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**Teacher Education in Ireland:
Facing challenge and recognising opportunity**



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TEACHER COMPETENCES – A CORE CHALLENGE FOR TEACHER EDUCATORS

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ABSTRACT: *This paper recognises that Irish educationalists need to assert and debate the values, knowledge, skills and attitudes that our teachers should acquire, while recognising the limitations of any rubric to describe the essence of a 'competent' teacher'. The process of naming our beliefs and values in education has been initiated with the establishment of the Codes of Professional Conduct for Teachers by the Teaching Council. The collaborative and consultative approach taken by the Council in devising these codes has contributed significantly to the recent debate on the issue of teacher competence and 'competencies'. Within this context the author suggests that it is important for the Irish education community to reconceptualise the term 'competencies' and to develop an alternative lexicon that might capture the nature and quality of teaching in Ireland.*

INTRODUCTION

The fundamental tensions that drive teacher education emerge and re-emerge periodically. Each time they do, they are threaded into and wound around the current intersections of educational and other kinds of research, practice, and policy. Thus, the tensions are both old and new. They are new in that they are woven into the tapestry of changed and changing political, social, and economic times and thus have a different set of implications each time they re-emerge in prominence. But they are also old in that they represent enduring and deep disagreements in society about the purposes of schooling, the value of teaching, and the preparation of teachers (Cochran-Smith, 2003, p. 278).

The Irish education community² is currently facing tensions that are both old and new. We are, as has always been the case, concerned that teachers are well-prepared, competent, and that they are accountable for their performance. We consider it a positive development that the issue of teacher education, teachers' competence and teaching quality is being addressed by international and national reports and associated legislation. This debate and focus provides us with an opportunity to contribute to the emerging consensus of the factors that

¹ I wish to acknowledge that this paper stemmed from conversations with Rose Dolan, NUI Maynooth.

² The Irish education community includes the many stakeholders for whom teacher quality is a major concern; the list below is not exhaustive but includes sectors such as policy makers, teachers, principals, mentors and those involved in induction processes, the inspectorate, and teacher educators.

define a 'competent' teacher within the rich political, social, cultural and economic tapestry of Irish society. However, the consequent challenge is to ensure that teacher educators as a professional community, together with central policy makers, engage in the broader political debate as to what is valuable in teacher education and teaching. As we engage in the discourse of defining what we value, it is important that we achieve an agreed understanding of teacher 'competence' that reflects the wealth of our Irish teaching heritage.

THE RECENT EMERGENCE OF 'COMPETENCIES'

In the 1960s and 1970s, performance or competency-based teacher education (P/CBTE) dominated the literature in the United States, and where programmes applied a competency-based approach, prospective teachers had to demonstrate their mastery of the essential tasks of teaching. The list of competencies proliferated and Michigan State University, for example, devised more than 1,500 teacher competencies (Zeichner, 2008, p.10). Since the 1990s competency-based education has re-emerged in the US in the form of a more limited number of 'standards' which are elaborated through the articulation of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that define those standards. Similarly in England, during the 1980s and 1990s, successive governments promoted a competency-based approach to teacher education. The government assumed greater control over initial teacher education and placed greater emphasis on school-oriented and practical training (Furlong *et al.* 1995; Hobson, 2003). The Department for Education identified specific skills teachers needed to attain, most notably in its Circular 9/92 (DfE, 1992) which outlined various competencies of teaching (relating to subject knowledge and application, class management and assessment etc.) on which initial training courses should focus. The Department also announced that trainees should spend a minimum of two-thirds of their training in schools (Hobson, 2003). The long lists of competencies or standards, as they were renamed in 1997, enumerated by the Teacher Training Authority have been issued without rationale or indication of their philosophical underpinning. The language of teacher education has changed where student teachers are 'trainees' and the curriculum is expressed in a set of standards to be attained to qualify for teacher status. Recognising the influence of our near neighbour on educational policy here, O'Donoghue has warned, 'It may only be a matter of time before this trend becomes a powerful one on the Irish scene' (1993, p. 98).

