



Reconceptualising Professional Competency of Secondary School Teacher: Perspectives from NPST 2023 and NEP 2020

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Abstract

Multifaceted and flexible school education demands skill-based, competent teachers for the holistic development of 21st-century learners. The professional competency of secondary teachers has emerged as a critical determinant of educational quality in the context of the **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** and the **National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST) 2023**. This paper aims to conceptualize the professional competency of secondary teachers by synthesizing theoretical perspectives, policy frameworks, and empirical evidence, and to identify its core dimensions in alignment with contemporary educational reforms. A systematic review methodology was adopted, drawing on national and international policy documents, peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and reports published between 2010 and 2025. The review examined major competency frameworks and their relevance to secondary education in India. The findings reveal that professional competency is a multidimensional construct encompassing professional knowledge and subject expertise, pedagogical competency, classroom management and socio-emotional competency, technology integration, assessment practices, continuous professional development, understanding the learner, and ethical and inclusive practices. These dimensions closely align with the competency domains articulated in NPST 2023 and support the learner-centred, competency-based vision of NEP 2020. The study provides a comprehensive conceptual framework that can guide teacher education institutions, policymakers, and researchers in developing competency-based teacher preparation, professional development programmes, and assessment tools for enhancing teacher effectiveness and improving the quality of secondary education.

Keywords: Professional competency, Secondary teachers, National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST), National Education Policy 2020

Introduction

The quality of school education largely depends on the professional competence of teachers, who play a central role in facilitating meaningful learning and fostering students' holistic development. Recognizing this, the National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST), 2023 provides a nationally consistent competency framework designed to prepare teachers who are professionally competent, reflective, ethical, and capable of delivering equitable, inclusive, and high-quality education (National Council for Teacher Education [NCTE], 2024). The framework aligns with the vision of the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020, which advocates learner-centred, competency-based, and future-oriented education.

Professional competency encompasses the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and professional behaviours that enable teachers to perform their instructional and non-instructional responsibilities effectively. It extends beyond subject expertise to include pedagogical knowledge, classroom management, learner engagement, assessment practices, ethical conduct, communication, and continuous professional learning. A professionally competent teacher is therefore equipped to create meaningful learning experiences that address the diverse academic and developmental needs of students.

Previous research has consistently highlighted the significance of professional competency in improving teaching effectiveness and student achievement. Studies indicate that competent teachers demonstrate effective lesson planning, sound classroom management, strong subject knowledge, positive interpersonal relationships, efficient time management, and appropriate use of instructional strategies during the teaching-learning process (Pachaiyappan, 2022). Research has also reported that teachers' professional competency may vary according to institutional characteristics, school type, and years of teaching experience (Mustafa, 2013; Pan, 2014).

The NPST further conceptualizes professional growth as a progressive continuum rather than a fixed achievement. It identifies different stages of teacher development, ranging from Beginner Teacher (Prarambhi Shikshak) to Proficient Teacher (Praveen Shikshak), Expert Teacher (Kushal Shikshak), and Lead Teacher (Pramukh Shikshak), with each stage representing increasing levels of professional expertise and responsibility (NCTE, 2024).

Contemporary perspectives on teacher professionalism also emphasize that effective teaching requires more than technical proficiency. A professional teacher is expected not only to understand what to teach and how to teach but also to critically examine why particular pedagogical decisions are appropriate and when they should be implemented. Such teachers function as reflective practitioners and transformative intellectuals who continuously evaluate their own practices, respond to the diverse needs of learners, and contribute to educational improvement and social transformation (NCTE, 2024).

Against this backdrop, understanding the dimensions of professional competency among secondary school teachers has become increasingly important. A comprehensive conceptualization of teacher competency, grounded in the provisions of NPST 2023 and the vision of NEP 2020, can contribute to strengthening teacher education programmes, professional development initiatives, competency-based assessment, and overall school quality.

Secondary Education and Highlights of NEP,2020

The National Education Policy 2020 aims to transform secondary education by making it holistic, multidisciplinary, competency-based, inclusive, flexible, and learner-centred. It seeks to prepare students with the knowledge, skills, values, and competencies required for the 21st century while promoting equity, quality, and lifelong learning.

