The Politics of Teacher Competence

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Nothing has brought pedagogical theory into greater disrepute than the belief that it is identified with handing out teachers recipes and models to be followed in teaching. (Dewey 1916, p.199)

In this paper we seek to identify ways in which 'teacher competency' statements are used in various current political settings. We further seek to indicate how one formulation may meet the requirements for satisfactory statements of competence and/or competencies but which may not meet the needs of all users. The paper will argue that the discourse of competence in teacher education has been resurrected and promoted by nation states as a means of governance in the context of the global economy as well as for stated purposes such as 'improving children's learning'. The paper begins by making reference to the re-emergence of the debate about competence in teacher education. Next it explains globalisation as a mechanism within which government legitimation through education is contested. Questions are then raised about the ways in which competencies in education might facilitate the purposes of international capital under current managerialist notions of 'quality'. The conclusion is that the meaning of competencies is in their use which sets the various criteria for acceptability in different political settings.

The rise of competencies

With reference to Dewey's observation above, the debate over competencies is not new. Teacher competency standards appeared in education in relation to a form of payment by results last century and in the early part of this century (see Tuck 1995), and as behavioural objectives in the 1960s, with problematic results. According to Louden (1992, p.3), the current movement towards competency standards in teaching promises to bring together two parallel programs of reform: school improvement and skills formation. The first of these, school improvement, has a history as long as the history of schooling itself. The second, skills formation, is an international economic formulation which is designed to:

build an economy which will be internationally competitive into the next century the solution to which is a national standards system . . . that . . . should lead to an effective, efficient, responsible and coherent national vocational education and training system (Louden 1992, p.3).

Louden (1992, p.3) notes that skills formation and school improvement are connected through attention to performance.

According to Knight and McWilliam (1995), 'in Australia, policy makers are attempting to define teachers' working knowledge in terms of competencies which will form the foundation of award restructuring both for teachers' careers and for their students in industry'. There is an initiative of a National Commission in the United States to draw up national standards (see Darling-Hammond 1996). Wise and Liebbrand (1996) also report
that in the United States the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) has recently revised its standards to incorporate new knowledge and practice, emphasising performance, new forms of assessment, collaboration with the schools, technology, and diversity in the context of continuous program evaluation. Ambach (1996) also reports from the United States that the Interstate New Teachers Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), created in 1987 as a programme of the Chief State School Officers, is currently engaged in a multistate effort to craft model licensing standards for teachers that reflect the intent of the standards for students. INSTAC’s primary constituency is state education agencies, including state departments of education and independent school boards responsible for teacher preparation and licensing. Currently thirty-six states and a range of major education agencies are actively involved in the INSTAC projects. The recently established Teacher Training Agency (TTA) in the United Kingdom has its purpose to raise the standards of teacher education and teaching and promote teaching as a profession. According to Bridges (1996), the TTA has:

set out an agenda for continuing professional development of teachers which is expressed entirely in terms of national standards articulated as competencies to be demonstrated in the workplace (p.362).

To this end the TTA have promulgated for public consultation a detailed list of competencies in a form reminiscent of behavioural objectives.

There is a notable difference between the United Kingdom and the United States in relation to thinking about teacher competency. The United States seems to be pursuing a path that, in contrast with the generic approach of the United Kingdom, emphasises subject specialist schemes. New Zealand, under its National Qualifications Framework (NQF), has developed QUALSET: Qualifications Standards for Education in Teaching (Gibbs & Munro 1994) which are derived from a functional analysis of the work of teachers.

Although competence is important and necessary, many writers argue that competency statements may be insufficient to capture the value-laden, contestable, unpredictable, complex, and dynamic performance that characterises effective teaching. In particular, competency statements do not recognise the tacit knowledge of those performing or of those judging the performance. Further, they are inadequate to achieve the agreement in judgment required to achieve their various purposes.

At various times, atomistic lists of competencies have been applied from other disciplines (for example, economics and management) to education as a set of decontextualised desiderata. There is currently little support in the literature for that type of application to education. There is considerable support for the professional rather than technicist approach which takes a much broader view of competence, eschews reductionist ideas, includes the wider issues of commitment and self-regulation, and emphasises reflection, cognition, morality and autonomy. What each of these notions means however, is a matter of creative contest. For example, although Shulman’s (1987) work is widely accepted as central to discussions about competency in teaching, his notion of reflection has been discounted as a contextual and uncritical by those writers calling for a more reflexive professional teacher-education process focused on educational intent.

