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Conceptions of Competency: A Phenomenographic Investigation of Beginning Teachers in Malaysia

Pauline Swee Choo Goh

Sultan Idris Education University, goh.sc@fppm.upsi.edu

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Abstract

I use phenomenography, which is an interpretive research approach, to seek and to discover what beginning teachers in Malaysia conceive and understand as competence in relation to what they do everyday as teachers. Phenomenographic approach is used because of its potential to capture variation of understanding, or way of constituting, the conceptions of competency. The outcomes of this study, therefore, are: (a) Categories of description which capture the critical dimensions of how beginning teachers in Malaysia understand the conceptions of competency, and, (b) An outcome space that describes the relationships between the categories. The results show that beginning teachers' conceptions of competence fall into five qualitatively different categories: (a) Classroom and Behaviour Management, (b) Knowing Subject Matter, (c) Understanding Students; (d) Reaching out for Assistance and Support, and (e) Possessing Values of Professionalism. The relationships between these categories are represented diagrammatically as the outcome space. The empirical data through phenomenography has provided a platform for teachers and teacher educators to ask: (a) " What are the implications, for beginning teachers, of their differing ways of understanding the conceptions of competency" (b) " How can teaching institutions better prepare pre - service teachers for their early years of teaching," and, (c) "How can appraisers (e.g., Principals, Head Teachers, Course Coordinators) use the outcomes to better plan any evaluations of competency?" I discuss each question in the article

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Sultan Idris Education University, Perak Malaysia

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Introduction

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

Serafini (2002) argues that measuring competency relegates teachers as mere performers, rather than reflective practioners. Echoing Serafini, critics have raised the issues about the lack of the teachers' "voices" and feedback in the standards process. Huntly (2008) contends that legitimate voices must be heard if the use of any measurement standards are to emulate as close as possible the teachers' own experiences of their work. Ingvarson and Rowe (2007) advocate that the individual most affected by any assessment system must be allowed to reach agreement on the scope and the content of their work and any underlying principles. Larsson (2010) advocates that it is necessary to "capture what teachers themselves perceive as competence in their own actions performed in their regular settings" (p. 2).

The judgement 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. Although there are some research that are related to the conceptions of competency of teachers (e.g., Cheng & Cheung, 2004; Huntly, 2003), there is very little (if at all) that looks specifically at the conceptions held by beginning teachers' conception in Malaysia. Therefore, my study opens the little explored territory in Malaysia of understanding the conceptions of competency from the perspective of beginning teachers. My empirical study attempts to take the guesswork out of understanding Malaysian beginning teachers' views. This study uses an interpretative approach advocated by Bowden and Marton (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. He contends 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. I have taken this approach. 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. Such research aim places the study within the terrain of a phenomenographic research.

Role of the Researcher

The phenomenon of competence is important in a profession where evaluation occurs early on to determine the teaching performances in the profession. Such is the state of beginning teachers. But what are absent are the existing views of teacher competence from the beginning teachers themselves. As a teacher educator myself, I contend that, more so than not, beginning teachers in Malaysia are judged against an externally formulated set of competence (e.g., the Malaysian Teacher Standards, 2009) and these beginning teachers are seldom invited to the debate surrounding what constitutes a competent practitioner within their own profession. The significance of my study presented here is the potential to give "voice" to a rather neglected segment of the education community and to better understand the elements of competency that are needed to ensure high quality teaching from the perspectives of the beginning teachers.

The Methodology: Phenomenography

I use phenomenography because, as an interpretive research approach, it seeks to describe the qualitatively different understandings of a particular phenomenon and to discover the variation in the experience or way of understanding some aspects of the world (Bruce et al., 2004; Martön & Booth, 1997). The central notion about phenomenographic studies is that there are a finite number of qualitatively different understandings of a particular phenomenon.

The intention in phenomenography is to discover variation in these experiences or ways of understanding some aspect of the world. It collects evidence to show that different range of conceptions exists within the population under study. The population under study may discern more than one conception because their way of seeing and feeling about a conception may change as the conceptions are discussed (Martön & Pong, 2005). In view of this, the phenomenographic approach is used because of its potential to capture variation of understanding, or way of constituting, the conceptions of competency (Bowden & Marton, 2004).

