Thinking about the key competencies in the light of the intention to foster lifelong learning

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During 2005 the Ministry of Education (MOE) released a pamphlet that introduced the “key competencies” proposed for the New Zealand school curriculum. These competencies are intended to align with the dispositions that underpin Te Whāriki—the early childhood curriculum, and the (slightly different) key competencies named for development in the tertiary education sector. For the school sector, the key competencies are: relating to others; managing self; participating and contributing; thinking; and using languages, symbols and texts. The most up-to-date descriptions can be found at the Curriculum Marautanga Project’s Curriculum Online website at www.cmp.ac.nz.

The key competencies, as defined for the school sector, have been debated at length, and formally defined and refined as part of the Curriculum Project. The consultation process is ongoing and can involve any educators who wish to take part via the Curriculum Project Online. All of this activity represents a lot of thinking and effort by a lot of people. The attempt to link all three sectors emphasises the importance that the MOE attaches to this idea of key competencies and the necessity for all students to continue developing them at all stages of their learning. What I want to discuss here is: why these competencies, why now, and what next?

How the competencies were developed

The first point to make is that these key competencies are not just something that has been dreamed up for New Zealand’s curriculum. They are based on a large piece of research carried out by the OECD. This research was called the DeSeCo project (OECD, 2005). For some years now the OECD has been framing challenging questions around how schooling needs to change to match the sweeping changes that have taken place in the wider society, how economies work, and how jobs are structured. The OECD sought to identify and describe what everybody should know and be able to do in order to lead a “successful life” in a “well-functioning society”. This research was intended to apply in all the nations that collectively make up the OECD—a group that is obviously made up of very different places and peoples. The researchers stressed that competencies labelled “key” must be universally relevant. They noted that many other competencies, while important, were considered “key” because they were situation specific. The key competencies that they came up with provided the foundation for the process of adaptation into the New Zealand curriculum.

The next point is that key competencies are intended to integrate knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values. To me, this means that they must be embedded in the current learning areas (or in contexts that integrate across several of these), not just appear as an add-on. Key competencies are also likely to be developed in groups, not in isolation from each other. They are holistic and students can only demonstrate them by undertaking real actions in meaningful contexts. The OECD researchers emphasised that they placed the “complex demands and challenges that individuals encounter in the context of work and in everyday life at the forefront of the concept [of competence]” (Rychen & Salganik, 2003, p. 43). The competencies are intended to develop learning in contexts that have personal relevance to students’ lives, and require them to use their growing knowledge actively in those contexts. It won’t be possible to achieve this holistic/integrated approach unless and until curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment are all closely aligned.

Key competencies versus essential skills

The MOE pamphlet claims (I’ve highlighted two of its terms in italics) that “the suggested framework of key competencies promotes a lifelong learning model” (Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 2). To achieve this outcome, it
defines all school leavers as those who “have a positive sense of identity, take responsibility for themselves, can interpret and critique the world around them, can participate and contribute effectively in a range of contexts, and are equipped for ongoing learning” (p. 3). While some of these aspects are specified in the “essential skills” of the current curriculum, it is clear that the pamphlet’s use of these terms is somewhat different. The two aspects I’ve highlighted seem to me to provide clear clues that these competencies have been informed by future-focused literature that asks what schooling might look like in the 21st century. But before we go into that, let’s look again at the five competencies, including their current titles—which have changed over the course of the year (in some cases several times) as people have got to grips with their subtleties. I also want to comment briefly on some of the ways I think these key competencies could be misunderstood. These are based on my involvement with the ongoing development of the competencies, both in writing their formal definitions and talking with many groups of teachers about how they might be interpreted in practice.

Relating to others
This competency has some obvious similarities to the “social and co-operative skills” of the current curriculum framework, but there is an important shift in emphasis. This key competency is not only about social skills, as some people have suggested. For example, students learn more about their own and other’s ideas when they listen, compare, clarify, and share their thinking—provided, of course, that they are willing to do so and are open to what may unfold as a result. From the point of view of sociocultural and situated learning theories, interacting with others plays a really important role in cognitive development, because ideas and skills are always embedded in actual contexts that usually involve people and their activities as well as “things”.

Managing self
This is similar to the “self management and competitive skills” of the current framework, but it includes important cognitive and metacognitive components. This key competency emphasises students’ developing autonomy as learners—finding out who they are in relation to others, how they learn, how their ideas and skills change over time, and why they think, act, learn, and interact as they do. The increasing attention being given to ideas such as self-regulated learning and learning styles reflects growing awareness of the importance of these aspects of learning, and links to the focus on “identity” that is introduced in the MOE pamphlet as a vital element of lifelong learning. I’ll come back to this point.

