

Teacher Competency: Some Conceptual Distinctions And Policy Implications

The movement to assess teacher competency is becoming a central concern for professional educators, state departments of education, and the public. The major underlying assumption of this concern is that primary and secondary school-aged children are falling far behind in basic skills as compared with their counterparts in other countries. A further concern is that, within this country, variability in teacher competency may exacerbate differences among children of various socioeconomic, racial and ethnic backgrounds and thus perpetuate long-term educational and economic inequalities. To support these assumptions, critics of teacher preparation institutions cite declining SAT and ACT test scores of those entering teacher training, and also suggest that since there is a surplus of teachers in many areas this constitutes sufficient grounds for assuming that becoming a teacher is less intellectually demanding than preparation for other fields.

While these assumptions may or may not be true, it may be pertinent to examine the entire issue of teacher competency testing along different lines in the hope of exposing and clarifying some basic positions. The purpose of this paper will, then, be twofold: to analyze what I consider to be certain hidden assumptions related to teacher competency testing, and, second, to offer a rather radical alternative to existing policies in this area. To accomplish these goals, I will try to use, in a very basic way, some of the techniques of what has become known within philosophy and philosophy of education as "ordinary language analysis" (Peters, 1966; Scheffler, 1965; Soltis, 1968; and Wilson, 1979). While the development of this mode of analysis has a fascinating history itself, referred to as analytic philosophy, its basic purpose is to look at how language is used in different contexts so that its meaning(s) can be analyzed and understood (Magee, 1971). Thus, in terms of teacher competency testing, we want to see what type of language is used and the explicit and implicit assumptions underlying the use of this language.

To begin with, we might want to initially ask what the phrase "teacher competency" means? But, before we can even approximate an answer to this question, it is necessary to see that the phrase is implicitly a *relational* one. That is to say, competent in what and to whom? To say that a teacher is "competent" to teach second graders, who themselves have the "capacity" or "ability" to understand the content. Thus, teacher competency in this sense means in *relation to students*, who themselves can somehow be labeled as "normal." This condition of "normalcy, in turn, suggests that students are able to give evidence that the content taught by the teacher has been learned or 'mastered' ".

The requirement of evidence of learning by students, as an indicator of teacher competence, is of course subject to many problems itself. In the case where students are "nor-

mal" and do indeed learn some given content, one could then conclude the teacher is competent. However, in those instances where students may suffer from some unique handicapping condition - physical, emotional, economic, or related to ability - and do not perform adequately on some indicator of learning, can we then argue that it is due to a *lack* of teacher competency? Conversely, students with no unique handicapping conditions may do very well on performance measures, but this may be due to factors such as having extraordinary ability which, in a sense, may go beyond basic teacher competency. In other words, if students do very well in some area, is it an indicator of having a very competent teacher? Thus, when teacher competency is assessed relationally, by way of student learning, it may give very mixed results.

We may want to assess teacher competency, then, in some other fashion. One suggestion might be to judge competency only in relation to other teachers. For example, we might want to state that all second grade teachers need to have some *minimal* competency "X", let us say the ability to understand basic arithmetical processes. The possession of this competency could be assessed in different ways: all second grade teachers would be judged competent if they had a course in math teaching methods in which they obtained a grade of "C" or better; or if they scored in a certain percentile on some type of standardized test such as the National Teachers Exam; or if they simply completed high school where some type of training in mathematics was indicated, and so on.

All second grade teachers would then be judged as competent or incompetent on the basis of previously established norms - falling below the norm would indicate incompetency, above or at the norm, competency. Although this begs-the-question of who should establish the norm(s), if this could be worked out, then a "measure" of teacher competence would be possible. In this conception of teacher competency, we would then say that a necessary condition for defining a competent teacher is by way of some previously established criterion. This may not of course define what is sufficient for competency, although some policy-makers could indeed argue this way.

The above discussion would imply then that teacher competency should be defined only in relation to others in a given category. We may want to argue, however, that all teachers, irrespective of grade level and/or specialization, be assessed in the same way. For example, all teachers would have to score at a certain percentile on the math section of the national Teachers Exam irrespective of background or educational training. A possible objection to this plan might be that it fosters equality but not equity. That is to say, if we require all teachers to score at a certain percentile in math, we are treating everyone in that category in the same way in so far as we are not requiring math teachers to score higher than second grade teachers, or teachers from various ethnic backgrounds to score differently, or teachers from prestigious institutions, and so forth. Given that a reasonable "minimal competency" can be agreed upon, then all are being treated equally.

