

# Teachers from the “Neighborhood”: Standardized Testing as a Barrier to Certification of Minority Candidates

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*This qualitative, longitudinal study documents the academic and professional journeys of 8 college graduates or “scholars” of the Paterson Teachers for Tomorrow (PT4T) program. Data from this study further contribute to the growing body of research focusing on preparing diverse candidates—particularly those from urban and low socioeconomic backgrounds—to become teachers. One finding that emerged from this study documented the barrier caused by the Educational Testing Service’s (ETS) Praxis II to the certification of minority teacher candidates. These findings support the call to provide additional support for minority candidates as they pursue their teacher education programs and prepare to take the Praxis II exams.*

PT4T is a collaborative project between a state university in northern New Jersey—namely, William Paterson University (WPU)—and four high schools in Paterson. The purpose of this program is to identify potential teachers while attending high school in Paterson in order to support and nurture their educational and professional aspirations throughout their college experience. By providing ongoing support through high school and college, the program aims to foster teacher candidates who return to Paterson as “scholar-

teachers.” The PT4T program was shaped by the philosophy that quality teachers for urban communities, such as the city of Paterson, are those who understand—through their own personal experiences—the cultures and complexities of urban schools such as those in Paterson.

Paterson Public Schools educate approximately 30,000 students every year (Paterson Public Schools, n.d.). Paterson’s 2007 graduation rate was 67.4 percent; approximately 78 percent of students receive free or reduced lunch (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2008). The Paterson School District mirrors urban school districts nationwide; despite having a majority of students who are African American and Hispanic—it continues to be staffed by predominantly white teachers and administrators. In the 2006-2007 academic year, 7.5 percent of classes were not taught by highly qualified teachers (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2008). Thus, PT4T aims to increase the number of highly qualified as well as ethnically diverse teachers working in Paterson.

PT4T scholars attending WPU receive scholarships covering their full tuition if they commit to returning to and teaching in Paterson for a minimum of three years after successfully completing the undergraduate program, including teacher-preparation. WPU is a state university located in the suburban township of William Paterson, New Jersey. It is located less than five miles from all four of the participating PT4T high schools. PT4T scholars admitted to WPU are required to maintain at least a 2.75 grade point average (GPA) requirement every semester, select and complete a major relevant to their proposed future area of certification, and be admitted into and complete one of the university’s teacher-preparation programs.

WPU’s College of Education is accredited by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education

(NCATE) and offers undergraduate as well as graduate programs in both initial and advanced programs. The university's teacher-preparation programs require an overall GPA of 2.75 for admission. Teacher-candidates are required to exhibit appropriate professional dispositions throughout their coursework and field experiences.

In addition to graduating from WPU with an approved major and completing a teacher-education program, PT4T scholars must pass Praxis II exams to become certified teachers in New Jersey. Passing a high-stakes standardized assessment for teacher licensure has become more widespread as a requirement since the 1990s; as of 2003, 16 states required teacher-candidates to pass Praxis II exams in order to obtain teaching licenses (Sutton, 2004). Although NCATE does not advocate for the use of a single, high-stakes, standardized test in order to determine teacher-candidates' content and pedagogical competencies, the State of New Jersey requires that teacher-candidates pass the Education Testing Service's (ETS) Praxis II exams—high-stakes standardized tests—to become a certified teacher.

Several criticisms have been raised regarding the Praxis II exams. According to the American Psychological Association (2007), “when test results are used inappropriately or as a single measure of performance, they can have unintended adverse consequences” (§ 1). Yet many states, including New Jersey, continue to require candidates to pass high-stakes tests as a teacher licensing requirement. Researchers have also raised the issue of validity with regard to Praxis II exams (Goodman, Arbona, & de Rameriz, 2008; Sutton, 2004; Wakefield, 2006). Sutton raised several questions in her research: “What evidence is there that this test predicts successful teaching? What are the consequences of widespread implementation of such tests? Do they lead faculty and students to focus on the wrong aspects of teaching?” (p. 465). Furthermore, Goodman et al. questioned

the validity of such high-stakes testing. “[The] failure to pass these high-stakes, minimum-competency tests could eliminate otherwise qualified teacher candidates from the teaching profession” (p. 26). Critics of standardized testing for teacher candidates (see Goodman et al., 2008; Sutton, 2004; Wakefield, 2006) have also questioned the equity of these exams and the effect these tests have on recruiting minority teacher-candidates to the teaching field (Goodman et al., 2008; Wakefield, 2006), particularly since “a disproportionate number of minority teacher-candidates fail these exams” (Goodman et al., 2008, p. 27).

