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Comparing Perceptions: the Competence of Novice Teachers and the Expectations of School Principals

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This paper compares the perceptions of school principals with those of novice teachers on the competence of such newly qualified members of staff. Findings suggest that the school principals and the novices both had similar perceptions regarding the satisfactory performance of the novices, although the novices tended to rate their own performance at a higher range than the school principals did. Moreover, the principals considered teacher competence items to be more important than that of the perceived performance of the novices. Drawing on the findings, a number of teacher competence items in which novices need to improve is revealed, including that of classroom management and assessing students' learning. The paper concludes with a discussion of four dimensions of the educational significance of the study.

Key Words: teacher competence, novice teacher, school principal

With the introduction of new education innovations and reforms, there are new demands on teacher competence. Teachers and school principals may have changing perceptions of the notion of teacher competence which may or may not match each other's expectations. This paper will look into the notion of teacher competence and compare the perceptions of the novice teachers and their school principals.

Teacher Competence

In 2001, the Hong Kong SAR Government launched an education reform comprising directions for changes within the school curriculum (Curriculum Development Council, 2001) and hence within teaching during the ensuing ten years. In order to meet the new demands of the reform, there is growing concern regarding the competence of novice teachers and the quality of teacher education programmes. There have been a number of studies in Hong Kong which have looked into issues relating to the competence of teachers. For example, Siu and Lo (1987) described the perceptions of a good teacher from the viewpoint of school principals, parents, teachers and pupils. Chan, Chan, Ngan and Yeung (1992) and Cheng (1994) researched teachers' self-concept and their locus of control respectively. However, these studies merely provided descriptions of the generic characteristics of a good teacher or explained the relationship between the characteristics of a teacher and their attitudes to teaching. Awareness of the competence of novice teachers in Hong Kong schools was highlighted when Cooke and Pang (1990) described the problems facing such individuals and suggested that the first year of teaching is indeed a crucial and difficult one. It is, therefore, important that more understanding is gained concerning the competence of graduates of local initial teacher education progammes, so that teacher educators can better assess the impact of their programmes. Studies involving novice teachers may also help to bridge the knowledge gap

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between newly qualified and experienced teachers and demonstrate the importance of continuing professional development.

A study comparing the perceptions of the school principals and the novice teachers on the competence of novice teachers is meaningful in two ways. Firstly, while there are studies describing teacher competence, there is a lack of information on how school principals perceive novice teacher competence. The perception of the school principals is worthy of greater attention; Ballantyne, Thompson, and Taylor (1998) have argued that principals' conceptions of teacher competence may have positive or negative effects on teacher behavior and student learning and the school principals have a central role in teacher appraisal or evaluation. They also called for more research on principals' conceptions of novice-teacher competence and that school principals need to be aware of possible biases. Secondly, psychological and teacher education studies (Alicke, 1985; Larwood & Whittaker, 1977) have identified that individuals hold a variety of self-serving biases, rating themselves superior to their peers in terms of personality traits, exemption from risks, and professional ability. There is a tendency for student-teachers to have "unrealistic optimism" – the disposition to believe that problems that plague others will not happen to them (Weinstein, 1988). The findings of the study will yield information that will assist novice teachers in gaining personal insight which is the first and most important step in the issue of teacher empowerment (Hunt, 1987).

