Competency-based approaches and literacy education
in schools:  A grass roots view

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The project described in this paper was one of the Children's Literacy
National Projects for 1993 under the Australian Language and Literacy
Policy (ALLP).Foci for the project arose from the proposals for reform in
post-compulsory education proposed by Finn (1991) and Mayer (1992), which
in turn arose from the belief that the needs of Australian individuals and
industry would be best served if an increasing convergence of vocational
with general education werefostered.
At the education system level, the committees chaired by Finn and Mayer
pointed to the need for a range of improvements in the organisation and
flexibility of pathways for students through schools, TAFE and
universities.
At the individual level, the committees advocated that all young people
should leave school equipped not only with subject-based knowledge and
skills, but with a range of skills necessary for functioning in their
post-school lives, including in employment.  These skills were initially
referred to as 'employment-related key competencies', but recognition of
their generic value for a wider range of pursuits than employment soon
followed.
At the time the project was commissioned, it seemed likely that the
implementation in schools of policies derived from the competency-based
approaches proposed by Finn and Mayer was imminent.  This expectation
wasaccompanied by much unease and uncertainty about what the implementation
would mean for schools, particularly in relation to more traditional
subjectareas.  The research described in this paper sought the views of a
cross-section of principals and key teachers about how competency-based
approaches could be integrated with existing programs and ascertained the
extent to which elements of such approaches were already in use.  The
research also sought to identify schools, teachers and teaching practices
which could serve as examples should wide-scale implementation of a
competency-based approachproceed.

Objectives
Consistent with the goals of the ALLP-that there is a need for all
Australians to attain proficiency in spoken and written English-the project
wascommissioned to examine the potential effects of proposals for
implementation of competency-based programs in schools on subject-based
teaching and learning, with a particular emphasis on students' literacy
development.  The implications which such proposals might have for school-
based assessmentand reporting practices were also of interest.
Specifically, the objectives of the project were:
ïto analyse existing school-based literacy curricula and assessment
and reporting practices;

ïto analyse and demonstrate the extent to which literacy is embedded
in current proposals for competency-based approaches to education
and training; and
ïto assess the impact that the implementation of competency-based
approaches might have on the curriculum and assessment practices
of the school system as a whole, with consideration given both to
literacy per se and to literacy in other curriculum areas.

Research strategies
The first objective was examined by means of a two-stage survey of an
Australia-wide sample of secondary schools.  The first stage involved
completion and return of mail questionnaires by the principal and a
range ofdepartment heads and subject coordinators.  In the second stage, a
subsample of schools was selected for telephone follow-up or site visits on

the basis of responses to the questionnaires.  There were three versions of
the questionnaire: the Questionnaire for School Principal, the
Questionnaire for Coordinators and Heads of Department, and the
Questionnaire for Coordinators of Work Experience/Work Education Programs.
These and the case study interview protocols were developed especially for
the study.
The remaining objectives were addressed partly through examination of
system-level documents, but mostly from examples of policy documents,
report forms and parent information material collected from schools.
School-level documents were also particularly relevant to the first
research objective of analysing existing school-based literacy curricula
and assessment and reporting practices.  As part of the response to the
third objective, all materials were reviewed according to how they could be
linked to the conceptual bases of recent specifications of generic
competencies, in the light of what is known about good literacy education
and good assessment and reporting practices.

The survey
The survey was mailed to a randomly-selected sample of secondary schools in
the first half of September 1993.  The sample contained government,
Catholic
and independent schools from all states and territories.  In addition,
educationauthorities in all states and territories were asked to nominate
schools known to have innovative or outstanding literacy programs or to be
already engaged in competency-based approaches.  This second group of
schools was also sentthe survey materials.
The procedures for distribution of the questionnaires to the various
respondents within schools ensured a coverage of Curriculum Coordinators,
Subject Coordinators or Department Heads of English, Subject Coordinators
orDepartment Heads for a range of learning areas other than English, Year
10 (or Junior Secondary) Coordinators, Year 11 or 12 (or Senior Secondary)
Coordinators, and Work Experience or other Work Education Program
Coordinators.
Completed questionnaires were returned from a total of 210 schools, of

which about ten per cent were schools nominated by the education authorities.  The replies came from all states and territories and from most sectors within these, and a total number of almost 1100 completed questionnaires was returned. Although the overall percentage of schools responding was not high (about 57%), the responses constituted an adequate base from which to present both a snapshot of existing policies and practices and an overview of respondents' views concerning the potential impact of competency-based approaches ontheir programs.