**Globalisation**

The imposition on teacher education of competencies that purport to be able to be measured against a standard are characterised in this paper as an attempt by governments to
reassure the population that their teachers are of a sufficient quality for the stated purpose. However, globalisation requires that governments seek to move education policy away from notions of equity towards economic considerations. This shift requires changes to economies and social life that involves political rhetoric including attacking what is not required and promoting what is. Under globalisation education has subsequently been reformed in many Western countries. Teachers are central to schools and would be required to change but there are dangers in attacking such professional groups upon which governments rely for their legitimation: teachers are vulnerable to political attack and unable to mount a damaging counter-attack. Instead of attacking teachers, a line more often adopted is to attack teacher education. This has several advantages: it is something that most people would agree could be improved; it is seen as valuable (like motherhood and apple pie); and the rhetoric about training teachers to a competent level increases the hope of an equitable future through ‘improved’ education.

Education rather than globalisation then becomes responsible for national economic performance—that is the essence of human capital theory—yet it is global neo-liberal practices that set the conditions for economic instability in many nation states. Neo-liberalism however, has been noted for its increasingly pernicious inequitable effects when, in the face of international competition, capital moves to other countries that provide human capital at less cost as well as other favourable economic inducements. That, of course, lowers local employment prospects and wages in the previous country (which incidentally, in the event that it happens and remains stable, makes that country once again competitive and attractive for international capital). The legitimacy of the government comes into question as it finds itself with less economic value to give to the people. The government is then faced with providing a credible myth to enable its legitimation. And according to Castells (1991, p.23), ‘when social systems experience a structural crisis as a result of historical events acting on their specific contradictions, they are compelled either to change their goals, or to change their means in order to overcome the crisis’. As a consequence, international capitalism was in structural crisis in the 1970s and was restructured. The restructuring continues:

The meeting of the Group of Seven industrialised nations (G7) together with the heads of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, United Nations and World Trade Organisation in Lyon, France in June 1996 was taken to symbolise the transfer of economic responsibility from national government to international agencies (Haynes 1997, p.44).

Under these conditions, nation states must structurally adjust their national economic capacities to a global economy within world markets where the nation and its people are said to have a place insofar as they have economic value. Nation states may no longer be seen as sovereign in economic matters, but servants of transnational corporations and agencies who set their agenda.

Governments under globalisation need to promote a new individual morality with flexible qualities that fit with enterprise culture and that is a matter for education. Flexibility is also required when capital comes ‘onshore’ and eventually leaves again (or perhaps lingers for a few minutes on the stock market). An individual who may work for a period of time and then becomes redundant requires flexibility as work disappears when capital relocates to a more profitable environment. For continued governmental legitimation, these practices of capital need to be made to seem legitimate. If workers accept—indeed even welcome—the chance to demonstrate their flexibility and view it as a virtue, the risks to
governments are diminished. Flexibility in individuals, attained through education, is now seen as an insurance against risk.

In terms of state security, subject positions that are ‘self-disciplined’ are required if, as is suggested by neo-liberal doctrine, as the state withdraws, it creates markets. If the neo-liberal reason of state is not convincing, the consequent subject positions may not be self-disciplined, that is, they may not be governable within that particular political rationality. This lack of discipline may defeat neo-liberalism that will then have failed to produce intelligible subject positions for individuals to inhabit. Under this questionable regime, individuals might not then value themselves as ‘human capital’ investment, ‘management subjects’, ‘entrepreneurs’ of themselves in their own enterprise of self-development, globally competitive and flexible individuals, in whatever economic condition next appears. That may reduce legitimation for the current political rationality and produce problems of governance.

Under the rationale of globalisation then, governments are involved in developing political rationalities within which individuals can govern themselves. The success of governance by individuals is dependent on their particular values and their integration with the prevailing discourse. The latest OECD (1997a) report on tertiary education in New Zealand for example, argues that the radical changes to the public and private sectors of the economy introduced over recent years in part in response to globalisation, will be ‘severe and disturbing to many established values and procedures’ (p.7). Another recent OECD (1997b) report on the internationalisation of higher education argues that ‘internationalism should be seen as a preparation for the twenty-first century capitalism (p.11)... and...’internationalisation [is] a means to improve the quality of education’ (p.8).

Internationalisation can be located as a component of globalisation. Globalisation however, causes unemployment in some states but the blame for this is attributed to poorly educated workers through statements made by the government and other prominent groups. This can be seen in the clamour about skills shortages where ‘skills’ is now a psychologised notion which locates the blame for economic problems within the individual. Governments are held responsible for education systems to control what they attribute to be the main cause of unemployment and low productivity—ineffective education. Governments and others support this view by pointing to studies showing a growing decline in literacy, numeracy and often, morality.

