The 'Voices' of Beginning Teachers in Malaysia About Their Conceptions of Competency: A Phenomenographic Investigation

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Abstract: This study gave 'voice' to 18 beginning teachers in Malaysia about their own teaching competences within their teaching profession through a phenomenographic investigation. The aim of the study was to discover what beginning teachers themselves conceive as competence in relation to what they did everyday as teachers. These beginning teachers were interviewed and the transcripts analysed to reveal how they conceived the phenomenon of competence. The results showed that beginning teachers' conceptions of competence fell into five qualitatively different categories: (i) classroom and behaviour management, (ii) knowing subject matter, (iii) reaching out for assistance and support, (iv) understanding students and (v) possessing values of professionalism. This study could serve as a platform to further extend beginning teachers' understandings of the teacher profession, and to provide them more possibilities to extend their competences to enable them to continuously develop and create opportunities for their own students.

Introduction

Malaysia, like other Asia-Pacific countries, has experienced rapid economic growth in the last 20 years (Tam and Cheng, 2007). These countries not only have to compete with each other but also globally. Hence, the ever growing economic, technological and social changes taking shape around the globe requires not only skilled workers, but those who are also innovative and competitive. High quality educational provision is necessary to achieve these goals, but highly competent teachers become imperative (Ng and Tan, 2006). Most likely then, the competence of teachers entering the profession becomes an important issue for all educational stakeholders (e.g. parents, educators, and educational administrators) who select and employ these teachers. In fact, in the new *Malaysian Economic Transformation Program*, "improving teacher quality in the education system is a top priority" (Jala, 2010, para 16). Various measures are put in place to make some form of judgement on aspects of their competence. It involves the complex process of developing a nationally recognised set of competency-based teacher standards. It is a new policy direction to make credible judgements on teacher competency ("Malaysia First in Region to Adopt Benchmark", 2009; Malaysian Teachers Standards, 2009).

The judgement of a teacher's competence generally begins when they become teacher candidates and it is carried on through their undergraduate years and during periods of their practicum. It then continues when beginning teachers are assessed to enable them to become confirmed staff of the teaching profession. This article reports on an empirical study which focuses on the competencies of beginning teachers in Malaysia. It contends that, more so than not, beginning teachers in Malaysia are judged against an externally formulated set of

competence (for example, the *Malaysian Teacher Standards*) and these beginning teachers are seldom invited to the debate surrounding what constitutes a competent practitioner within their own profession. This article seeks to add to the understanding of beginning teachers' competence through an investigation of the conceptions of competence held by beginning teachers themselves. Although there is some research that relates to the conceptions of competency of teachers (for example, Cheng and Cheung, 2004; Huntly, 2003), there is very little (if at all) that looks specifically at the conceptions held by beginning teachers' conception in Malaysia. At least, Malaysian beginning teachers will finally have their voices heard in relation to the conception of their own teaching competence. At best, it will make useful contributions to the ongoing conversation among educators and policy makers about teacher competency.

Judging Teacher Competence

One of the most widely recognised measures that influence student achievement and success in schools is teacher competence. Historically, defining and measuring teacher competence has remained a difficult task and the consensus of what constitutes high teaching competency remains relatively elusive. According to Berliner (2005), it "… always requires value judgements about which disagreements abound" (p. 206). A plethora of definitions has ranged from teacher actions, knowledge a teacher possesses to the creativity of the teacher (Blanton, Sindelar and Correa, 2006).

Over a 100 years' work on the characteristics of high quality teachers and their teaching has been conducted and is well documented in a series of Handbook of Research on Teaching (e.g. Richardson, 2001). Initially, teacher competencies were linked to specific teacher actions, behaviors or outcomes in a form that can be observed and assessed. Such behaviourist approaches expressed teaching competence as a description of behaviours and the circumstances in which the behaviours occurred (Norris, 1991). The approach was based on observable tasks in terms of teachers' knowledge, skills and attributes required for efficient performance of set tasks within a given time frame (Dall'Alba and Sandber, 1996; Griffin, Nguyen and Gillis, 2004). Dunlop (1992) argued that such a behaviourist approaches relegated effective teaching performances to rules, formulas and laws. It was assumed that a competent teacher produced positive student learning which in turn resulted in a productive future workforce and did not take into account the complexity of the teaching process. There was a mistaken belief that teaching competency could be so easily determined through observable behaviours.