In order to formulate a study on the perception of novice teachers' competence, a review of studies carried out in various countries in the areas of teacher development and competence was conducted. Among the studies on teacher development, Bell and Gilbert's (1996) work was particularly relevant to the present investigation. It defined 3 areas of teacher development as social, personal and professional. These areas provide an effective framework for analysing novice teachers' competence, along with the inclusion of a particular focus on professional or instructional competency, on building inter-personal relationships, and on enhancing professional development as well as meeting the needs of the school as an organisation. The importance of each of these areas in teacher development is shared by other teacher education studies. The significance of the personal area has been emphasized by Cameron-Jones (1988) who regarded teaching performance as stemming not only from knowledge and competence but also from the commitment of the teacher. Ballantyne, et. al. (1998), reporting on school principals' perceptions of novice teachers' competence, indicated the conception of the personal attributes of novice teachers which include personality, self-esteem, "natural" gifts and talents which they bring into the classroom. They have used the terms "respect", "air of confidence", "flair" and "presence" to describe this conception. Murphy, Delli, and Edwards (2004) echoed the findings on the personal attributes of a good teacher suggested by Tuckman (1995) that good teachers are believed to be caring, patient, not boring and polite. The professional aspect includes the suggestions made by Murphy, et al. (2004) highlighting the knowledge of the content area; Reynolds (1995) added to the list the ability to handle teaching tasks which includes preparing the subject matter for the students, the interactions in the classroom, adjusting plans according to students' response; Stroot, et al. (1998) proposed knowledge of the curriculum, possessing critical thinking skills, developing evaluation procedures and varying the environment to meet students' learning needs, and managing the classroom. The social aspect includes the ability to be willing to listen to and act upon advice from colleagues or senior teachers, involvement in school activities, professional development and extracurricular activities, which are described by school principals as "fitting into the system" (Ballantyne, et al., 1998). They also need to build trust and rapport, examine issues within an organizational context, build skill and confidence in others, and engage in collaborative work with teaching colleagues (Pellicer & Anderson, 2001). Moreover, the competence of being able to communicate with parents and guardians about student learning is also one of the elements in the social aspect (Loving & Graham, 1997).

Among the studies on teacher competence, four models conceptualizing competence are identified. These models have different implications for the understanding of beginning teachers' competence, and for making basic assumptions about assessment and teacher education. The first model is Taylor's (1949) behaviorist approach which results from task analysis breaking down the competence areas into constituent elements. The second one is a process model, which focuses on the role of teachers as the result of functional analysis. Researchers (Black & Wolf, 1990) who worked on this model emphasized knowledge and understanding as intrinsic and essential inputs which are then applied in specific instances resulting in a successful performance. In this model, experience and executive ability are also important.

The third type of model includes the combination of an interactive model developed by Hodkinson (1992) in which interactions between people and those between people and their environment are highlighted in explaining competence in vocational education, and a cognitive model (Reynolds &

Salters, 1995) in which knowledge and understanding underpinning competent actions are important. These models have proposed a more accurate and holistic view in analyzing teacher competence. While Hodkinson (1992) explained the development of competence using a schema theory where the individual uses existing schema to filter new learning experiences, Reynolds and Salters (1995) also provide a reminder about the importance of the personal dimension of teacher competence and suggested the consideration of the presence of a value dimension in all human action. Moreover, Hodkinson (1992) reiterated that competence is "constantly evolving in a dialectical relationship between performers, actions and culture". When applied to the novice teaching context, this means that the classroom and school contexts interact with the novice teachers and shape their teaching as they develop their teaching competence.

Short's (1985) attempt to clarify the confusion between models results in the fourth model. Short (1985) presented four different conceptions of teacher competence which include:

- Competence as behavior or performance, the doing of particular things independently of purpose or intent,
- Competence as command of knowledge or skills, involving choosing and knowing why the choice is appropriate,
- Competence as level of capability which has been 'sufficient' through some judicious and public process; this indicator of sufficiency may fluctuate since it involves a value judgement,
- Competence as a quality of a person or state of being, including more than characteristic behaviors: performance, knowledge, skills, levels of sufficiency, and anything else that may seem relevant, such as intent, motives, attitudes, or particular qualities. According to Short, the fourth definition implies that many theories about teacher competence can co-exist, all of which can be justified.

While teacher educators (such as Ashburn, 1987; Reynolds, 1992) have viewed teacher professional development as a continual or lifelong learning process, they have also considered teacher competence as a dynamic and developmental concept. Hence, the competence of novice teachers is only an early point if not the starting point of the teacher professional development continuum. Being the starting point also means that this is of significant reference value for charting out directions for further development. The sufficiency concept, as proposed by Short (1985), which indicates that a level of capability involves a value judgement made by some public process, is also relevant to the present study as school principals who are employers or leaders of the school may determine the "sufficient indicator" for competent novice teachers.

The definition of competence adopted in the present study has taken into account the work of Short (1985) and the interactive model proposed by Reynolds and Salters (1995). Teacher competence is therefore defined as demonstrating the necessary pedagogical skills and abilities in the school context. Competence is seen not only as a set of behavior but also as the quality of a person at a certain stage of development.