Since its inception last century, mass schooling had as one of its main aims to alleviate poverty through the enlightenment of the individual (thus providing that legitimation) and thereby reducing the risk of civil unrest and perhaps even revolution. As in the past, there is a real danger to society when a significant number of its youth become disengaged and thereby have little stake in the status quo. However, if education is seen to hold out hope of future prosperity, the youth will most likely continue to strive for that future. The ‘meritocratic’ myth (that is, of merit as the function of effort multiplied by the mysterious factor of ‘natural’ ability) has long been of value in legitimating education in this manner. Meritocratic theory is buttressed by competency statements but is now seen to operate in several unstable future careers for individuals.

**Meaning as use**

What use are competencies put to and by whom? Each role has a different frame of reference and criteria for assessment within these frames of reference. The sources for data for competency statements include: job descriptions empirical collections of views about what makes a good teacher; student-teachers’ opinions based on their experiences in
schools; political assertions; functional analyses; and deliberations about beliefs by
government officials. Each of these sources opens up the question of competing values.
Every 'fact' employed to promote or underpin a competency is chosen on the basis of a
prior value that led to the choice. The question then becomes whose values will emerge?
This suggests that a particular set of competencies is an answer to a political question and
its acceptance depends on whose definition dominates.

Halliday (1996) issued a challenge to those, who believe the competency revolution
might have something going for it, to ask themselves the following question: 'in what sort
of case and in what kind of circumstances do we use the terms 'competent' and
'competence' (p.47). We suggest that the terms are used for a myriad of purposes which
include flattery, recommendation, questioning, and description as well as the political
means to promote a narrow instrumental conception of vocational education.

Teacher education

Underlying much of the thinking about teacher competence is the assumption that pre-
service programmes should produce fully trained teachers for a wide range of school
circumstances. This is an idea that has appeal both to members of the profession and to
employers, but it is at odds with the expectations of graduates in other professions such as
medicine and law.

Generic competence statements may be used to reshape or reorder the curriculum of
teacher education by requiring general statements attesting to the competence of the
teacher under generic headings. Such statements may be descriptive, pass/fail or slightly
more differentiated in order to help rank order applicants for teaching positions. Specific
competency statements may be used to reshape or reorder the curriculum of teacher
education by requiring itemised statements of competencies passed and failed and
aggregated in some way to attest to the competence of the teacher.

There is a question for teacher educators as to whether, within a competency discourse,
concepts of teachers' professionalism can be maintained. When a neophyte teacher
educator is in a position of making a judgment, lists of competencies may be helpful but
normally, for an experienced teacher educator, they may only help in its justification. This is
not pernicious, as in many cases justification is required.

Governance

Generic competency statements can be employed to reassure the public as Floden and
Weiner have noted:

Evaluation may be seen as a ritual whose function is to calm the anxieties of
the citizenry and to perpetuate an image of governmental rationality,
efficacy, and accountability. The very act of requiring and commissioning
evaluations may create the impression that government is seriously
committed to the pursuit of publicly espoused goals, such as increasing
student achievement. Note that the ritual function is not a conspiracy of the
governing to deceive the governed. It is a ritual in which individuals at all
levels of governance participate in some way in order to bolster a common
Although the quote refers to evaluation of teachers, it could equally apply to the ways in which the competency discourse may function to reassure the public. That reassurance can be attained through judicious use of similar rituals around competencies which, if believed, will ‘bolster a common faith’.

Competency is associated with quality which, under neo-liberal discourse, is in the eye of the consumer. The mere public knowledge that competency in teacher education is intended to be increased will also allow education itself to be seen as improved, even before the legislation or policy changes have been instituted. Commissions of inquiry, government reports and public debates, function in this way. Once any changes are in place, then either the teachers are competent (true by definition as they passed the test) or else the teachers as individuals are to blame. Through these processes public confidence in the system can remain assured. But,

if competencies are essentially rooted in their cultural context...are defined by the kinds of tasks and attributes of those tasks which will be involved in their measurement...and are developed only through the application of discipline content in various contexts...they cannot be generic in anything like the universal sense envisaged by Finn and Mayer (Foster 1996, p.33).

Generic competence statements may serve some political purposes whereas other purposes may require specific competencies. Legitimation does not require competencies only competence, as it is concerned with product not process, that is, with having a competent teacher, not how to produce a competent teacher. The political control of the pre-service teacher education curriculum may use either or both¹. Teacher educators have often used generic competence statements (for example, can manage a class, can develop a curriculum for a class, has a professional attitude) and/or specific competency statements but may have problems with system-wide mandated competencies which would fit the Australian Standards Framework (or similar scheme) and which seek to be specific in their cultural context, measurement tasks and discipline content. This is particularly so if the competencies are drafted from a technicist point of view and designed to make the operation of the system more efficient and effective within official parameters.