But if *equity* is the issue, then the above strategy would be found to be flawed. We could argue, for instance, that teachers do indeed differ on relevant background and educational characteristics, and that even in terms of minimal competency these factors would result in labeling competent teachers as incompetent. If this stance is adopted, then it leads us back to the original position, with at least one variation. Thus, we should judge teacher competency first and foremost by an acceptable minimal criterion within each teaching category/level, but this could be "adjusted" as other relevant characteristics are taken into account. It should be stressed, again, that in these variations teacher competency is being judged in relation to categories of peers, and differences or lack of them within and between categories, but not in relation to student outcomes.

Knowing and Teaching

Up to this point, it has been suggested that the measurement of minimal teacher competency is at least possible, although difficulties may result. It should also be noted that the word "minimal" may have several different usages. If minimal is interpreted as "lowest acceptable level", this implies that there may be a range of acceptable performance criteria, let us say going from "low" to "high", but that the teacher need only to fall in the low category. On the other hand, minimal could be interpreted at the "high" end of the range and yet be thought of as *the minimal* acceptable criterion for competency. Likewise, minimal could be interpreted as some type of central tendency within a range, be it mode, median or mean, with, in the case of a mean, acceptable deviations from it.

Whatever definition is actually used, it cannot be separated from its performance or "in-use" function. That is to say, the *content* of what a teacher "knows" is usually thought to be closely related to "how" it is taught. Indeed, this performative function is exactly what distinguishes a "teacher" from someone who may have an equivalent knowledge base. The sense of this distinction may be illustrated by the following types of statements:

1. "She is really a good teacher because she knows how to present the material well."
2. "Of all the teachers Johnny has had, Mr. Jones is the only one who taught him anything."
3. "She knows her subject well, but she just can't teach it."
4. "He was probably the worst teacher I ever had."

In the first one (1), there is an implication that the teacher has at least a minimal competency in terms of knowledge of the content to be taught. If it is believed that the material is presented well, then the teacher must "know it" to begin with. It would seem odd to say that "she presented it well" but claim she did not really know it. The statement also suggests that not only does she know the content, but that her "teaching" of it is crucial to the *belief* that "she is really a good teacher." We see here at least two aspects of defining teacher competency. In one, there is the assumption that

competency as such can only be evaluated when it is connected to the performative act of "teaching." In the second, competency is evaluated as a belief coming from the observer.

In terms of the performative function, then, at least two possibilities suggest themselves: the teacher is "competent" and this shows itself through the act of teaching, or the teacher may not be competent but disguises the fact somehow through the act of teaching. The first instance would suggest that teaching is a necessary condition for the demonstration of competence. Thus, there is no way to gauge the teacher's competence unless she demonstrates it through teaching. The second instance would suggest that while teaching may be necessary to demonstrate competence, it is not sufficient. That is to say, the teaching act may be performed in such a way that it gives inaccurate information as to competence.

Statement one (1), however, additionally suggests that the act of teaching itself may be evaluated by criteria such as "teaching well" and "teaching poorly." When these evaluative criteria are applied as a basis for evaluating competency, the problems become more complex. Figure one illustrates these possibilities.

		Teaching "Ability"	
		Competent	Not Competent
Teacher's Knowledge of Content	Competent	I	II
	Not Competent	III	IV

An examination of the first cell could suggest that if a teacher is competent this will be reflected in competent (good) teaching. In this interpretation the knowledge of content is believed to be sufficient to predict competency in teaching, and competency in teaching is believed to be a necessary condition for having content competency; but not sufficient since competent teaching could, possibly, be the result of other factors. However, if the order of the terms is sufficient to predict content competency.

While content is necessary for competent teaching, it is not sufficient since teaching competency may be related to other factors. Additionally, both aspects could be seen as necessary and sufficient conditions and hence equivalent.

Cell IV would be the obverse of Cell I. Lack of competency of content would be sufficient to predict lack of teaching competency, and not-competent teaching would be a necessary condition for saying the teacher is not-competent in content. The terms could also be reversed as in Cell I.

Cell II could be interpreted in the following ways. We would not want to say that competency in content is sufficient to predict non-competency in teaching. But, rather, that a possibility may exist where a teacher is competent in content, but not in teaching (i.e. getting the content "across"). However, non-competency in teaching could be viewed as sufficient for saying non-competency in content.

Cell III could likewise be thought of in the following way: we would not ordinarily say that non-competency in content would be translated into competent teaching, but

we could suggest that a teacher could be non-competent in content and yet, in some way, be thought of as a "good" teacher. We could also suggest that a teacher might be a "good" teacher and yet not be content-competent.

