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**Tunisia's Quest for Educational Quality:
Introducing the Competency Approach
in Primary Schooling**

Ronald G. Sultana

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**Tunisia's Quest for
Educational Quality:**

**Introducing the Competency
Approach in Primary Schooling**

by Ronald SULTANA

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FOREWORD

There are many variations between the countries of the Middle East and North Africa in terms of access and quality of education. Tunisia is one of the countries in this region that have done very well in both regards.

This report is a case study of Tunisia's Basic Competencies (BC) Approach to improving learning and educational quality. The approach is founded on the educational principle that children can learn complex skills and achieve educational objectives through progressive mastery of basic competencies, the building blocks for attaining developmental goals.

The case study is a reminder that quality education does not just happen and cannot be taken for granted. Instead, quality education requires a serious, deliberate and persistent commitment on the part of a government and its partners. It is a commitment to children's future and to a country's economic, social and political stability.

The report provides a critical analysis of the process and initial results of the Competency Approach in Tunisia. UNICEF's role as a key player is also mentioned, notably its technical assistance that was critical in designing the approach and conceptual framework, and in developing background material, training and monitoring tools.

UNICEF will continue to work in partnership with the Tunisian government in fine-tuning this approach to quality learning that places the child at the centre of the instructional process. Above all, we hope to tap the experience and expertise acquired through this innovative approach for the benefit of other countries in the region.

Thomas Mc Dermott
Regional Director,
Middle East and North Africa

ACRONYMS

BC	:	Basic Competency
BIEF	:	Bureau d'Ingénierie en Education et en Formation
CNIPRE	:	National Centre for Pedagogic Innovation and Educational Resarch
EU	:	European Union
MENA	:	Middle East and North Africa
MLA	:	Monitoring and Learning Achievement
TIMM-R	:	Third International Mathematics and Sciences Study
UNICEF	:	United Nations Children's Fund

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The present report is one of a series of case studies of UNICEF-supported successful educational innovations in the MENA region ⁽¹⁾. The purpose of each of these case studies is to document the inception of an innovation, the ways in which the initiative or set of initiatives attempted to address specific educational challenges, the obstacles encountered in the piloting and/or going-to-scale phases of the project, the ways such challenges were overcome, and the relationship that was developed between the UNICEF country office and the national body or bodies that were involved in the innovation. Each of these studies relies heavily on qualitative methodology including in-depth interviews with, and observations of, key actors in the field in order to better capture the dynamic process of innovation, and to give a sense of the complex ways in which intentions and plans are translated into action in the field.

Purpose / Objective

«Tunisia's implementation of the Competency Approach in its primary schools» represents one such qualitative documentation of an educational innovation supported by UNICEF and deemed to be worthy of attention beyond Tunisia's shores.

The main purpose of this case study is to provide a detailed account of:

- The **context of education** in Tunisia, particularly in relation to the aspiration, on the part of the Ministry of Education authorities, to move on from a preoccupation with access, to one that also focuses on quality
- The **role of UNICEF** as a key player both in identifying the potential of the competency approach to vehicle a number of changes in the primary education sector, and in drawing on international expertise to feed into the process
- The **piloting phase** of the innovation, including the targeting of schools and regions in such a way as to further equity goals, the training of teachers, the preparation of pedagogic material and support, and the eventual reforms in curricula and in assessment strategies
- The **going-to-scale phase** of the innovation, with the problems and challenges associated with that, the different reactions from the field, and the change in culture that the competency approach brought with it.

While the report's main purpose is to document the innovation, there is a strong analytic and evaluative element running throughout, enabling the reader to critically appraise the promise that the competency approach carries, as well as its pitfalls and problems.

Methodology

The author of the report carried out desk research that included a perusal of a large number of documents linked to the innovation, such as reports, minutes of meetings, pedagogical material produced to support the competency approach, statistical data purporting to reflect the differential achievements of students piloting the innovation with those who were not, and so on. Most importantly, the author paid two visits to the field in order to capture a qualitative sense of the innovation in both its piloting phase (in 2000), and in its going-to-scale phase (2003). The author observed several lessons taught through the competency approach, visited schools in a number of regions across Tunisia, and held interviewed teachers, heads of schools, pedagogic assistants, inspectors, and officials from both the Ministry of Education and UNICEF.

(1) See Sultana (2001, 2002, 2003)

Key Findings and Conclusions

While there is the need for a thorough quantitative analysis of the actual outcomes in terms of improved learning of students involved in the competency approach, the positive impact of the innovation is in evidence across a whole range of educational indicators. In particular, the competency approach helped to:

- mobilize teachers to focus on the individual learning needs of pupils
- encourage teachers to distribute learning opportunities more evenly across all the members of the class
- ensure that lesson sequences were planned in such a way that they targeted clear and attainable objectives in a sequential manner
- identify learning difficulties with a view to developing remedying strategies.

Such a focus on ensuring quality learning for all also had a positive impact on school retention and efficiency, and overall achievement. In addition, the qualitative data provides evidence of the impact that a high profile innovation can have on other aspects of the teaching and learning enterprise, with a change in the underlying educational philosophy and culture encouraging a shift in roles of educational actors, the use of more interactive pedagogies, an engagement with more reflective forms of activity, and the transformation of schools into open communities of practice.

Lessons Learned

Two main lessons can be learned from this particular case study. The first lesson concerns the competency approach itself. Its focus on the rooting of learning in meaningful situations, its emphasis on what pupils should learn rather than what teachers should teach, its potential in facilitating cognitive growth through engagement in problem-solving contexts, its privileging of such central notions as individualized and differentiated learning, and equally individualized and differentiated formative remediation -indicate that the competency approach has a great potential in helping educators at all levels to make great strides toward the goal of all children learning excellently. This is especially true when teachers using the competency approach do not apply it in a mechanized fashion, which could lead to the development of a random combination of fragmented skills, rather than coherent, Gestalt-oriented knowledge.

The second lesson concerns the more general process of educational innovation. In particular, this case study illustrates the manner in which a well-thought out, focused project can challenge the prevailing educational culture, having an impact on all aspects of schooling including curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. The implementation of the competency approach in Tunisia also illustrates the difficulties that are likely to be encountered when a project goes to scale, particularly during the «twilight zones» in the process of innovation, when actors are required to adopt new roles in a context that has not yet been thoroughly modified to support new behaviour protocols. The case study also highlights the strategic decisions that have to be made in order to maintain support for the innovation over time, particularly when it concerns policy-makers on the one hand, and teachers on the other. The role played by external agents -in this case UNICEF- in promoting and sustaining change, while at the same time leaving ownership and ultimate responsibility in the hands of the national authorities, is also shown to be a critical factor in the success or otherwise of an educational innovation.

The competency approach is therefore certainly deserving of attention in the search across the MENA countries for strategies to improve education in the basic cycle. The way the approach has been implemented in Tunisia provides policy-makers and educators in the region and beyond with a fascinating case study of the dynamics of reform. Certainly, for Tunisia, the challenges remain many. But equally certain is the fact that the processes triggered off by the basic competency programme are leading to a wholesale transformation in the culture of teaching and learning, helping the country make great strides forward in providing a quality education for all.

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PART ONE: TUNISIA'S QUEST FOR EDUCATIONAL QUALITY: INTRODUCING THE COMPETENCY APPROACH IN PRIMARY SCHOOLING

Purpose and Objective

This report is prepared in the context of Case Studies in Education in the Middle East and North Africa where there is an urgent need to disseminate promising initiatives in education that other countries can learn from. The report provides a descriptive and analytical assessment of the performance of the Basic Competencies (BC) initiative in Tunisia, highlighting the origin of the project, its strengths and weaknesses, and presents some conclusions and recommendations for further attention and for more sustained efforts.

Background

The Republic of Tunisia stands out in the MENA region in terms of its investment and achievements in education. It is actually one of the few countries of the region which have already achieved UPE objective. From the 1950's until quite recently, the main focus was on quantitative growth and extension of education services to all. It has made great progress on this front, and for the school year 2002-2003, 99 per cent of children aged 6 years, 97.2 per cent of those aged 6 to 11 years, and 67.7 per cent of those aged 12 to 18 years were in formal education (Ministry of Education and Training, 2003a). The literacy rate for the population of Tunisia - which stood at 75 per cent in 2001 - equals that found in intermediately developed countries, and is superior to that in most of the MENA countries, with the exception of Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. The literacy rate for females was 57.7 per cent in 1995, which compares favourably with neighbouring Algeria (40%), Morocco (31%) and Egypt (39%). By 1999, the female literacy rate had gone up to 63.7 per cent.

Tunisia has in fact channelled a generous share of its public resources towards education, investing in the development of the schooling infrastructure, and in boosting the numbers of teachers, which more than doubled in number in 20 years, counting 46,211 in 1982, to over 100,000 in 2002. Only 12.8 per cent of teachers in the first cycle of basic education and 2.1 per cent of teachers in the second cycle of basic education and secondary education were qualified to teach in 1982; by 2002, the figures stood at 66.9 per cent and 78.9 per cent respectively. In 1982, 2937 schools catered for 1,142,060 pupils in the first cycle of basic education, and 305 schools catered for 332,219 students in the second cycle and secondary level education. Twenty years later, there were 4,486 schools in which 1,265,462 pupils received their basic education, while 1,117 institutions schooled 1,057,233 students in the second cycle of basic education, and at the secondary level. In the year 2002, the expenditure of the Ministry of Education and Training represented 16 per cent of the total State budget. Significantly, despite the structural adjustment programmes engaged in from 1986 onwards, the education share from the overall budget has not been decreased or undermined in any significant manner ⁽²⁾.

The commitment of the government to educational development has also found concrete expression not only through financial investment, but also through placing education high on the national agenda. Indeed, the new Education Act of 23 July 2002 declares at the very outset that «Education is an absolute national priority» (Article 1), and it is the subject of public debate, which has most recently been organised around the «L'École de Demain» - or the «Tomorrow's Schools»- a consultation exercise which was launched by the President of the Republic himself in November 1997 ⁽³⁾. Since 1992, and in accordance with a law of 1991, the Tunisian education system has been subject to regular internal and external evaluations. Tunisia's resolve to benchmark its practices with those of other

(2) Statistics obtained from various sources, including various Ministerial publications, as well as UNICEF country notes. See, *inter alia*, Ministry of Education and Training (2003a), and Banque Mondiale (1999) *Le Système Éducatif Tunisien: Orientations Stratégiques*. MNSHD Discussion Paper Series No.5.

(3) In this project, four commissions considered the schools of the future in Tunisia in terms of (a) their mission and organization, (b) the impact of the new technologies of information and communication, (c) the profile of the teacher required, and (d) the social and economic environment. The reports of these different commissions were submitted in June 1999, and the President of the Republic requested that these would be placed in the public sphere for nation-wide consultation.

countries internationally is apparent given that, despite the financial and human resource outlay required, it participated, along with 37 other countries, in the Third International Mathematics and Sciences Study-TIMSS-R evaluation, assessing basic learning in Mathematics and Science for 8th graders aged 14 years in the Basic Education cycle. It has also taken part in the Monitoring Learning Assessment-MLA evaluation, dealing with learning in Mathematics, Arabic, and a transversal area integrating different subjects (introduction to Sciences, civic education and geography), and focusing on the everyday competences for 10-year-old 4th graders in the Basic Education Cycle in eleven African countries.

This brief portrayal of achievements - in the face of high (albeit declining) demographic growth - needs to be tempered by a recognition of some fundamental challenges that Tunisia's educational system and practices have to face, particularly as it opens itself even more widely to international markets where it aims to compete on the basis of the quality of its human resources. Out of 38 countries participating in the TIMSS-R study, for instance, Tunisia ranked 29th in Mathematics, and 34th in Science, signalling the need for increased investment in two curricular areas fundamental to the country's development. In the context of the present study, where the focus is on the Basic Competences Programme, it is also important to further highlight difficulties of a qualitative nature, with reference to the internal and external efficiency of the educational system, as well as to its equity.

