

THE IMPACTS OF HIGH STAKES TESTING AND THE POLITICS OF TEACHER EDUCATION—MANAGING BALANCE OR MOVING ON?

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Vexation

As a science teacher educator in California, I find myself faced with a professional (and personal) frustration that has me questioning my continued participation in pre-service teacher training and my identity as a science educator. My entry into science education took the form of a chemistry TA as I worked toward my Ph.D. in science, followed by some detours and then 5 years as a high school chemistry teacher. I then changed roles and worked as a science educator and program coordinator at a natural history museum, where I worked closely with elementary and middle school students and their teachers. As a result, I find myself with research and teaching interests both in science teacher preparation, as well as understanding learning in out-of-classroom settings. While I feel that these experiences and interests afford me unique perspectives, I sometimes find myself being pulled in too many directions. Recently, some changes and mandates within our secondary science credential program have left me questioning the utility of teacher education and subsequently my role as a science teacher educator.

The root of vexation. Beginning this July, prospective teachers will be required to pass a series of high stakes Teacher Performance Assessments (TPAs) in order to be recommended for a credential. Each of the four TPAs presents different classroom scenarios and prompts—the future teacher must consider each situation and provide answers to a series of essay questions regarding instruction. Students will be graded by trained assessors who must examine every component of the TPA, looking for correct answers that are well-supported with examples¹.

I am not necessarily opposed to a high stakes test where the future teacher must demonstrate a particular level of competency. Prior to this, competency was based on passing a basic skills test (CBEST), a subject-matter test (CSET), completing over 40 units of post-bac units, and a semester of student teaching where prospective teachers were evaluated by a university supervisor and the cooperating teacher from the school. However, it would seem that legislators (not necessarily educators) felt that this was not rigorous enough—so another assessment was born. Personally, I think the *spirit* of the TPA is fine; I do feel, however, that this instrument is rather long and repetitive. Although the reliability of the test and training has been established, there have not really been any validity studies indicating that this particular assessment is a good predictor of teacher effectiveness or even teacher retention.

Beyond validity, a major problem lies in implementation. With no funding available for implementing or assessing, and an unwillingness of the university to pass costs on to students, it was decided that these high-stakes TPAs would be situated within 4 of the 9 education courses required for credential students. So now we have students taking tests designed as summative assessments of their teaching aptitude before they really finish the program. Instructors are now required to become unbiased assessors who are required to grade TPAs (in addition to their course responsibilities). What is worst is the fact that one of the TPAs had initially been situated within a *pre-requisite* class, originally designed as an introduction to teaching science, providing students with a first-look at what it means to be a science teacher.

This preliminary class features discussion of science teaching philosophy, demonstrations, science classroom management, inquiry, instructional methods, and adaptations for specific learners is addressed. In addition, students are required to complete at least 45 hours of fieldwork—observations and participation in local middle and high schools. The course is a mile wide and an inch deep—not ideal, but it gives students a feeling as to whether teaching is the right path for them. This pre-requisite class has been a challenging class to teach, and I hope to have helped students begin to understand that getting a credential may have some logistical hoops to jump through, but that there is also important information that they need to reflect on as future science teacher.

Questioning decision-making. The addition of a component of this high-stakes test to this already full course, originally designed to help students confirm that science teaching is a profession they wish to enter, has led me to doubt the wisdom of administrative decision-makers. The ‘TPA-added’ class would now be geared toward preparing students for this test. Those who oversee these decisions have not yet admitted that the structure of the class would or should change, again leaving me to question their objectives—supporting students, or finding the easiest path for compliance. This August, with less than a week until the start of classes, the TPA was removed from this introductory course and re-positioned in another of the required credential courses. I believe that changes in administration, along with persistent ‘nagging’ across the university helped to facilitate this change.

Though it might sound as if I am resisting more work, resisting change, I would suggest that there was not *enough* change here, and that placing the high stakes test in this class represented a lack of foresight, and sent an inappropriate message to prospective teachers. That message sounds to me like “So you want to be a teacher?”