Highlights of NEP 2020 for Secondary Education

1. New School Structure (5+3+3+4)

- Introduces a 5+3+3+4 curricular and pedagogical structure replacing the 10+2 system.
- The Secondary Stage consists of Grades 9–12 (ages 14–18).
- Greater flexibility in curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

2. Holistic and Multidisciplinary Education

- Eliminates rigid separation between arts, science, commerce, and vocational streams.
- Encourages students to choose subjects based on their interests and career aspirations.
- Promotes interdisciplinary learning and critical thinking.

3. Competency-Based Curriculum

- Shifts emphasis from rote memorization to competency-based learning.
- Focuses on conceptual understanding, problem-solving, creativity, communication, collaboration, and application of knowledge.

4. Flexibility in Subject Choice

- Students can select combinations of academic, vocational, arts, sports, and skill-based subjects.
- Encourages personalized learning pathways.

5. Experiential and Inquiry-Based Learning

- Promotes activity-based, project-based, discussion-based, and experiential teaching methods.
- Encourages inquiry, innovation, and scientific temper among learners.

6. Assessment Reforms

- Moves from high-stakes examinations to competency-based assessments.
- Board examinations will assess understanding, application, and analytical skills rather than rote learning.
- Greater use of formative assessment and continuous feedback.

7. Vocational Education

- Integrates vocational education into mainstream schooling.
- Provides opportunities for internships and exposure to local crafts, industries, and professions.
- Aims to equip students with employability and entrepreneurial skills.

8. Technology Integration

- Promotes the use of digital learning platforms, online resources, virtual laboratories, and ICT-enabled teaching.
- Encourages blended learning and digital literacy.

9. Inclusive and Equitable Education

- Ensures equal educational opportunities for all learners, including girls, children from disadvantaged groups, and children with disabilities.
- Emphasizes barrier-free, safe, and inclusive learning environments.

10. Teacher Professional Development

- Recognizes teachers as the cornerstone of educational reform.
- Encourages continuous professional development (CPD), reflective practice, competency-based teaching, and ethical professionalism.
- Supports implementation through the National Professional Standards for Teachers 2023.

11. Life Skills and 21st-Century Competencies

- Promotes critical thinking, creativity, communication, collaboration, digital literacy, environmental awareness, leadership, ethical reasoning, and problem-solving.
- Encourages social and emotional learning alongside academic achievement.

12. School Leadership and Governance

- Encourages collaborative school leadership and decentralized decision-making.
- Promotes the preparation and implementation of School Development Plans (SDPs).
- Strengthens school quality through community participation and institutional accountability.

13. Career Guidance and Counselling

- Recommends systematic career guidance and counselling services in schools.
- Helps students make informed educational and career choices.

14. Foundational Values

Secondary education under NEP 2020 aims to nurture learners who are:

- Critical and creative thinkers
- Ethical and responsible citizens
- Environmentally conscious
- Constitutionally aware
- Digitally competent
- Lifelong learners
- Globally competent while rooted in Indian values

According to Encyclopedic Dictionary of Education (1997) competence means as “The state of having and demonstrating skills, abilities or aptitudes in the satisfactory execution of a learning task.” According to Dave (1998), the term competency means the ability to apply a set of related knowledge, skills, and abilities required to successfully perform "critical work functions" or tasks in a defined work setting. The term competency is frequently used when we talk about any profession or work that express one's quality of being competent, processing adequate professional skills, knowledge and capacity. (cited by Barman, 2019)

Here Professional competency of secondary teachers refers to the competency in content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and technological knowledge in classroom practices. It includes understanding of professional knowledge, competency in lesson plan, lesson delivery, classroom components and dynamics, effective classroom communication, professional commitment as well as assessment and feedback. (National Professional Standards for Teachers, 2021)

Theoretical perspectives

Professional competency of secondary school teachers is not a monolithic construct; rather, it is underpinned by multiple theoretical perspectives that shape how competencies are defined, measured, and cultivated. Three key frameworks—psychological, educational, and philosophical—provide a holistic foundation for understanding the complex role of teachers in the 21st century.