From the behaviorist perspective that reflected a rather impoverished view of teacher competence, an integrated approach of competency-based education was later established which gave focus to the complex combination of teacher knowledge, skills and abilities required for successful performance in a specific context. Competency-based education and assessment provided better understanding of the nature of teaching competency and teacher competencies (Nguyen, Griffin and Nguyen, 2006). However, by the late 1990s, there was a shift from competencies to standards. Competency-based standards were developed to encompass a broader concept which included values and attitudes in addition to the knowledge, attributes and skills needed by teachers as a way to gauge their professional practices. Standards provided the framework of shared meanings and values for fair, reliable and useful judgements to be made (Ingvasrson and Rowe, 2007). However, Fenstermacher and Richardson (2005) argued that any judgements of teaching competence through standards could be highly interpretative and required high levels of discernment from the evaluators.

Furthermore, some educators see the application of standards to teaching as restrictive whilst others question whether the standards can adequately measure a complex event such as

teaching and reduce it to mere numerical scores (Serafini, 2002). Measuring competency relegates teachers as mere performers, rather than reflective practioners (Barnett, 1994). Echoing Barnett, critics have raised issues about the lack of the teachers' 'voices' and feedback in the standards process. Huntly (2008) contends that legitimate voices must be heard if the use of any measurement standards are to emulate as close as possible the teachers' own experiences of their work. Sandberg (2000) proposes that to have more accurate understanding of human actions in an organisation, it is necessary to investigate the internal logic of human activity, that is "the individual's way of making sense of their work situations" (Sandberg, 1994, p. 38). Ingvarson and Rowe (2007) advocate that the individual most affected by any assessment system must be allowed to reach agreement on the scope and the content of their work and any underlying principles. The point of departure of approaches as suggested by Huntly, Sandberg and Ingvarson & Rowe, is the use of the individual's own voices as a way to better understand how they conceive their 'world'. Larsson (2010) advocates that it is necessary to "capture what teachers themselves perceive as competence in their own actions performed in their regular settings" (p.2). For this reason, this article reports on a study which gave 'voice' to a rather ignored segment of the Malaysian education community –beginning teachers. This paper describes beginning teachers' conceptions of their own professional competence. Because the study sets out to describe the conceptions of competence of beginning teachers, it must employ a research methodology that can specifically discover conceptions of that particular phenomenon. The conceptions must be described in terms of the ways in which beginning teachers are aware of the phenomenon of competence, the different ways in which competency is constituted, and how it appears to them. Such a research aim places the investigation within the terrain of a phenomenographic research.

The Methodology: Phenomenography

Phenomenography is a research approach that seeks to describe the qualitatively different understandings of a particular phenomenon and the focus is to discover the variation in the experience or way of understanding some aspects of the world (Martön and Booth, 1997; Martön and Tsui, A, 2004). Although phenomenography uses interview as its main research method, it does not attempt to assert that participants possess specific conceptions. Instead, it collects evidence to show that a different range of conceptions exists within the population under study. The population under study may discern more than one conception because their way of seeing and feeling about a conception may change as the conceptions are discussed (Martön and Pong, 2005). The outcome of a phenomenographic study is organised into sets of logically related categories. These categories and the relationship between them form the *outcome space* for the study.

This study used the phenomenographic approach because it was able to define aspects that were qualitatively different within a group that were involved in the same situation when the interviews took place. The approach examined each participant's experience and it recognised that each participant's experience was an internal relation between them and the phenomenon. However, it was *the outcome space* "representing all possible ways of experiencing the phenomenon in question, for the population represented by the sample *group*" (Åkerlind, 2002, p.2) that provided the structure for understanding the phenomenon investigated. The participants were 18 beginning teachers (14 females and 4 males) who had started full-time teaching for between 1-3 years. These 18 beginning teachers had graduated from a variety of teacher preparation programs in a teacher education university in Malaysia and were teaching in the primary or the secondary government schools. Although there were no universally agreed timeframe guidelines to determine beginning teachers, this study defined beginning teachers as those who had not yet been formally given confirmed status in

their teaching position. In Malaysia, a newly graduated teacher must serve a three year probationary teaching period before becoming a confirmed staff member of the teaching profession.

