

National Implications: Teacher Education Students' Perceptions of State Licensure Requirements and Pedagogical Training

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ABSTRACT

As a result of the “No Child Left Behind” legislation, many state departments of education are advocating stricter standards of accountability to ensure only “highly qualified” teachers are employed, and many states require teacher education students to pass state licensure examinations to meet the “highly qualified” standard. This study examines teacher education students’ perceptions of pedagogical training and state teacher licensure examinations. Data from open-ended interviews of 267 teacher education students show most teacher education students believe formal pedagogical training and state licensure examinations are important to ensure teachers are well trained before entering classrooms. Although many policy makers are concerned about teacher shortages, our findings seem to confirm that state licensure requirements do not discourage prospective teachers from entering the teaching profession; instead, most teacher education students accept licensure examinations as important requirements for any profession such as the law, medicine, or teaching.

Introduction

Throughout most of the twentieth century, teacher licensure in the United States primarily was controlled by teacher education programs of colleges and universities. Graduates of these programs were considered qualified to

teach and were granted teacher licensure by their respective state departments of education (Darling-Hammond, 1999). However, with the publication A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform (1983) by the National Commission of Educational Excellence, the American public began to question the effectiveness of American public schools and called for educational reforms as advocated in this influential report. In reaction to A Nation at Risk, many states began to require more standardized testing for public school students and for candidates of teacher licensure to increase measures of accountability. In spite of state requirements, some school districts still hired and retained teachers who had not passed examinations mandated by their respective state departments of education.

However, the recent “No Child Left Behind Act of 2001” requires a “highly qualified teacher” in all classrooms in the United States, and state departments of education are more accountable to ensure anyone hired as a teacher has completed state requirements for licensure before they actually teach in public schools. Consequently, most states require teacher education students to pass mandated state examinations before they are considered “highly qualified” and eligible for employment as teachers. Recent polls show the vast majority of parents and the general public support reforms to hire and retain qualified teachers who are knowledgeable about content, learning theory, and methods because they believe teachers are the most critical factor for improving American schools (Educational Testing Service, 2002).

Purpose

As previously noted, teacher education students in most states must pass teacher licensure examinations before being considered “highly qualified” for employment. The purpose of this study was (1) to understand how teacher education students perceive the reasons for and the value of state mandated examinations for teacher licensure and (2) to determine whether or not teacher education students value their pedagogical training. Teacher education students who believe teacher licensure examinations are an important part of their professional development and who value their pedagogical training probably will have more incentive to complete their respective teacher education programs and attain teacher licensure than will those education students who do not value pedagogical training and state licensure requirements. At a time of teacher shortages in many rural and inner city schools, it is as important to retain teacher education students as it is to maintain quality teacher programs (Ingersoll, 2001). Understanding how teacher education students perceive state mandated testing is an important consideration, especially in terms of whether or not these examinations discourage prospective teachers from entering the teaching profession.

Like most states, Texas requires its teacher education students to pass licensure examinations. Because all teacher education students regardless of certification area (e.g., early childhood through fourth grade, fourth through eighth grade, and ninth through twelfth grade) must pass the TExES Pedagogy and Professional Responsibilities (PPR) examination, we focused our study on understanding teacher education students' perceptions of the TExES PPR, which is based primarily on four domains of knowledge: Domain I: Designing Instruction and Assessments to Promote Student Learning; Domain II: Creating a Positive Classroom Climate; Domain III: Implementing Effective, Responsive Instruction and Assessment; and Domain IV: Fulfilling Professional Roles and Responsibilities.

Sample

The sample of this study included teacher education students at a regional university in Texas. This university of approximately 7,000 students initially was established as a teacher normal school, and teacher education training still is one of its primary emphases. All participants in this sample of 267 students were enrolled in either a foundations of education or educational psychology course, the two primary courses, which this respective university uses to prepare students for the TExES PPR examination.

Data Collection and Analyses

Open-ended questionnaires were used to elicit students' perceptions of state licensure examinations and teacher education training. Questionnaires were administered by a professor other than the instructor of record for the course in question, and students completed these questionnaires during their respective classes to ensure high completion rates. Students were provided with as much time as necessary to respond adequately to each question. A total of 267 teacher education students from the following certification areas completed the open-ended questionnaires: early childhood through fourth grade, 115 students; fourth through eighth grade, 64 students; ninth through twelfth grades, 88 students. Each response was analyzed and coded by two different individuals, who employed qualitative methods advocated by Spradley (1980). If the two coders were not in agreement concerning how an item was coded, a third person coded the item in question. Next, a componential analysis was completed to organize the data into dominant themes for more in-depth analysis (Spradley, 1980).

Findings

The Value of Licensure Examinations

An analysis of the data revealed most teacher education students (89%) believe state licensure requirements are valuable aspects of their professional development. Teacher education students noted that teaching is an important profession and that all professions like medicine, law, and counseling need strict standards for certification. Other students emphasized that standards and required tests ensure teachers are well trained and competent. Furthermore, some students stressed state mandated teacher examinations are important to hold universities and teacher education programs accountable. The following two responses are typical of those students who noted that state departments of education must monitor teacher licensure to ensure the competency of prospective educators:

I think the PPR exam helps ensure teachers are knowledgeable and well prepared to enter into a teaching career. Otherwise, schools would be uncertain as to whether the teachers they hire drifted mindlessly through college or actually learned what they needed to know. State departments of education need to make sure teachers are well prepared just as they do to ensure physicians are competent.

