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From Knowledge to Competence: Educational Purpose in Competency-Based Education

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Abstract

This paper examines the philosophical transformation of educational purpose under the global rise of Competency-Based Education (CBE). It argues that the shift from knowledge to competence represents not merely a reform of pedagogy but a reconfiguration of the normative foundations of education. Traditionally, knowledge occupied a formative and ethical role in shaping persons capable of judgment and reflection. CBE redefines this role through a logic of performance, in which learning is measured by demonstrable outcomes rather than oriented toward understanding. Drawing on the critical theories of Horkheimer, Habermas, and contemporary educational philosophers such as Chappell, Gonczi, Hager, and Waghid, the paper explores how instrumental rationality has narrowed the horizon of educational purpose. Competence, while valuable as a means of organizing learning, becomes problematic when elevated to an educational end. The analysis identifies three structural consequences of this shift: the internalization of purpose within technical systems, the managerial rationalization of learning, and the erosion of reflective and moral formation. In addressing major defenses of CBE—its neutrality, its integration of knowledge, and its pragmatic alignment with societal needs—the paper acknowledges their partial validity while showing that each rests on an implicit instrumentalism. It concludes by proposing a framework for reclaiming educational purpose beyond competence through the restoration of knowledge as a formative good, the cultivation of reflection and uncertainty, and the reaffirmation of education as an ethical encounter. The paper contends that education must remain a human practice oriented toward understanding, not a technical system of measurable performance.

Keywords: competency-based education (CBE), educational purpose, instrumental reason, knowledge and formation

1. The Rise of Competency-Based Education and the Question of Purpose

In recent decades, educational reform across many regions has been animated by a rhetoric of relevance, accountability, and measurable outcomes. Competency-Based Education (CBE) emerged as a response to concerns that traditional schooling emphasized abstract knowledge disconnected from practical performance. Originating in the behavioral and vocational education movements of the 1960s and 1970s, CBE sought to specify educational outcomes in precise, observable terms (Klingstedt, 1972). Within this framework,

learning was to be validated not by time spent in instruction but by demonstrated mastery of defined competencies. This model promised fairness, transparency, and alignment with the labor market, providing a seemingly objective basis for evaluating educational achievement (Ainsworth, 1977).

Beneath this reformative language lies a deeper philosophical shift. CBE reconfigures the very purpose of education by redefining its outcomes in behavioral and operational terms. Knowledge is no longer regarded as the central medium of formation but as a resource serving performance. The epistemic dimension of learning—its capacity to shape understanding, judgment, and identity—tends to be absorbed within measurable frameworks of competence. Education becomes a system of goal attainment rather than a process of cultivation. As Schilling and Koetting observe, CBE's intellectual genealogy rests upon an epistemology of control, where learning is understood as a form of prediction and management rather than exploration (Schilling & Koetting, 2010).

This transformation exemplifies what may be called the defaulting of educational purpose. Across many reform agendas, questions about the ends of education have receded into the background. Efficiency, employability, and performance occupy the space once reserved for reflection on what kind of person education ought to form. The purpose of education has not disappeared; it has been silently redefined in operational terms. As Moon argues, the spread of CBE in global reform discourse reflects a broader cultural movement that privileges measurable performance as the ultimate indicator of quality (Moon, 2007).

The argument of this essay is that the transition from knowledge to competence reshapes the normative core of educational purpose. Competence is not merely a technical category but a carrier of implicit assumptions about human development, value, and social order. When competence becomes the organizing principle of educational systems, the purpose of education undergoes a subtle contraction. It shifts from the cultivation of understanding to the optimization of performance. This essay explores that transformation, clarifies the conceptual foundations of competence, and reclaims an idea of educational purpose that transcends the instrumental rationality embedded in CBE.

The discussion unfolds in several stages. The second section revisits classical and modern understandings of educational purpose and knowledge, providing a normative baseline for later critique. The third clarifies the meaning of competence and its diverse interpretations in educational theory. The fourth traces the structural shift from knowledge-centered to outcome-oriented education. The fifth and sixth sections analyze how educational purpose becomes recoded and narrowed within CBE. The seventh engages with common defenses of CBE, showing that technical arguments cannot settle normative questions. The eighth proposes a more open conception of educational purpose that acknowledges competence without reducing education to it. The essay concludes by reflecting on the broader significance of this shift in the contemporary age of competence.

2. Educational Purpose and Knowledge: Classical and Modern Perspectives

Education has long been regarded as a practice oriented toward the formation of persons rather than the production of outcomes. In classical philosophy, the question of educational purpose was inseparable from the question of the good life. Plato's conception of paideia envisioned education as the cultivation of the soul toward knowledge of the good. Knowledge in this sense was formative, shaping both judgment and virtue. Aristotle's tripartite distinction between *episteme*, *techne*, and *phronesis* further elaborated this idea: knowledge encompassed theoretical understanding, practical skill, and ethical judgment. Education, therefore, aimed not at performance but at wisdom.

Modern educational thought reinterpreted these ideals in light of emerging notions of reason and autonomy. Kant understood education as a process of moral and rational self-legislation, in which knowledge enables individuals to act according to principles rather than impulses. The purpose of education was to cultivate the capacity for reason and freedom, positioning knowledge as the path to moral maturity. Knowledge thus retained its normative status: it was both emancipatory and constitutive of selfhood.

The Enlightenment's elevation of knowledge gradually gave way to new forms of instrumental rationality as industrialization and state administration expanded. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw education redefined

through systems of mass schooling aimed at economic productivity and civic conformity. In the twentieth century, John Dewey's pragmatism sought to reconcile knowledge and experience, defining learning as the reconstruction of experience through reflective inquiry. Dewey's vision preserved education's formative purpose even while emphasizing utility. Education's aim was not only to prepare individuals for work but also to foster intelligent participation in democratic life.

This historical arc provides a benchmark for evaluating contemporary transformations. Across classical and modern traditions, education was never merely a process of skill acquisition. It was a normative practice concerned with what kind of person one becomes through knowledge. The loss of this orientation marks the depth of the current shift. The competence paradigm, in its focus on measurable outcomes, reduces knowledge to an operational resource, stripping it of its formative significance. As Chappell, Gonczi, and Hager point out, this reduction arises when competence frameworks are employed as substitutes for educational philosophy rather than as its expression (Chappell, Gonczi, & Hager, 2020).

To re-engage with educational purpose, one must recover the idea that knowledge possesses a normative dimension. Knowledge not only enables performance but also shapes understanding of the world and oneself. It carries within it assumptions about truth, value, and meaning that define the horizon of education. Without acknowledging these assumptions, reforms risk collapsing education into training. The enduring task is to sustain an idea of education in which knowledge serves as both means and end, a process that forms judgment as well as competence.

3. Clarifying Competence: Conceptual Foundations and Educational Meanings

The term competence carries a layered and often contested meaning within educational discourse. Its genealogy traverses psychology, professional training, and organizational management, acquiring diverse interpretations along the way. As Klingstedt noted in one of the earliest philosophical treatments, CBE was founded on the belief that educational outcomes should be made explicit and measurable so that learning can be verified empirically (Klingstedt, 1972). This behavioral orientation framed competence as the observable ability to perform specified tasks under controlled conditions.

Three broad interpretations of competence can be identified. The first is technical competence, centered on the execution of specific procedures to a given standard. It corresponds to the behavioral models of learning that dominate vocational education and performance assessment. In this view, competence equates to accuracy and efficiency. Schilling and Koetting observe that such models are sustained by a managerial logic that values predictability over understanding, rendering learning a form of operational compliance (Schilling & Koetting, 2010).

