référentiels de compétences* as a step toward rewriting Guinea’s national curriculum, with the

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eventual goal of developing new national textbooks. However, US consultants working on behalf of USAID in Guinea were mystified by the French-Guinean effort; they did not understand such a “theoretical” approach that would take years to complete. Therefore, I wondered, how did it happen that USAID was promoting a competence-based approach elsewhere in West Africa at the same time?

I became even more curious as I encountered claims about the sweeping scope of this reform, such as, “Aujourd’hui, la grande majorité des systèmes éducatifs s’entendent pour placer l’approche par compétences au cœur des curriculums”(Today the great majority of educational systems are in agreement about placing competences at the heart of curricula¹) (Roegiers, 2008: 1), or the claim by an internal Ministry of Education report describing France’s competence-based reform as part of a wider movement by many nations, and “numerous states of the United States” (Houchot *et alii*, 2007: 10). How had I as an educational scholar working in a US faculty of education not heard of this movement?

This puzzle led me to attempt, in this essay, to trace the trajectory or trajectories of competence-based approaches to primary and secondary curricula as they have appeared in various countries and international organizations from the 1990s to the present. I ask whether it is indeed a global movement, as some of its proponents have claimed. Specifically, I ask,

- In what parts of the world has a competence-based approach been introduced into the curriculum, at least at the level of policy?
- In each case, how did the policy come to happen?

These questions matter, as I will argue below, because constructing a reform as “global” or as very widely adopted by other countries is a mechanism for persuading other countries—or one’s own country—to embrace the reform. To make such an argument persuasively can be an exercise, deliberate or not, of “soft power” when the argument is backed by an aura of expertise. Therefore it is always important for would-be reformers to investigate such claims with an appropriate level of skepticism.

My analysis relies mainly on examining policy documents that propose a competence-based or related approach and scholarly works that analyze or critique competence-based reforms. I also rely on secondary historical analyses of the development of policy. I write as an anthropologist who has some familiarity

1 All translations into English are mine.

with education and education reform in Guinea, France, and the United States, but who is neither an expert on nor an advocate either for or against competence-based approaches. Although some readers will be much more familiar than I with the convoluted histories of competence-based reforms in their own country, what this essay offers is the perspective of an outsider and an attempt to see the larger patterns of reform ideas as they travel, intermingle, and get transformed across time and space.

Again, this essay focuses specifically on the notion of competence in elementary and secondary education, not on other domains like vocational and technical education, higher education, or teacher education. Importantly, it examines only policy discourse, not actual practices in schools and classrooms; actual practice can differ dramatically from policy and discourse on policy, as other articles in this issue illustrate. The essay will begin by laying out alternative explanations of borrowing and lending that will be useful to analyzing individual cases, and will also provide background on “competence” and related reforms. It will then survey in roughly chronological order where competence-based approaches have been adopted and, when known, how that came to be; where parallel reforms have been adopted ; and where such reforms have *not* been adopted. A final discussion will consider how to interpret this overview of the reform.

Theoretical frameworks

On traveling reforms

As I survey policies in different parts of the world across the last three decades, it will be useful to keep in mind various possible explanations of how it can come to pass that a particular educational reform appears simultaneously in a number of countries.

First, a modernist view holds that decision-makers are rational and adopt a policy because it truly is “best practice”. In this view, countries come to share a policy either because they borrow a “best practice” from a common source, or because they independently discover it on their own. As an anthropologist, I am skeptical that there always is a single best practice and therefore avoid a modernist perspective.

In contrast, world culture theorists, also called neo-institutionalists, assume instead that people operate in a socially constructed world of shared perceptions (Meyer & Ramirez, 2009). What matters, in this view, is not that a policy truly is the best, but rather that decision-makers *perceive* a policy as the “best” or at least as “globally” accepted and therefore inevitable. They therefore argue that policies often spread through willing emulation of “global” models. This theory thus raises an interesting question about just how a practice gets socially constructed, whether by policy lenders or by policy borrowers, as a global best practice.

However, critical social theorists point out that by emphasizing emulation, world culture theorists gloss over power differences, even if they have made an important contribution by highlighting the apparent convergence of some policies toward a supposedly global model of schooling (Anderson-Levitt, 2003). Critical social theorists focus on the exercise of power and see policies as often spread through “coercive policy transfer” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006: 671), including economic pressure and hegemonic “soft power”.

