

Development of a Qualifying Exam and its Use in

Admission to Teacher Preparation Programs

Jerry Neal

University of Central Missouri

Introduction

The preparation of education professionals, like most other professions, involves a number of gate-keeping responsibilities on the part of university or college officials to ensure that only the most qualified candidates are admitted to programs and ultimately achieve licensure or certification to teach in the nation's schools. Additionally, state departments of education typically require that the teacher education programs in their state set at least minimal standards for gaining admission to preparation programs for those seeking to become educators. Furthermore, accreditation entities such as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) have had established accreditation standards in place for decades. Examples of these standards include how teacher preparation programs induct candidates into their respective programs, what kinds of competencies are expected from the candidates, and what exit examinations or other criteria are used to determine if the program's graduates are ready and able to enter the profession and teach a diverse population of children and youth.

States and universities use a wide assortment of practices to admit candidates to their respective teacher preparation programs. Some states, for example, require that teacher education candidates earn a minimum score on paper-pencil tests such as the PRAXIS 1 or the Measure of Academic Proficiency and Progress (MAPP), both of which are widely-recognized assessment

products of Educational Testing Services (ETS) and essentially measure basic academic abilities in content areas such as mathematics, science, social studies, and written composition skills.

The use of standardized tests to admit candidates to colleges' teacher education programs is not without its detractors. Case law continues to mount supporting the notion that states and university teacher education programs can, and should, establish a variety of gate-keeping measures designed to eliminate candidates that may not be successful in the nation's public school systems (Karanxha & Zirkel, 2008). Levin (2006), in his widely-acclaimed report *Educating School Teachers*, notes that universities with teacher education programs tend to set low admission standards for those programs and further stresses that teacher education programs should bolster these admission standards if the nation's P-12 schools want to obtain higher test scores in elementary and secondary classrooms. Other policy analysts, such as Wakefield (2003), have espoused the belief that most of the extant paper and pencil gate-keeping requirements, which are very similar to the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or the American College Test (ACT), are both redundant and needlessly discriminate against minority applicants to the programs.

Assessment of content knowledge is not the only consideration when candidates apply for admission to teacher education programs or when they seek initial licensure to teach. Increasingly, an assessment of a candidate's "disposition" toward the profession of teaching is sought, and even required, by some university teacher preparation programs or by states' licensing entities. However, defining what a "disposition" is, or what set of dispositions should be employed in these instances, is daunting at best and subject to debate among even veteran professionals in the education field. A number of studies and position papers on the topic of teacher dispositions, and how to accurately assess them in teacher education candidates, has

emerged over the last ten years (For excellent discussions of this debate, see the works of Combs, et al 1974; Lewis, et al. 1999; Wascisko, 2002). As such, wide consensus on which particular dispositions constitute a definitive set of attitudes and behaviors has yet to be achieved.

This paper discusses in detail how one teacher education program determined that its teacher preparation program admission procedure was outdated and how a new system was developed and put into place. The new admission process uses assessments of both content knowledge and teacher dispositions. It is the authors' intention to detail step-by-step this process so that others may have an understating of the process and perhaps utilize it in their own institutions.

Previous Process for Admission

The "Interview" for admission of Special Education majors to the Teacher Education Program at the university had existed in the same format for more than a decade. Basically, the Interview process consisted of the following:

- Candidates were seated around a table in a large conference room equipped with audio/video recording equipment and a two-way mirror to a control room that would permit two faculty members to observe candidates. The candidates could not see the faculty. If more than about 8 candidates were involved, the process operated in "batches" of candidates consisting of from 5-6 interviewees.
- Candidates were given a "topic question" which was to be discussed by the group as a whole, much as professionals would do at an open forum at a conference breakout session. Examples of "topic questions" would include a "starter item" such as "Corporeal

punishment has been abolished in your school district. What types of alternative behavior management procedures might be used in place of paddling children, and how can you justify each one?” Or, “Describe how you would go about selecting a paraprofessional for your classroom. What kinds of skills or attributes might you look for in that person?”