The 18 beginning teachers participated in this study of their own free will, and they had the right to request that their interviews be withdrawn whenever they wished to. The participants were assured that ethical attention regarding how the interview data were used and stored was safeguarded. Anonymity was also guaranteed.

Phenomenographic Interviews

Two features of phenomenographic interviews were followed: i) the interviews were directed towards the phenomenon and, ii) the interview questions were broad enough to obtain meaningful responses without forcing a particular structure upon the interviewees (Bruce et.al, 2004). The interview questions were pilot tested with a small group of pre-service teachers and then revised before an in-depth one-to-one interview was conducted. Each interview consisted of both 'warm up' and main questions to guide the course of discussion. 'Warm up' questions provided the opportunity for rapport to be developed with the interviewees. The main questions were designed to obtain differing and complementary viewpoints from the beginning teachers about the phenomenon of competency. The questions allowed the freedom to prompt, probe, and follow up responses for clarification and elaboration. The beginning teachers were asked questions that dealt with: how much they understood what constituted competency, what it means to be competent or incompetent, the elements that should be present to be a competent teacher, how would they know that they had achieved competency, how would their superior know that they had been competent. All the interviews were conducted in the *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language) except for two which were conducted in English. At the end of each interview, the voice recording was transcribed verbatim by a research assistant and checked by the author (who was also the interviewer).

Data Analysis

The interview data consisted of typed verbatim transcripts from 18 beginning teachers' interviews. Each set of responses were gleaned through using a method of 'free' and 'open' coding to gauge an idea of what each said and any common conceptions that emerged. A more careful analysis was conducted where each response was again reevaluated and compared using an "iterative reading and re-reading of transcripts to establish similarities and differences in the responses made" (Entwistle & Martön, 1994, p.166). During this re-reading, 'chunks' of text with similar conceptions were highlighted using highlighter pens. Emerging conceptions which were highlighted were cut and pasted into a new set of documents and organised to form an initial set of categories. Once this initial categorisation was complete, further sorting and analysis were carried out to ensure that those characteristics that explained the conceptions and shared understandings documented by the beginning teachers were more accurately placed in their categories. This entailed re-assigning text and passages into the categories. The final categories became the identified conceptions. Specific comments were sought to provide quotations that represented the beginning teachers' conceptions of competency. The interviews in *Bahasa Melayu* were translated as best as possible so that the original intentions were not lost. Each quotation was allocated a gender and transcript number for purpose of identification, for example [Female, BT11], 'BT' denoted beginning teachers.

Results

The findings are presented as categories of description that represent the qualitatively different ways of conceptualising competency expressed by the beginning teachers in Malaysia.

Each category listed is supported by appropriate quotes from the transcripts which are illustrative of the conception and have been selected for clarity and brevity. It is important to note that the statements used to illustrate the conception do not indicate the number of beginning teachers supporting the conception nor do they put any particular participant into a specific category.

Category 1: Classroom and Behaviour Management

The first category focuses on competency that relates to classroom management and the management of misbehaviours of students. Beginning teachers tell about being able to manage both the classroom and their students' behaviour with appropriate controlling strategies to enable an orderly teaching and learning environment to happen.

> I am a class teacher. I find classroom management to be very important – control discipline and students arriving late. As qualified teachers, we must be able to handle all this. [Female, BT5]

Beginning teachers are aware that behavior management is an important part of working with students and that strategies need to be employed in the classroom so that misbehavior is kept to the minimum. BT16 tries to control the behaviour of the students by using a range of strategies such as moving the student's seating position or giving additional exercises.

> If I see misbehavior, I will move their seating position … sometimes, I will ask him to do some exercises to keep him [student] quiet … [Female, BT16]

Beginning teachers are aware too that it is important not to lose control or get upset with misbehaving students.

