# Teachers' Work: Beginning Teachers' Conceptions Of Competence

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## Abstract

*Worldwide, teachers' work continues to be the subject of discussion and debate, especially in terms of teacher competence and its appropriate appraisal. Available literature offers a number of perspectives of beginning teacher competence, yet the voices of beginning teachers themselves are not represented. This paper outlines the findings of a phenomenographic study that sought to uncover the conceptions of competence held by beginning teachers. The results of this study suggest that beginning teachers believe that teaching competence requires demonstration of thorough preparation, a sound knowledge base, effective classroom management, professional communication with a range of stakeholders, and an accurate sense of self-awareness in the role of teacher. These conceptions will be compared to a selection of the available literature about teacher competence and associated teaching standards.*

## Introduction

Available literature suggests that, both nationally and internationally, the competence of teachers continues to undergo close and constant public scrutiny. While teachers in the UK are forced to deal with the effects of mandatory appraisal of competence, American schools debate the wisdom of regular, compulsory teacher appraisal (Ingvarson & Chadbourne, 1994). Although Australian education bodies are similarly involved in the complex process of developing a nationally recognised set of professional standards for teachers (Board of Teacher Registration, 2002), there is little doubt that universal agreement on the composition of such standards is virtually impossible. Part of the problem in developing performance standards for teachers, is the difficulty in providing an adequate and agreed definition of teacher competence.

There are several approaches to competence and its measurement, yet none is able to explain fully the many facets of competent human performance. Hager and Beckett

(1995) argue that the problem lies in the traditional notion that competence may be identified from an investigation of either the worker or the work. They argue instead that competence is not one-dimensional, but *relational.* As such, competence is a relation between individual abilities and the satisfactory completion of appropriate tasks. Sandberg (1994) recommends an approach to human competence that seeks to achieve a more comprehensive view of performance. This *interpretative* approach to human action is based on the belief that the world is not merely the world, but the world as experienced by someone. The person and the world are internally related through human experience of the surroundings where workers conceive their work as they actively seek contextual understanding. Sandberg (1994, p. 38) justifies his belief through a suggestion that "in order to provide more accurate descriptions of human action in organizations, we should investigate the internal logic of human activity. That is, the individuals' ways of making sense of their work situations".

Departing from traditional methods of identifying and defining competence, this contemporary view recommends an audience of the voices of the individuals under investigation. Bennett, Lister & McManus (1992) agree that a thorough understanding of human competence cannot be gleaned through mere observation of worker performance. *Legitimate voices* must be heard if the research of competence is to come as close as possible to workers' own experiences of their work. For this reason, the research presented here aims to describe beginning teachers' conceptions of their own competence.

The phenomenon of competence is especially important in a profession where external appraisal occurs early on to determine who enters and remains in the profession. Such is the situation for beginning teachers. The literature reveals an existing range of views on the nature of teaching and teacher competence, especially the competence of teachers entering the profession. What is missing, however, is a view of beginning teacher competence that is provided by beginning teachers themselves. What is of interest to this study therefore, is whether beginning teachers' views of competence align in any way with those proposed by other stakeholders in the profession. If the conceptions align closely, the appraisal process can be viewed as fair and just. If this is not the case, then recommendations to the providers of teacher education programs may be needed so trainee teachers are equipped with a more compatible framework of standards. Alternatively, recommendations could be provided to external registration bodies to consider the view of the beginning teacher in any further development of teacher standards.

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 College of Teachers (QCT), formerly the Board of Teacher Registration, and a positive outcome enables beginning teachers to achieve full teacher registration. The QCT has established an overview of acceptable teacher competence and these Professional Standards for Queensland Teachers outline the "capabilities that teachers will possess in order to provide high-quality instruction and support improved student learning" (2007, p. 6). The early career teachers in this research had recently undergone appraisal according to these standards (at the beginning teachers' level) prior to being interviewed.

