

Beginning Teachers' Conceptions Of Competence

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Abstract

This paper reports the outcomes of a phenomenographic investigation of beginning teacher competence. In the research presented here, 18 beginning teachers were interviewed and the transcripts analysed to reveal how these teachers describe the phenomenon of competence. In highlighting the various conceptions of competence held by beginning teachers, the paper also outlines the variety of appraisal approaches experienced by teachers seeking entry into the profession. The competence of teachers is not a recently contested issue, nor one that is isolated to specific education contexts. More than ever before, there is worldwide debate about the authenticity of various forms of appraisal that aim to measure or judge teacher performance. Such judgements are of particular concern to early career teachers who must demonstrate 'competence' before they are formally accepted as members of the teaching profession. This paper seeks to add to the debate about teaching competence by providing the voice of the beginning teacher.

1. Introduction

The competence of teachers entering the profession is of concern to society in general, and specifically to those education bodies who employ teaching graduates. Depending upon the education context in which they operate, teachers may experience formal appraisal at various stages of their careers. Although the types of appraisal will vary between locations and systems, the one form of appraisal that is common to most education contexts is the formal judgement of beginning teachers, after a period of provisional employment. This paper investigates the phenomenon of beginning teacher competence and argues that appraisal of competence is difficult when beginning teachers are judged against an externally created definition of competence that is imposed upon them (Poster & Poster, 1991). Beginning teachers themselves, are rarely invited to contribute to the debate surrounding the competent performance of practitioners within their own profession. Although a variety of 'experts' is traditionally consulted, when it comes to defining teacher competence, the voice of the teaching novice remains unheard (Elbaz, 1991). The research presented here seeks to add to the understanding of beginning teacher competence through an investigation of the ways in which beginning teachers experience the appraisal process that seeks judgement of their competence.

2. Background To The Study

In education systems throughout the world there is a shared desire to identify and replicate 'good' teaching. To this end, the large majority of teacher registration organisations and employers of teachers continue the search for an accurate system that recognises and rewards competent teaching performance. Throughout the western world, teacher appraisal schemes continue to create discussion and debate. While American schools debate the wisdom of regular, compulsory teacher appraisal, teachers in the UK are forced to deal with the debilitating effects of mandatory appraisal of competence (Ingvarson & Chadbourne, 1994). Similarly, Australian education bodies are involved in the complex process of developing a nationally recognised set of professional standards for teachers (Board of Teacher Registration, 2002). There is little doubt that universal agreement of the composition of such standards is virtually impossible and that a reliable and recognised set of performance indicators continues to elude members of the teaching profession.

Although not an expectation of experienced practitioners, close scrutiny of performance is an accepted part of the profession for early career teachers in Australia. Specifically in Queensland, the context for the research presented here, beginning teachers are required to serve a twelve-month period of provisional registration, before they are formally accepted into the teaching profession. This process is a prerequisite for all beginning teachers and is overseen by the Queensland Board of Teacher Education. This compulsory appraisal represents a judgement of teacher performance that relies on an externally created definition of teacher competence.

In Queensland schools, responsibility for the appraisal of beginning teachers rests with the principal, whose duty it is to formally report on aspects of teaching competence (Invarson, 1989). This important task requires beginning teachers to be judged against a set of criteria contained in a checklist and interpreted by the supervising principal. This paper argues that the appraisal of beginning teachers must not be based solely on an externally created view of competence without consideration of the conceptions of competence held by the very group of teachers who are most affected by the outcomes of such appraisal.

The aims of this research were twofold. The major interest of the study was the identification and description of the conceptions of competence held by beginning teachers. The secondary focus sought to understand the appraisal process as experienced by these teachers, and it is this focus – beginning teachers' experience of the appraisal process, that is of interest here.

To enable a full understanding of the nature of this research, a number of themes need to be explored. The following section represents such an exploration through investigation of the relevant themes in the literature about beginning teacher competence.

