

Beginning teachers' conceptions of competency: implications to educational policy and teacher education in Malaysia

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Abstract When any innovations or measurement procedures are introduced into the education system to improve or judge the quality of its teaching force, beginning teachers often have to adapt to these new concepts of what constitute a high quality teaching. This article contends that these new concepts neither necessarily match beginning teachers' own conceptions about their own competency nor has it given beginning teachers a chance to be heard. This study provides an opportunity for beginning teachers' 'voices' to be heard through phenomenography which is an interpretive research approach to discover what beginning teachers in Malaysia conceive and understand as competence in relation to what they do every day as teachers. The main finding of this study is the key role played by beginning teachers' conceptions of competency which has provided strong implications for educational policies and teacher education. The findings suggest that teachers need to be represented in any quality improvement measures. Careful attention should also be paid to the school systems and to teacher training programmes to support and encourage teachers in their professional growth as competent teachers.

Keywords Malaysia · Beginning teachers · Conceptions of competency · Educational policies · Teacher education.

1 Introduction

Many countries are engaging in various promising educational reforms amidst these challenging times to elevate the overall quality of its education (Tam and Cheng 2007). Likewise, in the Asia-Pacific countries, the move towards globalisation and internationalisation has caused changes in the character and functions of education (Cheng 2007). Large-scale projects with emphasis on curriculum and teachers' performances have been initiated in Hong Kong to improve the quality of education (Chan 2010). Indonesia has embarked on an effort

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to decentralise their education system to provide greater access and equity in the delivery of education, although it comes with its own challenges (Toi 2010). In the island state of Singapore, stakeholders such as parents, community and society itself are now holding schools and educational institutions more accountable (Ng 2010, 2007). Education reforms in Singapore have seen efforts to encourage greater professional autonomy and empowerment among teachers, and to emphasise diversity and innovation in the education system (Ng 2010, 2007).

Cheng (2007) rightly suggests that any efforts towards educational reforms are to obtain an edge in creativity and quality amidst the accelerated competition among educational institutions globally. However, in any educational reforms too, many variables need to be considered, but competent teachers remain the most significant agent of change and the determinants of its student achievement and economic growth of the country (Ng 2012). Not to be left behind, Malaysia has embarked on a new *Malaysian Economic Transformation Programme* (METP) of which the provision of high quality education features prominently. Teachers are under pressure to meet the METP with expectations for them to, not only perform effectively in classrooms but also innovatively (Economic Planning Unit 2010). In fact, 'improving teacher quality in the education system is a top priority' within the METP blueprint (Jala 2010).

Various policies have been implemented under the METP with the intention to fulfill the aspirations for quality education as underlined in the educational *National Key Result Areas* (2010) (NKRA). The NKRA included upgrading all primary and secondary school teachers with a degree through in-service training. Teachers are also asked to improve their practice through some forms of professional development programmes. It also embarked on narrowing the digital divide between rural and urban schools, and this has required large-scale training of teachers as to how to use technology in teaching and learning (Economic 2008). Since the new school year in 2011, teachers have started teaching using the reformed *Curriculum Standard for Primary Schools* which replaced the old *Integrated Curriculum for Primary Schools*, and are thus challenged with both implementing the new curriculum reforms and delivering it efficiently (Chapman 2010). To ensure that the ambitions of the NKRA are achieved, various measures have also been put in place to make some form of monitoring and judgement on aspects of teachers' competence. It culminated in the complex process of developing a nationally recognised set of competency-based teacher standards. It is a new policy direction to make credible judgement on teacher competency (Malaysia First in Region to Adopt Benchmark for Educators 2009; Malaysian Teacher Standards 2009).

Serafini (2002) argues that measuring competency relegates teachers as mere performers, rather than reflective practitioners. Echoing Serafini, Chan (2010) criticises that teachers who are the 'significant actors' (p. 94) in any accountability of their performances, should be given the autonomy to inquire about their teaching and learning. Judging teachers in a uniform way without much thought for the teachers is akin to 'legislating intellectual activities and reducing it to trivial simplicity' (Delandshere and Arens 2001, p. 563). Teachers 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 (Huntly 2008; Ingvarsson and Rowe 2007). Larsson (2012) advocates that it is necessary to 'capture what teachers themselves perceive as competence in their own actions performed in their regular settings' (p. 2).