The QCT-initiated professional standards and their interrelationships are shown in Figure 1.
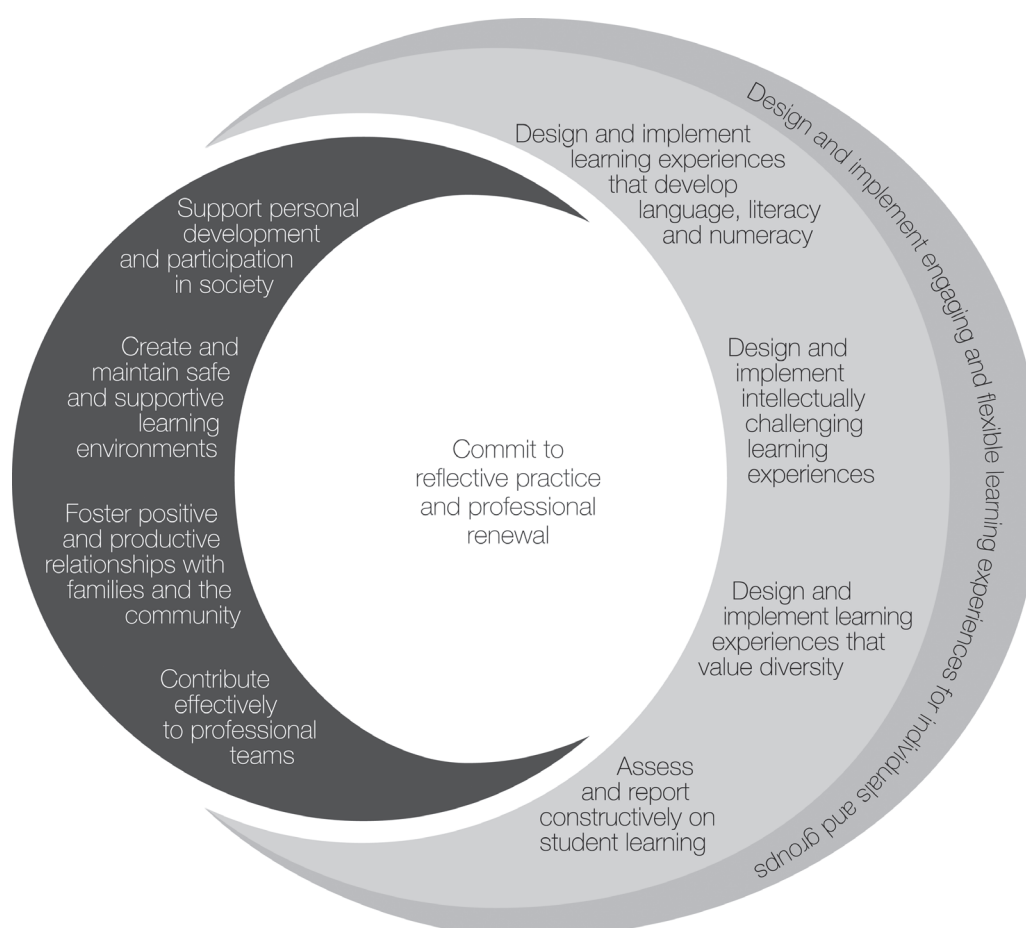


**Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of the Professional Standards for Queensland Teachers**

Hayes (2006, p. 13) suggests that "within the last decade, all (teacher) associations have become increasingly aware of the developing standards agenda in Australia". The Senate report *A Class Act: Inquiry into the Status of the Teaching Profession* (1998) recommended the establishment of a national standards and registration body. This was followed by the 2000 national forum co-hosted by the Australian College of Educators (ACE), the Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA) and the Australian Association for Research in Education (ACER) that prompted the national discussion paper, *Standards of Professional Practice for Accomplished Teachers in Australian Classrooms*. The publication by the Ministerial Council of a *National Framework for Professional Standards for Teaching* (2003) not only provided a framework for career dimensions (graduation, competence, accomplishment, leadership), it also consolidated thinking about the professional elements of teaching that include professional knowledge, practice, values and relationships. Based on this framework endorsed by the Australian Government, Teaching Australia (2007) has recently proposed that these standards be used as a basis for specific teacher *capabilities* as outlined in Table 1.

| Professional Knowledge | Professional Practice | Professional Commitment |
|---|---|---|
| Knowledge of Content | Planning for Learning | Professional Learning |
| Knowledge of Students | Creating a Learning Environment | Engagement |
| Knowledge of Teaching and Learning | Assessment and Evaluation of Learning | Leadership |
| | | Values |
| | | Relationships |
| | | Ethics |

**Table 1: Specific teacher capabilities**

Most agencies and associations who have expressed a desire to secure a standards framework that is representative of and accepted by the teaching profession, argue that the framework must come from *within* the teaching profession, rather than be imposed by those outside of education. After all:

> a mark of a highly skilled occupation is that those entering it should have reached a level of preparation in accordance with standards set by the practitioners themselves and that the continuing development of members should be largely the responsibility of the profession. (ASTA, 2002, p. 26)

Hayes (2006) agrees, arguing that:

> standards for the profession should be developed primarily by teachers for teachers, though in collaborative ways with stakeholders in the education community. They should be developed within a *discourse of the profession*, not imposed on the profession by others. (p. 14)

As such, the significance of the research presented here lies in its potential to give voice to a previously unheard section of the education community. Although much research has been conducted in relation to the experiences of beginning teachers (Bullough & Knowles, 1991; Kagan, 1992; Knowles, 1992; Berman, 1994; Marsh, 1996; Turner-Bisset, 2001), few, if any studies have specifically sought knowledge of beginning teachers' conceptions of competence.

