THE SOED ‘COMPETENCE’ GUIDELINES FOR INITIAL TEACHER TRAINING: ISSUES OF CONTROL, PERFORMANCE AND RELEVANCE

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SYNOPSIS
The SOED ‘Competence’ Guidelines for Initial Teacher Training have been the subject of recent controversy. They raise both specific and general issues of interpretation, as well as practical issues concerning the validity and utility of such lists. This article locates the Guidelines, and the more general debate about competence-based approaches to professionalism, within three different perspectives. The first is a critique of ‘socially disembedded’ knowledge. The second contrasts that critique with an account of the ‘socially embodied’ nature of competence construction. The third perspective evaluates the Guidelines in terms of empirical data on the school-based experiences of beginning teachers in Scotland, and finds both the ‘competences’ and some of their interpretations curiously detached from the realities they claim to address.

THE SOED ‘COMPETENCE’ GUIDELINES FOR INITIAL TEACHER TRAINING: ISSUES OF CONTROL, PERFORMANCE AND RELEVANCE
In 1992-2 The Scottish Office undertook a ‘revision, updating and consolidation’ of teacher training guidelines (SOED 1993 p. 1), producing a competence-based account of required skills and attitudes, following the production and discussion of draft guidelines for comment in July 1992. The period of consultation provoked some debate at the time, with Maclellan arguing in the TESS that the ‘competences’ represented a half-baked attempt at what ought to have been a more rigorous specification of objectives.

‘...to judge what constitutes a minimum level of competence, the performance indicators of competence must be couched in terms of criterial standards and the range/constraints of context(s) in which the performance will be displayed.’ (Maclellan 5.3.93).

On the other hand, others saw the competences as already intrusively technicist, threatening the autonomy of the profession and even the ‘democratic life of this country’ (Carr 26.2.93). Walter Humes commented:

‘The marginalising of the conceptual aspects of training and their systematic replacement by narrowly conceived skills-based courses will lead to the de-professionalisation of the teachers and their adoption of a reduced role as ‘functionaries’ — perhaps even, in the end, their ‘proletarianisation’ (Humes 18.12.92).

Finally, there were those such as Gordon Kirk who argued that ‘more sharply defined competences’ were no more than the consolidation of good practice and a matter of ‘professional consensus’ (Kirk 11.12.92).

The debate was curiously polarised: was it the end of civilisation or business as usual? common sense or technical nonsense? state coercion or professional consensus? This paper aims to examine these themes of technical analysis, professional autonomy, and political regulation as they are expressed in the SOED Guidelines, or the ensuing COSHEP competence-based profile, and also to relate the Guidelines...
to the experiences of student teachers and probationers. The themes will be interpreted from three different orientations. The first concerns the critique of 'competence' offered by Jones and Moore (1993), in which they view the competency movement as a new and more coercive mechanism for state regulation of the professions (vide Carr and Humes above). The central notion we will address here is the notion of competence as an instance of what Giddens calls socially 'disembedded' knowledge (Giddens 1991, p. 18).

The second perspective examines the construction of the draft and final guidelines themselves. It draws on an insider account of their development (although no doubt there are other accounts that can be told), as well as looking at the differences between draft and final guidelines. Our intention here is to argue that the guidelines emerge as a form of compromise between widely different conceptualisations of the profession and then to contrast that 'socially embodied' account of competency-building with the 'disembedded' critique offered by Jones and Moore.

The third perspective is a more empirical one. The guidelines prescribe competences which new teachers in Scotland ought to exhibit. It follows that an empirical examination of the experiences and perceptions of teachers in training, and of probationers, should tell us something about the match or mismatch between the 'competence' specification and reality — at least as perceived by those taking part in the training. In addition, it should be possible to say something about whether the SOED 'competence' statements are a useful pedagogic or assessment device. Do they help learning, or its valid assessment? Is the profile based on the Guidelines a sensible prescription? Similarly, such data can be used to evaluate the adequacy of Jones and Moore's account of competence. Will the data support Kirk's notion of competence as a consolidation of good practice, or Carr's and Humes's suspicions?

FIRST PERSPECTIVE: THE COERCIVE STATE

Jones and Moore offer a penetrating sociological critique of 'competence'. Drawing on Giddens and Bernstein (Giddens 1991; Bernstein 1990) they argue that competency movements in general involve the 'disembedding' of knowledge. Such a process decontextualises knowledge in ways that are simplistic and contradicted by 'actual cultural practices' (Jones and Moore 1993 p. 389). In addition such decontextualisation and subsequent recontextualisation (the SOED Guidelines are a 'decontextualisation'; their implementation a 'recontextualisation') is atheoretical — since 'competence' involves a denial of theory in favour of the alleged transparency of performances which can be prescribed, defined, and assessed. Competence-based professionalism, therefore, removes the mystique of professional knowledge, and is a form of de-skilling.

Such changes have consequences for power as well as knowledge. By making explicit and public the criteria for professional competence, Jones and Moore argue, the state 'progressively extend(s) its direct control over the sphere of professional expertise' (p. 390). Lists of competences can be altered to redefine the professional task by management, or to hold professionals accountable through audit measures. The profession loses the autonomy to define and police its own practices, professionals are redefined as technicians, and such attacks reflect a much more general phenomenon noted by Bernstein — 'the state's hostility to its professional base' (Bernstein 1990 p. 154-5, cited Jones and Moore p. 389).