The monitoring and judging of a teacher's competence in Malaysia 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 that focuses on the competence of beginning teachers in Malaysia. It contends that, more so than not, these beginning teachers are seldom invited to the debate surrounding what constitutes a competent practitioner within their own profession whenever standards-based policies and professional development programmes are implemented in the quest to improve teaching quality. An obvious solution to the dilemma is to first ask the beginning teachers how they understand 'competency' and then use this information to assist them in their teaching and support or even oppose any educational policies and practices. [Delandshere and Arens \(2001\)](#) succinctly remind that in determining educational policies, there is a need to document the teachers' 'articulated conceptualisations of teaching', and to 'emphasise the importance of maintaining different views of teaching' because 'learning will not occur from uniform practices but from the conversations and debates among educators who hold different views, and who engage freely in the study of their practices' (p. 564).

2 The methodology: phenomenography

This study opens the little explored territory in Malaysia of understanding the conceptions of competency from the perspective of beginning teachers. This empirical study attempts to take the guesswork out of understanding Malaysian beginning teachers' views. The study uses an interpretative approach advocated by [Bowden and Martön \(2004\)](#). [Sandberg and Pinnington \(2009\)](#) believe that an individual is internally related to the world through one's way of experiencing some aspects of the world. They contend that an individual should be given access to the different experiences and should be given opportunities to bring into focus one's critical dimensions of those experiences. This is the approach taken in the study. In this study, the pertinent aspect of the world is the beginning teachers' conceptions of competency. The conceptions may 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 ([Bruce et al. 2004](#)). Such research aim places the study within the terrain of a phenomenographic research.

Phenomenography is an interpretive 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 ([Bruce et al. 2004](#); [Martön and Booth 1997](#)). It differs from other qualitative approaches as the focus is on the collective understandings of groups and does not make claims about the positions held by individual participants ([Martön and Pong 2005](#)). It collects evidence to show that different range of conceptions exists within the population under study. The population under study may discern one or 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](#)). [Martön and Booth \(1997\)](#) advise that the group should be a 'smallish number of people chosen from a particular population' (p. 125), and a research group between 15 and 30 participants would be ideal.

The participants were 18 beginning teachers (14 females and 4 males) who had started full-time teaching between 1 and 3 years. They were from the Malaysian states of Perak, Selangor, Johor, Sabah and Sarawak. These 18 beginning teachers had graduated with a Bachelor of Education degree from a variety of teacher preparation programmes in a teacher

education university in Malaysia. Their ages were between 24 and 30 years. They were teaching in the primary or the secondary government schools. These teachers represented a range of teaching contexts and therefore assumed to possess the varied experiences needed in a phenomenographic study. 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 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 was used, stored and was safeguarded. Anonymity was also guaranteed.

Since the intention of this phenomenographic study was to report on the variation that emerged from beginning teachers' understanding of the phenomenon, in this case, the conceptions of competency, the questions were developed to focus on the beginning teachers' awareness on different aspects related to their understanding of 'competency'. Two features of a phenomenographic interviews were thus 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. The main questions were designed to obtain differing and complementary viewpoints from the beginning teachers about the conceptions of competency. The main questions were developed to encourage the beginning teachers to think about what they understood about the conceptions of competency and how they constituted meaning to the phenomenon. The beginning teachers were asked questions that dealt with: how much they understood what constituted competency, what it meant to be competent or incompetent, the elements that should be present to be a competent teacher, how they would know that they had achieved competency, and how would their superior know that they had been competent. All the interviews were conducted in the *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language) except for two that were conducted in English. At the end of each interview, the voice recording was transcribed verbatim by a research assistant and checked by the authors (who were also the interviewers). The interviews in *Bahasa Melayu* were translated as best as possible so that the original intentions were not lost. The illustrative quotes that were used from the interviews were labeled with pseudonyms to avoid identification of individual beginning teachers, for example (Female, BT2), 'BT' denoted beginning teachers.