The second is situational competence, which emphasizes contextual judgment and adaptability. This view, influenced by phenomenology and situated cognition, holds that competence involves not only knowing how to act but discerning what is appropriate in a specific situation. Education, under this conception, develops perceptiveness and responsiveness, qualities that cannot be reduced to procedural mastery. Chappell and colleagues highlight that genuine competence requires integrating knowledge, skill, and ethical discernment within the contingencies of practice (Chappell, Gonczi, & Hager, 2020).

The third interpretation is transferable competence, referring to capacities applicable across contexts, such as critical thinking, communication, and collaboration. These have been promoted as "twenty-first century skills," signaling education's adaptation to globalized economies and digital cultures. Yet even this broadened notion often remains framed within instrumental expectations of employability and adaptability rather than intellectual or ethical formation. Moon observes that CBE's global expansion reflects this instrumental orientation, which equates educational success with flexibility and measurable productivity (Moon, 2007).

Clarifying these distinctions reveals that the idea of competence itself is not inherently narrow. The problem arises when competence as an educational purpose replaces competence as an educational outcome. When competence serves as an outcome, it indicates the learner's ability to apply knowledge meaningfully. When it becomes the purpose, it defines the end of

education itself. In that shift, education risks losing its orientation toward understanding and becoming. The conceptual boundaries of competence must therefore remain open to philosophical scrutiny, lest the richness of education be reduced to the precision of performance metrics.

CBE's limitations thus lie not in the notion of competence but in its institutional codification. As Ainsworth observed, once educational achievement is translated into a system of discrete competencies, "the behavioral philosophy of education becomes self-validating," marginalizing inquiry and reflection (Ainsworth, 1977). To sustain a meaningful conception of educational purpose, competence must be reintegrated within a wider framework of knowledge and formation, where learning is not exhausted by what can be measured but remains animated by what can be understood.

4. The Turn from Knowledge to Competence

4.1 From Epistemic to Operational Rationality

The shift from knowledge-centered education to competency-based education is not simply a change in curriculum design. It represents a reordering of the epistemological and ethical foundations of modern schooling. For centuries, the pursuit of knowledge was understood as a moral and intellectual good in itself. Knowledge cultivated the human capacity for judgment, discernment, and imagination. It connected education to questions of truth, justice, and civic virtue. In the classical and humanist traditions, knowledge was the formative medium through which individuals became self-reflective and responsible members of a shared world.

Competency-Based Education (CBE) redefines this orientation. It introduces what can be called operational rationality, in which knowledge functions as a means to demonstrable outcomes rather than as an end of learning. This transformation began in the mid-twentieth century, when the behavioral sciences began to influence curriculum design and assessment. Educational psychologists such as Benjamin Bloom and Ralph Tyler promoted the view that learning should be defined through observable objectives, measurable through assessment. Within this framework, the epistemic content of education—concepts, theories, ideas—was subordinated to behavioral indicators of performance. Klingstedt identified this transition early on, describing CBE as a reform movement grounded in "precise specification of what learners must demonstrate" as evidence of mastery (Klingstedt, 1972).

This behavioral turn aligned with broader transformations in industrial and bureaucratic society. As organizations sought greater efficiency and predictability, education was recast as a form of human resource development. Learning became the process of acquiring competencies that could be mobilized for productivity. Magnusson and Osborne describe this development as the rise of "instrumental reason" in education: a mode of rationality that measures knowledge by its utility within systems of production (Magnusson & Osborne, 1990). The logic of performance thus displaced the older logic of understanding.

4.2 The Decline of Knowledge as a Public Good

The transformation of educational rationality must also be seen in relation to the changing social status of knowledge. In the Enlightenment and early modern period, knowledge was regarded as a public good. Universities were institutions for the cultivation of shared reason, grounded in the ideal that truth possessed intrinsic value beyond immediate utility. The expansion of mass education in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries extended this principle to citizens, linking knowledge to democratic participation and human emancipation.

By the late twentieth century, however, the rise of global capitalism and the knowledge economy redefined the function of education. Knowledge came to be valued for its capacity to generate innovation, competitiveness, and employability. Educational institutions were increasingly evaluated according to measurable outputs: graduation rates, employment statistics, and standardized test performance. Under such conditions, knowledge ceased to be an intrinsic public good and became an economic resource. The university became a producer of competencies for the labor market, while schools became sites of performance management. This reconfiguration of knowledge aligns with what Habermas calls the colonization of the lifeworld by systems of instrumental rationality, where communicative and ethical dimensions are displaced by technical control.

Chappell, Gonczi, and Hager note that competency-based systems "construct all learning as instrumental and performative,"

dissolving the distinction between education as a space of reflection and training as a system of compliance (Chappell, Gonczi, & Hager, 2020). Under this paradigm, knowledge acquires meaning only insofar as it contributes to measurable performance. The epistemological and ethical questions that once animated education—What counts as truth? What kind of person should we become?—are replaced by managerial questions about outcomes and accountability.

4.3 The Governance Function of Competence

The rapid adoption of CBE across policy contexts cannot be explained solely by pedagogical considerations. Its appeal lies in its governance function. Competence provides a language of control that renders learning visible, quantifiable, and comparable. It allows policymakers to translate the complex processes of education into discrete indicators that can be monitored and reported. This managerial rationality aligns education with the techniques of auditing and performance management that dominate modern institutions.

Waghid observes that this managerial framing of education reflects a deeper philosophical tension between education as formation and education as production (Waghid, 2003). Formation, or Bildung, conceives education as the cultivation of understanding and ethical judgment. Production conceives it as the efficient creation of measurable skills. The language of competence belongs to the latter, where learning outcomes are predetermined and standardized. The learner becomes a performer within a regulated system rather than an inquirer engaged in self-cultivation.

The governance advantages of competence are significant. Competency frameworks simplify the relationship between teaching and accountability. They provide administrators with quantifiable evidence of performance and funders with assurances of efficiency. Yet, as Magnusson and Osborne argue, this very efficiency conceals a philosophical loss: "The rationalization of learning under the rubric of competence transforms education into a form of management" (Magnusson & Osborne, 1990). The managerial promise of transparency masks the disappearance of reflection. When the purposes of education are encoded in performance standards, the space for questioning those purposes vanishes.

4.4 The Seductive Simplicity of Outcomes

The movement toward competence is sustained by the seductive simplicity of outcomes-based logic. Outcomes appear objective and neutral, offering clarity in a world of educational ambiguity. They promise to replace vague ideals with measurable criteria. In practice, however, outcomes obscure the complexity of learning. They reduce rich intellectual and moral processes to observable behaviors. Learning becomes a matter of alignment between input and output rather than transformation and meaning.

Preston describes this as the existential threat of competency: a reduction of human learning to quantifiable performance that erodes the reflective dimension of education (Preston, 2017). When learners internalize the expectation that their worth is measured by performance indicators, education risks becoming an exercise in self-optimization. The uncertainty, curiosity, and wonder that accompany genuine understanding are replaced by the anxiety of demonstration. The learner becomes both the subject and object of assessment, governed by the imperative to perform.