This instrumentalist and reductionist approach equates teaching with a collection of skills that can be analysed, described and mastered; where 'teachers are viewed as technicians who will simply apply what educational research has discovered' (Fish 1989 cited in Turner-Bissett, 1999, p. 40). The result in England has been to narrow and reduce the nature of teacher education, creating an instrumental, apprenticeship model of teacher training, with limited or no university engagement for aspiring teachers. Even where there is engagement with universities, the policy to de-theorise and de-professionalise teaching and teacher education in the interest of pursuing technical interests has resulted in programmes which, without foundation disciplines, do not support, encourage and enable student teachers to ask questions about the nature of education, or to challenge and analyse the current system and curriculum. In his critique of the system Michael Apple (2005, p. x) has stated that the drive to competencies and an instrumental view of education has resulted in the 'collapse in confidence of individual professionalism'.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Within an Irish context, there is a long tradition of debate concerning the essential knowledge, skills and attitudes required of a good teacher. Patrick Weston Joyce, one of the first providers

of school-based teacher development programmes in 1856 and thereafter head of the State Training College in Marlborough Street, identified in his *Handbook of School Management and Methods of Teaching* (1863) the core knowledge and pedagogies which the teacher ought to master, outlined the essential practical skills required by the teacher in the fulfilment of his/her duties, and described the prerequisite personal values and dispositions teachers required to be successful within the national school system. Joyce clearly advised users of his *Handbook* that he had included only the most essential aspects, and in the first editions of his text he incorporated sections relating to the 'Mechanical arrangements of the school' which detailed the site and physical dimensions of a school house, the organisation of classroom furniture and advised on school cleanliness, timetables and discipline matters. His *Handbook* also included sections on the personal values and morals of teachers, as well as the best approach to organising classes and pedagogy of simultaneous instruction. However, Joyce's understanding of what was essential knowledge, skills and attitudes for Irish teachers evolved during his career, which spanned three decades, and he kept abreast of developments internationally. The amendments to the 18 editions of his *Handbook* illustrate his own progression as a teacher educator and an educationist, but they also reflect what he perceived to be essential, core knowledge for teachers. In subsequent editions of his *Handbook* (1887, 1897) he included for example, sections on the psychology of teaching, manual instruction (a programme of design, construction and crafts), and 'kindergarten', an approach to early childhood education reflecting Froebel's concept of kindergarten. Joyce's revised views of the essential knowledge, skills and attitudes of what comprised a 'good teacher' were informed by extensive reading and reflection, as well as the study of education systems in other jurisdictions. It is evident from the evolution of his *Handbook*, that the limits/standards established in the 1860s were inadequate and out-dated by the 1890s. It is clear that one of the requirements of stating what is 'essential' for teachers and teaching is an awareness of the fluidity of appropriate teacher knowledge, a willingness to amend and develop such statements of knowledge, but also an underlying awareness of the essence of change; change in educational values, change in methods, change in the social, cultural, economic, and emotional landscape of a country.

In contrast to the willingness of one educationist to review and revise what he deemed essential teacher knowledge in the nineteenth century, the system of Payment by Results was applied in Ireland during the same period, in a static and unchanging manner. During the first thirty years of the National School System the cost of education in Ireland had increased exponentially. There was a belief that money expended on education was uneconomically and inefficiently employed and that the existing school system was not producing results to justify the growing expenditure. Following the practice already established in England in 1862, payment by results was introduced in Ireland in 1872 (Coolahan, 1981, p. 29). Within this process the National Board of Education set out the specific content within each subject area to be taught at each level of the school system and teachers' competence was assessed through the proficiency of their students' performance which was measured by annual examinations (Minutes of the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland (CNEI), 30 June 1872, and thereafter the annual reports of the CNEI provided details of the various programmes). Teachers' remuneration was computed on the basis of their students' ability to achieve a 'pass' within the examination process. Although this system is accredited with reducing illiteracy levels and improving school attendance, by 1900 it was abandoned at primary level because of its negative impact on education. In his evidence to the Belmore Commission, PW Joyce, who had assisted Sir Patrick Keenan in writing and devising the programme stated:

...after it had been in operation for a little while, it did produce great benefits ... After twenty-five years we find it has banished the power of thinking amongst pupils. For instance in reading, children read over the lessons, the simplest lessons, and they do not know, or care, or want or know the meaning...the results system has rendered children incapable of thinking. (PW Joyce, *Evidence to the Royal Commission of*

Inquiry on Manual and Practical Instruction in Primary School under the Board of National Education, HC 1897, First Report, pp. 85-86).