Before we examine to what extent the SOED competency text exhibits these features, it is worth noting how insistent Jones and Moore are about the nature of the conflict between the 'competency movement' and some notion of a liberal and autonomous profession. Liberal teachers try to 'blunt' its impact (p. 386). The
movement is a discrete thing, with 'its obvious insulation from a set of well known and elementary interpretive sociological or psychological constructivist criticisms' (p. 387). It involves clear contrasts: 'culturally embedded collective skill is replaced by an individualised, technical competency' (p. 392). Most important 'it' stands 'opposed to liberal and humanistic paradigms': indeed they go on to deny that educational debates ought now to be construed in terms of liberal versus traditional:

The opposition between liberal education and the competency approach can, indeed, be seen as more fundamental in that both traditionalism and progressivism can be construed as the two poles of a single liberal-humanist educational paradigm rather than as basically incommensurable' (p. 387).

Nor is such a critique of 'competence' unique to the 1990s. In some ways, as Jones and Moore imply, and Norris earlier observed (Norris 1991), much of the debate recycles failed ideas for the behavioural specification of various work performances from the 1960s (both in education and in North American business and government). And, of course, that is the kind of recycling that Maclellan advocated in the TESS debate reported at the beginning of this paper — she repeats Popham's arguments, lamenting that the specifications aren't clear enough. Clearly, she still keeps her 1960s bumper-sticker — 'Stamp Out Non-specific Behavioral Objectives'.

In addition, there are other analyses of professionalism that would tend to give support to an anti-professional view of competences. For example, Jamous and Peloiille (1970) argued that the key indicator of a 'profession' rested on its indetermination/technicality (IT) ratio. Professional knowledge contained inherently indeterminate knowledge that could not be expressed solely by technical rules and procedures. Attempts to reduce the element of indetermination amount to an attack on 'the conscience of the craft' — and public specification and monitoring of competences might be interpreted in that light — in the end provoking a crisis for the profession. Making a similar sort of analysis (although unrelated bibliographically), Davis advances a philosophical argument which differentiates between 'trade value' and 'reason value' (Davis 1991). Because professions are theoretically complex and have uncertain outcomes, professions can be distinguished from trades by 'how one justifies the way one's work is done' (Davis 1991 p. 168). Thus professions have an obligation to inform their publics — to 'profess'.

The sociological argument of Jamous and Peloiille, and Davis's philosophical argument, both fit quite readily with current 'social disembedding' theory. SOED Guidelines could be interpreted as an attempt to reduce the IT ratio far enough in order to 'proletarianise' teaching (The Humes thesis), with the 'competences' reducing professional performance to a technical one. Similarly, the specification of competences could be seen as a management takeover of 'reason value' and the reduction of teaching craft knowledge to its 'trade value', a phenomenon which might also receive support from attempts to rewrite professional roles in terms of 'customers', league tables, performance indicators etc — all of which presume to give the 'customer' the ability to read directly the value of professional work, that is, to create a market in values based on credentialism and accountability rather than trust. (For an exploration of alternative ways of viewing the notion of 'competence' see Stronach 1993.)

Our purpose in this section of the paper has been to develop a critical armoury to bring to bear on the SOED competence guidelines. Before turning to that task, however, it is necessary to be reflexive — to critically inspect our troops, as it were.
If we look at the ways in which ‘professionalism’ and ‘professional practice’ are defined, we find a suspicious clarity:

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<th>professional:</th>
<th>technician</th>
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<tr>
<td>liberal humanism</td>
<td>coercive state</td>
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<td>professional autonomy</td>
<td>state control</td>
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<td>craft ‘conscience’</td>
<td>managerialism</td>
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<tr>
<td>‘reason value’</td>
<td>‘trade value’</td>
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<td>high trust</td>
<td>low trust</td>
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<td>high ‘indetermination’</td>
<td>high rationality</td>
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**professional practice:**
- critical: procedural
- reflexive: conformative
- embedded: disembedded
- contextualised: decontextualised
- cultural/collective: technical/individual

Of what should we be suspicious? Perhaps the presence of an heroic emplotment of the professional, an ideological and rather one-dimensional portrait. Such binary and polarised thinking may obscure messier realities. Perhaps also the neatly nested nature of the analysis, especially as articulated by Jones and Moore: from ‘competence’ to mode of control to political ideology to ‘coercive state’ to the spirit of the age of ‘late modernity’: the giddy ascent of ‘competence’ as an essence of contemporary power.

And there are absences as well as presences to consider in the competence critique. The critique pays little attention to the ‘information assymetry’ involved in professional work (Buchanan 1988), that is, to the implications of who has knowledge and therefore power in the professional/client relationship, and seems unwilling to regard professions as at least possibly oligarchic, monopolistic or repressive in tendency. Instead there is an inconsistent and characteristic idealisation of the profession (Stronach 1992). The notion of teaching as part of an ‘ideological state apparatus’ (Althusser 1971) which was common in critiques in the 1970s has vanished without trace from the debate.

With these reservations in mind, our next task is to review critically the SOED competence guidelines, considering both those elements of the Guidelines that seem to fit with the general thrust of the above critique, and noting those which appear discrepant or ambivalent.

**THE CASE FOR ‘DISEMBEDDED KNOWLEDGE’**

It is clear that the Guidelines can be interpreted as reducing the autonomy of the profession. First, they introduce the principle of ‘externality’ in relation to the validation of initial teaching courses. External examiners are nothing new in Higher Education, of course, but these validators ‘should be notified to the Secretary of State and will be subject to his approval’ (p. 2). The monitoring of standards, then, may be conducted from outside the profession.