Method

The aims of this study were to identify school principals' perceptions of the performance of graduates from a teacher education programme. The context of the study was the two-year full-time Certificate of Primary Education Programme CE(P) at the Hong Kong Institute of Education. In addition, the graduates' self-perceived performance was also examined. Research questions in this study included:

- What was the performance of the graduates from the teacher education programme as perceived by the school principals?
- What were the school principals' perceptions of the relative importance of different teacher competency items?
- What was the self-perception of graduates of the teacher education programme on their own performance?

The findings reported in this paper were obtained using a quantitative method of study. School principals who had employed graduates of the full-time CE(P) programme were invited to complete a questionnaire indicating their perception of the performance of the beginning teachers and their view of the importance of a range of professional capabilities. The rating scale is a 5-point scale from 1 to 5. The higher the score, the better the perceived performance. A result of 5 indicates that the graduate 'always meets' the required standard, while 3 means the graduate 'just meets' the required standard and 1 indicates those who 'always fail to meet' the standard. Furthermore, the questions also elicit the views held by school principals on the importance of skills and knowledge for the teaching posts held by the graduates. The rating scales are again between 1 and 5. The higher the score, the more important the particular teacher competence item is perceived

to be. Moreover, school principals were invited to rate the graduates' overall performance in all aspects. The questionnaires were administered six months after the teachers had started their teaching careers.

In the questionnaire, the teacher competence items were designed based on both local (So, Cheng, & Tsang, 1996) and overseas studies (Ballantyne, et al. 1998; Loving & Graham, 1997; Pellicer & Anderson, 2001; Reynolds, 1995 : Stroot, et al., 1998) and were comprised of the following areas of competence: professional competency, analytical and problem-solving abilities, work attitude, inter-personal skills, information technology competency, Chinese language ability and English language ability. Adding the content of the seven areas of competencies together, there were a total of 52 elements. The novices were also invited to complete the same questionnaire indicating their self-perception of their performance and, in addition, to rate their own overall performance in all aspects. The analysis of the findings involved a comparison of the perception of the novices with that of the school principals on their performance as well as the relative importance of the competency items.

Two hundred and seventy five primary schools were invited to participate in this study and to complete the questionnaires. The return rate was 65.5% as 180 sets of valid questionnaires were collected. This participation rate amounts to approximately 25% of all the primary schools in Hong Kong. The questionnaires were distributed on school-by-school basis. Each school principal was asked to complete the questionnaire based on his/her perception of the graduate employed by the school during the current academic year. If more than one graduate was employed, the school principal was asked to select just one. He/she was also required to distribute the attached graduate's questionnaire to the graduate concerned for completion. As the findings needed to reveal a comparison between the ratings of the school principals and the graduates, odd questionnaires consisting only of the school principal's or the graduate's copy were excluded from the database. Each questionnaire set included responses from the school principal and the sampled novice, meaning that 180 questionnaires from both school principals and graduates were included in the data analysis. The values of the Cronbach's reliability coefficient alpha of the questionnaires for the school principals and the novice teachers were 0.98 and 0.97 respectively.

Findings and Discussion

The study employed two methods of identifying the school principals' perceptions of HKIEd graduates' performance, as well as the graduates' self-perceived performance. The first method of analyzing the data was by using mean scores, while the second identified the relationship between ratings of importance and graduates' performance by constructing a scatter plot. The major findings of the study can be summarized as follows:

In general, the school principals were satisfied with the performance of the graduates, as the overall rating of their performance in seven aspects was 3.88. The corresponding rating of the graduates' self-perceived performance was 3.89, thus indicating parallel results from both parties in this area. As shown in Table 1, the graduates' self-perceived performance in the areas of 'work attitude', 'inter-personal skills' and 'academic & professional competency' was equivalent to the expectations of the school principals in rank order.

Table 1. *Graduates' overall performance in each area as perceived by both school principals and graduates in rank order*

Areas	School principals' mean rating		Graduates' mean rating	
Work attitude	3.98	(1)	4.10	(1)
Inter-personal skills	3.97	(2)	3.99	(2)
Chinese language proficiency	3.92	(3)	3.91	(4)
Information technology competency	3.83	(4)	3.97	(3)
Academic & professional competency	3.71	(5)	3.73	(5)
English language proficiency	3.69	(6)	3.68	(7)
Analytical & problem-solving abilities	3.54	(7)	3.69	(6)
Overall performance in all aspects	3.88		3.89	

Note The rank order of each area is shown in brackets.

