



The Abundance of Knowledge and the Shortage of Activism:

Taking Action to Confront Teacher Certification Exams

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Abstract

Researchers, policy centers, and professional organizations have identified social justice issues related to teacher certification and retention, and have published recommendations for addressing these issues. This article uses one such issue – the underrepresentation of students of color in passing scores on teacher certification exams – as an example of how one scholar shifted her focus from research to activism. This article challenges scholars to engage in academic activism to work toward positive change as a necessary extension of social justice research.

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On two separate occasions in the same semester, very capable and intelligent students cried in my office after failing one or more of the teacher certification exams required for licensure in the state of Pennsylvania. The students were undergraduate art education majors pursuing K-12 art certification in our state. Besides the students' widely-respected status in our department and their shared experience of failing the exams, the students also had their status as under-represented minorities in common.

Perhaps my immediate desire to do something related to the propensity I have as an oldest child to assume responsibility well beyond what is sometimes necessary. Or, maybe it was my recent success rallying local parents of K-12 children in an act of resistance against state-mandated standardized tests. The most likely reason, though, was the shock I felt that these two students, who were star students in many ways, had failed the exam. *How could this be?*

I embarked on a research study that I had not planned, fueled mostly by shock and outrage. The purpose of this study, at its conception, had three goals:

- Explore the effects that failing teacher certification exams had on the under-represented minority students with whom I work,
- Identify institutional barriers and potential supports for students of color in the teacher preparation programs at the university where I work, and
- Locate practical ways to challenge the injustice created by teacher certification exams.

The Work that Does Not Need to be Done

In some ways, I began the study in a "typical" scholarly fashion: I scoured the literature about barriers for under-represented minority students in teacher education programs, teacher licensure exams, and the disproportionate failure rates of under-represented minority students compared to their White peers. I quickly realized I would have little to add to the literature. There was an abundance of knowledge identifying sources of injustice in teacher education, evaluations of funded initiatives to address barriers, and qualitative studies that captured students' voices and experiences.

The abundance of knowledge has not kept the under-represented minority students I teach from disproportionately failing the exam. They are still failing disproportionately, despite...

- Research that identified standardized tests as an inherently and historically racist measurement tool (e.g., Lewis, 2014).
- Detailed demographic data of how under-represented minorities fare on content-specific licensure exams (e.g., Elpus, 2015)
- Well-reasoned, evidence-based arguments about the value of a more diverse teaching force (e.g., Villegas & Irvine, 2010).
- Educational Testing Service's partnership with the National Education Association that resulted in suggestions for targeted supports and intervention strategies for teacher licensure candidates (Tyler, 2011).
- The Brown Center on Education Policy's report that identified the "real challenges" to building a diverse workforce (Putman, Hansen, Walsh, Quintero, 2016).
- Stories of how under-represented minority students experience the tests differently than their white peers (e.g., Kelehna, Piana, Fata, 1999; Petchaur, 2014).

I realized that what needed to be done was not more traditional scholarship that yielded peer-reviewed publications for a relatively narrow readership. As an academic, that is difficult to accept given that this is the work we know how to do, and work that our institutions traditionally support and reward.

The Work that Needs to be Done

I realized that action was what was needed: people working together to 1) *act on the recommendations* outlined in almost every one of those publications, and 2) *dismantle the structures that perpetuate systemic injustice* in teacher preparation. However, since I had no initial idea how to challenge the mechanisms that maintain structural racism and societal inequities in teacher education, no institutional incentive to do so, and no extra time on my hands, I initially interviewed my students about their experiences and then did nothing.

My work was also stifled by an increasing uncertainty about my role as a White scholar, and whether and how to engage in research with under-represented minority participants without perpetuating oppression. For instance, research that identifies barriers students of color face in teacher education programs is conceptually important, and when published, likely benefits the researcher/scholar in terms of promotions, acclaim, paid speaking engagements, etc. However, if no one uses the research in an attempt to challenge/remove the barriers identified in the research, the oppressed have given (their willingness to participate, their stories, their time) for someone else's gain. The researcher profits at the expense of the participants. Therefore, I made a commitment not to present or publish (about whatever this work turned into) until I had taken action to make positive change that would benefit participants.

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Catalyst to Action

There are many scholars who have active, socially-engaged research practices that consider their relationship and responsibility to their participants beyond basic ethical standards enforced by institutional review boards. I desire to be among those scholars. During my period of lament resulting in no tangible action, I coincidentally encountered the work of Matthew Desmond and Paul Gorsky. Their work brought moments of clarity in which I was able to envision academic activism for myself and decided to take action.