The faculty members observing the discussion would record the number of times that each candidate added to the discussion (frequency count), and made notes as to the appropriateness of each candidate’s responses (qualitative). Candidates were generally given 12-15 minutes to discuss the topic, but if it was obvious after 10-12 minutes that the group had depleted discussion strands, the interview was stopped, and the group proceeded to Phase 2.

- Phase 2 consisted of the candidates watching the video of their Interview and completing a self-reflection of their performances. Items on the self-reflection included things such as “I gave adequate support for my responses” or “I was able to disagree with others in an agreeable manner.”
- Candidates were generally recommended for admission to the program if they had “meaningfully contributed” to the Interview discussion, had passed a portfolio check and had passed a state-mandated content knowledge examination similar to the PRAXIS I or MAPP assessments produced by Educational Testing Services (ETS).

Informal discussions with candidates by several faculty members over the years indicated that the students did not perceive the Interview as a valid mechanism for admitting candidates to the final stages of their academic careers as it did not assess their content knowledge of the special education field, did not tap into their understanding of specialized pedagogy, legal issues,

historical development of the field, or how to collaborate with families and other professionals who work with children and youth with special needs on a daily basis. Several graduates of the Program, when asked about their experiences with the process, commented that the entire procedure was “a joke” and that the Program should take immediate steps to increase the rigor of the admission process and ensure that only candidates who demonstrated accurate content knowledge and possessed the appropriate dispositions will be admitted to the Teacher Education Program.

Revising the Process

In the summer of 2007, the Special Education Faculty determined to revise the Admission Process, and discussed ways to develop an assessment procedure that would be both fair yet rigorous to candidates seeking admission to the University Teacher Education Program as Special Education Majors. The group quickly agreed that the process should use the state-mandated dispositions that are a part of the overall assessment for both acceptance into the “professional student teaching semester” and at the completion of the student teaching semester. The dispositions are also used by the university’s teacher education program to conduct follow-up studies on graduates of the program, and thus it would be desirable to use the dispositions as the focus of the new admission process as well. The state’s disposition statements, loosely based on those espoused by the Interstate New Teachers Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), were agreed upon by the faculty members as the foundation for assessment items in the new “Qualifying Examination.” These ten Dispositions can be found in Appendix A. Additionally, the faculty members agreed that some measure of special education content

knowledge should also be included in the admission Qualifying Examination. One faculty member agreed to assume the responsibility for selecting items from test banks provided by textbook publishers in core courses required of all special education candidates in the early stages of their programs of study. These courses will be generic courses found in most special education major programs and titled for example as “Psychology/Education of the Exceptional Child,” “Collaborating with/Counseling Families of Children with Special Needs,” and “Introduction to Special Education Programs.”

Two other faculty members agreed to examine the Teacher Education Program’s “Disposition Statements” and devise “constructed response” items (written response items) that could capture the extent to which each respondent had developed that particular “attitude” toward teaching children with special needs. The faculty members who assumed this responsibility had a rather daunting task that was two-fold. First, they had to develop a set of questions that they believed would both embody what each disposition was about and would be measureable in objective terms. Second, they would have to devise scoring criteria (rubrics) for each item that would allow for unbiased measurement of the mastery of each disposition. There were few guides in the professional literature to follow in order to construct questions or scoring rubrics for these widely-used indices of professional conduct and attitude. Faculty members also agreed that the scoring rubrics should parallel the other scoring rubrics that were currently being used for other components of the program’s overall assessment system. Scoring rubrics included a 4-point scale (0=Does Not Meet; 1=Progressing; 2=Meets Standard; 3=Exceeds the Standard). Because requiring each candidate to address all ten Disposition Statements would prove to be impractical and very time consuming, faculty agreed that candidates must score at least an average of 6 points on a total of three Dispositions Constructed Response items, with not more

than one response being at or below a score of 1(Progressing). Thus, a score of 9 would be a perfect performance on this section of the Qualifying Exam.

