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# Citizenship Competences

by **Martyn Barrett**

**ABSTRACT:** *This paper provides an overview of the 20 citizenship competences that are specified by the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (Barrett et al., 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). The procedure that was used to identify these 20 competences is described, and some of the notable characteristics of the set of 20 competences are discussed. In addition, the descriptors that have been developed for the competences are explained. Descriptors are clear, explicit and concise descriptions of the concrete observable behaviours that a person will display if they have achieved a certain level of proficiency in a given competence. It is argued that these 20 competences, together with their accompanying descriptors, provide educators with a powerful set of tools for implementing a comprehensive, coherent and transparent approach to civic and citizenship education.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Citizenship, Competence, Competences, Descriptors, Proficiency levels*

This paper discusses the competences that may be taught and learned in civic and citizenship education (CCE). The account offered here draws upon the Council of Europe's *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* (RFCDC) (Barrett et al., 2018a, 2018b, 2018c), which specifies a set of 20 citizenship competences that can be promoted through education. This paper provides a broad overview of these 20 competences.

Before describing these competences, it is important to state a basic assumption made by the RFCDC concerning the competences required for citizenship within culturally diverse democratic societies. This assumption is that democratic competence within such societies needs to include intercultural competence. A fundamental principle of democracy is that the people who are affected by

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political decisions should be able to express their views when those decisions are being made, and that decision-makers should pay attention to those views when they make their decisions. In a culturally diverse society, respectful intercultural dialogue is therefore essential for democratic communication, discussion and debate, and for enabling all citizens to contribute to political decision-making on an equal basis, irrespective of their specific cultural affiliations. However, in order to participate in respectful intercultural dialogue with fellow citizens, intercultural competence is required. Hence, the RFCDC treats intercultural competence as an intrinsic component of democratic competence in the case of citizens who live within culturally diverse societies.

## 1. The concept of competence

The RFCDC builds on previous insights into the nature of competence, especially those of Jonnaert *et al.* (2006) and Kennedy *et al.* (2009). Taking its cue from their work, the RFCDC defines ‘competence’ as the ability to select, activate, organise and apply relevant psychological resources (values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and/or understanding) in order to respond appropriately and effectively to the demands, challenges and opportunities that are presented by a given type of situation. Democratic competence, which is the overall goal of CCE, is therefore defined as the ability to select, activate, organise and apply relevant psychological resources in order to respond appropriately and effectively to the demands, challenges and opportunities that are presented by democratic situations.

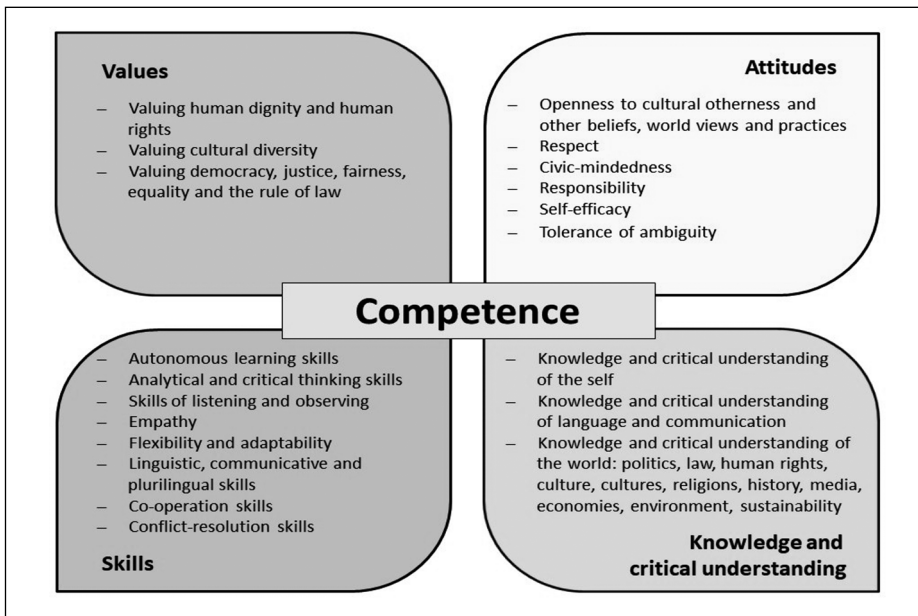
The RFCDC construes such competence in dynamic terms. This is because responding to a situation in an appropriate and effective manner requires the individual to actively monitor the impacts and results of their behaviour, and to monitor the situation itself as it develops. If the behaviour fails to achieve its intended purpose, or if the demands of the situation change, then a competent individual will modify their behaviour in an appropriate way, possibly by drawing on further psychological resources, in order to meet the evolving needs of the situation. In other words, a competent individual will mobilise and use psychological resources in a dynamic and fluid manner, self-regulating their behaviour and adjusting it according to situational circumstances.