Ainsworth's early critique remains relevant here. Writing in *The Journal of Higher Education*, he argued that CBE's focus on achievement "exclusive of the concept of understanding" risks producing technically competent but intellectually impoverished graduates (Ainsworth, 1977). The modern educational landscape bears witness to this danger. Students are trained to master frameworks and rubrics, yet they often struggle to articulate why knowledge matters or how it relates to the human condition. The substitution of competence for knowledge thus narrows not only what education achieves but also what it imagines as possible.

4.5 The Reconfiguration of the Learner

One of the most profound consequences of the turn to competence is the reconfiguration of the learner. Under knowledge-centered education, the learner was conceived as an autonomous subject engaged in inquiry and reflection. The goal of education was to cultivate intellectual independence and ethical discernment. Under CBE, the learner becomes a performer whose achievements are verified through demonstration. Learning is externalized in outcomes, and the learner's

interiority—understanding, motivation, uncertainty—becomes invisible.

Chappell and colleagues describe this transformation as the technologization of learning, where pedagogy becomes a set of procedures for producing specified outcomes (Chappell, Gonczi, & Hager, 2020). In such systems, reflection and dialogue risk being marginalized because they cannot easily be measured. The learner's identity becomes bound to performance records, portfolios, and rubrics. This aligns with Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power, in which subjects are constituted through systems of surveillance and normalization. Education thus shifts from an emancipatory to a regulatory function.

This transformation has ethical implications. When learners are evaluated solely on competencies, their value is determined by conformity to institutional expectations. Individual differences of perspective or interpretation are often treated as deficiencies rather than expressions of intellectual independence. The learner's capacity for critique, imagination, or resistance becomes secondary to their capacity for compliance. Such a conception of learning may produce efficient workers, but it cannot sustain democratic citizens or reflective thinkers.

4.6 Competence and the Logic of the Market

The global spread of CBE also reflects the penetration of market logic into education. In policy discourse, competencies are often equated with employability, flexibility, and adaptability—qualities prized in post-industrial economies. Education is thus positioned as a supplier of human capital, and learning is framed as investment. The vocabulary of competence dovetails neatly with the vocabulary of economics. Both treat human potential as a measurable asset.

Moon's analysis of education reform notes that CBE's expansion coincided with the emergence of neoliberal governance, where the value of knowledge is determined by its contribution to competitiveness and innovation (Moon, 2007). In this context, educational policy adopts the language of efficiency and accountability drawn from the corporate world. Learners are redefined as consumers, and institutions as providers of services. The success of education is judged by market outcomes rather than intellectual or moral development.

This economization of education produces a paradox. By promising relevance, it risks undermining meaning. When the purpose of learning is aligned entirely with employability, the question of what constitutes a good or just society becomes irrelevant. Education ceases to cultivate judgment and becomes a tool of adaptation. As Magnusson and Osborne caution, "competence becomes the ideology of late modernity," legitimizing systems that value control over reflection (Magnusson & Osborne, 1990).

4.7 Beyond the Binary: Knowledge and Competence as Complementary

Although the critique of CBE is compelling, it would be mistaken to romanticize knowledge as an unproblematic ideal. Traditional knowledge-centered education often reproduced elitism, abstraction, and exclusion. The rise of competence represents an attempt to make learning more accessible, transparent, and accountable. In principle, competence need not negate knowledge. It can provide a bridge between understanding and application, ensuring that education remains connected to practice and experience.

Chappell and Hager propose a more integrated conception of competence that includes reflective, ethical, and contextual dimensions. They argue that genuine competence involves not only technical skill but also "the capacity for judgment and meaning-making within practice" (Chappell, Gonczi, & Hager, 2020). This conception resists the reduction of competence to performance by linking it to knowledge and understanding. In such a model, competence becomes an expression of Bildung rather than its replacement.

The challenge, however, lies in institutional realization. Educational systems organized around assessment and accountability find it difficult to sustain open-ended conceptions of learning. Reflection, dialogue, and uncertainty resist quantification. Unless institutional structures are redesigned to value these dimensions, competence will continue to function as a mechanism of control rather than empowerment.

The turn from knowledge to competence marks a structural transformation in the meaning of education. It redefines what it means to know, to learn, and to be educated. Knowledge loses its autonomy and becomes a function of

performance. Learning is reorganized as production, and the learner as a measurable unit of output. These changes reflect not only pedagogical trends but also broader social shifts toward instrumental rationality, managerial governance, and economic efficiency. Yet the consequences are not merely structural; they are human. When education is reduced to competence, learners lose the space for uncertainty, imagination, and self-formation. The moral dimension of education—its concern with what is good, just, and meaningful—fades behind the imperative to perform. The task for contemporary educators and theorists is not to reject competence but to re-situate it within a richer conception of learning, where knowledge remains formative and inquiry remains open. The turn from knowledge to competence thus poses a fundamental question to modern societies: whether education will continue to serve as a space for the cultivation of understanding or become an instrument for the management of performance. The answer to that question will determine not only the future of education but the future of human freedom.

5. Educational Purpose under Competency-Based Education

5.1 From Normative Reflection to Technical Design

Competency-Based Education (CBE) transforms the very grammar through which educational purpose is articulated. In the classical tradition, educational purpose is a normative question. It concerns the moral and intellectual formation of persons, asking what it means to live well and act wisely. Within the CBE framework, purpose becomes a technical matter of program design. It is expressed through learning outcomes, assessment rubrics, and measurable indicators. The central question shifts from "What is education for?" to "What can education produce?" This is not a trivial linguistic substitution but a reorganization of meaning.

The transformation can be traced to the managerial rationality that has permeated public institutions since the late twentieth century. Schools and universities are increasingly evaluated through performance metrics, funding models, and audits. The discourse of competence fits neatly into this regime. It offers a vocabulary that translates education into quantifiable outcomes, enabling governance through data. As Schilling and Koetting observe, the philosophical underpinnings of CBE rest upon a "technological interpretation of education," where learning becomes a form of production rather than cultivation (Schilling & Koetting, 2010).

The danger of this transformation lies not in the pursuit of effectiveness but in the displacement of reflection by technique. The problem is not that CBE defines learning outcomes but that it defines them as substitutes for educational purposes. Purpose becomes internal to the system, encoded within its operational logic, and detached from broader philosophical or ethical reflection. This internalization renders educational institutions efficient yet hollow, able to measure everything except meaning.

5.2 The Logic of Contraction

Educational purpose under CBE experiences what can be called a triple contraction. Each contraction narrows the horizon within which education can be understood.

The outcome contraction occurs when learning is reduced to observable achievements. CBE's insistence on demonstrable performance compresses the open-ended nature of learning into discrete and assessable behaviors. Learning ceases to be a process of inquiry or discovery and becomes an act of completion. Preston identifies this contraction as the core of what he calls the "existential threat of competency," where human learning loses its reflective and transformative dimensions (Preston, 2017). The learner becomes an executor of tasks rather than an explorer of ideas.

The temporal contraction follows from the first. Competence frameworks emphasize immediacy and accountability. They privilege short-term demonstrations over long-term cultivation. The temporal rhythm of education—its capacity for patience, repetition, and contemplation—is replaced by the urgency of proof. In CBE systems, learning is verified through evidence collected in portfolios and standardized assessments, compressing complex developmental processes into snapshots of performance. The slowness of education, once considered integral to formation, becomes inefficiency.