Psychological Perspectives

From a psychological standpoint, teacher competency is viewed in relation to cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of learning. Theories of teacher cognition emphasize how teachers' mental models, beliefs, and decision-making processes affect instructional quality (Shulman, 1987). Secondary school teachers, for example, must integrate subject-specific knowledge with pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) to transform abstract concepts into comprehensible lessons. Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy also provides critical insight into professional competency. Teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to adopt innovative teaching strategies, manage classrooms effectively, and persist in the face of challenges. Conversely, low self-efficacy correlates with burnout and disengagement, particularly in high-stress secondary school contexts. Psychological models further highlight the socio-emotional competencies of teachers. Theories of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) suggest that effective teachers must regulate their own emotions, empathize with students, and foster positive classroom climates. In adolescence—a developmental stage characterized by identity formation and heightened emotional sensitivity—teachers' socio-emotional skills are indispensable for supporting student well-being. Finally, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory emphasizes the role of scaffolding and the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Teachers competent in applying these principles can identify students' learning thresholds and provide targeted support, a crucial skill in diverse secondary classrooms.

Educational Perspectives

Educational theories place professional competency within broader frameworks of instructional design, curriculum delivery, and assessment. Shulman's (1986, 1987) work on pedagogical content knowledge remains foundational, underscoring the necessity for teachers to blend subject matter expertise with pedagogical strategies that make learning accessible. Constructivist theories of learning further expand this perspective, suggesting that teachers should facilitate active, student-centered learning environments. This aligns with 21st century skill demands such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Secondary school teachers thus require competencies not only in content delivery but also in designing inquiry-based projects, fostering peer learning, and integrating real-world

applications. Bloom's taxonomy (revised by Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) provides another educational lens by framing competencies in terms of cognitive processes—remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Competent teachers must design assessments and activities that move beyond rote learning to higher-order thinking, preparing students for complex future challenges. Teacher competency is also linked to classroom management, a domain grounded in behaviorist theories of reinforcement (Skinner, 1953) and modern approaches to positive behavior support (Sugai & Simonsen, 2012). Effective classroom management ensures that instructional time is maximized and learning disruptions minimized, an especially critical task in adolescent classrooms where misbehavior can escalate quickly.

Philosophical Perspectives

Philosophical traditions contribute normative and ethical dimensions to the concept of professional competency. From a humanistic perspective, inspired by thinkers such as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Dewey, teaching is seen as a moral vocation centered on respect for the learner's individuality and dignity. Professional competency thus extends beyond technical proficiency to include ethical responsibility and reflective practice. Aristotle's notion of phronesis (practical wisdom) offers another philosophical lens. Competent teachers must exercise judgment in balancing competing demands—curriculum standards, student needs, and institutional policies. This requires not only knowledge but also discernment and moral reasoning. Contemporary educational philosophy emphasizes inclusivity and social justice as core components of competency (Nussbaum, 2011). Teachers are expected to uphold equity by recognizing and addressing systemic barriers faced by marginalized learners, including those with disabilities, socio-economic disadvantages, or cultural differences. In multicultural secondary classrooms, philosophical perspectives call on teachers to be culturally responsive and to promote democratic values. Finally, professional ethics frameworks, such as codes of conduct issued by teacher councils worldwide, formalize philosophical commitments into professional standards. Competency here implies adherence to principles of integrity, confidentiality, fairness, and lifelong learning.

Taken together, psychological, educational, and philosophical perspectives highlight that professional competency is both a technical and moral construct. A competent teacher must not only master subject matter and pedagogical strategies but also demonstrate emotional intelligence, ethical responsibility, and adaptability. These perspectives intersect in the practical realities of secondary school classrooms, where teachers navigate cognitive, behavioral, and ethical demands simultaneously. In the context of 21st century education, these theoretical foundations serve as guiding principles for empirical research and policy frameworks. They suggest that teacher training programs should adopt a holistic approach, integrating cognitive science, instructional design, and ethical philosophy into professional preparation.

Professional competency for 21st-century teachers

The modern education landscape requires teachers to equip students with essential 21st-century skills as **the 4Cs of Learning Skills** (Critical Thinking, Creativity, Collaboration, Communication), **Literacy Skills** (Information Literacy, Media Literacy, Technology Literacy), **Life Skills** (Flexibility, Leadership, Initiative, Productivity, Social Skills). The teacher must be competent with all the **core of 21st-century skills and** which make the teacher to adapt, innovate, and excel in a professional environment.