In addition to this global and holistic use of the term ‘competence’ (in the singular), the term ‘competences’ (in the plural) is used by the RFCDC to refer to the specific psychological resources (the specific values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and understanding) that may be activated and applied in the production of competent behaviour. In other words, in the terminology of the RFCDC, ‘competence’ consists of the selection, activation and coordination of ‘competences’ and the application of these competences in an adaptive and dynamic manner to concrete situations.

## 2. The set of competences required for behaving effectively and appropriately within democratic situations

The RFCDC proposes that 20 specific competences are required for responding appropriately and effectively to the demands, challenges and opportunities

**FIG. 1.** *The 20 citizenship competences required for participating effectively and appropriately in democratic situations, according to the RFCDC*



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of democratic situations. These 20 competences are shown in Figure 1. These are therefore the competences that CCE needs to help young people to acquire and use, in order to enable them to function as competent democratic citizens.

It is helpful to understand how these 20 specific competences were identified (see Barrett, 2016, for a full account). From the outset, the expert group developing the RFCDC was mindful of the fact that there was a substantial body of previous research into citizenship competences. For this reason, the group began its work by conducting an audit of existing proposals concerning citizenship competences. In total, 101 previous conceptual schemes of democratic and intercultural competence were examined (for a list, see Barrett, 2016, Appendix A).

The audit revealed widespread mismatches across these schemes in terms of: (i) the number of competences which they contained; (ii) the level of generality at which these competences were specified; and (iii) the ways in which the competences were grouped and classified. Consequently, the 101 schemes were decomposed to identify all of the individual competences which they contained, and these competences were then grouped into cognate sets. Not all of the competences could be placed into particular sets with full confidence. For example, some competences described in the schemes were vague, while others were formulated in a way which combined two or more conceptually distinct competences. In addition, some schemes were more exhaustive and complete than others.

In order to organise the competences, a set of principled criteria was used. These criteria included conceptual clarity, formulation at a general rather than a specific level, and commonality across a number of the schemes being audited. In addition, because a core goal was to construct a competence model for use in educational planning, only competences that were judged to be teachable, learnable and assessable (through either self-assessment or assessment by others) were included in the final set. Applying these criteria to the competences that had been derived from the competence schemes, the 20 core competences shown in Figure 1 were identified.

These 20 competences were then subjected to a further process of conceptual refinement and clarification in their formulation, ensuring that the most important aspects of each competence were being captured by the model, and a document containing a first draft of the competence model was written. This document was circulated in an international consultation involving academic

experts, education practitioners and education policymakers, including experts nominated by the education ministries of the Council of Europe's member states. The model received very strong endorsement in this consultation. In the final stage of development, the model was fine-tuned and finalised, taking into account the feedback that had been received.

As can be seen from Figure 1, the competences fall into four broad categories: values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge and critical understanding. Summary descriptions of the 20 competences are provided in Box 1. Readers who wish to read the full descriptions of each competence should consult Barrett et al. (2018a; see also Barrett, 2016).

### Box 1

#### *Summary descriptions of the 20 citizenship competences specified by the RFDC*

- Values
  - *Valuing human dignity and human rights.* This value is based on the general belief that every human being is of equal worth, has equal dignity, is entitled to equal respect, and is entitled to the same set of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and ought to be treated accordingly.
  - *Valuing cultural diversity.* This value is based on the general belief that other cultural affiliations, cultural variability and diversity, and pluralism of perspectives, views and practices ought to be positively regarded, appreciated and cherished.
  - *Valuing democracy, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law.* This set of values is based on the general belief that societies ought to operate and be governed through democratic processes which respect the principles of justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law.
- Attitudes
  - *Openness to cultural otherness and to other beliefs, world views and practices.* Openness is an attitude towards people who are perceived to have different cultural affiliations from oneself or towards beliefs, world views and practices which differ from one's own. It involves sensitivity towards, curiosity about and willingness to engage with other people and other perspectives on the world.
  - *Respect.* Respect consists of positive regard and esteem for someone or something based on the judgement that they have intrinsic importance, worth or value. Having respect for other people who are perceived to have different cultural affiliations or

different beliefs, opinions or practices from one's own is vital for effective intercultural dialogue and a culture of democracy.

