Journal of Research, Policy & Practice of Teachers &
Teacher Education
Vol. 4, No. 1, June 2014, 40-47

Discerning beginning teachers' conceptions of competence through a phenomenographic investigation

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The research reported here investigates variation in beginning teachers' early experiences of their own teaching competency. A phenomenographic research approach was used to show the qualitatively different ways teacher competence was understood amongst beginning teachers in Malaysia. Phenomenographic interviews were conducted with 18 beginning teachers who had started full time teaching for between 1-3 years. Analysis revealed that beginning teachers 'saw', 'understood' the conceptions of competency in five different ways: i) the ability to manage classroom and student behavior, ii) a strong knowledge of the subject content, iii) the ability to reach out for assistance and support, iv) understanding the students they teach, and v) possessing values of professionalism. The relationships between these different ways are represented diagrammatically. This investigation gives an insider's perspective a strong voice of what constitutes teacher competence, as well as illustrates that if teacher competence is to be used for any articulation of teacher standards, the term must be carefully defined through the help of the group most affected by any judgements of their competency to avoid misunderstandings, unhappiness and discontentment.

Keywords: Standard Guru Malaysia; teacher education; phenomenographic research.

Introduction

The judgement of a teachers' competence generally begins when they become teacher candidates and it is carried on through their undergraduate years and during periods of their practicum (Goh, 2011). It then continues when beginning teachers are assessed to enable them to become confirmed staff of the teaching profession (Huntly, 2008). This article reports on an empirical study which focuses on the competence of beginning teachers in Malaysia. It contends that, more so than not, beginning teachers in Malaysia are judged against an externally formulated set of competence (for example, the *Malaysian Teacher Standards*) and these beginning teachers are seldom invited to the debate surrounding what constitutes a competent practitioner within their own profession. This

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article seeks to add to the understanding of beginning teachers" competence through an investigation of the conceptions of competence held by beginning teachers themselves.

The conceptions must be described in terms of the ways in which beginning teachers are aware of the phenomenon of competence, the different ways in which competency is constituted, and how it appears to them. Such research aim places the investigation within the terrain of a phenomenographic research.

Methodology

Using phenomenography to discover the conceptions of competence

Phenomenography is a research approach that seeks to describe immediate and subjective phenomena in the world as people see them (Marton & Booth, 1997). It is also the "qualitatively different ways in which people experience or think about various phenomena" (Marton, 1986). The fundamental assumption of phenomenography is that there are a finite number of qualitatively different understandings of a particular phenomenon and the focus is to discover the variation in the experience or way of understanding some aspect of the world. Samplings of the population in a study must therefore, aim to capture the breadth of variation in understanding in the targeted samples (Bruce, Buckingham, Hynd, McMahon, Roggenkamp, & Stoodley, 2004). The phenomenographic approach has been selected for this study on the basis that it can reveal the number of qualitatively different ways in which beginning teachers conceptualize competency.

Participants

A total of 18 beginning teachers (14 females and 4 males) who had started full-time teaching for between 1-3 years were involved in this study. These 18 beginning teachers had graduated from a variety of teacher preparation programs in a teacher education university in Malaysia and were teaching in the primary or the secondary government schools. Although there were no universally agreed timeframe guidelines to determine beginning teachers, this study defined beginning teachers as those who had not yet been formally given confirmed status in their teaching position. In Malaysia, a newly graduated teacher served a three year provisional teaching period before becoming a confirmed staff of the teaching profession. In the first six months of teaching, the teacher will undergo an interview with personnel from the Ministry of Education. If successful, the teacher will be given an appointment letter and from there on served as probationary teacher for the next two years. Within these three years, the teacher was expected to attend courses and seminars organized by the Ministry. If and when the Head of Departments, Deputy Principal and the Principal were satisfied that the beginning teacher was competent to carry out the duties required of the profession, they will sign the official documentation enabling full confirmation status to be achieved.

The beginning teachers were asked questions that dealt with: how much they understood what constituted competency, what it means to be competent or incompetent, the elements that should be present to be a competent teacher, how would they know that they had achieved competency, how would their superior know that they had been competent. All the interviews were conducted in the *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language) except for two which were conducted in English. At the end of each interview, the voice recording was transcribed verbatim by a research assistant and checked by the authors.

