What do we mean by 'competence'?

Claire Cameron takes a critical look at a much-used concept

Introduction

The term 'competence' is fast entering European professional language in care and education work with children, to refer to everything that is done in the name of practice or responsibility for practice. But the term has at least two meanings. One concerns a defined bundle of knowledge, skills and attitudes that make up a particular professional domain; the other an approach to knowledge and development of knowledge in a particular area. There are also 'competency-based' approaches to preparation for work in a particular field.

The idea of competence is also central to European reforms of higher education introduced by the 1999 Bologna agreement. This stated that a Europe of Knowledge is now "widely recognised as an irreplaceable factor for social and human growth … capable of giving its citizens the necessary *competences* to face the challenges of the new millennium". A 2006 European Commission Communication added that "universities have the potential to play a vital role in the Lisbon (Strategy on Employment agreed in 2000) objective to equip Europe with the skills and *competences* necessary to succeed in a globalised, knowledge-based economy" (emphases added).

Contested meanings

An English dictionary definition of 'competence' refers to "being authorised or capable of doing something" and 'being competent' is having "sufficient skill, knowledge and ability or qualifications". The use of terms such as 'sufficient' and 'adequate' implies that the level of knowledge or ability required for 'being competent' is basic: it does no go beyond a minimum. In this light, the development of competence and competency-based qualifications implies reaching certain standards of performance, below which no practitioner should fall.

At first sight, this approach seems unarguable; but on reflection it is also limiting. It focuses on 'can do' aspects of learning rather than all-round development of knowledge and understanding. Competency-based qualifications set out in advance what skills and knowledge – competences - a practitioner should be capable of and against which they will be assessed. This process assumes agreement on the skills and knowledge needed for a profession, whereas, in reality, debates about professional practice and the 'right way' to practice continue, and make a contribution to evolving practice standards. A profession's development requires qualifications that support the ability of practitioners to engage in debate, to listen, to communicate and work democratically.

In a recent project investigating how social pedagogy (or 'education in its broadest sense'), an approach widely found in Continental Europe, might be introduced into children's services in England, I asked participants about their understandings of 'competence'. They were drawn from a range of professions working with, or educating those who work with, children or adults with specialist care needs. Two findings stood out. First, practitioners were unhappy about the way the term 'competence' was being used to describe practice in children's services; and second, those participants who had a background in social pedagogy understood competence differently from those who did not.

Most of the 50 participants referred to 'competence' as a 'benchmark' for practice. For them, 'competence' equated with being 'fit' to carry out their work, being 'safe to practise', and having 'an ability to use skills, knowledge and experience creatively and professionally, to achieve tasks or aims, to an acceptable level, with expectations set by the agency or legislation'. One respondent said that competence is showing "you can demonstrate being able to do something. Nothing has happened until it has been described". He added that without recording, the work is invisible, and "if you can describe what you do, it shows you are competent".

Competency-based qualification frameworks

These comments reflected a particular UK orientation to competence. In the 1980s, reforms of the system of vocational qualifications led to a system of progressive awards for those who could demonstrate their competence for practice through meeting nationally agreed 'occupational standards'. Outcomes were emphasised. This system was subsequently developed to encompass all training and qualifications. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland there is now a National Qualifications Framework, with a system of levels from Entry (basic life skills certificates) to Level 8 (doctoral studies). Today, the definition of competence in professional education is largely about performance to prescribed standards and levels.

In 2008, the idea of a European Qualifications Framework, on the UK model, with "eight reference levels, describing what a learner knows, understands and is able to do - their 'learning outcomes' - regardless of where a particular qualification was acquired" was adopted by the European Parliament. As with the UK approach, focusing on reference levels and learning outcomes was seen as a method of achieving a "better match between the needs of the labour market for knowledge skills and competences and education and training provisions" as well as promoting the transferability of qualifications across and within EU countries.

Shared meanings of competence?

One emerging definition of 'competence' is about performance to agreed but minimum standards. Is this shared by all practitioners in social professions? Some of the participants in my recent study were students or lecturers in social pedagogy from Denmark and Germany. They were not working with competency-based assessment and prescriptive national standards and took a different approach to defining competence, saying it was "more than a skill". A Danish lecturer said being competent combined the "knowledge and ability and thought to do something". It was about translating knowledge into effective action in a thoughtful way, in particular being mindful of the social context and any implications of the action. Being competent was also about self-development. A second lecturer commented that competence is "to be able to be in relation, to have to reflect on and develop

their competence, to be able to relate to others and to do it yourself". For example, competence is "to be able to communicate, to know how to communicate with different groups, staff, children, parents", and to be "able to go into practice and be able to develop knowledge, competence and values, personal and professional development".

These reflections on competence expressed a rather different approach and are closer to the conclusions from an OECD project that competence is: "the ability to meet complex demands in a particular context … (and) implies the mobilization of knowledge, cognitive and practice skills … as well as attitudes, emotions, values and motivations .. .a holistic notion, that was not synonymous with 'skill'" (http://www.portal-stat.admin.ch/deseco/deseco_finalreport_summary.pdf). In this project, which drew on an interdisciplinary and international panel, the concept of competence was stretched beyond the limited conceptualisation in current UK discourse. It was understood, instead, as being about the mobilisation of resources within the self in a social context.

Conclusions

Overall, two positions on competence have emerged. One is about competence as an organising principle in the measurement of a practitioner's performance; the second is a way of expressing ability and action, where the individual is conceptualised as both responsible for their individuality and a social being integrated into a wider group. The UK position - competence as a benchmark for standards in training and practice - is creeping into European frameworks. Arguably, it is anti-developmental, tying education to practice in a way that is limiting to the theoretical and practice development of a field. At the same time, there is a rich understanding of competence in work with children in European countries that is explicitly linking professional-personal development to a field's theoretical knowledge and to the ability to put this into practice. The UK position might be said to lead to a more technical professionalism, rooted in behaviour, the other is supportive of a reflexive professionalism. Can we avoid throwing the (richly competent) baby out with the (minimum standard competency based) bathwater?

Claire Cameron is a senior researcher at Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education University of London. C.cameron@ioe.ac.uk