Preparing Future Teachers in an Era of Mandated Testing

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As English teachers, many of you have probably read the September 2001 issue of *English Journal* or Alfie Kohn's book, *The Schools Our Children Deserve*, or the fall 2000 edition of *American Educational Researcher*, along with other current publications on mandated, high-stakes testing. All of these articles delve into the problems associated with the current movement in mandated preservice teacher testing. In this article, we begin by discussing several problems with the current state of mandated tests for teachers, followed by a brief overview of a survey of our teacher candidates, and we conclude with recommendations for concerned individuals seeking to take action concerning high-stakes testing vis-à-vis teacher preparation.

Beginning in the late 1980s, researchers sounded a warning of impending teacher shortages across the nation (U.S. Dept. of Education 1). Certain disciplines are clearly more in demand than others. For example, in Minnesota, we are faced with "shortages in industrial technology, foreign languages, science, and math" ("Teacher Advisory Council" 1). As experienced faculty retire and as new teachers leave after only a few years service, the need for English/language arts teachers will persist. As Hoffman and Pearson noted, "Retirements, coupled with teacher attrition rates (nearly 30% quit teaching during their first 3 years), could lead to a tremendous teacher shortage by the year 2010" (28-31). By some estimates, the United States will need an additional 190,000 new teachers by 2006 (Hoffman and Pearson 31). Standardized testing required of these potential licensees could impact the number of teachers we ultimately place in the field.

It is important to note that high stakes tests can, and often do, serve useful purposes in relation to certifying teachers. Do we want to ensure that the teachers we endorse and license have a minimum level of competence in reading, writing, and mathematics? Of course we do. Our main concern, however, stems from a belief--seemingly endorsed and practiced by test makers such as Educational Testing Service (ETS)--that English/language arts teachers should be schooled in a uniform body of knowledge. Content area exams, such as the Praxis II, test preservice teachers on author specific information that may or may not be relevant to one's teaching life. If prospective teachers are well versed in the poetry of William Carlos Williams, but not e.e. cummings, will they be unable to perform their duties in the classroom? Probably not. Our hope is that we prepare new teachers who are well rounded in their content area, and if they teach a text with which they are unfamiliar, they will know how to make meaning of it themselves as well as help their students.

Perhaps at the core of this issue is the question, 'What should preservice English/language arts teachers know, from a content perspective, before they are allowed to teach?' We're not prepared to set forth a given curriculum, but we do advocate a broad knowledge base, including gender fair, multicultural, and adolescent literatures that often do not show up in the current Praxis II exams.

The View from Two Preservice English Education Methods Courses

In the spring of 2001, the Minnesota Board of Teaching (BOT) implemented Praxis II testing for all students seeking licensure beginning in the fall of 2001. These tests consist of a content-specific exam and a general pedagogy exam. During this, the first year of implementation, the tests are considered "hold-harmless," meaning that scores count for naught; however, starting in the fall of 2002, students who score below a minimum level will

be refused licensure, although they can retake the test at a later date.

To better understand how our students at Saint Cloud State University perceive the Praxis tests and how they would perform on a sampling of both content-specific and general pedagogy test questions, we asked them, in separate English/language arts methods classes, to respond to a survey.

Of the students surveyed (n=41), 61% agreed that they generally did well on standardized tests such as the ACT, SAT, and PPST. Furthermore, the same number agreed that the state of Minnesota should require its teachers to pass an exam of basic skills (e.g., PPST, now known as the PRAXIS I exam). However, when asked if they were confident that they would perform well on the general pedagogy exam, only 43% responded affirmatively; that number drops even lower when asked if they are confident about taking the content-specific exam (33%). Their concerns are not unwarranted.

We sampled a total of ten practice questions from Barron's Praxis test preparation book, five from the general pedagogy test and five from the content-specific test. Students correctly answered 64% of the general pedagogy questions and 37% of the content specific questions. Although the number of correct responses to the content specific questions gave us initial cause for concern, upon further consideration and through additional conversations with our students, we determined that it was not due to a lack of familiarity in certain genres (i.e., Early British literature), but rather with the extremely narrow scope of the questions themselves. Like many multiple choice questions, the samples we used offered more than one plausible interpretation. Eighty-one percent (81%) of the survey respondents indicated that answering all questions correctly would not necessarily make one a more effective teacher compared to one who answered only 50% of the questions correctly.

Preservice teachers were also asked to rate six items, one being the most important and six being the least important, in terms of what qualities account for effective teaching. Those items are: commitment to helping children, creativity, enthusiasm for teaching, extensive knowledge of adolescent psychology, friendliness, and literary scholar. We summed the numbers across all respondents for each item, concluding that the lower the numbers, the more important the item. Commitment to helping children and enthusiasm for teaching tied for the most important quality, while literary scholar ranked last.