Thus, despite the progress that has been achieved, there are still problems with internal efficiency of the system (Ktari, Jarousse & Solaux, 1997; Ministry of Education and Training, 2003a), with 8.9 per cent and 15.1 per cent of students in the first and second cycle of basic education respectively repeating a year of studies in 2001/2002. The number of dropouts for the same year was 77,339 - representing 1.8 per cent of students in the first cycle and 8.9 per cent of students in the second cycle of basic education (i.e. 53,628 students). The repetition rate in secondary education for the same year was 14.5 per cent, with 39,115 - or 9.2 per cent of students - dropping out before terminating the cycle. The net enrolment rate for the 6-16 age group stands at 90.5% which shows that close to 10% of the compulsory Education age group are out of school.

Tunisia's Educational System at a glance

The Tunisian educational system is structured in a 9-years Basic Education cycle and a Secondary Education cycle lasting 4 years. This structure is in effect since the adoption of the July 1991 educational reform law.

The Basic Education cycle is subdivided in two complementary sub-cycles:

- a primary sub-cycle, lasting 6 years and managed by primary schools
- a preparatory sub-cycle, lasting 3 years and managed by intermediate schools (7th - 9th grade).

The former 6th grade National Exam which conditioned the transition from primary to intermediate schooling was replaced in the mid-1990s by a regional exam which in turn has been recently abandoned and replaced by a system of on-going evaluation.

The 9th grade National Exam which conditioned obtaining the basic education certificate and the transition to Secondary Education has also been recently replaced by a system of ongoing evaluation. The exam remains in effect for those students who wish to take it to possibly fulfill the requirements of access to the «Pioneer schools» (Elite schools).

10th grade or 1st year of Secondary Education offers a common curriculum for all students who, starting 11th grade are oriented to one of 5 fields of specialty (arts, experimental science, Math, Technology or Economics). A new orientation system will be implemented starting school year 2005-2006 with 11 branches.

At the end of the 13th grade (4th year of Secondary Education) all students take the National Baccalaureate Exam which in case of success opens access to Higher Education.

Key constraints and challenges

There are a number of reasons that, if one looks at the recent past of Tunisian educational systems and practices, might account for some of the problems identified. Among the most often referred to in the literature (e.g. Belhareth & Baumgratz-Gangl, 1998; Chabchoub, 1998, 2000; Labadi, 2002; Ministry of Education and Training, 2003b) and by Tunisian educators interviewed during the course of the research on which this study is based, one could refer to:

- The culture of élitism that has tended to prevail among system administrators, teachers and parents alike, where the legacy of a historically meritocratic system aiming at «excellence» for a few has traditionally led to a preoccupation with selectivity. Such practices are well known to have a variety of perverse educational repercussions, including the «cooling out» of large numbers of disaffected students who, for reasons that are often social in origin, do not perform well at school and who give up on the formal learning enterprise having been negatively labelled by «significant others» such as teachers.
- Curricula which have traditionally stressed coverage rather than mastery, and which have placed an emphasis on «knowing that», and to some extent on «knowing how» rather than on «knowing to be» and on competences generally, and on those higher-order skills that are central to cognitive societies, and that have become so critical to competitive survival in the modern global economy. Recently the wholesale revision of the curriculum has been launched, though many feel that it will be quite a challenge to move away from an encyclopaedic tradition which had tended to develop «well-filled», and not «well-made» brains (Ministry of Education and Training, 2003b: 18, 23).
- Pedagogical practices that until recently, have not sufficiently taken into account the different learning needs and styles of pupils, and have not encouraged or facilitated the development of autonomous learning. While an investment has been made in introducing information technology in the curriculum at both the secondary and, most recently, at the primary school level, computers have not quite revolutionized teaching methods, through more flexible and differentiated pedagogical strategies.
- Assessment strategies that have tended to be summative in nature, with the focus being on selection and channelling rather than formation, diagnosis, remediation and support.
- Centralized administrative structures inimical to innovation and to flexible responses to challenges that arise in specific contexts.
- A noticeable lack of sufficiently trained teaching staff, with weak - occasionally non-existent - initial and continuing teacher education structures, particularly for the secondary cycle. In addition, teachers have had little to incite them to up-date their pedagogical practice or to adopt more learner-centred modes of instruction, and have been largely constrained by centralized curricula that inhibit them from responding creatively and professionally when faced with heterogeneous classrooms. Heads of schools are still hampered by lack of training and autonomy.
- The traditional problem of equity, with major imbalances along east-west, coastal-interior, and urban-rural axes, which manifest themselves through the usual indicators of learning achievement, repetition of levels, and drop-out rates.

There is broad consensus and agreement among educators in Tunisia that these weaknesses need to be addressed, and indeed, the past decade has seen a great deal of effort and initiative in tackling such challenges, which Tunisia shares with several other countries in the region and internationally. The resolve to transform - rather than merely tinker - with the system comes through several declarations and educational plans, the most recent being the one covering the five years 2002-2007. (Ministry of Education and Training, 2003b), where priority is given to meeting several key targets, among them the following:

- Revising curricula, and ensuring that more time is allocated to mathematics and science, and requiring students to master two foreign languages by the end of the Basic Education cycle;
- Giving more attention to the pre-school level;
- Placing the student at the core of the educational process;
- Improving the initial and in-service training of both teachers and principals;
- Encouraging decentralisation and school autonomy, with the school becoming the basic unit in the overall system, particularly through the implementation of school improvement projects;
- Promoting a form of schooling that facilitates employment and employability;
- Ensuring that students remain at school till the age of 16;
- Improving the success rate at the end of compulsory schooling;
- Ensuring that every student is exposed to the teaching of computing and to the use of internet, and that multimedia technologies are used in teaching;
- Entrenching a system evaluation and monitoring culture, facilitated by the establishment of a management information system.

PART TWO: THE BASIC COMPETENCES PROGRAMME

Both the challenges and the strategic responses to them are not unique to Tunisia: indeed, practically every single MENA country would recognize itself in this list of difficulties that are uppermost in the minds of the different Ministries of Education in the region (Nucho, 1998; Sultana, 1998, 2001, 2002). What is perhaps unique about Tunisia is the coordinated strategy that has been adopted in an attempt to face up to these challenges, largely through a resort to a Basic Competences (BC) approach which promises to bring about a paradigm shift in the way education is conceptualized and delivered in the country, and in ensuring that quality education targets are attained by all. The following sections present the methodology for the case study and provide an overview of the BC approach in education, as well as an account of the way it was introduced in Tunisia, detailing some of the main achievements and identifying some of the key problems in implementing it.

Methodology of the study

The study is informed by several documents related to the innovation - including conference and seminar proceedings, minutes of meetings, evaluation reports written by local and foreign consultants, a dissertation, a video documentary on the BC approach, and lesson plans, notes, memos and research bids provided by Ministry and UNICEF officials, inspectors, heads of schools, and teachers. Fieldwork carried out between the 4th and 11th of June 2000, the 20th and 24th October 2003, and the 20th to the 21st November 2003 provided further insights. The visits in 2003 served the purpose of extending and updating the earlier fieldwork, with a view to also getting a sense of the developments of the CB approach in Tunisia over time. The fieldwork entailed:

- Individual and/or group interviews with key officials at the Ministry of Education and Training, and at the National Institute of Education Sciences (renamed recently as the National Centre for Pedagogic Innovation and Educational Research - the CNIPRE) in Tunis. These interviews included persons with responsibilities in overall management of the innovation and research activities, in the development of programmes and school manuals, in the in-service training of teachers, and in the design and management of the data base related to the BC approach. Most of these were members of the CB team, established in 1994 to steer the different aspects and phases of the initiative.
- Several interviews and lengthy informal discussions with four of the UNICEF staff in Tunis, who also were - or still are - members of the CB steering committee.
- Interviews with regional directors of primary education in the El-Kef and Kasserine governorates, as well as in Tunis and Monastir.
- In all, 17 inspectors were interviewed in different settings, such as in their offices, in schools during visits, and during training workshops. 18 heads of primary schools, 6 pedagogic advisers and 53 teachers were also interviewed, either individually or, in a few cases, in the context of small focus groups (three to five persons in all). Three teachers were interviewed twice, first during the fieldwork in 2000, and then in 2003. Several schools and classrooms were also visited in order to observe the Basic Competency approach in action. Twelve primary schools were visited in 2000 (7 in the Kasserine region, and 5 in El-Kef), and 5 lessons were observed (3 in Kasserine and 2 in El-Kef) ⁽⁴⁾. In 2003, another nine schools were visited (5 in Kasserine and El-Kef, 1 in Monastir, 1 in Tunis, and 2 in Ariana, a suburb of the capital city), and a further 11 lessons, or sequences of lessons, were observed.

(4) In the fieldwork carried out in 2000, the timing of the visits at times coincided with the revision period prior to the final examination sessions in primary schools, and this limited the number of lessons delivered through the competency approach that could be observed. Despite this limitation, it was felt that the interviews with teachers provided enough material to provide a credible portrayal of both the achievements and challenges in competency-based teaching. These insights were further reinforced and extended during the second field visit in 2003.

- Observation of - and interviews with - a group of inspectors at a workshop in Hammamet, during a session dedicated to the re-examination of school manuals for 5th and 6th grades.
- An interview with the Director of a Teacher Training College, and five of his staff.
- A discussion with 15 senior officials from the Ministry of Education and Training was also jointly organised by the Ministry and the UNICEF office on the 21st November 2003, when the key observations arising out of the fieldwork were presented, with a view to obtaining feedback and comments.

While care was taken to get as broad a range of views about the BC initiative as possible, it was impossible, given time and other limitations, to triangulate the data by also interviewing parents and pupils. It must also be noted that despite the fact that the schools visited reflected a good spread of rural, urban, and semi-urban settings, the fieldwork was limited to 5 out of a total of 24 governorates. While documentary evidence perused covers the implementation of BC in all of Tunisia, interviews and observations focused mainly on El-Kef and Kasserine, and to a lesser extent on Ariana, Monastir and Tunis, and consequently the present case-study will not capture the richness and diversity of how the BC programme operates across the country.

In this regard, it is important to keep in mind that El-Kef and Kasserine illustrate the regional imbalance typical of Tunisia. Half of El-Kef's 272,000 people, for instance, live in rural areas, and more than 10 per cent live in absolute poverty. In El-Kef and Kasserine, the illiteracy rate at the time of the first field visit was 39% while the national rate was 27 per cent; the unemployment rate was 21 per cent, when the national rate was 15.5 per cent. In 1995, the average annual expenditure on each citizen was 620 Tunisian Dinars compared to 966 TD at the national level. 44 per cent of the rural schools in these governorates do not have running water, as against 30 per cent at the national level. There is also a large turnover of staff in schools in these two regions, with a minimum of 20 per cent per annum being transferred. Teachers tend to prefer to work in the coastal region, which attracts a lot of tourism and which is often advantaged in many ways. High performing teachers tend to avoid the interior, which has always had the label of being less developed. That the BC programme has also worked so well in El-Kef and Kasserine against such odds gives an idea of the potential of the approach in less challenging environments, such as the ones observed in the schools in Tunis and Monastir.

Education through Basic Competencies

The «basic competency» approach to teaching and learning engages a coherent educational philosophy that is underpinned by a fundamental conviction: that students can learn complex skills through the sequential mastery of competences which act as building blocks in the attainment of a final - and integrated - performance objective (De Landsheere, 1988; Ministry of Education, 1999a, b; De Ketele & Sellami, 1999; Lazhar, 2000). These competences are basic in the sense that without them, a student cannot advance to the next step in learning; they therefore differ from advanced competences in that the latter, while both useful and important, are not absolutely essential for the child to cope with more advanced learning.

«Basic competences» go beyond the specific objectives of the traditional programme: a student will learn how to read a prospectus, for instance, or how to make a video-recorder work, with competences learnt within a particular, problem-solving situation which is challenging and which requires resolution. Competences are also integrative: what the approach aims for is the mastery of a macro-competence that involves the holistic assimilation (and not mere juxtaposition - with the whole being greater than the sum of its parts) of several related, subsidiary skills mastered previously, and linked to a «family» or «category» of situations. In other words, competency-based teaching programmes establish hierarchies of learning objectives, ranging from entry level competence to desired outcome competences. Teaching is structured to take pupils from one level of competence to another through a carefully defined approach based on the acquisition of enabling intermediate competences. The litmus test of learning is the ability of the student to choose pertinent knowledge or know-how to solve problems in a specific context or situation.