3. Themes In The Literature

The available research on *beginning teachers* reveals a substantial number of issues including the transition from university to school, teaching concerns and a range of developmental stage theories. These theories argue that teachers experience professional growth in a sequential series of stages from pre-service practice teaching to later career teaching. Most stage theories locate early career teachers at the beginning of the continuum, and suggest that this group of teachers are identified by their limited classroom experience (Berliner, 1988; Kagan, 1992; Kuzmic, 1994; Steffy, Wolfe, Pasch, Enz, 2000). For the purpose of the research presented here, beginning teachers are defined as those who have completed or are about to complete their first year of full time employment. This definition of time sits nicely with the formal judgement of beginning teachers' competence at the conclusion of their first year of full time service. This compulsory teacher appraisal is required of all beginning Queensland teachers by the Queensland Board of Teacher Registration.

As in most professions, the phenomenon of competence within the teaching workforce is a highly contested and emotive issue. Since the early twentieth century, managers and supervisors have sought to improve productivity through the results of investigative studies of worker competence (Sandberg, 1991). This research however, employed a narrow, scientific definition of competence, reducing it to rules, formulas and laws. Observable tasks were delimited in terms of the knowledge, skills and attributes required for efficient performance of set tasks (Dall'Alba & Sandberg, 1996). Dunlop (1992) reports that this process-product notion of competent performance introduced to education through the industry and training sector, formed the basis of many teacher appraisal programs throughout the Western world. Such programs sought to define desirable teacher attributes, against which teachers were judged. It was assumed that competent teaching facilitated positive student outcomes that, in turn, resulted in an efficient, productive future workforce.

Sandberg (1994) recognises that human competence at work is not primarily constituted by a list of attributes that is possessed by the worker and externally related to the work, as stipulated by the dominant rationalistic approaches within human resource management. The research presented here argues that the narrow, factory-oriented view of competence has little to contribute to the complex processes involved in education. These traditional views in reality, merely offer a description of *performance*, not *competent performance*. Although there exist several approaches to competence and its measurement, none is able to fully explain the many facets of

competent human performance. Hager and Beckett (1995) argue that the problem lies in the traditional notion that competence may be identified from an investigation of either the worker or the work. They argue that competence is not one-dimensional, but *relational*. As such, competence is a relation between individual abilities and the satisfactory completion of appropriate tasks.

No investigation of competence is complete without some insight into *appraisal*. It is the appraisal process, after all, that seeks to collect evidence of worker competence so that a judgement can be made. Teacher appraisal schemes are evident in most systems of education throughout the Western world (Marsh, 1996). Since the early 1990's, teacher employment organizations, both private and Government administered, have struggled to introduce and maintain a fair process for judging the competence of their teaching workforce (Bennett, 1992; Marsh, 1996). In Queensland, Australia, the context for the research presented here, teachers undergo compulsory appraisal during their undergraduate education studies and as they exit their period of provisional registration at the end of their first year of fulltime employment (Board of Teacher Registration, Queensland, 2002). It is the latter form of appraisal, when beginning teachers are appraised by their supervisor (usually the principal) that forms the focus of this paper.

Having served the provisional registration period and successfully participated in formal appraisal, the newly appointed teacher is considered to be *competent*. This is a disturbing notion in the light of previous discussion that reports the distinct absence of any widely accepted definition or description of teacher competence. If competence is such an elusive phenomenon then it follows that accurate judgement of competence is equally problematic. This is a notion recognised by Thompson (1998) in his PhD study. Thompson suggests that in the absence of any formal tools for measuring teacher competence, principals revert to a series of *conceptions of competence* that are personally and professionally conceived. His research utilises a phenomenographic study of the ways in which principals conceive of competence. This knowledge is especially valuable in light of the notion that, when appraising beginning teachers, principals are influenced by their personal conceptions of what constitutes competent performance.

