Taking Hope Out of Teaching

At a time when states are being pressured to put “highly qualified teachers” in their classrooms, Mr. Wakefield draws attention to a factor that is blocking some of the most promising teacher candidates from entering the profession.

HOPE POSTED A composite score of 790 on the SAT. Because of her low score, most teacher preparation programs in Georgia, Hope’s home state, considered her an unlikely candidate for the teaching profession. To be officially accepted into a teacher preparation program and begin student teaching, she needed to reach state cut scores on Praxis I from ETS. On her first attempt, Hope passed the math and writing tests but not the reading test. She retook the reading test four times, each time missing Georgia’s cut score by 5 to 7 points. As her junior year in college drew to a close, student teaching and state certification appeared to be impossible.

POSTER CHILD FOR DETERMINATION

Hope has wanted to be an elementary teacher since childhood. She imagined herself as a teacher while playing “Little House on the Prairie.” An animated, highly determined student, she has a record of achievements that would make any parent proud. Those who know and work with her agree that Hope is passionate and has an obvious aptitude for teaching.

DARA WAKEFIELD is a professor of curriculum and instruction at Berry College, Mount Berry, Ga.
During high school Hope missed just two of 543 days of school and graduated in the top third of her class, with an overall grade-point average (GPA) of 3.8 and a 92.3% average on assignments. Hope participated in the National Honor Society, the Community Leadership Club, student council, volunteer teaching, Junior Beta Club, varsity cheerleading, track, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and chorus. She was also a member of her school’s homecoming court, tutored remedial students in math, and logged 288 hours of community service. Hope was president of her class during her junior and senior years and amassed an array of awards that would warm any college admissions officer’s heart.

As Hope tells it, she and her two older siblings grew up in a climate of “high expectations and support.” Her social skills are strong, so she enjoys working with others, and they enjoy working with her. When Hope was in third grade, she and her parents realized that reading was going to be a problem. Her parents found a tutor, and she began reading with her mother, swapping pages as each read aloud. Hope found that she could manage as well as or better than most of her peers, although schoolwork took her longer. Hope willingly committed the time and effort needed to succeed.

Community service is important to Hope. She believes everyone has a responsibility to give something back to society. As a volunteer teacher during her junior and senior years in high school, Hope spent 90 minutes each day helping in kindergarten and third-grade classrooms. During summers she helped with vacation Bible school and other children’s activities at her church. “I want to make a difference in young children’s lives and leave the world better than I found it,” she says.

Testing was never Hope’s strong suit, but she learned that here, too, diligence and determination paid off. She performed adequately on achievement tests and passed her high school graduation exams. Although her grades qualified her for Georgia’s HOPE scholarship program, Hope’s SAT score was not high enough for admission to the college of her choice. In her typical, determined fashion, she attended a local community college for a year and earned a commendable college GPA that qualified her for admission to the school she originally wished to attend. At the end of her successful year at the community college, she transferred and declared herself an education major.

Through hard work and determination Hope successfully completed her sophomore and junior years in a top-ranked, nationally accredited early childhood education program. Her institutional GPA at the end of her junior year was a respectable 3.33. A 21-year-old ball of enthusiasm, Hope completed all assignments in a timely manner, followed directions carefully, and sought peer and professional feedback on her practice as a teacher. Her practicum work in diverse inner-city and rural schools indicated that she was likely to be a superior primary-grades teacher.

In spite of her successes, Hope was told at the end of her junior year that she would not be allowed to student teach until she had passed the reading portion of Praxis I, the screening test Georgia required. Hope knew what the problem was: she was a slow reader. Generally, she compensated by taking the extra time needed to complete academic tasks, but this approach was not permitted on a timed test. “The only thing standing between teaching and me is a stopwatch,” Hope stated in the summer of 2004.