The questionnaires were designed to provide:

ïdescriptive information about schools, respondents, school policies and programs;

ïevaluative information about adequacy of policies in relation to literacy and assessment and how well programs were working;

ïperceptions of improvements which could be achieved within current resource levels;

ïdescriptions of current practices which already incorporated aspects of the key competencies; and

ïperceived needs if competency-based approaches were to be implemented in schools on a large scale.

The case studies

Case studies of a smaller group of schools were undertaken to provide a muchmore detailed analysis of curricula and assessment and reporting practices, together with deeper probing of school-based views about the potential impact of competency-based approaches, than was possible through writtenresponses to questionnaires.  Following receipt of the completed questionnaires an initial selection of 35 possible case study schools was made, based on a range of features from their responses.  More than half of theseschools were visited for full-scale interviews and others were

contacted by telephone to discuss specific aspects of their programs.  At each site visit a wide cross-section of staff members, including but not restricted to those who had been questionnaire respondents, was interviewed, usually in a group situation.

To provide a structure for the interviews, an Issues Statement was prepared.

(See Figure 1, which has emphases added for this paper.) This document provided an overview of those concerns which had been expressed by teachers in their responses to the survey.   The issues identified for discussion in the interviews related to the five main areas of policy, curriculum, teaching and learning, organisation and support, in all of which areas assessment issues featured.  Teachers' reactions to the concerns in Issues Statement were sought in the interviews, with discussion ranging from the expression of troubled anxieties to a swift rejection or the provision of local examples of resolution of the issues as presented in the document.

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Figure 1 here

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Survey results
The responses received were from a satisfactory cross-section of
schools from all states and territories, all sectors, metropolitan and
non-metropolitan areas, a range of enrolment sizes and special need
compositions.  Including replies from nominated schools, 189 questionnaires
were completed by principals, 688 by subject/year level/curriculum
coordinators and 214 by work experience/other work education coordinators.
Comparisons between responses from staff in nominated schools and staff in
the randomly-selected schools on several key variables showed no
significant difference.  For clarity and comparability, most analyses were
based on the 170, 628 and 196 responses from principals, subject/curriculum
coordinators and work experience coordinators in the randomly-selected
schools.  The subject, year level and curriculum coordinators were well
distributed according to type of responsibility.  Area of responsibility
was less well distributed, although all major learning areas had some
representation in the replies.  The respondents were highly experienced,
with over 80 per cent having 12 years or more of teaching.  Only two per
cent were in their first five years of teaching.  Few coordinators had
responsibility for more than one year level, but most taught classes at
several.
From the principals' perspective, very little breaking down of traditional
subject barriers was occurring in the way their schools' programs were
delivered.  Only two per cent had a wholly integrated program at any
yearlevel, and only five per cent had partially integrated programs.
However, more than half of the schools had some kind of school-industry or
school-TAFE link program.
All groups of respondents held generally similar conceptions of
literacy as such, as judged from their selection of one of five
definitions, ranging in comprehensiveness and complexity, listed in the
questionnaires.  Fewer than eight per cent of each group selected the most
basic definition provided and more than half selected the fourth or fifth
definition.  The fifth, the one adopted by the ALLP, was selected by about
30 per cent to about 45 per cent of respondents, depending on the group.
English coordinators were significantly more likely to hold a more complex
view of literacy than coordinators of other learning areas.  There was
little evidence that respondents would be hampered in making connections
between the Mayer competencies and literacy aspects through holding an
unduly restricted view of literacy itself.
Thirty to forty per cent of the schools had recent or on-going policy
developments in language or literacy areas, including assessment,
though initiatives pertaining to assessment in general were more common,
being reported as occurring in about 60 per cent of schools.


There was general agreement that the strengths of current school-based
literacy programs lie primarily in the quality of their staff, the
adoption of an 'across the curriculum' approach to literacy assessment, and
the use of a wide variety of teaching strategies and styles.  The same
strengths were identified by coordinators no matter what their area of

responsibility (Table 1). Perceived needs in literacy programs which might be accomplished within current resource levels were the adoption of a 'whole school' approach to literacy, more support and professional development for teachers, and the provision of programs to extend the more able students (Table 2).

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Tables 1 & 2 here

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Fostering the development of students' literacy skills was not stated as among the first five objectives of work experience programs in response to an open-ended question to work experience/other work education coordinators.  In response to more focused questions, these coordinators identified many aspects of their programs which they regarded as relating to literacydevelopment.

