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Beyond Hysteria

Constructing New Narratives of Teachers and Teaching in the United States

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Abstract

This essay considers the influence of standardized testing in the construction of teachers in the United States. It calls on teacher educators to organize against neoliberal influences and create new narratives of what it means to be a teacher.



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Pennsylvania is among a consortium of 25 states seeking more rigorous demands in teacher preparation programs, including more difficult teacher examinations (Sawchuk, 2012). Until this past year, teachers entering most undergraduate teacher certification programs in Pennsylvania had to pass an Education Testing Service (ETS) exam – the Pre-Professional Skills Test or PPST in reading, writing and math – in order to gain entry to a teacher education program. Last year, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) changed the requirement from the PPST to a Pearson exam, called the Pre-service Academic Performance Assessment (PAPA). The PAPA exam consists of selected-response items and constructed-response assignments, distributed as follows:

- Reading: 36 selected-response items
- Mathematics: 36 selected-response items
- Writing: 36 selected-response items, 2 sentence correction assignments, and 1 extended-response assignment

Students may sign up for one module at a time, or take all three exams in one sitting. The fee is \$37 per module, or \$89 for all three. The exams are administered at Pearson testing centers, which are located across the country and around the world.

Soon after students in Pennsylvania began to take these exams, university faculty members and academic advisers learned of problems. The reading and math scores are available at the end of the testing session, and the writing results are delivered within twenty business days of the exam date. Students were failing at what seemed to be alarming rates, and we heard reports of students spending upward of \$700 in their efforts to pass. These often were students who had strong GPAs, some of the students were enrolled in honors colleges, some were completing concurrent majors in other colleges, and many were engaged in a number of university-based activities, including co-curricular clubs and organizations, that suggested they would be academically successful and do well in their field placements. Yet, failing even one of these three exams meant that the students were not able to matriculate into undergraduate teacher education programs (graduate students pursuing certification were not required to take the exams), shattering for some what may have been a life-long dream.

In August 2013, the Pennsylvania Association of Colleges of Teachers Education (PAC-TE) issued a statement to the Pennsylvania Department of Education claiming that state-wide 53-67% of teacher candidates were being eliminated from undergraduate teacher education programs based on the results of one test. The PAC-TE membership requested reconsideration of the exam and proposed alternate solutions, one of which included substituting the SAT score in place of the PAPA exam. The department responded in kind by setting a minimum 1550 SAT score (out of a possible 2400) as an equivalent to the PAPA exam cut off score as an entrance requirement for teacher education programs.

In follow up conversations with colleagues since this change was made, I learned that the 1550 SAT score has not made a marked difference in admitting aspiring teachers into certification programs. It seems, at least through initial correlational analysis, that teacher candidates who struggle to pass the PAPA did not typically score high on the SAT, suggesting that these students may not be good test-takers overall. 1550 is the benchmark score ETS sets as a predictor that college students will earn at least a B- or higher in their first year of a four year college education. At most universities in Pennsylvania, students taking the PAPA exams must also have earned at least a 3.0 out of 4.0 GPA by the end of their second year of college in order

to enter teacher education programs, and so one could say that the SAT benchmark is irrelevant by this point. They earned the grade but still are denied the right to try to become a teacher.

So how do we make sense of this phenomenon, in this time and this place? I'll explore two possibilities in what follows: (1) explanations by students; and (2) the broader public narrative that constructs teachers through standardized tests, both as test takers and test administrators.

Student Testing Experiences

As students came back to campus after taking the exams, we asked them about the tests and their experiences. It turns out that the place and space of the exams factored into their success (or failure) in sometimes significant ways. Standardized tests are exercises in reading, no matter what the content of the exam, and scholars like Deborah Brandt (2001) remind us that reading practices are always situated in place and space. Even when the test is about reading and writing, the skills measured by standardized tests are unique to this format or genre, which raises questions about the validity of the exams in relation to the wide range of reading texts and practices our students engage daily. The last time many of the students took a standardized test was probably at the end of high school, if not earlier, which means there were potentially two or more years during which they were not engaged in the kind of reading and writing required to be successful on these tests. While undergraduate students may participate in a wide range of reading activities on a daily basis, few of them probably read short passages and answer multiple-choice questions on a regular basis.