Table 2. *The importance of teacher competence in each area as perceived by the school principals in rank order*

Areas	Importance
Work attitude	4.69
Inter-personal skills	4.62
Academic & professional competency	4.51
Analytical & problem-solving abilities	4.42
Information technology competency	4.33
Chinese Language proficiency	4.26
English Language proficiency	4.07

Table 3. *The most important items of teacher competence and graduates' best-performed items as perceived by the school principals*

Areas	Items
Academic & professional competency	Use of classroom language – Cantonese
	Knowledge of the subject of teaching
	Teaching method of the subject taught
Work attitude	Sense of responsibility and commitment
	Ability to work independently
	Caring for students
	Perseverance
	Professional ethics
	Seeking to develop oneself professionally
Inter-personal skills	Team work
	Ability to build rapport with colleagues
	Ability to build rapport with students
	Ability to build rapport with parents
	Ability to build rapport with superiors
Chinese language proficiency	Reading in Chinese
	Writing in Chinese

When the rating of individual areas was considered, the novices rated their own performance more favourably when compared with the school principals' ratings (Table 1). The mean values on perceived performance for the seven areas ranged from 3.7 to 4.1, whereas the ratings from the school principals fell within the range from 3.5 to 4.0.

These findings suggest that the school principals were expecting teachers of a higher calibre as all the scores on the importance of the work were above 4. As shown in Table 2, the important areas of teacher competence, as perceived by the school principals in rank order, were 'work attitude', 'inter-personal skills', 'academic and professional competency', 'analytical and problem-solving ability', 'information technology competency', 'Chinese language proficiency' and 'English language proficiency'. The school principals perceived graduates' English language proficiency to be the least important area of teacher competence. This could be explained by the fact that 95% of the sampled schools were Chinese medium schools.

Comparing the perceptions of the school principals and graduates in the area of graduate performance Figure 1 presents the principals' perception of the graduates' competence for all items. The findings indicate that six out of the top ten items were perceived by the school principals as being performed best by the graduates, the most important being competence in subject knowledge, the related teaching

Figure 1 Survey of School Principals: How often has the performance of the GRADUATE met your expectations in the following aspects?

