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ABSTRACT

An overview of the assessment of the basic skills of prcspective secondary level education students at Pennsylvania State University is provided in this paper. Assessment in the areas of reading, writing, and speaking was conducted as a response to public criticism cf teachers' skills and as a means of meeting a competency requirement in the teacher educaticn program. The results of the first testing of 47 students are discussed in this and in three related papers. This paper notes results indicating significant correlations between reading and writing scores and between writing and speaking scores, but not between speaking and reading scores. Questions for further consideration are listed. (MKM)

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Overview

Basic Skills of Prospective Secondary Teachers

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Recent wisdom holds, with Time magazine, that many teachers are not able to practice the basic skills which they are called upon to teach. Educators have long accepted that a teacher cannot teach what s/he does not know. Hence, this syllogism goes, such teachers cannot teach effectively the basic skills which concern the general public. For all teachers this is a serious problem. For English teachers it is a disaster.

The wrathful attack of critics like Time led the secondary faculty at Penn State to search for the evidence of teachers' inability to use the basic skills effectively. Each critic has a certain set of horror stories useful for underscoring his assertion that teachers are incompetent. In fact, we found no evidence of teachers' basic skill levels, either positive or negative, except for a small study of elementary teachers' ability to use study skills (Askov, Kamm and Klumb, 1977). We questioned, then, how effectively our prospective teachers could use their skills in professional situations.

To clarify these basic skills, the Penn State faculty has agreed that reading, writing and speaking are the skills generally included as "basic." Although we can add a large number of skills we believe to be "basic" to good teaching, we have accepted this generic definition of the basics. We have more recently added computation to these basics, but we do not report on that skill here.

A little background. The Penn State program in Secondary Education prepares teachers in English/communication, foreign languages, social studies, mathematics, and the sciences. A newly revised program, under development

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for over two years, was formally begun in September, 1979. During the period of revision, the program was formulated on a competency base. Included in this list of competencies was a straightforward statement that each student will demonstrate his/her ability to read, write and speak effectively in professional situations.

When the program faculty got serious about making this competency operational, it was easy to decide that the University's introductory course-work in these skill areas was not sufficient to verify professional level competence. That is, requiring a grade of C or better in freshman composition or speech was not sufficient. The development and implementation of the necessary assessment procedures is the subject of the papers which follow. Our goal is to demonstrate to a skeptical public--and ourselves--that the teachers we recommend for certification can use these three basic skills effectively in their professional work.

The results of our first testing (47 students during Winter Term, 1980) are reported here, as well as the development and implementation of the assessment procedures. We looked initially at the correlation between the three language skills, predicted to be high from earlier research. Figure 1 demonstrates our results. These correlations are significant ($p < .05$).

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Insert Figure 1 About Here
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We have several ways of scoring these three skills areas, so we have a range of correlations to report. As expected, reading and writing correlate significantly. Also as expected, writing and speaking correlate significantly. But the third leg of the triangle does not occur. No correlations between speaking and reading are significant. This gives us room to question the accepted truth--the intercorrelation of the language arts. It also

provides a base for discussion after we have presented the full description of the three assessment procedures.

The major questions we are investigating here are:

1. Is this assessment procedure a valid and reliable instrument for screening secondary teachers?

2. How well do our current students measure up, looking at differences by both subject area and sex?

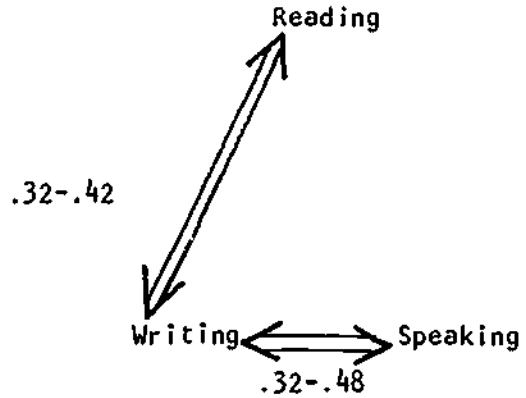

Figure 1

Correlations Between Reading,
Writing and Speaking Assessments