- *Civic-mindedness*. Civic-mindedness is an attitude towards a community or social group to which one belongs that is larger than one's immediate circle of family and friends. It involves a sense of belonging to that community, an awareness of other people in the community, an awareness of the effects of one's actions on those people, solidarity with other members of the community, and a sense of civic duty towards the community.
  - *Responsibility*. Responsibility is an attitude towards one's own actions. It involves being reflective about one's actions, forming intentions about how to act in a morally appropriate way, conscientiously performing those actions, and holding oneself accountable for the outcomes of those actions.
  - *Self-efficacy*. Self-efficacy is an attitude towards the self. It involves a positive belief in one's own ability to undertake the actions that are required to achieve particular goals, and confidence that one can understand issues, select appropriate methods for accomplishing tasks, navigate obstacles successfully, and make a difference in the world.
  - *Tolerance of ambiguity*. Tolerance of ambiguity is an attitude towards situations which are uncertain and subject to multiple conflicting interpretations. It involves evaluating these kinds of situations positively and dealing with them constructively.
- Skills
    - *Autonomous learning skills*. Autonomous learning skills are the skills required to pursue, organise and evaluate one's own learning in accordance with one's own needs, in a self-directed manner, without being prompted by others.
    - *Analytical and critical thinking skills*. Analytical and critical thinking skills are the skills required to analyse, evaluate and make judgements about materials of any kind (e.g., texts, arguments, interpretations, issues, events, experiences, etc.) in a systematic and logical manner.
    - *Skills of listening and observing*. Skills of listening and observing are the skills required to notice and understand what is being said and how it is being said, and to notice and understand other people's non-verbal behaviour.
    - *Empathy*. Empathy is the set of skills required to understand and relate to other people's thoughts, beliefs and feelings, and to see the world from other people's perspectives.
    - *Flexibility and adaptability*. Flexibility and adaptability are the skills required to adjust and regulate one's thoughts, feelings or behaviours so that one can respond effectively and appropriately to new contexts and situations.
    - *Linguistic, communicative and plurilingual skills*. Linguistic, communicative and plurilingual skills are the skills required to communicate effectively and appropriately

- with people who speak the same or another language, and to act as a mediator between speakers of different languages.
- *Cooperation skills*. Cooperation skills are the skills required to participate successfully with others in shared activities, tasks and ventures and to encourage others to cooperate so that group goals may be achieved.
  - *Conflict-resolution skills*. Conflict-resolution skills are the skills required to address, manage and resolve conflicts in a peaceful way by guiding conflicting parties towards optimal solutions that are acceptable to all parties.
- Knowledge and critical understanding
    - *Knowledge and critical understanding of the self*. This includes knowledge and critical understanding of one's own thoughts, beliefs, feelings and motivations, and of one's own cultural affiliations and perspective on the world.
    - *Knowledge and critical understanding of language and communication*. This includes knowledge and critical understanding of the socially appropriate verbal and non-verbal communicative conventions that operate in the language(s) which one speaks, of the effects that different communication styles can have on other people, and of how every language expresses culturally shared meanings in a unique way.
    - *Knowledge and critical understanding of the world*. This includes a large and complex body of knowledge and critical understanding in a variety of areas including politics, law, human rights, culture, cultures, religions, history, media, economies, the environment and sustainability.

Source: Barrett (2016), © Council of Europe, reproduced with permission.

It should be noted that some of the competences, such as openness and empathy, may be targeted from a relatively early age at pre-school and primary school. However, others, such as knowledge and critical understanding of politics, law and economies, are more suitable for targeting in upper secondary school or even higher education. For this reason, the RFCDC proposes that promoting the development of these 20 competences is a task that applies across all levels of formal education, from pre-school through primary and secondary education to higher education.

