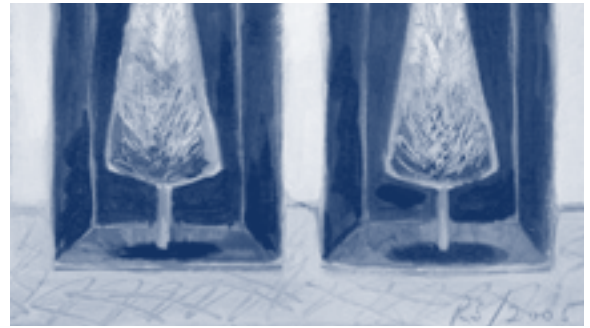


Creating Flexibility in Teacher-Certification Policy to Ensure Quality and Equity

by Flynn Ross



Like many states Maine has requirements and standards aimed at having “well-qualified” teachers. While few dispute the need for such standards, Flynn Ross brings attention to one case in Portland where use of a standardized exam to certify new teachers was preventing well-qualified—but culturally and linguistically diverse—teachers from becoming certified. She chronicles the successful attempts of one group to petition the Maine State Board of Education to allow greater flexibility in the testing standards. In doing so, she points to a larger truth that well-intentioned policy goals may seek to achieve a greater good, but may at the same time have unintended consequences. 

It is well recognized that teachers make a significant difference in students' learning, achievement, and success. Ideally, a force of high-quality teachers would include well-educated, intelligent, caring, committed individuals who are representative of the wide variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds found in the student population. Setting policy to ensure that every child has an excellent teacher, however, is a complicated endeavor, as the characteristics of excellent teachers elude simplistic standardized objective measurement. Crafting fair and equitable policies that will allow Maine to recruit and to retain a diverse teaching force is a challenge and requires ongoing scrutiny, revision, and reassessment. This article reports on one element of the initial teacher-certification process, the Praxis I examination, and the need to have flexibility in the use of this imperfect measurement.

Most policies are crafted with the best of intentions, but the ways in which these policies affect individuals and classes of people often is not discovered until after the policies are implemented. In an era of increasing bureaucratization and standardization in accountability for K-12 schools and institutions of higher education, we need to bring to light the benefits and consequences of education policies on groups of individuals who are traditionally underserved by the educational system at large and who may not have experienced the benefits of certified and highly qualified teachers.

INITIAL TEACHER-CERTIFICATION POLICY

In the state of Maine, initial teacher-certification policy is set by the State Board of Education, after public input, and must be ratified by the state congressional Education Committee. Chapter 115—Certification, Authorization, and Approval of Educational Personnel¹ governs teacher certification of all kinds. The policies governing initial teacher certification were created with the intent of ensuring that every child is taught by a well-qualified teacher. Similar to most other states, Maine's policies require that teachers hold a bachelor's degree, pass a standardized exam of basic skills, the Praxis I, and meet some definition of student teaching and professional pedagogical knowl-

edge. Members of the State Board of Education wanted to maintain a high level of quality of teachers and, therefore, set the Praxis I cut scores of 176 for the reading section, 175 for the writing section, and 175 for the math section of the exam, which are among the highest scores required in the nation.

In comparison, the state of Vermont Board of Education approved policies that reflected a commitment to excellence and flexibility. The state allowed teacher candidates the choice of three options. Praxis I cut scores were set at 177 for reading, 174 for writing, and 175 for math, or a composite score of 526, or a choice of minimum scores set on the Graduate Record Exam (GRE), Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), or American College Testing (ACT) exam. Connecticut had a similar policy with cut scores of 172 for reading, 171 for writing, and 171 for math or a combination of scores on the SAT, ACT, and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). New Hampshire allows a composite score of 518.² States such as Massachusetts and California have developed their own exams for teachers. Other states have recognized the need for flexibility in the policy for licensing teachers in part because they recognize that standardized tests are an imperfect measurement and have not proven to be directly related to teaching performance.

Both proponents and opponents of teacher testing point out that a passing score is not a guarantee of high quality teaching; nor does failing the tests assure ineffective teaching... [however]...in most instances, fewer than 50% of African Americans pass teacher tests. This pattern prevails across time, location, and types of tests. Overall, more teacher candi-

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dates of color pass Praxis II subject matter content tests than Praxis I basic skills tests (Gay et al. 2003: 4).