Some theorists focus on processes internal to the state rather than on cross-national borrowing. Decision-makers facing difficulty in promoting a particular idea at home may add to its legitimacy by attributing it to an admired foreign source, whether or not the attribution is accurate, in a process sometimes called “externalization” (Schriewer, 1990; Waldow, 2015). Others note that, in response to internal political struggles, decision-makers may actually borrow policies from other countries but then work to hide the foreign source of the idea (Spren, 2004).

Comparative education theorists have also suggested various mechanisms by which ideas travel. In other words, whatever motivates adoption of a policy, how did decision makers come to know about it in the first place? Ideas may travel through the agency of individual actors or through social networks (e.g., Steiner-Khamsi, 2006). Ideas may also be made available through conferences, refereed journals, glossy reports, or sophisticated web sites. Sometimes lenders take the initiative, as in Japan’s recent efforts to promote lesson study in countries where it aids development (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006). In fact, lenders may promote policies—possibly through coercion or soft power—even when they are controversial or problematic or failing in the source country (Steiner-Khamsi & Quist, 2000). Alternatively, borrowers may take the initiative to import a policy, as when US school districts developed a passion for “lesson study” from Japan. Finally, it is important to consider reactions of borrowers to new ideas. Do they fully appropriate them, master them without making them their own, “creolize”

them to blend with local practices, adopt them in name only, or reject them outright (Anderson-Levitt & Alimasi, 2001)?

“Competence” and related concepts

As discussed in the Introduction to this issue, there are several theoretical definitions of competence. Central concepts in 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 situations. But what sorts of abilities or knowledge do reformers actually have in mind when proposing competence-based curricula? On the one hand, there is the familiar knowledge of academic disciplines, and on the other hand, broader cognitive and social abilities. Thus the OECD recognizes “students’ knowledge and skills in the areas of reading, mathematics, science and problem solving” (which it measures in its Programme for International Student Assessment, PISA), but also argues that “students’ success in life depends on a much wider range of competencies”. It labels the latter “key competencies” and lists them as the ability to “use language, symbols and text interactively... use knowledge and information interactively... use technology interactively... relate well to others... cooperate, manage and resolve conflicts... act within the big picture... form and conduct life plans and personal projects... [and] assert rights, interests, limits and needs” (OECD, 2005).

Competence-based education (CBE), or *l’approche par compétences* (APC), refers to any approach aiming to enable students to develop particular competences. All competence-based approaches differentiate themselves from content- or discipline-based approaches, focusing instead on what students learn to *do* with knowledge rather than on the knowledge itself.

Beyond agreement on that point, there is a divide between behaviorist approaches on the one hand and constructivist, integrative approaches on the other. The first approach, true to the early roots of competence-based education in industrial efficiency, focuses on the *savoir-faire* students must master to successfully execute a job or a profession, and is usually aligned with behaviorist psychology (e.g., Ropé, 2000) and the concept of mastery learning (Bloom, 1968). It is also associated with breaking down skills into their smallest components and is thus called “fragmented” or “reductionist” by its critics. An alternative set of competence-based approaches in primary and secondary education, which began to develop in the 1980s (e.g., Delorme, 2008), are said to be “constructi-

vist” rather than “behaviorist” and “integrative” rather than “reductionist”. It is variously associated with Piaget’s constructivism, Vygotski an socioconstructivism, and/or the cognitive sciences (e.g., Jonnaert, 2002; Roegiers, 2001).

As Fichtner observed to my surprise in Benin (2012), reformers often link the integrative competence-based approach with learner-centered education. Learner-centered pedagogy is a supposedly global movement in its own right (McEneaney & Meyer 2000; Schweisfurth, 2013), and the meanings of “learner-centered” are as elusive as the meanings of “competence”. However, the link makes sense because both integrative competence-based approaches and learner-centered pedagogy share an interest in “active learning” (e.g., Chisholm & Leyendecker 2008), which may be translated as the opportunity for students to “participate” more in class or to work on personal or group projects; both approaches also tend to emphasize that learning should be relevant to children’s lives or interests and in general be meaningful (McEneaney & Meyer, 2000).

One question that will arise below concerns the relationship between competence-based education and objectives-based education, *la pédagogie par objectifs* (PPO). The answer cannot be simple, for some analysts have seen competence-based approach as evolving from an objectives-based approach (e.g., Ropé, 2000), while others describe a competence-based approach as a complete break with pedagogy by objectives (Cros & alii, 2010). These differences derive from differences in ways people have conceived of “objectives” and have experienced objectives-based education in practice. If PPO was experienced as focused on learning the *content* knowledge of particular disciplines, it contrasts sharply with the emphasis of competence-based education on action—but not so if objectives-based approaches were seen, in the spirit of Bloom’s work, as including the active *application* of knowledge (Bloom & alii, 1956; cf. Amar Meziane, 2014).