Taking this a step further, reading and writing skills are demonstrated on standardized tests in spaces that have strictly adhered to normative practices. Typical American undergraduate students have grown up with No Child Left Behind as federal law, and they became accustomed to testing situations that are timed, offered in relative quiet, and are most often in paper and pencil format administered in a room where others are taking the same test. Most American students begin annual batteries of standardized tests in the third grade, and these continue through college entrance exams, and so these conditions are persistent over a number of years.

Yet the testing space and place changed with the PAPA exams. Students had three hours to take three different tests and were responsible for pacing themselves. A red light kept track of their time, and they were not permitted to stop the test to take a break or use the restroom. People around them were not necessarily taking the same test, which meant there was constant movement in the room as other test takers entered and exited the exam place. In addition, the exams were computer-based, in contrast to the paper and pencil exams typically administered in American public schools. Added to these social challenges, students were faced with some unusual decisions in the context of the exam. For example, students reported that the writing portion asked them to respond to prompts like "Do you think the legal drinking age should be lowered to 18?" How does one make an argument for or against this in the context of a testing center, particularly when one aspires to be a teacher of students who may be 18 years old?

The challenges this place and space presented, coupled with test construct problems, meant that many students who were formerly quite successful in school failed the exams, sometimes multiple times.

Constructing Teachers

Yet it is not easy to argue that lowering or eliminating testing requirements for teachers is the solution. Who would support allowing teachers into classrooms who failed what is supposed to be a basic reading, writing and math test? From the earliest days of the profession in the United States, teachers have been required to pass exams to gain entry to the field, even if they had only an 8th grade education and were teaching in a one-room schoolhouse on the prairie. The broader public narrative about what it means to be a teacher, both historically and currently, is one that is enmeshed with test-taking, test-giving, and what has become a pervasive testing regime. This has been a fairly stable phenomenon.

So what is to be done? In this current place and space, it seems important to consider the socially constructed stories of who teachers are and what they do, and then rationally sort out what is real and possible in relation to particular communities. I'll use English professor Thomas King's (2005) example to help explain my question about what is real. King has written about the places in American society where "Indians" are constructed – Red Man chewing tobacco, movies like *Dances with Wolves*, the crying Indian in the 1970s iconic ad about the devastating effects of pollution, the Atlanta Braves, and countless other examples. King points out that "In the end, there is no reason for the Indian to be real. The Indian simply has to exist in our imaginations" (2005, p. 54). Think about how this plays out with teachers. We have imaginations that are fueled by popular culture about who teachers are and what they do, what I will call hysterical narratives that come from emotion and fear more than fact. These derive from extremes like the seemingly idyllic teachers in *Little House on the Prairie* television shows and books to the teacher heroes of *Stand and Deliver* and *Freedom Writers*. Hysterical narratives are also fueled by news reports and other sources that portray teachers as responsible for failing public schools, teachers as criminals who sexually prey on children, and teachers as heroes who save student lives in the face of natural catastrophes and violent intruders. We may think the teachers in our school are fine, and we know what our own teaching experiences are (or have been), but these experiences are mitigated with and against these broader social narratives.

The hyped up hysterical narratives seem to collide in this time and place with changes in tests in ways that have significant consequences for teacher education programs. Officials in Pennsylvania have often stated that there are too many teacher education programs (there are 91 institutions that prepare teachers, ranging from small liberal arts colleges to state schools and research institutions), and in fact, some are now closing. The State System for Higher Education in Pennsylvania, which is built on former teacher colleges, has announced closure of several teacher education programs at some of its campuses due to the ongoing budget crisis and enrollment challenges. Smaller campuses are under increasing pressure to increase enrollments, something that is nearly impossible to do given the rigid entrance requirements. This is occurring in the aftermath of a report to the Pennsylvania governor's office in the mid-2000s that suggested teacher education should be an "industry" for Pennsylvania, and it is also running up against news reports that elementary education will be one of the top job markets in the next decade. So what may be best as we consider teachers and teaching in this time and place? How do we know?

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My sense is that we don't really know, and that is perhaps the most dangerous place we can be. As teacher educators, we need a plan and we need to act. It seems to be time to sort out

the narratives that exist – teacher as test taker, teacher as test administrator, teacher as hero, etc. - and use our sociological imaginations (Mills, 1959) rather than hysteria and fear to reconstruct narratives of teachers in this time and place. Who is a teacher, really? What does she need to know and be able to do? How do we best prepare him to engage thoughtfully and well to educate children in our communities? And finally, how do we assess, which means to me that we must ask how we sit beside that teacher to know what she is doing well and where she needs the support of others to improve the art and practice of her teaching?