The normative contraction is the most profound. In knowledge-centered traditions, the purposes of education were debated in moral and political terms. CBE translates these debates into the language of effectiveness. Values are redefined as competencies: ethical judgment becomes

"ethical decision-making," civic responsibility becomes "participation competency," and aesthetic appreciation becomes "cultural literacy." In this translation, education's normative dimension is rendered technical. Bagnall and Hodge describe this process as an "epistemology of control," in which the moral ambiguity of human learning is domesticated by managerial rationality (Bagnall & Hodge, 2016).

These contractions reveal how CBE reshapes not only pedagogy but also the ontology of education itself. The meaning of being educated becomes synonymous with the ability to perform predefined acts. What cannot be measured—understanding, imagination, moral struggle—gradually disappears from view.

5.3 Embedded Purpose and Administrative Rationality

In the architecture of CBE, educational purpose is no longer external to institutional practice. It becomes embedded within procedures, frameworks, and assessment systems. Once codified in competencies, purpose is no longer a matter of deliberation but of implementation. Educators are not asked to debate what counts as worthwhile learning; they are tasked with aligning instruction to predetermined standards.

This embedding process transforms purpose into a governance mechanism. Educational outcomes become performance indicators for teachers, students, and institutions alike. The system thereby converts philosophical questions into administrative tasks. Magnusson and Osborne's deconstructionist analysis of the competency movement identifies this as a form of ideological closure: "the redefinition of educational questions as management problems" (Magnusson & Osborne, 1990). Once purpose is embedded in technical structures, critique itself becomes marginalized. The question "why" gives way to the question "how."

The embedding of purpose within administration has profound consequences for academic autonomy. Teachers increasingly function as facilitators of competencies rather than interpreters of knowledge. Their professional judgment becomes constrained by frameworks of accountability. The curriculum loses its open texture and becomes a grid of outcomes. This proceduralization of education aligns with the logic of bureaucratic governance identified by Max Weber, where rationalization leads to the domination of technical means over substantive values. In CBE, the educational good becomes indistinguishable from institutional efficiency.

5.4 The Technologization of Learning

The embedding of purpose also results in the technologization of learning. Education is reimagined as a system of inputs, processes, and outputs that can be optimized through design. The pedagogical relationship between teacher and student becomes mediated by digital platforms, rubrics, and algorithms. Learning analytics and automated assessments translate human development into data flows. This technological mediation further distances education from its humanistic roots.

Chappell, Gonczi, and Hager argue that CBE's adoption of technological rationality reflects a broader epistemological shift from reflective understanding to performative measurement (Chappell, Gonczi, & Hager, 2020). In this environment, learning is defined not by what the learner knows but by what the system can record. The educational relationship becomes a process of calibration between instruction and assessment. Students are trained to self-monitor, self-assess, and self-report, internalizing the evaluative gaze of the institution. The pursuit of truth or meaning gives way to the management of performance.

Technological mediation also changes the emotional texture of learning. Anxiety and self-surveillance replace curiosity and wonder. Learners become project managers of their own development, constantly producing evidence of competence. The moral horizon of education—its invitation to encounter the unknown—is replaced by an economy of validation. Preston's existential critique is acute on this point: when learning is reduced to competence, "human education ceases to be an adventure and becomes an exercise in proof" (Preston, 2017).

5.5 The Displacement of Formation by Optimization

Competency-based systems redefine education as optimization. The ideal learner is efficient, adaptable, and measurable. Formation—understood as the gradual development of judgment, taste, and moral sensibility—is displaced by continuous improvement. The question is no longer what kind of person one becomes but how well one performs relative to benchmarks.

This displacement reflects the deep penetration of economic rationality into education. Moon identifies this as part of the global reform agenda that treats education as a subsystem of economic competitiveness (Moon, 2007). CBE's focus on employability and skill alignment mirrors corporate management principles. Educational institutions are expected to function like enterprises that produce competent graduates as human capital. In this process, the ethical and civic dimensions of education are marginalized. The learner is no longer a citizen or moral agent but a resource.

Such economization transforms not only institutions but subjectivities. Students are encouraged to see themselves as self-entrepreneurs responsible for maintaining their "skills portfolio." Teachers are urged to design learning in terms of measurable deliverables. Even intellectual inquiry is reframed as "research impact." The vocabulary of competence thus naturalizes an economic ontology of the self. Education becomes a technology of self-optimization aligned with market imperatives.

5.6 The Ontological Cost of Competence

The reduction of educational purpose to competence entails a loss that is both epistemological and ontological. Epistemologically, it narrows what counts as knowledge to what can be operationalized. Ontologically, it redefines the learner as a functional being rather than a reflective subject. This double reduction transforms education from a process of becoming into a process of adaptation.

Bagnall and Hodge emphasize that this transformation is not accidental but systemic. Competence frameworks, by their very design, "constrain the epistemic field" of learning and regulate the kinds of identities that can emerge within it (Bagnall & Hodge, 2016). The learner's relationship to knowledge becomes instrumental, mediated by external validation. The notion of learning as self-formation or moral awakening becomes unintelligible within this logic.

The ontological cost of competence is thus a loss of depth. Education no longer addresses the inner life of the learner—their sense of purpose, wonder, or moral struggle. It addresses only what can be observed and certified. Preston warns that this leads to "an erosion of the metaphysical dimension of education," the space in which human beings confront questions of meaning and existence (Preston, 2017). When education forgets this dimension, it ceases to be education in the humanistic sense and becomes a system of training.

5.7 The Persistence of Purpose Beneath the System

Despite these transformations, educational purpose does not disappear entirely. It persists beneath the surface of systems and standards, manifesting in moments of curiosity, dialogue, and wonder that resist quantification. Even within CBE frameworks, teachers and students often reclaim spaces for reflection. These acts of resistance demonstrate that purpose cannot be eradicated; it can only be suppressed.

Educational purpose persists because it is intrinsic to the act of learning itself. To learn is to orient oneself toward meaning. No amount of managerial design can eliminate this orientation. The challenge lies in making it visible again. This requires reclaiming the language of purpose from the language of performance. It demands that educators reassert their role as interpreters of meaning rather than implementers of policy.

Preston suggests that the future of education depends on recovering "the existential imagination," the capacity to see learning as a mode of being rather than a process of doing (Preston, 2017). In this sense, critique of CBE is not nostalgia but necessity. It is a call to preserve the human vocation of education in the face of technical and bureaucratic encroachment.

The redefinition of educational purpose under CBE reveals the vulnerability of education to the forces of instrumental rationality. When purpose is operationalized, education loses its reflective depth. It becomes a self-referential system that can measure its efficiency but not its meaning. Yet the very persistence of critique, both philosophical and pedagogical, shows that this transformation is not total. Reclaiming educational purpose requires reasserting the distinction between means and ends. Competence may serve as a means of structuring learning, but it cannot define its ultimate end. The end of education must remain open, shaped by reflection on human flourishing rather than institutional convenience. As Bagnall and Hodge remind us, "education begins where measurement ends" (Bagnall & Hodge, 2016). Purpose, in this sense, is not a goal to be achieved but a horizon to be pursued.

6. Instrumental Reason and the Narrowing of Educational Purpose

6.1 The Concept of Instrumental Reason

The notion of instrumental reason occupies a central place in critical theory and provides an incisive lens for understanding the transformation of education in the age of Competency-Based Education (CBE). First articulated by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), instrumental reason describes a mode of rationality that subordinates thought to utility. It measures knowledge by its capacity to control, predict, or produce results rather than by its capacity to reveal meaning or truth. In this view, reason itself becomes a tool of domination. It ceases to inquire into ends and concerns itself only with the optimization of means.