WJM Starkie, the Resident Commissioner of National Education, was clear in his criticism of the narrow and prescriptive nature of the curriculum and examination process and its effects on teachers and teaching. He stated that children and teachers laboured under the payment-by-results system, an “elaborate mosaic of sixpences and shillings ... [that] made half a million children in each year the drudges of the teachers, the teachers the drudges of the inspectors, and the inspectors of the office” (Starkie, 1900, p.3). Starkie recognised that the prescribed programme imposed iron limitations on teachers and pupils, and the ensuing unavoidable monotony and uniformity “paralysed the intellects of a whole generation”. He condemned the results’ system which inflicted an artificial standard on all Irish schools, irrespective of their location, requiring “the same high efficiency in reading ... from Gaelic speakers of Aran as from the children of Dublin.” Starkie continued:

Freedom and elasticity are vital to good teaching and it is worthwhile sacrificing a great deal of accuracy exacted by an examination-test in exchange for the alertness of intellect, the spirit of initiative and independence, the slow but continuous development which a less rigid training fosters (1900, p.2).

Despite the general dissatisfaction with the payment by results system and the optimism associated with the introduction of the Revised Programme in 1900, some twenty years later, the concern to once again provide proof of academic standards within schools provided the impetus for the establishment of the Primary School Certificate Examination. Introduced in 1929 in a voluntary capacity, approx 25% of children sat the examination in the early years which assessed their proficiency in a broad range of subjects. However, by 1941 participation in the examination became a compulsory requirement and the range of subjects assessed was reduced to Gaeilge, English and Arithmetic. In May 1941, Eamonn deValera, then Minister for Education and himself a product of the Payment by Results system both as a second level student and subsequently as an examiner of the Intermediate Board, advocated:

I am for cutting off every frill so as to make certain that the essentials are properly done. I do not care what teachers are offended by it. I am less interested in a teacher’s method of teaching than I am in the results...and the test I would apply is the examination (Dáil Éireann, 27 May, 1941).

The Primary Certificate was abolished in 1967, but in the interim what was valued in primary education reflected that which was assessed in the terminal examination in sixth class. With the publication of the Investment in Education Report (1965) and the awareness that Irish education was out of step with international norms, the abolition of the examination paved the way for the introduction of a broader and child-centred education.

During each of these periods it became clear that the limitations and constraints imposed by highly defined processes of assessment, benchmarks, and accountability did not contribute to the real education of the children involved. It failed to enrich the teaching styles or approaches implemented by teachers and it imposed narrow definitions of attainment expected at each level and limited the curriculum significantly as teachers taught to those standards. Past events within Irish education illustrate that the introduction of ‘competencies’, which reduce teaching to a prescribed number of easily and clearly defined skills drawn from a narrow base of knowledge, has a severely limiting and negative impact on teaching and teacher education. Fortunately, the retention of the history of Irish education as one of the foundation disciplines within teacher education has contributed to teachers’ ‘cognitive map’, enabling us to locate issues within a set of meanings (Stanley, 1968, p. 235 cited by O’Donoghue, 1993, p. 105) and consequently has significantly reduced the threat of collective amnesia that has engulfed other education systems (Cochran-Smith, 2003).

THE TEACHING CAREER

Traditionally, the role of teachers has been respected by the Irish public and this regard is deeply rooted in historical circumstances. Even when teachers did not benefit from good salaries there was regard for their scholarship, the nature of their work and their roles in the community (Coolahan, 2003, p. vi). Teachers and teaching continue to have high status in Irish society and there is widespread acceptance of the value of education and awareness of the quality of Irish teachers. The OECD examiners in 1991 noted, 'Ireland has been fortunate in the quality of its teaching force' (1991, p. 100). Teaching continues to attract students who are high academic performers and who are interested in job satisfaction, fulfilment and creativity, and who place a high value on caring and 'making a difference' to others. Drudy's (2006) research illustrates that candidates who select teacher education programmes are of the opinion that primary teachers enjoy their jobs and that, while less interested in pay and prestige, these candidates express egalitarian views more frequently than did their peers (pp. 259-273).