Returning to the other statements (2, 3, and 4), we may attempt to place them in the framework of Figure 1. Thus, statement (2), "of all the teachers Johnny has had, Mr. Jones is the only one who taught him anything," would probably be taken to mean (I) - that Johnny's teacher was competent in both teaching and content, although (II) could be interpreted as implying that the teacher's content competency *might* have been as important or more important than teaching competency. Statement (3), "she knows her subject well, but she just can't teach it," would suggest II, content competency but not teaching competency. Statement (4), "he was probably the worst teacher I ever had," might imply (II) content-teaching non-competency, (IV) both deficient in content and teaching competency, and possibly (III) in the sense that non-content competency overshadows the possibility that the teaching might be competent.

These varied interpretations of teacher competency can be seen to hinge on the performative act of teaching. While a weak, but possible, case could be made that competency in teaching may mask non-competency in content, most individuals would, I believe, argue that good teaching cannot be accompanied without at least a "minimal" competency in content; although "minimum" or "maximum" content competency does not insure good teaching. Given this position, the "teaching" competency issue may be abandoned as a criterion of *general* competency, or it may be used as a criterion *for* determining competency.

Thus, in the first instance, one need only obtain a measure (whatever it may be) indicating that the person who intends to be a teacher (or is presently serving as one) has reached a level of competency congruent with the students to be taught, or as an average of what has been determined as competency for those in the same category, or as an average for *all* of those who want to become (or are) teachers. This definition of competency divorces itself from the act of teaching as well as possible evaluation, in terms of performance measures, of those who are taught. The second instance judges competency by an assessment of the teaching act itself. A teacher is then judged to be competent if, for instance, he/she is rated favorably by peers, or supervisors, or students, or possibly all. In this conception of competency, the major appeal is made to evaluative criteria which assess the act of teaching. The weight of evidence for competency is other than strict content competency. If we then judge a teacher to be "excellent", this may or may not imply content competency, and this may also hold for a teacher who is judged to be "poor".

The Belief Condition

These considerations likewise apply to the notion of "belief" that was mentioned earlier. Most arguments about teacher competency revolve around the belief systems of individuals directly or indirectly involved in the schooling process. Students "believe" they can distinguish good and poor teachers; parents "believe" teachers are good or poor

for their children; principals "believe" they know how to judge good from poor teachers, and so on. Now, while each of these groups is entitled to their beliefs about teacher competency, the basis of these beliefs often needs to be critically analyzed. One would imagine that a minimum criterion for assessing any belief would be the kinds of reasons that are given for holding that belief. Or as Scheffler (1965:77) states it, "belief is generally, then, a disposition to offer an affirmative response to certain sentences under appropriate conditions, for example, under systematic questioning."

The "systematic questioning" that Scheffler is talking about is concerned with the *evidence* given for a belief, and the types of scrutiny that can be applied to these kinds of statements. When Mr. Smith says, "Johnny really had a good teacher this year; he got an 'A' in math," one could translate it as meaning "I believe the reason Johnny got an 'A' in math was because he had a good teacher." With this statement, two initial questions concerning evidence could be raised: (1) What *is* that evidence, and (2), how "good" is the evidence? On the first point, one simply asserts the conditional, "if a student obtains a given grade x, then the teacher is competent." Then simply by asserting that the conditional is true, and affirming the antecedent to be true, "the student did get a grade of x," one can validly conclude that the teacher is competent. In this situation, the parent *believes* that Johnny's grade is sufficient for predicting teacher competency, and this constitutes, for him, all the evidence he needs. However, it may also be the case that Johnny did not get the requisite grade; but from this we could not conclude that Johnny did not have a good teacher - although, of course, many parents would argue exactly in this way.

But in any case, could we say this is adequate evidence base for this belief? We might want to ask Johnny's father additional questions to satisfy ourselves. For example, "How do you know that Johnny's 'A' was due to having a 'good' teacher"? He might reply that it would be silly to conclude that his son's grade could have resulted from having a "poor" teacher. This is certainly a plausible answer which, as explained above, implies that good teaching may be related to content competency, or, minimally, that good teaching is the primary factor.

We could press him further, however, and inquire as to his beliefs about Johnny's own "ability" and how this relates to his teacher. That is to say, does the father believe Johnny is "bright", "average", or "dull", and given any one of those, how do they relate to the teacher being a "good" one? If he responds that Johnny is an average student in math, but because he got an "A" this proves the teacher is "good", we might then want to ask what constitutes his belief of what makes a "good" teacher. Through this line of questioning we would eventually hope to come up with some criteria which would constitute necessary and/or sufficient grounds for judging teacher competence.