Another question that will arise concerns the relationship between competence-based education and outcomes-based education (OBE). Again, the answer depends on how one defines “outcomes”. As Malcolm explains, outcomes-based education shifts the emphasis from inputs to outputs, and outputs can refer to anything—“traditional content matter, competencies (such as problem-solving and using technology), or ‘role performances’” (1999: 85). In the case of the South African reform to be discussed below, Malcolm argues that outcomes referred to competencies and role performances (1999: 102).

Reforms and policies across place and time

I turn here to my central question, where have competence-based approaches been adopted and how did that come to be? Beginning in 1992, a number of nations and international organizations launched competence-based reforms of primary and/or secondary education in quick succession. Table 1 illustrates the timing of this burst by referencing key policies that addressed “competences”. Reforms positioned “competences” in different ways vis-à-vis “objectives” and constructivist pedagogy; in the table, an asterisk (*) marks those aligned with learner-centered education. The right-hand column of the table lists other reforms cited in the text below.

France's *Charte des Programmes* and *Socle Commun*

France's 1992 *Charte des Programmes* seems to be the first major policy document to incorporate the notion of competences into primary and secondary education. The *Charte des Programmes*, a framework of principles for curriculum reform, grew out of the major Jospin reform of 1989. For analysts from inside France, the new principles represented evolution, not revolution, for they described the new curriculum as developing from the policy of pedagogy by objectives that had been in place since the 1970s (Ropé, 2000). The reform also proposed that pupils acquire interdisciplinary competences *alongside*, not in place of, disciplinary knowledge. The deeper change was that the reform expressed a shift in pedagogical thinking that had occurred in the late 1980s in France from content-centered to learner-centered instruction (Ropé & Tanguy, 1994; thus the asterisk in Table 1).

The *Charte des Programmes* had some impact because it led to the development of new pupil evaluation forms (“report cards”), *livrets de compétences*, organized by competences (Ropé, 2000: 166). However, because teachers were not mandated to use the *livrets de compétences*, not all schools adopted them (Boniface, 2009). Only with the next major reform cycle in 2005, which instituted a *Socle commun de connaissances et de compétences* (Common foundation of knowledge and competencies), did the notion of *compétences* become fully instituted in French law (Gordon & alii, 2009: 265). The new law made *livrets de compétences* mandatory as of 2007, meaning that it necessarily impacted teachers' evaluation practices, whether or not it affected classroom pedagogy.

Table 1. Key policies in primary and secondary competence-based education

Competence-based policies		Other reforms	
Countries or regions	International organizations		
1991			
1992	France, 1992*		
1993		European Commission, 1993	Botswana, "skills", 1993*
1994	Belgium (Fr), 1994		USA, Goals 2000 "standards", 1994-2000
1995		Confemen Yaoundé, in Confemen, 1995 OECD, 1995	
1996		Unesco, 1996*	
1997		OECD launches PISA	South Africa, "outcomes", 1997-2010*
1998			Japan, "zest for living", 1998-2011*
1999		OECD, DeSeCo, 1999-2003*	
2000			
2001	Belgium (Fr), 2001* Quebec, 2001* Benin, 2001*	OIF experts work in Africa	
2002			
2003	Algeria, 2003		
2004	Mexico, preschool, 2004		
2005	France, 2005*	OECD, 2005*	
2006		European Union, 2006*	
2007			
2008			England, "skills", 2008-2010
2009			Australia, "capabilities", 2009
2010			
2011	Mexico, 2011		
2012			USA, Common Core "standards", 2012-

* aligned with learner-centered instruction

French observers do not report any international influence on France's 1992 shift toward competences. Instead, they describe internal political struggles (Clément, 2012) and the impulse to respond to the high unemployment that persisted, especially among youth, despite the expansion of secondary education

(Ropé, 2000; Ropé & Tanguy, 1994). On the other hand, some French analysts saw international influences at work in France's 2005 reform (Laval & alii, 2012). Analysts writing from a Europeanist perspective attributed the French reform to influence from Europe, from international assessments like PISA, from the OECD's DeSeCo reports (see below), and from Unesco reports (Gordon & alii, 2009). Similarly, an internal Ministry of Education report described France's 2005 reform as part of a wider movement by Canada ("particularly Quebec"), Britain, Belgium, Switzerland, Portugal and other European nations, and (supposedly) by "numerous states of the United States" which had, the report claims, "introduced the logic of competencies into their curricula" (Houchot & alii, 2007: 10).