The RFCDC proposes that, in real-life situations, these competences are rarely mobilised and used individually. Instead, they are much more likely to be applied in clusters. Depending on the situation and the specific demands,



challenges and opportunities of that situation, as well as the specific needs of the individual within the situation, different subsets of competences will be activated and used. As has been noted already, the RFCDC construes the activation and use of competences as a fluid and dynamic process. Because any given situation changes over time, an effective and adaptive response requires the constant monitoring of the situation and the appropriate ongoing adjustment of the competences being used. In other words, the RFCDC proposes that a democratically competent individual activates and uses clusters of competences in a fluid, dynamic and adaptive manner in order to meet the constantly shifting demands, challenges and opportunities that arise in democratic situations.

### **3. Some of the distinctive features of the RFCDC competence model**

There are several distinctive features of the RFCDC competence model that distinguish it from the previous competence schemes that were audited. One of these distinctive features is the fourfold classification of competences, as opposed to the more traditional threefold classification into attitudes, skills and knowledge. This was a result of including values explicitly as a fourth category of competences.

Those who are familiar with existing competence schemes may be surprised by the appearance of values as a distinct type of competence. However, it is important to bear in mind that the term 'competence' is not being used here in its casual everyday sense as a synonym of 'ability', but in a more technical sense to refer to the psychological resources that need to be activated and used to meet the demands and challenges of democratic situations. Values are included in the model for several reasons. First, values do in fact appear (although often only implicitly) in many of the previous competence schemes which were audited. Thus, their omission from the current model would have meant that the model was only partially capturing the contents of those previous schemes (values are not always obvious in previous schemes because they are usually included under the heading of attitudes rather than under their own separate heading). Second, there are several characteristics that differentiate values from attitudes. These include their generality, trans-

situational applicability, focus on desirable goals, and normativity (Schwartz, 2006). Third, values are essential for conceptualising the competences relevant for democratic citizenship. This is because without a specification of the particular values that underpin the use of the competences, they would not be *democratic* competences but would instead be more general political competences which could be used in the service of many other kinds of political order, including anti-democratic orders. For example, one could be a responsible, self-efficacious, skilful and politically well-informed citizen within a totalitarian dictatorship if a different set of values were to be employed as the foundation for one's behaviour. Thus, the values in the RFCDC model are essential for the characterisation of *democratic* competence.

A second distinctive characteristic of the RFCDC competence model is that it does not include any behaviours (unlike some other schemes). This is because competences (in the plural) were defined by the RFCDC as the *internal psychological resources* (i.e., values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and understanding) that enable the individual to respond to specific situations appropriately and effectively. Behaviour itself is instead the *external outcome* of applying competences to situations. Every competence has behavioural expressions, and all competent behaviours are a product of deploying one or more underlying competences. However, behaviours themselves are not competences.

A third characteristic that differentiates the RFCDC model of citizenship competences from some previous competence schemes is that it does not include 'dispositions' as a type of competence. In the audit, it was found that 'dispositions' were among the most difficult putative competences to classify, primarily because they were very poorly defined, with 'disposition' typically being used as a non-specific catch-all term for any and all underlying psychological factors that might motivate or drive democratic behaviours. It was also unclear how some of these putative 'dispositions' differ from their end result (e.g., how 'disposition to be empathic' differs from 'being empathic'). In the RFCDC competence model, the values and attitudes function as the motivations and drivers of behaviour, eliminating any need for the inclusion of 'dispositions'. For example, a person is empathic because they are open to others, respectful of others, have empathic skills, and value the dignity of others. Likewise, a person engages in active participation not because they have a 'disposition' to engage in active participation but because they value democ-

racy and are civically minded and responsible, and understand the importance of political action. Thus, the RFCDC model treats values and attitudes as the specific underlying psychological factors that motivate and drive democratic behaviours, rather than any non-specific and generalised ‘dispositions’.