Second, the Guidelines lay down a series of ‘core competences’ which constitute a national curriculum for initial teacher training, removing autonomy from the training colleges. These competences are expected to act as a basis for course assessment as well, and inform external accountability, as the list of ‘Course Design’ questions on p. 10 clearly intend (eg: ‘to what extent has the training institution elaborated the competences as set out in Section 2 of the guidelines, formulated criteria for assessing their achievement and matched them to the...
particular requirements of different categories of teachers and different courses?’) A longer term development is also mooted—‘setting, on an national basis, criteria against which the achievement of competences can be measured’ (p. 1). Such a development might also permit the external monitoring of professional standards.

Third, the core competences imply a redefinition of professionalism as ‘performance in teaching’ (p. 2), and reflect a desire for more school-based learning for beginning teachers. They also specify appropriate competences for subject teaching, classroom management, assessment, and so on. While these are vague in relation to standards and precise meaning (as Macellans points out), they nevertheless point towards an instrumental and technical specification of the role—such as, ‘create contexts in which pupils can learn’, ‘manage pupil behaviour by the use of appropriate rewards and sanctions and be aware when it is necessary to seek advice’, be able to assess against national standards, select appropriate resources, and so on. Such role specification reflects a lessening of ‘trust’ in relation to the professionalism of teachers, and the panoply of competences express the sorts of ‘disenembedded knowledge’ that Jones and Moore describe. The scattering of adjectives like ‘suitable’ and ‘appropriate’ indicate that the authors are aware of that decontextualisation but feel trapped between arbitrary precision and necessary vagueness.

The recent translation of the Guidelines into a COSHEP profile which insists on a national prescription of competence categories, and specifies levels of grading, epitomises this trend towards decontextualising professional knowledge, and then injecting a forced ‘recontextualisation’ in terms of an assessment of each individual student teacher’s competences against sets of vague categories and grades. Such a process is philosophically confused (Carr 1993), politically coercive (Jones and Moore 1993), comparatively invalid and unreliable (Cameron-Jones and O’Hara 1990) and practically unrealisable. (Yet devised not by the state but by the profession itself, in the form of a working group established by the Committee of Principals of the Scottish Colleges of Education.)

Finally, the competence guidelines are most problematic in that they give the state a mechanism with which to generate tighter control of teacher training and professionalism. Despite their current vagueness, they provide a slippery slope towards the reduction of professionalism to an inventory of classroom and school behaviours, a mechanism that can increasingly determine the definition of the role, and what will count as ‘standards’. The emphasis on school-based learning, and ‘transparent’ outcomes—with their implicit rejection of ‘theory’—may also point to a longer term goal of eroding and eventually abolishing Higher Education-based teacher training and replacing it with school-based apprenticeship.

SOME COUNTER-CRITICAL READINGS

If we now try to read the SOED Guidelines against the criteria for the ‘professional’ model rather than the ‘technician’ one (p. 5), however, we find that we can plausibly construct a very different interpretation.

Jones and Moore emphasize that the ‘professional’ model has an absolutely necessary virtue...

‘Essentially it is critical reflexivity which is at issue’ (p. 395)

… while Davis, as we saw, argued that the core of the professional argument lay in the notion of ‘reason value’, and Jamous and Peloiile identified ‘indetermination’ as the key aspect of professionalism. If we take these elements to be defining characteristics of the ‘professional’ model, what does that suggest in relation to the Guidelines?
First, there are numerous references to what might be taken to be a critical reflexivity. Beginning teachers have to be able to ‘justify’ what is taught, to have knowledge that ‘goes beyond’ the demands of the school curriculum. They must be able to ‘evaluate and justify’ their methodology, to ‘evaluate and improve their teaching’, to be able to make ‘preliminary evaluation of [...] professional progress.’ Their ‘professional competences’ include ‘critical thinking’ (p. 3-6). Each of these requirements therefore implies a reflexive capacity, a self-critical and developmental outlook—a defining characteristic of the professional rather than the technician.

Second, the notion of ‘reason value’ is firmly represented in the Guidelines. Teachers must be able to ‘evaluate and justify their procedures to others’ (p. 1), and to ‘discuss with parents a range of issues relevant to their children’ (p. 5).

Third, the document certainly talks of ‘core’ competences but it also talks of them as ‘mere’ competences, and goes on to stress a series of six commitments that teachers must make. Clearly, these are vocational commitments in that they are kinds of dedication held to be necessary for the proper performance of the job. These ‘have particular power in that they are communicated to those being taught’ and include what we might reasonably assume to be ‘indeterminate’ elements of the job, such as:

- a commitment to self-monitoring and continuing professional development, a commitment to the community, to the environment, to equality of opportunity, and to the moral and spiritual well-being of pupils (condensed account, p. 6).

That’s some technician, we might conclude.

We could go further and add: that’s some professional as well. A review of the professional definition of the beginning teacher role implied in the SOED Guidelines might well argue that what is so striking about the competence guidelines is their idealisation of the job, and of the sorts of qualities beginning teachers are supposed to have:

- ‘justify what is taught from knowledge and understanding of the learning process, curriculum issues, child development in general and the needs of his or her pupils in particular’ (p. 3).
- ‘a commitment to collaborate with others to promote pupil achievement’ (p. 6).
- ‘identify and respond appropriately to pupils with special educational needs or with learning difficulties’ (p. 4).