**POSTER CHILD FOR FALSE REJECTION**

Hope took the reading test repeatedly, only to find she was still 5 to 7 points short of the cut score. The standard error of measurement for her particular test was 3 points. While numerous authentic assessments indicated clearly that she was an above-average candidate, none of them were recognized by her college’s certification committee or by the state certification agency. The door to the teaching profession seemed to be closing. The state was desperately seeking “highly qualified” teachers, but Hope was being rejected. The very tests designed to ensure teachers’ qualifications appeared to be disqualifying a very promising candidate.

Hope’s predicament suggested to me that entry-level tests for teachers might be rejecting other candidates who had learned to compensate effectively for undocumented disabilities or socioeconomic hardships by dint of determination and commitment. Through informal surveys conducted during presentations at the Georgia Association of Teacher Education in Brasstown, Georgia, in 2004 and at the Association of Independent Liberal Arts Colleges of
Teacher Education in Washington, D.C., in 2005, I found that similar cases were not uncommon. For example, of the 28 teacher preparation program representatives I surveyed in Georgia, 26 shared one or more cases of false rejections on entry-level screening tests. All knew candidates who were likely to become competent teachers if alternative assessments were available. While the total number of such false rejections is not known, even one case is tragic for the promising teacher candidate who is rejected.

SCREENING PRESERVICE TEACHER CANDIDATES

Title II of the Higher Education Act requires annual reports on the quality of teacher preparation in the various states. Unfortunately, many states have interpreted this as a demand for quantitative data. And confusion about the relative importance of quality and quantity may indeed be at the heart of the current dilemma. How can a complex variety of academic, social, and ethical teacher qualities be accurately quantified to yield a foolproof statistic? One might show how fundamentally flawed such logic is by trying to develop a timed, multiple-choice test to screen “highly qualified” mates or friends. A “future relationship assessment” might be developed that could be helpful, but who would make final decisions based upon such a test?

Both the Higher Education Act and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) allow states to design or select their assessments for screening candidates and certifying or licensing teachers. The primary stipulation is that states must provide quality assurances in order to receive federal funding and avoid fines.

Faced with the necessity of submitting data on teacher candidates and teacher preparation in general to the U.S. Department of Education and Congress, a majority of the states have taken the data path of least resistance: high-stakes exams. “Quality” candidates are those who meet state cut scores on tests of basic academic skills. Usually, these tests are timed, so that not only must candidates “bubble in” circles, fill in blanks, and write paragraphs, they must do so quickly.

Praxis I, adopted by 28 states as well as Guam, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the U.S. Department of Defense, is the most widely used basic-skills test series for screening teacher candidates in the United States. The academic-skills assessment is offered in both paper-based and computer-based formats, and both formats cover similar content and measure reading, mathematics, and writing. Approximately 103,000 teacher candidates attempted Praxis I during the 2004-05 school year at an estimated cost of $18.1 million. The tests are timed, so candidates must work at or above a set pace if they are to be successful. This poses a significant problem for someone like Hope. Some states, including Georgia, have SAT cut score exemptions, but this offers no solace to someone like Hope, for the SAT is a timed test as well.

HOPE PERSEVERES

During the summer of 2004, after four attempts at Praxis I, Hope and her parents engaged the services of a certified educational psychologist. Sixteen psychological tests later, Hope was officially identified as “learning disabled.” The psychologist reported that Hope “demonstrated superior verbal fluency, but had difficulty retrieving names of specific objects.” The report further highlighted indications of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and dyslexia (weaknesses in word retrieval, rapid naming, and phonological memory). After receiving her diagnosis, Hope applied for a time extension for her fifth attempt at Praxis I, and her request was approved.

While Hope was seeking her time extension, one of her professors, who had a history of similar academic disabilities, gathered her school records and related data and submitted them to the Georgia Professional Standards Commission (GAPSC) for consideration. As Hope was being tested for learning disabilities, her professor sought a waiver of the screening test requirement. The GAPSC was receptive to the idea and responsive to Hope’s situation. After a review of submitted data, the GAPSC granted Hope a test waiver.