After much writing, editing, rewriting, and outside consultation, the ten disposition statement questions and their scoring criteria and the set of objective content knowledge items were finally ready for critique and validation from outside the university. The reader is directed to Appendix B to see one of the 10 Disposition Statement questions and its scoring rubric as well as two objective content knowledge items.

Validation Process

The state where the university is located has a number of regional advisory groups that consist of directors of special education programs who are members of the Council for Exceptional Children's Council for Administrator's of Special Education (CASE). The principle author is a member of the State's CASE organization and has regular contacts with these seasoned professionals. The CASE group was approached with the request for volunteers to peruse both sections of the Qualifying Exam (Objective Items and Constructed Response), and asked these volunteers to complete a Likert-Type Scale assessment of each item. This assessment asked the respondent to address each item on a 4-point scale (1=Inappropriate; 2=Appropriate; 3=Very Useful; 4=Essential). The respondents were also given the opportunity to provide comments pertaining to each item. Six CASE members agreed to participate in the validation process and were sent the Qualifying Examination Items and the Assessment Protocol via email. All six participants returned the instruments within 10 days as requested by the principle author. The responses from the respondents were highly favorable. It had been pre-determined that any item receiving a response of 1 (Inappropriate) from two or more raters would be eliminated.

Additionally, any item that was perceived as being “Appropriate” or “Very Useful” but tended to be ambiguous would be reworded. Only two items (both multiple-choice items dealing with language impairments) needed to be reworded. No item was deemed “Inappropriate.” No constructed response item was targeted for revision. After rewording the two multiple-choice items of concern, and receiving favorable responses to the revisions from the CASE members, the Qualifying Exam was ready to administer to Candidates to the Teacher Education Program.

Pilot Testing

In late October of 2008, the last of the traditional “Interview” candidates went through the process as they had done for several years, with the exception that this group was told that they also would be confronted with the “new” process. After doing both sections of the “old” format (video-taping of the group discussing the interview ‘question’ and the self reflection of their performance), the group (N= 9) was taken to a computer lab in the same building and instructed to take the “Objective Test” portion of the new Qualifying Exam. They were told that the test would be “counted” as to whether they would be admitted to the program or not, thus ensuring that sufficient effort would be exerted on their part. The candidates were required to log onto the Black Board Learning System that is used as the online course delivery system at their university and is one of the most common methods for online course delivery at many universities nationwide. All candidates were familiar with Black Board and the procedures needed to take an online test. The “Constructed Response” section was not administered to this group. These candidates were administered only the objective (multiple-choice) items. The group was given 60 minutes to complete the test. There were 50 multiple choice items and the group scored a mean of 38 correct responses (76%, range 32-46).

A serendipitous request occurred to the authors when several candidates, for a variety of reasons, could not take the Interview as scheduled. These candidates were told that they had two options: Wait until the next semester to take the Qualifying Exam, which meant waiting an entire year to take advanced “methods courses” and putting off student teaching for perhaps a year, or take the Qualifying Exam in its pilot version, and be admitted (or denied acceptance to the program) based upon their scores. All candidates (N=5) agreed to take both sections of the Qualifying Exam and abide by the scoring procedures set forth by the faculty. This meant that the scoring rubric for the Constructed Response Disposition Items would now be tested. As previously mentioned, each candidate responded to only three of these Disposition Statements. Black Board allows the faculty member to have the program randomly assign three items to each candidate. For example, “Candidate One” may respond to Dispositions 4, 9, and 11, while “Candidate Two” responds to Dispositions 2, 3, and 8. Their results for the multiple-choice section were somewhat lower than the first group (mean correct items=32, range=31-44). The group scored on the Constructed Response section a mean of 6.8 (range 5-8).