The structural and systemic nature of poverty and homelessness highlighted in Desmond's ethnography work that resulted in his New York Times Best Selling book *Evicted* (2016) left me overwhelmed and outraged, much like what I had discovered related to under-represented minority students and teacher licensure testing. Yet, with Desmond's work, I had a

clue about how to make change. Through his resultant and related activist work (justshelter.org), Desmond offered those who encounter his work a tangible way to respond.

Paul Gorsky, who spoke at the university where I work in the fall of 2017, used the examples of coat drives and homelessness to challenge the audience's desire to do good. He called for work that dismantles oppressive structures (by challenging the conditions that create homelessness) which we often forsake in service of treating the symptoms of homelessness (e.g., having coat drives or serving in soup kitchens). Gorsky acknowledged that treating the

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symptoms make us feel like we are doing something helpful but the impact of such actions is short-lived and allows oppression to continue. In the talk, Gorsky unknowingly laid out a framework to help me approach my study with fresh eyes when he said, "However, I don't want the homeless to freeze to death while I work on structural issues."

In that moment, I realized that my work needed to mitigate the needs of the students right in front of me (finding on-campus supports to help them pass the tests) while building collaborative partnerships to challenge the testing requirement altogether. I set out to identify ways I could mitigate this issue for my students right here and now, and better understand the structures and policies that create this social injustice so that I could work toward change.

Doing the Work Here and Now

My interviews with student participants made it clear that I needed to better understand the test and the process of taking it, from registering to finding out scores. I registered to take the test fifteen years after passing it for my initial teaching license. This experience of re-taking the exam taught me a lot and allowed me to ask more specific questions of my participants. Through the process, I identified and made first attempts to mitigate difficulties students were experiencing. I outline these efforts in Table 1.

What I learned	Why this mattered	Actions I took as a result	Result
Availability and geographic location of testing site facilities.	This mattered because the metal-detecting wand used at some of the sites was a trigger for the students of color whose bodies have been policed in ways that I have not experienced. Not all sites used the same security methods.	An on-campus testing center (that had no metal-detecting and other physical policing of students' bodies) had limited hours. I advocated to the Dean of the College of Education, who oversaw the center, for additional testing opportunities and expanded hours.	The Dean listened and understood the concern. However, due to a few institutional issues, the testing center on campus closed completely less than 6 months later.
When students register for a test through the Educational Testing Service Website, nowhere during the checkout or registration process does it state that there are fee waivers available for students who need financial assistance.	A participant in my study was distressed about failing the test for many reasons, but finances were one of her main concerns. The five required tests, if passed on the first try, cost students \$390. This student spent \$750 on exams prior to passing them all. I realized students on our campus were generally unaware of the fee waiver.	I held a briefing on campus for anyone who wanted to attend. The briefing was attended by approximately 10 faculty, the Dean and Associate Dean of the College of Education, the Associate Provost, and two staff members who work in our university field placement office. I shared my work and suggested points of action at the university to better support students taking the licensure exams.	Colleagues now know I am working on this issue and send pertinent information my way. Others who attended the briefing were serving as academic advisors for students who were struggling to pass the tests and as a result of our shared conversation, were able to immediately offer strategies or resources for those students.
The university purchased a site license to ETS' practice exams.	Students did not know about the site license and were therefore paying for the practice exams, especially after they failed the test the first time, which increased their costs unnecessarily.	I asked and got permission to create an informational flyer to distribute to students during their first education courses that highlight the fee waiver as well as our university's site license which provides them access to practice exams.	All education majors at the university are made aware of the fee waiver and the university site license to the practice tests.

Table 1. *First attempts to mitigate barriers for students taking teaching licensure*

The limitation of Table 1 is that it fails to demonstrate the chain-like nature of how I encountered this information, which I believe is important to understand. For instance, I learned about the fee waiver while waiting at the testing center. When I arrived, a student who had taken two classes with me was also there to take her test. Shocked to see me there, she asked why I was there. When I explained I was doing research about the testing process and provided examples of barriers some students faced that I wanted to better understand, she casually mentioned she had a waiver and did not have to pay for the test. I, of course, was shocked such a thing existed. She, a White student, had also received an income-based waiver for the SAT, which she learned about through her high school guidance counselor. She and her mom just assumed since ETS authors both the SAT and PRAXIS tests, there would be a fee waiver for these tests as well. They were correct. Although well beyond the scope of my study, I immediately considered the systemic injustices present in K-12 schools that might result in some students having access to this type of knowledge from high school guidance counselors. None of the students from under-represented minority groups that participated in my study were aware of the income-based waiver even though some of them would also have qualified.