Names of beginning teachers who had graduated from a teacher education university in Malaysia were sought from the state education department. Out of 35 beginning teachers who were contacted by me, 18 gave their consent to be interviewed. These 18 beginning teachers (14 females and 4 males) had graduated with a Bachelor of Education degree from a variety of teacher preparation programs in the teacher education university. They were from the states of Perak, Selangor, Johor, Sabah and Sarawak. Their ages were between 24 to 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. I assured the participants that the data would only be viewed by me and a research assistant. They were also assured that ethical attention regarding how the interview data were used and stored 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, I developed the questions 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: (a) the interviews were directed towards the phenomenon and, (b) the interview questions were broad enough to obtain meaningful responses without forcing a particular structure upon the interviewees (Bruce et al., 2004). The interview questions were pilot tested with a small group of pre-service teachers and then revised before an in-depth one-to-one interview was conducted. Each interview consisted of both "warm up" and main questions to guide the course of discussion. "Warm up" questions provided the opportunity for rapport to be developed with the interviewees. The main questions were designed to obtain differing and complementary viewpoints from the beginning teachers about the 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 means 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, how would their superior know that they had been competent. All the interviews were conducted in the *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language) except for two which were conducted in English. At the end of each interview, the voice recording was transcribed verbatim by research assistant and checked by me (who was also the interviewer).

Data analysis focused on the meaning that was identified within the transcripts and not through some pre-determined categories. Each set of responses were gleaned through using a

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

The outcomes of this study, therefore, are:

- Categories of description which capture the critical dimensions of how beginning teachers in Malaysia understand the conceptions of competency, and
- An outcome space that describes the relationships between the categories.

Categories Describing Beginning Teachers' Conceptions of Competency

The findings are presented as categories of description that represent the differing ways beginning teachers in this study experience and understand the conceptions of competency.

Focus on control

Category 1: Classroom and Behavior Management

The first category focuses on competency that relates to classroom management and the management of behaviors of students. Beginning teachers tell about being able to manage both the classroom and their students' behavior 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]

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

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

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

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

Moreover, understanding why the behavior occurs is necessary.

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

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

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

Generally, beginning teachers feel that any classroom and behavior 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]

Focus on the practice of teaching

Category 2: Knowing Subject Matter

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> I need to diversify my teaching. Not only to use powerpoint slides or use visuals all the time – the students will get bored. We must use other strategies that can attract the attention of students. [Male, BT10]

> I provide significant difference in the kinds of notes that I give. In a better class, I will provide notes with lots of description. In the weaker class, the notes will have notes with points – key points. [Female, BT12]

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

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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Similarly:

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

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

Focus on positive communication

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 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 realized that if I did not ask, it would be very difficult for me. If I did not ask, I would not be able to handle the problems myself. I wanted to improve myself, I wanted to make teaching more enjoyable, so I got to know some of the teachers, and fortunately, they were also willing to teach me [Female, BT2].

BT2 further adds:

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

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

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

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

> … initially as a new teacher, I feel less confident, but when I face issues at school, I will find other teachers who are more experienced, the teachers can

also be from other schools who I know. They [the other teachers] have their own opinions and experiences. I guess I am one of those new teachers who always seek to share and ask … [Female, BT9]

Emotional support generally comes from close relatives and friends.

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

The beginning teachers value the assistance and support from not only their colleagues but also friends and family members. Probably, 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.

Focus on becoming a professional teacher

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 seem to be 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 stated,

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

And,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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 provides the structure for understanding the phenomenon investigated. Overall, the outcome space in this study has five different categories which describe beginning teachers' view of their own conceptions of competency which ranges from those considered "fundamental competencies" to "professional competencies." The term "fundamental competencies" is used to describe those

beginning teachers who tend to focus their attention towards less complex processes of classroom teaching and learning. This could mean that these beginning teachers are concerned about the basic necessities for "survival" (e.g., classroom and student management processes (Fuller & Bown, 1975). Conversely, beginning teachers who can describe higher and more complex competency (e.g., using appropriate strategies, or being aware of teaching as a profession) are able to use their own understanding of competency in a reflective and professional way to create and maintain a professional image.
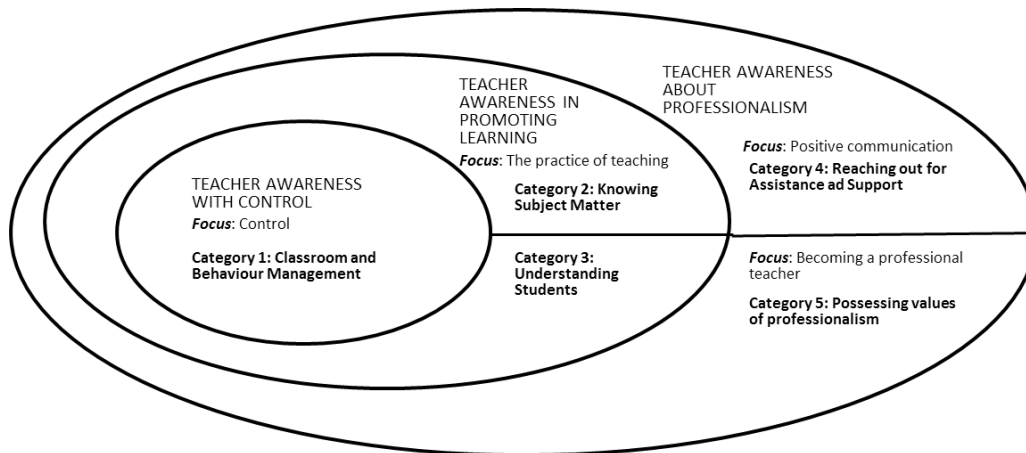