The Guidelines also stress that these competences are only a beginning:

- ‘All the competences set out in these guidelines should be seen in the context of the beginning teacher responsible for a class (or classes). Such a teacher will go through a great deal of development before he or she becomes a fully skilled practitioner (p. 1).’

Far from offering a restricted version of professionalism, then, we might well choose to argue that the guidelines offer a hopelessly over-extended view of professional achievement in relation to the beginning teacher. We should not accuse the SOED of coercive technicism, but of seductive utopianism.

As in the case of ‘disembedded knowledge’ we could go on, but the point is already clear. It is possible to make both arguments. The document is much more politically ambivalent than the critique of Jones and Moore would have predicted, and so we need to understand why it contains such a mixture of procedural, conformist, reductive, critical, and utopian features; why it seems to offer the promise of autonomy with one hand, and greater state control with the other. That takes us to the second perspective that we wish to discuss.
SECOND PERSPECTIVE: 'EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE'

First, a story. It is an insider story, although of course we have no way of knowing whether it really happened, or whether it represents an institutional myth. No matter, it is relevant as a possible story concerning the construction of the competences. The minister with the Scottish education portfolio decides — in the light of radical moves in England and Wales, and in the darkness of his New Right thinking — to summon one of his top officials and demand ‘root and branch’ reform of teacher education. The senior civil servant summons his staff and ironically translates the instruction: ‘We must reform the guidelines’. (This is a ‘Yes Minister’ story.)

We note that first translation, that first domestication of the proposed policy change. A process of consultation is then started, a draft produced, more discussion, and then a final version. The consultation, we may assume, picks up shades of the concerns which are expressed in the TESS debate with which we began. We do not know the precise process (more insider information would be welcome), but the Guidelines emerge as a series of suggestions and counter-suggestions mediated through the Inspectorate. The technical enthusiasts presumably argue for greater specificity; the liberals for a more open document capable of wide interpretation; the radicals for an abandonment of the whole project. The result is a series of translations or domestinations of the original project, based on a consultative process that is as much part of Scottish tradition as is teacher education itself (the latter apparently being the oldest teacher education tradition in Europe). We can reasonably assume that the result is designed to attract a measure of support from teacher education, or at least to blunt some of the criticism.

The point we wish to make here is that such a process does not simply involve an elaboration of a ‘technical’ specification of competences (such as Macellellan wanted to see). Instead there is a certain amount of horse-trading: the competences represent a series of political compromises. So, for example, the liberals try to insist on getting ‘critical’ and ‘reflexive’ elements into the specification, and there is a push to identify ‘commitments’ that ought to accompany and go beyond ‘mere’ competences. These install a broad and vocational definition of the job, and incorporate various appeals to social justice.

On the other hand, there are pressures to tighten up the language of the competences (so, for example, passive verbs like ‘have’ in the draft guidelines become ‘set’ or ‘identify’). The shift from draft to final guidelines shows some of these pressures in terms of other changes (we might guess that the introduction of notions like ‘partner schools’ and ‘externality’ come from the political side, and a beefing up of equal opportunity themes from the professional end). To some extent, at least, we would argue — on the admittedly limited data available to us — that an overall process of ‘liberal recapture’ is at work in this process. But whether it is or it isn’t, it is clear that we cannot understand the production of these ‘competences’ without taking into account ‘the actual circumstances of their production’ (Fuller 1988) and the ways in which the meanings of words like ‘competence’ change under those sorts of political pressure — the ‘domestication’ of the key vocabulary (Rouse 1993). As Woolgar and others have shown (Woolgar 1988; Latour 1988) even supposedly ‘hard’ scientific knowledge is shot through with the influence of its social construction. In the case of such ‘soft’ social technologies as ‘competences’, the social and political fluidity of their definition and construction is vivid. They show little technical sophistication, but much political sleight of hand in creating an amalgam of form and function that can be quite widely accepted, and given a range of different but still plausible meanings. In this sense, it is insufficient to interpret such innovation as technically inadequate (as Macellellan does) or philosophically confused (Carr 1993a, b, c). Although Carr is right to point to the confusion of competence as ‘capacity’ with competence as ‘disposition’, and to note a ‘funda-
mental and irresolvable tension’ (Carr 1993b p. 260), we would add that such tensions—according to this reading—are also inescapable. They are simultaneously philosophical problems and political solutions.

What are we to make of that fluidity of meaning, of the shifting relation of form and function? We can probably assume that the political imperative to have ‘core competences’ was irresistible. That was the deal with the Minister that would yield ‘root and branch’ reform. It would (or would appear to) offer the opportunity to standardise and control the curriculum of Initial Teacher Education in Scotland. It would give outsiders (the ‘externality’) a purchase for accountability. Thus the ‘form’ of the innovation was a given, but within that ‘form’ we can see that there were much more fluid possibilities concerning ‘function’, and indeed that the specification of functions could begin to contradict the form itself. Thus the ‘core’ competences are also ‘mere’ competences, and the ‘commitments’ are prominent even although they are inherently incapable of any sort of specific criterial specification that a competency system might be assumed to demand (and which is anticipated elsewhere in the document—‘...although there may be a case for setting, on a national basis, criteria against which the achievement of the competences can be measured’). Function and form are clearly at odds with each other in the Guidelines—there are conflicting realities at work.