The European Union

Just a year after France published its *Charte des Programmes*, the European Commission under Jacques Delors' presidency issued a white paper on economic growth that referred in broad terms to "les compétences fondamentales indispensables à l'insertion sociale et professionnelle" (basic competences indispensable for social and professional participation) (EC, 1993: 124). The document provides insights into why the discussion of competence moved into primary and secondary education. Because of high unemployment rates among young people, it noted the need to establish "la liaison entre la formation scolaire et la vie active" (a link between academic training and the world of work). Fore shadowing Unesco, the European Commission also argued that competences to be developed should include the ability to learn throughout one's life (p. 124). Bruno, Laval and Clément (2010) argue that the 1993 white paper and a follow-up report in 1995 represented a shift towards neoliberalism within the European Union and that its logic was influenced by the lobbying of European organizations of business leaders that were actively promoting labor market flexibility linked with a radical transformation of schooling (2010).

Just as France revisited the notion of competences a dozen years later, the European Union later developed a framework of competences (EC, 2006) that was similar to, although not identical with, the framework that the OECD would develop (OECD, 2005).

Francophone Africa: a rupture

Returning to the early 1990s, the scene shifted from Europe to Africa, where competence-based discourse was taken up by Confemen (Conférence des ministères de l'éducation des pays ayant le français en partage, Ministers of Education in French language countries). Confemen's Yaoundé summit of 1994 led to a proposal for reforms, published as Confemen (1995), which featured a call for a curriculum to develop pupils' competences. As in France's 1992 reform, Confemen proposed competences along side of, not replacing, academic knowledge like reading and calculating; likewise, Confemen's document described competences as expanding and refining the idea of objectives, not replacing them. Nonetheless, Confemen referred to the proposed changes as revolutionary, not evolutionary, calling it "une rupture équilibrante" (a break for re-balancing). Moreover, the Ministers linked the new approach with learner-centered teaching as opposed to the traditional teacher- and knowledge-centered instruction (1995, Section 3.1, part 2). Under Confemen's mandate, the intergovernmental organization AIF (l'Agence Intergouvernementale de la Francophonie), now part of OIF (l'Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie), provided financial support for the development of competence-based approaches in 23 Francophone countries (Bernard, Nkengne, & Robert, 2007; Roegiers, 2008); OIF supported a pool of experts offering training in competence-based approaches for a decade beginning in 2001 (Roegiers, 2008). There was also support from Unicef, Unesco, and the European Union in various countries (Roegiers, 2008).

It is difficult to say what inspired the 1994 Yaoundé declaration. However, it is worth noting that Lyon-based CÉPEC (<http://www.cepec-international.org>) was working in eight Sahelian countries to develop a notion of "competences" in 1993 (Delorme, 2008), and that Confemen adopted CÉPEC's definition of "competence" (Valérie, 2014, pp. 181-2).

The Belgian organization BIEF (Bureau d'Ingénierie de l'Éducation et de la Formation, www.bief.be), created in 1989 by De Ketele and Roegiers, began supporting development of competence-based approaches in Africa and elsewhere in 1996 ("Notre histoire" at www.bief.be). And even though books devoted specifically to competence-based primary and secondary education (notably, Perrenoud, 1997; Roegiers, 2001; Jonnaert, 2002) did not appear until later, the idea of competence had been broached in earlier works (De Ketele, 1982-83 and 1988; Jonnaert, Lauwaers, & Pesenti, 1990, cited by Ayotte-Beaudet

& Jonnaert, 2010; Gérard & Roegiers, 1993).² One would need serious interview-based research to investigate whether these practitioner-theorists actually stimulated the competence movement in primary and secondary education or were simply responding to policy moves by governments and international organizations.