Horkheimer distinguished instrumental reason from objective reason, which once guided moral and philosophical reflection on the good and the just. Objective reason asked what was worth doing; instrumental reason asks only how something can be done efficiently. When this rationality enters education, it converts learning into a process of optimization. Knowledge becomes a technical resource rather than a domain of understanding. Questions about the meaning of knowledge, the cultivation of character, or the formation of judgment are displaced by questions about performance, assessment, and employability.

Within contemporary educational systems, CBE exemplifies this rationality. Its design rests on the logic of specification, measurement, and control. Every educational act must produce demonstrable outcomes, and every learner must show evidence of mastery. As Magnusson and Osborne explain, the rise of CBE reflects the broader "instrumentalization of learning," where the value of knowledge is equated with its function within systems of accountability (Magnusson & Osborne, 1990). Instrumental reason thus provides both the philosophical foundation and the political logic of competency-based reform.

6.2 Rationalization and the Loss of Ends

The dominance of instrumental rationality in education represents a broader historical process of rationalization, which Max Weber identified as characteristic of modern societies. Rationalization brings predictability, efficiency, and control, but it also produces what Weber called the "iron cage" of bureaucratic logic. In education, this manifests as the proliferation of assessment systems, accountability frameworks, and quality assurance mechanisms. The language of competence fits perfectly within this environment because it translates learning into a series of operational tasks. The question of *why* one learns is replaced by the question of *how effectively* one learns.

The classical tradition of education, stretching from Aristotle's notion of *phronesis* to John Dewey's conception of reflective inquiry, assumed that knowledge served to orient human action toward good ends. Instrumental rationality severs this connection. It treats knowledge as neutral and value-free, ignoring the moral dimension of understanding. The consequences are profound. Educational institutions become highly efficient in producing measurable outcomes but increasingly incapable of articulating why those outcomes matter. The purpose of education becomes self-referential: it exists to improve its own performance indicators.

Chappell, Gonczi, and Hager have observed that this self-referentiality underlies the "performative culture" of modern education, where learning is judged not by intrinsic understanding but by evidence of productivity (Chappell, Gonczi, & Hager, 2020). In this environment, knowledge is validated by its capacity to generate measurable performance. The rational pursuit of ends gives way to the administrative management of results. The narrowing of educational purpose is thus not an accidental byproduct of reform but the logical outcome of instrumental reason applied to learning.

6.3 The Technocratic Transformation of Purpose

Instrumental reason transforms educational purpose into a technocratic project. It redefines educational success through measurable criteria such as efficiency, completion rates, and employability. These criteria appear neutral but encode a specific conception of the learner as a productive unit. Under CBE, the learner's value lies in their demonstrable competencies, which can be audited, compared, and certified. Learning becomes a technology of control that aligns human development with institutional priorities.

Habermas's distinction between instrumental and communicative rationality** illuminates this

transformation. In communicative rationality, meaning is generated through dialogue and mutual understanding; in instrumental rationality, meaning is replaced by efficiency. Educational purpose shifts from cultivating communicative engagement with the world to optimizing behavior within it. The discourse of CBE celebrates transparency and accountability, yet these values operate within a closed system that excludes moral and existential reflection. What counts as valuable learning is already decided by the framework itself.

Preston's *Competence-Based Education and Training and the End of Human Learning* explores this technocratic drift as an existential problem. He argues that when learning is defined solely by competence, the learner's inner life—curiosity, doubt, and wonder—becomes irrelevant (Preston, 2017). The human subject is reconstructed as an instrument of performance. The educational process, which once invited learners to question, imagine, and interpret, becomes a process of adaptation. The rationalization of purpose thus produces an ontological impoverishment: learners are taught how to achieve but not why achievement matters.

6.4 Learning as Optimization and Surveillance

Instrumental rationality produces a distinctive pedagogy of optimization and surveillance. Education is organized as a system for improving performance through continuous monitoring. Learners are expected to manage their progress, demonstrate self-regulation, and provide evidence of mastery. The teacher becomes a facilitator of data collection rather than a guide in inquiry. The classroom transforms into a site of verification.

Chappell and Hager describe this system as one in which "learning is no longer judged by insight or creativity but by conformity to predefined criteria" (Chappell, Gonczi, & Hager, 2020). The surveillance of learning is not necessarily coercive; it operates through the internalization of accountability. Students learn to monitor themselves, to think in the categories of performance, and to evaluate their worth through measurable results. The outcome is a form of self-regulation that mirrors the dynamics of the workplace.

Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power helps clarify this phenomenon. Under CBE, power operates not by repressing learning but by structuring its possibilities. The learner's freedom is exercised within a pre-defined system of competencies. Autonomy becomes indistinguishable from compliance. Instrumental rationality thus reproduces a subtle form of domination: it shapes the very ways learners understand themselves. Education becomes a technology of the self, guiding individuals to align their aspirations with the imperatives of productivity.

6.5 The Ethical and Ontological Consequences

The ethical consequences of instrumental reason in education are visible in the erosion of responsibility and judgment. In the classical conception, education formed the capacity for moral discernment—the ability to act wisely in uncertain situations. Instrumental rationality, by contrast, privileges procedural correctness over moral reflection. It replaces questions of value with questions of efficiency. Learners are taught to comply with standards rather than deliberate about principles.

This shift has ontological implications. The learner is no longer a being-in-formation but a being-in-performance. The interior life of the learner, once nurtured through dialogue and contemplation, is rendered invisible. Preston warns that this transformation produces "a crisis of interiority" in education, where selfhood becomes fragmented into measurable competencies (Preston, 2017). The capacity to dwell in uncertainty—to think beyond outcomes—erodes. Education ceases to cultivate the ability to live meaningfully with complexity.

The loss of interiority also affects teachers. As educational purpose becomes technical, the moral and intellectual agency of teachers is constrained. They become implementers of curricula rather than participants in philosophical reflection. Magnusson and Osborne note that this loss of agency results in the depersonalization of teaching, where educators are valued for procedural fidelity rather than interpretive wisdom (Magnusson & Osborne, 1990). Instrumental rationality thus narrows the ethical scope of education at every level—from learners to institutions.

6.6 Education and the Market Logic of Instrumentality

Instrumental reason in education is inseparable from the market logic that dominates late modern societies. CBE thrives in environments where learning is framed as investment and

knowledge as capital. The economic metaphor reshapes educational purpose. Schools become suppliers of human capital, students become investors in their employability, and learning becomes a commodity. The question of educational purpose is subsumed under the question of market alignment.

Moon identifies this economic rationality as the defining characteristic of global education reform. The rhetoric of competence aligns with neoliberal ideals of flexibility, adaptability, and self-management (Moon, 2007). The result is a new subjectivity: the enterprising learner who continuously upgrades their competencies to remain competitive. Education thus becomes a lifelong project of optimization in service of economic systems. Learning is reimagined as labor.

This economization of education carries ideological consequences. It masks power relations behind the neutral language of competence. Learners are told that success depends on their skills, obscuring structural inequalities that shape access to knowledge. The discourse of meritocracy legitimizes inequality by presenting performance as objective measurement. Instrumental reason thus reinforces the very hierarchies it claims to transcend. The narrowing of educational purpose becomes a mechanism of social normalization.