Or perhaps we should interpret the situation as surreal, rather than containing conflicting versions of reality. Magritte offers us a picture of a pipe. Underneath, a caption: ‘this is not a pipe’. We are invited to think about the picture as a representation that cannot be the thing it represents. Why not? Perhaps because the picture represents the form of a pipe, but not its function (Stake 1994). The SOED, in contrast, offer us a caption. It reads: ‘this is a competence system’, but the picture above seems to represent something that looks like (whether suspiciously or reassuringly) a liberal humanist ideology, little different from its predecessors although dressed up as a system of ‘core competences’. In that case we confront liberal humanism in competence drag—a carefully engineered simulacrum of control. (We not mean to imply, however, that attempts could not subsequently be made to ‘realise’ that form in terms of more congruent and coercive possibilities—such an anticipation is located in the text, as we have seen, and partly realised in the COSHEP competence profile.)

In terms of trying to determine what kind of a beastie these Guidelines are, where does that now take us?

First, we can explain the ideological eclecticism, logical confusion, and strategic imprecision of the Guidelines: they have much to accommodate. They do not fall neatly to the left or the right of the lists we earlier presented, and this is explained by the processes of ‘social embodiment’. They are a political compromise masquerading as a technical specification. It is unfortunate, of course, that the COSHEP working group do not realise this, and attempt a ‘technical’ translation of the Guidelines into directly assessable ‘competences’.

Second, we cannot give the competences a definitive reading. We can plausibly offer the ‘liberal recapture’ story: these Guidelines (see Kirk in the TESS debate) are business-as-usual. They encapsulate liberal principles in a pseudo-technicist frame. Or we can conclude that they represent a ‘slippery slope’: having sold the form of ‘core competences’ to the education profession in Scotland, the government will make further attempts to tighten control over the focus of the curriculum, the assessment criteria, and their monitoring. Or we can conclude that even if such attempts are made, they will come to nothing because what managers take to be a ‘technical’ problem is in fact a political problem incapable of technical solution. Attempts to tighten up the system will only bring underlying contradictions into relief (as the difficulty of trying to make sense of the COSHEP profile has already

125
shown). At any rate, the political ambivalence of the competency reform may help to explain the phenomenon of a bizarre 'own goal': a conventional critique of competency would anticipate that it is the state that proposes such reforms and the profession that resists. But in the Scottish case, as we have seen, it is the College Principals who pick up the SOED competence Guidelines and sponsor the ill-founded attempt to translate them into directly assessable categories and grades, in a vague mix of different notions of capacities and dispositions assessed in an even vaguer mix of criterion and norm referencing — apparently with the support of the regional educational authorities (COSHEP 1993b). To extend the footballing metaphor a little, the unusual case of an own goal that was simultaneously a professional foul.

Third, we can begin to understand why the competences are so idealised in their nature, overloading the poor beginning teacher with enough competences and commitments to see her or him through several careers with greater distinction than most experienced teachers, rather than simply indicating what it is realistic to expect in relation to a one-year training for a job. These utopian expressions perhaps appear because the profession feels threatened by the reductive, technicist, and anti-professional reputation of competences, and wishes to take the opportunity to express as idealistically as possible what it thinks the job is about. In that sense, the Guidelines should be read as a symbolic statement. Again, of course, the COSHEP profile misses the point, taking the six idealistic and vocational commitments of the Guidelines to be technically realisable and assessable entities, and offering up beside them a choice of two tick-boxes, labelled 'areas of strength' and 'areas for development' in an early version, and then, in the later version, a single tick-box for all six, labelled 'areas of particular strength'. The incoherence of these profiling practices does not need labouring.

Fourth, it allows us to argue that Jones and Moore are mistaken in their interpretation of competences — at least in this instance. Their rather one-dimensional account (see also Humes and Carr) tells only one side of the story. The other side is carried by the 'socially embodied' way in which these competences are created and negotiated. We need to read the 'socially disembedded' and the 'socially embodied' nature of the process of competence construction alongside each other.

We can now also argue that the 'disembodied' thesis as it is put forward by Jones and Moore is self-contradictory. They argue against the 'disembodied knowledge' represented by competences, defining it as knowledge taken out of the cultural context in which it is constructed and in which it makes sense. Yet their own account of competences is disembodied in exactly the way they decry — they take no account of the socially embodied construction of the competence specification itself. As a result they construct a one-dimensional picture of competences that fails to represent the sorts of political conflict and compromise that are inevitably engaged in the creation and implementation of such a social technology.

Thus far we have argued that the notion of the effectiveness of 'competences' is strung out between two fantasies. The first is the fantasy of superperformance (by which we mean these utopian characteristics, as well as the belief that 'standards' can be determined by a weak instrument in the face of a powerful occupational culture, and the curious indifference to the actual transitions that student and beginning teachers make). The second is the fantasy of supercontrol (exaggerated notions about the impact of innovations, depprofessionalisation, increasingly coercive state, end of democracy). That takes us to our third perspective, an attempt to understand something of the actual transitions that Scottish teachers currently make, and to relate those experiences and perceptions to the notions of competence expressed in the Guidelines.
THIRD PERSPECTIVE: ACTUAL TRANSITIONS

Our research into the experiences of beginning teachers (McNally et al. 1994a, McNally et al. 1994b) suggests that what they mostly experience is their own incompetence, rather than competence (1). Their experiences do not reflect the multiple skills and abilities envisaged in the SOED’s document. The nature of that ‘incompetence’ is worth spelling out from an anthropological perspective, because much of it is unavoidable and concerns their entry into the school both as novices and strangers:

‘...you’re coming into the school for the first time. You’ve obviously got to fit into the way the school’s running [...] well, for the first year definitely there’s very little room for any of your own ideas to come forward, the second year maybe a little more, and certainly after that you should be able to be in a position where you’ve got the respect of your colleagues [...] and you can start to introduce your own ideas, teach things your own way.’