Such questions have emerged not only because of possible issues relating to equity as well as cultural and racial bias, but also because of the alignment of the content of such tests to national standards. For example, the Conference of English Educators (CEE) (2005), a constituent group of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), developed the *Program Assessment in English Education: Belief Statements and Recommendations*, which critiques the alignment of the Praxis II exams and their alignment with NCTE national standards. CEE (2005) noted:

In their current forms, Praxis II content and pedagogy examinations do not reflect the *Guidelines* and *Standards*, and we believe serious attention must be given to revising these high-stakes assessments. This work should build on earlier NCTE efforts to advise ETS on issues of alignment among standards, curriculum, teaching, and assessment (p. 1).

### **Methods and Data Sources**

Reviewing program outcomes is necessary for the success of any program. The current inquiry sought to document the academic and professional journeys of eight college students who graduated between 2001 and January 2008, and to examine what factors posed barriers to participants returning to the neighborhood as teachers. Data

was examined to determine the extent to which the program aids graduates in 1) attending college, 2) completing college, and 3) becoming certified teachers who work in the Paterson Public Schools. The use of qualitative procedures provided the opportunity to explore the phenomenon in its authentic context and presented findings that defined, explained, contextualized, and generated hypotheses for future inquiry.

The study utilized qualitative methods, including document and content analysis, to compile mini-case studies (Yin, 1994) of the eight graduates to generate hypotheses at the end of these investigations (Hubbard & Power, 1999). The content of the data was analyzed and categorized according to patterns and themes that emerged. Data collection and analysis were a recursive process; multiple sources of evidence were used to triangulate findings (Yin, 1994). The use of qualitative procedures provided the opportunity to explore the phenomenon in its authentic context and present findings that defined, explained, contextualized, and generated hypotheses for future inquiry.

The main sources of data for this research were initially set to be classroom visitations and longitudinal data, records, and documents relating to the scholars' academic and professional histories. Although the original intention was to spend time visiting the graduates in the classrooms in which they teach, once the research began, it became evident that only one graduate was currently a full-time permanent teacher in Paterson. Therefore, the data collection methods were changed to include a questionnaire, which was sent and subsequently resent via email to all graduates as well as hand-delivered to three graduates. None of the questionnaires were completed or returned. Therefore, the data used came primarily from naturally occurring sources—primarily students' files collected as they participated in the program as high school and college students.

## Results

Preliminary analysis revealed that, since its inception in the spring of 2000, 54 high school students have been offered scholarships; 50 have accepted the scholarships, and 8 scholars have graduated from the university. Data revealed that few teacher candidates have received certification and only a two as of September 2008 have returned to teach in the neighborhood as certified teachers.

### *Few Teacher Candidates Have Returned to Teach in the Neighborhood*

As of fall 2008, two out of eight graduates were working full time as certified teachers in Paterson, representing a success rate of 25 percent, when only those scholars who completed their undergraduate degrees are included. Of these eight scholars, seven are female and one is male; six are African Americans, one is Hispanic, and one is Caucasian (see Table 1). The two scholars who are presently teaching in full-time positions in Paterson schools are one female Hispanic teaching high school physical education and one female African American teaching at the elementary level.

As of fall 2008, in addition to the two PT4T graduates working as certified full-time teachers in Paterson, three PT4T graduates work as substitute teachers—two females in Paterson schools and one female as a long-term substitute in Orange, New Jersey. Two of these substitutes have not yet passed the Praxis II in their respective subject fields. The remaining three PT4T graduates are not currently working in education-related fields. The only male graduate works in an administrative department at WPU. Although he had worked as a substitute teacher in Paterson, despite taking the exam several times, he did not pass the Praxis II in English, making him ineligible for certification as an English teacher in New Jersey. In addition, a female teacher candidate who is

Caucasian and graduated summa cum laude did not finish the education program at WPU. She did not pass her field experience and, after careful reflection and consultation with her advisers, decided to not become a teacher. She has since been admitted to Rutgers University's graduate school in library science. One African American female graduate was unable to enter the undergraduate teacher education at WPU as her GPA did not meet the required 2.75 (until the semester she graduated); consequently, she was not admitted to the program. After graduation, she enrolled in the Post-Baccalaureate program at WPU and is currently enrolled in graduate-level initial certification courses in order to become certified as an elementary teacher.

### *Impact of Praxis II on Certification of Teacher Candidates*

At this time, more than one third of the scholars who have graduated from the PT4T program are not working as certified teachers based solely on the fact that they have not passed Praxis II exams in their content areas (see Table 2). These three scholars—all African Americans—graduated from WPU's NCATE as well as state-approved teacher-education programs and were recommended by WPU to the State of New Jersey for certification in their respective fields of study. Two of these scholars completed their degrees in English, and the other completed a degree in music. These data support previous research (Goodman et al., 2008; Wakefield, 2006) and further document the negative effect of high-stakes standardized testing on minority teacher-education candidates.

An analysis of college GPA does not appear to directly correlate with the candidates' ability to pass the Praxis II. Scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) for scholars who did not pass the Praxis II or needed to take it several times all fell below the 2008 mean average on the Critical Reading as well as the Mathematics subtests. Two out of the three scholars who have yet to pass the Praxis II required

remedial reading courses upon entrance into the university. One student who took the Praxis II test twice before passing and another who took it five times before passing were also required to take remedial reading courses upon entry into the university.