4. Focus And Context Of The Study

Although the primary focus of the research presented here was the revelation of the conceptions of competence held by beginning teachers, a secondary aim was to gain insight and understanding of the appraisal process as experienced this group of early career teachers. The present research focuses on a group of Queensland beginning teachers who have been teaching longer than one year, but less than two years. These beginning teachers held positions in a regional education district in South East Queensland. The research group comprised 14 females and four males representing preschools, primary, secondary and special schools with the Queensland State Education (Education Queensland), Catholic Education and Independent Schools' systems. The results of this study built on those reported by Thompson (1998) in his PhD investigation of the conceptions of beginning teacher competence as understood by a group of principals.

5. Methodology

As with Thompson's (1998) study, the research presented here utilised a phenomenographic approach to glean a second order perspective of the phenomenon of competence through the eyes of the research participants, rather than the researcher. Traditional research of teacher effectiveness has tended to study only isolated dimensions of the performance of the teacher, with methods usually focusing on something other than the thoughts and ideas about the content of the teaching itself (Kroksmark, 1995). In a departure from the traditional methods of researching elements of the teaching and learning processes involved in formal education, the present study adopted a phenomenographic line of enquiry because phenomenography can assist those interested in education, to be conscious of the complexity of the phenomenon of teaching. After all, the basic premise of this methodology is that the world is not just the world, but the world as experienced by someone (Marton, 1996). As the object of a phenomenographic study, it is the teachers' *conceptions* of their teaching that take centre stage and it is only when these conceptions are "embedded in the teacher's real world that they become logical and comprehensible" (Andersson & Lawenius, 1983, p. 8). Jones and Moore (1995) argue that a phenomenographic study alone, has the potential to gather and interpret data expressed through contextually defined social practice.

Phenomenography is ideally suited to the research presented here as it not only assists in the revelation of individuals' conceptions of a given phenomenon, it also identifies the variation that exists between and among the recognised conceptions (Velde, 1997; Pong, 2000). Analysis of phenomenographic data produces an *outcome space* detailing the variation in conceptions of the phenomenon under investigation. This outcome space represents all possible ways that groups of individuals may conceive of a phenomenon. Only when conceptions, and the variation between and among them have been identified, may researchers glean a complete understanding of how these groups experience aspects of the world around them. Data for this type of research is usually collected through individual phenomenographic interviews that are taped and transcribed (Velde, 1997). The interview utilises a small number of 'what' questions to elicit rich, descriptive accounts of how the phenomenon under investigation is experienced by interviewees (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000). Kvale (1996) recommends an interview technique that gently probes for the most comprehensive description of the interviewee's interaction with and understanding of the nominated phenomenon.

In the research presented here, beginning teachers were asked to respond to the following questions:

- What is a competent beginning teacher?
- How did you know when you were competent?
- How did your principal know that you were competent?

The most challenging aspect of phenomenographic research is the conceptual part of data analysis that includes identification of meaningful segments of data, organisation of these segments into categories and finally construction of an outcome space that describes the relationship among the categories of description. There is a large volume of qualitative data gathered from the phenomenographic interview process and the mechanical analysis assists with the deconstruction of the data into chunks that are manageable for assimilation by the human mind. Tesch (1987, p.1) argues that this process is not one of mere random division, but involves "skilled perception and artful transformation by the researcher". She outlines a number of elements that represent the essence of successful qualitative data reduction and it is this combination of elements that provides an overview of the process adopted in this study.

- The researcher captures what is most important, most prevalent, most essential in the thousands of words dealing with the object of investigation;
- The data become distilled to their essentials rather than simply being diminished in volume;
- The process is methodical, systematic and goal-oriented; and
- The research outcomes lead to a result that others can accept as representing the data (Tesch, 1987, p.1).