Practice shows that is difficult, if not impossible, to create a set of requirements that ensure, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that every individual who holds a teaching credential will be an excellent teacher. However, research shows that some of the requirements set forth by policy for licensing teachers are systematically discriminating against specific classes of people.

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CULTURAL DIVERSITY OF TEACHERS NATIONALLY

Recently, a coalition of several organizations involved in teacher preparation and support issued a “call to action” to examine the role of cultural competency in student achievement, student and teacher demographics, and the recruitment and retention of culturally and linguistically diverse teachers.

Although teacher quality has been accepted and internalized as a mantra for school reform, the imperative for diversity is often marginalized rather than accepted as central to the quality equation in teaching (p.3)... increasing the percentage of teachers of color in the workforce is connected directly to closing the achievement gap of students (National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force 2004: 6).

The National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force commissioned three reports to outline the current state of cultural competence in the classroom (Gay et. al. 2003), efforts taken by states to recruit and support teacher candidates of color

(Education Commission of the States 2003a, 2003b), and the implications for student achievement.

That minority teacher candidates struggle with standardized tests is well documented (Heger and Engelhart 1991; Hood and Parker 1989; Memory et al. 2003). In his article, “Poor Test Scores Bar Many Minority Students from Teacher Training,” Fields (1988) found that test results from 19 states showed nearly 38,000 minority teacher candidates failed. Many experts have argued for a variety of strategies to address this marginalization, such as involving minority groups in the construction and review of standardized tests (Quoicho and Rios 2000). Others have called for a paradigm shift in the way that standardized tests are developed, reviewed, and account for language as a source of measurement error in response to English language learners (ELL) test takers (Solano-Flores and Trumbull 2003).

The Educational Testing Services (ETS), which produces the Praxis I exam, states in their document *ETS Standards for Quality and Fairness*, “If relevant factors change, reassess the evidence that the product or service meets its intended purpose(s) for the intended populations(s), and gather new evidence as necessary. Relevant factors include...changes in the characteristics of the user population” (ETS 2002: 12).

When the scores for Praxis I were established for the state of Maine, they were not normed on a group that represented persons changing careers in mid-life, persons who learned English later in life, persons with special needs, or persons of Native American heritage. All of these represent “changes in the characteristics of the user population” and call for re-norming to meet the criteria for quality and fairness.

The Educational Testing Service (2002: 21) further states: “Consider the needs of nonnative speakers of English in the development and use of projects or services. For assessments, reduce threats to validity that may arise from language differences.” Assessing and validating the suitability of a test for use with a linguistically diverse population is a complex technical process. Many states have addressed this issue for their teaching candidates from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds by allowing the use of alternative tests such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

LOCAL CONTEXT

In Maine, the Portland public schools educate 7,500 students in grades K-12. Twenty-five percent of these students are identified as culturally or linguistically diverse. In contrast, only five of the 900 full-time teachers are identified as culturally or linguistically diverse, less than 1%. This difference between student and teacher demographics is more extreme than national statistics, where 39% of students are people of color (NCES 2004) and 8% of teachers are non-white (NCES 2002). Unique to the Portland public schools is that one-tenth of the student population is identified as having limited English proficiency (LEP), with 1,100 students from more than 70 nations speaking more than 54 different native languages. Issues around the importance of cultural congruence in student achievement are amplified even further in this context.

NEWCOMER EXTENDED TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM

The Newcomer Extended Teacher Education Program (Newcomer ETEP) was designed specifically in response to this community's needs. Developed through a school and university partnership in 1999, the program currently is funded through a Federal Title III National Professional Development Grant awarded to the Multicultural Education Programs at the University of Southern Maine.³ The funding provides tuition, books, tutoring for Praxis I, cohort support, and program coordination among the University of Southern Maine, Portland Public Schools, and the Newcomer ETEP students.

The Newcomer ETEP program is a graduate-level teacher-certification program designed for recent immigrants and refugees, many of whom were teachers in their home nations (Ross 2001, 2004, 2005). A variation of the nationally recognized Extended Teacher Education Program, the Newcomer ETEP program provides for several culturally responsive adaptations. These modifications include adapting the program from nine months to two years to allow greater time for familiarization with the school system in the United States and for additional language development, particularly in acquiring the professional language of

progressive education in English.

