Re: Teacher licensure exams

From: Misty Sato, Associate Professor, University of Minnesota

7 October 2015

Why do we have a requirement for examinations in “basic skills” of reading, writing, and mathematics for teachers in Minnesota? The basic answer to this question is that as a society we hold a belief that all teachers should have fundamental academic skills. This is a reasonable belief given the nature of the professional work of teachers and the high expectations we want to hold for entry into the profession of teaching. In some ways, it’s just common sense that teachers should know the basics of reading, writing, and mathematics. If we accept this common sense belief, then the next question we must wrestle with is how do we ensure that all teachers have these fundamental academic skills?

Some education policy reform groups would suggest that if we do not have a test in place, we do not expect our teachers to have fundamental academic skills. They even go so far as to give states and programs grades based on whether or not these tests are required in policy. Thus, we follow up on our belief by putting what seems like a simple and benign requirement in place – a set of tests—and if we don’t have an accountability mechanism in place, it looks like we don’t care about fundamental academic skills.

There is also mythology around teaching in the United States that suggests that the people attracted to becoming teachers are those who are not in the top ranks of academic performance in their colleges and universities. So, the policy mechanism for improving the academic ranks of teacher candidates is to use tests to filter or screen out people who are not strong academic performers based on a measure that is deemed to be “objective.” Some even argue that by expecting academic talent, we will recruit more academically talented people into teaching.

There are several problems with all of these arguments. First, they are based primarily on beliefs and what might seem like common sense. There is very little research evidence that teacher testing on basic skills has any predictive value for the future performance of teachers and the students. Research has shown some weak correlations between the teachers’ subject matter knowledge and verbal skills and student achievement of teachers once they begin teaching. This tends to hold up in the area of mathematics, but then mathematics is one of the few content areas in which this kind of research has been conducted. Admittedly, we would not appreciate having teachers in our classrooms who could not write coherently, read critically, or do basic mathematics calculations. But the testing of these skills does not prove to be a strong determinant of the quality of the teacher once they are hired. And there is almost no research that shows that the test scores are used to determine who gets hired within a school district. This would be an interesting follow-up to the discussion of why we need teacher tests for licensure—do the hiring bodies make decisions based on these results? If not, then very little information is actually being gleaned from an expensive and time consuming process of testing in these areas.

For policy reform groups who insist on having teacher testing in place for licensure, the argument tends to rely on the idea that we need the “best and the brightest” in our classrooms and the most logical policy lever is to have a high testing bar to ensure “smartness” among our teachers. What these groups do not attend to is that most hiring decisions, once the license is granted to a candidate, are based not on academic performance, but on “soft skills,” dispositions, attitudes, “fit in the school culture,” and interpersonal performances. We currently have no way of systematically supporting teacher candidates in these areas, much less of having assessments that would help determine the nature and quality of these kinds of relational characteristics. Even when reform groups point to nations such as Finland and Singapore to argue that they have high academic standards for the people they admit to teacher education programs, they ignore the fact that both of these nations also have very explicit and carefully designed processes for screening and developing teacher dispositions at the point of entry and exit from teacher preparation programs (not to mention that the rest of the policy system in these countries is also set up to support teacher development across their entire career).

Finally, the arguments for teacher testing can be challenged based on how these test filters affect our teaching population. Some studies have shown that testing requirements actually deter people from entering teacher preparation programs and do not increase the academic talent within the population. And a strong body of research shows that teacher candidates of color and those whose first language is not English perform disproportionately lower on tests of basic skills than their white counterparts and are thus systematically kept out of the teaching profession. We have witnessed this in Minnesota over the past several years.

Given these arguments, we should step back and really consider what options we have that would speak to our belief that teachers should have fundamental academic skills but would help us to not deter people from entering teaching (at a time when we need more teacher candidates to fill future classrooms) and does not systematically remove teacher candidates of color from the teaching pool (at a time that all corners of the education system are calling for diversifying our teaching force)? The follow options would require eliminating the requirement of “examinations” as written in current rule and find alternative ways to ensure that fundamental academic skills are part of the teacher candidates’ preparation and repertoire.