## Methodology

Sandberg (1991) argues that traditional approaches to the study of competence have utilised a *first order perspective* where those not directly involved in the work have decided on the skills, knowledge or attitudes necessary to competently perform a given task. Accordingly, this approach yields only an approximate and indirect description of what human competence comprises. Alternatively, Sandberg (1991) recommends the use of a *second order perspective*, characterised by the collection of data from a number of individuals whose competence is under investigation.

To collect the required data, Kroksmark (1995) recommends phenomenography as the research tool of choice because it "assumes a life-world, a co-constituted reality where human being and world are inseparably attached to each other so that understanding and meaning cannot be traced to either one individually" (p. 372). As such, phenomenography can assist those interested in education to be conscious of the complexity of the phenomenon of teaching. As the object of a phenomenographic study, it is the teachers' *conceptions* of their teaching that take centre stage and it is only when these conceptions are "embedded in the teacher's real world that they become logical and comprehensible" (Andersson & Lawenius, 1983, p. 8).

Marton and Booth (1997, p. 125) contend that the research group involved in a phenomenographic study should comprise a "smallish number of people chosen from a particular population". Similarly, Merriam (1988) does not specify the actual size of the group, but argues that the number of research participants selected should enable the maximum possibility of identifying variation in participant understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. She refers to this research group size as a *purposive sample*. Marton (1988) and Franz (1994) recommend a research group of between 15 and 30 participants to best achieve the aims of phenomenographic enquiry.

Consequently, in planning the research presented here, it was decided to investigate the conceptions of a group of 18 Bachelor of Education graduates at the end of their first year of full time teaching. These graduates represented a cross section of beginning teachers thus maximising the range of perspectives encountered. Although

working in a regional area of Queensland at the time of the interviews, the research participants had graduated from a variety of teacher preparation programs and represented a number of education contexts including preschools, primary schools, secondary schools and special schools, within systems managed by Catholic Education, the Independent sector and Education Queensland. As these teachers represent a range of teaching contexts, they are presumed to possess the variety of experience that is so valued in phenomenographic research.

Because phenomenographic research seeks human conceptions of a specific aspect of the world, Marton (1986) argues that these conceptions may be revealed in several ways including drawing, products of peoples' work and the manner in which people behave under controlled conditions. Both Marton (1986) and Svensson (1994) however, believe that conceptions are most accessible through peoples' language. Based on this assertion, this study utilised a one-to-one interview format for data collection. Bruce (1994) recommends the individual participant format over the focus group format because it enhances the focus of the interviewee and enables the researcher to probe for further details whilst allowing for constant clarification of meaning and intention on the part of the interviewee.

The beginning teachers involved in this study were invited to do so through their principal. After expressing an initial interest, potential participants were provided with a briefing that outlined what their participation would involve. After consenting to their involvement, interviews were arranged at a place where the beginning teachers felt comfortable. The semi-structured interviews lasted between 50 and 60 minutes and were recorded. Each participant was interviewed once during the research project.

The semi-structured interview format was selected due to the recommendation of Bruce (1994) who suggests that one or two key questions should be prepared. These questions should lead the interviewee to a discussion of how they see, experience or understand the selected phenomenon. The questions should be sufficiently open-ended to allow interviewees to structure their own response, thus tapping their lived experience (Bruce, 1994). It is also the contention of Marton (1986) that open-ended questions are preferable as they enable the participant to choose the dimensions of the question they wish to answer. In utilising this open-ended style, both Bruce and Marton promote the use of 'what' questions to elicit the desired description of the relation between research participant and phenomenon. For this reason the following interview question was selected to facilitate discussion: 'What does it mean to be a competent beginning teacher?'

## Results

Initial analysis of phenomenographic data occurs through a series of steps as outlined below:

1. Transcripts were read and reread until the researcher felt that she had a clear understanding of what each was saying.
2. During the third or fourth read, the researcher used coloured pens to highlight 'slabs' of text with a similar theme.
3. Highlighted sections were then cut and pasted to separate documents, representing each emerging conception.
4. These new documents were then read in their entirety so that the researcher could get a 'feel' for the shared understandings that were documented by the beginning teachers. During this combination of processes of sorting and analysing, the researcher sought characteristics that clarified conceptions of the phenomenon and also the 'structurally significant differences' that would allow relationships among the categories to be specified (Bruce, 1994).
5. Once the researcher felt satisfied that she was being as faithful as possible to the experiences of the research participants, she allocated an appropriate label to each document. These labels became the recognised conceptions, and the associated text then provided quotations that represented each conception.
6. From this stage forward, individual transcripts were no longer a part of the analytical process. Instead, the new documents containing data representing each conception were used as points of reference, thus creating the 'pool' of data that is the cornerstone of phenomenographic research.