Systematic monitoring allows teachers to detect the specific difficulties faced by learners, and to take the necessary steps to assist students to overcoming them by reviewing the previous competences before moving on to new ones. Evidence that a basic competency has been integrated is the restructuring of the internal cognitive universe of the learner to take into account the «graft» of the new learning. That reorganization of knowledge is demonstrated in the actual performance evinced in a given situation - and particularly when the learner is capable of transferring the competency from one situation to another, that is, in facing new problems and new situations. Such performance is open and amenable to evaluation.

There are different approaches to competency based pedagogy in education - ranging from a behaviouristic and neo-behaviouristic emphasis on rather fragmentary cognitive outcomes, to a more constructivist, and social psychological and integrative approach which highlights the issue of equity and the entitlement of every citizen to a pre-determined minimal threshold of knowledge and skills as tools to participate in a democracy. Despite these different traditions, however, there are a number of characteristics that are common to most BC approaches (Perrenoud, 1997; De Ketele, 2000; Roegiers, 2000; Bosman, Gerard & Roegiers, 2000). De Ketele (2000) has usefully summarised these similarities, and they are represented in Table 1.

Table 1: How the Basic Competencies approach differs from Traditional teaching

TRADITIONAL APPROACH	BASIC COMPETENCY APPROACH
The nature of the curriculum	
<p>The traditional curriculum is made up of hundreds of specific objectives parceled out across 6 years of study.</p>	<p>The BC program is made up of around 30 competencies distributed within each of 3 cycles of learning, each of which is 2 years in duration.</p>
The central idea behind the curriculum	
<p>The central idea here is the «specific goal or objective», which basically refers to the ability to absorb content, or specific skills to apply.</p>	<p>The central idea here is the concept of «competence», which refers to the ability to choose and use the relevant knowledge and skills to resolve a category of problematic situations.</p>
Method of evaluation	
<p>A range of questions juxtaposed one to the other and independent of each other, targeting some of the concepts and skills transmitted by the curriculum.</p> <p>It is clearly impossible to use the exam to evaluate all the specific objectives of the curriculum, given the summative nature of that same curriculum.</p>	<p>Situations that require problem-solving, which oblige the pupil to use the minimal competencies acquired during the cycle, in a manner that is integrative and holistic.</p> <p>Given the hierarchical and integrated nature of the curriculum, it suffices to evaluate the most integrative competency to evaluate the ones that came before it.</p>
The nature of the examination and the way of establishing a grade	
<p>The exam is made up of a set of independent questions, sampling aspects of knowledge that the pupil must reproduce faithfully, or skills that must be applied.</p> <p>Pupils succeed in the exam if they manage to obtain half of the total marks, whichever areas of the curriculum these marks refer to. This cannot therefore guarantee that pupils who pass the exam have the required foundation on which to build subsequent learning.</p> <p>In the traditional approach, there is often a preoccupation with placing students in an hierarchy according to grades obtained at exam session.</p> <p>As such, exams of this nature lead to perverse results, both when pupils succeed or fail - the purpose of the exams remains fundamentally selective rather than educational.</p> <p>The purpose of the exam is «to prove», and often leads to demotivation for those students who are most in need of motivation to learn.</p>	<p>The exam poses a set of problems to resolve (math), or meaningful communicative expressions to produce (Arabic, French), which therefore assumes that the pupil has the competence to use the relevant knowledge and skills.</p> <p>Pupils pass the exam if they master the totality of the minimal competency or competencies, at the basic level expected. There is therefore a reasonable guarantee that anybody who passes the exam is in a position to benefit from the next step in the hierarchy of learning tasks.</p> <p>Generally speaking, the BC approach is interested in ensuring that pupil X is competent in performing task Y, rather than in comparing competence levels held by different persons.</p> <p>To ensure validity of the examination, 75% of material tested concerns basic competencies, while 25% concerns advanced competencies.</p> <p>The purpose of the examination is formative and continuing evaluation, privileging constant and relevant feedback in order to create the ideal conditions for motivation and learning, and where the point is to «improve», not to «prove».</p>

Progress in teaching and learning

Teaching is conceptualized as a succession of lessons juxtaposed to each other and cumulative in nature, with the sequence broken up by periods of revision. Each lesson has specific learning targets.

Learning is equally summative in nature: pupils are considered to have learnt something once they have accumulated the discrete bits of knowledge, and once they show their ability to reproduce that knowledge and apply it. In many ways, the whole is considered as a sum of its parts.

Progression is thought of largely in terms of the subject matter itself.

Teaching is considered to be a series of sequences alternating the teaching of knowledge and new skills on the one hand, with integrative sequences aiming to solve problems or to produce communicative expressions.

Learning is integrative and holistic, since the mastery of a new competency automatically involves the integration of the most important previously learnt knowledge, skills and competencies. The pupil is considered to be competent only when s/he has integrated the different elements, since “the whole is more than the sum of its parts”.

In the BC approach, the target is to facilitate progress within a discipline or subject matter, and across disciplines.

Catering for pupils with learning difficulties

In the traditional approach, pupils with learning difficulties are identified on the basis of weak results in tests and examinations. There are at least two dangers here:

- Marks are given rather late in the day, when remediation should have been started earlier;
- The nature of the exam and the mode of marking do not facilitate effective remediation: of two students who fail, one might need support in one area, the other in another.

There is no mandated remediation strategy, so that teachers can proceed with the teaching of new material without having to check whether the foundational knowledge and skills have been attained, and without attending to the specific learning difficulties of pupils.

In addition, there is no positive discrimination policy in favor of those most in need.

The Basic Competency approach mandates a specific strategy in the catering for pupils with learning difficulties:

- At the start of each term, teachers draw up a diagnostic table (identification of basic competencies that have not been mastered by individual pupils; of minimal criteria that have not been sufficiently learnt; analysis of types of errors committed; development of hypotheses to explain why such errors are committed);
- This type of diagnosis is made possible by the type of test set, and the way it is corrected.

The BC approach also requires that, at the start of every term, lessons or remediation sessions are delivered to ensure that all pupils have the basic competencies required to handle the new learning targets.

In addition, largely through the various strategies associated with the BC approach - such as action research, school development planning, and community involvement - there is a positive discrimination policy in order to support those most in need.

As with most modern approaches to teaching and learning, the BC approach privileges learning over teaching, and above all targets one major set of related objectives: success in learning for all, and the elimination of failure. It engages where the person is at, with a view to facilitating autonomous and self-directed learning, where «knowing», «doing» and «being» are integrated in an inter-disciplinary manner. Students are encouraged to take ownership of and responsibility for their own development through signing individual «learning contracts», and to see the social dimension of education through engaging in peer tutoring, where quicker learners help out slower ones individually or in groups.

PART THREE: THE BASIC COMPETENCES APPROACH IN TUNISIA

The promise of the Basic Competences approach

The relevance of the BC approach to Tunisia was first proposed in 1993, during a seminar on «Objectives-Based Planning of Pedagogical Interventions», coordinated by the Bureau d'Ingénierie en Education et Formation (BIEF) of Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium⁽⁵⁾. The BC approach promised to address several aspects of the educational endeavour which, as has been noted earlier, were considered to be in need of change, including curricula, the learning process, evaluation and assessment practices, the role of the teacher and of the student, and the management of schools and classrooms (Sellami, 1999). Through the BC approach, Tunisian educators hoped to adopt an integrative rather than a summative model of teaching and learning; to orient the educational process towards higher order thinking skills; to encourage a view among all stakeholders that all children can learn, and that failure is not normal; and to commit the whole system to formative assessment privileging diagnosis and remediation. It was hoped that the BC approach would lead teachers to be more creative and innovative in responding to student needs, and more amenable to working with colleagues in planning and implementing school development.

In targeting such objectives, the BC approach made available a set of strategies, including the design of school development plans and school improvement projects; the provision of pedagogic support in view of the goals established by the school community; the establishment of action research groups mobilizing different actors in a number of schools; and the involvement of the local community in the projects.

The aspired-for improvement in learning attainment as well as in equity had to be monitored carefully in terms of both quantitative and qualitative indicators, with data on learning achievement gleaned from regular testing of students entered into a central database and used at both national and local levels to identify patterns that might throw light on the impact of the BC approach on students.

Beginnings and development of the BC Programme in Tunisia

In 1994 the Ministry of Education, in partnership with UNICEF, embarked on an adoption of a Basic Competency programme with a view to improving the outcomes and internal efficiency of the educational system through a focus on increasing equity and enhancing the quality of learning in schools in underserved regions. Cost-effectiveness was a major concern, and it was largely thanks to the financial support provided by UNICEF that much of the initial training as well as preparation of materials and manuals could take place. One of the most striking characteristics of the BC project is the way it was planned and adopted, moving from a reception marked first by indifference, then by curiosity, leading finally to a demand by schools to be involved, and generalisation of the approach.

The progressive implementation of the BC programme provides us with an insight into the rationale and strategic planning approach that was adopted throughout, as well as with a deeper understanding of the piloting and going-to-scale phases of an innovation. The emphasis on careful scheduling, piloting, training, consultation and involvement of key actors, provision of support, and constant evaluation and monitoring gave the project credibility, together with high visibility both nationally and internationally. This to the extent that the BC approach is now being piloted in the second cycle of basic education, with major agencies, including the World Bank, UNICEF and the EU, making commitments to it. By 2003, the BC approach had gone to scale, and had been progressively extended from one grade level to the next, reaching all fourth grades in all primary schools in the country by the time of the second visit. The generalisation to the subsequent grades is scheduled to take place over the next few years, with the final grades of the primary level (5th and 6th grades) as well as the three years of the intermediate level (7th - 9th grades) formally implementing the competency approach over the next few years. Some of the key developments in the introduction and implementation of the innovation are presented in Figure 1 below:

(5) This account of the development of the Basic Competency approach in Tunisia is based on documents made available by the UNICEF office in Tunis, particularly reports drawn up by J.M. De Ketele, the lead Belgian consultant on the BC project. The proceedings of a conference on the BC innovation, jointly organised by the MoE and UNICEF (Ministère de l'Education, 1999), were also very helpful. Insights about the process obtained through interviews held with different members of the pilot committee involved with the approach from the very outset are also integrated into the account. Other documents included: Ministère de l'Education et de la Formation (2003c) «Généralisation de l'approche par compétences dans le cycle primaire de l'enseignement de base.»