Data analysis focused on the meaning that was identified within the transcripts and not through some pre-determined categories. Since phenomenographic analysis is interpretivist and emergent (Bowden and Martön 2004; Martön and Pong 2005), categories that emerged were constructed based on the range of responses observed in the transcripts. Emerging categories describing the variation were identified and re-checked by repeated reading. 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 final categories.

The findings are presented as categories of description that capture the critical dimensions of how beginning teachers in Malaysia experience and understand the conceptions of competency.

3 Categories describing beginning teachers' conceptions of competency

3.1 Focus on control

3.1.1 Category 1: Classroom and behaviour management

The first category focuses on competency that relates to classroom management and the management of behaviours 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, BT2]

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]

Although being able to use appropriate classroom and behaviour management strategies are important part of a beginning teacher's role, beginning teachers feel that knowing the learning environment is 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.

If you can have proper control of classroom and behavior management, then it [teaching] is much more easy - much more enjoyable. Then, you can concentrate more on their [student] learning. [Female, BT6]

3.2 Focus on the practice of teaching

3.2.1 Category 2: Knowing different teaching strategies

Beginning teachers explain competences in terms of the pedagogical knowledge and skills required to enable learning to occur.

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]

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]

What beginning teachers are saying in this category is that the necessary teaching skills are required to present subject content.

3.2.2 *Category 3: 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 which entails being patient and know what to do when faced with students with learning issues and problems.

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

Beginning teachers are aware too that it is important not to lose control or get upset with misbehaving students, but to understand why the behaviours occur.

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]

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

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 learning. It is not about managing behaviour, but to understand why those behaviours occur in the first place.

3.3 Focus on positive communication

3.3.1 *Category 4: 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 inside and 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].

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.

3.4 Focus on becoming a professional teacher

3.4.1 *Category 5: Possessing values of professionalism*

A competent beginning teacher possesses values of professionalism that is 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]

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.

4 Discussion of the outcome space: relationships among the conceptions of competency

The *outcome space* in Figure 1 has provided a structural framework to show how the different categories of the conceptions of competency may be logically related. The *outcome space* represents 'all possible ways of experiencing the phenomenon in question, for the population represented by the sample group' (Åkerlind 2002, p. 2).

It is a hierarchical array of logically related categories, from the most fundamental competencies and most limited to the highest competencies (in this case, achieving professionalism in teaching) and most inclusive. The categories describe the qualitative differences between one conceptions of competency to another, and are generally reported in order of their inclusivity. A participant who reports having the highest competencies will also have the other competencies, while those who report having fundamental competencies do not have access to the same competencies. Thus, when the focus in on 'Control' (Sect. 3.1.1) then the related competency is the awareness to manage both the classroom and student behaviour, when the focus in on 'Practice of Teaching' (Sects. 3.2.1 and 3.2.2), then the related competency is the awareness to make learning happen, when the focus is on 'Positive Communication' and 'Becoming a Professional' (Sects. 3.3.1 and 3.4.1), then the related competencies are the beginning teachers' awareness to use their own understanding of competency in a constructive, reflective and professional way to create and maintain a professional image. Illustrative quotes (for example, BT2 and BT6) show that, although participants understand that Sect. 3.1.1 is a necessary competency for a beginning teacher, they are also aware that higher competency (Sect. 3.4.1—possessing values of professionalism) is also required to become a professional teacher. Quotes from different categories in BT2's transcript also show that she is aware of the whole range of the conceptions. Nevertheless, there are a few beginning teachers (for example, BT8), who only described their understanding of the conceptions of competency at the fundamental level, and are not able to view competency at the 'professional competencies'.