The conceptions identified in a phenomenographic study are labelled as *categories of description.* The categories of beginning teacher competence identified from the data produced in this study were:

- **Beginning teacher competence is being 'well prepared'** A competent beginning teacher is responsible for thorough planning and classroom organisation.

- **Beginning teacher competence is having a sound 'knowledge base'** A competent beginning teacher uses a sound knowledge base to facilitate learning.

- **Beginning teacher competence is 'being in control'** A competent beginning teacher utilises a range of appropriate behaviour management strategies to control the learning environment.

- **Beginning teacher competence is 'creating networks and partnerships'** A competent beginning teacher is capable of effective communication with a range of school stakeholders.

- **Beginning teacher competence is 'becoming a professional'** A competent beginning teacher maintains an image of professionalism.

- **Beginning teacher competence is 'becoming self-aware'** A competent beginning teacher is aware of himself/herself as both person and teacher.

According to Bruce (1996), names given to the conceptions create labels for each category of description. She argues that these names should enable instant communication of the meanings attributed to the phenomenon by the participants in a study. The following sections of this paper serve to elaborate the six conceptions represented as categories of description. Each category is illustrated by quotations from participating beginning teachers.

## Category one: Competence is being 'well prepared'

The focus of this conception is the ability of the beginning teacher to create and maintain a classroom characterised by methodical preparation.

> Being well planned is really important. Having lots of resources and questions that already are prepared so that you're sort of not grabbing at loose ends when you go into a classroom and hoping that the kids… The class never goes the way that you plan it. I mean the kids just might not be interested or they might be having, you know, just coming from PE and they're too tired. So if you have lots of interesting and stimulating resources they are able then to grab onto those. And you know do it a little bit more enthusiastic. I think it's also worthwhile getting to school, you know, forty minutes before the bell goes in the morning. Even a bit more than that. Just to sort of plan the day so that you're ready and you know whats coming up. (Interview 9, Female)

According to beginning teachers, preparation refers to *planning ahead* in various aspects of planning such as curriculum and the physical and conceptual *organisation* of teaching resources.

Just as the element of competence referred to as *planning* has several subsets, so too does the notion of *organisation*. Beginning teachers conceive of competent organisation as "just using your time wisely" and being able to "keep myself up-to-date". This notion of effective time management can manifest itself in several ways, but generally refers to an ability to deal creatively with the time demands placed upon beginning teachers.

> You know, just collecting books and having a look at them is time consuming. So what I always do, instead of collecting the whole class' books up at one time, and you know, having 35 books to mark – I take say, six every week. (Interview 8, Female)

Another aspect of *organisation* mentioned by beginning teachers is the ability to organise themselves and their classrooms so that learning experiences flow smoothly and without incident.

> Interviewer (I): What does it mean to be a competent beginning teacher?
> Beginning Teacher (BT): Just to be organised. I mean, if you're not organised, you get yourself into a lot of trouble, I think, with your teaching. Any sort of teaching. (Interview 2, Male)

A third area of *organisation* recognised by beginning teachers as vital to the notion of competence is an ability to *prioritise* tasks. Competent beginning teachers should be able to prioritise all aspects of their professional role:

> . . . and not just the curriculum aspect. Just with other things that come up as well. Like prioritising things in your day. Like you need to speak to different people. Need to deal with certain issues. (Interview 11, Female)

The final aspect identified under the umbrella of *organisation* is the arrangement of the physical classroom setting. This tangible organisation should facilitate maximum student engagement through a well-considered pedagogical 'plan of attack'.

> Just by setting up, I guess, an effective learning environment, which is supportive of the students in your care. That might mean organisation for your level reading groups or ensuring that you negotiate a set of classroom rules for behaviour. Arranging class group settings. Organising specific routines for reading and maths etc. (Interview 14, Male)

Being well prepared is considered vital if beginning teachers are going to cope with the many and varied expectations placed on them in their new professional role.

## Category two: Competence is a sound knowledge base

The overriding theme of this conception is that competent beginning teachers take to the classroom a knowledge base that will empower them to facilitate student learning. A thorough knowledge of the *curriculum* is considered essential by beginning teachers if they are to perform their professional duties in a competent manner.

> Competence in general I suppose is knowing the curriculum that we [beginning teachers] have to follow. Understanding what we've got to cover. How we've got to cover it. What it means. (Interview 3, Female)

Beginning teachers place importance on their ability to interpret curriculum documentation, enabling them to "understand what the requirements are actually asking you to do".

> Once you realise what it [the syllabus] is actually asking of you, what it wants you to do, you can get on with the job. (Interview 2, Male)

When explaining the importance of syllabus knowledge, beginning teachers initially focus on knowing what *they* have to do. Then their focus shifts to include how such knowledge affects the learning outcomes of their students. Evidence from this study suggests that this ability to facilitate learning is a strong indicator of competence.