Figure 1: The development of the Basic Competency Approach in Tunisia

1994-1995	1995-1996	1996-1997	1997-1998	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002
Setting up of Pilot Committee (MOE + UNICEF) and Steering Committee	Launch of BC program in 65 schools in 8 governorates	Extension of BC program to selected schools in all the 23 governorates, with a total of 98 schools involved	275 schools piloting the BC approach	Further spread of BC, now including 471 schools	First phase of generalisation launched covering an additional 466 Prim. Schools reaching up 937 schools (22% of total) with 282,547 students and 12,791 teachers.	Second phase of generalisation launched: BC approach is used in 1st grade in all schools of country. Schools covered in earlier years continue using approach in other grades.	Generalisation of BC approach is pursued in 2nd grade in all schools. Half a million students covered.
Development of support material in selected subjects (Arabic, Math: 1st and 2nd grades, French: 3rd and 4th grades)	Training at local and national levels aimed at schools piloting BC	Production of BC teaching support material for 5th & 6th grade Arabic & Math	MOE decides to experiment BC program in 2nd cycle of basic education (Grades 7 to 9) in the intermediate schools	Production of 2nd set of training modules	Generalisation prepared by an intensive large scale training program for teachers, supervisors and pedagogic assistants.	Training program targets approximately 8000 teachers.	New evaluation system introduced in line with BC approach and degree system.
Training of teachers, principals, inspectors	Setting up of 3 regional research teams to develop BC material for the 3rd & 4th grade (Arabic & Math) and 5th & 6th grade (French)	Competency-based training for each category of staff.	Training workshops organised at both national and local levels.	External evaluation of BC program, prompting a decision to generalise BC nation-wide by 2004	Generalisation prepared by an intensive large scale training program for teachers, supervisors and pedagogic assistants.	Training program targets approximately 8000 teachers.	Full revision of school curricula and textbooks is launched focusing on 3 first grades of Prim. Education
Continuation of School Development Project (SDP) in El-Kef in 10 schools.	Creation of database	Analysis of tasks to be performed by all actors	Production of 1st set of training modules	An international colloquium on BC and Quality Education is organised in Sousse	Third set of BC training modules is produced for headmasters and supervisors.	A second set of teaching remedial and integration aids is designed for 3rd and 4th grade Arabic and Math and 5th and 6th grade in French.	First package of teaching, remedial and integration aids distributed to schools while second package is tested & 3rd elaborated
	Production of training manual	Launch of action research projects in El-Kef.	Control group added to data base	Launch of a new series of Action Research Projects in El Kef and Kasserine	Results of internal evaluation of BC experiment are publicised.	Regional BC monitoring teams set-up in 99/2000 become fully operational providing useful feedback on field implementation	Training is provided to regional BC monitoring teams to set-up regional data base.
	Training of a first group of trainers	Restructuring of program data base	Launch of 2nd phase of SDP : 6 schools in El Kef and 14 schools in Kasserine	BC extended to general science	Experimentation of BC approach in 2nd cycle is pursued covering 7th to 9th grade in subjects: French, Arabic, Math, Science, Civic Educ, History /Geography.	Elaboration of BC tests is for the first time entrusted to regional team.	1,200 schools provided with a photocopier.
	Study visit to Belgium.	Second study visit to Belgium.	Third study visit to Belgium.	Experimentation of BC pursued in 2nd cycle	A first set of teaching, remedial and integration aids is designed and tested in primary schools.	First reports of action-research projects published.	Publication of Action research reports continues.
				Eight new schools targeted in Kasserine by SDP	Study visit to Belgium, France and Switzerland focusing on "Degree system".	Ten new school projects are launched in Kasserine and Kef.	A one-year preschool education program for 5 years old children started in 400 schools.
				Fourth study visit to Belgium.	Seven new schools in Kasserine are integrated in the SDP.	International seminar is organised on the Education Priority Program.	Four new schools are integrated in the SDP in Kasserine.

It is also evident from the evolution of the project that a number of important strategic decisions were made which had an overall positive impact on the innovation. Visible political support for the project was clearly essential in order to obtain the status of an initiative of national importance and standing. The President of the Republic himself officially acknowledged its importance, as well as the confluence between the aims of the Programme and the educational targets established for the country. One of the members of the Ministerial steering committee leading the BC innovation had close contacts with the press, and as a result, newspapers often ran features on the BC approach, thus ensuring it a high public profile, with different Ministers becoming interested in learning more about it, and publicly endorsing it. The Council of Directors of Education often met specifically to discuss the BC approach, inviting other educational partners associated with the project to attend their meetings. Eventually, a promotional video was also prepared by the Ministry with UNICEF help, with a view to sensitizing both teachers and the general public about the concepts and benefits of a BC approach to education. A bilingual (French and Arabic) bulletin-type leaflet called *Kifayat*, dedicated exclusively to the CB approach, and jointly published by the Ministry of Education and UNICEF, started being produced and distributed free of charge by the Ministry in March 1996, with a new series in more attractive and reader-friendly format launched in January 2002. The gaining of public support was considered to be so important as to warrant an extensive communication campaign on the media. This was designed by the Ministry of Education with UNICEF support, and its implementation started in 2002. A more extensive phase of this communication strategy is planned for 2004. The BC approach, then, has attained national visibility, with many of the concepts associated with it being readily recognisable, and entering into the discourse of both the education professionals and sectors of the general public alike.

Attention was also paid to the choice of schools to be involved in the initial stages, with institutions which were either already doing very well, or which had an entrenched history of failure, being avoided. Interviewees felt that that had been a wise decision, since it highlighted the achievements of the BC approach in a context which was neither too advantageous, nor impossibly difficult, and that the early experiences in the pilot schools had encouraged emulation. The subjects through which the BC approach was to be piloted - namely Arabic, Math and French - were also carefully chosen, with the rationale being that these basic subjects gave access to the other fields of knowledge. It was only in the fourth year of the experiment, for instance, that a fourth subject (science) was added.

Care was also taken to connect the BC programme with several of the ideas expressed through the Tomorrow's Schools project, with the national strategy to reduce early school leaving and to enhance quality education, and with other innovations such as school improvement projects, action research, educational priority schools, and so on. It therefore acted as a catalyst for the change that was felt to be necessary by many Tunisian social partners.

Interestingly enough, several interviewees noted that the BC approach was much less vacuous and more concrete and structured than the Tomorrow's Schools project, both in terms of the planning strategy adopted, and in terms of the actual impact on the way teachers had to go about their work. It was also the only project «sur la table» which practically and concretely responded to the needs and aspirations articulated for education, in terms of progress in quality, efficiency, and equity. It therefore rightly became the backbone of the Tomorrow's Schools endeavour. Other dimensions were later on added as a natural extension to the competency approach. This is the case, for example, with the one year preschool education programme for 5-year old children which was launched in October 2001, and the system of two-year cycles, each followed by careful assessment of competency attainment, that now characterises primary schooling in Tunisia. Indeed, the BC approach became so infused across the different schools that, to an extent, this irked some of the personnel involved in leading other innovations, since they felt that the logic underpinning the competency approach had left little space for alternatives. Others, even if they very positively disposed towards the BC programme, nevertheless regretted the fact that there had not been a national debate about pedagogy in the country, and that that phenomenon was still to happen once the professional corps and the public more generally became more aware of the issues at stake. Some - especially those who had had a good deal of exposure to educational debate in other countries - therefore felt that with the generalisation of the BC approach, the risk was of replacing one pedagogic monolith with another.

Despite concerns that the BC approach could be adopted too mechanistically - a point that we will return to later in this account - it was nevertheless clear that the project generated a lot of excitement about the real impact it could

have on the culture of teaching and learning in schools. Such expectations were most powerfully articulated by one education Director, who exclaimed that the BC approach was «a pedagogic revolution against the tyranny of the status quo». By 2003, other Directors were claiming that the education system could afford nothing but success in relation to the BC innovation, given that so many hopes had been pinned on to it. The Minister of Education himself, on listening to a presentation of one of the external evaluation reports of the BC approach, responded by saying: «Now I've understood what this is all about: one must change everything!», thus acknowledging the systemic agenda behind the competency programme. Even here, however, the Steering Committee leading the project was sensitive to the fact that the Tunisian government had already bandied around the word «reform» in 1989 through to 1991, and that it was politically awkward to speak of yet another wholesale transformation of the education system just a few years later. They thus emphasized that the BC approach was about «change» and «adaptation» rather than out-and-out reform.

It must be noted, however, that despite the careful and strategically paced introduction of the BC project - one which corresponded to the tradition of reform in the country where change is often top down, marked by caution and a gradual, steady, step-by-step approach - Tunisian educational leaders involved with the project were keen to move forward, motivated by a strong sense that the moment was propitious and that the opportunity had to be grasped. Thus, even when foreign consultants were advising prudently slow implementation, there were moments when the Tunisian team felt that it was crucial to keep the momentum going, and to forge ahead and adjust on the strength of progress achieved rather than wait for the ideal conditions to be present. It was that tension between audacity, strategy, and caution that determined the pace of piloting and generalization.

Finally, a note should be made regarding the unusually positive and productive relation between the donor - in this case, initially UNICEF - and the beneficiary. As has already been noted, UNICEF was very much the instigator behind the proposal of the BC approach. Interviewees from the BC Steering Committee, the Ministry, and the governorates felt that UNICEF had been of critical value to the project in several ways. UNICEF, through its technical assistance programme, was very much the instigator, and in terms of funding allocated approximately \$US 250,000 a year to the BC initiatives. UNICEF has also acted as a 'crossroads of international experience and expertise', as one director put it, by bringing in consultants and by organizing study visits abroad so that different categories of education personnel could see what the BC approach could achieve in other contexts, such as in Belgium, and in Quebec in Canada. Since UNICEF had representatives on the Steering Committee of the project, they were involved in the key decisions made, with several interviewees from both the Ministry and the UNICEF office noting that the team spirit was such that there was little if any distinction made between the Tunisian and agency counterparts. In this regard, a member of the UNICEF staff noted that he had «never been on a project anywhere else with UNICEF where there was so much communication and dialogue», with constant contact between the Steering Committee and the Minister of Education, who often responded with direct advice and comments.

The administrative continuity of the Steering Committee is also to be highlighted as a factor contributing to the progressive implementation of the BC programme. Despite the changes of six education ministers from the launch of the programme to the year 2004, more or less the same members remained on the Committee, with UNICEF staff being largely responsible for introducing a new culture of project management that one Education Director specifically referred to in the most apposite manner. There was also attention given to maintaining a constant contact between the Steering Committee at the centre and the regions. Reports were regularly sent, with top officials attending sessions of evaluation and remediation, for instance.

Perhaps even more importantly, Tunisian ownership and leadership of the BC programme was quickly established, with major contributions to key elements in the innovation being made solely or mainly by them. This included the preparation of material linked to the BC approach, and the adaptation of ideas to the Tunisian situation to the extent that the final product differed in many respects from the way the BC programme had been implemented in Belgium, which is where the key consultants came from. UNICEF staff was also very careful about who to involve as external experts, with many of these being singled out for praise by Tunisian staff interviewed not only in terms of their knowledge and expertise, but also for their sensitivity to cultural issues. By 2003, Tunisian officials had garnered enough experience, expertise and standing in relation to the competency approach that they were being solicited by other countries in the region - including Mauritania, Djibouti, Senegal, Madagascar and Algeria and more recently Yemen - in order to provide training and to supervise the early stages of the implementation of the innovation in their respective education systems.

PART FOUR: SOME ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE BASIC COMPETENCES PROJECT

Earlier, the many expectations of the BC project were noted in some detail. **The following sections highlight the extent to which these expectations have in fact been met**, as well as some of the major difficulties and challenges encountered in implementing the innovation. **Most of the observations are based on field notes**, with insights also being drawn from evaluation reports filed with the Ministry of Education and Training and UNICEF (e.g. Altet & Develay, 1999; the General Inspectorate report for the Ministry of Education and Training, June 2003c).

The BC Programme as a mobilizing force and catalyst for change

While, for reasons already mentioned earlier, the BC Programme was not «marketed» as a «reform», it nevertheless managed to mobilize different actors in the educational enterprise, from the Ministry of Education to parents. Interviewees spoke about the «BC effect» and about the «BC spirit», comparing its ability to influence several practices to an «oil stain» which spreads through material. Schools which had not been involved in piloting the project heard about it by word-of-mouth and started experimenting, themselves asking to become involved.

Inspectors referred to the fact that the BC programme was comparable to a system, where if you accepted an aspect of it, then that had an implication for whatever you did in schools, inducing a movement towards school development planning, parental involvement, positive discrimination, teachers' councils, exchange and interaction between teachers at school, local and regional levels, and so on. One Ministry director aptly referred to the BC locomotive, which pulled many wagons behind it. Another teacher picked up the same image, noting that the national «BC train» had gathered momentum, and that many of his colleagues, even if they were apprehensive about the changes it required of them, felt that they had little choice but to climb on board.

A real dynamic of change has, in effect, appeared in many schools across the country where the project has been implemented, a change that was visible in the governorates visited during the fieldwork, and which was particularly tangible given the opportunity to follow up the first field visit with a second one three years later. Curricula and text books that had been in use prior to the introduction of the BC approach were also no longer considered to be suitable, given their organization of the learning process. Ministry task forces were in fact set up to revise study programmes and school manuals, with UNICEF providing technical assistance to the entire process. By 2003, several new text books infused with the competency approach were available for various grades in primary schools, as were model lesson plans and teachers' manuals.