Given that one political purpose of such competencies is to define what it is to be a competent teacher, rather than prior experience or certification, then the specification and nature of the competencies will differ from those that would serve other purposes. The evidence for such judgments of competence would be limited to a specified test situation that should in some sense be comparable for all candidates. It may be difficult to avoid a narrow or behaviourist approach to such testing even though Hager and Beckett (Foster 1996, p.33) argue otherwise. They say that competencies require that the valid assessment of attitudinal factors be assisted by longitudinal and multiple assessments that gather evidence of attitudes and values from a variety of sources. This may be difficult, however, for candidates presenting for the test on the basis of prior experience rather than experience of an educational course in which such assessments could be conducted. Further, the competency statements should be encompassing of the task and be clear as to whether the competencies specified in the items were necessary, sufficient or indicators. Given that certification as a competent teacher is usually not for a specified position but is a generic

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¹ Cf. the situation in England to get rid of Marxist sociology and ‘soft’ cooperative approaches in favour of individual, competitive, work-oriented, and ‘back-to-basics’ approaches in schools.
qualification then it may be difficult to justify competencies in necessary and/or sufficient terms.

Improving teaching–learning

As one of the political purposes is to ensure competent teachers in front of particular classrooms, then a set of competencies that may serve to identify competent teachers in a generic sense may not serve to reduce the number of incompetent teachers in classrooms. While generic competency statements can be used to identify those who are unlikely to be competent in most classrooms, this task is fairly readily achieved without such formal statements. These incompetent teachers are often employed (as is claimed to be the case in New Zealand at present) because there is no one else to fill the position. What such generic competency statements can be used for is to facilitate the justification of judgments about the competence of individuals and to help focus the attention of those learning to make such judgments. These purposes of competency statements form part of the political purpose of the legitimation of the certification of teacher competence.

Teacher work conditions

Another political purpose of teacher competencies and competency statements is to facilitate the restructuring of the workplace in schools. This not only means that statements have to be developed for teachers throughout their careers, not just beginning teachers, but it also implies some form of differentiation of the teaching task.

Current lists of competencies do not discriminate between success and failure in teaching; most of the statements could apply to most teachers without signifying much distinction. What then are the criteria by which one would judge competencies to be adequate for teaching?

Managers may also find value in competencies as performance indicators with which to involve staff in their own disciplinary governance. Brown (1996) for instance, argues that the liberal teacher-educator may view with alarm the opportunity for a coercive state to take control of this exercise, reduce the autonomy of the profession, rest approval of courses on their co-operation with the official competence schemes and require both assessment of student teachers and external accountability to be enacted within the framework. Here competence might be constructed as merely a technical activity devoid of politics, scientific knowledge, and lacking in an appreciation of ethical debate and aesthetics. One possibility as a result of these omissions, is that there would be a privileging of the primacy of technical practice within the teaching profession. Any questions other than limited technicist ‘practical’ ones would then be precluded. The conditions that create the possibility for critical evaluations would therefore be missing. That would reduce teaching to a non-profession but would still allow for the creation of the neo-liberal flexible workforce (geographically, politically, ethically and economically).

To legitimate the education system

Competencies as a policy issue have arisen in the broader political system for legitimate reasons. There are actual issues about the education system that politicians must address and competencies purport to do this. The issue then is, even if the idea of competencies were radically flawed intellectually, can they, in a non-destructive way, serve a political purpose? The real problem is that, if not properly thought out, competencies may threaten
the education system. The naive realist scientific project seeks competencies as 'real' entities that exist as universals. This view requires the correct formula and will continually seek more data and refinement in the quest for the universal 'truth'. Under this project, generic and standardised competencies can degenerate into first order check lists with all the problems inherent in behaviourism. That nearly happened in the 1960s with behavioural objectives. In that form, teachers taught to the test with no other objective. When faced with a narrow specification of competencies, teachers will perform the specified behaviour and at that point the system may fail, as there will be merely a technical response to the tasks to be observed. This is equating teaching with learning and is a category mistake. But from the perspective of a politician, if competencies are not pernicious, then any form of competencies could be adopted. But if they seriously distort the enterprise or divert undue energy to their own maintenance, they ought to be rejected.