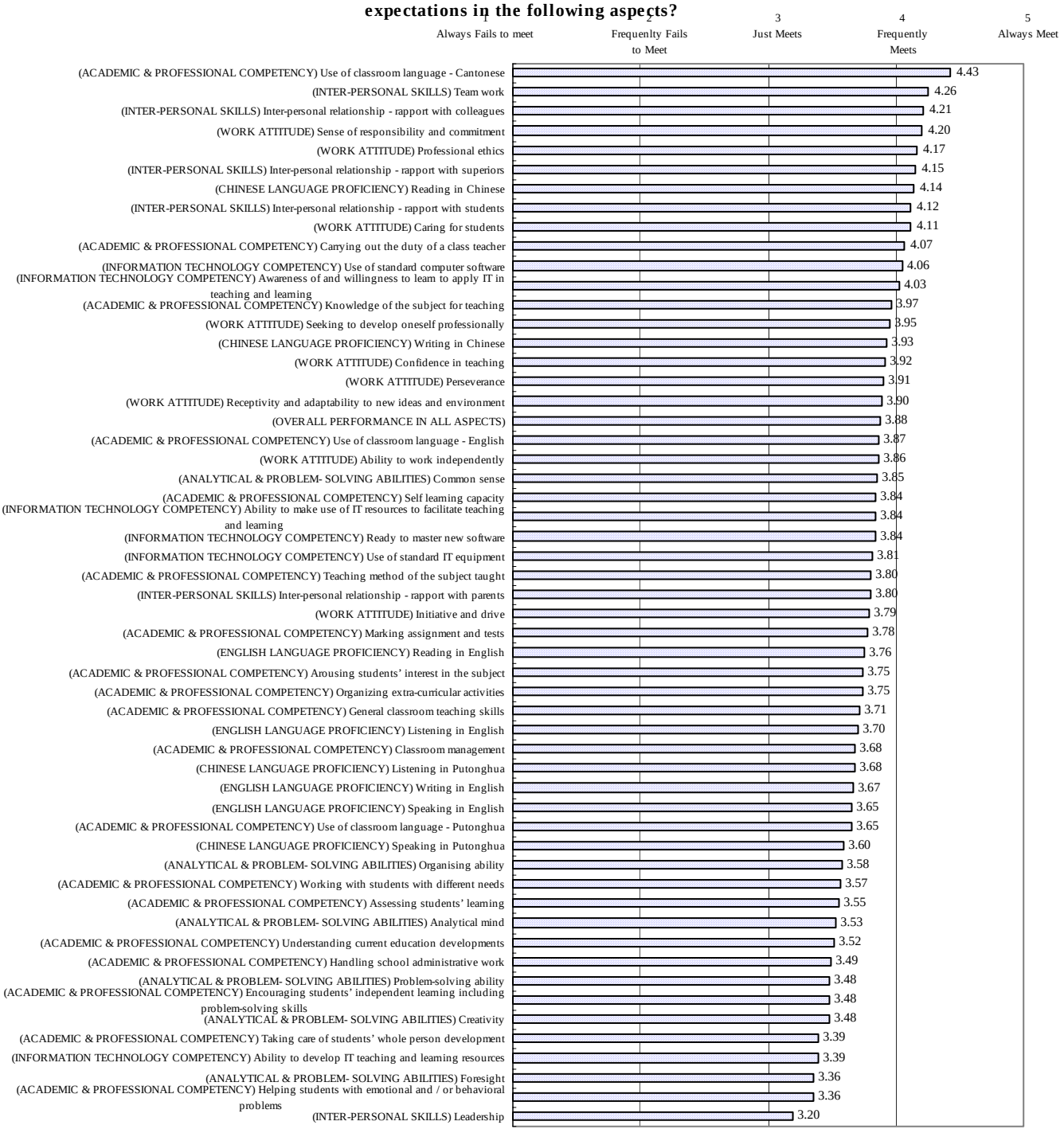
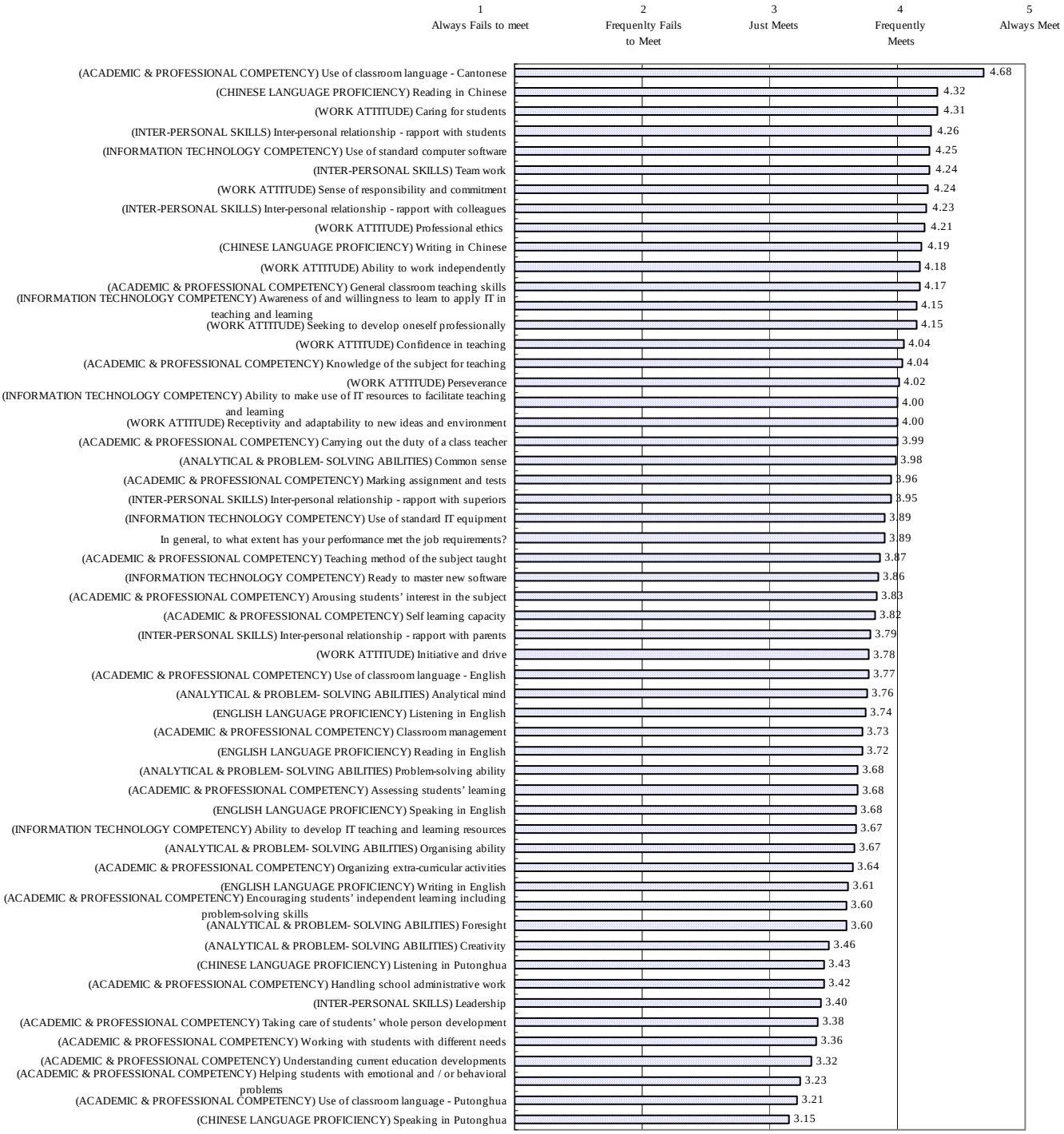