Changes in the role of educational staff

Interviewees noted how the BC project had perturbed habits - indeed, it had caused some teachers concern, since the previous way of doing things had left little place for autonomy, with instruction often being delivered through teacher-proof packages, where every single step of the lesson was defined and followed. Indeed, it is well known that, in situations where teacher training is limited, a teacher is as good as his or her textbook. Some teachers experienced the new demands made by the BC approach as somewhat daunting, since it challenged them to work harder and to be creative. Many noted that it required more work, emphasising the quantitative dimension in terms of increased preparation time, and particularly, more energy expended in regular and continuous assessment of students. Other teachers noted that they experienced the competency approach as a demand to work in a qualitatively different manner. A teacher in an El-Kef school noted for instance that with the introduction of the BC approach in her school, she found herself thinking much more about the pedagogical repertoire she could use in order to teach a particular sequence in a lesson, and that even as she went about doing her housework, she kept trying to come up with ideas to improve her classroom delivery. But as one inspector noted, not all teachers

had it in them to exploit new opportunities for professional development and autonomy provided by the BC train: «freedom is not given - it is taken», he remarked.

The BC approach was often described by those involved in terms of the challenge it made to old roles. One director noted how the teacher was now a «thérapeute pédagogique»: the emphasis was now on evaluation and remediation, with a great deal more attention being paid to individual learners. That emphasis on evaluation and diagnosis had another important effect: the development of a spirit of inquiry, which was formalized through the adoption of action research as one of the key components of the BC approach, and with the idea of the teacher as a 'reflection practitioner' being promoted in view of the target of increasing the professionalisation of the corps. It was fascinating to see not only teachers involved in actively reflecting and evaluating their own efforts in the context of schools, but also to see them work in teams that included heads of schools, inspectors, and in some cases regional directors as well. Many of these action research projects were written up formally in order to attract funding from the regional or national centres, with seminars being organized to give an account of what was being attempted, and in order to get feedback from colleagues. Examples of these action-research projects reported by Roegiers (1999), include: an inquiry into remedial activities; the more efficient use of the multi-purpose halls attached to schools and built with UNICEF funding; modes of classroom management required by the competency approach; the monitoring of teachers piloting BC; the management of multi-grade classes and schools, and so on. Some of these action research projects were written up as a report to be shared with other schools so that transfer of knowledge and experience could be facilitated (Chouchani et al., 1998; Chouchani, 1999; Abrougui, 1999). Several new action research projects were launched after the first one were completed, and many of these focused on initiatives that were directly linked to competency teaching, including school-based development, parental involvement, and the success for all targets embedded in the launch of Education Priority Areas.

It was also generally pointed out by several interviewees throughout the two field visits that prior to the introduction of the BC programme, there had not been much of a culture of team work among teachers. Primary level teachers tended to be isolated and individualistic in their approach; they did not even want others to know what they were doing, and generally resisted having visitors in their classrooms. The BC approach led to several initiatives, and to a gradual shift in the perception of the role of pedagogic advisers, who were seen to be supportive of professional development rather than as inspectors. The BC programme also facilitated a shift in the way teachers thought about their work. They were now somewhat keener to work in groups, to collaborate with colleagues in order to plan lessons together and to get ideas from each other. Both in the piloting and generalisation phases of the BC programme, many of the teachers interviewed noted that for collegiality to develop, time had to be structured for meetings between staff, since much of the interaction within the context of primary schools took place incidentally, during recreation time, for instance. By 2003 a collaborative work culture had started appearing in some schools, with teachers who had implemented the BC approach supporting those who were about to do so, and working together in grade-based or subject-based groups, particularly in relation to the development of assessment strategies and materials for their classes. The formal time-tabling of meetings for teachers, as part of their regular working hours, has however not yet been institutionalised, despite the obvious need for it. This, at least in part, explains why an evaluation of the generalisation of the BC approach, based on a questionnaire survey with 420 inspectors in charge of the monitoring and support of teachers in the first cycle of the primary school (Ministère de l'Éducation et de Formation, 2003d: 12), noted that team work between teachers, between teachers and their principal, and collaboration with teachers from other schools remained below expectations, even though there was a clear shift in the right direction.

The competency approach also required heads of schools to change. In many of the schools visited, principals were taken up by the day-to-day running of the school, and in teaching a number of hours per week, depending on the overall student population. The BC programme required them to take the role of educational leaders, to choose and run projects, to involve themselves with teachers, inspectors, and pedagogic advisers in planning and executing action research projects, and to reach out to parents and the wider community to ensure a better synergy of resources and efforts. Evidence of such role changes abounded in the schools visited, though some teachers did note that in their experience, the head tended to nevertheless be taken up too much by administrative problems, when s/he should be involved in pedagogic issues. By 2003, however, the threshold for discharging the

school headmaster from any teaching obligation was lowered from 15 to 12 classes and the grade of deputy principal was introduced in schools that had more than 40 classes; this meant that the administrative burden on the head was eased somewhat, and more time could be found to exercise educational leadership. The latter role was however circumscribed by the fact that in Tunisia, teachers do not require specialised training in order to be promoted to a headship position.

As in the case of pedagogic advisers, the BC approach challenged the inspector's traditional role, which had focused on control, sanction, and inspection. Inspectors noted that now they considered themselves to be trainers involved in offering support and advice to colleagues. Previously they had dispensed «recipes», what they referred to as a «pret-à-porter», with the teacher on the receiving end of the process. Now they felt that the BC approach had pushed them to think of pedagogical challenges as the subject for collegial reflection, one in which teachers were deeply implicated as contributors to the problem-resolution process. In the best of cases, inspectors shed their rather territorial and hierarchy-conscious attitude towards the schools they were responsible for, and joined heads and teachers in implementing school improvement and action research projects. **The changes at the local levels** had implications for central levels as well: given the dynamic initiatives undertaken by teachers, heads, and the inspectorate, central bureaucratic management no longer made a great deal of sense, and the pressure and movement towards decentralization became even more pronounced. While many of the heads and inspectors interviewed in 2003 felt that the time was ripe for different forms of decentralisation - including financial ones, which would permit them to use centrally allocated funds in a way they deemed most useful given the specific challenges their school had to face - the double heritage of Ottoman and French centralised administration still casts long shadows in Tunisia.

It must be emphasized that the adoption of new roles was not free of tensions. Inspectors noted, for instance, that they felt a conflict in their dual role as evaluators and trainers: they felt that teachers generally tried to hide their weaknesses when they had visitors in their classroom. This was understandable if the purpose of the visit was inspection, but it clearly hindered professional development. Most importantly for the study of educational innovations, it is crucial to point out the stress and confusion that the BC programme caused in the piloting stages, when teachers were obliged to implement competency teaching in only some of the subjects, and using the old curriculum and textbooks at that. This created a sense of schizophrenia since they had to respond to two rather different teaching paradigms at one and the same time, and with hindsight, key Ministry officials noted that it would have been better to have introduced the competency approach in all subjects in the pilot schools, rather than selectively in a few curricular areas. As will be noted in greater detail further on, the generalisation of the competency approach has gone a long way in resolving such tensions, but it is critical to highlight the hazards associated with what can be referred to as the «twilight zones» in the process of innovation, when actors are required to adopt new roles in a context that has not yet been thoroughly modified to support new behaviour protocols.

Changes in method of in-service teacher training

Professional development and training can be considered as one of the main strengths of the BC programme: it was rightly considered to be crucial in the successful introduction of the BC approach, and investment in it was not only sustained, but increased, diversified, and decentralized. The emphasis seems to have been placed on capacity building at the national, regional and school level, with a cascade plan that encouraged the training of trainers - though there was an awareness that such cascade strategies could easily lead to a dilution or even thwarting of the spirit behind BC as the core concepts and skills were relayed from one group to another.

Many inspectors noted that the training paradigm had to be re-conceptualized: while prior to the introduction of BC trainers had been quite happy to call teachers away from school and offer a course, now the idea was to engage school-based development, with the departure point being real classroom and school situations, identifying problems and challenges that were meaningful and connected to real concerns. In this situation, inspectors considered themselves to be resource persons, with the classroom and school being the «workshop», and with the

teacher being deeply implicated in the search for solutions - an approach reinforced by another yet related initiative, «le projet d'établissement», or the school improvement project. Some of these experiences were shared at regional workshops, with one of those who took part exclaiming: «We never ever even dreamt of doing this - We had been so comfortable with what we had before. BC really shook old habits!» The fact that so much of the training revolved around the BC approach also meant that different categories of educators were talking the same language, sharing a set of vocabulary and concepts that led to more productive dialogue and the sharing of a vision and mission.

Sets of training manuals were also prepared for teachers of different subjects, for Inspectors, for pedagogic advisers, and for school heads. The publications were professionally produced with the support of UNICEF, with each set consisting of modules taking around 15 hours to deliver over two days and a half. The modules are «isomorphic» with the BC approach they set out to teach, in the sense that they adopt the sequence and strategy being promoted among teachers. Furthermore, self-directed learning manuals to support the distance teaching of staff in competency approaches have also been produced (Ministère de l'Éducation et de la Formation, 2003d).

Initially, the phase of generalization of the BC programme across the whole country encountered some difficulties in relation to the training requirements of staff. The Ministry, anxious to avoid a situation where staff development aspirations had a negative impact on the opportunities for learning available to students, issued a directive stipulating that staff training had to be organized outside of regular class hours. This led to a mismatch between demand and supply of training, with some teachers ending up receiving only a one- or two-day training course before being plunged into a BC classroom. Many teachers - particularly during the first field visit in 2000 - felt that such training as they did receive served mainly to sensitize them to the main ideas concerning the approach, but did not really give them the skills to put it into practice. Similarly, some of the inspectors interviewed noted that they themselves had not received adequate training, and were unclear as to what to watch out for when they were observing teachers who were adopting the BC approach, and which observational grid they could adopt.

By 2003, however, some of these issues had been dealt with. Ministry and teacher union officials reached a compromise, whereby half of the training time dedicated to professional development could be taken from the teachers' regular working hours the other half from teachers' free time. In addition to this, the Ministry asked for UNICEF support to develop methodologies for self-directed study so as to reduce the time needed for the teacher to follow training and attain the required skills, leading to the publication of manuals already referred to. These manuals were careful to list glossaries, checklists, and other practical resources to ensure that, across the country, teachers were utilising the same vocabulary for the same concepts, in order to facilitate networking in training efforts. Three video-based documents were also produced in order to support training and self-learning. As we will have occasion to note later on, however, the training aspect of the innovation, particularly in the going-to-scale phase, proved to be particularly challenging for the Ministry and the inspectorate.

Improvement in learning achievement

School authorities' concern with tests of learning achievement was striking. It was fed by the official resolve of the government - and indeed by the President's decree - that by the year 2004, 80% of students should obtain a pass at the end of their 9th year of compulsory schooling.

Learning achievement in the schools visited was still largely linked to the Grade 6 examination, which used to bring to a close the primary school cycle. This examination was given a great deal of importance by parents and teachers alike, to the extent that some of my interviewees referred to the «psychosis» of the Year 6 exam. Consequently, heads introduced their school by showing the percentage of passes in this examination, as a mark of the quality of teaching and learning in their institution. They also made positive comments about the impact of the competency approach on the overall educational achievement of their pupils, noting that the emphasis on continuous and regular assessment, the building-block approach to learning, and the ideological shift away from streaming and focusing on the more able, to a belief that success for all could be achieved if teaching was appropriately designed to meet all needs, had made a significant difference in pass rates.

By 2003, the Grade 6 examination had already become a distant memory, if the accounts of heads and inspectors are anything to go by. The elimination of the examination took place in two policy moves. First, the Ministry shifted the responsibility for setting the examination from the national to the regional level. This, however, only minimally affected perceptions, and the importance of the examination did not decrease. In addition, in the BC pilot schools, the burden of assessment had increased for teachers and pupils alike, given that there were not only summative, certification-oriented examinations and tests to administer and sit for, but a whole gamut of parallel formative tests to manage, given BC requirements for continuous assessment.