A researcher may try to draft competencies using a naive scientific realist account as the default setting. Such a researcher then would want to define competencies in as accurate and as completely a form as possible. For a teacher educator however, these 'complete' and 'accurate' lists may be of little value; they may be pointless in that they distort the educational enterprise through limiting education to a culture of compliance without educational intent. Maintaining competency lists may also simply take too much time.

As is often argued, there is no necessary reduction of competency statements to an atomistic list, but that does not provide sufficient reason to believe that the reduction will not happen. A skill-oriented or task-driven approach may entice both instruction and assessment into becoming overly occupationally-specific such that, at best, only a weak basis exists for people to transfer achieved competencies into different occupations. The idea of deriving competencies from job analysis favours a skill-oriented or task-driven approach because it describes current practice and therefore may not be compatible with improved teaching. Although minimum competencies may be set, they cannot mandate excellence in teaching.

It is important that educationalists do not come to accept and treat competencies as a value-free technical process that can be applied unproblematically. One of the most important conclusions from experience and research is that competencies imply a point of reference (for example, a standard or assessment) and are, therefore, relative rather than absolute in character. This means that an essential feature of competencies is the fact that they inherently involve value judgments. Such indicators, thereby, have immense implications for implicitly defining what schooling is—its purposes and practices.

Maintain professionalism

Hager (1994) advances an integrated conception of competence that is conceptualised in terms of knowledge, abilities, skills and attitudes displayed in the context of a set of professional tasks (intentional actions). A feature of this integrated approach is that it avoids the problem of a myriad of tasks by selecting key tasks that are central to the practice of the profession. The main attributes required for the competent performance of these key tasks are then identified. Hager argues that experience has shown that when these are integrated to produce competency standards, the results do capture the holistic richness of professional practice. The relative complexity of the actions can be gauged from the fact that in his view, a typical profession involves no more than thirty to forty such key intentional actions. Competence is inferred from assessment of performance of those actions. Such competency statements serve as indicators in competence tests.
Can detailed prescriptions for ‘best practice’ in the classroom include broad views of critical, evaluative, reflective, analytical, attitudinal, understandings, commitments, values and other personal qualities that we look for in a teacher? The rationale for a broader set of competency statements is that the sum of the visible parts in teaching is not as great as the whole. Can we then describe differences in quality rather than be trapped in assessing minimum competence? The answer to this one is yes, but not those that embody values contrary to government policy directions. There is a tension here between (i) global neoliberal requirements within official parameters for flexible workers who require critical, evaluative, reflective, analytical, attitudinal, understandings, commitments, values and other personal qualities, (ii) the conservative requirements of ‘back to basics’ supporters who do not want any of these things, and (iii) traditional liberal and critical theorists who wish the official parameters to be the subject of critique.

Interpretation of situations is essential if professional action is going to make sense. Interpretation is theory impregnated and the ability to formulate valid theories depends upon a legitimate background of knowledge. The implication is that knowledge and understanding arise in the context of experience and subsequent appraisal of that experience. In other words, it is a process based on values. An account of competencies is, therefore, problematic because government requires teachers to implement policy with its embedded values. If these values in theoretical content are unstated and unknown, then neither teacher nor assessor can then (i) understand why the competencies make sense, (ii) make appropriate judgments, or (iii) critique the competencies. It is possible that agreements in judgment may be achieved by apprenticeship (later training) but this still leaves (iii) difficult or illegitimate.

Conclusion

Any framework for competencies typically incorporates a selection of perspectives drawn from a range of disciplines but this fact does not qualify it for foundational status in knowledge building. The framework is as elastic as the values, concepts and purposes underpinning it. If the competency framework is contestable in terms of values, it follows that neither ‘the problem’ nor the theories in use pertaining to its significance can be accepted alone as an adequate basis for making truth claims, trustworthy interpretations or a reasonable critique of indeterminate situations. Nor can one set of competency statements be given privileged foundational status in knowledge building for example, as determinants of teacher education even though they serve as the means of certification.

What may be required is a different style and content for sets of competency statements designed for different purposes. Data collected by one competency instrument for a particular purpose may not be relevant or useful for another purpose. Likewise, to criticise a set of competency statements framed for one purpose because they do not meet the needs of another purpose or would be damaging if used for that other purpose, does not, thereby, show that they should not be used for the purpose for which they were appropriately designed. Critique of a set of teacher competency statements may either use the standards and purposes of that game to make a judgment about the appropriateness of the statements or their adequacy, or it may make a judgment about the appropriateness or adequacy of the educational language game itself. The meaning of a set of teacher competency statements then, is their use in a particular educational language game.
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