Respondents' levels of knowledge about a range of recent policy initiatives, and support within schools for these initiatives in terms of the provision of documents, holding of staff meetings and so on, were mostly moderate to high.  This applied across the board to the competency-based proposals of Mayer and Carmichael but selectively to the National Subject Statements and Profiles.  The ALLP was less widely known or supported.

On average, the individual Mayer competencies were rated as important to very important by respondents from each Key Learning Area, though there was some differentiation in predicted directions for Using Mathematical Ideas and Techniques and Solving Problems (rated most highly by mathematics, science and technology teachers) and Cultural Understanding (rated most highly by social studies teachers).  Respondents listed a wide range of ways in which each competency was already incorporated in their teaching.

To assess the extent of principals' and teachers' recognition that the competencies were already being addressed in their schools' programs, the following open-ended question was asked (separately for students in Years 11and 12 and in Year 10 or below):

If competency-based approaches were to be implemented in your school, what structures or procedures might the school develop for teaching and assessing students?  If your school has structures or procedures already in place that you consider relevant to a competency-based approach, please refer to them in your responses.

Responses were coded according to whether something was indicated as already in place or whether it was indicated as needing to be developed.

Many principals and coordinators omitted this entire section of their questionnaire.  The responses given by both principals and coordinators aresummarised in Table 3.  As could be expected at that stage in the evolution of the Key Competencies agenda, many more comments were made about needed structures and procedures (shown below in Table 4) than about structures and procedures already in place.  Even so, the fact that a quarter toa third of the respondents recognised that the competencies were alreadyincorporated into their teaching and assessment practices was of

interest.
Most recognised that the skills embedded in the competencies develop in
thecontext of students' work in their various school subjects, including
work education.
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Tables 3 & 4 here
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The extent of teachers' recognition that they are already addressing
the competencies in their programs was supported by the minority percentage
(35 to 40 per cent) of comments indicating the belief that new curricula
would have to be developed and that teaching strategies and styles would
have
to change to accommodate a competency-based approach.  By contrast, only
30 to 40  per cent of respondents considered that the assessment structures
theycurrently use could be extended or adapted to allow for reporting of
the attainment of competencies.  The substantial majority opinion in
response to the survey was that new structures for assessment and reporting
would haveto be developed.

KEY FINDINGS: THE CASE STUDIES
The case studies yielded a vast range and richness of comments, ideas and
concerns about competency-based education in general and its specific
relationship to students' literacy development.  Teachers urgently want
toknow what is on the horizon with competency-based approaches; they feel
saturated with recent actual and mooted policy changes, and will not
readily
take on more unless they are certain and accepting of the purposes and
nature
of any further new policy.
Some teachers are cynical about the motives behind the competency
movement and some see the competencies as having a narrowing effect on
thecurriculum.  On the positive side, many believe that the competencies
areessential ('these competencies are what kids need') and do not preclude
widereducational aims such as 'the development of a love for learning'.  To
some, the competencies are 'all about learning and developing as a person'.
Someadvocated that work on the key competencies should begin much earlier
thanpost Year 10, and some pointed to primary schools as places where some
ofthe competencies probably do, and certainly could, develop naturally
throughgroup work.
On a broader level, teachers recognised the importance of relating the
introduction of competency-based approaches in schools to current
expectations of schooling held by students, parents and the community
ingeneral, but were not sure how this could best be achieved.  Many of
theteachers interviewed  were concerned that the competencies are still
seen bytheir promoters, the business world and many educators, as primarily
work-related and thus belonging more in vocational than in general
education
and therefore being of more relevance to less academic students.  They

rejected this view of the competencies, seeing them as fundamental to the
learning experiences and outcomes of all students. Benefits for students
include being able to see a wider purpose to their schooling, possibly
resulting in a 'cross-over effect' into their work in a range of subject
areas.  Much emphasis is placed by teachers on the importance of these
competencies as 'Life skills',needing to be incorporated into all
curriculum.
All teachers could see relationships between the competencies and
literacy skills and there is much in the reports of the research to
illustrate their beliefs and practices in this regard.  The key role of
literacy in almost all school learning areas was not questioned.  The
potential of the competencies as 'confidence building' for students with
low literacy skills was noted-teachers felt that the competencies would
help them help these students with basicaspects of communicating.
Most teachers who responded to the survey or were interviewed in this
research recognised literacy as having many facets, which allowed them
to see,for example, the direct correspondence of 'Communicating Ideas and
Information' to written and oral literacy skills-for all students, not
only thoseat low literacy levels.  The teachers also gave a large number of
examples ofhow literacy aspects were embedded in other competencies, and
the
relationships were frequently expressed as reciprocal.  Literacy was
seen asunderpinning the competencies, not merely supporting them.  By way
of
example, one cannot expect to be able to solve a problem without
reading or listening to understand what the problem is; and the solution
will be of no useunless it is communicated either orally or in writing.
The teachers interviewed had many concerns about organisational aspects