Here Professional competency of secondary teachers refers to the competency in content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and technological knowledge in classroom practices. It includes understanding of professional knowledge, competency in lesson plan, lesson delivery, classroom components and dynamics, effective classroom communication, professional commitment as well as assessment and feedback. (National Professional Standards for Teachers, 2021). For quality education, integrating 21st century skills and the professional standard (NPST, 2023) proposed by National Education Policy, 2020

professional competency of a secondary teacher can be contextualized with four components like as Teaching competency, Techno-pedagogical competency, Professional Development and Professional competency. As the indicators of professional competency identified as per NPST,2023: studies showed variation of professional competency with demographic variables as Gender, Year of Experience, School management and educational qualifications.

Professional Standards for Teachers

Different countries have different guidelines on the professional competency of teachers. The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (2014) are a public statement of what constitutes teacher quality. They define the work of teachers and make explicit the elements of high-quality, effective teaching in 21st-century schools that will improve educational outcomes for students. The Standards do this by providing a framework that makes clear the knowledge, practice and professional engagement required across teachers' careers. The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers comprise seven Standards that outline what teachers should know and be able to do as: 1) Know students and how they learn 2) Know the content and how to teach it 3) Plan for and implement effective teaching and learning 4) Create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments 5) Assess, provide feedback and report on student learning 6) Engage in professional learning 7) Engage professionally with colleagues, parents/carers and the community. The Standards are interconnected, interdependent and overlapping. The Standards are grouped into three domains of teaching: Professional Knowledge, Professional Practice and Professional Engagement. In practice, teaching draws on aspects of all three domains. Within each Standard, focus areas provide further illustration of teaching knowledge, practice and professional engagement. These are then separated into Standard Descriptors at four professional career stages: Graduate, Proficient, Highly Accomplished and Lead.

In India, Common guidelines of National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST) has been developed in 2023, by the National Council for Teacher Education in its restructured new form as a Professional Standard Setting Body (PSSB) under the General Education Council (GEC), in consultation with NCERT, SCERTs, teachers from across levels and regions, expert organizations in teacher preparation and development, expert bodies in vocational education, and higher education institutions. The standards would cover expectations of the role of the teacher at different levels of expertise/stage, and the competencies required for that stage. It comprises performance appraisal standards for each stage, to be carried out on a periodic basis. In the Indian context, the professional standards are defined as the professional values, professional knowledge, professional belief and actions as well as quality teaching. For NPST, the three levels are proposed as applicable to all domains and competencies of teaching—across the different stages of schooling and subject teaching areas, such as proficient (Praveen Shikshak), advanced (Kushal Shikshak) and experts (Pramukh Shikshak).

Components of Professional Competency-NPST,2024

The National Education Policy 1968 stated, "Of all the factors that determine the education quality and its role to the development of the country, the teacher is unquestionably of the highest importance. The success of all educational ventures must eventually depend on his personal characteristics and character, his educational qualifications and professional competence. Professional standards for teachers should attain a common core set of standards for competencies that are identified essential for teaching profession. By competence, we mean a combination of knowledge, skills, understanding, values, attitudes, and desire that lead to effective, embodied human action in a particular domain. The following three domains are identified as standards: 1) Professional Knowledge and Practice 2) Professional Growth and Development 3) Professional Ethics.

In Indian context, the professional standards define as the professional values, professional knowledge, professional belief and actions as well as quality teaching. For National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST-2023), the three levels are proposed as applicable to all domains and competencies of

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Domains of professional competency

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The operational definition is derived from the **National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST), 2023**, which emphasizes teacher competencies in professional knowledge, pedagogical practices, learner understanding, assessment, technology integration, professional ethics, inclusion, and continuous professional development. These competencies are aligned with the vision of the **National Education Policy (NEP), 2020**, which advocates competent, reflective, ethical, and future-ready teachers capable of providing equitable and quality education. Here, the Professional competency of secondary teachers can be measured in various ways as