The introduction of the 1971 Curriculum and the establishment of degree-awarding teacher education programmes heralded a new era in Irish education. During this period there was a transition from a process of teacher training to one of teacher education, and since the 1970s teaching has become an all-graduate profession; curriculum at all levels of the system was renewed and revised; there have been enhanced opportunities for teachers to engage in professional development programmes, and teachers have had greater opportunities to exercise their professionalism within their classrooms, schools, and in collaboration with the design and implementation of the Primary School Curriculum 1999. Teaching in schools has become more flexible, and teachers have been enabled to adapt the curriculum to suit the individual needs of their students, cognisant of their geographical location and particular school ethos. Teachers engage annually in continuing professional development programmes, some of which are accredited at graduate diploma, master's and doctoral levels. In parallel the teacher representative bodies have negotiated increased salaries and promoted and defined more secure career phases, contributing in no small way to the professionalisation of the teaching career.

There has been a high level of public trust and confidence in the schooling system. In official policy documents, the Government has repeatedly acknowledged and affirmed the work of teachers and acknowledged their generous contribution to community life (Green Paper, 1992; White Paper, 1995). There is a public acceptance that the work of teachers, within a holistic approach to education, extends well beyond the direct business of teaching school subjects. The caring dimension of the teacher's role with regard to the welfare of young people is well recognised (Coolahan, 2003, p. 63). While recent legislation has created a tighter context of accountability and the rights of students and parents have been more clearly defined, teacher morale and motivation remains high. In addition, it was noted at the National Education Convention that 'The approach taken to educational change in Ireland is very different from that prevailing in some other countries. Here the keynote is consultation and partnership, as distinct from rule or dictat or prescriptive imposition (Coolahan, 1994, p.9). This approach has been built on mutual respect for all partners in education and has also contributed to the increased professionalism of teachers.

The positive status and image of teaching enjoyed in Ireland is not the norm in many other countries. The recent OECD report *Teachers Matter: Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers* (2005) examined the characteristics of the workforce in 25 countries. This report documented that half of the countries have serious concerns about maintaining an adequate supply of good quality teachers, it asserts that fewer high achievers are becoming teachers and that in most countries teachers' relative salaries are declining with consequently negative impact on the image and status of teaching. Some countries also have

high levels of teacher attrition with one-third of America's teachers leaving the field during the first three years of teaching, and almost half leaving after five years (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2002, p. 3). England also reports that up to 50% of all entrants to teaching leave the profession within the first five years of their careers (Jones, 2009, pp 4-21).

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS THAT PROMOTE A COMPETENCY AGENDA

The last two decades have been a particularly rich period for the publication of educational reports, discussion papers and legislation. The review of education by the OECD in 1991 provided the impetus for a surge in statutory and policy documents generated during the 1990s and 2000s. While some of these documents may appear to support radical change in Irish education and teacher preparation, on closer scrutiny, they frequently reveal a technicist and instrumental view of teaching. The publication of the *Green Paper: Education for a Changing World* in 1992 presented an agenda for change, and the document delineated the role of education as 'preparing students for life and for work and should equip them with the skills for this purpose'. It continued:

It should foster a spirit of self-reliance and enterprise among students...While adhering to its philosophy of contributing to the development of the whole person, the education system must seek to interact with the world of work to promote the employability of its students and in playing its part in the country's economic development (p.35).

The Green Paper introduced language and terminology appropriate within a commercial climate with reference to the principal of a school as 'the Chief Executive' (p.19) and the persistent use of the term 'teacher training' (p. 23). The National Education Convention (1994) recorded that the Green Paper had lacked 'an adequate philosophy of education' and this omission had given 'an over-emphasis to utilitarian and commercial concerns' (p.7). The National Education Convention was ground-breaking in that it facilitated a consultative, collaborative approach to educational change; it underlined the importance of initial, induction and in-career teacher education.

Nonetheless the subsequent White Paper *Charting our Education Future* supports a restricted view of teaching, stating that the 'teacher has the onerous responsibilities of imparting knowledge' (Ireland, 1995, p. 119) and favours an approach whereby the pre-service development of teachers should be 'decentralised, school-focused and conducive to high levels of teacher participation in all aspects of the process' (Ireland, 1995, p.128). Leonard and Gleeson (1999, p.61) note that the terms 'teacher education' and 'teacher training' are used interchangeably within the Paper and that the discourse of training, which promotes a technical rather than a professional concern, permeates the approach taken to in-career development. These papers helped shape the Education Act in 1998, the first comprehensive piece of legislation published since the establishment of the Irish national school system in 1831.

