

# The Case for Professional Competencies

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*The advantages and disadvantages of stating performance competencies are becoming clearer. Certain questions, however, need further study.*

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**T**HE case for professional competencies is here defined as the case for determining as specifically as possible the skills, knowledge, ways of working, and personal attributes needed by persons to serve effectively in professional educational positions. The purpose in identifying such competencies is to use them as the basis for preparing, selecting, and evaluating the performance of professional educators.

In program development, the stating of performance competencies is generally combined with certain curricular and instructional approaches that are behaviorally and systematically oriented. Together they can be considered the performance competency model. The descriptions of this model by its advocates in the current literature<sup>1</sup> provide a tightly organized and logical rationale for it.

Certainly a most positive result of the performance competency movement has been

its impact on undergraduate teacher education. A large number of colleges and universities have developed competency-based programs. (A recent survey by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education is reported to have identified more than 200 such programs.) Analysis of these programs reveals the tremendous amount of work which has gone into building them. Without question the performance competency idea has generated enthusiasm for program redevelopment.

Competency-based undergraduate programs have accomplished an increase in curriculum integration. Instead of a series of discrete courses, as exists in most conventional teacher education programs, competency-based programs usually produce a high degree of relationship among the learning activities provided students. They are more oriented to goals of an action nature, rather than of a knowledge nature, and generally allow prospective educators more practice and on-the-job experiences.

A second positive result of the performance competency movement has been that it has created a rethinking of certification standards and procedures. The typical certification standards were developed with the purpose of encouraging more formal educa-

<sup>1</sup> See, for example: W. Robert Houston and Robert B. Howsam, editors. *Competency-Based Teacher Education*. Chicago: Science Research Associates, Inc., 1972. See also: Ivor K. Davies. *Competency Based Learning: Technology, Management and Design*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973.

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tion on the part of teachers. That having been well accomplished, it is now appropriate to design more demanding standards. While the development of the performance competency approach to certification is only in its very early stages, it is an approach that merits exploration.

Another value of the performance competency approach is its effect on the teacher educator himself. To a considerable degree this is an in-service growth experience. Instructors in performance-based undergraduate teacher education programs have found it necessary to develop many new competencies—such as goal writing and analysis, development of sequencing strategies, and goal-referenced evaluation techniques as well as skills in working as team members.

The promise of the performance competency movement is real and is already being realized, at least in part. The movement is under way; it has its advocates, and it is accepted by large numbers of educators. It may be, however, that the movement is now approaching its most crucial stage.

Unless changes are made, the next few years will see the end of inquiry into the performance competency model and thus of its further development. If so, the movement then will be characterized by its acceptance and attempted implementation by unquestioning advocates wanting to be a part of the "in" movement of the day or mandated to do it by state action.

## Mechanisms for Self-Renewal

To ensure the continuing vitality of the movement, it is necessary that more attention be paid to establishing vehicles for its critique. Many promising movements in American education have failed to have a continuing impact because they lacked such mechanisms for self-renewal.<sup>2</sup> While it seems that the performance competency model with its emphasis on evaluation would be different, it does not appear that the movement is now

<sup>2</sup> This problem was clearly identified in: John Goodlad. *School Curriculum Reform*. New York: Fund for the Advancement of Education, 1964. p. 73.

developing those characteristics necessary to self-renewal. Questions need to be asked, data gathered, and exploration increased if the movement is to remain healthy.

Investigations which are needed for further refinement of the performance competency model should focus on questions such as the following:

● *Has there been a tendency to oversell the model before knowing what it can do?*

At a recent meeting of teacher educators,<sup>3</sup> considerable unhappiness was expressed that some states were demanding a competency-based certification approach before educators were ready to supply it. Well, now, who sold those making these demands on this idea anyway? Have educators perhaps been guilty of selling an idea beyond what is known about it?

Perhaps every movement has to have its missionary aspects, but there have been enough conferences, etc., geared at convincing people that they should try the performance competency approach.

● *Have performance competency advocates been guilty of "overkill"?*

It seems that some are demanding that every possible kind of educational endeavor be set up on a competency basis. Furthermore, they expect not only the use of performance competencies to guide program development and evaluation, but total acceptance of the behavioral, systematic teaching-learning plan that characterizes the movement.

A recent study by Phillips *et al.*,<sup>4</sup> however, demonstrates the danger in attempting to produce and explain all results through such a single model. Phillips reported on the use of behavior shaping techniques (this approach is, of course, closely related to the performance competency movement) in a family-style treatment home for delinquent

<sup>3</sup> Spring 1973 meeting of the Working Group on Teacher Education of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

<sup>4</sup> Elery L. Phillips, Elaine A. Phillips, Dean L. Fixsen, and Montrose M. Wolf. "Behavior Shaping Works for Delinquents." *Psychology Today* 7 (1): 75-79; June 1973.

youths. First results indicated that the behavior shaping approach was highly successful. When an attempt was made to duplicate the home, however, it was discovered that important factors other than the behavior shaping approach were operating in the first setting.

Just as these researchers were wise enough to look for other factors and not insist that behavior shaping methods account for all results, so too must advocates of the performance competency approach work to determine the kinds of teaching-learning situations for which it is most effective—rather than trying to insist that it can be used completely and for everything.

It seems almost trite to say that more research is needed, for that is usually the automatic recommendation of anyone reviewing any innovation, but the amount of research on this model which has been reported is disappointing—particularly in view of its emphasis on evaluation and data gathering. The research which must be conducted if the model is to continue to develop will be not that which is conducted by educators attempting to “prove” that the competency-based approach is better or to search for “the” taxonomy or “the” anything else, but on testing the limits of the model and the functions of each of its elements.

● *What progress has been made through this model toward establishing techniques for assessing the quality and validity of goals?*

With goals the major determinant of program in the model, this is an extremely important question. Certainly, it is also a most difficult problem, for it requires some means for assessing the values that are inherent in goals. Despite this, proponents of the model must view the assessing of quality and validity of goals as a most significant area for their efforts.

● *What has been the nature of the studies aimed at determining whether the performance competency model is as appropriate and effective for general education uses in K-12 schools as it is in teacher education programs?*

It seems clear that teachers who are trained in programs based on this approach will in many cases apply the same approach in their own teaching. Is this to be encouraged? Again, the question is in what kinds of situations does the model produce good results? (This also raises the question of whether an approach which is effective for undergraduate teacher education programs is necessarily appropriate for graduate education.)

### Where to?

Without question, continuing efforts to conceptualize the performance competency model must be made. This will only happen if at least some educators turn their attention to research and tryout efforts aimed at learning more about how the model can function. Instead of viewing the performance competency approach as a finished product to be implemented, it will then be viewed as a step toward even greater understanding of the teaching-learning process. □

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