> I:  What does it mean to be competent in this [curriculum] area?
>
> BT: Actually making sure that you cover what you're expected. Especially for the syllabus, so when they [students] go onto the following unit, you've covered what you have to. So the teacher next year doesn't have to go over what you should have done. (Interview 3, Female)

In addition to curriculum knowledge, some beginning teachers also explain competence in terms of the *pedagogy* required to optimally facilitate learning. This pedagogical knowledge enables them to select teaching strategies and learning experiences that engage students in all aspects of a classroom task.

> When you talk about competence or incompetence I always think of the actual teaching part. (Interview 9, Female)

This 'teaching part' refers to the very practical elements involved in classroom practice. Beginning teachers mention the importance of "getting the work across to the kids in activities or games", "clear instructions", a "functioning classroom" and "using different strategies to get them [students] on task". The notion of maintaining student focus is an element of teaching that is mentioned by several of the interviewees. Additionally, more than half of the beginning teachers involved in this study reinforce the importance of selecting a learning experience that is most appropriate to the context, student group and curriculum area.

> I have personally found that when we do our handwriting on the board – that's very teacher-directed. And then they [the students] have a go. But then you've got to do the group things with them for hands-on making puzzles and that sort of thing. (Interview 4, Female)

The third knowledge base that contributes to the beginning teacher's feeling of competence is knowledge of *students*. Beginning teachers require a substantial understanding of their students in order to provide appropriate and relevant learning experiences. The combination of these experiences provides students with "the environment they need to have". Knowledge of individual students is a teaching element expressed by the beginning teachers involved in this research, who

demonstrate the value of specific knowledge of "children's needs" and "the background of the kids". Also valued is knowledge of learning styles, so that beginning teachers are able to understand the ways in which their students learn most effectively.

> I:    Explain this type of knowledge.
>
> BT:  How kids learn best. Different kids do best whether they be visual learners or whether they be people who are kinaesthetic, when they need to go and do something. If one tack doesn't work, trying something totally different. You know, continually trying to explain things in different ways so kids can learn. (Interview 15, Female)

A knowledge base for *teaching* is frequently referred to in the education community, but results of this study suggest that for beginning teachers, the emphasis should be placed on the knowledge required to facilitate learning. Evidence presented in this section identifies three discrete yet inter-related types of knowledge, without which beginning teachers are unable to feel competent. According to beginning teachers, knowledge of the curriculum, pedagogy and their students enhances their competence in terms of how the knowledge contributes to their ability to facilitate learning outcomes for students.

## Category three: Competence is being in control

> I:    What is it about beginning teachers that makes them competent?
>
> BT:  They have to be competent in the behaviour of their class – the children in their class . . . having strategies to deal with inappropriate behaviour in the classroom. Being able to handle whole class situations, group situations and of course, individual behaviour problems. (Interview 3, Female)

This interview extract represents the essence of conception three. To consider themselves competent, beginning teachers must be able to manage the behaviour of their students. In this context, behaviour management refers to the teacher's ability to *control* the behaviour of the students so that an orderly learning environment can be developed and maintained. Beginning teachers agree that behaviour management issues will occupy a regular part of classroom routine because "rarely do you get one of them [students] through the day without misbehaving somewhere – so rarely do you have a day where you're not dealing with behaviour". Because behaviour problems arise on a regular basis, beginning teachers consider knowledge and skill in this area to be vital to their conception of competent teaching.

The participants in this study consider that "behaviour management is a vital key part of working with children". It can be the difference between feelings of success and failure in terms of how these teachers conceive of their professional competence.

> If you set your behaviour management up right it can be . . . It's the difference between a good year in the classroom and a bad year in the classroom. If you set down your expectations. Set down your rules. (Interview 15, Female)

If a classroom is to be managed in an efficient manner, a range of strategies must be employed to control behavioural aspects of the environment. One beginning teacher refers to the use of "different models in different classrooms" and the need for an ability to make relevant selections from a "bank" of behaviour management strategies that best suit the particular situation or problem.

> Each person's individual. What works for one class, won't work for another class. What works for one child, won't work for another child. So you can't really learn it. You've got the strategies to reflect upon, but yeah, one child might ignore a reward system where another child might be totally changed by that. (Interview 3, Female)

Linked closely to the notion that competence may be judged by the range of behaviour management strategies possessed by beginning teachers, is the belief that classroom control is enhanced when a balance of strategies is employed. Beginning teachers are able to strike this balance when they develop an intuitive sense of what level of control is required. Such intuition can only be drawn upon when teachers have a thorough knowledge of their students and the learning environment.