OECD 1995 to 2003

Two other international organizations also published documents proposing competence-based education in the 1990s, the OECD and Unesco. The OECD, although at heart an economic organization, has become the most influential international organization in the domain of education since it developed PISA. In 1995, two years before it launched formal planning for PISA, the OECD explored the notion of competence in a report that compared educational standards used in ten OECD member nations. The report equated “competence” with “skills” made specific references to employers’ needs and graduates’ capabilities for employment, as had the European Community’s 1993 report. Soon after, the OECD embraced the notion of competence, as reflected in the goals for PISA, assessments designed to measure not “mastery of the school curriculum,” but rather “knowledge and skills needed in adult life” (OECD, 2000: 8). As it launched PISA, the OECD also initiated a multi-year reflection on “Defining and Selecting Competences” commonly called DeSeCo. The DeSeCo project published its first report in 1999 (Salganik et. al., 1999), an influential think piece in 2001 (Rychen & Salganik, 2001), and its edited volume on “Key Competences” in 2003 (Rychen & Salganik, 2003). The last presented “a holistic model of competence” (2003, Chapter 2); its definition of competence aligned closely with integrated definitions that emphasize the ability to mobilize resources to respond to a real-life situation in a particular context. Of interest to the question of trajectories, the introductory chapter of DeSeCo’s 2003 report cites a list of 16 standards or “generative skills” developed by a commission in the United States (Stein, 2000) as an important source for DeSeCo’s identification of key competencies.

² I do not include much-cited Le Boterf’ (1994) because it comes from management, not education.

UNESCO

Meanwhile, Unesco published a report developed by a commission overseen by Jacques Delors (whose 10-year presidency of the European Commission had ended, and who had also contributed to the DeSeCo reports). Entitled *Learning: The Treasure Within* (Unesco, 1996), the report emphasized “learning throughout life” and identified “four pillars” of education: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be. In the context of learning to do, it discussed a shift from “skill” to “competence”, thus apparently defining competence more broadly than the OECD’s 1995 report.

Analysts differ on how to read the “Delors report”. Some see it as a deliberate counter-move “situated in Unesco’s enlightenment tradition” (Elfert, 2015: 88) against the World Bank’s “purely economic view of education” (Mundy, 1999: 46) and, if less directly, as opposed to the OECD’s interest in human capital theory (Elfert, 2015: 90-91). Yet the report also makes ample reference, as do OECD documents, to the changing nature of employment, and other analysts point out that Delors’ Unesco report, like the European Commission reports written under his presidency, responded to concerns of the business community (Bruno & alii, 2010; Takayama, 2013)

Competence-based reforms in other nations

During and after this burst of policy-making in the mid-1990s, other governments joined the movement toward competence-based reforms. In Europe, the French community of Belgium introduced competences into its primary and lower secondary curriculum in 1994 and 2001 (Belgium, 1994; Jonnaert 2001). Luxembourg also changed its curriculum (Jonnaert, 2001). In North America, Quebec’s new programs of 2001 took a socioconstructivist competence-based approach (Jonnaert, 2001: 2). In Latin America, Unesco’s regional office promoted reform through a series of meetings in the 1980s and 1990s, and meeting declarations made references to competences as early as 1993 (Unesco & Orelac, 2001), but I have not discovered what effects this movement had on curricula. However, as Portilla reports in this issue, competence-based policies in Mexico started with the pre-school curriculum in 2004, and then spread to the entire primary and secondary system in 2011.

In Africa, Roegiers reported some level of discussion of competence-based approaches in “une bonne moitié des pays du continent” (at least half the countries of the continent) (2008: 1, note 2), although he excluded Anglophone countries for lack of information (p. 16, note 21). The countries he listed where an integrative pedagogy had already become widespread at the time of his writing were Tunisia, Djibouti, Mauritania, Gabon, and Madagascar, all thanks to their participation in the OIF initiative (2008: 16). Although Roegiers cited several countries as “pioneers” in developing competence-based curricula—Benin, Tunisia, Guinea, Senegal and Mali (2008, pp. 10-11)—Tunisia is the only country on that list that he later mentioned as having actually instituted competence-based pedagogy (p. 16). Algeria is another example of a country that adopted *l’approche par compétences*—in a 2003 reform, per Amar Meziane (2014)—but has apparently not established the approach in classrooms.

Finally, in Asia Roegiers (2001) referred to a 1996 textbook reform in Vietnam and to reforms in Kazakhstan. However, it is difficult to know from such fleeting references what policies have actually changed, let alone their influence on practice. I will discuss Japan in the following section on related reforms, and mention China and Korea further below.

Related reforms elsewhere

During the burst of competence-based reforms in the 1990s, a few other countries instituted what seem to be closely related major curriculum reforms. In southern Africa, Botswana instituted a 1993 reform that Richard Tabulawa analyzed under the broad rubric of learner-centered instruction (2013). However, Tabulawa made clear that the reform included a focus on very broad “skills”, which resemble lists of competences (critical thinking skills, individual initiative, interpersonal skills and problem-solving ability), and that it aimed to encourage projects and group work. Moreover, Botswana justified the reform in OECD-like language as preparing workers for modern factories, even though prospects for such modern factories in Botswana were slim to nil. Tabulawa also noted that a push for accountability focused the reform in practice on much narrow objectives.