One other thing worth mentioning is that holding the briefing on campus and presenting my research to my local colleagues was the means by which I found out we had a university site license for practice exams. The briefing served as an opportunity for all of us to share current and potential supports for students, and resulted in a community-wide concern about many of the issues.

Challenging the structures

At the Social Justice Symposium at Florida State University, about which this journal issue is centered, Dr. Amber Johnson described the necessity of collaboration in order to challenge the larger structural injustices that exist in our society. This was an important reminder for me, as I begin to take action on some larger, more systemic issues and will need to gather voices/bodies to add to my own. Collaboration itself is work. This is especially true when those of us interested in collaborating work within institutions of higher education that often lack structural supports for collaboration and/or may not view academic activism as either service or scholarship. Doing the work to challenge the structures is difficult, and I need help.

I sought to better understand the structures I was trying to challenge by identifying exactly where the testing mandate lived in the policies of teacher licensure in our state. I learned that Pennsylvania's School Code requires an assessment plan, but that the types of assessments are not identified specifically in the law. Therefore, the law in Pennsylvania would not have to change. The Assessment Plan, which is approved triennially by the Pennsylvania Board of Education, would have to change.

Upon researching the Board of Education, I was able to identify a time at which they receive public comments during their meetings. Working with the Dean of the College of Education and Human Services at my institution, I was able to create a strategy for approaching the board based on his experience with some of the members. My goal is to present to speak to both the Board of Education and the Director of School Leadership and Teaching Quality at our state department of education by the end of 2018.

I also contacted the Educational Testing Service based on some of my concerns that arose throughout my process of registering for the exam. For instance, the fee waiver is not mentioned anywhere in the registration or payment processes. I contacted ETS with specific recommendations (see Appendix) on November 9, 2017. When I got rerouted to two other employees who were noted as working on this issue, I waited four months and heard nothing. I sent a follow up email on March 15, 2018. To date, I have yet to hear from ETS.

Conclusion

Requiring high-stakes exams as gateways into the profession is a social justice issue worthy of action from the field of art education. The work needs to address the obvious shortage of under-represented minorities in the U.S. teaching force and the tests and other barriers that perpetuate this shortage. However, this personal journey has also led me to recognize another crucial shortage. Scholars who do work to identify oppressive structures must also be willing and able to engage in activism to collaboratively disrupt those structures. Collaborative conversation and a shared commitment to equitable certification practices are essential to the work of social justice in teacher education. However, naming the work to be done does not sufficiently change the reality for the people who are oppressed. The only way structures will change is if after naming the work to be done, we do it.

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Appendix

Dear XXXXX,

I am an educational researcher and am engaged in an applied research study attempting to better support the students of color who disproportionately fail the PRAXIS tests our state requires for licensure. I was glad to see the “Towards Increasing Teacher Diversity” report that was a joint venture of ETS and NEA (<http://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/ETS-NEA-2011-01.pdf>) and pleased to learn about the Fee Waivers available for students, especially since it’s clear that socioeconomic status impacts the lives of many racial and ethnic minorities (<http://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/publications/minorities.aspx>).

Today I write with a few requests of ETS, based on two factors:

- 1) ETS’s published documents that identify it’s commitment to support teacher licensure candidates, and
- 2) My observations about ways in which ETS can increase transparency and supports in a few very specific ways.

Request #1: Include information about fee waivers in the process through which candidates register for PRAXIS exams. Based on my research, nowhere in the process of registering for a PRAXIS test are candidates made aware of the opportunity for a fee waiver. There is help text about vouchers during the checkout process (see screenshots below), but the potential for a fee waiver is not included.

Request #2: Expand the opportunity of fee vouchers so that students have the ability to retake the test using an additional voucher during the same year. Based on ETS’s own research and statistics specific to test takers in my home state, it is clear that students of color have lower first time passing rates than their white peers. Therefore, students of color retake the exams at higher rates than their white peers. The existing fee waiver terms may inadvertently delay or deter a student in a licensure program if they cannot a) afford the test on their own or 2) wait a year because of progress benchmarks in their program.

Thank you for hearing my concerns. I look forward to your response and perhaps a continued dialogue about supporting candidates of color.

Sincerely,
Leslie Gates

About the Author

Leslie Gates, Ph.D. is Associate Professor of Art Education at Millersville University of Pennsylvania, where she coordinates the undergraduate and graduate art education programs. She has taught visual art at the high school and elementary levels in both urban and rural contexts. Leslie's research interests are art educator's professional learning, assessment in the arts, and feminist and choice-based pedagogies. Her research, using participatory and feminist approaches, often means she is working alongside art educators to identify problems and work towards possible solutions. Leslie's artistic practice includes artists books that explore and question the history and sacredness of objects and experiences.