> Well, I think once they are able to find the balance of – you know, I guess not being too strict but not being too light. You know, knowing what works, what doesn't work, how much, I guess, flexibility to give. You know when to pull the reins in, when to let them out a little bit. You know, just being able to know the balance. And I mean one of the things too that you know, I found pretty quickly was, you can't do everything in every class. I mean, there are some classes that I have that I can be very flexible with activities and the behaviour with. And yet there are others that I must be very strict with, on my toes the whole time with them. You know, I can't sort of relax as much with those sorts of grades. (Interview 2, Male)

Beginning teachers comment on the highly individual nature of competent behaviour management. They understand that these skills cannot be learned from a book, nor reproduced from the observation of more experienced teachers. The management of classroom behaviour is "something that you've got to sort of work out for yourself. You try something and if it doesn't work, don't scrap it altogether. It may be it just won't work for that person [student]". A behaviour management plan must therefore reflect the individual characteristics and needs of both students and teacher.

## Category four: Competence is creating networks and partnerships

The focus of this conception is the ability of the beginning teacher to develop and maintain open and effective communication with a range of stakeholders within the education context. Beginning teacher competence means, "being able to communicate with all people. Communication is vital". In this context communication is not limited to verbal exchanges within the classroom. It refers to a range of verbal and non-verbal exchanges between beginning teachers and their students, parents, other teachers and ancillary staff within the school and the teaching staff of other schools.

Beginning teachers share a belief that their teaching competence is linked closely with their ability to communicate with other teachers on staff.

> I think there's just so much more to it than just teaching kids. You have to be able to relate to the other staff. You have to communicate really well. (Interview 11, Female)

Beginning teachers also make special mention of the importance of maintaining communication with the principal.

> I: You mentioned that you needed to be a competent communicator. Who do you need to communicate with?
> BT: But yeah – communication is important – definitely with the principal. (Interview 2, Male)

According to beginning teachers an important focus of their communication skills, and one that links directly with their feeling of competence, is their ability to build rapport with the parents of their students.

> You know, that's what we're doing. Introduce yourself as a beginning teacher. Help them [parents] get to know you, I suppose. And it depends on the relationship that you have. If you talk to the parents, parents talk back to you. (Interview 1, Male)

Beginning teachers admit that communication with people is not one-way. Just as they encourage parents to share information, so too do they have a responsibility to provide parents with regular, accurate updates on general classroom events and the progress of the children within the class. To ensure that this communication is developed and maintained, beginning teachers utilise a range of techniques including verbal communication, written communication and other tangible means of conveying an intended message.

Beginning teachers encourage parental involvement in classroom activities and also make themselves available "for a chat".

> I think having the little grades every afternoon is almost like a parent/ teacher interview. And that's something that I've really . . . Last year I was really, really nice and we'd chat and be here till 4.00 o'clock chatting to parents. (Interview 4, Female)

Although communication with parents can be verbal, beginning teachers also judge their competence in terms of their ability to provide *written communication* to parents. Competent beginning teachers take the time to provide relevant details regarding the progress of students to their parents. This interaction may take many forms, including a formal report, an informal letter or entries in a daily communication book.

> And so that was part of it. And she realised that, you know, how I maintained communication. Every week I sent home at the back of their homework books, I'd write notes about each individual child. So each parent gets individual notations about their child every week. (Interview 7, Male)

It should be noted that just as effective communication occurs with parents in a range of contexts, this also applies to communication with students. Beginning teachers recognise the power of informal interaction with their students in other contexts ranging from playground duty or sports training, to school camp or concert practice. Some beginning teachers even go so far as to suggest that they "get to know kids better" in an informal setting.

> You always get to know kids better in, you know, out of school, classroom settings. Like, you know, in touch football teams or whatever. Outside school. You just, you tend to get a better knowledge of them. You know, their parents might be coming down so you sort of get a better knowledge of them. (Interview 17, Female)

The notion of informal communication with students is highly valued by beginning teachers who believe that competent teachers develop a bond with their students through shared interest and understanding.

## Category five: Competence is becoming a professional
The focus of this conception is the ability of the beginning teacher to present to the eduction community, an image of confidence and professionalism.

> I think it [competence] means that you can have a bit of a presence so it looks like you know what you're doing. (Interview 4 Female)

This confidence generally refers to the beginning teachers' belief in themselves and their ability to fulfil the necessary requirements of the job. Beginning teachers recognise the importance of the profession that they have entered and acknowledge

that to undertake their responsibilities successfully they must have confidence in themselves.

> I:   What does competence mean to you?
> BT:  I think to feel confident that you come into the classroom and do
>       the job that you've been trained to do. (Interview 15, Female)

In addition to conveying confidence, beginning teachers believe that their competence is also linked to a display of *enthusiasm* for the profession. The participants in this study maintain that competent beginning teachers must convey enjoyment of and enthusiasm for the content of their lessons. Such enthusiasm is considered vital and provides a positive example for students.