6.7 Resistance and the Recovery of Reflective Reason

Despite its pervasiveness, instrumental rationality is not total. Education still contains moments of resistance where reflection interrupts optimization. Critical pedagogy, inspired by thinkers like Paulo Freire, reminds us that learning is inherently dialogical and ethical. Freire's concept of *conscientização*—the awakening of critical consciousness—offers an antidote to instrumental reason. It positions education as a practice of freedom, not a process of adjustment.

Waghid's philosophical defense of non-instrumental education echoes this spirit. He argues that education must remain committed to the cultivation of practical reason, the capacity to deliberate about the good in plural contexts (Waghid, 2003). Such reason cannot be reduced to competencies because it involves judgment, empathy, and imagination. It is exercised through participation in dialogue, not compliance with standards.

Reclaiming reflective reason in education requires rethinking assessment, pedagogy, and institutional culture. Assessment must move beyond performance indicators to include interpretive and dialogical dimensions of learning. Pedagogy must be oriented toward understanding rather than completion. Institutions must rediscover their moral vocation as spaces of inquiry. As Habermas insists, communicative rationality offers an alternative to the instrumental: it grounds education in the pursuit of mutual understanding rather than efficiency.

The narrowing of educational purpose under CBE is a symptom of the broader ascendancy of instrumental reason in modern life. By reducing knowledge to performance, it transforms education into an apparatus of optimization. The learner becomes a producer of evidence, and the teacher becomes a manager of outcomes. Yet the persistence of critique demonstrates that education still harbors a countervailing impulse: the desire to understand and to become. To resist the hegemony of instrumental rationality is not to reject efficiency or accountability but to restore reflection as the heart of education. Purpose must once again include moral and existential dimensions. Learning must be understood not as the achievement of competencies but as participation in a shared search for meaning. Only by reclaiming this reflective vocation can education remain a human endeavor rather than a technical system.

7. Addressing Defenses of Competency-Based Education

7.1 The Need to Engage Defenses Philosophically

Critiques of Competency-Based Education (CBE) often risk appearing dismissive if they fail to acknowledge the genuine aspirations that motivate reform. CBE's defenders do not see themselves as undermining education's moral or intellectual depth. On the contrary, they present it as a pragmatic innovation designed to make education more responsive, transparent, and equitable. Many of its advocates work from within traditions of progressive reform that emphasize learning outcomes, student agency, and real-world relevance. A philosophical critique must therefore begin by granting these motivations their seriousness. The issue is not whether CBE can yield technical improvements, but whether it can sustain education's normative and formative purposes.

Klingstedt's early defense of competency-based reform in the 1970s was grounded in democratization. He argued that making learning outcomes explicit could reduce arbitrariness in evaluation and create fairer opportunities for all learners (Klingstedt, 1972). Later advocates such as Sturgis (2016) and Spady (1994) developed this argument further, suggesting that competency frameworks empower students by clarifying expectations and allowing individualized progression. These defenses point to real limitations in traditional knowledge-centered systems, where success often depends on implicit cultural capital rather than transparent standards. Yet the philosophical problem arises when transparency becomes totalizing—when the measurable replaces the meaningful.

The following subsections examine three common defenses of CBE and explore how each, while containing valid insights, reveals deeper tensions concerning educational purpose. These defenses are: (1) the organizational defense, which treats CBE as a neutral framework; (2) the epistemic defense, which argues that competence inherently includes knowledge and judgment; and (3) the pragmatic defense, which holds that education must serve economic and social needs. Addressing these claims requires moving beyond surface-level pragmatics to consider the ontological and normative implications of defining education through competence.

7.2 The Organizational Defense: "CBE Is Just a Model"

The first and most frequent defense holds that CBE is not a philosophy of education but a technical framework for organizing teaching and assessment. Advocates claim that it merely provides clarity by specifying what students should know and be able to do. This defense rests on a distinction between form and content: CBE is said to affect only the form of educational delivery, leaving its deeper purposes untouched. By this logic, philosophical critiques are misdirected, because the framework itself carries no normative assumptions.

At first glance, this argument seems persuasive. Teachers can, in theory, design competencies that include ethical, critical, and creative outcomes. The structure of CBE does not predetermine the content of what is taught. Yet as Schilling and Koetting note, every instructional framework implicitly encodes a conception of the learner and the teacher (Schilling & Koetting, 2010). In practice, the operational logic of CBE privileges what can be standardized, recorded, and compared. Its form gradually shapes its content. The categories of competence, no matter how flexibly defined, function as containers that favor measurable over interpretive knowledge.

Magnusson and Osborne's critical analysis makes a similar point. They argue that the "neutrality" of competency discourse is illusory because the very act of specifying learning in advance transforms education into a process of compliance (Magnusson & Osborne, 1990). The neutrality of form conceals a technocratic conception of purpose. The moment learning is structured around demonstrable outcomes, the unpredictable and dialogical character of inquiry is subordinated to performance verification. Thus, even if CBE is introduced as a neutral model, it carries a latent epistemology that values precision over ambiguity, certainty over exploration, and management over reflection.

The organizational defense, then, cannot hold. CBE's neutrality is structural, not philosophical; its very procedures enact a form of instrumental reason. Educational purpose becomes embedded in the operational logic of the system. Once purpose is internalized in procedure, reflection on purpose itself becomes unnecessary or even unintelligible. The claim that CBE is "just a model" fails because all models, once institutionalized, become carriers of implicit norms.

7.3 The Epistemic Defense: "Competence Includes Knowledge"

A second defense asserts that competence does not exclude knowledge but rather presupposes it. Advocates argue that CBE is compatible with knowledge-centered education because genuine competence involves understanding as well as skill. Chappell, Gonczi, and Hager advance this argument persuasively, proposing that competence be defined as the "holistic integration of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values within contextually appropriate action" (Chappell, Gonczi, & Hager, 2020). On this view, competence frameworks can promote deep learning by connecting theory with practice, reducing the gap between abstract knowledge and real-world application.

This epistemic defense addresses a legitimate concern about traditional schooling. Academic systems have often privileged theoretical abstraction detached from life. Students learn concepts but cannot apply them meaningfully. CBE's focus on transferability and context seeks to overcome this divide. Yet the critical question is not whether competence can include knowledge in theory but whether it does so in practice. When institutional accountability demands quantifiable results, complex forms of understanding are translated into simplified indicators. The richness of judgment collapses into the clarity of measurement.

Ainsworth's historical critique remains instructive. Writing in the 1970s, he warned that the behavioral definition of competence, while effective for training tasks, was "insufficient for intellectual education" because it fails to capture the reflective dimensions of understanding (Ainsworth, 1977). Modern CBE systems, even when they claim holistic intent, face similar challenges. The managerial need for comparability drives them toward simplification. Knowledge is incorporated only to the extent that it can be operationalized. In this process, its intrinsic value as a form of insight is lost.

Epistemically, competence differs from knowledge in its orientation toward performance. Knowledge seeks understanding; competence seeks adequacy. The two are not mutually exclusive, but their priorities diverge. A learner may demonstrate competence without genuine comprehension, just as one may understand deeply without immediate performance. The substitution of competence for knowledge thus redefines what counts as learning. It privileges *doing* over *thinking*, *use* over *truth*. Preston argues that this substitution leads to "ontological impoverishment," in which learning becomes functional adaptation rather than personal transformation (Preston, 2017).

The epistemic defense therefore overlooks a fundamental tension. Competence may require knowledge, but it instrumentalizes it. Knowledge becomes subordinate to performance goals. The reflective relation between knower and known—central to philosophical and humanistic traditions—dissolves into technical adequacy. Education becomes a system for producing capable agents rather than thoughtful persons.