6. Results Of The Study

Although the conceptions of competence as experienced by beginning teachers formed the primary focus of the present study, it is the analysis of the data collected in relation to the question 'How did your principal know that you were competent?' that is of interest in this paper. After all, responses to this question revealed how the appraisal process is experienced and understood by beginning teachers. It is the contention of this paper that the process of teacher appraisal can only be improved and enhanced when it is understood from all perspectives, including those of the group who must undergo compulsory appraisal. Previous research has reported the appraisal process from the perspective of principals (Thompson, 1998) and this study contributes to the knowledge in this area by presenting the view of beginning teachers.

In Queensland, the context for the research presented here, after a twelve-month period of provisional registration, beginning teachers are formally appraised by their principal on behalf of the Queensland Board of Teacher Registration. On the report form, the principal makes comment on a number of teacher characteristics before making a recommendation as to whether the beginning teacher is deemed competent. A positive report enables the beginning teacher to achieve full registration. Alternatively, the beginning teacher is considered not yet competent and is required to undertake further teaching under provisional registration. Each of the beginning

teachers involved in this study experienced a successful appraisal report and moved to full teaching registration. According to their principals, each was competent.

The results of this study suggest that the process of appraising beginning teachers is neither straightforward nor clearly mandated. Although being supplied with some basic guidelines from the Queensland Board of Teacher Registration, principals are largely responsible for the decision, and for the collection of the data required to make the decision. Thompson's (1998) study sought details of how the appraisal process was perceived by principals and revealed a number of approaches to the appraisal of beginning teachers. The present study sought the same details, but from the perspective of the beginning teacher rather than the principal.

During the interviews, beginning teachers were reminded that as they had achieved a positive appraisal report, they were now officially considered competent. They were then asked to respond to the question "how does your principal know that you are competent?" Their responses suggest that beginning teachers believe that principals use a range of appraisal approaches to collect information about competence. Gleaned from the data gathered during the interviews, five different approaches to appraisal were identified and described as follows:

- **Appraisal is investigative** – beginning teachers believe that principals gather appraisal data through formal judgement of teacher performance (Approach one).
- **Appraisal is observational** – beginning teachers believe that principals gather appraisal data through general observations (Approach two).
- **Appraisal is consultative** – beginning teachers believe that principals gather appraisal data through consultation with others (Approach three).
- **Appraisal is concealed** – beginning teachers believe that principals gather appraisal data through informal methods, most frequently without the knowledge of the beginning teacher (Approach four).
- **Appraisal is blind** – beginning teachers believe that principals do not gather appraisal data and make decisions with no evidentiary basis (Approach five).

In the following pages, each of these approaches to appraisal will be summarised in the form of a table that includes the name given to the approach, the main points of expressed ideas and illustrative excerpts from the interviews.

The first approach described by beginning teachers is termed the *investigative approach* and according to the participants in this study, is the most formal of the processes used by principals to gather information about competence. Within this approach principals use prearranged discussions, meetings and classroom visits to determine beginning teachers' progress. The beginning teachers involved in the present research described the investigative approach to appraisal as almost second nature. This is perhaps due to their recent transition from undergraduate teaching programs that require close scrutiny and judgement of their competence.

For beginning teachers, this appraisal approach includes data gathering procedures of a formal nature. Examples of the types of investigative procedures cited by the beginning teachers involved in this study include formal prearranged classroom visits, informal 'drop-in' classroom visits, formal observation of planning and associated documentation, formal, prearranged meetings and informal meetings and discussions about the beginning teachers' performance or progress. Regardless of the type of procedure described, beginning teachers take this appraisal approach very seriously. Although based on quite a traditional model, investigative appraisal is obviously a widely used means of gathering data from which to make a judgement of beginning teacher competence. Table 1 represents a 'snapshot' of the investigative approach to appraisal.