Though we cannot make claims of high reliability and validity for this somewhat informal survey, it does offer significant insight to our preservice teachers' perceptions of the Praxis exam as well as their beliefs concerning what quality teaching entails. First, unlike some disciplines, English/language arts curricula are fluid and ever-expanding; teachers in middle and high schools would be hard-pressed to articulate a codified body of knowledge with which all students should be familiar. Second, our preservice educators perceive their future positions as teachers in humanistic terms, whereby helping their students become critical and adaptable thinkers is more highly valued than passing along a sanctioned list of texts and ideas—a philosophy in keeping with a constructivist approach to teaching that we advocate. As Luna, Solksen, and Kutz pointed out, "Literacy is not a single body of knowledge, but a varied set of social practices" (277). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, our students support high standards required of all teachers, but how those standards should be measured and enforced lacks certainty.

Having summarized some of the views at our university, we next provide a summative overview of what researchers across the country have identified as problems framing high-stakes testing.

Problem #1: Over-testing

We over-test. A few years ago, our pre-service English/language arts teachers were only required to take Praxis I, a basic reading, writing, and math test. This year, as previously mentioned, the Minnesota Board

of Teaching implemented Praxis II tests, one in the subject area and one in general pedagogy. With what could be considered five standardized tests (reading, writing, math, pedagogy, subject area) we potentially turn our universities into test mills and send out teachers who, in turn, concentrate on preparing for standardized tests in their classes, thereby losing valuable instruction time. As Alfie Kohn states, ". . . the rhetoric of 'standards' is turning schools into giant test-prep centers, effectively closing off intelligent inquiry and undermining enthusiasm for learning and teaching" ("Rescuing Our Schools" 1).

Problem #2: Commercialization

Money seems to override any testing value. Educational Testing Services (ETS) makes large sums of money on these tests. Praxis II costs include a $35.00 registration fee, $80.00 for the pedagogy test, and $70.00 for the subject matter test. Consider our institution, a rather mid-sized state university, which has approximately 300 education undergraduates per year. Multiply the number of students by the costs, and you will see that ETS makes $55,500.00 in one year, at one institution. That does not factor in re-tests, changed test dates (an additional fee), additional reporting fees, or late registration fees. Although this year's testers are "held-harmless" by their scores, they still must pay the fees involved. James Moffett voiced similar concerns at a 1995 Ohio State Department of Education meetings when he said, "It [testing] is political and commercial, not educational."

Problem #3: Teachers' Voices Ignored

Teachers' voices are ignored in the over-zealous testing movement. We served on committees assembled by our Minnesota Board of Teaching. At these meetings, those of us in content areas were invited to provide opinions about the Praxis II test. We critiqued multiple choice tests and the types of questions that went against some of our teaching practices. We critiqued the lack of alignment between the Board of Teaching standards (thirty-one Communication Arts and Literature standards), which are performance-based, while the mandated tests are mostly multiple choice. Nothing happened. In the spring of 2001 the Board of Teaching held open sessions and invited content area professors to share concerns about Praxis II. The Board obviously met some goal by inviting teacher educators to participate in the dialogue surrounding mandated testing, but what followed was silence. In addition to ignoring our voices about the test questions, our concern about the teaching philosophy underlying the tests was disregarded. Many of us who work with future teachers base our teaching and learning on a constructivist approach to learning in which literacy is contextually situated. Application of this philosophy might mean that a valid test would be situated within all aspects of what teachers really do. For example, the National Teacher Certification uses multiple "exams" such as a teaching video with analysis or reflection, an "in-box/out-box" where a teacher is given a note from a parent which requires a written response, or a unit plan with scripted comments on how students learned or problems they encountered.

Problem #4: Everyone Loses

A recent *English Journal* article entitled, "Teaching in the Time of Testing: What Have You Lost?" suggests that we lose a) diversity in teachers because of the culturally biased tests; b) diversity in course work because multicultural literature, critical literacy, young adult literature, and works by women are not well represented in the Praxis II; and c) critical thinkers because "candidates who have had more experience learning how to learn than with rote learning are at a disadvantage" (McCracken and McCracken 34). Meg McSherry Breslin and Stephanie Banchero's recent *Chicago Tribune* report noted that the college sophomore-level exam given to pre-service teachers in Illinois resulted in a 25% failure rate. "The preliminary results revealed some disturbing trends. Of the roughly 1,800 people who took the test in September, only 40 percent of Hispanics, 44 percent of African-Americans and 54 percent of Asians passed it. About 87

percent of whites passed the exam" (5 November 2001). This is a disturbing statement about the future of minority teachers lost to mandated, high-stakes testing.