Participating and contributing
This competency is about learning that is authentic, defined as learning that students can use because it relates to their lives in ways that have personal meaning for them. Again, they need to be both able and willing to make the transfer between what they already know and can do, and what they might do next or in the future, and to locate their own actions in personal, local, national, or global contexts, as appropriate. At one stage of the development process this key competency was called “belonging”. There is an important identity component here as well. The suggestion is that who we are influences learning, and (in a somewhat recursive process) what we do with our learning affects who we are. I have been interested to see this interpreted as a call to activism (and therefore as either impractical or dangerous). While this kind of participation obviously does not rule out activism, to me it appears to be at one end of a continuum of ways of using new knowledge and skills.

Thinking
This key competency subsumes several categories of the previous essential skills. It focuses on all types of both critical and creative thinking, and includes innovation and entrepreneurial thinking. The name has been somewhat controversial, as all the key competencies have a strong cognitive component that requires students to think, but the temporary change to “pursuing knowledge and information” was seen as clumsy—so “thinking” it is, for now.

This may be a good point to note the “attitudes” component of each competency. For this competency it might mean not just knowing how to think critically, but showing a willingness to actually do so in a real situation of personal relevance.

Using languages, symbols and texts
Of all the competencies, this is perhaps the one that is potentially most different from the previous essential skills. It subsumes aspects of “communication skills” and “numeracy skills”. It includes, but is far more than, simple literacy and IT skill development. This competency is about understanding and knowing when and how to use all the communication tools and conventions of a culture, and how aspects of the ways we see and interpret the world are shaped by those tools and ideas. The earlier title “making meaning” was misleading, because it tended to be interpreted as “understanding” ideas in general—clearly not the direct focus of this key competency (although knowing how a particular discipline “works” will obviously greatly increase students’ chances of understanding its ideas.)
too high and that it would have a negative impact on the research process they agreed that their fears were unfounded.

Programme adjustments in 2005
Reflection on the teaching of information literacy to Year 9 students in 2004 has suggested a few changes for 2005. One faculty negotiated to be exempt from the Year 9 programme. Another faculty agreed that, as it usually set two research topics per year, the 2005 Year 9 students would complete two research assignments in this curriculum area. This would mean that the 2005 Year 9 students would complete one research topic per term.

Many junior students believe that they have mastered a skill after one attempt and are not very open to repetitive practice. It is a challenge to overcome this perception. One way is for the faculties, with the aid of the teacher-librarian, to coordinate their research assignments to avoid clashes and to ensure that students are undertaking a research assignment only once a term.

Teaching of the Selecting step will be modified to reflect the smaller amount of information Year 9 students retrieve as notes. Instead of transferring their selected notes to another sheet, they will be able to mark their selected points with a highlighter pen.

Throughout the Presenting step classroom teachers, students, and the teacher-librarian will work together as much as possible. Being able to work closely with students during this step is important for their success, and it is easier to provide the necessary support when more than one teacher is involved.

Some teachers did not appreciate the importance of sighting students’ notes and drafts. As James Henri (1999) says, “Teachers seek evidence that students are constructing their own meaning.”

A few students’ notes bore little relevance to their final assignment—when their sources were checked, it was evident that they had plagiarised from elsewhere. They had taken notes as required and then ignored them. The relationship between students’ notes and their paragraphs needs to made more explicit.

All the teachers involved in the programme came together for a pre-research conference in Term 4 of 2004 to discuss the survey assignment, its requirements, and how we would be working together. These meetings were continued in 2005 and allowed teachers to raise any final questions about what we were about to deliver.

In post-research conferences it became evident that a few teachers thought that one source of information was adequate for a research assignment. These post-conferences were also important to discuss the assignment for what worked well, what didn’t, and what could be changed.

From the results of the 2004 Year 9 Information Literacy Awareness it is obvious that the main focus for Year 10 students’ research assignments will be on the Deciding, Finding and Evaluating steps and, to a lesser extent, Selecting.

Acknowledgments
It is important to acknowledge the work of the students and teachers who participated in the 2004 programme. Their contributions were crucial and I learnt many valuable lessons from them. Students very quickly made it clear when my instructions or explanations were unclear. They made me reflect on my teaching style and adjust my instruction techniques.

The preparation for each assignment required collaboration with the subject teacher(s) and research on my part, which resulted in my own knowledge of the subject being expanded. Working in classrooms with teachers who love their subject and can convey that love, and who are able to challenge students to think, is stimulating.

References


There are five key competencies: 

• Thinking is about students being curious, and having the creative, critical, and metacognitive processes to make sense of information, experiences, and ideas, in order to create new knowledge and reflect on their own learning.

• Using language, symbols and texts refers to interpreting and communicating information, experiences and ideas and is not restricted to literacy. Realising the Potential of The New Zealand Curriculum. Page 6.

• Character traits support lifelong learning; an unpredictable and changing world requires continuous learning to face unknown challenges. Meta-learning is "how students reflect on themselves and adapt by continuing to learn and grow toward their goals." Thinking about the key competencies in the light of the intention to foster lifelong learning. SET: Research Information for Teachers, 3, 36–38. Google Scholar.

• What do you mean by "authentic"? A comparative review of the literature on conceptions of authenticity in teaching. Adult Education Quarterly, American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, 58(1), 22–43. Article.