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 were fostered.

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 was accompanied by much unease and uncertainty about what the implementation would mean for schools, particularly in relation to more traditional subject areas. 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 approach proceed.

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 was commissioned 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 assessment and reporting practices were also of interest.

Specifically, the objectives of the project were:
- to analyse existing school-based literacy curricula and assessment and reporting practices;
to analyse and demonstrate the extent to which literacy is embedded in current proposals for competency-based approaches to education and training; and

to 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 of department 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, education authorities 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 sent the 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 or Department 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 on their programs.

The questionnaires were designed to provide:
- descriptive information about schools, respondents, school policies and programs;
- evaluative information about adequacy of policies in relation to literacy and assessment and how well programs were working;
- perceptions of improvements which could be achieved within current resource levels;
- descriptions of current practices which already incorporated aspects of the key competencies; and
- perceived 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 much more 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 written responses 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 these schools 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 year level, 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).

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 literacy development.

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 11 and 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 are summarised 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 to a third of the respondents recognised that the competencies were already incorporated into their teaching and assessment practices was of
Most recognised that the skills embedded in the competencies develop in the context of students' work in their various school subjects, including work education.

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 they currently 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 have to 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 to know 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 the curriculum. On the positive side, many believe that the competencies are essential ('these competencies are what kids need') and do not preclude wider educational aims such as 'the development of a love for learning'. To some, the competencies are 'all about learning and developing as a person'. Some advocated that work on the key competencies should begin much earlier than post Year 10, and some pointed to primary schools as places where some of the competencies probably do, and certainly could, develop naturally through group 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 in general, but were not sure how this could best be achieved. Many of the teachers interviewed were concerned that the competencies are still seen by their 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 basic aspects 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 those at low literacy levels. The teachers also gave a large number of examples of how literacy aspects were embedded in other competencies, and the relationships were frequently expressed as reciprocal. Literacy was seen as underpinning 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 use unless it is communicated either orally or in writing. The teachers interviewed had many concerns about organisational aspects of implementing a competency-based approach, particularly with respect to demands on their time and the resources and professional development that would be needed. Many teachers already felt too exhausted by other recent changes 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.

References


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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