According to beginning teachers, principals also gather appraisal data through a series of *observations*, the results of which are used as evidence of competence or incompetence. During their first year of employment, beginning teachers are closely monitored by the principal both inside and outside of the classroom. Whilst the 'inside' observations are often formal processes, the 'outside' observations relate more to the level of the beginning teacher's involvement in school activities. In gathering this evidence, principals observe the beginning teacher's involvement in activities such as school functions, school committees, musical events and coaching sporting teams.

They also make informal observations of the beginning teacher's attitude to professional duties, rapport with children, interactions with parents and their general outlook and personality. Beginning teachers maintain that these observations contribute to the evidence collected by the principal and ultimately are used to appraise beginning teacher competence. Table 2 represents a summary of the *observational* approach to appraisal.

Table 1: Appraisal Is Investigative

Approach to appraisal	Main points of expressed ideas	Excerpts from interviews
Appraisal is investigative	<p>Principals formally inspect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lesson/unit planning • classroom interaction <p>Senior members of staff may also be involved in appraisal.</p> <p>Principals conduct informal classroom visits – drop-ins.</p> <p>Principals or other senior members of staff meet regularly with beginning teachers to check their progress.</p>	<p><i>With my planning, my principal just wanted to see the overview of what we were doing.</i></p> <p><i>Well, he [principal] came at the start of the year he said like as part of my probation I had to have twenty lessons observed.</i></p> <p><i>I had like three, four different Heads of Department come and watch my lessons.</i></p> <p><i>But yeah, so he'd [principal] come in and he'd sort of walk past and he'd go and have a look and see what the kids are doing.</i></p> <p><i>... I had meetings with my Heads of Department every Monday, and they'd go over lesson plans for the week and these types of things.</i></p>

Table 2: Appraisal Is Observational

Approach to appraisal	Main points of expressed ideas	Excerpts from interviews
Appraisal is observational	<p>Principals gather appraisal data about beginning teachers through informal observation of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • classroom practice • rapport with students and parents. • general approach to the job. • involvement in school activities. 	<p><i>Yeah. She [principal] says if she can hear us downstairs we're gonna be too noisy.</i></p> <p><i>Probably informally observe like their [beginning teachers] rapport with children and how they deal with the other children at school...</i></p> <p><i>Like outgoing, happy personality-wise. Don't walk around with a sour head down.</i></p> <p><i>I guess the way you participate in school functions. Like involvement in committees and your point of view towards things in the school.</i></p>

The third approach to appraisal experienced by the beginning teachers involved in this study is termed *consultative*. Beginning teachers acknowledge that as the “new kids on the block” they will be closely monitored by a range of school personnel and visitors to the school. They also understand that the principal may consult with these individuals or groups, prior to making a decision on the beginning teacher's competence. A selection of the individuals involved in this consultative process includes teaching partners, mentor teachers, teacher aides, other teaching staff, students and parents. Table 3 provides an overview of the salient features of the *consultative* approach to appraisal.

Table 3: Appraisal Is Consultative

Approach to appraisal	Main points of expressed ideas	Excerpts from interviews
Appraisal is consultative	<p>Principals gather appraisal data about beginning teachers by consulting with other members of the school community including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> teaching partners teaching staff students parents 	<p><i>Just well through the staff and like I think the teaching partner I have beside me. I think like they'd [principal and teaching partner] talk to each other.</i></p> <p><i>I work closely with six other people and all the subjects are team- taught. I think they'd have a fair idea what sort of teacher I am just from that.</i></p> <p><i>But if you seem to be getting on well with the kids. And you seem to have a handle on everything... You know, that would probably have a big, you know, a big weight on your judgement. Yeah.</i></p> <p><i>And I do get a lot of parents coming in and helping and all that. And yeah, so they might, you know, say something to the principal about what I do.</i></p>

A further approach to appraisal reported by beginning teachers is described as *concealed*. Beginning teachers report an appraisal process where evidence of their competence is gathered in ways that are not obvious. In fact, beginning teachers are in awe of the subtlety of the principal in 'keeping an eye on' teachers who are new to the school. They speak almost in espionage terms about the covert operations of their primary supervisor. Accepting that they will be under direct and indirect scrutiny during their initial teaching experience, beginning teachers understand that it is the duty of the principal to identify possible problems. Beginning teachers also acknowledge the skill of the principal in maintaining close contact from afar. Principals are almost intuitive in what they glean about the beginning teacher, even without being physically present in the classroom. The participants in this study were not intimidated by the covert operations of the principal and accepted without question, this subtle means of collecting evidence of their level of competence. The essence of the *concealed* approach to appraisal is summarised in the following table.

