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Expanding notions of competence in recognition of prior learning assessments of candidate artisans in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

In South Africa, a recent policy initiative is under way to certificate unqualified artisans through recognition of prior learning (RPL) assessment of those who have work skills and experience but lack formal qualifications required to take the official national trade test. This article is based on a larger empirical study to investigate South African RPL practitioner perspectives and practices in light of formal policies, in settings where RPL for uncertificated artisans was being conducted, in order to understand how these candidate artisans were being assessed and how evidence of competence was being evaluated. Findings revealed that practitioners assessed only a limited range of competencies required for modern work environments, and that consequently the type of assessment being conducted was also limited to traditional methods. It was evident that more innovative assessment of a wider scope of competencies is needed.

Key words: recognition of prior learning, competence, assessment, artisans

INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, an artisan is defined as one who has been certified competent to perform a listed trade/occupation (SAQA, 2023). The route to becoming an artisan has traditionally been through indentured apprenticeship in a particular trade, interspersed with periods of learning at a college to obtain the requisite theory certificates. But there are also large numbers of workers who for various reasons entered a trade and gained extensive experience without having gone the formal qualification route. These "unqualified" artisans are being given the opportunity to become certificated *via* the Artisan Recognition of Prior Learning (ARPL) route instituted to assess their competencies and enable them to take the trade test to become certified artisans. Recognition of prior learning (RPL) thus offers alternative access to qualifications for people educationally and economically marginalized by racialized, discriminatory government policies of the South African government prior to 1994, whereafter a democratic dispensation came into being. The assessment of such artisan candidates is conducted by RPL practitioners/assessors who are qualified subject matter experts in the trade/discipline, and who are trained to conduct ARPL through a standardized assessment process encapsulated in a set of assessment instruments called the RPL Toolkit. The toolkit and assessment procedures are aligned to national competency standards for specific trades. Our research attempted to interrogate assessor understanding of competence and the implementation of RPL assessment prescribed by the toolkit.

The RPL system in South Africa

RPL is primarily concerned with measuring the evidence of learning acquired by a candidate through formal or informal learning as well as through work experience,

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against the outcomes or entry requirements of a particular qualification (SAQA, 2019). SAQA defines RPL as the "principles and processes through which the prior knowledge and skills of a person are made visible, mediated and assessed for purposes of alternative access and admission, recognition and certification, or further learning and development" (SAQA, 2019). Although SAQA is responsible for the development of RPL policy in terms of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Act (South Africa Government, 2008) it has very limited authority to enforce the application of these policies within education and training institutions or at workplace education and training provider sites; and official RPL implementation policies still face significant hurdles including a lack of human and financial resources; quality management capacity; administrative bottlenecks; and limited options for candidates seeking articulation of vocational certificates with higher education qualifications (DHET, 2013). Publicly funded Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges are required to have institutional RPL policies and processes reflected in their documents and brochures, with a dedicated RPL unit to oversee the implementation of RPL at their institutions, which is a significant advance on the ad hoc management of RPL that previously existed. RPL also takes place at workplaces in private training academies and testing centers where assessments are conducted and competency gaps identified. While the assessment of candidates seeking certification as artisans and evaluations of the evidence of competence are governed by national policies for RPL, there has been little empirical research on implementation in this education and training domain. The research outlined in this article was therefore specifically concerned with how artisan candidates were being assessed and how evidence of competence was being adjudicated.

Understandings of competence in the 21st century

Scholarly literature reveals little consensus on the conceptualization of competence, a situation attributed to complexities within the education sector (Azemikhah, 2005). Older and narrower ideas about competence have held that competence is context-specific, whereas more recent scholarship (Billett, 2009; Ellström, 1997; Gamble, 2009; Ikävalko *et al.*, 2020; Mulder, 2017; Rauner & McLean, 2008) propose a broader conception of competence that includes, inter alia, applied competence, occupational competence, and emotional competence. Pye (1994), Gonczi (1999), and Brockmann *et al.* (2008) have argued for more holistic and integrated competence development in authentic settings that enable expertise to be built.

While scholarship on occupational competence has been centered on the application of knowledge and skills to perform work, some scholars (Billett, 2009; Mulder, 2017) agree that to develop 21st century competencies (Finegold & Notabartolo, 2010) there needs to be a broadening of the definition of competence, because technological development in engineering for instance, requires artisans to demonstrate higher levels of competence including problem-solving, critical thinking and effective communication. In addition, empirical evidence shows that emotions affect how individuals experience change, how they learn, and how they adapt to situations (Ikävalko *et al.*, 2020). Emotional competence in the work context is therefore highlighted in the literature as the ability to "perceive, understand, recognize, express and practice/apply emotions in the workplace" (Ikävalko *et al.*, 2020). In light of expanded notions of competence for modern work contexts, this article examines how RPL practitioners/assessors conducted their assessments, and their understandings of competence that informed assessment activities.

METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative approach within an interpretive paradigm was adopted whereby data was gathered from artisan training stakeholders and practitioners/assessors to provide insights into how RPL was being understood and implemented at TVET colleges and workplaces, and how the competencies of engineering artisan candidates were being assessed and recognized. Documentary research interrogated the relevant national and institutional policies governing the implementation of RPL in South Africa, and international comparative scholarship on competency testing was undertaken. In addition, on-site observations of RPL processes were undertaken at selected testing centers and interviews conducted with RPL practitioner-assessors.

Two economic sectors were selected for this study, namely Engineering, and Construction, which are trades that are well established in South Africa and in which there are large numbers of trade test applications annually. The research sample targeted 20 trade test centers at institutions that included six public TVET colleges, three State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) and seven private workplace training centers. A total sample of 32 respondents comprising management and staff from colleges and workplaces as well as representatives from quality assurance bodies were interviewed, as set out in Table 1. Note that the term "practitioners" refers to those involved in teaching/training and in the conduct of RPL assessment.

RESULTS

Significantly, the study revealed very narrow

Table 1: RPL research respondents

RPL trades	State	Public college	Private workplace	Total
Assessment authorities*	4	-	-	4
Management**	-	4	2	6
Motor/diesel RPL practitioners	-	5	5	10
Welding RPL practitioners	-	9	1	10
Plumbing***	-	1	1	2
Total	4	19	9	32

*, Assessment authorities included the Department of Higher Education and Training, National Artisan Moderation Body and the Sector Education and Training Authority;**, Management of college and workplace not directly assigned to a trade;***, Plumbing in focus groups (this trade also has a welding component). RPL, recognition of prior learning.

understandings of competence among RPL practitioners that limited their opportunities for assessing deeper levels of competence. The majority of practitioner respondents indicated that the focus of the official assessment toolkit was on evaluating the underpinning knowledge of the candidate, and a range of skills related to the trade rather than broader competencies associated with 21st century workers. Thus, attitudes and values, more especially competencies necessary for future-focused employment such as emotional competencies, were not part of the assessment of artisan candidates, notwithstanding that industry representatives concurred about the rapidly shifting technology associated with 21st century artisans' work. Industry respondents particularly suggested that candidate assessments ought to reflect on the changing nature of modern workplaces and adapt accordingly. The importance of recognizing competencies such as problem-solving, and a capacity for change, which might require more sophisticated measuring tools to be developed for the toolkit, was emphasized by practitioners and industry respondents alike. Despite official RPL policies it was evident that a lack of resources and funding for RPL in South Africa prevailed, hampering this alternative route to trade testing from growing substantially in the artisan arena. A large number of public college respondents, managers, and practitioners, cautioned that proper resourcing and assessment training of assessors were critical for ensuring enhanced RPL assessment opportunities for candidates.

Compared with the competency domains highlighted in the literature as being important for candidates' holistic competence development, practitioners reported that they assessed only the theoretical and the practical domains, as prescribed by the official toolkit. Evidence of artisan candidates' content knowledge was most often obtained through verbal questioning of the candidate or from written knowledge tests. Despite acknowledgment by practitioners that RPL assessment is/should be about candidates demonstrating competence, respondents felt that the embedded knowledge of the candidate was still seen as paramount, and that being able to do the task meant "demonstrating underpinning knowledge".

A significant number of college practitioners acknowledged the relevance of emotional competencies in modern workplaces, for instance, a candidate's ability to work in teams, but recognized that the assessment toolkit was limited to traditionally tested competencies that did not allow for evidence of other (important) competencies to be generated. Practitioners' recognition of emotional competencies was evident from the way in which they (informally) acknowledged some candidates' demonstration of affective competencies as they executed tasks in the workplace. A few practitioners expressed the view that RPL was not simply about assessing the practical and theoretical competencies of the candidate, but also about understanding candidates' responses in relation to the contexts that had influenced their learning.

Observation of RPL practices at assessment sites revealed a general lack of a broader conceptualization of RPL assessment in policy and implementation, demonstrated by the absence of fine-grained measures for evaluating the prescribed competencies or a wider range of competencies. But the recognition of emotional competence was an interesting nascent phenomenon in the data, expanding the traditional binary conceptualization of competence as comprising only theoretical and practical competencies.

CONCLUSION

It was evident from the research that modernized policy reform should recognize the need for a wider range of competencies in the workplace, and in the RPL assessment of artisan candidates. Such reform would align with expanded notions of competence and recognize deeper levels of competencies that encompass at a minimum essential disciplinary knowledge, practical competencies, and emotional competencies critical for fully capacitated workers and learners of the future.

Adopting a broader, more holistic conception of competence and an expanded model of competency assessment for RPL and indeed across the spectrum of vocational training would be an advantage to employees and employers alike.

DECLARATIONS

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Author contributions
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Ethical approval
The study protocol was approved by the University of the Western Cape Ethics Committee.

Informed consent
The participants were fully informed about the nature of the research and that the interview data would only used for research purposes, and their information would be anonymized when presenting the research result.

Conflict of interest
The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Data availability statement
Data used to support the findings of this study are available from the authors upon request.

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