Assuming that "y" conditions are finally arrived at, and those form the evidence for the father's belief, we are still left with the problem of judging *these* beliefs by some stan-

ard. What if another parent, under similar conditions, judges the teacher to be incompetent and attributes his child's grade to the personal characteristics he (the child) has, i.e., ability, hard work, perseverance. Or it may be case that teachers and parents, or principals and parents, or principals and teachers may disagree in their beliefs concerning competence. The assessment of the evidence given for beliefs then becomes crucial, both in terms of content and in terms of those doing the assessing.

But what paradigms should be used to assess the evidence? This is indeed a difficult question, but perhaps the crucial one for determining teacher competency. One may begin by suggesting that two general approaches are possible; one *a priori*, one *a posteriori*. In the first approach, someone (who, of course, may be crucial) stipulates that a given disposition "x" should be possessed by all those desiring to be or who now call themselves teachers. This disposition "x" may be absolute or based on some type of central tendency, but in all cases is thought to be necessary, or sufficient, or both for defining teacher competency. For example, this disposition may be some measure of "ability", perhaps a personality characteristic, or a teaching style. Furthermore, this disposition may be viewed in isolation or as part of a process. When viewed in isolation, the claim would be that disposition "x", let us say ability, is simply the most important characteristic a person needs for being a teacher. If viewed as part of a process, one would say disposition "x" is needed because without it one cannot "teach well", "empathize with students", "understand content", "get along with peers well", and so forth. Likewise, it could be suggested that disposition "x" is only one of several related to being a teacher, but it is the *most* important.

The basis for the primacy of a given disposition must, however, still be substantiated. How could this be done? One means would be to deductively structure an argument in such a way that the disposition "x" is validly concluded. Thus, "high" ability may be postulated as the most important factor in occupational competence. Teachers, or those wishing to be, who are "high" in ability will therefore be the most competent. In this formulation, the purported relationship between ability and competence is *assumed* to be true and therefore not in need of further substantiating evidence (although such evidence could, theoretically, be provided). Likewise, if further evidence is required it could be supposedly provided by a variety of means such as previous research findings, the opinions of testing experts, and so on.

Another way of providing evidence for competency would simply be to ask relevant publics (teachers, parents, students, school administrators) what *their* conception of teacher competency entails. This "polling procedure" would then attempt to isolate those dispositions crucial to competency by looking at common dimensions across groups and their frequencies, or common dimensions within groups and their respective frequencies. The "truth" of these judgments would, of course, remain an open question, but perceived competency would be determined by these frequency counts. If judgments across and within groups would differ, one

would again be obligated to suggest criteria for a final choice.

What the discussion up to this point has shown is that any attempt to define and measure teacher competence is similar to the story of the blind men and the elephant: there are simply too many and often competing interpretations. However, in the next section I would like to (albeit with some hesitancy) offer a suggestion for defining teacher competency. While the suggestion may be viewed as too narrow, and possibly too radical, I have come to it after reviewing much of the literature on teaching effectiveness and noting that, at best, this literature indicates "mixed" results. This suggestion should thus be viewed as simply one alternative in the teacher competency debate.

Competency and Ability

My major assumption is that since any definition of teacher competency is so intertwined with overlapping, and often conflicting, conceptual and empirical issues, it is best to try to isolate some factor that is general enough to be applicable to all those defining themselves as teachers, and yet specific enough to differentiate "competent" and "non-competent" teachers. The one factor that seems to do this is the notion of ability. That is to say, if we wished to isolate some one "thing" that would seem to be important for teachers to have, in general, a good candidate would be ability. By ability, I simply mean the use of *any* "standardized" test which claims to measure "ability", "cognitive processes", "intelligence", or "achievement." I am aware of the issues, both psychometric and cultural, surrounding the use of these kinds of tests, but my claim is that they at least provide a fairly common definition of ability. I am further claiming that one need not be bound to any given test, which suggests, counter to the psychometric position, that different people may do better or worse on any given test. Thus, there is an element of flexibility in terms of choice, here.