7.4 The Pragmatic Defense: "Education Must Serve Reality"

The third defense of CBE is pragmatic. It holds that education must respond to the demands of the real world. In an era of rapid technological change and economic uncertainty, schools and universities cannot remain insulated from social needs. Competence-based frameworks are said to ensure relevance by aligning education with employment, innovation, and civic engagement. To oppose them, advocates claim, is to defend outdated elitism or academic abstraction.

Moon's analysis of global education reform captures the spirit of this defense. He notes that CBE emerged in part as a response to the "crisis of relevance" in traditional systems that failed to prepare learners for contemporary life (Moon, 2007). Governments and institutions adopted competency frameworks to link education with national development goals. This pragmatism is not inherently problematic; education must indeed address real human needs. Yet the problem arises when the definition of "reality" is narrowed to economic efficiency. The so-called real world is interpreted through the logic of markets, productivity, and competitiveness. The moral and cultural dimensions of human existence recede from view.

Schilling and Koetting observe that when educational design becomes a response to external demand, it loses its reflective autonomy (Schilling & Koetting, 2010). The pragmatic defense thus risks transforming education into a service industry. The institution no longer asks what kind of society education ought to create; it merely adapts to what society already is. This adaptation may appear realistic, but it eliminates education's critical function. As Habermas would argue, instrumental adaptation without reflection reproduces existing power structures. Education becomes conservative in the deepest sense: it preserves the present under the guise of innovation.

Preston deepens this critique by describing CBE as "a pedagogy of adjustment" that trains individuals to navigate systems rather than question them (Preston, 2017). The rhetoric of relevance thus conceals a loss of agency. Learners become efficient participants in the given order, not creators of new possibilities. The pragmatic defense mistakes adaptation for freedom. True education, as philosophers from Dewey to Freire have argued, must not only respond to the world but also transform it.

7.5 Reconciling Utility with Meaning

The persistence of these defenses shows that CBE addresses real anxieties about education's purpose. It responds to demands for fairness, clarity, and relevance. Yet its solutions tend to overcorrect. The organizational defense reduces purpose to structure, the epistemic defense subordinates knowledge to performance, and the pragmatic defense identifies value with utility. The challenge is to reconcile utility with meaning, to create systems that are both responsive and reflective.

Bagnall and Hodge propose an "epistemology of openness" as an alternative to both the rigidity of CBE and the abstraction of traditional schooling (Bagnall & Hodge, 2016). They argue that education must retain a dimension of uncertainty, where outcomes are not wholly predetermined. Learning should engage students in the construction of understanding rather than the reproduction of competencies. This approach accepts the practical insights of CBE—clarity, accountability, connection to context—while resisting its totalization. Competence can serve as a means within a broader conception of formation, but it cannot replace formation itself.

Reconciliation also requires rethinking the relationship between education and work. Instead of treating employability as education's ultimate end, institutions could treat it as one domain of human flourishing among others. The ability to think, to question, to imagine alternative futures remains as vital to social progress as technical proficiency. As Waghid argues, education achieves its highest purpose when it cultivates *practical reason*: the capacity to deliberate about the good in uncertain circumstances (Waghid, 2003). Such reason resists instrumentalization because it is oriented toward understanding rather than control.

The defenses of CBE reveal both the promise and the peril of educational reform in an age of management. Each defense begins with a legitimate concern—inefficiency, irrelevance, inequity—and ends by reinforcing the logic of instrumentality. The deeper problem is not CBE itself but the conception of reason that underlies it. When rationality is reduced to technique, purpose becomes indistinguishable from performance. Education can measure its success but not justify it. Addressing these defenses philosophically requires recovering the distinction between technical improvement and moral advancement. Technical systems can make education more efficient, but they cannot determine what education is for. Only reflective judgment—what Aristotle called *phronesis*—can do that. The task is to restore spaces within educational systems where such judgment can flourish. Without them, competence will continue to expand while understanding contracts. In this sense, the critique of CBE is not a rejection of competence but a defense of education's human vocation. To educate is to invite learners into the shared project of meaning-making, not merely to train them for measurable performance. The technical logic of competence can support this vocation only when subordinated to reflective reason. The danger lies in forgetting that distinction. When the measurable becomes the meaningful, education loses its soul.

8. Reclaiming Educational Purpose Beyond Competence

8.1 The Question of Recovery

To reclaim educational purpose beyond competence is to ask what kind of learning remains possible when performance ceases to be the final measure of value. The question is not whether competence should exist but whether education can still serve as a space for formation, reflection, and understanding. Competence describes what learners can do; purpose concerns what they ought to become. The challenge is to recover this dimension of *becoming* without rejecting the insights that have made CBE attractive to reformers.

The recovery of purpose requires a philosophical act of remembering. It demands that education re-engage with its moral and epistemic inheritance—the conviction that knowledge possesses intrinsic worth and that learning involves more than adaptation to social needs. Preston describes this recovery as a return to "the existential core of education," the recognition that learning is inseparable from the search for meaning (Preston, 2017). The recovery is not nostalgic but critical. It does not seek to restore an idealized past but to retrieve what has been lost: the idea that education is a mode of self-formation grounded in knowledge and reflection.

8.2 Bildung and the Ethics of Formation

The concept of Bildung offers one of the most profound frameworks for rethinking

educational purpose beyond competence. Originating in German idealism, Bildung denotes a process of self-cultivation through which the individual shapes both understanding and moral sensibility. It unites intellectual and ethical growth, linking the acquisition of knowledge with the development of character. In this tradition, education is not the transmission of skills but the cultivation of humanity.

Wilhelm von Humboldt, the architect of the modern university ideal, regarded Bildung as an activity of inner freedom. To be educated was to engage in an ongoing dialogue between self and world, mediated through knowledge. Humboldt insisted that the goal of learning was not utility but self-determination through reason. Knowledge served as the medium through which individuals could recognize their dependence and autonomy simultaneously. This vision contrasts sharply with CBE's logic of outcomes, where the learner's development is externally defined and evaluated.

Waghid's reinterpretation of R. S. Peters' non-instrumental justification of education aligns with this humanistic ideal. He argues that education must retain moral autonomy from economic or political utility (Waghid, 2003). Learning acquires meaning not through performance but through its contribution to reflective life. Education as Bildung is thus an ethical practice: it concerns how individuals come to inhabit the world responsibly. Competence, in this context, may be a by-product of formation, but it cannot replace it as purpose. Where competence aims for adequacy, Bildung seeks wholeness.

8.3 Knowledge as a Formative Good

Reclaiming educational purpose requires restoring the formative status of knowledge. Knowledge is not merely information or skill but a way of being oriented toward truth. It engages the learner in the labor of understanding, which includes uncertainty, interpretation, and transformation. The formative power of knowledge lies in its capacity to reshape perception and value. It allows individuals to encounter the unfamiliar, to revise assumptions, and to act with judgment.

Chappell, Gonczi, and Hager suggest that any authentic education must include the integration of knowledge, skill, and ethical reflection within situated practice (Chappell, Gonczi, & Hager, 2020). Their argument implies that competence is meaningful only when grounded in knowledge that extends beyond technical procedures. Knowledge provides the interpretive depth that enables learners to see the significance of what they do. Without this depth, competence risks becoming empty performance.