In order to further refine both sections of the Qualifying Examination, student volunteers who had already been admitted to the teacher education program were solicited and asked to assist in the piloting process. Four students agreed to do this and were each paid a small honorarium (\$50 each) for their services. As expected, the volunteers, all of whom had been admitted to the teacher education program and were preparing to do student teaching the next semester, fared considerably better than the two earlier pilot groups. They scored much higher on both the multiple-choice section (mean=45, range=42-49) as well as the Constructed Response section (mean=7.3, range=7-9). At the conclusion of this piloting session, the four students were asked to submit comments about their experience with the new process, including providing

suggestions about the appropriateness of the items, wording and difficulty of the items, and any other comments that they cared to make about this process. All four students provided favorable comments and were very enthusiastic about the new process, particularly noting the greater rigor than that which they experienced in the old “traditional interview” process. Additionally, consistent feedback from these students indicated that we needed to change wording on three multiple-choice items and completely eliminate and replace two other items as the content of the items was too advanced for candidates in this stage of their academic programs.

First Session with the New Process

In late March of 2009, the first group of candidates officially went through the new Qualifying Examination process. The group was about average size for this process (N=7 candidates). As had been done in the first piloting session, the candidates were assembled in the computer lab, asked to logon to their Black Board Learning System accounts, and were instructed how to proceed with the two sections of the exam. They could opt to take either the multiple-choice or the constructed response section first. Two program professors, including the first author, were there to proctor the session and assist students should anything go wrong with the technology. Candidates were told that they had 90 minutes to complete both sections of the exam. There was only one minor problem in which one candidate completed the first section of the test, neglected to save her work, and lost that portion of the exam. She was allowed to start over without penalty. All candidates completed both sections of the exam within the time allotted. Table 1 presents the information regarding the performance of this group of candidates on the Qualifying Examination.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Additional Refinements

Faculty members, for the most part, were generally pleased with the way that the new assessment process has functioned thus far. Because candidates are to be evaluated by at least two faculty members, the Constructed Response section from the first group of candidates was provided to four of the special education faculty members who agreed to score the responses using the Scoring Rubric that had been developed for this purpose. Inter-rater reliability, using Cohen's Kappa Coefficient, was computed for these faculty members' scoring these responses. Inter-rater reliability coefficient was found to be high (.94), and thus faculty responses in scoring these sections in the future should be very similar.

It was agreed that an "acceptable performance" on the new assessment would be as follows: An average score of 35 on the Multiple Choice section, and an average score of 6 on the Constructed response section. However, during discussions about student performance, faculty were quick to point out that some students perform better on multiple-choice items than they do on essay items, and vice-versa, and so a means of weighting the scores might prove useful in instances where candidates did not meet one of the two acceptable passing scores. It was agreed that one point on the Constructed Response section would be equal to three points on the Multiple Choice section. Thus, if a candidate had only 32 points on the Multiple-Choice section, this could be offset by scoring at least 7 points (1 above mean) on the Constructed Response section. Similarly, a candidate scoring 38 points on the Multiple-Choice section could have a score of 5 on the Constructed Response section and still "pass" the Qualifying Exam as a whole.

Concluding Thoughts

The new Qualifying Examination process for gaining admission to the Teacher Education program at this university appears to be a valid and reliable method of selecting candidates who are likely to become competent, compassionate professional educators. The next step to determine actual validity of the process will be to examine the teaching performance of these individuals in an objective manner during student teaching as well as when they take their places in their own classrooms in the schools where they subsequently will be employed. It is hoped that other institutions will utilize this process in their own programs and view it as a valuable mechanism for the selection of qualified candidates to their teacher education programs.