> But you know, sort of, if you're going to be teaching history like I teach,
> actually *like* teaching history and *enjoy* history so your enthusiasm can
> rub off on the students! (Interview 8, Female)

Another behaviour that may be linked to the notion of beginning teacher enthusiasm, is their willingness to become involved in all aspects of school life. Beginning teachers link their feelings of competence to an attitude that compels their total *involvement* in the school community to which they belong. The participants in this study cited school involvement as including such activities as "getting involved in the community", "taking kids for sport and debating". Such involvement provides evidence of beginning teachers' willingness to fully immerse themselves in their profession.

> So that's a competency thing. Being able to be involved in just the
> general school. . . . Not to be so busy trying to run your program but
> realising that part of the school is not only what happened in the
> classroom but all the little linkages that happen along the way. And
> being able to find for yourself a role somewhere in the bigger scheme
> of things. (Interview 16, Female)

A vigorously described element of this conception that emerged from the data, is the notion that to consider themselves competent, beginning teachers must demonstrate a high standard of professional behaviour. This *professionalism* manifests itself in many ways including a high standard of conduct, responsibility, attitude and work ethic.

> I think you've got to present yourself in a certain way if you're
> professional. You know, people come up and see you at school and
> parents come up. You've got to seem – you like them to think you are
> a professional. You know what you're doing. (Interview 10, Female)

Professional conduct however, is not limited to what happens within the boundaries of the school. Beginning teachers display professional competence when they are aware of the impact of their conduct in the community beyond school.

> Like I know what I mean about professionalism, I've got to think when I'm out now. Like I went out bowling yesterday and I wonder how many kids will be at bowling. And then I think. . . . And then I've got my boyfriend, too. And I make sure, you know, you've got to act, I think in a certain way, too. But like if people do see you out they think "oh my God" sort of thing. Is that what they're like? In a way it's a bit unfair that you've got to take your sort of . . . Because you put on a bit of an act at school, I think, with the kids and you sort of take that sort of outside your workplace as well. But that's sort of what you choose to do when you become a teacher. (Interview 10, Female)

As evidenced in the interview excerpts, the essence of this conception is the beginning teachers' focus on the need for professional behaviour in all aspects of school life.

## Category six: Competence is being 'self-aware'

The essence of this conception is the notion that beginning teachers, although new to the profession, have already established an awareness of themselves as teachers. The data compiled in relation to this conception has a substantial interest in the ways in which beginning teachers are aware of themselves, both personally and professionally, in the teaching role. Repeated interaction with the data compiled in this study revealed that beginning teachers are aware that they are *human* in the conduct of their duties. It also revealed a dual meaning of the term *human*. In some instances, beginning teachers refer to the importance of portraying the *human* face of teaching when trying to connect with students. At other times these teachers acknowledge the frailty of their new role when referring to themselves as *only human*. It is through the use of these two discrete yet interconnected terms that conception six describes the emerging self-awareness of the beginning teachers involved in this study.

When teachers enter the profession, they do so with substantial undergraduate experience involving discipline knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and practice teaching. They also enter the classroom as human beings with personality traits, instincts and pre-existing behaviours. The first element involved in this conception has its interest in the human elements brought to the education context by beginning teachers. One beginning teacher refers to this awareness of self by stating:

> I feel it's much more a 'me' thing, that I brought with me from my background. (Interview 5, Female)

Competent beginning teachers are able to connect with students and form relationships based on mutual trust and respect. Teachers new to the profession, judge their competence in terms of their ability to have a positive impact on the lives of their students. It should be noted that this impact is not limited to students' academic achievement. Beginning teachers are aware that they should contribute to and be an important part of all aspects of their students' lives. Competent teachers recognise the need to get to know their students fully and are interested in them as young people, not just as 'clients'.

> Well the grade ones I think they just relied on me so much, you know. And they all just thought, you know, thought I was great. I mean you could tell, you know. You know, they're running up to you and you know, they invite you to birthday parties and all that sort of stuff. And they just really responded to me as a person as well as a teacher. (Interview 9, Female)

A theme that was identified in the data related to this conception suggests that competent beginning teachers are aware that they will develop caring relationships with their students. To be considered truly competent, beginning teachers believe that they must consider the best interests of their students as a priority. One participant in this study reported "I feel competent because I love my work and I love the kids". Another declared:

> I think you have to be, not an emotional person, but just have that instinct within you. That . . . anything about children's feelings, you put yourself in their positions. In their position. What other ways do I care? For their future. For their future. Yep! (Interview 13, Female)

In addition to keeping in touch with their *human* side, competent beginning teachers are not afraid to admit that they are *only human*. They are aware that, as newcomers to the profession, they do not yet have all of the answers to the dilemmas uncovered in everyday classroom life.

