

FACULTY DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH GRANT PROPOSAL

Illinois Content Area Tests for Teachers: Predictive Validity for Beginning Teacher Performance

Requested

Start-up Mini-Grant (\$500)

Researcher

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I. Project Summary

In the State of Illinois, prospective teachers are required to achieve passing scores on the Illinois Basic Skills Test and the licensure-appropriate content area tests in order to be licensed to teach in the state's public schools. Policy makers at the state and federal levels assume that achieving a passing score on specified teacher tests correlates with placing a qualified, competent teacher in the classroom. A staggering number of high-stakes decisions are being made based on this assumption, including those pertinent to what has become known as "Title II", despite the fact that research to date has not shown a definitive connection between test scores and teacher competence or effectiveness.

To address this gap in the literature base, this researcher wants to compare several variables, with an emphasis on Illinois Basic Skills test scores and Illinois Content Area test scores, with performance assessment by building principals (or other immediate supervisors) of beginning teachers who are graduates of an Elmhurst College teacher preparation program. This will be done to explore the validity of standardized Illinois teacher test scores for predicting beginning teacher performance.

II. Narrative

Current Situation/Background

In October of 1998, revisions were made to Title II of the Higher Education Act that would require comprehensive data on how states prepare teachers via a process of data collection and reporting: IHE's to the states (due April 7, 2001), states to the U.S. Department of Education (due October 7, 2001), and the U.S. Department of Education to Congress (April 7, 2002). All programs that prepare teachers (and expect to remain eligible for any federal financial aid, including student scholarships) must submit test data for all program completers. Each institution must report several pieces of data, including institutional pass rates on teacher licensure exams and how they compare to statewide averages, to the public and include them in all publicity (catalogues, recruitment material, etc.) available to prospective students and parents.

In the State of Illinois, the required test scores are those earned on the Illinois Basic Skills Test (designed to measure paper-pencil competence in reading, writing, grammar, and mathematics) and Content Area Tests (designed to measure content knowledge via multiple-choice questions). Achieving a passing grade on the tests supposedly assures a competent teacher in the classroom. The better the test scores – the better the pre-service student will be as a teacher. In short, these test scores are being considered predictive of performance once a beginning teacher is in the classroom. This is the underlying premise of standardized teacher testing despite publication of test development agency directives clearly to the contrary. It is the case despite the fact that passing content area tests may be required before students have taken all of their methods classes or had classroom-based experiences on which they will be tested because the test is only offered four times a year. It is also the case despite the absurdity of the notion that a single administration of a decontextualized paper and pencil test can assess the potential competence of a teacher in a classroom, given the vast array of variables that are a part of teaching, with any meaningful degree of predictability.

Conversations among teacher educators at the state and national levels resound with recognition of these concerns. Although this has become a pressing assessment issue in every state, there are few published studies that “prove” there is no meaningful connection between scores on standardized teacher tests and actual performance of beginning teachers in the classroom. What little does exist focuses on issues pertinent to the Educational Testing Service’s Praxis I or Praxis II tests rather than on state-specific teacher tests (Educational Testing Service, 1998; Latham, Gotomer, & Ziomek, 1999). One notable exception is a study by Nweke and Hall (1999) which compared a sample of beginning teachers’ scores on the Georgia Teacher Certification Test and the Praxis II Test with principals’ ratings (on a four-point Likert scale) of how well-prepared beginning teachers looked during their first nine weeks on the job. Studies concerning use of the National Education Systems’ teacher tests designed for the State of Illinois were not represented in the ERIC database.

Project Plan

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to compare several variables, with an emphasis on Illinois Basic Skills test scores and Illinois Content Area test scores, with a performance assessment by building principals (or other immediate supervisors, such as vice principals or high school department heads) of beginning teachers who are graduates of an Elmhurst College teacher preparation program. This will be done to explore the validity of standardized Illinois teacher test scores, required for initial licensure in the State of Illinois, for predicting beginning teacher performance.

Research Questions: There are two main research questions to be addressed in this study. (1) Does a correlational relationship exist between pre-service students’ scores on the Illinois Basic Skills test and/or content area test(s), other assessed variables, and their performance as first-year teachers? (2) For variables where a correlation is found to exist, is the correlation directional, ie, the higher the standardized test scores, the higher the first-year performance ratings? Other variables to be assessed in terms of their predictive validity include SAT/ACT scores, GPA in the major and overall GPA at the time of entry into student teaching, whether a student begins his or her teacher education program at Elmhurst College or transfers into Elmhurst College, number of hours/settings/supervising teacher evaluations of field experiences, and basic student demographic variables such as age, gender, and ethnicity.