### **Educational Implications**

The results of this study further contribute to the growing body of research focusing on preparing diverse candidates—particularly those from urban and low socioeconomic backgrounds—to become teachers. One finding that emerged from this study further documents the barrier caused by the Praxis II to the certification of minority teacher candidates. Although the data set in this study is small (only eight participants as of fall 2008), the inability to pass the Praxis II test has prevented more than a third of the highly trained scholars from becoming certified teachers in Paterson, New Jersey, an urban area facing a shortage of both highly qualified and diverse teachers. This study’s results support recent research (Goodman et al., 2008; Wakefield, 2006) documenting the negative impact of high-stakes testing on the recruitment of minority teacher-candidates as well as recommendations by the CEE (2005) relating to the misalignment between NCTE standards and Praxis II content exams in English and language arts. The findings further indicate that a correlation exists between whether teacher candidates need to take remedial reading courses upon entry into the university and their ability to pass the Praxis II. Moreover, all students who did not pass the Praxis II had SAT scores in critical reading and math that were significantly lower than the 2008 mean scores.

All scholars participating in the PT4T program hail from public schools in Paterson, New Jersey, a district classified under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act as being “in need of improvement.” Many of the same barriers that these scholars faced while trying to enter college (e.g.,



standardized test scores) likely continue to be barriers as they pursue careers as teachers. The fact that the Praxis II subject area tests are, for the most part, multiple-choice, content-focused reading tests that measure a candidates' low-level knowledge of kindergarten through twelfth-grade curriculum suggests that, although teacher candidates who are minorities or come from low socio-economic backgrounds may excel in their subject areas in college, "gaps" in their knowledge and ability to perform well on standardized tests may continue to exist due to the inequitable schooling they received while attending "failing" schools. It is the hope that these findings will further support the need to question as well as research the validity of high-stakes testing in the area of teacher preparation, particularly in regards to minority teacher-candidates.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the current study, several recommendations have emerged. All potential teachers from under-represented groups should be carefully monitored, mentored, and—when necessary—tutored throughout their college years. Testing students using Praxis II subject area practice tests during every year of college can aid in determining whether gaps exist in the candidates' content knowledge that can be remediated through college-level courses or outside tutoring. In addition, auxiliary reading and writing in content area courses should be considered for candidates who are required to take basic skills reading or writing courses upon entry into the university or who have achieved below-mean scores on critical reading and math SAT subtests. Although the current study is limited due to the sample size, these recommendations—if carried out—could potentially aid the remaining PT4T students attending WPU.

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**Table 1**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Graduation Date</b>	<b>Major/Area of Certification</b>	<b>Experiences in teaching</b>
A	AA	F	May 2006	Psychology / Elementary	Presently working as an elementary teacher in Paterson
B	AA	M	August 2006	English/K-12	Worked as a substitute teacher in Paterson and now works in higher education
C	AA	F	May 2007	History/Elementary	Worked as a substitute teacher in Paterson but was not hired full time due to lack of vacancies
D	AA	F	May 2008	English/K-12	As of Spring 2008 was working as a substitute teacher in Paterson
E	AA	F	August 2007	Music/K-12	Working as a long-term substitute teacher outside of Paterson
F	H	F	January 2008	Physical Education/ K-12	Worked as a substitute teacher for a semester and will be a full-time physical education teacher in Paterson in Fall 2008
G	AA	F	August 2008	Psychology / did not enter education program because she did not meet GPA requirement	None
H	W	F	January 2008	Music/did not pass field experience requirements	None

**Table 2**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>SAT Scores* (Critical Reading / Math; highest scores reported)</b>	<b>Overall College GPA</b>	<b>Number of Remedial Reading / Writing (No credit courses taken at WPU)</b>	<b>Number of Credits Attempted but Not Earned</b>	<b>Passed Praxis II</b>
A (teaching)	330/400	3.262	None	6	yes (no data available about times taken)
B (did not pass Praxis II)	380/360	2.851	None	3	no (no data available about times taken)
C (working as a substitute in Spring 2008)	370/400	3.006	1 (reading)	15.5	yes (took 5 times)
D (did not pass Praxis II)	340/480	3.019	1 (reading)	none	no (took 5 times)
E (did not pass Praxis II)	450/470	2.809	1 (reading)	20	no (took 4 times)
F (teaching as of Fall 2008)	450/400	3.311	1 (reading)	2.5	yes (took twice)
G (graduated without taking teacher education classes due to insufficient GPA)	540/380	2.844	None	4	yes (took once)
H (did not pass student teaching)	590/520	3.758	None	19	yes (took once)

\*While the mean scores on SATs change every year, the 2008 mean score in Critical Reading was 502 and Mathematics was 515 (College Board, 2009)