Although Ireland has not adopted such an obviously technicised, competency-based approach, since the 1990s, many policy documents published by central government reflect a pervasive technical interest. Additionally, various policy decisions by the Department of Education and Science are underpinned by the technicised and narrow approach to teacher education. In particular, in 2003, a Higher Diploma in Arts in Primary Education, delivered by a private provider, Hibernia College, was accredited by the Higher Education Training Awards Council (HETAC) and recognised by the Department of Education and Science. This

marks a significant 'benchmark' in the Irish context, and has many of the hallmarks of a privatisation agenda, though it is frequently presented by the DES as a necessity due to the inability of existing providers to meet demands (Sugrue and Dupont 2005, p. 82).

The Teaching Council Act 2001 and the subsequent establishment of the Teaching Council on 1 March 2006, provides further national impetus towards the establishment of a 'competency' agenda. The Teaching Council has taken over the function of registration of teachers and has, under the Act, responsibility for establishing and maintaining 'standards of ... teaching, knowledge, skill and competence of teachers...' (Government of Ireland, 2001, Section 6.b, p.8). In addition the Council also must 'review the standards of knowledge, skill and competence required for the practice of teaching' (Government of Ireland, 2001, Section 38, 1.c. p. 26). The language and expectations of the Teaching Council reflect strongly the principles enshrined in international agreements to which Ireland is a signatory.

During the last decade Irish society has changed radically and the far-reaching economic and social changes which were heralded by the 'Celtic Tiger' placed greater importance on the provision of high-quality schooling than ever before. The demands on schools and teachers are becoming more complex. In addition education policy has become much more central to EU deliberations since the middle 1990s than had traditionally been the case (Coolahan, 2007, p. 10). OECD Education Ministers have committed their countries to the goal of raising the quality of learning for all. This ambitious goal will not be achieved unless all students receive high quality teaching (OECD, 2005, p.7). To this end the OECD noted:

The overarching priority is for countries to have in place a clear and concise statement or profile of what teachers are expected to know and be able to do ... A statement of teacher competences and professional standards at different stages of their career will provide a framework for the teacher development continuum (OECD 2005, pp. 131 - 132).

At the annual SCoTENS conference in 2004, Irish educationists analysed the most significant developments within the European political context, including the Bologna Agreement, and the European Council (Lisbon 2000) where it was agreed that Europe should aim to become by 2010 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustaining economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion'. One consequence of this objective was the agreement to develop a European framework for the quality of teachers' and trainers' competences and qualifications and to establish a single metric to ensure the transparency of qualifications and competences called a Europass (Feerick, 2004, p. 17).

Subsequently the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme was initiated and eight working groups were established. Group A (the first of these groups) was devoted to 'Improving the Education of Teachers and Trainers'. At the European Summit in Spring 2002, the Ministers for Education highlighted a number of key issues on which the work group should focus; the first two key areas were:

1. Identifying the skills that teachers and trainers need given their changing roles in society
2. Supporting teachers and trainers as they respond to challenges of the knowledge society (Feerick, 2004, p. 19)

Irish teacher educators are conscious of the impact of the introduction of the Bologna Declaration and the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), where the mobility of teachers and their qualifications is an international right. To comply with these requirements teacher educators are expected to develop descriptors of the learning outcomes of their programmes.

This has resulted in processes whereby the ECTS weighting of each module and programme has been identified, as well as the specific learning outcomes for each unit. Documents such as the *Common European Principles for Teacher Competences and Qualifications* and *Improving the Quality of Teacher Education* (Commission of the European Communities 08/2007) are now part of the lexicon of initial and continuing teacher education. Engagement with European legislation and requirements is an essential activity for teacher educators within the current climate. There is little ambiguity in the national or international legislation; both require that those who are involved in education address issues of teacher competence and qualifications. John Coolahan, in his recent article on 'The operational environment for future planning in teacher education: OECD and EU initiatives' concludes 'recent policy approaches by the OECD and the EU towards teacher education... are of considerable importance to teacher education in Ireland'. He asserts:

Different models of competence criteria are in existence, and some countries have considerable experience of them. Depending on the mode devised, the competency approach can be professionally positive and benign, or it can, alternatively, be of a narrow, check-list character and be professionally malign. Both the OECD and EU emphasise the desirability of pro-active engagement by teacher educators in the design of the competences. It would be remiss if Irish teacher educators do not take the initiative in exploring aspects of the competency approach, with a view to ensuring if, as seems likely, this policy is politically favoured, that the best competency model possible is available for adoption in Ireland (2007, p. 14).