Soon after, in 1997, South Africa launched a curriculum reform that was labeled “outcomes based education” but which, as mentioned above, some analysts interpreted as a competence-based approach (Chisholm & Leyendecker,

2008; Malcolm, 1999). In the same spirit as Confemen's report, South Africa cast its new curriculum as a complete rupture from the former system and its pedagogy (Jansen, 1999), linking it closely with learner-centered instruction and constructivist approaches to learning (Malcolm, 1999: 102; Nykiel-Herbert, 2004). However, in the challenging context of a country newly emerging from apartheid, a decade after its introduction the reform was widely contested within the country even while South Africa was exporting it to other countries in the region (Chisolm, 2007), and outcomes-based curriculum was officially abandoned in 2010 (Chisolm, 2015: 411).

Japan launched a major curriculum reform the following year, in 1998. Keita Takayama saw the reform as a competence-based curriculum (2013) in line with the OECD's vision, and certainly the OECD described it favorably (OECD, 2012). However, it is difficult to know exactly how the reform concepts translate into French or English. Japan promoted the reform under the slogan (*ikiruchikara*) "zest for living", referring to the hope that it would encourage an eagerness to learn. A new section of the curriculum, called "Integrated Study", aimed to "foster children's ability and quality to find a theme, think, judge and solve a problem on their own; and enable children to think about their own life, urging them to explore subjects with creativity" (OECD, 2012: 188), goals that faintly echo the OECD's key competencies. However, sensitivity to PISA results and national testing introduced in 2007 narrowed the original focus to formal schooling (Takayama, 2013). In addition, there was a backlash against the reform, particularly in response to PISA results in 2006 and 2009 (Takayama, 2013), and in 2011 the Ministry of Education "rebalanced" by returning to a more prescriptive curriculum, albeit trying to retain the goal of critical thinking (OECD, 2012).

More recently, Australia established its first-ever national curriculum for preschool through lower secondary in 2009, focusing it on "capabilities", some of which resemble key competences: "Literacy, Numeracy, Information and communication technology capability, Critical and creative thinking, Personal and social capability, Ethical understanding, Intercultural understanding" (<http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/>). Apparently this curriculum is now being implemented.

Where competence-based curricula have *not* been adopted

Although widespread, the competence movement and related reforms in primary and secondary education have not covered the entire globe. For example, I have found no references to competences for primary or secondary education in Russia, although I can find occasional discussion in English of competences in Russian higher education or teacher education. Similarly in India, there are some scholarly references to competences in teacher education, higher education and health fields, but not to competences for primary or secondary curriculum.

In East Asia, I noted above the Japanese primary and secondary curriculum, now in retrenchment, that aligned with competence-based education, but I have not found other examples of competence-based curricula. A Unesco working paper indicated that South Korea was thinking about competence, but only at the level of “mere discourse,” not movement toward policy (Lee, 2014: 2). China is a case worth further investigation. A Unesco report said that China’s 2001 Basic Education Curriculum Reform Programme represented “a fundamental shift... from discipline-based knowledge-centered curriculum to a learner-centered curriculum” (Zhou & Zhu, 2007: 53), and that it has added an “integrated curriculum” to “discipline-based curriculums” (p. 27). What this means in the specifics of the official curriculum, not to mention in actual practice, is an open question.

It appeared in 2008 that England was shifting to a competence-based curriculum, but the shift never happened. Back in 1988, England had moved *away* from the learner-centered instruction favored in its primary schools to a content-focused National Curriculum. Then twenty years later, in 2008, England adopted a new primary and secondary national curriculum that resembled a competence-based approach, although the British preferred the term “skills” (Gordon & alii, 2009). The reform was to include a cross-curricular “set of broadly cognitive and social skills”—specifically, that students become “Independent enquirers. Creative thinkers. Reflective learners. Team workers. Self-managers. Effective participators” (Gordon & alii, 2009: 309). However, the government changed in 2010 before the new curriculum was to be implemented, the new government suspended the changes, and by 2014 had proposed a different curriculum described by the Prime Minister as “rigorous, engaging and tough” (Coughlan, 2013). These events remind us that official curriculum can never be considered real until actually implemented. Another lesson is that,

at least in England, curriculum reforms look more like swings of a pendulum back and forth than like movement in the direction of a global consensus.