Table 4: Appraisal Is Concealed

Approach to appraisal	Main points of expressed ideas	Excerpts from interviews
Appraisal is concealed	<p>Principals gather appraisal data about beginning teachers through methods that are concealed from the beginning teachers.</p> <p>Principals have almost an intuitive sense of how the beginning teacher is progressing.</p> <p>Beginning teachers acknowledge that principals often supervise 'from afar'.</p>	<p><i>He finds out about people when he wanders around the school, I guess.</i></p> <p><i>Also like I know our principal comes around the school and does a 'sus' [secret look].</i></p> <p><i>I think he [principal] can just pick up a lot just by the vibes in the classroom.</i></p> <p><i>Yeah, where they sort of, you know, on a regular basis have to make it that somebody in administration has to wander past the door just to make, to give that physical presence that they're there.</i></p>

The final approach to appraisal described by the beginning teachers involved in this study is termed *blind*. It seems that for some beginning teachers, the appraisal process is a mystery and they have no idea how evidence is

collected regarding their competence. Others actually question the notion that evidence is even gathered and wonder how an informed and accurate decision is possible. In summary, according to the beginning teachers who believe that appraisal is blind, principals make little effort to gather appraisal data before making a judgement relating to competent performance. As such, they are cynical about the whole process, but do not make a formal complaint as long as the outcome is positive. Table 5 outlines the salient features of the appraisal approached described as *blind*.

Table 5: Appraisal Is Blind

Approach to appraisal	Main points of expressed ideas	Excerpts from interviews
Appraisal is blind	<p>Beginning teachers believe that the principal makes a decision about their competence, with inadequate information.</p> <p>Beginning teachers are cynical about the process of their performance appraisal, and to some it remains a mystery.</p> <p>So long as the outcome is positive, beginning teachers are unwilling to seek clarification of the process of their appraisal.</p>	<p><i>I had no one observing my teaching. I had no one look at any of my reporting documentation. Yeah, basically I had nobody who knew what I was doing. The principal had never even been down this way.</i></p> <p><i>So when it came to that bit of paper [appraisal report], I was a bit cynical, obviously.</i></p> <p><i>I personally would have been happier if some of the information gathering was done more publicly. Then I would of felt that what they had written was out of care of my competency. Even though what they wrote was very positive, it was very good what they wrote. But I felt that maybe I didn't earn it.</i></p>

7. Discussion

This paper previously outlined the research by Thompson (1998) that revealed the ways in which principals view the appraisal of beginning teachers. What follows is a comparison of the ways in which principals conduct beginning teacher appraisal from the dual perspectives of principals involved in Thompson's study and beginning teachers interviewed for the research presented here. This comparison will be summarised in Table 6 with discussion to follow.

Table 6: Principals' And Beginning Teachers' Views Of The Appraisal Process

Principal's view of appraisal	Beginning teachers' view of appraisal
Appraisal is <i>inspectorial</i> – the principal arranges a classroom visit and uses a checklist to make judgements.	Appraisal is <i>investigative</i> – the principal gathers evidence through formal classroom visits and meetings.
Appraisal is <i>covert</i> – the beginning teacher is unaware that the principal is collecting information.	Appraisal is <i>concealed</i> – the principal gathers appraisal data without the knowledge of the beginning teacher.
Appraisal is <i>via a third party</i> – the principal asks others about the competence of the beginning teacher.	Appraisal is <i>consultative</i> – the principal gathers appraisal data through consultation with others.
Appraisal is <i>collegial</i> – the principal appraises the beginning teacher within a supportive relationship.	Appraisal is <i>observational</i> – the principal gathers appraisal data through general/ informal observation.
Appraisal is <i>intuitive</i> – the principal makes judgements about competence in an intuitive way.	Appraisal is <i>blind</i> – the principal does not gather appraisal data and makes a decision with no evidentiary basis.