As a stranger, the new teacher lacks a ‘reputation’ with the pupils, and has to negotiate his or her identity as a teacher. Different personae and tactics are tried out (like ‘Mr Serious’, or not-smiling-till-Xmas). Being novice members of a school community, they are in these senses fundamentally incompetent — and of course the common practice of allocating student teachers to a variety of placements adds to this phenomenon. As a result, beginning teachers have to try to create and establish a version of themselves that pupils will accept, as the following account suggests:

‘I didn’t blow up, I didn’t go into a rage or anything. I just gave them my honest opinion, the opinions of the Germans I knew and that’s that. Then I went back to what I was doing and he said, ‘Miss, the lady before never let us talk about him, she always went into a rage and shouted at us and told us not to mention him’. I said ‘Well, am I that person? ‘No.’ ‘Well, there you go-different person, different reaction.’

Such negotiations are the commonplace of teacher initiation.

Teachers’ accounts at this ‘trial’ stage of their initiation are often full of references to the ‘deep end’, ‘the law of the jungle’, and to a sense that they have at last confronted ‘reality’. Reality means Possil not Balfron, failure not success, a negative rather than a positive state of affairs:

‘I said that third year class, I have really done them, done them wrong here. I haven’t taught them anything. She said ‘what do you mean?’ So I explained and she said ‘Welcome to the real world’. Which I thought was quite good and cheered me up.’

This reality is often felt to conflict with the version of teacher identity promoted in initial teacher training, and many of the teachers come to dismiss that training as ‘idealised’. It is a ‘vacuum’, unconnected to the reality of survival in sometimes difficult schools:

‘...in college you know it’s all that stuff, psychology, self-esteem, and all the rest of it and I used all that at first and it was completely useless [...] I’ve given it up, all the academic stuff [...] When I’ve said to the other teachers, ‘Look how do you actually do that?’ and the answer is basically ‘Bawl them out.’

From the point of view of a novice and a stranger coming to be accepted by the school community, ‘competence’ is a kind of experiential award, granted principally by the pupils to the teacher in terms of acceptance of the persona of the teacher, the end of initial challenges, the giving of positive feedback, and so on (see McNally
et al 1994 for an elaboration of this argument). They experience their learning in holistic terms, not in terms of discrete competences which they believe they are or are not achieving. Our data suggest that there are three broad phases in the induction of beginning teachers. The first is a stage of ‘idealised competences’, wherein the values and ideals of the training course are inculcated. To some extent they are resisted during training, but the real breaking point comes with the need to cope with being a new teacher — a double stranger — both to other teachers and to the pupils. This provokes a sharp change in attitudes and values, and a series of ‘coping competences’ are then developed as teachers learn to fit in, deal with confrontations, negotiate an acceptable identity with pupils and other teachers, and so on. The learning process is often a fairly solitary one, achieved mainly through ‘trial and error’. In this coping stage there seem to be a lot of transitory behaviours, particularly relating to discipline and the need to establish an acceptable ‘reputation’.

It is striking that the SOED ‘core competences’ resemble the ‘idealised competences’ stage, and hardly at all the stage of ‘coping competences’. This is ironic when one considers that the ideological point of ‘core competence’ lists is their supposed relevance, their sense of reality, their common-sense and systematic analysis of actual job functions. Yet in this instance, the competences seem very distant from the real experiences of beginning teachers.

We would rather argue, on the basis of our data on how beginning teachers are inducted into secondary school teaching, that what they first acquire are a series of ‘vernacular competences’, acquired mainly through a fairly solitary process of trial and error, although also assisted by the advice of teachers in their subject department. These vernacular competences may be temporary or permanent features of a developing teaching ‘style’ and ‘persona’. Most of them refer to relationships rather than to learning outcomes, and there is an emphasis on disciplinary competence. The coping stage (if successful) gives way to a third stage of ‘realised competences’, where relationships become more settled and discipline issues recede in importance:

‘…it’s the case of the chicken and the egg. You know, which comes first? I’m not quite sure but because I’m getting to know them better it’s easier to manage them, or because I’m managing them better, I’m getting to know them.’

The third stage involves more stable relationships with most classes, and quite often the emergence of surprisingly firm sets of belief about the nature of teaching, what kids are like, and why standards are as they are. Familiar arguments emerge — about school uniform, these kids, children knowing their rights these days, too many things being done for them, inability to concentrate — ‘all those flickering images they watch’. We concluded that there was an intense sense on the one hand of how much these novice teachers had learned (become teachers, learned routines that work, decided what teacher ‘personalities’ to have, experimented with their effectiveness), and on the other hand of how quickly they had grown old in their knowledge. Such teachers seemed to move from the stress and uncertainty of becoming a teacher, to a plateau of certainties with which to fortify their practice and identity. It seemed that the kind of ‘reflective practitioner’ implicit in parts of the SOED competences and commitments was quite frequently caught and extinguished between the Scylla of initiation and the Charybdis of routine.