> My students are all different. I will try not to be angry. For example, once I caught one of my student smoking, what I did was to talk to him, asked him why he smoked, and hoped that he would realise for himself how bad smoking could be. [Female, BT5]

Moreover, understanding why the behaviour occurs is necessary.

> If a student always plays truancy, I will check what the problem is first instead of disciplining him without knowing the reason. [Female, BT12]

Although being able to use appropriate classroom and behaviour management strategies are important part of a beginning teacher's role, beginning teachers feel that having knowledge of their students and the learning environment are important to *determine* the types of strategies and control that is needed.

> I must know the classroom environment I am in. Each time I do relieve class for another teacher, I will try to know the class, see what the subject is and learn the best way to communicate with them so that they do not make too much noise. [Female, BT8]

Generally, beginning teachers feel that any classroom and behaviour management approaches are to benefit their students' learning.

> Once you start to get classroom and behavior management under control, then it [teaching] is much more easy - much more enjoyable. And you can work more towards their [student] learning. [Female, BT6]

Category 2: Knowing Subject Matter

A competent beginning teacher has confidence and has a strong knowledge base of the subject.

> Once I get a subject, I will explore and make sure I understand it well, meaning that if I want to teach something to my students, I must teach myself first. No hesitation or doubt in our subject. I will teach without fear.[Male,BT10]

Beginning teachers also explain competence in terms of the *pedagogical knowledge* required to enable learning to occur. Pedagogical knowledge and skills are required for choosing the most appropriate teaching strategies, techniques and learning experiences to engage students in learning.

> Competent teachers, hmm ... someone who can try a lot of teaching techniques to vary teaching to produce an interesting teaching and learning. [Female, BT15]

Similarly, BT17 mentions that she needs to "make teaching interesting". When asked to expand on 'make teaching more interesting', she has this to say:

> … an interesting teaching, for example, if we teach a particular topic, we need to have interesting introduction to the lesson to attract the students' attention before carrying on with the remaining lesson [Female, BT17]

Diversifying methods of teaching and catering for different learning abilities are seen as important to keep students interested.

> I need to diversify my teaching. Not only to use powerpoint slides or use visuals all the time – the students will get bored. We must use other strategies that can attract the attention of students. [Male, BT10]
>
> I provide significant difference in the kinds of notes that I give. In a better class, I will provide notes with lots of description. In the weaker class, the notes will have notes with points – key points. [Female, BT12]

What beginning teachers are saying in this category is that being competent in the subject content alone is insufficient if the skills to present this contents are absent.

Category 3: Reaching out for Assistance and Support

The focus of this conception is the ability of the beginning teacher to reach out for help from their colleagues and individuals outside their school environment. Beginning teachers believe that being competent is the ability to communicate with other teachers in their school to share views and to obtain support as they begin their new role as teachers.

> … at first, I was quite shy to ask as I did not know them [other teachers in school] well or close to them [other teachers], … hmmm.. but I faced issues, so I realised that if I did not ask, it would be very difficult for me. If I did not ask, I would not be able to handle the problems myself. I wanted to improve myself, I wanted to make teaching more enjoyable, so I got to know some of the teachers, and fortunately, they were also willing to teach me [Female, BT2].

BT2 further adds:

> If we ask other teachers' opinions, we can learn from their experience. [Female, BT2]

Beginning teachers share the belief that other experienced teachers are more than willing to assist and share ideas with them.

> … the teachers are very willing to teach me how to teach through their own experiences … so I am learning something new from them. [Female, BT2]

Besides beginning teachers' colleagues in the school, beginning teachers also establish rapport with others outside their own school, for example, other teachers in another school, family members and friends. These individuals provide additional support and guidance to beginning teachers.

> … initially as a new teacher, I feel less confident, but when I face issues at school, I will find other teachers who are more experienced, the teachers can also be from other schools who I know. They [the other teachers] have their own opinions and experiences. I guess I am one of those new teachers who always seek to share and ask … [Female, BT9]

Emotional support generally comes from close relatives and friends.

> … family members and friends are the best listener when I am down in my teaching. [Male, BT18]

The beginning teachers value the assistance and support from not only their colleagues but also friends and family members. To the beginning teachers, being competent is the ability to reach out for assistance, to share, to learn from the experiences of other teachers, and to get support from family members and friends. It is about not being shy or embarrassed to seek help.