One challenging aspect of this research project will be to design a performance-based system of assessing beginning teachers. The researcher proposes to design an assessment rubric that aligns with teaching behaviors under each of the eleven Illinois Professional Educator Standards. A rubric is preferable to a Likert-scale instrument because rubrics specify exactly what behaviors or competencies must be demonstrated in order to achieve a given rating whereas Likert-scale ratings are inherently subjective: one person's "3" may be another person's "4" on a five-point scale. School principals of partner schools in the Elmhurst College Department of Education's Satellite Network will be brought together on campus during the summer of 2001 to identify observable competencies, for each of the eleven Illinois Professional Educator Standards, that they look for in beginning teachers. They will then work in groups to develop eleven rubrics for group-identified competencies that align with each of the eleven standards. Once this rubric instrument is designed and tested, it will provide a means for obtaining a numerical score that can be directly connected with actual teaching competencies and compared with beginning teachers' scores on both Illinois tests and with other variables as noted above.

After the rubric is designed, it will be used to assess performance of Elmhurst College students who complete a program in education during the 2000-2001 academic year and enter the classroom as beginning teachers in fall of 2001. Assessments will be obtained for as many graduates as we are able to locate. Performance will be assessed by building principals (or the person in authority whose responsibility it is to assess the beginning teacher) at the end of the first year of teaching. Resulting rubric scores will then be correlated with scores graduates had obtained on the Illinois Basic Skills test, the appropriate Illinois content area tests, and the aforementioned variables of SAT/ACT scores, GPA in the major and overall GPA at the time of entry into student teaching, whether a student begins his or her teacher education program at Elmhurst College or transfers into Elmhurst College, number of hours/settings/supervising teacher evaluations of field experiences, and basic student demographic variables such as age, gender, and ethnicity.

Hypothesis: It is this researcher's hypothesis that the Illinois standardized paper-and-pencil teacher tests will be found to have no practical validity in terms of predicting actual performance of our graduates once they are in the classroom as beginning, non-tenured teachers. Test scores will not be found to correlate with principals' standards-based, quantified, assessments of beginning teacher performance.

Faculty Expertise

The researcher presenting this proposal brings background in performance assessment and rubric development. She was the primary author of an annotated bibliography of professional literature pertaining to teacher testing issues for an Association of Teacher Educators forum held at the ATE national conference in 2000. Prior to that, in 1998-1999, she led the design team charged with developing and piloting INTASC standards-based rubrics to assess student teaching competence for student teachers at the largest teacher preparation institution in Iowa while a faculty member of the College of Education at the University of Northern Iowa. A condensed curriculum vita is attached.

Plans for Evaluation and Dissemination

Results of the overall project will be presented to Elmhurst College faculty and administration. Proposals for research presentations will also be submitted to the Illinois Association of Teacher Educators, the national Association of Teacher Educators, the national and state chapters of the Association for Colleges of Teacher Education, and – if findings warrant and travel funding is available – to the American Educational Research Association.

IV. Budget

Mini-grant funding not to exceed \$500 is sought to cover costs associated with bringing Satellite principals on campus for a day in summer of 2001 to design the rubrics: coffee/rolls in the morning, lunch, afternoon beverages/ snacks, EC folders, printing costs, and supplies (example: a 3-M flip chart). Grant funding of \$1,000 will be sought from the Illinois Association of Teacher Educators' Research Mini Grants program (deadline May 30, acceptances announced in September, 2001) to assist with costs associated with state and national dissemination of findings.

Thank you, in advance, for considering my proposal. Please contact me if I can provide additional information or documentation.

REFERENCES

Educational Testing Service (1998). The use of Praxis pass rates to evaluate teacher education programs: An ETS background report. Washington, DC: author. [ERIC Document Reproduction Number ED435640]

Latham, A., Gitomer, D., Ziomek, R. (1999). What the tests tell us about new teachers. Educational Leadership, 56(8), 23-26.

Nweke, W., & Hall, T. (1999). Evaluating cut-scores on two certification tests: How well do decisions based on cut-scores match teacher- and principal-reported ratings of competence in the classroom? Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Canada, April 19-23, 1999. [ERIC Document Reproduction Number ED431000]