The conceptions of classroom and behaviour management are placed at the bottom most level, labelled as 'teacher awareness with control' representing the necessary competency that is '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. Classes that are not managed well will generally lead to student discipline problems and this can inhibit effective instructional approaches from occurring (Freiberg and Driscoll 2005; Page 2008). Beginning teachers acknowledge using appropriate controlling strategies with misbehaving students as important areas of their early teaching roles as evidenced from the interviews. Turner-Bissett (2001) maintains that teachers who are more concerned with the 'technical aspects' of classroom operation are associated with what she calls the 'active' phase of teaching, where the focus is on organisation and control. However, Turner-Bissett cautions that teachers should not be trapped into

Teacher awareness about professionalism	Category 4		Category 5	
Teacher awareness in promoting learning	Category 3			
	Category 2			
Teacher awareness with control	Category 1			
Competency	Control	Practice of Teaching	Positive Communication	Becoming a Professional
	Focus			

Fig. 1 The outcome space for beginning teachers' conceptions of competency

low-procedural controls over using more sophisticated skills to promote effective learning within the learning environment.

The middle tier of the hierarchy of the outcome space, labelled as ‘teacher awareness in promoting learning’, shows that beginning teachers now view teaching competency as more than just classroom and behavioural management. Beginning teachers are looking beyond basic competent classroom practices. They 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 teachers have acquired the necessary understanding of various education-related bases of knowledge to operate effectively within the classroom environment (Shulman 2004). The concept of understanding students being taught includes a shared focus on knowing why students encounter problems in learning, having patience and taking an interest in the students’ achievement. Student learning and achievement become more focused in this 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 processes upon their students’ achievement (Goh and Matthews 2011). They tend to question whether their students are getting the preparation to be successful in their lives.

Sections 3.3.1 (reaching out for assistance and support) and 3.4.1 (possessing values of professionalism) are placed at the highest tier of the hierarchy labelled as ‘teacher awareness about professionalism’. At this tier, beginning teachers are aware that, as a professional teacher, competencies do extend beyond their classrooms to a wider community, for example, their colleagues, superiors and their families. It is about having positive communication skills, reaching out for assistance, not being shy, to learn and share experiences, and getting recognition and support from other teachers, family members and friends. Beginning teachers understand that teaching as a profession is not just about ‘classroom activities’ but they also need to focus upon different aspects of their social and emotional understandings (Larsson 2012).

Sharing this tier are the values beginning teachers regard as ‘professionalism’. Values of professionalism are the ability to project confidence, maintain a professional image, interest and enthusiasm for the teaching profession. It is about possessing 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 also the teaching profession is about having belief in their own competences and how these competences can contribute to developing their own professionalism within teaching. These teachers who are relatively new to the profession are able to regard teaching in a wider context that is beyond the classroom or the school.

In summary, this study shows several key findings related to the qualitatively different ways in which beginning teachers ‘conceive’ and ‘experience’ competency. The diagram in Fig. 1 provides a graphic explanation of the relationships among the categories of conceptions.

5 Implications for educational policies and teacher education

This study has implications for both educational policies and teacher education. It also carries implications that beginning teachers have the responsibility to reflect upon their own teaching and learning.

5.1 Representation of teachers in assessment and standards policies

Policy makers must understand that in the creation of any competency-based standards documentation and monitoring procedures, especially to the effort of the [Malaysian Teacher Standards \(2009\)](#), the voices of the very people concerned must not be left out. At present, in Malaysia, beginning teachers are evaluated by a pre-determined set of standards. Although any standards-based judgement of teacher quality attempts to establish the idea of an accomplished practitioner, it can be accused of legitimising one particular forms of teaching over other forms. For example, in the transcripts, it would seem that BT10 uses constructivist approaches, whereas BT17 appears to practice a more direct instructional method of teaching but both achieved to make learning happen. A standards processes may be guilty of eliminating some forms of effective teaching while endorsing other forms and molding all teaching and learning into a uniform way without giving teachers the opportunity to talk about their teaching work or to draw upon their knowledge and experiences to serve their students. Furthermore, it may also be criticised whether a standard measurement could possibly be the same for judging teaching in reading, mathematics or creative arts. [Ball \(1994\)](#) once indicated that making policy is simple but the practice is 'sophisticated, contingent, complex and unstable' (p. 10). Any attempt to establish the underlying conceptions of competent teaching must be openly debated and articulated openly among various educational stakeholders. Teachers, the people most affected, must be engaged in defining and providing evidence of their teaching work to guide any formulation and judgement of their practices else, the professional identity of the teaching profession may end up in the hands of policy makers.