The US case

The United States offers another counter case—an important case because analysts sometimes equate “globalization” and world movements with US influence. As mentioned, the OECD credited US documents for inspiring its efforts toward competence-based reform (OECD, 1995: 1; Rychen & Salganik, 2003: 33), and analysts in the French Ministry of Education claimed that “many states of the United States” were implementing competence-based reforms (Houchot *et alii*, 2007). However, these are clear cases of “externalization”—attributing a reform desired by local actors to an external source. Although Taylorism in early 20th century United States was indeed a source of the original notion of competences in the *workplace*, and although some states experimented with competence-based *teacher* education in the 1980s, competence-based approaches are not and have not been the norm in US primary and secondary systems.

It is true that in 1994 the federal government of the United States introduced a reform proposal entitled “Goals 2000” during the florescence of competence-based approaches elsewhere (US Congress, 1994). Some analysts saw the 1994 reform document as an example of outcomes-based policy (e.g., Malcolm, 1999), although the law actually used the term “standards”. It combined a discipline-based goal, that students demonstrate “competency over challenging subject matter”, with a parallel goal more akin to key competencies, “that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment” (US Congress, 1994, Section 102). However, since US education is decentralized and since the federal government exercised no accountability over this “voluntary” reform, few states or individual districts actually changed their curricula (Superfine, 2005). The reform quickly withered, and the movement behind it evolved into movement about standards rather than outcomes (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006). Thus US support for competence-based reform in Benin in the 1990s, the puzzle that inspired this essay, might be explained as enthusiasm for an idea similar to one launched in the US but not thriving back home.

Since the 1990s, reform talk in the United States has focused on accountability and standards, not competences. In 2010, the governors of the states endorsed a common curriculum, the Common Core State Standards, which most states have enacted in state-specific versions, prompted by truly accountable federal funding (<http://www.corestandards.org>). Although the Common Core does take an interdisciplinary approach and does encourage meaningful learning (Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011), its standards are a very long list of grade-specific content goals for literacy and mathematics practices across the disciplines. It bears little resemblance to the broad “key competencies” of the type developed by the OECD.

A new movement for competence-based education has arisen recently in the United States. One version is the Partnership for 21st Century Learning, a coalition of the US Department of Education, the National Education Association (a major teachers’ union), and several “founding” business organizations, including Apple Computer and Microsoft. It has advocated since 2002 for “21st century skills” inspired in part by the OECD reports (Bellanca & Brandt, 2010). (Here attribution has come full circle, with these US reformers now crediting the OECD as their source, whereas the OECD had credit supposed competence-based education in the United States back in the 1990s.) A parallel US movement appeared on the web in 2012 as Competency Works (<http://www.competencyworks.org/>), an organization that emphasizes mastery learning and students learning at their own pace. Its sponsors include the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers (supervisors of education for each state), powerful funders like the Gates Foundation, and influential private think tanks like the Carnegie Foundation.

Although the powerful business leaders and government groups behind the movement may succeed in getting policies established, to date competence-based policies have been established in only a few of the 50 states (such as Iowa, 2016). Reformers write in the future tense about “Advancing a New Agenda” and ask “What Will Drive the Shift?” (Bellanca, 2014). It would be a mistake to interpret frameworks as policy documents and a greater mistake to see them as descriptions of common practice.

Discussion

Widespread but not global

Competence-based curricula and related reforms have been widespread although they are not truly global in their reach. They have been promoted by several international organizations and have been established as policy in many countries of Europe and in some countries of Latin America, North Africa, and Africa.

I have pointed out different explanations for how competence-based approaches spread or developed internally in different places. Some analysts attributed the movement for competence within Europe to high rates of unemployment in the late 1980s and 1990s (e.g., Ropé 2000). Indeed, that economic crisis helps explain the near simultaneous emergence of policy discourse on competences in France, the European Union, and the OECD, and pressure from business leaders on the European Union has been documented. However, the more persuasive economic argument, the one that applies to the Americas as well, is that automation in manufacturing is eliminating the need for less “skilled” workers while increased global competition requires workers who are flexible, good problem-solvers, and lifelong learners (e.g., Hirtt, 2009; Laval & alii, 2012). This is the notion of the “new knowledge economy” brought by Delors from the European Union to Unesco, and taken up with fervor by the OECD. Integrative competence-based approaches serve employers. One might argue that they serve students as well by making them more employable. However, Takayama (2013) argues that the new competences, particularly as assessed, are likely only to exacerbate class-based inequity.

