

BEGINNING TEACHERS' CONCEPTIONS OF COMPETENCE

Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this study is the phenomenon of beginning teacher competence. In Queensland, the context for the research presented here, the competence of beginning teachers is appraised by their supervisor (usually the principal) at the end of their first year of full-time employment. This appraisal is conducted on behalf of the Queensland Board of Teacher Registration and a positive outcome enables beginning teachers to achieve full teacher registration. Although there exists research suggesting that principals bring to the appraisal process their conceptions of competence, there is a dearth of knowledge about beginning teachers' conceptions of their own teaching competence. The research presented here adds to the debate about competence by including the voice of the beginning teacher. This focus, located within the context of local issues, is used to explore important themes that are relevant to other systems of beginning teacher appraisal.

The selection of phenomenography as the research approach adopted for this study is based on its appropriateness to the investigation of a phenomenon such as competence. Phenomenography aims to describe, analyse and understand the ways in which people experience aspects of the world around them. The point of departure that sets apart this approach from many others, is the principle that phenomenography seeks to investigate neither the phenomenon, nor the people who experience the phenomenon, but the relation between the two. The results of a phenomenographic study are presented as a description of all of the possible conceptions that a specific group can have about a particular phenomenon.

For the research presented here, eighteen beginning teachers were interviewed individually in order to identify and describe the variation in their conceptions of competence. Research participants representing State, Catholic and Independent school systems were drawn from preschools, special, primary and secondary schools of one provincial city, in one regional area of South East Queensland.

Two major outcomes emerged from the research presented here. Firstly, beginning teachers were identified as experiencing competence in a number of ways.

Although these conceptions were varied, their number was quite limited. Six distinct conceptions of beginning teacher competence were identified, with a further finding that individual beginning teachers were not limited to one conception, but conceived of competence in multiple ways.

Because the relational nature of competence demands that it be investigated within the context in which it is experienced, this study also identified five different approaches to competence appraisal, as understood by the beginning teachers who had undergone the appraisal process. Comparisons of both conceptions of competence and approaches to appraisal were then compared to existing research in this area.

This thesis presents an alternative view of competence and appraisal that may be used to further develop the process of appraisal and indeed, the professional development of beginning teachers.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables	vii
List of Figures	viii
Acknowledgements	x
<i>Chapter One – Background to the study</i>	
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Background to the Study	2
1.3 Themes in Literature	4
1.3.1 Beginning Teachers	4
1.3.2 Competence	7
1.3.3 Teacher Appraisal	11
1.4 Focus and Context of the Study	13
1.5 Significance of the Study	15
1.6 Methodology	16
1.6.1 Phenomenography	17
1.6.2 Sample for this Study	19
1.6.3 Data Collection	20
1.6.4 Analysis of the Data	22
1.6.5 Judgement of Phenomenographic Outcomes	24
1.7 Outcomes of the Study	26
1.8 Delimitations and limitations of the Thesis	27
1.9 Structure of the Thesis	28
<i>Chapter Two – Themes in the Literature on Beginning Teacher Competence</i>	
2.1 Introduction	29
2.2 Beginning Teachers	29
2.2.1 From student to teacher	30
2.2.2 Stages of teacher development	31
2.2.3 Locating beginning teachers	35
2.3 Teacher Appraisal	37
2.3.1 Rationale for teacher appraisal	38
2.3.2 Teacher appraisal models	40
2.3.3 International perspectives of appraisal: England	41
2.3.4 International perspectives of appraisal: United States of America	44
2.3.5 Appraisal: an Australian perspective	46
2.3.6 What is appraised?	49