Figure 1: The outcome space for beginning teachers' conceptions of competency

The conceptions of classroom and behavior management are placed in the innermost circle, labeled 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 can this can inhibit effective instructional approaches from occurring (Freiberg & Driscoll, 2005). Page (2008) labels student discipline as one of the most prevalent problems experienced by new teachers and therefore, is considered a serious problem for many of them. However, 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 organization and control. However, Turner-Bissett cautions that teachers should not be trapped into low-procedural controls over using more sophisticated skills to promote effective learning within the learning environment.

Extending out, the middle circle of the outcome space is labeled as "teacher awareness in promoting learning." It shows that beginning teachers now view teaching competency as more than just classroom and behavioral management. Beginning teachers are looking beyond basic competent classroom practices. They refer to having confidence in the subject content. Synonymous with knowing the subject well is having the necessary "pedagogical knowledge" to present the subject matter. 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 data support that effective teachers use a variety of strategies and techniques to put their "pedagogical knowledge" into practice (Shulman, 2004). Shulman (2004) asserts that teachers who have achieved pedagogical content knowledge have acquired the necessary understanding of various education-related bases of knowledge to operate

effectively within the classroom environment. These teachers are also able to develop and maintain an effective classroom.

Synonymous with developing and maintaining an effective classroom is their awareness of the importance of student learning and achievement. The concept of understanding students being taught includes a shared focus on knowing what to do with problematic students, having patience and taking an interest in the students' achievement. Student learning and achievement become more focused in 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 & Matthews, 2011). They tend to question whether their students are getting the preparation to be successful in their lives.

Categories 4 (reaching out for assistance and support) and Category 5 (possessing values of professionalism) are placed in the outermost circle and labeled as "teacher awareness about professionalism." Here, 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. There is a certain maturity in how they conceive their own competencies. Larsson (2010) succinctly remarks that only focusing upon classroom teaching reduces the picture of teacher competences into something narrow and limited. Teachers must seek opportunities to learn and develop within a wider society of the educational community. In addition to looking beyond the classroom to the wider school community, new teachers also need to know that they are recognized in their teacher roles and accepted as autonomous professionals (Goh & Matthews, 2011).

Sharing this circle 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, and positive work ethics and being innovative and creative. Possessing values of professionalism are important to the beginning teachers in this study as they believe that the teaching profession is not only about knowing subject content or putting methods into practice, but the teaching profession is about having belief in their own competences and how these competences can contribute to developing their own professionalism within teaching. 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. This conception appears to align to Standard 1 of the recently formulated Malaysian Teacher Standards (2009) which recommends that teachers possess positive professional values (e.g., sincerity, knowledge, love, patience, courtesy, endurance, competitiveness and hardiness, and efficiency) and love for the profession (e.g., integrity, role models, proactive, creative and innovative) so that they can more effectively contribute to the teaching profession to achieve the aims of the national education system.

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 Figure 1 displays the outcome space, summarizing the competency and focus of each category. In addition, the diagram also provides a graphic explanation of the relationships among the categories of conceptions and the expanding external horizon of the categories, that is Category 1 (classroom and behaviour management) is placed in the innermost circle

as they represent the "fundamental competencies" necessary for a teacher and Category 5 (possessing values of professionalism) in the outermost circle representing "professional competencies." The illustrative quotes from BT2 and BT6 show that, although they understand that Category 1 is a necessary competency for a beginning teacher, they are also aware that higher competency (Category 5 - 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 (e.g., 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."

Implications for teachers and teacher educators

The study has shown that beginning teachers understand the conceptions of competency in different ways. It should be noted that the competencies of the beginning teachers in this study may be affected by their teaching and learning environments they are in. Therefore, it is not possible to be prescriptive concerning the practical outworking of the study results. Nevertheless, the empirical data through phenomenography has provided a platform for teachers and teacher educators to ask:

- What are the implications, for beginning teachers, of their differing ways of understanding the conceptions of competency?
- How can teaching institutions better prepare pre-service teachers for their early years of teaching?
- How can appraisers (e.g., Principals, Head Teachers, Course Coordinators) use the outcomes to better plan any evaluations of competency?