5.2 A supporting 'system' for teachers

There are important implications from this finding for a 'safe', trusting and respectful school environment for teachers to seek assistance, explore and create rapport between beginning teachers and the other teachers. Beginning teachers themselves describe the importance of creating friendship and mentors with their colleagues in the school and the community (Sect. 3.2.2). Beginning teachers who are left alone without the support to help them improve do not have a chance to succeed as teachers—teachers need support to be effective ([Futernick 2010](#)). [Goh and Matthews \(2011\)](#) have reported that teachers on practicum find it difficult to ask for help because teaching staff were unfriendly and were biased towards trainee teachers.

Educational critics of the Malaysian school system have been quick to criticise the deteriorating quality of education in schools because of the seeming low teaching quality found among teachers and that teachers are not dedicated enough. However, schools in Malaysia have been known to load teachers with work outside the scope of teaching and various clerical works, including entering numerous student and learning data in different software applications that are not linked up ([Jala 2012](#); [Chapman 2012](#)). Educators and policy makers need to view the barriers to high teaching quality in terms of 'systems' rather than the attributes of individual teachers. Improving the quality of teachers' teaching environment will require a better grasp of what is happening in schools. This study has clearly shown that variations in competency exists, but these variations could exist because of variables such as school induction programme for new teachers (or the lack of), school climate and time for professional collaboration to happen—that have little to do with the competencies of teachers themselves. Problems of deteriorating quality in schools cannot be simply resolved by holding teachers solely accountable but to acknowledge that something in the 'system' may be contributory as well.

Initiatives under the NKRA to assist teachers and to improve student learning saw efforts coming to fruition in the last two years. In an effort to alleviate the burden of the teachers' non-teaching workload, the Malaysian government has initiated a pilot project that saw schools engaging administrative assistants to assist teachers in data entry, documentation and filing. A single entry data system called the School Management System has also been introduced to avoid multiple data entry in different systems (Chapman 2012). Another initiative of the NKRA is the introduction of the 'Lesson Study programme' (LSP) under the Professional Learning Community (PLC) concept that is part of a professional development process to assist teachers improve their instructional methods for better learning experience among students (Improving Teaching Practices Via PLC Concept 2011). The LSP requires teachers to work together. The process is to engage 'knowledgeable others' to improve the teaching and learning process. For example, teachers would enable their colleagues to learn their teaching methods through observation (Improving Teaching Practices Via PLC Concept 2011). However, designers of the professional development curriculum must acknowledge the variability of teachers' competencies, as this study has demonstrated. Designers must create conditions for teachers to teach and support each other to deepen their awareness and go beyond 'fundamental competencies', else it may be relegated as another repackaged training programme with a 'one size fits all', fragmented and disconnected set of professional development workshops. Partnership support and networks are important, as evidenced in Sect. 3.3.1, and can be formed under the PLC to further create opportunities for teachers to share ideas, seek advice and solve complex problems and learn from and with their peers.

5.3 Teacher learning: roles of teacher education

The study has shown that beginning teachers understand the conceptions of competency in different ways. The ways in which beginning teachers meaningfully view their own competencies as a result of their own 'self-assessment' could have the positive effect of assisting them to inquire and develop other ways towards being a 'competent teacher'. Wolf and Siu-Runyan (1996) state that 'reflection is what allows us to learn from our experiences: it is an assessment of where we have been and where we want to go next' (p. 36). The results have shown that beginning teachers do have rather critical views of themselves as teachers. They have commented freely about aspects of their teaching, giving suggestions about how some actions should be done differently and to give constructive examples about how they could improve aspects they are unhappy about. Their reflections have made them become more aware of their own pedagogical learning and understanding. It is important that teachers be given the opportunity to write and speak reflectively and through their own 'voices' learn their role as teachers and be the 'learner in control' (Martön and Booth 1997).