With the screening test waived, Hope was placed for student teaching. In the fall of 2004, during her first semester of student teaching, she passed the required Praxis II pedagogy and content tests in early childhood education on her first attempt. Her student teaching experience began with district planning in July 2004 and continued through the end of April 2005. Hope received near-perfect marks from her college supervisor and cooperating teacher during her first semester of student teaching. With a month left in the second semester of her student teaching, Hope accepted a position as a kindergarten teacher in the elementary school where she had volunteered as a high school student.

DO WE NEED THE TESTS?

With very few exceptions, educators and psychologists condemn the use of standardized tests as sole indicators of academic aptitude or achievement. This precept is well articulated by the American Psychological Association:
“Avoid using a single test score as the sole determinant of decisions about test takers. Interpret test scores in conjunction with other information about individuals.”

In addition, candidate screening tests are costly. Many students and their parents save for years, work extra jobs, and cut personal expenses in an effort to earn their college degrees. A significant portion of the population will pay their fees and pass teacher-screening tests without any added effort. For those who can’t, the additional testing, preparation, and travel expenses can approach the cost of a semester’s tuition at a state school.

The problem of additional cost is compounded by the fact that those who struggle with testing typically do not receive academic scholarships and often come from socioeconomically deprived settings. Most readers of this article will not see a $120 exam fee as an extreme hardship. But as the total cost of testing and retesting, of preparation materials, and of coaching surpasses $500, how many readers would begin to question seriously investing any more hard-earned cash in an apparently lost cause? Candidates like Hope, who have been rejected on specious grounds, spend the most because they know they can teach and are determined to do so. Borderline candidates often spend more than $300 in an effort to pass standardized tests, and a few spend as much as $1,500.

Because there are significant correlations between scores on screening tests, SAT scores, and GPAs, screening tests for teacher candidates have only marginal value. Thus evaluating candidates according to high school and college transcripts would appear, at the very least, to be as reliable as using a one-shot test of basic skills. Transcripts also have the advantage of being longitudinal, and they can point to content-area strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, passing a screening test fails to predict the passage of licensure tests; most borderline candidates find Praxis I more difficult than Praxis II.

Candidate screening tests also inadvertently perpetuate historic inequities. Measures that correlate well with SAT scores are problematic for historically poor-performing populations. Blacks and Hispanics score below the mean on the SAT, and those from low-income households score significantly below the mean as well. Low-income candidates, who may coincidentally be minorities or recent immigrants, are hit hardest by screening tests. Cost alone may force many to opt out of the teaching profession.

The unintended result of test-centered candidate screening is discrimination through testing. Demographic studies produced by standardized testing companies suggest that well over half the minority/low-income populations would be rejected by screening tests. Donald Livingston predicts that candidates from the South’s “Black Belt” will be fortunate to graduate from high school under new test-for-promotion reforms, much less qualify for candidacy in teacher education programs.

Hope’s story has a happy ending, but her experiences suggest that some capable teachers are being kept out of the profession by the very tests intended to identify them. In 2002, John Merrow spoke of the current “pressure for ‘accountability’” that overwhelms common sense. And common sense dictates the use of multiple sources of evidence of successful teaching aptitude in order to minimize questionable rejections and discrimination.

Before our nation became test-crazy, teacher candidates were screened by experienced teacher educators in accredited programs. GPAs and test scores were reviewed, but decisions were based on a variety of kinds of evidence, from recommendations and references to academic highlights and a candidate’s philosophy of education. Most teacher education programs continue to screen candidates closely despite the tests. Perhaps a realistic alternative to the tests might be entrusting candidate screening to teams of professional educators who have access to academic records and direct experience with the candidates.

Today, Hope is a teacher. But because of the hurdles presented by a screening test, she is also a card-carrying “disabled learner.” She is a poster child for a significant group of candidates who are virtually invisible to screening tests.

Which reminds me, did I mention Justice? Justice is a nontraditional undergraduate student who surfaced in a certification and accreditation committee meeting last week. He’s 45 years old, has run a successful business for 20 years, is a volunteer coach, and wants to pursue his lifelong dream of becoming a health and physical education teacher at a local high school where he serves as a volunteer. He has a 3.0 GPA, but every time he attempts the Praxis I more difficult than Praxis II.

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