In the final section of this paper we want to bring together the three perspectives we have outlined, and to consider practical steps forward. The first of these steps involves a brief discussion of the concept of ‘vernacular competence’. We mean by that expression the sorts of generalisable learning that in practice helps teachers
through the ‘coping’ stage and into the stage of ‘realised competences.’ In other words, can a notion of competence embody ‘embedded knowledge’ — to invert Jones and Moore’s category?

VERNACLARAL COMPETENCE

We have argued that the SOED ‘competences’ are not grounded in reality. They idealise the processes of initiation into teacherhood for reasons that we have already discussed. They are a highly political compromise, disguising a struggle between different conceptions of teaching and disagreement about the nature of professionalism. On the whole, we judge that they represent — as they stand at the moment — an instance of ‘liberal recapture’, but that does not make them useful or even very meaningful in a direct sense: their achievement is what they have prevented rather than what they have brought about. It is not surprising, however, to see competence lists turn out in this way: the debate on pupil profiles/Records of Achievement has reflected similar agendas and conflicts over the last 15 years. The general problem seems to be that when an innovation is made to symbolise a larger problem or crisis (eg pupil profile/work ethic; ITE competences/‘trendy’ progressives eroding standards) then the political ‘press’ on the debate becomes too powerful, the experiences of those directly involved in the process are dismissed or distorted, and a privileged diagnosis is made. In Thatcherite times, such diagnoses have very often made an appeal to the ‘reality’ and ‘common sense’ they were simultaneously destroying.

So let us set ourselves a final practical task: to illustrate a ‘competence’ that avoids the perils of idealism, or illusory relevance, that is recognisable in terms of beginning teachers’ perceptions of their experiences, and relevant to the ‘coping’ stage of teacher induction. Let us also insist that the competence be of theoretical interest — meeting the SOED criterion that ITE courses should ‘provide an intellectual challenge for students and have an explicit concern with the classroom and the professional needs of teachers’ (p. 2). The example is given in order to show that competences grounded in reality rather than fantasy are possible to imagine, and may be worth developing as part of an Initial Teacher Education curriculum — as a kind of applied sociology in this particular instance. Naturally, it would be possible to give other examples, but we feel it best to explore one such ‘coping’ competence in some detail.

VERNACLARAL COMPETENCE IN LEARNING TO TEACH: AN EXAMPLE

Let us start our search by acknowledging that ‘competence’ is a problematic word: it is highly ideological. For example, it is central to ‘Back to the Basics’, nestling alongside ‘common-sense’ in the family of virtues: ‘People look to us for common-sense and for competence and we have a responsibility to show these qualities day after day’ (John Major, reported in ‘Daily Telegraph’ 9.10.93). We should not underestimate, therefore, its potential for vacuity, and hence the need to ground the concept both in terms of meaning and context.

As we have seen, ‘competence’ is also a term that drifts off into idealism in its more liberal moments, or into behaviourism in its more instrumental ones. Caught between these various influences, it is not surprising that some of the SOED competences have an improbable or remote air to them. They belong to the inevitably elastic language of reform, meaning different things to different people at different times. We should also not that as soon as such language aspires to generalisation, it tends to develop a tautologous quality — abstract nouns (qualities, expectations, occasions, awareness) defined in terms of equally abstract adjectives (clear, appropriate, suitable, wide). Yes, but what performance, under what conditions, counts as...?
So we need a notion of competence that will be specific enough to be useful. ‘Useful’ must refer to teachers rather than to external managers, that is, useful in some way likely to be connected to the most effective performance of the role and the consequent learning of their pupils.

Let’s hypothesize a teaching ‘competence’ that might meet some of these criteria. It concerns understanding ‘indirect rule’ in the classroom, the possibilities of using pedagogy as an instrument of control. It refers to the sorts of ‘coping’ strategies which typify early teaching experiences. It begins at the classroom door, as the potentially unruly descend, and Bruno Latour is our theoretical guide to understanding this kind of competence.

THEORY

(Bruno Latour ‘Mixing humans and nonhumans together: the sociology of a door-closer’ 1988, pps 289-310)

‘The cleverness of the invention hinges on the hinge-pin: instead of driving a hole through walls with a sledge-hammer or a pick, you simply gently push the door (...) and here is the real trick, once you have passed through the door, you do not need to find trowel and cement to rebuild the wall you have just destroyed: you simply push the door gently back (...). Now draw two columns. In the right column, list the work people would have to do if they had no door; in the left column write down the gentle pushing (or pulling) they have to do in order to fulfill the same tasks. Compare the two columns; the enormous effort on the right is balanced by the little one on the left, and this thanks to hinges. I will define this transformation of a major effort to a minor one by the word (...) delegation (...) That the small be made stronger than the large is a very moral story indeed (think of David and Goliath). By the same token, this is also, at least since Archimedes’ days, a very good definition of a lever and of power: the minimum you need to hold and deploy astutely in order to produce the maximum effect.’

PRACTICE

...you’ve got 25 kids coming into the classroom. They’re sitting down and they’re taking their jackets off, and their bags, and getting their pencils out. They’re not silent. They’re yapping at this time, right, and they’re not exactly very sure what the lesson’s going to be. So somebody said to me ‘Get something on an overhead, just a few sums — 5 or 6 sums or problems — so when they get in the door, they’ll look at the overhead on the board, sit down, take their stuff out, and do it...’