ofimplementing a competency-based approach, particularly with respect to
demands on their time and the resources and professional development
thatwould be needed.   Many teachers already felt too exhausted by other
recentchanges to wish to contemplate a scenario of further change, without
certain preconditions related to planning, consultation, resources and
professional development being fulfilled.  The most favoured implementation
strategies were those which focused on the use of models of best practice,
which should be distributed to interested schools in the first instance and
then more widely after trialling.  Teachers also strongly supported the
strategy of practising teachers working in teams, in school clusters.  Each
of these strategies revolves around the conviction that there is no need to
re-invent the wheel, and if other professional, practising teachers have
had a hand in the development of a competency-based curriculum, then it
will be worth their colleagues in other schools working from that knowledge
and skill base.  Teachers trusted the capacities and professionalism of
their peers and believed that working with their colleagues in their own
school environments did and would continue to result in quality curricula
and delivery, suited to the needs of their students.
Echoing the results of the survey, the most widespread uncertainties and
concerns in the case study visits were expressed about assessment

procedures
and how these would be adapted to accommodate assessment of competencies
such as the Mayer key competencies.  While most teachers could easily
see how work on attainment of the competencies could be integrated into
their teaching, and many demonstrated that they were already doing so, the
assessment and reporting of this attainment were very different matters.
While some were confident that they would be able to cope with whatever
emerged as the requirements for assessment, based on their experience
in assessing 'work requirements' at upper secondary level, most wanted
debate and clarification of the most appropriate strategies for assessing
competencies, and of the frequency and nature of assessment and reporting
tasks likely to be required.  Many expressed concern that the reporting
process could be very consuming of teachers' time,  cumbersome and open to
mis-interpretation by some of the wide range of  the intended clients of
such reports.  It was, however, seen as transparent for students, and
therefore an effective pedagogic tool, which by its very nature assisted
learning.
Given the centrality of concerns about assessment and reporting to the
effective implementation of the competencies, we have chosen to illustrate
the case study findings and highlight their richness with the following
extracts from the reports, in which  teachers ponder and discuss some of
issues associated with assessment .


Extract 1:
Problems of Defining Necessary Conditions for saying a Student is
'Competent'
One general assessment matter impinging on teachers' understanding as
they
reflected on the implications of assessing competency-based approaches
concerned the possible ramifications of the question 'How many times is
it
appropriate or necessary to assess before a competency can be said to
have
been achieved?'   A solution to this remains a mystery to many
teachers, yet
they continue to feel it is an important question.
Int:Would you subscribe to the view that you actually do address most
of these competencies in your teaching anyway?
J:Yes.  But we don't measure them.
Int:Is that because they're not explicitly in the curriculum?
J:Yes, that's right, but they are definitely covered.  The thing that
interests me is that we still are very faculty based, and when you


take the profiles that all Year 12 teachers do now, they cover the
same areas of skill, that everybody sort of ticks, but for their area
only.  For example, R could say a kid can work well in a group
and has group cooperative skills in science, but I could say 'no' in
English.  And this is the thing that's going to come up with

competencies.  This is again going to cause problems with
teachers.  There's going to be an enormous amount of work to go
into it, because the competencies are across faculties, and for me to
say a person hasn't got to a level, and for you to say they have, is
going to cause a little bit of concern.
D :Like the profiles.  The danger of averaging averages.  That's what
happens.
J:The curriculum profiles avoided it, but this profile at Year 12
doesn't,
and I'm wondering how the competencies will.
R:A lot depends on how they're written up. As long as you've got your
levels within each competency it is quite clear what is meant.
Int:They don't have to do it every time, but they have to do it
consistently.
J:That was the problem with the curriculum profiles.  We had to make
sure they demonstrated it three times: the record keeping!
"Johnny's only done it twice - I'd better have another look", and
how do you find time for all that?
R:It's a record of achievement, really - it's not a record of doing it
all the
time.
J:Oh, I know, but in English you couldn't say that if they'd only
demonstrated it once.  So therefore you had to have at least three
ticks to show that they had done it.
R:High, medium or low or that they've started on this competency, or
they can perform it under supervision, or that they can perform it
without supervision, which is another measuring thing anyway.
*    *    *    *    *    *    *    *    *    *
You have to be aware that competencies are not set in stone: they
change
and shift, and that a student who can display a particular competence
in
one subject may not be able to do so in another.