Analysis

The analysis consisted of a series of steps (Entwistle, & Martön,1994) :

Step 1: The interview transcripts were read and re-read using a method of free and open coding to find common themes that emerged which pertained to student teachers' concerns experienced during their practicum.

Step 2: A more careful analysis was conducted where each text was compared using an iterative reading and re-reading to establish similarities and differences in the interviews. Chunks of text with similar or different themes were highlighted with pens of different colours.

Step 3: Highlighted transcripts were then re- typed into separate documents, representing emerging themes. Each document was read in totality to obtain a picture that was documented by the beginning teachers. These themes became the recognized conceptions.

Ways of 'seeing', 'understanding' teacher competence

The findings are presented as categories of description that represent the qualitatively different ways of experiencing teacher competence as expressed by the beginning teachers and an *outcome space* that represents the relationship between those different ways of 'seeing' and 'understanding'. The *outcome space* represents "all possible ways of experiencing the phenomenon in question, for the population represented by the sample *group*" (Åkerlind, 2002). It provides the structure for understanding the phenomenon investigated.

Each category listed is supported by appropriate quotes from the transcripts which are illustrative of the conception and have been selected for clarity and brevity. It is important to note that the statements used to illustrate the conception does not indicate the number of beginning teachers supporting the conception nor does it put any particular participant into a specific category.

Figure 1 diagrammatically displays the outcome space, summarizing the focus of each conceptual category.

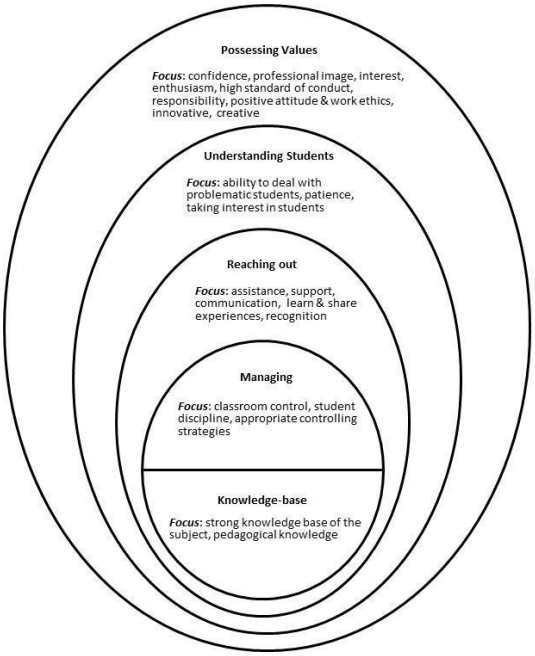

Figure 1. Outcome space: Diagrammatical representation of expanding horizon of the categories

Category 1: Managing

The first category focuses on competency that relates to classroom management and the management of misbehaviors of students. Beginning teachers tell about being able to manage both the classroom and their students" behavior with appropriate controlling strategies to enable an orderly teaching and learning environment to happen.

> *I am a class teacher. I find classroom management to be very important – control discipline and students arriving late. As qualified teachers, we must be able to handle all this. [Female, Interviewee5]*

Category 2: Knowledge-base

A competent beginning teacher has confidence and has a strong knowledge base of the subject.

> *Once I get a subject, I will explore and make sure I understand it well, meaning that if I want to teach something to my students, I must teach myself first. No hesitation or doubt in our subject. I will teach without fear.[Male, Interviewee10]*

Beginning teachers also explain competence in terms of the *pedagogical knowledge* required to enable learning to occur. Pedagogical knowledge and skills are required for choosing the most appropriate teaching strategies, techniques and learning experiences to engage students in learning.

> *Competent teachers, hmm ... someone who can try a lot of teaching techniques to vary teaching to produce an interesting teaching and learning. [Female, Interviewee15]*

The conceptions of *classroom and behavior management* and *knowing subject matter* are placed in the inner most circle of the diagram, possibly representing the two skills that are core for any beginning teachers starting out.

Category 3: Reaching out

The focus of this conception is the ability of the beginning teacher to reach out for help from their colleagues and individuals outside their school environment. Beginning teachers believe that being competent is the ability to communicate with other teachers in their school to share views and to obtain support as they begin their new role as teachers.