Category 4: Understanding Students

A competent beginning teacher is responsible for understanding the strength, weaknesses and potential of the students being taught. The focus of this conception is the ability of the beginning teacher to understand the students being taught.

> … in addition to knowing our subjects, we must know and understand the students. [Female, BT5]

Understanding the students being taught entails patience and not getting overly worked up.

> … when I first became a teacher, I was always angry at noisy students, I was angry they did not sit down or angry when the students said something bad, like 'pig' and so forth. I did not feel satisfied. After a while, I had to coax the students, used kind words. I realised I had to understand the kind of students I had and their temperament. [Female, BT5]

BT5 further adds that it also requires that teachers know what to do when faced with students with learning issues and problems.

> For example, students have a problem of not being able to read, so a competent teacher has to know, if the problem arises, we must know what we need to do and how we can go about solving the problem. Ah, that is competency. [Female, BT5]

Another element of understanding the students being taught necessitates that teachers are not complacent in their involvements with students in their class. BT12 explains that a competent beginning teacher must take interest in his or her students' learning.

> We must take interest. We have to look at what the student is working on, see what the student is doing. Don't ignore the student. [Female, BT12].

Similarly:

> I must know the student who makes noise. I will try to pull his attention. I try to teach in Chinese. For example, I learn the word 'be quiet' in Chinese. When I use the Chinese language the student knows I am interested in him, he becomes more attentive and pays attention. [Female, BT5]

It is proposed that the concept of understanding the students being taught includes a shared focus on knowing what to do with problematic students, having patience and taking an interest in the students.

Category 5: Possessing Values of Professionalism

A competent beginning teacher possesses values of professionalism that are manifested in beginning teachers projecting confidence, ability to fulfill their roles as teachers, possessing enthusiasm, and undertaking their responsibilities well.

BT9 feels that having confidence and being courageous are two image of professionalism which a teacher should possess.

> For me, a competent teacher is a teacher who is confident and brave to try something new. Yes, teachers will face challenges that exist in the schools, but must possess patience, important – patience! One more thing, must be strong! [Female, BT9]

Beginning teachers are also confident in their own abilities to undertake the responsibilities of their profession.

> A competent teacher means that the teacher is efficient in all duties that need to be done in school, not just from a teaching and learning perspective, but also management. [Female, BT5]

Similarly,

> … he/she [the competent teacher] is like, knows and is proficient in a lot of matters. [Female, BT6]

Another state,

> … to be punctual to class … someone who conducts the duty well – with trust, responsibilities, and be timely. [Female, BT16]

And,

> … a teachers who is versatile. [Male, BT10]

Beginning teachers feel that being competent is also linked to displaying enthusiasm and possessing some elements of competitiveness in their work.

> Another aspect of a competent teacher is that he/she must want to compete with himself/herself, must have the enthusiasm to want to attempt something better. He/she is always competing to achieve a higher level of professionalism for his/her students. [Female, BT15]

Beginning teachers also believe that being a professional involves having integrity in doing the job well.

> … use the time for teaching and learning well, that is, is during the teaching period we must do it really well – really implement the teaching and learning and not do other things in class. [Female, BT16]

Ability to deal with change is mentioned as another element of professional competency.

> A competent teacher must be dynamic. He/she must be able to change with the times, to adapt to new situation. Also is willing to sacrifice for the sakes of the students. [Female, BT2]

Interestingly, ability to accept change involves a willingness by the beginning teachers to be innovative and creative.

> Competent to me is I will be able to get my students' attention, to be able to give good information, to know whether or not the objective of my teaching is successful or not. As long as my students get the meaning of my teaching, to me, is competent already. … that I will be able to adjust my lessons according to my professional efficiency [sic]. When I see that they [the students] don't understand, I will teach in another way. [Female, BT1]

It is heartening to note that the beginning teachers in this study, though relatively new to the teaching profession, are able to discern that being competent in their own eyes and the eyes of the educational community is to maintain a high standard of professional behavior. Positive professional behaviours include a high standard of conduct, responsibility, attitude and work ethics. Making sacrifices for the sakes of their students entails 'going the extra mile', being innovative and creative.