The inherent perceptions and beliefs student teachers bring into their education may function as a barrier towards their ability and willingness to learn. If beginning teachers can be assisted to understand their own personal experiences and beliefs through the mind of a learner first, they may be better equipped to assimilate their understanding into the process of teaching (Rodman 2010). It is the responsibility of the teacher educators to build a high level of awareness before beginning teachers go out into the teaching profession by making self-reflection a part of their professionalism. Teacher educators need to prepare pre-service teachers who can reflect on their practice in the broader context of an ever-changing landscape of teaching and learning (Goh 2012). Self-reflection that becomes part of a teacher's activities at an early stage may promote an awareness of oneself as a learner and encourage them towards the path of becoming a thoughtful and conscientious practitioner (Schon 1996).

There is evidence in the transcripts to suggest that beginning teachers' approaches to teaching show that, in some situations, they describe their approach as student-focused (Sect. 3.2.2), the aim is to help their students construct their own knowledge, and therefore their role as teachers is to help the students achieve it. Beginning teachers' conceptions of their teaching are important motivation in the approach they take to their teaching (Trigwell et al. 2005). For instance, a beginning teacher focusing on the 'Practice of Teaching', moves from making learning happen (Sect. 3.2.1) towards students' deep understanding (Sect. 3.2.2) of the subject being learnt using appropriate teaching approaches, thus encouraging deep learning approaches among the students. The *outcome space* shows that beginning teachers are aware of the need to work towards higher competencies for their students and for their own professionalism as teachers. In contrast, there are beginning teachers who appear to have limited competencies and are unable to move beyond using 'fundamental competencies'. There are reasons to believe that beginning teachers may have issues in competency skills such as teaching strategies, classroom management and instructional planning and the lack of these skills may overwhelm the beginning teachers' efforts to provide positive learning environments for their students (Goh and Matthews 2011). In today's competitive environment, the need for Malaysian schools to have competent teachers who can create a professional and effective learning environment of 'best practices'—cannot be understated. Ramsden (2003) have suggested that learners are influenced by their prior learning experiences and the learning environments they are immersed in. If teacher educators wish to produce Sects. 3.3.1 and 3.4.1 experiences and understanding, then they need to incorporate Sects. 3.3.1 and 3.4.1 into their instructions. If teacher educators want their pre-service teachers to have Sects. 3.3.1 and 3.4.1 experiences, they need to design learning strategies that introduces them to this 'way of seeing the world'. Teacher training institutions must be serious about developing teacher training programmes and to 'walk the talk' to sustain the high competency that teachers need to support and promote education development in Malaysia (Goh 2012).

Sultan Idris Education University (the only teacher training university in Malaysia) has, proactively in 2009, reformed its teacher-training curriculum. The curriculum has included elements such as contemporary active teaching and learning activities, leadership skills, e-learning skills, standards, creative thinking, and time and stress management, besides more conventional teaching pedagogies. This new curriculum was implemented in the new semester year of 2010. A project is underway to assess the effectiveness of this new curriculum towards improving the overall quality of teaching and learning in Malaysian schools (the authors are team members in the project). With new insights from this study's findings, probably the new curriculum also needs to accommodate the variation in teachers' conceptions of their own competency, both because this variation exists, and also to help teachers broaden their awareness of competency. It will also be important to inculcate and highlight teaching as a profession to demonstrate the applicability of their studies to their future career and professional roles.

6 Conclusion

The main findings of this study are the 'voices' of beginning teachers about their own conceptions of their competency in shaping their actions and decision making with regards to their work. This can be interpreted as an important message to educational leaders and policy makers implementing assessment procedures and educational programmes, and for teacher educators in teacher training institutions. Certainly, raising the competencies through some form of monitoring procedures for the purposes of improving student learning is laudable.

Whether any competency-based standards can justifiably improve the quality of the teaching profession and not impose a staid framework on classroom teaching that can limit the teachers' creativity and autonomy is another matter. Despite the popularity of a competency-based approach to achieve high teacher quality, it may suffer from ignoring the fact that an alleged low quality teaching among teachers could be the functions of inadequate support and resources in school for them to improve. Any professional development programmes to improve teaching quality also need to be relevant to the real problems of classroom practices. However, it can be suggested that competency-based processes and compulsory professional development programmes may have at least forced teachers to judge and reflect on their own teaching and to attend to the practices that they may not have addressed before. In this regard, teacher education has a role to play to prepare individuals to the self-reflection necessary to function as active, critical and progressive thinkers.

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