Operational Dimensions of Professional Competency	
1. Professional Knowledge & Subject Expertise	
Refers to the extent to which secondary teachers possess comprehensive subject knowledge, curriculum understanding, interdisciplinary awareness, and the ability to relate concepts to real-life situations while aligning teaching with curriculum objectives.	
2. Pedagogical Competency & Instructional Strategies	
Refers to the extent to which teachers effectively plan, organize, and implement learner-centred, competency-based, experiential, inquiry-based, and differentiated instructional strategies that promote meaningful learning outcomes.	
3. Classroom Management & Socio-Emotional Competency	
Refers to the extent to which teachers establish a positive, safe, disciplined, and inclusive classroom environment, foster respectful relationships, manage student behaviour effectively, and support learners' socio-emotional well-being.	
4. Technology Integration & Digital Pedagogies	
Refers to the extent to which teachers effectively integrate digital technologies, educational resources, and ICT tools into teaching-learning processes to enhance student engagement, collaboration, accessibility, and learning outcomes.	
5. Assessment & Pedagogical Practices	
Refers to the extent to which teachers employ valid, reliable, continuous, competency-based, formative, and summative assessment practices, utilize assessment data to improve instruction, and provide constructive feedback to learners.	
6. Continuous Professional Development & Reflective Practice	

Refers to the extent to which teachers engage in lifelong professional learning, participate in professional development programmes, undertake reflective practice, conduct action research, and continuously improve their teaching competencies.

7. Knowing the Learner

Refers to the extent to which teachers understand learners' developmental characteristics, individual differences, cultural and linguistic diversity, learning styles, interests, abilities, and special educational needs, and use this understanding to provide equitable learning opportunities.

8. Ethical & Inclusive Practices

Refers to the extent to which teachers uphold professional ethics, demonstrate integrity, respect diversity, promote equity and inclusion, ensure gender sensitivity, protect learners' rights, and create an inclusive learning environment that supports all students.

Factors affecting professional competency

Implications for Policy and Practice

The review yields several implications for policy and practice:

1. Teacher Education Programs

Teacher training curricula must adopt an integrated approach, balancing content knowledge, pedagogy, technology, and ethics. Programs should include practicum experiences where theoretical competencies are applied in real classrooms.

2. Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

Polymakers and school leaders should invest in sustained, practice-based CPD rather than one-off workshops. Professional learning communities, peer mentoring, and action research projects should be institutionalized.

3. Assessment Reform

Systems overly reliant on summative examinations should incorporate formative assessment training for teachers. Policy frameworks must emphasize assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning.

4. Digital Equity and Competence

Investment in digital infrastructure and training is crucial. Teachers must be supported not only in using technologies but also in ensuring equitable access for marginalized students.

5. Inclusive Education

Competency frameworks should prioritize inclusive pedagogy, with targeted preparation for addressing the needs of children with disabilities, linguistic minorities, and socio-economically disadvantaged learners.

6. Professional Ethics and Standards

National and institutional codes of ethics should be integrated into competency development. Teachers must be equipped to act as moral agents, promoting equity, respect, and democratic values.

Conclusion

The present review highlights that professional competency is the cornerstone of effective secondary education and a prerequisite for achieving the goals of educational transformation envisioned in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The introduction of the National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST) 2023 has redefined teacher professionalism by emphasizing competency-based standards that integrate knowledge, skills, values, ethics, and continuous professional growth. The review confirms that professional competency is a dynamic and multidimensional construct encompassing subject expertise, pedagogical competence, classroom management, learner-centred practices, technology integration, assessment literacy, reflective practice, and ethical and inclusive teaching. The synthesis of theoretical perspectives, policy documents, and empirical studies further indicates that competent teachers contribute significantly to improving student learning, fostering critical thinking, promoting inclusive classrooms, and enhancing overall school effectiveness. At the same time, evidence suggests that teachers' competency levels are influenced by factors such as teaching experience, school context, institutional support, and opportunities for professional development. The competency framework proposed in this review provides a conceptual basis for strengthening teacher education programmes, designing competency-based professional development initiatives, and developing valid assessment instruments for evaluating teachers' professional competency. Aligning teacher preparation and in-service training with the principles of NPST 2023 and NEP 2020 can help build a highly skilled, reflective, and ethically responsible teaching workforce capable of responding to the evolving demands of secondary education. Future empirical studies should validate the proposed competency dimensions across diverse educational settings and examine their relationship with teacher effectiveness, school improvement, and student learning outcomes.

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