Discussion and Implications

This study shows several key findings related to the qualitatively different way in which beginning teachers 'conceive' and 'experience' competency. Figure 1 diagrammatically displays the outcome space, summarising the focus of each conceptual category.
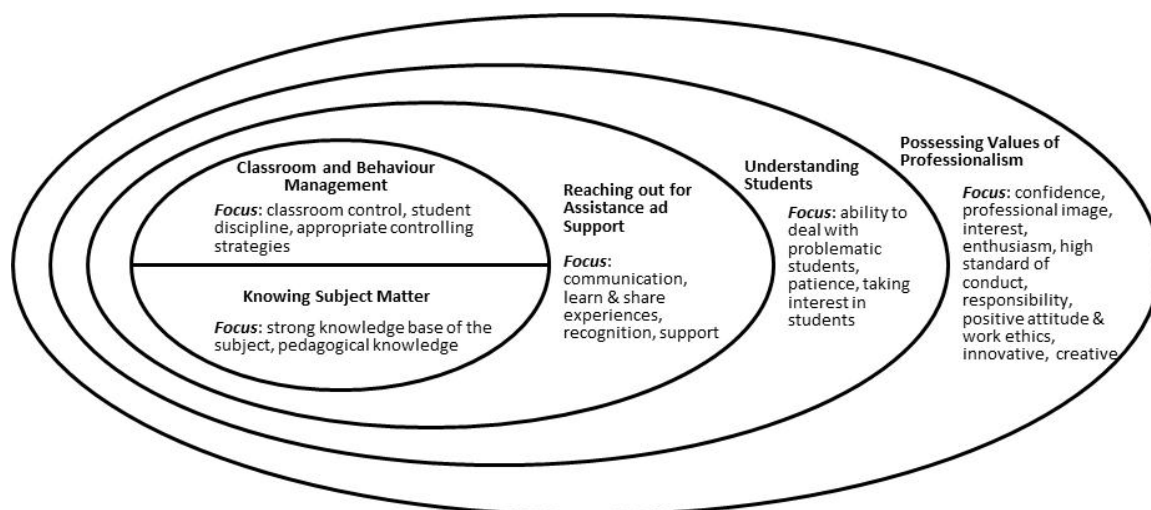

Figure 1 Diagrammatical Representation of the Outcome Space

The conceptions of *classroom and behaviour management* and *knowing subject matter* are placed in the inner most circle of the diagram, possibly representing the two skills that are 'core' for any beginning teachers starting out.

Classroom control is a common issue for new teachers because they feel that they need to establish control over the learning environment before any lessons can be carried out effectively (Lee, 1994). Classes that are not managed well will generally lead to student discipline problems and can this can inhibit effective instructional approaches from occurring (Freiberg & Driscoll, 2005). Page (2008) regards student discipline as one of the most prevalent problems experienced by new teachers and therefore, is considered a serious problem for many of them. Beginning teachers in this study are able to discern classroom control and using appropriate controlling strategies with misbehaving students as important areas of their early teaching roles as evidenced from the interviews. However, it is interesting to note that from the interviews a few of the beginning teachers are not clear about the differences between classroom management and student discipline and tend to use the term simultaneously, for example 'I find classroom management to be very important – control discipline and students arriving late' (BT12). BT12 appears to express her view of competence characterised by managing the class through disciplining the students. However, classroom management relates to events that occurred in a classroom such as maintaining order and cooperation to prevent problems from arising; whereas disciplinary problems occurred in the act of handling and managing students' behavioural problems (Levin & Nolan, 2000).

The other conception that shares the same inner circle with *classroom and behaviour management* is *knowing subject matter* well. Beginning teachers in this study refer to having confidence in the subject content. Synonymous with knowing the subject well is having the necessary 'pedagogical knowledge' to present the subject matter. Beginning teachers refer to using the correct pedagogical methods to engage students in their learning, cater to differing abilities of students and to make the lesson interesting. These data support the view that effective teachers use a variety of strategies and techniques to put their 'pedagogical

knowledge' into practice (Shulman, 1987), and this study shows that beginning teachers are able to discern that having this knowledge as aspects of competence.

