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Introduction

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SPECIAL ISSUE ON COMPETENCY-BASED STANDARDS IN TEACHING

INTRODUCTION

The Minister for Employment, Education and Training, the Hon. Kim Beazley (1993, p. 11) announced the provision of \$20 million over the following three years to support the development of key competencies and the "development of a prototype training and development package for teachers/trainers".

This announcement highlights the significance currently accorded to competency based standards for teaching and teacher education. The identification of teacher competencies and the specification of competency based standards for entry (and promotion?) in the profession has the potential to restructure the workplace in schools by specifying what is done and who controls it. Together with the more general vocational competency developments, it could influence what is taught, how it is taught and how it is assessed. Because of this significance, it was decided to devote a special issue of the Australian Journal of Teacher Education to this topic.

The paper by Loudon outlines the two current approaches to teacher competency standards adopted by the National Project on the Quality of Teaching and Learning. The issue of the approach to specification of competency standards is contentious because the experience of the 1968 teacher education models in the USA suggests that there is an inverse ratio between degree of specificity of competencies and useful practical application. The dozen different American models included some with over 3,000 specific teacher competencies to be mastered by those entering the profession. One danger of the term 'competency' is that, as Broudy (1974) said, there will be "transubstantiation through semantic incantation". That is, irrespective of how relevant or useful the standards are, the mere use of the term will be taken to assure the public that teachers are competent.

Bartlett outlines the current state of development of competency statements in various professions in Australia and notes some of the problems involved in applying this experience to the teaching profession. Bartlett presents the view that competency statements (at a national level)

are appropriate if they are used for promulgation of standards as a means for prognosis and improvement of practice. This view differs from that put by the president of the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee.

Universities already provide effective education for entry into professional life ... I do not believe that the 'key competencies' approach is either an appropriate or the most effective way for universities to continue to ensure that their graduates are suitably prepared for the workforce.

(McKinnon, K. 1993, p.4)

Hager and Kaye focus on one aspect of the key competencies proposed by Finn in their discussion of critical thinking in teacher education. This paper demonstrates a way in which the competency based standards may change school and teacher education curriculum and teaching methods.

Soucek takes a different view of critical thinking and uses the notion of performative moral capacity to critique the limitations of competency based schooling. Soucek also places the competency standards debate in the context of the skills formation strategy to meet economic imperatives - a strategy sanctioned by OECD reports.

The context, indicated by Soucek, of the competency standards initiative in Australia influences the context within which moves to implement competency-based teacher education may be made. The increasing direction of universities by Commonwealth bureaucrats and politicians is part of the shift from elite to mass higher education in Australia. McCulloch's paper on academic unionism provides an account of the change in higher education and considers the way in which industrial conditions (of which competency statements are a part) have developed. It is important to note that the drive to provide competency statements for all levels of the workforce has had significant union input (although not necessarily from academic unions).

Becher's paper sets out the experience of English teacher education since 1944. It indicates the current form of government control in England and the shift to school-based teacher education which, when combined with competency standards, may be seen as a reversion to an apprenticeship model. Beazley (1993, p. 8) states

The Government ... would not support an apprenticeship model for teacher education teacher education is not antithetical to a competency-based approach. Of utmost importance, is ensuring that the issue of competency standards is widely debated throughout the profession.

This special issue is a contribution to that debate.

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COMPETENCY STANDARDS IN TEACHING: TWO PROBLEMS – ONE SOLUTION

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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. In recent decades, proposals for school improvement have led to changes in curriculum content, materials and structure; assessment; architecture; and governance of schools. Throughout these changes, teachers' classroom practices have been remarkably durable and characterised by a few common practices (Cuban, 1988). According to the North American literature, such characteristics include the following:

- teachers 'out-talk' students by a 3:1 ratio;
- teachers provide little corrective feedback to students;
- teachers devote little time to questioning of any sort and almost no time to open questions that call for complex and emotional responses;
- whole-class instruction predominates, with almost no independent, small-group, or cooperative work by students;
- emotions rarely appear in classrooms
- there is little praise, enthusiasm, or intensity of any sort. Classrooms are emotionally neutral, affectless places.

(Sykes, 1988, p. 461; see also Sirotnik, 1983 and Goodlad, 1984.)

These teaching practices are judged to be insufficient to meet the educational challenges of the post-modern era, and so educational reformers have now turned their attention to improving schools by focusing on what teachers know and do. Various levers of change have been proposed, including changes to pre-service and in-service education, teacher registration, career structures and pay for performance. What these proposals have in common is a conviction that the education profession should be more explicit about what teachers know and do, and about what teachers might need to know in order to act differently.

In Australia, this international concern about the knowledge and skill of teachers has been connected with a second program of reform, represented by the skills formation policy and guide-lines issued by the National Training Board (NTB). Whereas the school reform movement is characterised by decades of debate about the nature of the problem, a history of many attempts and a few successes, and an ecumenical view of possible solutions, the skills formation movement arrives as a complete and internally consistent view of the problem and the solution. The problem, in the words of the NTB, is "the need to build an economy which will be internationally competitive into the next century" and the solution is "a national standards system ... that ... should lead to an effective, efficient, responsible and coherent national vocational education and training system" (NTB, 1991, p. 4). Although the NTB was initially established to set national skill standards "for occupations from entry to para-professional level" (Dawkins, 1989, p. 17), more recent NTB publications propose that the National Competency Standards also apply "in the professions and executive management" (NTB, 1991, p. 12). Such competency standards, the NTB argues, should closely relate to industrial awards and should encompass the role of the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition which is encouraging the development of competency standards in the professions.

As these two sets of reform collide, competency standards are likely to be central to the 1990s Australian quest for school improvement. The common thread which connects the reforms is that both skills formation and school improvement focus attention on performance: how well do people need to perform, what do they need to know, and what training is necessary to bring them up to the required standard. The question for education, however, is what conception of 'standards' will allow teaching to take its place in the National Competency Standards system and contribute to the broader agenda of school improvement?

This paper explores two alternative forms of competency standards — case-based standards and behavioural descriptor-based standards.