The recognition of knowledge as formative also challenges the dominance of instrumental reason. Magnusson and Osborne observe that modern education's crisis stems from the reduction of knowledge to utility, which impoverishes the intellectual and moral imagination (Magnusson & Osborne, 1990). To reclaim purpose, education must once again affirm knowledge as a public good rather than a private asset. This affirmation requires institutional courage: to defend the space of inquiry against the encroachment of measurement.

8.4 Restoring Openness and the Value of Uncertainty

Competency-based systems assume that effective education requires closure. Every learning process must be defined by explicit outcomes and measurable indicators. Yet genuine education depends on openness—the willingness to dwell with questions that cannot be resolved in advance. Learning is not linear progress toward mastery but an encounter with complexity. The recovery of purpose therefore entails revaluing uncertainty as an essential condition of learning.

Bagnall and Hodge describe this revaluation as an "epistemology of openness," which recognizes that education must include dimensions that cannot be codified (Bagnall & Hodge, 2016). Openness allows education to remain responsive to the unforeseen and the emergent. It resists the temptation to define outcomes exhaustively, preserving the space for interpretation. In this sense, uncertainty is not a defect but a virtue. It keeps education human by reminding us that learning is an unfinished dialogue between self and world.

Preston's existential critique reinforces this view. He warns that when learning is reduced to competence, education "ceases to acknowledge its own mystery" (Preston, 2017). The mystery he describes is not irrational but reflective. It refers to the openness that allows learners to ask why knowledge matters. To reclaim purpose, educational systems must create spaces where

learners and teachers can engage with questions that have no predetermined answers. Such spaces resist the closure of technical rationality and restore education's contemplative dimension.

8.5 The Role of Reflection in Educational Renewal

Reflection is the central act through which education transcends competence. It transforms performance into understanding and experience into meaning. Reflection enables learners to connect what they do with who they are becoming. In CBE systems, reflection is often reinterpreted as "self-assessment," a procedural activity focused on identifying strengths and weaknesses. While such exercises have value, they do not capture the deeper philosophical meaning of reflection as the capacity to examine one's assumptions, values, and purposes.

Waghid's work on *practical reason* offers a framework for this deeper understanding. Practical reason involves deliberation about what is good or right in particular contexts. It requires engagement with ethical and political questions, not merely technical decisions. Education that fosters practical reason cultivates learners who can act with judgment rather than mere competence (Waghid, 2003). Reflection thus becomes a moral practice that anchors knowledge in responsibility.

Institutions can nurture reflective learning by creating pedagogies that privilege dialogue over compliance. The Socratic method, project-based inquiry, and philosophical discussion are examples of practices that engage students in interpretive reasoning. These methods reassert the teacher's role as a guide in meaning-making rather than an assessor of outcomes. They also reframe assessment itself as a conversation about understanding rather than a certification of performance. Through such reorientation, reflection becomes the bridge between competence and purpose.

8.6 Integrating Accountability with Formation

Reclaiming educational purpose does not mean abandoning accountability. Institutions must still ensure that learning achieves recognizable outcomes. The challenge is to balance accountability with formation, efficiency with openness. Preston argues that this balance is possible only if institutions treat measurement as servant rather than master (Preston, 2017). Assessment should illuminate learning, not define it.

Accountability can support formation when it respects the qualitative nature of knowledge. Evaluative practices that include narrative feedback, dialogical evaluation, and portfolio-based assessment can capture dimensions of learning that standardized tests miss. Such methods recognize that competence is meaningful only when situated within a story of growth. They allow for diversity of interpretation while maintaining rigor.

Chappell, Gonczi, and Hager's conception of competence as holistic integration provides a model for this reconciliation. Their framework acknowledges the importance of measurable outcomes but situates them within broader educational values. It invites educators to design learning experiences that cultivate both skill and understanding, both performance and reflection (Chappell, Gonczi, & Hager, 2020). When accountability is redefined in this way, it can coexist with Bildung. It can help sustain a culture of responsibility without erasing the mystery of learning.

8.7 Education as an Ethical Encounter

The deepest justification for reclaiming educational purpose beyond competence lies in the ethical nature of education itself. Education is not a transaction but an encounter between persons. It involves trust, care, and dialogue. These relations cannot be codified into competencies. They arise from the recognition of the learner as a moral subject rather than a unit of performance. When education is reduced to competence, this ethical encounter is obscured.

Bagnall and Hodge remind us that the ethical dimension of education is expressed in its refusal to close meaning (Bagnall & Hodge, 2016). Teachers who engage learners as partners in inquiry affirm the humanity of both. Such encounters restore education's vocation as a space for mutual transformation. The teacher becomes a witness to the learner's unfolding rather than a manager of outcomes. The student becomes a participant in shared understanding rather than a recipient of training.

This ethical vision repositions competence as a by-product of relational engagement rather than its aim. Competence follows from dialogue because it arises from understanding. When learners grasp the meaning of their actions, they act competently as a natural extension of judgment. The restoration of ethical encounter therefore completes the reclamation of purpose.

It binds knowledge, reflection, and responsibility into a coherent whole.

To imagine education beyond competence is to imagine a future in which learning remains accountable yet open, practical yet reflective. The task is not to reject modern reforms but to infuse them with philosophical depth. Systems of accountability can coexist with cultures of inquiry if they acknowledge that not all value is measurable. Institutions can honor transparency without erasing mystery. Preston envisions such a future as a dialogue between measurement and meaning. He writes that "education must become a practice of translation between the quantifiable and the unquantifiable" (Preston, 2017). This translation is the work of teachers, scholars, and policymakers who recognize that education is both a science and an art. The art lies in discerning when to measure and when to let learning breathe. The future of educational purpose depends on recovering the courage to ask questions that systems cannot answer: What is the good life? What is worth knowing? What does it mean to be human? These questions, neglected by CBE's technical rationality, remain the heartbeat of education. To reclaim them is to reclaim the soul of learning.

Reclaiming educational purpose beyond competence is a philosophical and ethical project. It calls for a reorientation of educational thought from performance to understanding, from outcomes to formation, from measurement to meaning. Competence, while valuable, cannot bear the full weight of educational purpose. It must be situated within a larger framework that honors knowledge as formative, reflection as moral, and learning as open-ended. The recovery of Bildung and the reaffirmation of knowledge as a formative good offer pathways to this renewal. By integrating accountability with openness and technique with reflection, education can regain its human vocation. In this vision, competence serves understanding, and understanding serves freedom. The true purpose of education lies not in producing what can be measured but in cultivating what can be imagined.

9. Conclusion

Competency-Based Education emerged as a rational response to legitimate concerns about efficiency, fairness, and employability. Yet its success as a policy framework conceals a deeper philosophical cost: the reduction of education's purpose to performance. The shift from knowledge to competence redefines the aims of learning in ways that mirror the logic of production and management.

The critique advanced here does not deny the value of competence. It calls for a rebalancing between technical proficiency and intellectual formation. Education must remain a space where knowledge is pursued not only for its outcomes but for its contribution to understanding and human flourishing. As Magnusson and Osborne remind us, the challenge is not to abolish competence but to prevent its elevation into an unquestioned ideology (Magnusson & Osborne, 1990).

In an age dominated by metrics and accountability, reclaiming educational purpose requires philosophical vigilance. Education must resist the temptation to define itself solely by what can be measured. Its true purpose lies in nurturing the capacities for judgment, imagination, and meaning that make learning an enduring human endeavor.

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