(p.181/2)


Extract 2:
On Variations in Assessment Styles
There are likely to be, as teachers will quickly point out, essential
differences
between assessment of the competencies (whatever the eventual formats
actually promulgate) and more traditional assessment of
knowledge/content.
One principal difference they see stems from the cross-curricular
nature of
competencies, and hence the likely cross-curricular operation of the
assessment.  One teacher foresees a negative spin-off in the event  of
system-

wide testing or some similar regime:
J:   The worst would be if somebody came out with a problem-solving
course.  We actually have got an example of something like it in
this system a folio that big, which is a course on "Decision
Making".
P: Which is what?
J:  "Decision Making". I'm sure you've seen the decision-making kit,


haven't you?  Some of the things aren't terribly bad in it, but it's a
decision-making course.  That's a danger - you could have a
problem solving course.  I'm sure somebody could work it out
very easily.  Where you would have the box and dice.
Int:  That emphatically is not what I mean by "cross-curricular".
J:  No, I know you don't: I'm just saying that's one of the dangers you

get with competencies, as I see it.  And that didn't initially occur to

me as a bit of a danger.  But that'll only happen - be a real danger,
I mean - if there's a test at the other end.
                    (p. 191)

Extract 3:
Assessing Competence in the Affective Domain
Another group expressed concern about the importance of the affective
domain and the peculiar difficulties associated with assessing in that
area of
the competencies.
L:What's missing is acknowledgment of creativity areas. There is
nothing there about people's creative growth and development.
Int Do they need to be, for competencies?  I mean literacy is not there

either and yet we are not saying that literacy will get lost.
L:I see literacy in all of those.
Int:Do other people see that?  That literacy underpins all the
competencies?
All:Yes
L:I can see the way this is being presented and correct me if I am
wrong
but there is an implied dichotomy, right?  OK.  This is coming
across - the key competencies as the be-all and end-all. This is the
big push: "Vocational education blah blah blah blah".  And it
seems to me, to be at the expense of what are referred to here as
affective aspects.
Int:So the selling plan has not been a good one?
L:No, and to me the values implicit in that were in conflict with the
values of many teachers, students and parents.  I am not saying
there need be conflict, much less a dichotomy, but what I am
saying is that the inclusion of key competency approaches must be
within a larger context.

T:If you ask any of the subject teachers, they would say that those key
competencies are already part of their teaching in their subject
area. They're not.
L:It depends on the subject.  It would depend very much on the subject.

If you looked at the more recent history syllabuses.  A lot of that is
covered one way or another pretty explicitly.
Int :In terms of objectives?
L:And outcome statements.
Int :Right.  And that means if you follow your outcome statements you
are going to have to assess it as well?
L:Yes.
Int :Essentially, do you think that all of these things are in fact
assessable?
L:I don't know what you would do with cultural understanding.  A lot
of people don't quite know how to assess that.
A:That is almost a values things, isn't it, and do we want to assess
values?
T:I doubt if they will be ever assessed separately.  I can't see a
report
format that is going to assess each one of those in each subject


area.
L:It would depend on how they are assessed. Is it going to be
quantitative or qualitative?  And if you make it qualitative, I see
virtually all of them being done that way.  You could use an
assessment profile.
(p. 191)

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Ministers of Vocational Education, Employment and Training.

Reports of the study
Two reports of the study were published in 1995 by the Australian
Council for
Educational Research (with the copyright held by the Department of
Employment, Education and Training).  These are:
Lokan, J., Withers, G., Mellor, S., Batten, M., McQueen, J. & Carthy,
I.  Literacy
and the competencies:  Potential impact of competency-based approaches
on
literacy curricula and assessment in schools, and

Mellor, S., Withers, G., Batten, M., Lokan, J., McQueen, J. & Carthy,
I.  Literacy
and the competencies:  Teachers' perspectives.
Copies of both of these reports may be obtained from the authors at the

conference, or later (at cost) from the Language, Literacy and Asian
Studies
Projects Clearinghouse at the University of South Australia-contact Ms
Shirley Devereux on telephone (08) 302 6891 or facsimile (08) 302 6756.
Competencies and Literacy Education


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