> *... at first, I was quite shy to ask as I did not know them [other teachers in school] well or close to them [other teachers], ...*
> *hmmm.. but I faced issues, so I realised that if I did not ask, it would be very difficult for me. If I did not ask, I would not be able to handle the problems myself. I wanted to improve myself, I wanted to make teaching more enjoyable, so I got to know some of the teachers, and fortunately, they were also willing to teach me [Female, Interviewee2].*

The second circle includes the conceptions of *reaching out for assistance and support*. It is about sharing issues and achievements. To the beginning teachers, being competent is the ability to reach out for assistance, not being shy, to learn and share experiences, and to get recognition and support from other teachers, family members and friends. Beginning teachers in this study understand that being a teacher is not just about „classroom activities" but they also need to focus upon different aspects of their social and emotional understandings.

Category 4: Understanding students

A competent beginning teacher is responsible for understanding the strength, weaknesses and potential of the students being taught. The focus of this conception is the ability of the beginning teacher to understand the students being taught.

> *... in addition to knowing our subjects, we must know and understand the students. [Female, Interviewee5]*

The third circle proposes that the concept of *understanding students* being taught includes a shared focus on knowing what to do with problematic students, having

patience and taking an interest in the students'achievement.

Category 5: Possessing Values

A competent beginning teacher possesses values of professionalism that is manifested in beginning teachers projecting confidence, ability to fulfill their roles as teachers, possessing enthusiasm, and undertaking their responsibilities well.

> *For me, a competent teacher is a teacher who is confident and brave to try something new. Yes, teachers will face challenges that exist in the schools, but must possess patience, important – patience! One more thing, must be strong! [Female, Interviewee9]*
>
> *... he/she [the competent teacher] is like, knows and is proficient in a lot of matters. [Female, Interviewee6]*
>
> *... a teachers who is versatile. [Male, Interviewee10]*

It is heartening to note that the beginning teachers in this study, though relatively new to the teaching profession, are able to discern that being competent in their own eyes and the eyes of the educational community is to maintain a high standard of professional behavior. Positive professional behaviours include a high standard of conduct, responsibility, attitude and work ethics.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study has offered an alternative view of teacher competence. It is, nevertheless, not complete. Further study is needed to strengthen the empirical findings of the present research. The following recommendations grew out of the present study:

- To repeat the current research with teachers from other training programs in Malaysia.

- This study was conducted with beginning teachers who were formerly Sultan Idris Education University's teacher candidates. Replication of the study with beginning teachers from other training programs would help determine whether the conceptions of competence revealed here are similar to those in other contexts.

- To repeat the current research in other systems and cultures.

  This study was conducted in Malaysia with participants drawn from the states of Perak, Selangor, Johor, Sabah and Sarawak. Replication of the study in other remaining Malaysian states, other countries, and other cultures would help determine whether the conceptions of competence revealed here are similar to those in other contexts.

- To repeat the current research with beginning teachers who graduated from the postgraduate diploma programs in Malaysia.

With the knowledge that beginning teachers may no longer be identified as young adults with recent experience as school students, it is a recommendation of this study that additional research is required. Such research should seek clarification of the conceptions of beginning teacher competence of beginning teachers who entered university from school, as compared to those who entered as mature age students.

- The results of the current research be further developed for the purpose of the professional development of beginning teachers.

- The results of the current research be used as a departure point to discuss the challenges that lies ahead for pre-service teacher educators especially in the light of the new assessment of teacher competence through the new *Malaysian Teacher Standards*.

Final words

The focus of this study is the conception of beginning teachers" competence. There exists very little research about beginning teachers' conceptions of their own teaching competence from Malaysian beginning teachers' perspective. This study adds to the debate about competence by including the voice of the beginning teacher.

This data will be especially important because of its implications for teacher educators and teaching institutions. It is possible that the results reported in this study may influence the manner in which beginning teachers are appraised, prior to their formal entry into the teaching profession. A better understanding of the existing perspectives of beginning teachers of their teaching competence enables insight into the differences and similarities of competence of this particular group and can form a point of departure for future work to increase the conceptual clarity of competence as it relates to a Malaysian context.

Acknowledgements

This study was supported by the Sultan Idris Education University grant given to the author. The authors would like to acknowledge the contributions of fellow researcher, Dr. Associate Professor Dr. Nasir Masran. The author also gratefully acknowledged each of the 18 beginning teachers involved in this study and who have kindly contributed with integrity and honesty.

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