2.4	Beginning Teacher Competence	51
2.4.1	Teacher effectiveness	52
2.4.2	Professional standards for teachers	56
2.4.3	Historical perspective of competence	58
2.4.4	Limitations of competency-based appraisal	61
2.4.5	Approaches to competence	65
2.5	Chapter Summary	71
<i>Chapter Three – Design of the study: A phenomenographic research approach</i>		
3.1	Introduction	74
3.2	Selection of research methodology	75
3.2.1	Qualitative inquiry	75
3.3	Phenomenography	78
3.3.1	Origins of phenomenography	79
3.3.2	Educational relevance	80
3.3.3	Phenomenographic lines of inquiry	81
3.3.4	Relation to phenomenology	83
3.3.5	Assumptions about phenomenography	84
3.4	Experience and awareness	85
3.5	Conceptions and phenomena	87
3.6	Categories of description and outcome space	91
3.7	Implementation of the study	95
3.7.1	Role of the researcher	95
3.7.2	Research plan	97
3.8	Data collection	98
3.8.1	Phenomenographic data – from whom?	98
3.8.2	Phenomenographic interview – why?	100
3.8.3	Phenomenographic interview – how?	102
3.9	Data analysis	106
3.9.1	Principles of data analysis	106
3.9.2	Data analysis in practice	107
3.9.2.1	The mechanical analysis of the data	107
3.9.2.2	The conceptual analysis of the data	109
3.10	Presentation of the results of the study	119
3.11	Chapter summary	121
<i>Chapter Four – Beginning Teachers’ Conceptions of Competent Beginning Teachers</i>		
4.1	Introduction	123
4.2	Presentation of results of the study	123

4.3	Categories of description	125
4.3.1	Category one: Competence is being well prepared	126
4.3.2	Category two: Competence is a sound knowledge base	131
4.3.3	Category three: Competence is being in control	138
4.3.4	Category four: Competence is creating networks and partnerships	145
4.3.5	Category five: Competence is a professional presence	154
4.3.6	Category six: Competence is being ‘self aware’	162
4.3.7	Summary of section	168
4.4	Beginning teacher appraisal	168
4.4.1	The process of appraising beginning teachers	170
4.5	Principals’ approaches to the appraisal of beginning teachers	170
4.5.1	Approach one: Appraisal is investigative	171
4.5.2	Approach two: Appraisal is observational	175
4.5.3	Approach three: Appraisal is consultative	177
4.5.4	Approach four: Appraisal is concealed	181
4.5.5	Approach five: Appraisal is blind	184
4.6	Chapter Summary	186
<i>Chapter Five – Relationships among conceptions and perceived appraisal approaches</i>		
5.1	Introduction	187
5.2	The outcome space: the relationship among the conceptions of competence	188
5.3	Beginning teachers’ understandings of the appraisal process	199
5.4	Chapter Summary	205
<i>Chapter Six - Conclusions</i>		
6.1	Introduction	208
6.2	Substantive research findings of the study	208
6.3	Building on the current study	215
6.4	Epilogue	220
<i>Appendix 1: Board of Teacher Registration Report Form</i>		221
<i>References</i>		222

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1	Overview of ‘coarse’ analysis of interview protocol	116
Table 4.1	A competent beginning teacher is well prepared through thorough planning and classroom organisation	130
Table 4.2	A competent beginning teacher has a sound knowledge base to facilitate learning	137
Table 4.3	A competent beginning teacher uses a range of behaviour management strategies to control the learning environment	144
Table 4.4	A competent beginning teacher creates networks and partnerships with a range of school stakeholders	153
Table 4.5	A competent beginning teacher maintains an image of Professionalism	161
Table 4.6	A competent beginning teacher is self aware	168
Table 6.1	Principals’ and beginning teachers’ views of the appraisal process	213

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1	Interview except 1	111
Figure 3.2	Interview excerpt 2	112
Figure 3.3	Interview excerpt 3	115
Figure 4.1	The subject-object relationship of Category One	126
Figure 4.2	The subject-object relationship of Category Two	131
Figure 4.3	The subject-object relationship of Category Three	138
Figure 4.4	The subject-object relationship of Category Four	145
Figure 4.5	The subject-object relationship of Category Five	154
Figure 4.6	The subject-object relationship of Category Six	162
Figure 5.1	Outcome space of beginning teachers' conceptions of competence	189
Figure 5.2	Continuum of perceived appraisal approaches	202

STATEMENT OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted for a degree or diploma at any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Helen Huntly

Date

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