Latour writes about the boundary between the human and the nonhuman. Don’t think of a boundary, he says, nonhumans have their sociology as well. We delegate tasks to them, and they carry them out with a more or less efficient use of power. The principle of most power for least effect is the goal. In his account the real boundary is between the Inside (warm, ordered, efficient) and the Outside (cold, disordered). The job of the door-closer is to create an efficient transition for those who cross the threshold, and one which preserves the qualities of the Inside. The analogies hold true for the probationer teacher. The disorders of the corridor and of the mass of the pupils are delegated to the nonhuman — to the OHP. The OHP disciplines, orders, even warns — without the expenditure of energy by the teacher. It is her Archimedean lever. Thus the OHP is the social hinge for the teacher to control the transition from disorder to order, corridor to classroom. It breaks the solidarity of the corridor for the individuality of the classroom.

The specific competence is clear, but the notion of ‘delegation’ or ‘social hinge’
would allow us to ask further questions. What other examples of ‘social hinges’ do teachers use or abuse? What relationships of power and knowledge are involved in such a competence of ‘delegation’, as Latour calls it? (Another obvious example of ‘social hingeing’ from our data: ‘He would say — about standing at the door of your classroom and looking them in the eye as they come in, making out this is your domain and they are coming into it and sort of set a standard early on.’)

Asking and answering such questions, discussing the validity of such competences and their educational implications — through direct observation, reflection on action, video-recording, and discussion — would allow students and probationers to consider what ‘embedded’ competences might look like. They would also meet the SOED criteria for developing a critical reflexivity. It would be ‘tricks of the trade’ theorised, experimented with, criticised. It would also have to be founded on a research-based and experience-based examination of how beginning teachers learn, and what contributes both to their development and its absence. As such, it would stand in contrast to the sorts of abstract innovation-by-consultation or by working group that has typified the development of ‘competences’ and competency profiles in Scottish education.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Our first conclusion is that the debate aroused by the issue of SOED competence guidelines has been over-polarised. The processes of ‘social disemboding’ noted by Jones and Moore are a feature of this particular case of competence, but they are not its only feature. It is plausible that such competency systems could be used in the future to undermine the professionalism of teaching, especially by giving managers and politicians an apparently direct purchase on redefining and policing the profession through the accountability offered by ‘core competence’ statements. But such an interpretation fails to do justice to the complex processes of negotiation and domestication involved in the construction of the SOED competences themselves. Our interim conclusion would be that it is necessary to understand these ‘actual cultural practices’ (as Jones and Moore call them) if a less one-sided and more complex view of the competence guidelines is to emerge. We argue that the absence of this double perspective on knowledge — as both ‘disembodied’ and ‘embodied’ — makes their argument self-contradictory in an important sense.

2. We are sceptical of the sorts of direction proposed by Maclellan in the TESS debate. Attempts to treat teacher competences as a ‘technical’ problem run into the same sands as earlier attempts to specify job performance in industry (MBBO), to identify skills inventories for prevocational education, to identify specific teaching skills inventories for prevocational education, or to identify specific teaching skills in micro-teaching in the 1970s. If they were to ‘succeed’, they would remove just those elements of ‘indetermination’ that define teaching as a profession irreducible to specific and atomistic skills. The changes from draft to final guidelines suggest that there is some support for this kind of attempt to make the competences more ‘scientific’, as seen in the tightening up of the language of the descriptors, and the mooted development of the competences into a more detailed specification of performances that would allow them to be used as assessment criteria. As the development of the COSHEP profile indicates, such developments are likely to end up being technically impossible, politically unacceptable, and practically unworkable. They will lose credibility faster than they can gain control.

3. We reject, therefore, the notion of what we called ‘supercontrol’, as variously expressed by Jones and Moore, Carr and Humes. At the same time, we reject the notion of ‘superperformance’, including the assumption that somehow such a competence-based reform is likely to have far reaching consequences for the quality of Scottish teaching, the nature of initial teacher training, the autonomy of the
profession, the cause of liberal humanism, and so on. We put most of these what reactions down to the tendency of ‘competence’ to act as a focal and symbolic contest between state-sponsored managerialism and professionalism. Yet most innovations are characterised by failure, not success (Pressman and Wildavsky 1979), and there is very little reason thus far to see these competence reforms in Scotland as much more than a series of diplomatic manoeuvres that offers consolation to the Right in the form of a simulacrum of control over the teaching profession, and a consolation to what might approximately be called the Centre-Left in terms of providing an opportunity to embed professional virtues in some kind of professional declaration. As we have tried to show, neither of these two strategies has much to do with how beginning teachers actually struggle with their role and the development of their expertise: it is once again the supreme irony of the ‘competence movement’ in general and in this particular that it never quite manages to find out what the reality is on which it is so insistent, and we have tried to indicate how a research-based approach to the business of developing the ‘competence’ of beginning teachers might proceed.

4. We would only add as a final comment that the need to develop the critical reflexivity of teachers (meaning the continuing ability of teachers to improve their practice) ought to be confronted somewhere towards the end of the ‘coping’ phase. We have some evidence to suggest that many teachers succumb to occupational socialisation at this stage, and — more often than we might wish — to a premature and unambitious definition of the possibilities of their role. It is there that the developmental accent should fall, rather than in the initial period when ‘coping’ concerns are a dominant and necessary concern. And it is there that it most certainly does not:

‘...as a probationer suddenly I’m expected to monitor my own performance and evaluate my own performance and there’s nobody waiting there to give you a pat on the head and say ‘well that was really good, or that was mince’ [...] Suddenly, all of a sudden, nobody seems to care how you perform in front of a class.’

As the staffroom cynic in an earlier quote said: ‘Welcome to the real world’?

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132