¹ Samples of TPA assignments can be found at <http://www.ced.csulb.edu/single-subject/resources/documents/tpa.cfm>

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Great! Here's a high stakes test—better get used to it.” This experience with the TPA, coupled with other observations of top-down decision-making, has strengthened my concerns about how political the ‘field’ of education can be and how potentially difficult it is to promote reform. I see too many examples of educated educators who seem to have lost touch with the bigger picture and ignore good practice. I find it difficult to ignore this broader picture, although I know that I may be better off if I simply follow directions and do the best I can within the constraints as they are handed down.

Venture

This experience has led me to a crossroads where I question my role as science educator. While I like to think that I can still help prospective science teachers as they discover the excitement and challenges of the secondary classroom, more and more I find myself at odds philosophically with top-down mandates (from the state, from the university, etc.) that seem to ignore good pedagogy. I am finding it hard to shrug that off. As a graduate student in education (not science), I was quite interested to read about dissenting opinions explaining that the role of colleges of education was obsolete. With my five years of experiences as a professor, I find myself questioning my association with a college of education, and my role as a teacher educator.

Venture 1. One possible venture would be to refocus my energy on another area of science education. As mentioned, I am also interested in science learning beyond the classroom and much of my research agenda lies in this area. This informal or free-choice science learning, as it is sometimes called, is often associated with learning in museums or similar venues, or learning from media (TV, gaming, etc.) and is characterized in part by the learner's ability to choose when, where and with whom they will learn. Much of my research has examined how teachers navigate informal science settings via fieldtrips, and I have continued interest in the interface between formal (schools) and informal (museum) learning settings.

I recognize that no organization is without politics, and museum settings and the like have their fair share. Yet these institutions are faced with less regulation and fewer mandates from government agencies regarding their methods of science education. They are not told what to teach or when to teach and there are no standardized tests used to see whether visitors are learning or whether staff members are explaining concepts effectively. This is not to say that evaluation does not have a place in these institutions—rather that the goals and objectives are defined by the institution more than external legislation. The challenge here, of course, is whether those who lead these institutions understand how people learn in museum settings is in fact different from the classroom. Or if these leaders have other agendas and issues that take precedence over the educational effectiveness of the institution.

Leaving teacher education completely and refocusing on informal learning research has multiple implications. As a faculty member at a teaching university, I must consider whether the department is flexible enough to allow for a departure from secondary teacher preparation classes. I must also consider whether such a change would involve Academia, or would require a shift to another institution for research or evaluation. Wearing two hats (formal science education and informal science education) has been challenging (and exhausting at times)—focusing on one may ultimately have positive personal impacts.

Venture 2. Certainly, a different venture would be to maintain my current balance between these two ‘realms’ of research/teaching interest, and continue to push back at external forces that may be eroding what I feel is important for the preparation of future teachers. (Note that it is not just about what I feel is important, but what researchers and reform efforts suggest is important.) Perhaps my ‘nagging’ helped to make a difference in this case—I would have hoped, however, that decision-makers at the college level would have understood the implications of such changes for our students' success (and retention) as future teachers. Of course, making my concerns known takes much energy, and involves risks.

I might consider refocusing my research agenda to examine the effectiveness of the teacher preparation programs—or at least the programs as implemented where I am currently a faculty member. How are these tests impacting teacher success, retention, and ultimately, student success. I am unsure how best to do this, however, and fear that the learning curve may be excessive (e.g. familiarizing myself with the literature more deeply.) It is not a matter of avoiding extra work or confrontation, but rather a fear that as a professor going up for tenure, I am already struggling with managing work (too much) and personal (not enough) time. And I'm simply not sure I'm ready to table or limit my research related to informal science education.

Change is difficult, as we are faced with leaving the known and venturing into uncertainty. At this point, I'm not sure whether either of these ventures are valid options. I recognize that such decisions are rather personal—however, I hope that this discussion might serve to help those of us with multiple interests with ways to maintain balance, foster satisfaction, and ultimately contribute to the profession of science education.