Figure 2 Survey to Graduates: How often has your performance met the job requirements in the following aspects?



method and the use of Cantonese as a classroom language (also refer to Table 3). These six items included 'use of classroom language – Cantonese', 'team work', 'sense of responsibility and commitment', 'professional ethics', ' ability to build rapport with students' and 'caring for students'. Figure 2 shows how the graduates perceived their own performance. A comparison of Figures 1 and 2 indicates that the views of both graduates and school principals corresponded with each other concerning performance. Eight out of the ten items were perceived by both graduates and school principals as being the graduates' best-performed items. These were 'use of classroom language – Cantonese', 'reading in Chinese', 'caring for students', ' ability to build rapport with students', 'team work', 'sense of responsibility and commitment', 'ability to build rapport with colleagues' and 'professional ethics'. All these items were included in the areas of 'inter-personal skills', 'work attitude' 'academic and professional competency' and 'Chinese language proficiency'.

The relationship between the graduates' performance and the importance of teacher competence items as perceived by the school principals

The school principals' ratings on the performance of the graduates were reasonably associated (Pearson Product moment correlation coefficient = 0.41, significant at 0.01 level) with their ratings on the importance of that particular competence. This association was illustrated using a scatter plot (Figure 3). All the dots on the graph clustered around a straight line, indicating that there was strong concurrence between the school principals' ratings on work performance and the importance of the work duties ascribed. It can be said that the school principals were satisfied as the graduates had performed well in the work duties which they considered to be important.

A more detailed observation of Figure 3 shows that sixteen items in the areas of 'academic and professional competency', 'work attitude', 'inter-personal skills' as well as 'Chinese language proficiency' were perceived by the school principals as the most important items of teacher competence and the graduates' best-performed items. These included 'use of classroom language – Cantonese', 'knowledge of the subject of teaching', 'teaching method of the subject taught', 'sense of responsibility and commitment', 'ability to work independently', 'caring for students', 'perseverance', 'professional ethics', 'seeking to develop oneself professionally', 'team work',