The high Praxis I cut scores have had a tremendous impact on members of the Newcomer ETEP program. Sixteen out of 17 of the Newcomer ETEP participants have struggled to meet the policy's new demands. Many have had extensive tutoring and preparation and still struggle to pass the exam. Members of the Newcomer ETEP program include former engineers, individuals who have completed graduate studies in animal sciences and chemistry, individuals who are published in three different languages, and individuals who demonstrate a lifelong commitment to children and education. These are individuals who exceed the definition of "highly qualified teachers" in many ways, but who are victims of a well-documented trend of "high rates of failure across ethnic groups of color" (Gay et al. 2003: 4).

With respect to the Newcomer ETEP program, six of the seven recent graduates completed all the requirements for teacher certification except for receiving passing scores on Praxis I. This meant that they had to look for jobs while holding a conditional teacher certification as opposed to a provisional certification, which in many cases made them ineligible for job positions.

In 2003, in compliance with the new state policy, students admitted to the ETEP program needed to have passed the Praxis I exams, as opposed to the previous policy where students had to pass the exam in order to graduate from the program. This meant that three of the four first-year participants were ineligible to continue in the program and had to delay their graduate-level internship while they retook Praxis I. This pattern repeated itself in 2004, when again three of the four first-year participants were ineligible to continue in the program solely because of their Praxis I scores. Over the course of five years, this single policy change systematically excluded a specific class of teacher candidates.

PROCESS OF PROPOSING CHANGE

The Newcomer program is governed by a steering committee made up of the director of multicultural education programs, the Newcomer program coordinator, the assistant to the superintendent for multicultural affairs from Portland public schools, the

state-level coordinator for English language learners, faculty in teacher education and English as a second language from the University of Southern Maine, and employees from the multilingual office of the Portland public school district. Our group met monthly to discuss program design, policy, and operations and to solve problems. We were consistently frustrated by the limitations that Praxis I placed on Newcomer students and graduates.

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In May of 2004 at one of the monthly meetings, we discussed what it would take to change the policy. The gravity of the situation was emphasized when we learned that one of the program's graduates would lose her classroom teaching job after two years of successful job performance based solely on two points on the Praxis I exam. We discussed the number of teaching candidates affected and the impact it was having. The state-level coordinator for ELL noted that the Native American population was facing similar challenges in trying to support Native Americans in their effort to become certified teachers for public and reservation schools. Members of the steering committee who had lived and worked in other states noted that other states had much larger populations of immigrants and refugees and yet had a more diverse teaching population than Maine. We resolved to ask the State Board of Education to hear the case and decided to bring with us a list of case studies outlining the impacts of the policy, a list of comparisons of state policies regarding standardized tests and initial teacher certification, and a proposal of possible alternatives, including a more flexible composite score for Praxis I.

The intention of the proposal to the State Board of Education was to demonstrate that while we felt it was important to keep high standards, we did not want to eliminate from the pool of potential teachers individuals who had demonstrated high-quality teaching, excellent content knowledge, and who brought the additional strengths of biculturalism and a broad world perspective to enrich the classroom. The goal was to help to create policy that would allow flexibility as it created access. What we saw over five years with a sample of 17 candidates was that individuals who were otherwise strong teaching candidates were not even allowed to participate in the applicant pool because of their scores on the Praxis I exam, which often were just one or two points below the state's cut scores.

Everyone at the presentation was clear that we did not want to lower the state's high standards to allow minorities to enter the teaching profession. We felt that such a perception would not serve anyone and could fuel a backlash of public opinion that might further exclude individuals from the profession. Rather, our group wanted to educate policymakers and to expand the definition of highly qualified teachers, while removing barriers that were not directly correlated with teaching quality.

The steering committee's proposal to the State Board of Education read in part:

We, the members of the Multicultural Education Programs Steering Committee, are asking for a review of the Praxis I requirement for teacher certification in light of the continuing change in demographics of teachers and students in the state of Maine. These changes include 3,200 English Language Learners, covering 75 languages enrolled in approximately 50% of Maine's schools. The issue of requirements for teacher certification not only impacts teachers and teacher candidates who are non-native English speakers, but also affects individuals with special needs and persons of Native American heritage.