In 2001, therefore, the Ministry decided to completely do away with the examination, and to replace it by tests that were entirely devolved to the school level. Teachers were now responsible for developing their own test schedules, with the outcomes of the evaluations being also used for certification purposes. The BC approach fitted in well with - and supported - such changes, since it promised to improve learning achievement, even though its approach to teaching and learning differed greatly from the «input-output» model that is normally signalled by an examination-led system of education. The credibility of the BC approach however could only be clinched if one could prove that students did indeed learn more through this new approach than in the traditional one. Of course, international educational literature suggests that it is not unreasonable to expect such results. Reviewing more than fifty studies carried out across the world, Walberg & Paik (2000) conclude that careful sequencing, monitoring and control of the learning process raise the learning rate. According to these studies, the emphasis on the mastery of learning saves pupils time, allows more remediation for students who need it, enables faster learners to skip material they already know, and leads to higher rates of achievement in learning all round. It is important to see whether such a promise has also been fulfilled in the Tunisian context of the BC programme.

This can be ascertained through an examination of the sets of interconnected databases that have been developed since the launch of the BC programme, where test results have been entered at regular intervals, and analyses carried out to note any improvement in achievement. The first database (1995-1996) was implemented in 1995, and involved 65 schools in all, from Monastir, El-Kef, and a nationally representative sample covering 6 governorates. A second (relational) database (1995-1996) includes the results of questionnaires distributed among pupils, teachers and school heads, and provides information on pedagogical practices and training, as well as other data on the schools, including the term grades and the results of tests carried out in September, December, March and June. The third database (1996-1997) is similar, except that it focuses on 50 schools piloting the BC project across all 23 governorates. A control group was added in 1997 and was used until the generalization phase was decided on.

Despite the complexity of the task - which, it must be noted, was seen as an unwelcome bureaucratic burden on teachers - there is a fair amount of evidence that the BC approach has made a positive difference. Thus, one report noted that the average improvement in Math was 20 per cent for the first grade, and 17 per cent for the second grade; in Arabic the increase was 15.3% and 9.4% respectively, while in French it was around 8 per cent for both the third and fourth grade (UNICEF, 1999). Another preliminary report concluded that the most significant improvement in test scores concerned those pupils who had been involved in the BC project for three years or more, with the effect being less significant for those pupils who had been in the programme for one or two years. This was true for Arabic and French. In Math, length of experience in the BC programme did not seem to make a difference (Lazhar, 2000). The report concludes that, despite the tentative nature of some of the data as well as of the analysis, 'since each time there is a significant difference between two groups this works in favour of that group which has most experience in the BC programme, one can assume that with time, the BC approach has improved the performance of these pupils' (Ministère de l'Éducation, 2000b: 40).

A third, detailed analytic report by De Ketele (2000) also notes encouraging results for students involved in the BC programme when several indicators were taken into account. Not only was there a net improvement in grades on the part of most students, but there were also other achievements worth highlighting:

- Students were retaining their learning more firmly over time;
- The difference in attainment between the more achieving and the less achieving students diminished over time;

- Higher achievement was attained despite the fact that the competences in question were more complex;
- Schools piloting the BC approach experienced a marked reduction of repetition and drop-out rates;
- Students in BC schools performed significantly better at end of year tests than those of the 20 schools in the control group. This was so even when the students of the control group outperform those of the pilot schools at beginning of year tests.

The most recent report is that provided by Khablachi & Murayi (2003), analysing the results obtained in the CB tests in June 2001, in seven curricular areas, namely: Arabic, French, Mathematics, Civics, History, Geography, and the Natural Sciences in the 7th to the 9th grade in Basic Education. Given that the BC approach has now gone to scale, this was the last report to compare results for schools piloting the approach with those which did not. Overall, the pilot schools performed better, scoring superior results to the control group in 11 of the 19 competency objectives tested in the different subjects. In two of these competency objectives they attained equal scores, while in 6 the group not being taught through the competency approach actually performed better than those who were. A team of inspectors and pedagogic advisers analysed the latter results together with the authors of the report, noting that among the reasons to explain the anomaly - given the overall stronger performance of the BC schools - was the fact that some of the sample of students had not been exposed to the competency approach in the most efficient manner, due to the limited training that their teachers had received (Khablachi & Murayi, 2003: 15).

Qualitative data, while largely based on impressions, tends to support the positive claims made for the competency approach in relation to improved learning by the quantitative studies referred to above. The teachers interviewed during both field visits generally agreed that BC did have an influence on achievement. Some acknowledged this grudgingly, saying that the BC approach required much more work from them than methods they had used in the past, but that whatever one said about it, competency-based learning was, in their experience, undoubtedly more effective in attaining results. Teachers generally felt that the approach was more «scientific» in its processes, and that its focus on the identification of errors, as well as the sources of those errors, ensured that remediation was focused, and ultimately more effective.

One discordant but important voice needs to be highlighted, however. A number of teachers, and some heads and inspectors, noted that the fact that formal assessment (as opposed to continuous assessment) was now being carried out at the end of a biennial cycle, led to a situation whereby pupils were being promoted to the second year of each cycle without necessarily having obtained the foundational competencies on which to build subsequent learning. In this sense, therefore, the reforms associated with the BC approach - though obviously not the approach itself - could be leading some students to fall through the net as they move up, perhaps rather too automatically, from one year to the next.

Even more importantly, given the claims made on behalf of the BC programme, the enormous investment that the Tunisian government and donors have made in it, and the fact that so many hopes have been pinned onto it, several key officials in the Ministry argued that it has now become necessary to have a full-blown evaluation of the impact of the BC approach on levels of learning achievement, a task which promises to be complex as the comparative dimension with non-BC schools is no longer possible given that competency teaching has now become generalised.

Changes in pedagogy

Over and above the structured pedagogic changes that the BC approach entails - in the sense that the focus shifts to competences that must be contextualized in meaningful situations that connect with the students' everyday lives, as described in earlier sections of this paper - the training that the introduction of the Programme brought with it led to other interesting pedagogical developments. The approach favours action-based learning, student-centred forms of teaching, peer tutoring, group work (with groups formed according to level or task), and learning contracts (where teacher and pupil reach an agreement regarding specific work tasks that have to be accomplished by a set date).

A thorough evaluation exercise, reporting on observations of the BC approach implemented in several classrooms during the piloting phase, noted that in the best of cases, and in contrast to the traditional teaching observed in non-BC schools, pupils had more opportunities to express themselves, were more participative, active, and productive; lessons were more holistic and integrated in nature, and there was a sense of dynamism and motivation with learning deeply rooted in situations that were meaningful for the pupils (Altet & Develay, 1999: 16-17). Another evaluation, already referred to earlier, and based on a questionnaire survey with 420 inspectors in charge of the monitoring and support of teachers in the first cycle of the primary school (Ministère de l'Éducation et de Formation, 2003d), noted that while there was still a lot of room for improvement - particularly in the use of group work - inspectors found practices in a number of pedagogical areas acceptable, satisfactory, and even very satisfactory at times, in relation to the kinds of methods of teaching they were used to observing prior to the introduction of the BC approach ⁽⁶⁾. Scores indicate that 92 per cent of teachers were deemed by inspectors to be quite capable of developing teaching situations which connected with the pupils' frameworks of relevance, and to which competences could be applied; 71.9 per cent had demonstrated the skills required to organise learning sequences around pupil activities, and 86.5 per cent actively encouraged student participation in the lessons.

Significantly, the report attributes such positive pedagogical practices to the training that accompanied the introduction and generalisation of BC programme - though of course, it would only be fair to add that causal judgements as to what changes practices in such a complex area as teaching need to be made with a great deal of caution and prudence. It also does not mean, of course, that prior to the introduction of the BC approach, the kinds of pedagogical practices observed and lauded by the inspectors in their report were totally absent. As several seasoned teachers and some inspectors and ministry officials pointed out, the repertoire of teaching methods associated with competency approaches echoed those that had been vaunted in earlier times by partisans of Freinet for instance, or of la méthode globale and other pedagogic trends and fashions that accompanied the wave of change that marked the 1960's in Europe and the United States, from where they were consequently exported across the globe. Indeed, the best teachers did not experience the introduction of the competency approach as a rupture, but as continuity with the past, inscribed as it was in a particular approach to teaching and learning that had a long lineage in modern pedagogy. Most did note, however, that the renewed emphasis on differentiated teaching did nevertheless oblige them to adopt new teaching styles rather more frequently. The previous emphasis on summative assessment had generally led to a teaching style that was frontal and collective in nature. It concerned few pupils, usually those who were already achieving. With the focus now being on differentiated remediation, teachers felt that they were being pushed to expand their repertoire of skills in order to take the specificity of the individual pupils into account.

Teachers reported that they were innovating, with some of them running ahead of the 'centre', feeling the need for - and introducing - pupil profiles before they were instructed to do so. Others were turning some of these experiments into action-research projects. A case in point was the teacher who developed an 'auto-evaluation form' for pupils, with exercises on one side of the page, and the correct answers on the other, in order to get the pupils to practice and develop in the area where they had weaknesses - a useful strategy in that it leads pupils to develop meta-cognitive skills, learning to identify and reflect on their own approach to learning. Other prompters for innovation frequently mentioned by teachers included the need to find meaningful and significant situations through which they could teach competences, including excursions, visits to institutions, correspondence with students from other regions or countries, and so on. During the second field visit in particular, by which time the BC approach had become well-established in the schools that had been involved in piloting it, teachers were using puppets, models, and a whole range of visual aids, often home-made by the pupils themselves. One teacher had transformed his classroom into an Ali Baba cavern of home-made pedagogical delights, creating a cosy and **educationally vibrant environment, with colourful masks**, nature corners, carpeted reading space, cushions, a rabbit pen, an aquarium, papier-mâché sculptures, traditional **shadow puppets**, and an **ingenious** use of old mobile phone cases, one for each desk, and which the teacher had wired up to a bell and a light that would ring and flash when pupils needed his assistance!

It is important to point out the distinction drawn by some of the teachers themselves when referring to the pedagogy they used prior to their involvement with the BC programme. Teachers noted that while before they did use different pedagogic styles (such as language games, for instance, or the production of radio programmes or

(6) Inspectors were asked to rate different criteria on a five-point scale, i.e. very unsatisfactory, unsatisfactory, acceptable, satisfactory, and very satisfactory. It should be constantly kept in mind that one cannot think of the teaching corps as a unified body: as one director usefully pointed out, one should distinguish between three groups of teachers in terms of their ability to implement the BC approach, i.e. (a) those who had been involved in piloting BC from the very start, (b) those who had received a great deal of training in the interim period between piloting and going to scale, and (c) those who had just starting using the approach.

newsletters), they tended to do so rather more for recreational than pedagogic reasons. Now they were using those same methods and others within the context of a specific methodology, which they thought more meaningful and powerful. Innovative strategies were therefore not one-off initiatives, but tended to be connected to a global approach which provided teachers with a specific philosophy, a network of concepts, and an agreed-upon vocabulary that permitted both individual and collective reflection.

Situations that had previously been considered pedagogically challenging were now being handled differently. A case in point concerned those classes which, given the small population of the school, had pupils of different age groups. While these multi-grade classes had not been targeted by the BC programme during the experimental phase, teachers took the initiative of introducing peer-tutoring which they saw practiced in BC classrooms, and which they found particularly appropriate in their context.

Such examples of excellent practice stimulated by the BC approach are highly significant because they demonstrate that the innovation did not just have an impact on the superficial aspects of teaching and learning. Indeed, it is a well established fact that most educational innovations are more likely to have an impact on the discursive practices of teachers, rather than on their pedagogical practices. In other words, it is easier for teachers to change the way they talk about their work, rather than the way they work - though even talking different about pedagogy could, in the long run, have a real effect on practices. The going-to-scale phase of any pedagogic project, merely by virtue of the fact that many more teachers become involved, necessarily entails risks of this nature, i.e. that the less competent, the less experienced, or the less dedicated teachers change their pedagogical vocabulary in order not to stand out in the monitoring process, but remain attached to old ways of doing things in the privacy of their classroom. Indeed, during the second field visit to Tunisia, it became clear that while many of those involved in the piloting phase of the BC approach had integrated a great deal of the pedagogical repertoire that went along with it, the newcomers to the approach were tending to use it rather more for the purposes of evaluation and diagnosis of errors, rather than to modify their methods of teaching. Others were persuaded that the BC approach was appropriate for some of the subjects in the curriculum - particularly languages and the arts - but not for others. Yet others remained sceptical, arguing that fashions in teaching and learning come and go, and that the methods they had used in the past had worked just as well. «We produced doctors with those methods, didn't we?!» exclaimed one, in justification of his cool attitude towards BC.