Fourth, whereas traditional competence schemes classify competences into attitudes, skills and *knowledge*, the RFCDC classifies competences into values, attitudes, skills, and *knowledge and critical understanding*. A distinction is drawn between knowledge and understanding. In keeping with the standard use of the term, knowledge is defined as the body of information that is possessed by a person. By contrast, understanding is defined as the comprehension and appreciation of meanings. The distinction is important because it is possible to know something without understanding it (e.g., one can memorise and therefore know that human rights are universal, inalienable and indivisible without understanding what is meant by these three terms and their implications). Knowledge is necessary but not sufficient for understanding. For this reason, the RFCDC emphasises the need for not only knowledge but also understanding in order for an individual to be democratically competent. In addition, note the term ‘*critical understanding*’ that is used by the RFCDC. This term is used in order to emphasise the need for the comprehension and appreciation of meanings in the context of democratic processes to involve active reflection on and critical evaluation of that which is being interpreted and understood (as opposed to unreflective, habitual and automatic interpretation).

#### **4. Descriptors and proficiency levels in CCE**

In order to assist education systems to achieve the goal of equipping learners with these 20 citizenship competences, the RFCDC provides validated and scaled descriptors for all of the competences. Descriptors are clear, explicit and concise statements or descriptions of the concrete observable behaviours that a person will display if they have achieved a certain level of proficiency in a given competence. In other words, they are indicators of an individual’s level of achievement in that competence. Examples of the scaled descriptors for two of the competences are shown in Box 2.

## Box 2

### *Scaled descriptors for civic-mindedness and for skills of listening and observing*

#### CIVIC-MINDEDNESS

- *Basic level of proficiency*
  - Expresses a willingness to co-operate and work with others
  - Collaborates with other people for common interest causes
- *Intermediate level of proficiency*
  - Expresses commitment to not being a bystander when the dignity and rights of others are violated
  - Discusses what can be done to help make the community a better place
- *Advanced level of proficiency*
  - Exercises the obligations and responsibilities of active citizenship at either the local, national or global level
  - Takes action to stay informed about civic issues

#### SKILLS OF LISTENING AND OBSERVING

- *Basic level of proficiency*
  - Listens attentively to other people
  - Listens carefully to differing opinions
- *Intermediate level of proficiency*
  - Can listen effectively in order to decipher another person's meanings and intentions
  - Watches speakers' gestures and general body language to help himself/herself to figure out the meaning of what they are saying
- *Advanced level of proficiency*
  - Pays attention to what other people imply but do not say
  - Notices how people with other cultural affiliations react in different ways to the same situation

*Source:* Barrett *et al.* (2018b), © Council of Europe, reproduced with permission.

As can be seen from Box 2, the behaviours that are used to characterise proficiency at the three levels become increasingly more sophisticated and complex as one moves up through the levels of proficiency. However, even at the basic level, an individual is still displaying a degree of proficiency in the use of the competence.

It is important to note that the RFCDC descriptors were not established through expert judgement but through an empirical process to ensure that they represent real levels of proficiency that may be displayed by learners and to ensure that they can be used easily by teachers in the classroom. The empirical process used to establish the descriptors involved the following steps.

In the first step, a set of criteria that could be used for formulating descriptors was drawn up. It was decided that, for ease of use by teachers, descriptors should be relatively brief (ideally no longer than about 25 words), positive in wording (expressing an ability in terms of what a person can do rather than what they cannot do), clear in their wording (transparent and not jargon-laden, and written using relatively simple grammar), independent (self-standing and not taking on meaning only in relationship to other descriptors), and definite (describing a concrete behaviour or achievement indicating that the relevant competence has been mastered to a particular level of proficiency).

In addition, and importantly, it was decided that the descriptors should be formulated using the language of learning outcomes, so that they could be used for curriculum development, pedagogical planning and assessment purposes. For this reason, each descriptor contained an action verb together with the object of that verb, with the behaviour described being both observable and assessable (cf. Kennedy, 2006).

The development of the descriptors then began with an audit of existing psychometric scales, research documents and policy documents which contained potentially suitable statements about behaviours and learning outcomes that could be matched to one of the 20 competences. In total, 98 source documents were audited. Scale items and statements found in these documents were extracted and rephrased to construct short statements that could potentially serve as descriptors. Initially, 2,085 descriptors were written. These draft descriptors were then subjected to a critical scrutiny of their compliance with the criteria stated above by two experts working together. After this process, 1,371 descriptors were retained.

