Definition and Selection of Competencies
In the face of social and economic change, education is undergoing far-reaching modernization, with the focus shifting from input-oriented policies to outcome-oriented ones. This inevitably places questions about the objectives of education on center stage. Tomorrow’s curriculum has become a favorite subject of politicians’ speeches and the core of everyday efforts geared to education reform. Furthermore, the question of assessing and measuring the output of educational processes triggers keen interest all over the globe.

Though literacy has been measured throughout OECD countries, and indeed, the world, we are still far from assessing a comprehensive set of competencies, particularly key competencies. One of the main reasons for this is that there is no general agreement as to precisely what competencies are, and furthermore, which are the ones that warrant being systematically tested. Thus, it is important for an overarching framework to be developed so that key competencies can be defined and selected based on transparent conceptual guidelines and according to accepted premises. The project Definition and Selection of Competencies: Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations (DeSeCo), under the auspices of the OECD, is led by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office in collaboration with the United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Its goal is to conduct research that will help foster the development of the needed conceptual framework.

The contributions published in this volume represent the result of the scholarly work conducted during the first phase of the DeSeCo Project. They may appear rather heterogeneous initially, but a close reading reveals many shared preoccupations and suggestions regarding the task of defining and selecting key competencies most relevant to OECD countries. The discussions also shed light on a variety of related issues, such as what it means to lead a successful and responsible life; what the potential consequences of defining a set of more or less universal key competencies are on society; what assumptions underlie the definition of such a set of competencies; and most importantly perhaps, what does the concept of competence actually entail.

This book is an important step toward the DeSeCo Project’s goals to strengthen the theoretical foundations for defining and selecting key competencies as well as to lay down guidelines for future development work for the assessment of key competencies in an international context. It does this by sounding out perspectives on competencies from different academic disciplines, as well as from various areas of policy and practice.

Because this book is comprised of essays written by different authors, from different backgrounds, it will appeal to a varied readership, including policy-makers, educators,
economists, and politicians. We believe that it provides much food for thought and will enrich the debate about the topic of key competencies.

Finally, we would like to take this opportunity to thank the editors, Dominique Simone Rychen and Laura H. Salganik, for their efforts in pursuing this project and for bringing together these essays, which provide a valuable start toward defining and selecting key competencies.

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Finally, we fondly remember our colleague Franz E. Weinert, who passed away on March 7, 2001, before the release of this book. His contribution to the DeSeCo Project is a seminal one, and we will miss having him as a colleague as we continue our work.
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