Similarly Drudy (2004, p.32) has suggested 'as the higher education system moves towards a competences model ... it will be important to avoid the administrative seductions of systems which are overly prescriptive and reductionist'. It may be deemed pragmatic to state that teacher educators must engage in designing and defining a competence model that best fits with Irish cultural and systemic needs. However, the impact of political decisions which were made some years ago, are now becoming a reality and if teacher educators and the professional community fail to address the issue of teacher competences, then it is inevitable that others will fill the vacuum. Whatever the outcome of the process, the description as to what constitutes 'good teaching' will in turn define teacher education for the next number of decades, shaping the experiences of a generation of teachers and the children in their care. The potential, Cochran-Smith (2004) warns, is that education will be removed from initial teacher education to be replaced by 'training' programmes which are narrow and technical in nature. In this context 'teaching (is) seen as something for which you can train by learning particular skills, and once you have acquired these skills or competencies, you are amply equipped to teach' (2004:3).

The move towards the development of teacher 'competencies' within our own system is one that generates considerable argument and resistance. Irish educators generally associate the term with a technicist and reductionist view of teaching where the performance or achievement of teachers can be observed, measured and evaluated against identified standards or benchmarks. Some of our leading educationists, such as Andy Burke, argue cogently that the introduction of a competency model to Irish education may lead to the commodification of education and a utilitarian approach to teaching and consequently teacher education (Burke, 2007. p. 67). However, the dilemma for teacher educators and the education community is that within an international domain the competency/standards approach to teaching and teacher education is pervasive and has become central to the operational environment for future planning (Coolahan, 2007). We cannot ignore the existence of this movement; Drudy (2004, p. 31) cited by Deegan (2007, p.15) states 'we are only now beginning to realise the impact of educational change initiated at European level'. We have to engage with the 'competency' debate but in a manner that remains loyal to our culture and

values, while avoiding the international movement to reduce what it means to teach to a limited number of statements of ‘competencies’.

This is a significant challenge. Nonetheless recent developments provide optimism for our ability to create a framework that articulates what we value in Irish teaching. Each teacher education programme has designed and developed assessment processes not just for written assignments, projects and portfolios, but also for the grading of teaching practice. Within this process, each college or department of education has an established rubric where personal and professional competences on teaching practice are identified, and where grade descriptors have been developed as an objective measure of the competence of a student teacher during teaching practice. Each programme has appointed external examiners who evaluate the content and assessment of modules as well as the teaching practice component. All colleges have processes whereby the transparency of the awarding of grades on Teaching Practice can be tested and where students have the right to appeal a grade. While the emphasis on certain criteria or aspects may differ between colleges, there is a broad consensus as to what should be included in an appraisal of teaching practice and as Gleeson and Moody (2007, p. 32) acknowledge, all institutions have adopted a holistic rather than a technical/numerical approach to grading.

The recent work of the Teaching Council has also contributed positively to the development of such a framework. While the legislation establishing the Council refers to ‘standards’ and ‘competence’, the Council has interpreted and implemented the Act in an inclusive and holistic manner. One of the first achievements of the Teaching Council was the publication of the ‘Codes of Professional Conduct for Teachers’. In the design and development of the Codes, the Teaching Council engaged in a comprehensive consultative process, inviting all partners to participate in the discourse and debate. The result has been the development of a set of Codes, which are agreed by a broad community, and which endeavour to state clearly the complex range of values, capacities and responsibilities which professional teachers bring to their work. The Codes capture the essence of a multi-faceted model of teacher professionalism, which ‘includes teachers’ commitment to the care of students, their personal well-being and educational development, their commitment to promoting equity and justice, to engaging their students in active learning, to being creative, imaginative, and innovative in their teaching, to collaborate with colleagues, parents and the wider educational community, and to engage in their own continuous professional development’ (Teaching Council, 2007). These statements allow for the individuality of teachers and recognise that teaching is not a neutral activity; while cognisant of international developments, and informed by research literature, they also accord with the unique tradition of teaching in Ireland.