Sociologist C. Wright Mills has explained the sociological imagination as a way to connect personal troubles to public issues in order to imagine new and different possibilities for our lives together. To do so, we must understand our social milieu, our historical and social contexts, and use reason over emotion, to solve social problems. As Mills suggests, we need to transcend this time and place to understand the structures of our society, the ideologies that drive policies and practices, and our roles as educators within and against these structures. This is not easy work to engage, but necessary. In part, it requires serious consideration of the ideological agendas at work, it requires critically reading policy, reading wide awake (Shannon, 2011) to understand the motives and aims at work in and against our lives. If we don't do so, we fall prey to false consciousness, which sociologist Charles Lemert (2011) described as an impoverished sociological imagination. With false consciousness, we get duped.

As a starting place, I think we need to ask why efforts are in place to eliminate half the potential teaching force from higher education institutions, and read that against alternate route programs like Teach for America (TFA), which has been awarded tens of millions of dollars by the Obama administration and was given a reprieve when a loose definition of “highly qualified teacher” was slipped into the debt deal legislation in October 2013. Remember, TFA members do not need to take the PAPA exams in Pennsylvania.

We also need to continue to analyze and use our sociological imagination to provide alternatives to the broader neoliberal influences in our society, which privatize public services and celebrate the individual at the expense of the social, making problems like failing a Pearson exam a personal failure rather than societal concern. Neoliberalism is protected by a power elite, as Mills (1956) described, and this elite sets up and maintains bureaucracies as one means to perpetuate a conservative society. Frankfurt school philosopher Herbert Marcuse (1965) would later astutely point out in the context of President Johnson's War on Poverty that those in power would not design or enforce policies that would ultimately undermine their own power or privilege.

The power elite will not have children who are taught in schools that are falling down by minimally trained teachers on a two year cultural tour. They aren't concerned about the aspiring teacher who has given hundreds of dollars to Pearson only to miss the pass rate on the PAPA exam by one point, yet again, nor are they really concerned about policies and funding models that send increased monies to prisons yet work to undermine public education and public higher education. Just this summer, the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers aired a radio ad criticizing Pennsylvania Gov. Corbett and his fellow politicians for building a \$400 million prison – complete with air-conditioned cells, classrooms, and a librarian – at a time when Philadelphia's schools are being cut to the bone.

The power elite continue to benefit and prosper from the relationships between government and corporations, relationships that ignore the public and construct teachers in ways

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that may ultimately erase them. Just look at the Bridge International Academies School in a Box model in Kenya where more than 200 schools deliver education to children for less than \$5 a day using a highly structured, technology-driven model that relies on teachers reading standardized lessons from hand-held tablet computers. With this model, teachers do not need to be educated. In fact, we don't need teachers. Problem solved. Children just need to follow directions constructed by white people in the Silicon Valley. As Karl Marx observed, all that's solid melts into air.

So let's connect the dots. The power elite are setting standards for teacher education that may be unattainable by a majority, some states are working to eliminate teacher education programs situated in colleges and universities because enrollments are down and the programs are not economically viable as a result, and teachers are widely portrayed as the source of societal problems, rather than the solution (except in those rare instances when they are heroes). So, teachers as we have had them, aren't smart and they are expensive to produce (according to a neoliberal narrative). Technology, on the other hand, is good and will solve these problems. Here is Bill Gates talking to the National Association of State Legislatures in Philadelphia in 2009:

...identifying common standards is not enough. We'll only know if this effort has succeeded, when the curriculum and the tests are aligned to these standards. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan recently announced that \$350 million of the stimulus package will be used to create just these kinds of tests – next generation assessments aligned with the common core. **When the tests are aligned with the common standards, the curriculum will line up as well – and that will unleash powerful market forces in the service of better teaching. For the first time, there will be a large base of customers eager to buy products that can help every kid learn and every teacher get better.** (July 21, 2009)

We need to connect the dots differently. The bureaucracies and policies we face have been made by people and are protected by people, they are driven by ideological perspectives that protect some at the expense of many, and they can be changed. We need to be smarter about how we do this work. Mills (1956) explained that the masses have never been very effective at organizing, and we see this with the 99% on Wall Street and elsewhere. To be smarter at organizing, we need to understand the complexities of what we are up against and work together to forward a different vision for public education within a democratic society – an education that does more than train people for jobs, but instead prepares them to employ a sociological imagination so that the world can in fact become a different place.

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