Standardization is the purpose of certifying teachers through state agencies. The purposes of the state teacher tests are to see if we understand what we have been taught & can apply it.

On the other hand, some students (about 11%) did not believe teacher licensure examinations by state agencies are important. The most common response was the concern that individuals who had potential to become excellent teachers may not achieve licensure because they could not pass state examinations. Others stated requirements to pass examinations are attempts by state departments of education to control teachers and the teaching profession without actually improving education, and one student noted:

The state is trying to control teachers – it's a political tool to make it look like politicians really can and want to improve schools. It's all for show.

Perceptions of Education Coursework

The majority of the students (93%) believe their teacher education training is valuable in terms of preparing them as future teachers. Some of the most

common responses focused on how these courses exposed them to key aspects of teaching such as knowledge about effective teaching strategies, lesson planning, classroom management, student motivation, parental involvement, diverse learners, and special education. One teacher education student stated:

I have learned so much about learning theories and teaching students from diverse cultural backgrounds. There is so much to know to become a good teacher; I don't know how anyone could really help kids without a strong background in teacher education.

However, a few students (7%) described teacher education training as ineffective. The following statement is an example of the responses written by students who believe teachers primarily learn to teach by teaching and teacher education training is unnecessary:

I really don't think teacher education courses are helpful because most teachers I've spoken with say they don't remember much from their courses and just do what works in their classroom teaching.

These teacher education students appear to assume that prospective teachers must learn about content area knowledge through their university courses but that their training in teacher education is unnecessary for their preparation as future teachers.

Teacher education students who do not value courses in learning theory and methods seem to assume pedagogical training is impractical in the university context. For instance, one teacher education student complained that much of teacher education training lacks practical applications and real-world contexts and that teachers learn to teach through on the job experience in the classroom:

Education classes aren't real-world teaching situations even if they give us examples from the classroom. The examples still won't be exactly like what will go on in my own classroom. I'll learn to teach by teaching and maybe some theory later.

Curriculum Alignment

Another finding is that teacher education students are aware that the four domains of knowledge have become the curricular framework for foundations and educational psychology courses. Most teacher education students believe their

pedagogical training has a dual purpose of preparing them for teaching and for the successful completion of teacher licensure examinations. One teacher education student commented:

Studying the domains of knowledge and trying to master them gives us specific ideas, theories, and solutions about teaching, but it also helps us to prepare for and pass the state teacher examination. The concepts of the domains will help us with real-life classroom situations. I am glad the concepts of the 4 domains, the PPR exam, and the practical knowledge from our teacher ed courses overlap. We [teacher education students] are able to study for the state exam and prepare for classroom teaching at the same time.

Most teacher education students are relieved that their foundations and educational psychology courses are aligned to the four domains of knowledge tested on the TExES PPR, and they emphasized the importance of pedagogical training as well as the necessity of preparing for licensure examinations to meet the “highly qualified” standard of the “No Child Left Behind” legislation.

On the other hand, a few teacher education students were concerned about passing teachers licensure examinations but not about acquiring a knowledge-base of teaching and learning. For example, one teacher education student said:

I’m glad- relieved to a great extent- that the content of our [teacher education] courses prepares us for the TExES exam. I’ve talked to personnel directors and they’re not very interested in hiring people who haven’t passed the state tests. Even if education courses weren’t that helpful for our future teaching, at least we will be able to find a teaching position and learn to teach if we can pass the state tests.

In this respect, some teacher education students viewed passing licensure examinations as an end in itself and taking teaching education courses only as a means of preparation to pass these examinations.

Conclusions

As a result of the “No Child Left Behind” legislation, state departments of education are advocating stricter measures of accountability to ensure that only “highly qualified teachers” are employed as teachers. To meet the “highly qualified” standard, prospective teachers in Texas must pass state licensure examinations. Although we acknowledge that the views of teacher education

students in our sample may not reflect those of teacher education students at other universities, we have found that most teacher education students do not perceive state licensure examinations as an irrelevant step for state teacher licensure. In fact, most teacher education students favor some sort of state mandated examinations for teachers, and only a few teacher education students believe state licensure examinations discourage prospective educators from pursuing teacher licensure.

These findings seem to concur with the research of Sedlack and Schlossman (1986) who found raising standards for teacher licensure does not discourage individuals from entering the teaching profession even in times of shortages. This is an important consideration because there are growing concerns about teacher shortages in the United States (Belfield, 2005). Equally important, we found most teacher education students value pedagogical training from their teacher education programs. Research has shown pedagogical training does have positive effects on student learning (Laczko-Kerr and Berliner, 2002; Wenglinsky, 2002); consequently, it is critical for teacher education students to profit from their teacher education courses. The more prospective educators perceive their training as an important part of their preparation for classroom teaching, the more inclined they will be to learn about current research on best practices. Although it is debatable whether or not state mandated teacher licensure examinations improve the quality of teachers entering the profession, the majority of teacher education students in this study accept and value state licensure requirements.

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