These descriptors were then evaluated using a series of rating tasks, validation tasks and scaling tasks which involved 3,094 teachers across Europe. Teachers were given subsets of the descriptors and asked to assign each descriptor to its relevant competence (in order to ensure that each descriptor mapped unambiguously onto only one competence), to rate the descriptors against three criteria

(clarity, concreteness, and observability in an education setting), to rate the usefulness of each descriptor for different levels of education, and to give feedback on the wordings of the descriptors. The most highly rated descriptors were then taken forward into the next phase of the work, in which further teachers were asked to use subsets of the descriptors for rating individual learners in their classes, and also to report on how easy it was to use each individual descriptor for this purpose. These data were used to eliminate further descriptors that were not easy to use in practice, and to statistically scale the remaining descriptors to three levels of proficiency – basic, intermediate or advanced. Through these processes, 447 highly rated scaled descriptors covering all 20 competences in the model were identified. Of these, 135 were classified as key descriptors on the basis of the scaling data and their wording. The full bank of 447 validated descriptors, and the subset of 135 key descriptors, are reported in Barrett *et al.* (2018b).

It should be noted that the scaling procedure that was used indicates that the descriptors are cumulative across the three levels of proficiency. In other words, if a learner displays a behaviour at an advanced level of proficiency for a particular competence, then it is highly likely that he or she will also display the behaviours at both the intermediate and basic levels for that same competence. However, if a learner displays a behaviour at an intermediate level of proficiency, then it is highly likely that he or she will display the behaviours at the basic level, but he or she may not necessarily display the behaviours at the advanced level.

That said, the scaling procedure does *not* imply that once a person has achieved a certain level of proficiency, he or she can only increase his or her proficiency level further. It is always possible that regressions can occur. For example, this might happen as a result of a change to the political climate of a country, an encounter with someone from a previously unknown cultural background, or a negative personal experience. If this happens, then a learner may require additional support for returning back to the higher level of proficiency.

In addition, a learner is likely to be at different levels of proficiency on different competences (e.g., he or she may be at an advanced level of proficiency on empathy but at a basic level on knowledge and critical understanding of politics, law and economics). There is no reason to assume that progress in the development of the 20 citizenship competences proceeds in a coordinated manner; instead, advances in proficiency will take place at different times for different competences.

The key point about the descriptors is that they provide an operationalisation of the 20 citizenship competences in terms of the concrete observable behaviours that may be displayed by learners at different levels of proficiency in those competences.

## 5. Using the descriptors

Because the descriptors are phrased as learning outcomes, they can be used for numerous purposes. For example, they can be used to develop a curriculum which specifies not only the citizenship competences but also the specific learning outcomes that should be targeted at particular educational levels. The descriptors can also be used as a tool for designing learning activities for enhancing learners' citizenship competences, by providing specifications of the learning outcomes that need to be achieved through the activities. In addition, the descriptors can be used to support the assessment of learners' levels of proficiency. For example, assessments might be conducted for the purpose of determining a learner's current levels of proficiency, learning gaps or learning needs, so that further learning activities can then be planned in such a way that they help him or her to achieve higher levels of proficiency (formative assessment). Assessments can also be conducted using the descriptors for the purpose of determining a learner's levels of proficiency in a specific set of competences after a period of learning (summative assessment). Guidance on how to use the descriptors in curriculum review, pedagogical planning and assessment is provided in the third volume of the RFCDC (Barrett *et al.*, 2018c).

## Conclusion

The model of citizenship competences and the descriptors that are provided by the RFCDC offer educators the opportunity to implement a comprehensive, coherent and transparent approach to CCE. Such an approach is comprehensive because it covers all of the citizenship competences that need to be promoted through CCE. The approach is also coherent, because it enables alignment to be achieved between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (with the same

set of competences and descriptors being used to plan the curriculum, to design pedagogical activities, and to assess learners' levels of proficiency). CCE based on the RFCDC is also transparent because the citizenship competences, and the levels of proficiency in those competences, are explicit and clearly defined and can be understood by all stakeholders, including education policymakers, teacher trainers, school principals, teachers and learners.

In short, the RFCDC model of citizenship competences provides a powerful set of tools that may be used in a systematic way by CCE to equip learners with all of the citizenship competences that are needed for life as active and competent citizens in culturally diverse democratic societies.

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