CLARIFYING OUR LANGUAGE: ‘COMPETENCIES’ VERSUS ‘COMPETENCES’

In his keynote address to the SCoTENS conference in 2008 Ciaran Sugrue, while referring to the recent OECD publication *Improving School Leadership*, made a number of relevant and challenging comments in relation to the use of language, which are particularly pertinent to this discussion. Sugrue asked participants to pay attention to the language of reform, and advised, ‘if you want to change the mindset, change the language, and so if you use a particular kind of language which is very evident in this report then you actually get people using that language and in a way that changes the conversation over time’. While Sugrue was specifically referring to the use of the terms ‘distributed leadership’, ‘distributive leadership’ and ‘collaboration’ which are used interchangeably in the OECD document, he argues that these terms not only have different meanings from one another, but that each is also defined differently by different people. He argued that this lack of precision on the part of the OECD

authors is not simply an academic quibble but that each term refers to different leadership styles and each presents differing challenges. He argued that ambiguity is a major stumbling block to logical discussion as well as application.

In the context of teacher competency terms such as competence, competences, competency, and competencies have been used synonymously and it is appropriate that we establish clarity in how we use the terms, particularly '*competencies*' and '*competences*'. While the change in language may seem minute, whether or not to include an 'i' in the plural of the noun, yet both concepts are anatomically different and are premised on opposing sets of values and expectations. "Competencies" are the list of skills, knowledge, attitudes which have been developed in other jurisdictions where concern for the quality of teaching and teachers has resulted in the development of prescriptive, narrow, rigid criteria and which are premised on an impoverished perception of teaching and learning.

However, 'competences' need not be limited, instrumental or behaviourist in nature. If we engage in a process where we identify what we consider valuable in education, then statements of competence, or 'competences' can be flexible, expansive, culturally rich, and challenging. Creating such wider, broader, more complex, visionary statements will challenge us to name the values which should permeate all aspects of teaching and learning. This process should envision the professional teacher as one 'who learns from teaching' and the job of teacher education as empowering teachers to 'develop the capacity to inquire sensitively and systematically into the nature of learning and the effects of teaching' (Darling-Hammond, 2000, p. 170). O' Donoghue and Whitehead (2008, p.198) stress that unless this inquiry and reflection is at a level where teachers critically reflect on the systematic and ideological forces that shape their work in schools, then reflection might be meaningless and serve to perpetuate 'technical rationality' (2008, p. 198). Statements of competence should incorporate the professional knowledge, judgement, and autonomy of the teacher, be premised on the teacher's involvement in critical inquiry, and recognise the ethical, individualised, personal and 'non-routine' nature of teaching. These statements eschew the concept of tool-kit teaching and 'reject simplistic formulas or cookie-cutter routines' (Darling-Hammond, 2000, p. 170).

CONCLUSION

Many developed countries have embraced the 'competency/standards' process, and the expansion of competency-based education is one aspect of global educational reform. Levin (1998) characterises this reform movement in terms of a 'policy epidemic' which unleashes a flood of closely inter-related reform ideas into diverse education systems which have different histories and social and political locations. Frequently this reform agenda is championed by powerful change agents such as the World Bank and the OECD. Despite the widespread adoption of the competency agenda and the development of precise statements which are designed to measure teacher performance, and therefore promote and assure excellence, many countries are experiencing difficulties in attracting high calibre entrants to teaching and in retaining qualified teachers in their systems. The context in Ireland is radically different to that experienced in American and British education systems. The competency-based approach to teaching should reflect and be refracted by the particular context in which it is enacted. For that reason, the extant 'solutions' to international concerns in education which are devised in education systems that have successfully reduced teachers to the status of 'technicians' and which deprecate the role of teacher as 'intellectual' (Giroux, 1988) are inappropriate within Irish education. Nonetheless the pervasiveness of the competency-based approach to teaching cannot be ignored. Engagement in a process of generating statements of teacher 'competence' and the process of negotiating agreement around those statements could be beneficial for the educational community. On a national level it would encourage professional

dialogue and debate on issues which are frequently intuitive or taken for granted. This dialogue will result in a greater ability among all in the professional community to articulate our objectives, share our values, and recognise the complexity and uncertainty of the teaching life. Such a debate would open up the nature and approach to teaching within an Irish context to an international audience and hopefully contribute to the reconceptualisation of the competency debate.

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