Most people would probably agree that, in general, it would be better to have teachers with "good" ability than without it. Indeed, one of the popular claims is that becoming a teacher is much easier than becoming an accountant, for example, because teaching requires a minimum of intellectual ability. This argument is often bolstered by citing ACT or SAT scores of those wishing to become teachers, or looking at evidence which shows correlations between mean I.Q. levels and various occupations (See Jencks, 1972)

While this evidence may not be convincing, it does suggest that ability is viewed at least a necessary condition for occupational choice and prestige and, by implication, occupational competency. And this is the position I will adopt: that a necessary condition for defining teacher competency is ability. I am not saying that it is a sufficient condition, nor that it is necessary for "good" teaching, but only that without it, a teacher should not be defined as competent. This formulation also leaves open the question as to whether ability competency can be translated into student outcomes. I will return to this point later.

Now, if we acknowledge that ability may be an important criterion in defining teacher competency, then what *level*

of ability is necessary or sufficient for defining competency? This is a difficult question since it suggests that level of ability can only be determined in connection with either the teaching act itself, or student performance, or both. We have seen, however, that defining teacher competency by way of the teaching act or student performance, or beliefs held by students, teachers and others again involves us in a web of complications, both conceptual and empirical.

Thus, I will simply stipulate that, in general, it would be better, in terms of how one performs occupationally, to have individuals with "more" rather than "less" ability. This may be incorrect, but it would seem to make more sense than to argue that "low" ability is better. It could also be reasonably argued that ability would show a positive correlation with content-competency. Again, in general, it would probably be better to have a teacher who is content-competent than one who is not. As to "teaching competency", the presumed correlation between ability and content could be viewed as neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for teaching competency. Yet this view would seem strange. While ability plus content-competency may not be viewed as sufficient for predicting good teaching, certainly it could be viewed as necessary. We would not ordinarily describe someone as a good teacher in the absence of content-competency.

Assuming that we have identified teachers (or those wishing to become teachers) as having good ability (and hence content-competency), we might still want to ask if it would make a "difference" in terms of student performance? Here we are shifting the analysis back to the presumed relationship of teacher to student. As pointed out, this remains an open question because of the many factors related to students (background, ability, motivation), those related to the teacher and the interaction of these factors. However, let us assume that we can somehow magically "hold constant" these complicating factors. We could still ask, then, could teachers make a difference on student performance, in general?

The empirical evidence on this question is "mixed". Some studies look at *some* measures of teacher competence (Coleman, et al, 1966) while others (Sewell and Hauser, 1975; Duncan, Featherman, Duncan, 1972) do not. Many of these studies indicate that home background factors are moderately related to educational outcomes, while ability measures, alone, are strongly related to outcomes; however, the explicit influence of teacher competency is usually ignored. In the Coleman findings, there is some evidence (although there are many technical problems associated with it; see Bridge, Judd, Moock, 1979) that those teachers who scored well on a test of verbal ability did increase the scores of students on a verbal ability measure - although the gains were only significant for mostly low-SES black children.

Since there is a paucity of hard evidence on teacher ability as a factor in student performance, one could conclude that either it is not important in itself, or not as important as other characteristics of students and families. The position I am taking is that since the influence of background factors is important but moderate (correlation around .20),

and that ability of students is important and stronger (around .40), why not assume - in the absence of specific evidence to the contrary - that "good" ability teachers *could* produce an effect on student performance that is at least somewhere "between" these other two factors? Or put differently, teachers with "good" ability may not make a great difference as compared to other factors, but they may make some difference, and if they can, why not argue that the difference more likely will be on the higher side of ability than on the lower? If evidence could be gathered in the future which showed that teachers with "good" ability made little or no difference, this certainly would be more conclusive than maintaining the belief that teachers with "poor" ability made little or no difference.

Ability as Competence

How should ability then be measured as at least one characteristic of teacher competency? What would constitute "good" ability for existing teachers or those wishing to become teachers? Going back to the previous discussion, competency could be measured by suggesting a choice among standardized tests and stipulating a common level of achievement for all individuals. I am suggesting *two* levels of achievement, a moderately stringent one and a very stringent one. In the former, an individual would have to score one standard deviation above the mean; on the latter, one would have to score between one and two standard deviations above the mean. In either case, a fairly high level of ability could be insured. Individuals could have a choice of tests as well as the possibility of taking them several times; but the stipulation of the *level* would not change. Again, this policy would certainly not define the sufficient condition for teacher competency. We would still get many individuals who would eventually not make "good" teachers, even though they were quite "good" ability-wise. However, the current debate on teacher competency is exactly centered around the fact that this is reflected in their level of ability. The suggested policy, then, would minimally guarantee that teachers would have good ability to begin with. It would also provide some assurance that teachers are content-competent, and, finally, that the probability of their being effective teachers (teaching-competency) is at least fifty-fifty. Even these guarantees would go a long way in "putting-to-rest" the whole issue of teacher competency.

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