In Africa, although there is high unemployment among educated young people, the argument that students must be prepared for the new knowledge economy is less tenable, even if Botswanan reformers made that claim (Tabulawa, 2013). Rather, it appears that African leaders trying to move away from colonial education systems saw the need for a clean “break” with prior policies. The notion of competence-based education was at hand, made available by particular French and Belgian advisors working in West Africa. It was compatible with the notion of learner-centered instruction being pressed through soft (or not so soft) power by external agencies like Unicef, Unesco (Schweisfurth, 2013) and USAID (Tabulawa, 2003; my field notes). Therefore, I suggest, African ministers seized

upon competence-based curriculum and learner-centered pedagogy, portraying them as a “rupture” with objectives-based pedagogy and prior curriculum.

I have just noted the case for the agency of a few individual actors, French and Belgian advisors, as one mechanism for spreading competence-based reforms. Another prominent individual actor was Jacques Delors, who oversaw the European Commission’s adoption of the language of competence, then took those ideas to Unesco and reformulated them in a 1996 report that reverberated in the global South, and then participated in OECD’s crafting of a message for the global North. One might also point to social networks as conduits of the competence “gospel”. For example, Philippe Jonnaert was a colleague of De Ketele in Belgium before moving to Québec, some years before Québec instituted its competence-based reform. We might also assume that Confemen and AIF/OIF, as more formal networks, shared ideas efficiently within Francophone Africa and the Francophone zone in general.

While noting that competence-based policies became widespread, I should clarify that just what was shared from one country to another is not clear. Not only is it not questionable whether policies in some countries have actually been implemented, but policies themselves vary in meaning or may even be internally inconsistent. For example, Québec’s 2001 policy contained elements of both behaviorist and constructivist approaches to competence (Jonnaert, 2001). Should the competence movement ever succeed in the United States, it is important to know that its promoters at Competency Worksseem more interested in students’ individualized progress through a presumably uniform curriculum than in the integrative, project-based approach often described by European reformers.

Moreover, although the reform has been widespread, there has been retrenchment by some important adopters. England canceled a planned competence-based curriculum in 2010, while South Africa abandoned its 1997 outcomes-based curriculum in the same year, and Japan “rebalanced” its 1998 reform in 2111. This suggests to me that competence-based approaches are the latest reform to pass over primary and secondary countries like a wave, liable to recede when the reform has played itself out or faced growing political opposition locally, and liable to be replaced by the next wave of reform just as competence-based education replaced objectives-based education in some countries where it was adopted. Alternatively, perhaps the swing of the pendulum in England (and in Japan?) foreshadows swings back and forth across the world between discipline-based curricula on the one hand and learner-centered reforms on the other.

Not global

Although competence-based approaches have appeared in many countries, the reform is not global in the sense that large countries like the United, Russia and India have not adopted competence-based primary or secondary curricula. China seems to have appropriated some competence-friendly discourse, but it is not clear what its 2001 curriculum actually means or how it has been implemented.

Claims that “most countries” have adopted competence-based curricula or that the United States has implemented it must be interpreted as examples of “externalization,” in which enthusiastic reformers look outside their own setting for external legitimation of what they seek to accomplish. Externalization is one of the mechanisms through which a practice gets socially constructed as “global” or as a “best practice”. Another mechanism, understandably practiced by international organizations committed to the reform, is to gather in one report all possible cases of countries that have actually implemented a practice, have at least written it into policy, or are thinking about it. A related practice would be to generously interpret “skills”, “capabilities”, “core objectives”, “goals” and “themes” as more or less the same thing as “competences” (as in Gordon & alii, 2009). A particularly surprising example of such rhetorical practices is a table from Unesco listing Indonesia’s anticipated “targets” for national examinations, which include “personality” and “noble character,” as a definition of key/core competencies alongside Australia’s “capabilities” and Norway’s five “basic skills” (Unesco, 2016).

Limitations and lessons

Readers will note many omissions, for it has been difficult to document believable accounts of policies, where they came from, and whether or how they have been implemented around the world. I encourage other researchers to trace the details of trajectories in particular countries, especially seeking to locate the impact of individual actors or networks and the possible exercise of soft power by business leaders or donors.

Despite the lacunae, however, I believe we can draw a clear lesson from this survey. Although it is good to reflect on the goals of primary and secondary education and it may well be good in many contexts to seek to make education

meaningful to students as well as useful in their future work and lives, skepticism is appropriate about competence-based reform (as about any reform). Potential adopters need to investigate what the reform actually means in various places that have adopted it, where it has actually been implemented and to what effect, whether it is really global or inevitable or the one best practice, whether it will be swept away by the next wave of reform before it takes root, and whom it serves.

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