What are the implications, for beginning teachers, of their differing ways of understanding the conceptions of competency? 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 reflect 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). Reflection is useful for teachers to reflect on their classes in terms of class management, content, and teaching and learning strategies to improve themselves to enable transference of knowledge to their students (Schön, 1996).

Beginning teachers have suggested in their interviews that they need to move from the basic skills (such as classroom and student management) to more complex and sophisticated conceptions (such as understanding students, reaching out and having values of professionalism). Teachers should note that possessing values of professionalism are important as the teaching profession is not only about knowing subject content or putting methods into practice, but it is also about having belief in their own competences and how these competences can contribute to developing their own professionalism within teaching (Wong, Chan, & Lai, 2009).

How can teaching institutions better prepare pre-service teachers for their early years of teaching? There is a high possibility that the different range of conceptions of competency may have been attributed to the beginning teachers' prior learning experiences. Biggs (1999) and Ramsden (2003) have suggested that learners are influenced by their prior learning experiences and the learning environment they are immersed in. If teacher educators

wish to produce Categories 4 and 5 experiences and understanding, then they need to incorporate Categories 4 and 5 into their instructions. Bowden and Marton (1998) succinctly sum up that "variation must be present in the learning environment in dimensions corresponding to the aspects students have to become capable of discerning" (p. 12). If teacher educators want their pre-service teachers to have Categories 4 and 5 experiences, they need to design learning strategies which introduces them to this "way of seeing the world." Teacher educators may want to design learning experiences, practical activities or assignments that familiarize pre-service teachers towards the range of possible ways of going about teaching. The use of 'diary of competency development' or some form of 'competence portfolio' through reflection and self-assessment may create a positive environment for competence building among pre-service teachers (Bankauskiené, Augustiniené, & Čiučiulkiené, 2005). Teacher education programs can promote as well as to develop teachers towards more conscious and deeper understandings of the requirements of the profession.

How can appraisers (example, principals, head teachers and course coordinators) use the outcomes to better plan any evaluations of competency? At, present, in Malaysia, beginning teachers are evaluated by a pre-determined set of standards. The evaluations are seen as something "forced" upon the beginning teachers without feedback from or consultation with them. However, evaluation tools are not bad, but rather, they can be powerful mechanisms to help guide professional development for beginning teachers. Beginning teachers should be evaluated from time to time throughout their early years of teaching, and the results of these evaluations be used as a guide for some form of professional development planning. For instance, if beginning teachers find it difficult to go beyond Category 1, professional help in the form a mentor-mentee system can be organized to assist the teacher. Closer collaboration between beginning teachers and their appraisers can assist in the revision and enhancement of the evaluation process. Afterall, the main intention of any evaluation processes is to help beginning teachers become more competent in their roles as teachers and the schools will benefit from these more competent teacher workforce.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the possibility and appropriateness of using phenomenography in studying how beginning teachers in Malaysia conceptualize their own competency. The use of phenomenography adds to the limited knowledge of beginning teachers' competency in Malaysia by giving "voice" to this particular group of teachers. The findings of the study, shown in the form of an outcome space highlight the hierarchical view and heightened awareness of beginning teachers' conception of their own competency. Implications for policy and practice arising from these findings have been suggested.

Like all research methods, there are always limitations to the claim that any study can make. Therefore, to strengthen the empirical results from this study, it is recommended that other research approaches be used in conjunction with phenomenography. It is always important to extend beginning teachers' understandings of the teacher profession, and to help them extend their professional competences for the benefit of their own students. To further add substantiation of beginning teachers' competency, it is suggested that further study in this area could focus upon comparing Malaysian teachers' conceptions of competence with those of teachers in other teacher education institutions within the country and in other countries. Teacher competence from an "inside perspective" could give that needed "voice" towards a more accurate picture of a teacher's work.

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Author Note

Pauline Swee Choo Goh received her doctorate from the University of Adelaide and is currently an associate professor at the Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia. Besides teacher education, her research and teaching interests also includes the development of beginning teachers with reference to their approaches to teaching, competency, pedagogical knowledge and actual use in classroom situations. Pauline is a lead researcher to a national grant concerning the use of standards for teacher competency, and is co-researcher for three other national grants looking at improving teaching and learning in colleges and schools. She is currently involved in teaching in the undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs, and supervises a range of masters and doctoral students in fields of teaching and learning. Pauline actively contributes to journals and books, and is currently an editorial board member for the newly established *Journal of Research, Policy and Practice of Teachers and Teacher Education* of Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia. She may be contacted at Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia, 35900 Tanjong Malim, Perak, Malaysia; Phone: +6012-4872983; Email: goh.sc@fppm.upsi.edu.my or goh.sweechoo@yahoo.com.

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