As was the case with conceptions of competence, beginning teachers and principals share a similar view of the data-gathering phase of the appraisal process. Both groups agree that it is the right or duty of the principals to formally inspect beginning teachers as they perform their classroom duties and to convene regular meetings where planning is observed and discussed. Similarly, both groups assert that appraisal is sometimes conducted in quite a secretive manner whereby principals watch the performance of beginning teachers 'from afar'. Another appraisal

approach mentioned by principals and beginning teachers is one whereby, through a process of formal and informal consultation, principals glean details of the competence of beginning teachers through a process of consultation with other members of the school community.

Analysis of the data collected in each of the studies reveals that principals and beginning teachers have a shared understanding of many of the approaches used to gather evidence of beginning teacher competence. There are however some points of departure. The principals involved in Thompson's (1998) study suggested that appraisal is a collegial undertaking where evidence of competence is gathered within a supportive relationship. Conversely, the beginning teachers interviewed for the present study view their principals as supervisors and appraisers, rather than colleagues. Although there is no mention of unfair treatment or strict regimes, the beginning teachers still perceive their principals as occupying positions of power where the relationship is hierarchical. The principal is in a position of power. The beginning teacher is not.

Of particular concern is the belief of some beginning teachers that for them, the process of appraisal is 'blind' in that they have no conscious input into, nor awareness of the manner in which evidence of their competence is collected. For these beginning teachers, there is no transparency in the process, resulting in feelings of frustration and resentment. Furthermore, it is questionable whether principals look for the same kind of things when conducting the appraisal of beginning teachers. In Queensland, the Board of Teacher Registration provides a Principals Report containing a list of five standards that must be displayed prior to the achievement of full registration. These standards are very broad and open to interpretation, leaving principals to make value judgements based on their personal conceptions of beginning teacher competence. The necessity for such interpretation almost assures that appraisal decisions produce different outcomes.

Thompson (1998) even goes so far as to suggest that the most successful beginning teacher will therefore be one who best 'fits' the conception of competence that is held by a particular principal. If this is the case, then the process of appraisal is reduced to a 'game' where winning means finding ways to please the principal (Gitlin & Smyth, 1984). The results of Thompson's (1998) study suggest that although the process of appraisal is almost impossible to standardize, the principals who conduct appraisal are "humane educators who are concerned to be professional" (p. 311). Concurring with this belief are the results of the present study that reveal that beginning teachers respect the judgement and professionalism of principals. If there is any discontent it is with the *system* rather than any individual operating within the system.

8. Conclusion

The results of the research presented here reveal that principals and beginning teachers share similar conceptions of competence and similar understandings of how evidence of such competence is collected. This new knowledge adds to the knowledge in this area through its confirmation that although not perfect, the current system of beginning teacher appraisal is generally effective and widely accepted by all stakeholders in the process. If there is any particular anomaly in the process, it is the finding that principals and beginning teachers share differing perspectives on the collaborative nature of the appraisal process. Although principals have a strong belief that their appraisal methods are collaborative and inclusive, beginning teachers' experiences would suggest otherwise. It is therefore the recommendation of this paper that principals adjust their current appraisal process to include more collaboration with beginning teachers at the commencement of their period of provisional registration. Early and regular conversations will take the mystery out of the appraisal process and enable these early career teachers the best chance to attain full teaching registration after a rewarding and enriching first year of full time employment. 📖

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