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Table 1

Qualifying Exam Results for First Group of Candidates (N=7)

	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Range</u>	<u>Possible Score</u>
<u>Test</u>			
Multiple-Choice	37.8	31-44	50
Constructed Response	7.6	1-9	9

Appendix A

Disposition Statements

Disposition 1: Commits to high expectations for all students, and values the ability/capacity for each student to learn. (INTASC 1,2,3,4,5,6,7)

Disposition 2: Values student ability to apply concepts learned to performance activities. (INTASC 1,2,3,4,5,7)

Disposition 3: Commits to the development of critical thinking skills (e.g., problem solving, analysis, etc.). (INTASC 1,2,3,4,6)

Disposition 4: Commits to seeking out, developing, and continually refining teaching practices that generate more learning for students. (INTASC 9)

Disposition 5: Commits to development of lessons that are interesting and engaging through a variety of instructional strategies to accommodate all learners, including those from diverse backgrounds, experiences, and cultures (e.g., use of technology, grouping, motivating materials). (INTASC 1,2,3,4,5,6)

Disposition 6: Commits to making appropriate adaptations and accommodations for students with diverse needs (e.g., use of technology). (INTASC 1,2,3,5,6,8)

Disposition 7: Appreciates and promotes acceptance of self-discipline, responsibility, and self-esteem. (INTASC 2,5,6)

Disposition 8: Commits to a positive and enthusiastic attitude for teaching and learning to inspire self and others. (INTASC 9)

Disposition 9: Believes students and colleagues should be treated and should treat others with kindness, fairness, patience, dignity, and respect. (INTASC 5,6,9,10)

Disposition 10: Commits to relationships with school colleagues, parents, and educational partners in the larger community to support student learning and well being. (INTASC 10)

Appendix B

Sample Constructed Response Item and Related Scoring Rubric

and

Samples of Multiple-Choice Items

Disposition 4: Commits to seeking out, developing, and continually refining teaching practices that generate more learning for students.

Describe, in detail, what you would do, the steps you would take, if you had a student who was not learning a specific skill or concept after you had been teaching it for several days.

ZERO POINTS - Does Not Meet Standard: Does not offer any specific suggestions, other than continue to teach the skill or concept in the same or slightly different manner. Offers to refer the child to a “specialist” in that particular academic area.

ONE POINT - Progressing: Suggests, or alludes to ways to re-teach the skill or concept. States that parental assistance could be solicited. States that collegial help could be obtained.

Two Points – Meets Standard: Describes how alternative teaching methods can be tailored to meet student’s needs. Suggests, or specifies, materials modification, alternate lesson plans, or modification of learner expectations. Implies how he or she would consult with colleagues to accomplish the learning skill/objective. Describes how parents/families could become involved in teaching the skill/concept.

Three Points – Exceeds The Standard: Describes how teacher assistance teams can be used to accomplish learning objectives. Alludes to or specifies one or more of the following:

- Doing research in professional literature or methodology texts to find ways to meet learner objectives.
- Communicating with parents to solicit help for the student at home
- Peer tutoring
- Computer-assisted teaching
- Reinforcement techniques
- Attending workshop/class to develop teaching skills
- Taking baselines and exploring effectiveness of alternative teaching methods
- Other specific interventions

Sample Multiple-Choice Items

Which of the following acronyms best describes the substance of Public Law 94-142 (IDEA)?

- A. LRE
- B. FAPE** (Correct Response)
- C. SQRRR
- D. EHCA

The term for children who once were labeled “mentally retarded” is now which of these?

- A. Mentally Handicapped
- B. Severely Disabled
- C. Trainable Children
- D. Cognitively Impaired** (Correct response)

Author Contact Information:

Jerry Neal

Work: (660) 543-8497 Home: (660) 394-2690

University of Central Missouri, Lovinger 4136, Warrensburg, MO 64093

Email: jneal@ucmo.edu . FAX: (660) 543-4164

Jerry Neal, Ed.D., is Professor of Special Education and Coordinator of Special Education Programs at the University of Central Missouri. His research interests include assistive technology and modifications of equipment and materials for students with special needs.

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the step-by-step process used by a teacher preparation program to develop a more rigorous method for admitting candidates to the program. Through the use of constructed response items focusing on established teacher disposition statements and objective multiple-choice questions, the program produced a validated instrument that can be adapted to a wide variety of teacher education programs seeking to improve gate-keeping responsibilities to the professional education semester or internship/practicum experiences.