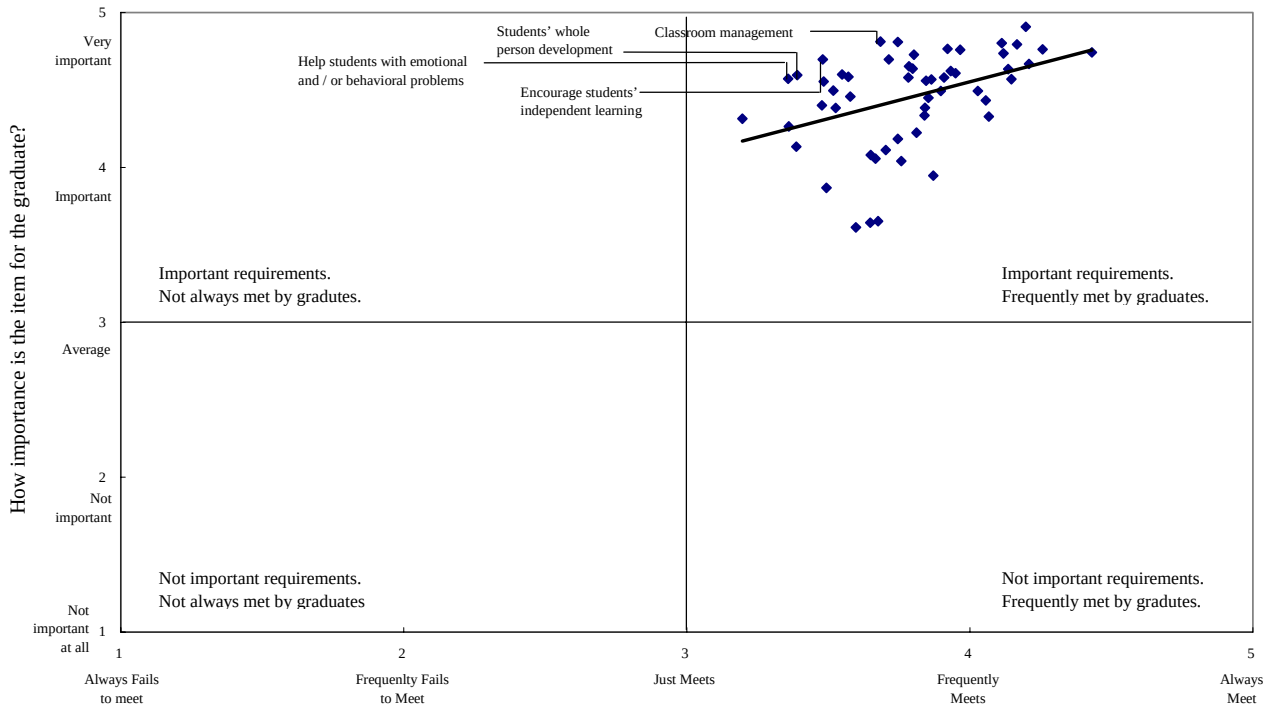


Figure 3. Comparison between the importance of teacher competence items and the graduates' performance as perceived by the school principals

Table 4. *Graduates' least well performed items which were, however, perceived by the school principals as those of most importance with regard to teacher competence*

Areas	Items
Academic and Professional Competency	Arousing students' interest in the subject
	General classroom teaching skills
	Working with students with different needs
	Classroom management
	Marking assignments and tests
	Assessing students' learning
	Helping students with emotional and/ or behavioural problems
	Encouraging students' independent learning and helping them to develop problem-solving skills
	Taking care of students' whole person development
Work attitude	Initiative and drive

' ability to build rapport with colleagues', 'ability to build rapport with students', ' ability to build rapport with parents', ' ability to build rapport with superiors', 'reading in Chinese' and 'writing in Chinese'.

Apart from indicating the close match between the perception of the school principals and that of the graduates, this study can also provide information on how the teacher education programme may further improve in the area of professional development as required by novice teachers if teacher education is seen as a lifelong process. Table 4 lists the graduates' ten least well performed items which were, however, regarded by the school principals as the most important items of teacher competence. These were in the areas of 'academic and professional competency' and 'work attitude'. They included 'arousing students' interest in the subject, 'general classroom teaching skills', 'working with students with different needs', 'classroom management', 'marking assignments and tests', 'assessing students' learning', 'helping students with emotional and/or behavioural problems', 'encouraging students' independent learning and helping them to develop 'problem-solving skills', 'taking care of students' whole person development', as well as 'initiative and drive'. These items can be interpreted as the areas of teacher competence where the graduates performed less satisfactorily in the eyes of their school principals. Many of these items reflected common problems faced by novice teachers (Pang, 1990) who lack substantial experience in working with students e.g. 'helping students with emotional and/or behavioural problems', 'encouraging students' independent learning and helping them to develop problem-solving skills' and 'taking care of students' whole person development'. These can therefore be highlighted as areas to be considered more closely by teacher educators as they attempt to chart out possible directions of induction and in-service professional development opportunities, and also as they evaluate the shape and content of their pre-service teacher education programs.