* We could look at entry level GPAs (high school for undergraduate programs and college for graduate programs). GPA is a measure that the candidates admitted into programs have met the academic standards of the high school from which they graduate. These academic standards would include reading and writing. By screening at the point of entry, however, we may eliminate some people from the potential teaching pool who do not perform at high levels academically but may still prove to be effective at working with P-12 students. We might also face difficulty in having differing criteria for entry into undergraduate programs and graduate programs and we would have to determine if high school level academic skills is what we want as a minimum entry into teaching for some candidates.
* Another option would be to look at the overall performance of the teacher candidate in their bachelor’s degree program as an indication of their acquisition and performance of fundamental academic skills. Given that all teachers in Minnesota must hold at least a bachelors’ degree (a four year post-secondary degree), it stands to reason that they have successfully completed an academic program built upon fundamental academic knowledge and skills. It would be hard to argue that someone who holds a bachelors’ degree has not demonstrated that they have the fundamental skills of reading, writing, and basic mathematics.
* A third option would be to continue ensuring subject matter content knowledge (one of the few predictors of future teacher performance and student achievement) through testing and allow the preparation programs to ensure that reading and writing have been mastered. Each program in the state must demonstrate that its candidates have met standards of performance in the area of “communication.” This standard already requires that programs have learning and assessment opportunities for candidates in the following areas:

Subp. 7. Standard 6, communication. A teacher must be able to use knowledge of effective verbal, nonverbal, and media communication techniques to foster active inquiry, collaboration, and supportive interaction in the classroom. The teacher must:

A. understand communication theory, language development, and the role of language in learning;

B. understand how cultural and gender differences can affect communication in the classroom;

C. understand the importance of nonverbal as well as verbal communication;

D. know effective verbal, nonverbal, and media communication techniques;

E. understand the power of language for fostering self-expression, identity development, and learning;

F. use effective listening techniques;

G. foster sensitive communication by and among all students in the class;

H. use effective communication strategies in conveying ideas and information and in asking questions;

I. support and expand learner expression in speaking, writing, and other media;

J. know how to ask questions and stimulate discussion in different ways for particular purposes, including probing for learner understanding, helping students articulate their ideas and thinking processes, promoting productive risk-taking and problem-solving, facilitating factual recall, encouraging convergent and divergent thinking, stimulating curiosity, and helping students to question; and

K. use a variety of media communication tools, including audiovisual aids and computers, including educational technology, to enrich learning opportunities.

* Finally, we could also consider using other tests as proxies for academic skills—SAT, GRE, and ACT tests could be options for programs if the Board of Teaching would choose to approve them as a measure of academic skills as defined in rule. Using these tests, however, does not address issues of how these tests give us any additional assurance that the candidates who will be screened out because of these tests would not otherwise have been effective teachers. We will continue to be using a mechanism to address our belief but that is not supported by research evidence that this bar for entry into teaching is a useful bar to have in place.

If we continue down the path of establishing a new standardized test, it will be very important to decide where the difficulty level of the test is set and to work with preparation programs on when their candidates should ideally take the test. For programs that work with undergraduates, candidates will need to have a fair chance of passing the test before they graduate with a bachelors’ degree. For programs at the graduate level, their candidates will have already completed a bachelors’ degree, but candidates returning to graduate school after careers in related fields will need to have a fair chance of passing the tests after being away from “academic testing.” So test difficulty level is a key factor to consider across these varying populations.

Currently, the law reads that teacher candidates must pass the basic skills exam to be awarded a license, not to enter a preparation program. There has been legislative interest in the past to shift the requirement from the point of receiving the license to the point of entering preparation. The strong argument against moving the licensure exams to entry into professional program is that a filter at the entry point will screen out even more people who would potentially thrive as classroom teachers but who never get the opportunity to develop the necessary skills through a preparation program. Since these exams have historically had adverse effects on teacher candidates of color, requiring exams at the point of entry into preparation programs in all likelihood will decrease the diversity of our teacher candidate population.

Setting expectations for “passing” a standardize form of a test are locally determined for each test. The state establishes the content standards to which the test questions are written, content panels are assembled to assign difficulty levels to individual test questions, a cohort of test takers who represent your test-taking population takes the test, an expert panel is assembled and they review the performance of the pilot cohort and a cut-score is set using the mean and standard deviation of performance of the pilot cohort. Thus, the passing score is ultimately negotiated by the expert panel. It is a surprisingly subjective process and one that often falls prey to statistical misconceptions that the expert panel holds. Typically, on teacher exams, first time pass rates are 70% or above. This does not mean, however, that the passing score is 70% since these tests are criterion referenced and scaled to reflect the question difficulty and using a “percentage correct” model is not appropriate.

Every state has its own set of exams and its own passing standard. One of the arguments for using a nationally available performance assessment like the edTPA is to provide a common assessment for teacher performance that gives a clearer benchmark assessment for readiness to teach that we can hold in common across the nation. States can choose to adopt this assessment. We should maybe begin to think about how the edTPA fits within the teacher assessment framework for Minnesota.