Development of an ethos that favours positive discrimination

A number of UNICEF personnel noted the way the BC approach had facilitated the development of an ethos in favour of positive discrimination in Tunisia, and that such an ethos had, generally speaking, found fertile ground both at the policy-making levels and at the grass roots. The idea of making an option in favour of the least achieving students, as well as in favour of the least well-off communities in the rural and interior regions of Tunisia, was of course reinforced by the BC concern with identifying pupils with learning difficulties, with a view to understanding what was causing it and to coming up with a strategy for remediation. The preoccupation with continuous assessment led teachers to become more aware of learning outcomes, and of the different patterns of achievement between different students, classrooms, and schools. They also became much more aware of the extent and nature of grade repetition, and of the drop-out phenomenon, while at the same time having at their disposal the tools and skills not only to quantify the problem, but also to address it.

As one regional director noted with a great deal of satisfaction, the awareness and training that the BC programme had brought with it had made a major contribution to the development of quality teaching in rural and «failing» schools, and had created new incentives for good teachers to remain in those schools rather than asking for a transfer to the more attractive coastal areas. Frequent turnover of staff is, needless to say, still a problem. However, the fact that some of these rural teachers had been offered opportunities for professional development, both within Tunisia and elsewhere (through study visits in Belgium, for instance), had contributed to a feeling of pride in what was being achieved.

The ethos favouring equity also led to the adoption of the idea of Educational Priority Areas, and the identification of such zones according to a list of indicators that included low achievement in examination sessions, as well as repetition and drop-out rates. A total of 696 primary schools and 104 intermediate schools have been considered as falling within the parameters of the EPA project (Ministère de l'Éducation, 2000c).

PART FIVE: CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING THE BASIC COMPETENCY APPROACH

As with other complex innovations, educational success can only be partial, and failure to recognise the limitations of any endeavour leads to a one-dimensional portrayal of a process, closer to fiction than to documentation. **The following sections highlight some of** the main challenges encountered in the implementation of the Basic Competency approach, in order to give a better sense of the complex dynamics that change involves. Moreover, the fact that the field was visited twice, with a three-and-a-half year interval in-between, **allows for** a diachronic account which captures the difficulties both of the piloting stage, and those that arose during the going-to-scale stage. The description of these challenges and difficulties should not in any way detract from the considerable achievements of the BC programme. **Rather**, it should help the reader appreciate and value better those achievements, chalked up in the face of what have often been adversarial conditions.

Difficulty of the Basic Competency approach

It must be stated immediately that the BC approach was found to be rather technical and complex by a good number of the interviewees involved in the present study, with some concepts considered to be quite abstract and difficult to grasp. Some of those involved in training in the BC approach noted, for instance, that the programme was not easy to describe, while others referred to it as «heavy», and even «pedantic», having too much terminology and «slogans», as they put it. Some declared themselves confused, at least at the start. «The basic competency approach reminds me of a spider web», said one of the teachers interviewed; «it's integrated into a whole, beautiful, but difficult to master: you need to be really clever to put it into place». Others seemed to be nonplussed by the rather detailed and technical approach to teaching, when they had been used to what could be termed a more «Mediterranean» orientation to teaching, which conceived pedagogy as an «art» or a «craft», rather than a science.

It is erroneous to think that the BC approach can only be mastered by an élite of highly intelligent teachers: that it is in the grasp of all is certain. However, it is important to keep in mind the very real limitations of teachers involved in both the piloting and generalisation stages. In the first instance, teachers in primary schools in Tunisia receive their initial training in university level institutes, where they follow a two-year course. In contrast, in Europe teachers receive their education in universities, but their training lasts between three or four years. Moreover, an interview with the director and staff of a training college revealed that the BC approach is taught through a few modules in the pre-service course they offer, rather than permeating the programme of study in such a way that teachers experience it, rather than learn about it. Certainly, Tunisian primary level teachers have plenty of opportunities for in-service training, and such training, offered by the Higher Institute of Education and Training, can even lead to a degree. But the general educational background of several teachers remains low - in El-Kef, for instance, more than one third of teachers only had the Baccalauréat level or equivalent when the BC approach was being piloted, and this in itself did raise cause some concerns, given the complexity of some of the concepts (De Ketele, 2000: 7). The situation in the remote and deprived regions of Tunisia further complicates the «teacher factor» in the implementation of innovations such as the BC approach: in addition to a deficit in formal training and education, there tends to be a deficit in experience, given the tendency for younger staff to start their career in less attractive rural areas. Contrary to received wisdom and common sense assumptions, younger teachers are often less ready to be innovative in their approach to teaching, with a lack of professional self-confidence leading them to stick to the traditional methods they had been exposed to during their long apprenticeship by observation as pupils on the other side of the teacher's desk (Lortie, 1975).

As a result, it was not uncommon to hear inspectors make comments about teachers - particularly those who had not benefited from extended training in the generalisation stage - observing that they tended to apply the approach in a rather mechanistic manner, as if «painting by numbers», hence risking the banalisation of the whole

approach. As one director put it, some schools and teachers expected inspectors to whip out their «valise James Bond» and to use the «gadgets» of the competency programme to solve any and every problem that they were encountering. Others were observed preparing lesson plans and registers in rather uniform ways, rigidly reproducing models that had been used during in-service training sessions. Of course, some of these difficulties can be attributed to the kind of context Tunisian teachers are working in, and to the lack of adequate pedagogic material and support, as will be noted further on. Nevertheless, it would seem that a good number of difficulties are also related to the technicality of the approach itself, with weak or inexperienced or unconvinced teachers failing to wholly absorb the competency approach, and to integrate it as an intrinsic part of their personalised repertoire as a teacher. «It is difficult to expect all teachers, who have been used to an almost militaristic regime in teaching, to suddenly be able to perform pirouettes and other complex moves that only the expert ballerina can be expected to accomplish!», exclaimed one Ministry official ruefully.

In other words, the BC approach is more likely to flourish when there is a cadre of well-educated, thoroughly trained, and experienced teachers - hardly an unexpected conclusion, given that the approach requires teachers to engage in a number of higher-order professional activities, including the identification of the components of instruction, the development of assessment strategies so that individual students are appropriately placed in the instructional continuum, and the provision of appropriate and individualised reinforcement and corrective feedback - while continuously engaging all the students in the class in lessons. These are highly developed skills, and it is not surprising that in a thorough and largely positive evaluation report, the point was made that in a significant number of cases in the piloting stage, teachers were encountering some difficulty in understanding and applying some of the concepts, particularly those referring to integrated learning (Altet & Develay, 1999: 15). Diagnostic testing too was found by a good number of teachers to be difficult and demanding, not only in terms of time, but also in terms of the knowledge and skills that were required to exploit the results in a meaningful manner. The most recent evaluation, based on observations made by inspectors (Ministère de l'Éducation et de Formation, 2003d: 12), also notes that teachers are still performing at lower than expected levels of competence when it comes to providing differentiated feedback to students, and to encouraging and supporting autonomous learning.

Given these and other considerations - some of which have already been covered in previous sections in this study - the Ministry was wise enough to engage in a serious attempt at modifying aspects of BC, and to adapt rather than merely adopt the approach. Other than providing adequate support for teachers, so as to ensure better understanding of the concepts behind competency approaches - including, for instance, the use of glossaries and teacher manuals, as well as the provision of model lesson plans - the Ministry gradually reduced the rather excessive use of criteria-based evaluation and the formal and recorded testing of levels of mastery of individual competencies, relying on more generic continuous assessment that could more easily be handled by the average Tunisian teacher, given his or her training background.

Such efforts seem to be paying off. Generally speaking, inspectors seem to be quite satisfied with the theoretical grasp, on the part of the teachers they are responsible for, of the BC concepts and approach, with the relevant scores in the survey referred to earlier (Ministère de l'Éducation et de Formation, 2003d: 14) reaching 85.7 per cent to 92.6 per cent, depending on the specific concepts being referred to. The inspectors collectively expressed less satisfaction in terms of the teachers' understanding and practice of differentiated teaching.

The process and pace of change

Another set of difficulties arose from the implementation of the BC programme as well as from the process of change. While generally speaking the BC approach had been accorded a good reception all round, the «going-to-scale» phase was experienced by some as happening rather too fast. Some inspectors in El-Kef, for instance, felt that one should wait for more signs of conviction on the part of teachers before more schools, classrooms and subjects were integrated in the project. Other inspectors felt that too many stages of the project were happening at the same time with some of them, for instance, undergoing professional development in the BC approach at the same time as they had to train teachers.

By 2003, many interviewees were also expressing concern that not only was the pace of BC implementation fast, but that it was accompanied by too many other changes and reforms, some of them being a natural offshoot of the logic and educational innovation stimulated by the BC programme, while others were heralded in by the new Education Act of 23rd July 2002. Indeed, other than the BC approach (though often related to it), teachers, heads, and inspectors - not to mention Ministry officials - had, over a period of a few years, to deal with the introduction of such initiatives as pedagogic councils, school councils, school improvement projects, educational priority areas and schools, community schools, pre-school classes for five year-olds, increased parental involvement, English language clubs, learning-by-doing approaches (the main à la pâte project), the introduction and use of new media and communications technology, both within and across the curriculum, and, most recently, the mandated integration of students with special needs in the mainstream. All this in the context of changing curricula and revised textbooks, and changing roles and increased responsibilities due to decentralisation, with the Education Act describing schools as «self-sustained pedagogic structures» (Article 6). Of course, not all these initiatives have been experienced as an additional burden by the primary school teachers in Tunisia, but several of those interviewed, while recognising the value of the different projects, did express concern at their own capacity and that of the school as a whole to implement so many initiatives, linked to each other though they were.

On the other hand, it must also be said that, as noted earlier, the BC programme has, in many ways, challenged the very foundations on which Tunisian education is built, and is not a mere superficial addition, allowing school and classroom practices to go on as usual. While there had been other innovations and initiatives which challenged the traditional paradigm in teaching, learning and assessing, the BC approach and its proponents, as we have seen, have not been content with merely tinkering with the system. Rather, the BC programme has promoted a paradigm shift, conveying with it a dynamic of change, underpinned by a coherent and persuasive educational philosophy.

In such a reform-oriented environment, one initiative necessarily triggers off - and indeed often demands - another, so that, for instance, the careful monitoring of learning achievement, and the diagnostic remediation that it entails, also require closer collaboration between teachers and a heightened degree of parental involvement, hence the need for pedagogic councils as well as of school councils. Indeed, when, due to the lack of resources, or due to the lack of administrative capacity of the system to sustain thorough-going reform, only limited aspects of an initiative are implemented, a situation arises which, in itself can be as hazardous to the reform process as having too many innovations being implemented at the same time.

This is why, as we have seen earlier, the piloting phase of the BC approach created a number of concerns for teachers, who found themselves pulled into two different and contradictory directions. Teachers pioneering competency learning were applying the BC programme in a limited number of subjects, and using the old curriculum for the rest of the teaching areas. In addition to that, up to quite recently, they had to use two sets of evaluative instruments: the ones linked to the official programme of study, and those linked to the diagnostic testing required by the BC reform team. The official teachers' guide to the curriculum also promoted a pedagogical approach that was inimical to the key tenets of the BC spirit. Indeed, inspectors interviewed in the piloting phase of the initiative had noted that the co-existence of two paradigms was leading some teachers to resist the BC project, and to a damaging perception that it was marginal to the «real task». Teachers were also experiencing more than their fair share of pressure, since they felt that they had to meet the expectations of parents within the context of the old approach. Parents for instance wanted teachers to give them feedback on how their child was achieving in comparison to classmates, while the BC approach's concern is with progress achieved by each pupil on his or her own terms, and with reference to specific competences. Such dual and conflicting expectations were also experienced when inspectors or pedagogic advisers criticized teachers for straying away from the official curriculum, which they often felt the need to do given the nature of the BC approach.