In ensuring high-quality teachers for all students, we would like you to consider

other options to determine high-quality teachers without putting up barriers for teachers and prospective teachers who have learning disabilities or who come from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

During the question session, members of the board asked how the state can ensure that teachers have strong communication skills so students are able to understand them and that teachers model the correct use of language as they teach students. Members of the board asked questions about what other nations and other states did to address these issues. The essential question in the debate was how to efficiently and equitably ensure that teachers are well prepared to teach. Our presentation raised the issue of equity in a way that the State Board of Education had never before considered. At the end of the presentation, the chair of the board expressed a feeling of urgency concerning the issues presented and stated that the board would address the issues expediently over the summer.

CHANGES APPROVED

After several small workgroup sessions and additional background research, the subcommittee made the recommendation to the full State Board of Education⁴ that the cut scores for Praxis I be amended to read, "For teachers requiring a Bachelors Degree, cut scores of Reading 176, Writing 175 and Math 175 are required. A composite score of 526 must be achieved, with individual test scores varying no more than 3 points lower than the above scores." After a public hearing and time for discussion, the motion was approved on December 15, 2004. The policy changes did not take effect until late spring of 2005. An emergency ruling was requested for the individuals who would lose their jobs under the old policy, but who were eligible for certification under the revised policy.

CONCLUSION

Teaching, like most professions, is a combination of knowledge, skill, and technique as well as the art of human relations. Unlike many other professions,

however, policies that regulate the teaching profession are set by public legislators, who are laypersons in the field of education. Other professions, such as medicine and law, have professional boards that set policy regarding minimum competencies and entry requirements for the profession. Setting policy for teaching and education is a sophisticated, complex endeavor because of the large number of differences in the students in our schools. Our public legislators need informed input regarding the impacts of the decisions they make.

The intentions behind the legislation to ensure that every child has a highly qualified teacher are to be commended; however, many different perspectives should be included in the process that turns definitions into regulations and standards. The recent national call to action put forth in the Assessment of Diversity in America's Teaching Force asserts that "diversity and cultural competence are key factors in improving the quality of America's teaching force," and that "issues of teacher diversity and cultural competence must be infused into state and national education policy agendas" (NCDTF 2004: 9)

In the example from Portland presented here, the group proposing to change state policy was able to present a broad perspective regarding teaching, including that of teachers, administrators, higher education, local and state representatives, teachers' union, and specialists in language acquisition and ESL. Case studies of individuals affected by the policy and comparative examples of policy across a variety of states strengthened the presentation.

While we cannot ensure that every child is taught each year by a teacher from his or her community, we hope that every child at some point in 12 years of schooling encounters a professional in the schools

Our group wanted to educate policy-makers and to expand the definition of highly qualified teachers, while removing barriers that were not directly correlated with teaching quality.



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who reflects his or her cultural and linguistic community. Perhaps equally importantly, having a diverse group of teachers can enrich the school experience for all children, making them better prepared to participate in our global community. Teaching, which is at its core for the “public good,” must reflect all of the voices of our growingly diverse public (Sleeter 2001). 🐟

ENDNOTES

1. The text of Chapter 115—Certification, Authorization, and Approval of Educational Personnel is available on the Maine state government Web site: <http://www.maine.gov/sos/cec/rules/05/chaps05.htm>
2. More information about the Praxis I test scores required by the states discussed in this paragraph can be found on the following Web sites <http://www.state.vt.us/educ/>; <http://www.ed.state.nh.us/education/doe/organization/programsupport/Certification/PraxisInfo.htm>; http://www.state.ct.us/sde/dtl/cert/prax0102/prax-chrt_pr1.htm; and http://www.state.ct.us/sde/dtl/cert/certform/ed_192.pdf
3. More information on the Newcomer Extended Teacher Education Program and the Extended Teacher Education Program is available on the following Web sites: <http://www.usm.maine.edu/cehd/Multicultural-education-programs/> and <http://www.usm.maine.edu/cehd/etep>
4. The full text of the recommendations is available at the following Web site: http://www.state.me.us/education/sb/Hompages/documents/PraxisI121504Exhibit_000.doc

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