Problem #5: The Test Itself

As noted earlier, Praxis tests use many multiple choice questions that seem based on rote learning. This is not the way many pedagogy courses are taught, nor is memorization for a test something we want to reinforce in our future English/language arts teachers. This past summer, at a University of Minnesota conference on mandated testing, the Assistant Director of Teaching and Instructional Strategies for the Minneapolis school system, William Sommers, used the following example to illustrate potential problems with multiple choice test questions:

Which one doesn't fit?

Horse

Cow

Bed

Chicken

Sommers pointed out that test takers who do well on this sort of multiple choice test are actually superficial thinkers who would typically answer C (because it is the only inanimate object). However, a more divergent thinker might answer B because the word "cow" has no "e" in it, or D because the chicken is the only two-legged item on the list. In a similar vein, "the Praxis II test gives a quiz-show's sense of some discrete items from a college course of study" (McCracken and McCracken 32). In the Praxis subject specific exam for English, students are tested mostly on authors, titles, and their ability to recognize literary terminology, meter, or who wrote what. A more meaningful test would measure a preservice candidate's ability to interpret a literary passage, or at the very least, assess if she can write a coherent, sustained critique.

Problem #6: The Tests are Political

Nearly every politician in the last election voiced an opinion on education. These opinions most often focused on testing for accountability purposes. Most knew little about the construction of tests, the validity of tests, or the cultural biases involved. As *English Journal* editor Virginia Monseau states, "Like so many 'cures' for the maladies ailing our schools, testing has become a misguided attempt by misinformed and sometimes ignorant legislators and pseudo-educators to address only the manifestation of problems they can't begin to understand " (14). On the one hand, Minnesota faces a teacher shortage; on the other hand, politicians want to promote more tests and add more hurdles for future teachers. The North Central Regional Laboratory (NCREL) which reports on educational issues and statistics, recently wrote, "Minnesota is facing a clash between proponents of back-to-basics and standards. The winner will be determined by which political party wins the next state election" (http://www.ncrel.org/policy/network/fines/tac06_00.htm).

Problem #7: Tests Offer No Basis for Teaching Ability

"In addition to these [aforementioned] problems, we seem to have forgotten that previous research finds no relation between test scores and successful teaching" (McCracken and McCracken 33). This piece of information underlies all recent articles and objections to the mandated high-stakes testing. Karen Hartke of FairTest points to some of these implications:

> Depending on high-stakes tests to make final judgments about education is a deeply flawed approach. For instance, too much emphasis on [testing] creates distortions, such as teaching to the test at the expense of providing a well-rounded curriculum. These practices can raise test scores without resulting in better quality education. (1)

As we conclude our remarks on some problems associated with high-stakes, standardized testing, we want to make it known that testing in and of itself is not always negative. Tests can provide useful information for a variety of purposes. However, even a cursory inspection of the problems we just discussed above underscores the need for a sustained, open dialogue before widespread and unexamined acceptance of the Praxis exams. In

the next section, we conclude our paper with recommendations for promoting such a dialogue.

Recommendations

- Form a coalition with other university subject area and general education faculty to discus testingconcerns
- Unite with members of the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English for a multi-level dialogueon testing issues
- Contact the Minnesota Board of Teaching with concerns and desired actions
- Educate legislators with rationales and explanations (At the national level, Senator Paul Wellstone is aware of some testing pitfalls and limitations)
- Share sample Praxis tests with colleagues to get a sense of what your preservice teachers are expected to know
- Discuss testing issues with future English/language arts teachers
- Visit web sites such as: alfiekohn.com, fairtest.org, ncte.org, nomoretests.com (student site)
- Write a letter to the editor of a local paper expressing your views
- Read the American Education Research Association's (AERA) Position Statement on High-Stakes Testing to acquaint yourself with test cautions, test use and interpretation.

Consider, for accreditation purposes, the National Council of Accreditation for Teacher Education (NCATE) guidelines, which suggest multiple assessment measures for preservice candidates, rather than allowing standardized tests to determine abilities.

Most importantly, we urge educators at all levels to question the purposes underlying high stakes testing. To reiterate, we do not condemn all testing procedures; we simply wonder if tests such as the Praxis II really do determine who will be a good teacher. Furthermore, we question the underlying assumption of Praxis tests that knowledge should be delivered and memorized rather than constructed and applied. We question the fragmented, decontextualized nature of the English/language arts content questions.

As we prepare future teachers in an era of mandated testing, we need to be mindful of the larger issues involving these tests. If our universities become testing mills, if we eliminate students of color from our teacher preparation programs, if we ignore the political nature of testing, or if we teach only to the test, we do a disservice to future educators.

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