> You know, we're only human. We all make mistakes. And that, sort of, like a real-life thing for the kids to understand as well. They're gonna make mistakes. They have to make mistakes if they're going to learn. (Interview 1, Male)

For beginning teachers, being competent requires an admission that they are likely to make mistakes and will not be successful in all areas of their new position. Beginning teachers admit that they "will be incompetent at some things" and "not able to do everything straight away".

> I think we were both trying to be competent but she (another first year teacher] was . . . she struggled in that she tried to do so much. Tried to get everything done all the time and it just became more and more work. So she was working late at night. Just, it just kept building up. So I think competency is the ability to sort of say, "look, I can't do everything." (Interview 4, Female)

The two elements involved in this conception suggest that competent beginning teachers are in touch with the human aspects of their profession and are able to recognise their limitations as well as their strengths.

## Discussion

Available literature reveals ongoing discussion and debate about the need for an accepted framework of professional standards for Australian teachers. Specifically, Teaching Australia and the Queensland College of Teachers (QCT) have both recently developed their own professional standards for use within the profession. As previously stated, in the Queensland context of this research, beginning teachers are appraised by their principals according to the QCT standards near the end of their first year of full time teaching. When considered competent, the principals report this to the QCT and the provisional registration of beginning teachers is converted to full registration.

Professional competence is an important personal, professional and social issue at any time, but adopts greater significance at a time when competence appraisal can mean the beginning or the end of a career so early in its development. This being the case, it is very important that beginning teachers have an appropriate conceptual understanding of what is required of a competent teacher. This study revealed that the beginning teachers involved have definite views on teacher competence, and that many elements of what they considered competent practice aligned closely with the standards frameworks of Teaching Australia and the QCT. The following table is presented as a summary of this alignment:

The results of this study reveal that, although new to their profession, beginning teachers already have a relatively accurate view of what constitutes professional competence. Examination of Table 2 shows that the beginning teachers mention most of the key aspects, although are not yet as cognisant of the longer term visions of professional renewal and potential leadership. However, they raise an ethical issue of maintaining an image of professionalism that is not specifically mentioned in the professional standards. Given this alignment, it can be assumed that teacher education programs are currently promoting an accurate view of the profession to tomorrow's teachers. It is also possible

that such close alignment of these views could be the result of an effective induction program in the early stages of the careers of beginning teachers.

| Teaching Australia | Queensland College of Teachers | Beginning Teachers |
|---|---|---|
| Knowledge of content | Design and implement intellectually challenging learning experiences | Use a sound knowledge base to facilitate learning (content) |
| Knowledge of students | Design and implement learning experiences that value diversity | Use a sound knowledge base to facilitate learning (students). Some mentioned catering for diverse learning styles |
| Knowledge of teaching and learning | Design and implement engaging and flexible learning experiences for individuals and groups | Utilise a range of appropriate behaviour management strategies to control the learning environment. Some mentioned using different teaching strategies for different individuals and groups |
| Planning for learning | Design and implement learning experiences that develop language, literacy and numeracy | Is responsible for thorough planning and organisation |
| Creating a learning environment | Create and maintain safe and supportive learning environments | Some mentioned creating a supportive learning environment |
| Assessment and evaluation of learning | Assess and report constructively on student learning | Some mentioned the importance of clearly reporting to parents |
| Professional learning | Commit to reflective practice and professional renewal | |
| Engagement | Contribute effectively to professional teams | Some commented how important it was to relate to other staff and the principal |
| Leadership (for advanced teaching) | | |
| Values | Support personal development and participation in society | Is aware of himself/ herself as both a person and a teacher |
| Relationships | Foster positive and productive relation-ships with families and the community | Is capable of effective communication with a range of school stakeholders |
| Ethics | | Maintains an image of professionalism |

**Table 2: Demonstrating the alignment between professional standards and beginning teachers' conceptions of competence**

## Conclusion

This study indicates that this group of beginning teachers had developed conceptions of competence that closely align with those presented in professional standards for teachers. The study enabled them to express the internal logic of their human activity, their ways of making sense of their work situations, in line with Sandberg's (1994) beliefs. That they are a legitimate voice as per Bennett *et al* (1992), is self-evident in that they are the ones whose competence is being appraised, and yet who have not been heard until now. As the data unfolded, the researcher found the insight represented within this group to be remarkable in light of their limited practical job experience.

Given these outcomes it is the recommendation of this study that further research be conducted in the area of beginning teacher competence, with a focus on how (if at all) early career induction programs affect the way in which beginning teachers view their own professional competence. Future research could also investigate the conceptions of competence held by graduating teachers, with a view to comparing these to the conceptions that they hold at the end of their first year of teaching. At a time when the professional competence of teachers is under close scrutiny by several sections of the community, it is vital that the voices of all sectors of the teaching profession are heard, so that an inclusive and accurate picture of teachers' work can be revealed.

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