The field visit carried out during the generalisation phase showed that the concerns about contradictions that led teachers and inspectors to talk about a «schizophrenic» existence had been dealt with, given that several of the components of the overall educational system were being reformed in a way that each was congruous with the other. While this is of course necessary and undoubtedly salutary, the reaction noted earlier in this section that a good number of actors in the field felt that there was simply too much change going on at the same time reminds

us how difficult it is to get things just right in the reform process, and how important it is to strike a balance between doing too much or too little. Indeed, this challenge is even more complex when one considers education beyond the basic education horizon. During interviews with inspectors and senior regional officials, it became clear that news that the competency approach being piloted in the collège and lycée levels was being resisted greatly perturbed them, since they felt that unless the logic of the Baccalauréat changed to mirror and support the BC approach, the latter could never attain central legitimacy and status, given the propensity for the examination tail to wag the education dog. As one director aptly put it, «pour réussir l'approche par compétences, il faut tenir plusieurs taureaux par les cornes!»

Overburdening of teachers

Directly linked to the concerns about the process and pace of change are issues related to the way such changes are perceived by teachers, who, after all, are the front line troops who have the responsibility - and the burden - of transforming concepts and ideas into practice in the crucible of the classroom. Even those teachers who exhibited enthusiasm for the BC approach, nevertheless also noted that it made a great many demands on them. In real terms, the BC approach requires teachers to:

- evaluate which competences have been mastered by each individual student in the class, since it is on the basis of that that the new competences must be learnt;
- engage in error analysis, to identify and diagnose patterns and classify them according to types, to come up with a hypothesis accounting for these errors, to test that hypothesis, and to plan remedial strategies accordingly;
- follow schemes establishing the basic competences as well as the final integrated learning objectives for each two-year cycle;
- plan meaningful learning situations which enable pupils to learn competences through their application to problem-solving contexts;
- develop meaningful evaluative situations, particularly with reference to the final integrated learning objectives;
- monitor progress in the learning of competences, keeping track of each student from semester to the next, from one year to the other, and from cycle to cycle;
- use a variety of activity-based teaching strategies, including role play, drama, creative self-expression, and so on;
- engage differentiated pedagogy, in order to respond effectively to the various needs of individuals and groups through ability-based group work, peer tutoring, and learning contracts, among others;
- keep a record of one's teaching, in a way that the link between that and the official curriculum as well as the basic competences to be mastered is visible and clear;
- regularly engage in critical reflection and self-evaluation, in response to a set of questions that identify the different aspects of the Basic Competency approach.

When one takes into account the lack of pedagogic resources, the somewhat crowded classrooms and «Spartan» environments, the fact that, in the initial stages, the new approach had to be piloted with the old curriculum still in place - one cannot help but be impressed by the professional commitment to pupils on the part of Tunisian teachers, who patiently bore ever increasing demands in the most trying of circumstances. One director who had gone on a familiarisation visit to Quebec to see the way the BC programme was working out there mentioned, in a side comment at a meeting of high officials, that Tunisian teachers were being asked to do five times as much as their Canadian counterparts, in contexts which were significantly less favourable; this probably to some extent explains the muted co-operation on the part of the teachers' trade union. Teachers noted that the BC approach required more work from them, and that this had not been compensated by an increase in wages. Several expressed their dissatisfaction with their standard of living, with one of them articulating powerfully what others

hinted at: «We are like stairs», he said. «Society uses us to climb up, but we remain where we are. And when some climb up, they then look down on us!» Many were supplementing their income through giving private tuition, which means that not only were spare capacities being reserved for after-school hours, but also that the exam-oriented culture was reinforced at the detriment of the BC approach.

Teachers in the rural areas in particular also led an everyday existence marked by indigence and boredom: they had nowhere much to go to for recreational and leisure purposes, and in some cases could not even watch TV since they did not have access to a regular supply of electricity. Often the school seemed to function as a social club for teachers, both in the urban and especially in the rural regions, particularly given that, with the implementation of the notion of the community school, the premises remained open late into the evening. In a number of cases, however, it became clear that young male teachers were hankering to be transferred to the more attractive social conditions prevalent in coastal towns and cities. But elsewhere too the teaching corps, though often exemplary in its commitment, appeared somewhat depressed and unenthusiastic about the lot of its profession. It is revealing when, in the course of both field visits, teachers were asked whether they would be happy to have their own sons and daughters themselves become teachers in turn, the answer, accompanied by a wry smile, was invariably «Never!»

Lack of adequate support

The increase in work that the BC approach represented was made more difficult to bear because teachers did not receive the support that they needed and hoped for, even if, in some cases, there was a marked difference between the resources made available during the piloting phase and the going-to-scale phase. Teachers expressed the need for different kinds of support. Reference has already been made to the incompatibility between the BC approach and crowded classrooms, where the ratio of teacher to pupil was, in most cases in 2000, 1:30 - though efforts are being made to deal with this, with a dropping birth rate helping the Ministry attain its goal of 25 pupils per class. Indeed, teachers attributed lower numbers in their classrooms to the requirements of the BC programme, and were grateful for that ⁽⁷⁾. Heavy and fixed furniture was also rightly deemed to be inappropriate by teachers, who preferred to have movable chairs and desks that were more conducive to interactive and group learning. By 2003, the Ministry had opted for the introduction of new furniture in schools, and some schools were in the process of replacing benches with individual chairs and tables for each pupil. The pedagogic methods that BC favours, including the departure of instruction from meaningful situations linked to the everyday life of pupils, requires pictures, flashcards, posters, and so on. While some teachers roped in pupils to help them in preparing this - a strategy that was encouraged by inspectors and pedagogic advisers - others noted that they had to prepare everything themselves, with some claiming that they spent as much as two hours or more every evening producing the different materials, including the worksheets and the exercises. Much of this material could not be used again over the years, both because teachers move around from class to class and from school to school, and because the BC approach emphasizes the very specific needs of individuals, with pedagogic material being tailor made in response to that.

It is for the latter reason in particular that most teachers and heads of schools highlighted the fact that the most useful single piece of equipment they had was a photocopier, which they felt was an essential item, and not a luxury. Indeed, in response to such a need, UNICEF donated photocopiers to the 80 schools it collaborated with in El Kef and Kasserine. 1200 schools have also been similarly equipped by the Ministry of Education in 2002 and 2003, and this investment will be extended to other schools over the next few years. Heads and teachers seemed lost when, particularly in the rural areas, a machine broke down and nobody could be found to fix it. In some cases, teachers ended up buying material with their own money, to the point that it was no longer possible for them to continue doing so. Neither was the transfer of some of these costs onto parents acceptable in a context where many families were indigent.

Such issues have been addressed somewhat during the generalisation phase: a range of teaching and remedial aids have been produced by the Ministry with UNICEF support; model work cards - the *fichiers-classes* - have also

been developed and distributed in most schools, in order to help teachers support the diagnostic remediation of the most common errors that pupils tend to make in different subjects. Schools have also been provided with a carnet d'évaluation et de suivi - which structures the monitoring and evaluation process of each student, in collaboration with parents. As already noted, Kifayat - an attractive and very useful professional magazine, wholly dedicated to helping teachers implement the BC approach, and providing a forum for exchange of experiences between teachers - is being published on a regular basis by the CNIPRE with the support of UNICEF. The Ministry has also a website dedicated to the BC approach, which presently receives around 4000 hits a month. Overall, however, the impression remains that the level of support provided to schools falls well below the needs of teachers, in their attempt to implement the BC and other, related reforms. Additionally, the perception of some teachers is that such resources as there are have not been distributed equally among schools in the different regions, with those in Tunis and some other urban centres having more than their fair share in comparison to others, despite the policy of positive discrimination in favour of the more economically depressed communities. Comments to this effect were made with to the distribution of the fichiers-classes, for instance - though some also noted that the teacher-to-student ratio was also more advantageous in some governorates than in others, thus facilitating the successful adoption of the BC approach.

Another form of support that teachers interviewed declared they needed was possibly specific to the rural regions the present study largely focused on. Teachers noted that many of their pupils needed social assistance, and that given the nature of the social problems they had to cope with, the success of the BC approach was limited. Many children came from families where the father had to go and look for work elsewhere, mainly in the coastal and tourist towns and cities of Tunisia. High unemployment led to the usual social problems. There were not only financial difficulties in El-Kef and Kasserine, for instance, but there was also no organized support from the community to help in the educational formation of children. As one teacher noted, «Here it is the school, and the school alone. There are no associations that can complement what we are trying to do... BC is good, but it cannot do miracles, since some of the limitations are not pedagogic in nature: you cannot teach a child whose mind is elsewhere, because his father lives abroad, for instance and he does not see him more than for a few days in the year». Teachers therefore felt that realities such as these needed to be taken into account, with one suggesting that a sort of telephone help line be set up for teachers encountering difficulties.

CONCLUSION

The difficulties outlined above are not intractable. They are real, though some of them are specific to the governorates that this study focused on, and might not be shared to the same extent by other regions in Tunisia. Also, such challenges do not detract from the impressive achievements of the Basic Competences project, which has been such an important catalyst for change at so many different levels, and which has undeniably had such a positive impact on the different actors in the educational field. There seems to be a strong basis for the project to impact in a most fundamental manner on the way teaching, learning, and evaluation are carried out in the country, and to serve as an example of good practice in the region, and beyond.

What might be worthwhile keeping in mind are not only the challenges and difficulties that need to be addressed, but also the fact that no educational innovation, however successful, should be considered to be a panacea for all the complex problems facing educators at the start of the new millennium. Competency-based teaching, together with other methods based on mastery learning, were developed in the 1970's and 1980's, and applied with a greater or lesser degree of success within a good number of education systems internationally. That such an approach is still meaningful today, when educational trends and fashions come and go at what sometimes seems to be an alarming pace (Cuban, 1990; Marsh, 1997), speaks volumes about its capacity to respond to some of the most searching questions and challenges that Tunisian educators are facing. Other approaches can be drawn upon to buttress and reinforce the achievements made through the BC programme.

(7) The average number of students per class varies according to the Grades, with the lowest being 24.4 for Grade 1, and the highest 28.4 for Grade 3 (Ministry of Education and Training, 2003a).

What is certain is that careful attention to the key components of the Basic Competences approach - such as the rooting of learning in meaningful situations, the idea of focusing on what pupils should learn rather than what teachers should teach, the facilitation of cognitive growth through engagement in problem-solving contexts, the central notions of individualized and differentiated learning, and equally individualized and differentiated formative remediation - allow educators at all levels to make great strides toward the goal of all children learning excellently. It is ideas and practices such as these that will go a long way in ensuring that all children, whatever their background, have access to their entitlement: a quality education that equips them to lead a life marked by dignity.

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Compétence ?

Khadija Mouelhi

Les concepts :

- On veut installer les compétences
Au détriment d'utiles connaissances.
- Eh! Compétence, tu veux prendre nos places?
Nous sommes nombreux, venez nous faire face

Compétence :

- Ah! Non.
Vous vivez dans les répétitions
Et moi je vis dans l'innovation.

Les savoirs :

- Nous sommes là pour remplir les têtes
Pour affronter les problèmes sans défaite.

Compétence :

- Je suis au-delà de l'assimilation
Des savoirs s'arrêtant aux répétitions
Je fais de telle sorte pour m'appuyer sur vous
Mais je ne peux pas me réduire à chacun de vous.

Les schèmes :

- Il nous semble que vous nous ignorez
Nous sommes flexibles, non compliqués

Compétence :

- C'est vrai!
On me compare au différents schèmes
On risque d'être dans un dilemme.
J'appelle ceux d'intelligence et d'action
Je constitue de nombreuses dispositions;
Ce qui me permettra de mobiliser
Des connaissances dans des situations déterminées
La situation est mon terrain de jeu
C'est évidemment là où se trouve l'enjeu.

Khadija Mouelhi (2003) Un Cœur pour un cœur. Tunisia