Conclusion

By identifying the areas in which novice teachers performed best as well as those areas which need improvement and determining the perceptions of the school principals on the importance of the various tasks, programme developers may be able to ascertain possible directions for the improvement of the teacher education curriculum. The findings reveal that the graduates' self-perceived performance matched the expectations of the school principals. In general, the graduates can be said to have performed satisfactorily according to the school principals' perception. Eight out of the graduates' top ten best-performed items were perceived by both the graduates and the school principals as those in which they showed most ability. These items were:

- 'use of classroom language – Cantonese';
- 'reading in Chinese';
- 'caring for students';
- 'ability to build rapport with students';
- 'team work';
- 'sense of responsibility and commitment';

- 'ability to build rapport with colleagues'; and
- 'professional ethics'.

As the ratings also indicate that the school principals would expect better performance from the graduates in a number of areas, it is therefore suggested that areas concerning students' personal development, dealing with their emotional and behavioural problems, leadership, creativity, as well as coping with administrative work should be improved within the programme or that teacher induction and further professional development opportunities should focus on these areas.

Educational Importance of the Study

This study is significant in four ways. Firstly, it serves as an instrument with a high reliability coefficient that may well capture school principals' expectations and perceptions of novice teachers themselves. A portrait of the professional development of teachers could also be provided through a longitudinal study where ratings of the competence items could be compared. Secondly, drawing on the findings, areas for improvement in initial teacher education programmes may be identified based on the relative importance of the competency items as rated by the novices and the school principals. Teacher educators and novice teachers need to be constantly mindful of the expectations and demands from schools. As research studies (e.g., Burden, Peterson, 1979; 1990) have reported on changes that occur during a teacher's career, teacher competence is a dynamic notion. These changes can include job events such as promotion or being assigned additional or new professional responsibilities, or they may reflect some of the constant challenges that come with the new roles of and demands placed upon schools and education in general. In Hong Kong for example, there is a new emphasis on Information Technology (IT), and on the all-round development of children. These new demands require teachers to be competent in developing IT teaching and learning resources, and in organising extra-curricular activities (Curriculum Development Council, 2001). Teacher education programs need to be responsive to changing emphases and directions in education and to the continual development of students. In line with the demands of the education reform agenda, programs also need to raise students' English language abilities, IT competencies and their ability to communicate in Putgonhua. The findings of this study reinforce the understanding that teachers need to engage in continual professional development and enhance teacher competence. Moreover, in countries where standards for teaching and professional development for teachers are defined (National Research Council, U.S.A., 1996), new demands on teacher competence are being introduced. Items of the questionnaire can be constructed in line with the requirement of particular standards and the results of the study will then inform teachers and the education community as to how fully these standards are being met.

Thirdly, the differences or discrepancies in the perceptions of the novices and the school principals indicate important areas which need to be addressed by the provision of in-service teacher development opportunities. Areas such as professional and academic competency, problem solving, more specific abilities including relating to parents, catering for the emotional needs of students, and competencies in school administration will benefit from continual professional development after graduation throughout the career of the teacher. This reinforces the notion that teacher professional development does not terminate at the graduation of the initial teacher education program. Studies in teacher socialization (Busher, Clarke, & Taggart, 1988; Duesterberg, 1998; Liston & Zeichner, 1991) shared the same position that learning to teach for novices is influenced by the culture of the school which sets the boundary and limits of teachers' practices. Initial teacher education programs therefore only mark the starting point for what should ideally be the continual if not lifelong learning of the teachers.

Finally, school principals need to communicate their expectations to novice teachers and should identify for them or emphasize the areas of work they see as requiring greater attention. It is hoped that through the joint efforts of novice teachers and principals, the quality of education offered to students will be improved.

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