The second circle includes the conceptions of *reaching out for assistance and support*. It is about sharing issues and achievements. To the beginning teachers, being competent is the ability to reach out for assistance, not being shy, to learn and share experiences, and to get recognition and support from other teachers, family members and friends. Beginning teachers in this study understand that being a teacher is not just about 'classroom activities' but they also need to focus upon different aspects of their social and emotional understandings. Larsson (2010) succinctly remarks that only focusing upon classroom teaching reduces the picture of teacher competences into something narrow and limited. Teachers must seek opportunities to learn and develop within a wider society of the educational community. In addition to looking beyond the classroom to the wider school community, new teachers also need to know that they are recognised in their teacher roles and accepted as autonomous professionals (Goh and Matthews, 2011).

As the outcome space extends further outward, beginning teachers in this study have greater awareness of the importance of student learning and achievement. The third circle proposes that the concept of *understanding students* being taught includes a shared focus on knowing what to do with problematic students, having patience and taking an interest in the students' achievement. Student learning and achievement become more focused in the penultimate category. Fuller and Bown (1975) suggest that teachers who have more concerns for their students than about themselves have reached a level they call 'impact concerns'. Teachers at this level are more concerned about the needs of their students and the effect of their teaching/learning process upon their students' achievement. They tend to question whether their students are getting the preparation to be successful in their lives.

At the outermost circle is located the final conception categorised as *possessing values of professionalism*. Some of the values of professionalism the beginning teachers refer to are their ability to project confidence, maintain a professional image, interest and enthusiasm for the teaching profession, a high standard of conduct, responsibility, attitude, positive work ethics and being innovative and creative. Possessing values of professionalism are important to the beginning teachers in this study as they believe that the teaching profession is not only about knowing subject content or putting methods into practice, but the teaching profession is about having belief in their own competences and how these competences can contribute to developing their own professionalism within teaching. This study shows that these teachers who are relatively new to the profession are able to discern teaching in a wider context that is beyond the classroom or the school. This final conception appears to align closely to *Standard 1* of the Malaysian Teacher Standards (2009) which recommends that teachers possess positive professional values (for example, sincerity, knowledge, love, patience, courtesy, endurance, competitiveness & hardiness, and efficiency) and love for the profession (for example, integrity, role models, proactive, creative and innovative) so that they can more effectively contribute to the teaching profession to achieve the aims of the national education system.

The findings of this study have implications for both teacher education and educational policy. This study shows that there are a multitude of ways that beginning teachers use to understand their profession which, when added up, can be called their conceptions of competence. Teacher educators can use beginning teachers' perspectives of their competency to support and to extend pre-service teachers' and other teachers' understanding of the teaching profession. The results of this study can be used for the professional development of beginning teachers and to be inculcated into any new teacher education curriculum. A shared meaning cannot be assumed by educational policy makers when they set out to formulate any external measurement of teacher competence. The concept of competency must be carefully defined through the help of the group most affected by any judgements of their competency to avoid misunderstandings, unhappiness and discontent.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the possibility and appropriateness of using phenomenography in studying how beginning teachers in Malaysia conceptualise their own competency. The use of phenomenography adds to the limited knowledge of beginning teachers' competency in Malaysia by giving 'voice' to a rather neglected group of teachers. The findings of the study, depicted in the form of a circular representation of the *outcome space* highlight the expanding view and heightened awareness of beginning teachers' conception of their own competency. To further add substantiation of beginning teachers' competency, it is suggested that comparative studies among different context, culture and educational systems be conducted.

Like all research methods, there are always limitations to the claim that any study can make. Therefore, to strengthen the empirical results from this study, it is recommended that other research approaches be used in conjunction with phenomenography.

Finally, perhaps, more importantly, not only does this study bring Malaysian beginning teachers to the fore, but the results can help educational stakeholders, who are interested in elevating teacher quality, appreciate that there are different kinds of concepts of competency held by beginning teachers and that to depend solely on *the* common definitions of competency can be erroneous.

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