INTRODUCTION

The issue of teacher evaluation and certification was raised by the Conservative Government as early as 1999. In June 2001 the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) announced that in order to continue to achieve teacher excellence a new "teacher testing program" will come into effect in the 2001-2002 school year. All new teachers and a proportion of practicing teachers will participate in a mandatory re-certification program. The "teacher testing program" includes a language proficiency test, a qualifying test, an induction program, and a performance appraisal. According to the OME such a program will "assure parents that new teachers know the curriculum and teaching strategies before they enter a classroom,"¹ and "a certification test may be viewed as a safeguard for the public -- a mechanism that helps ensure that only individuals who possess important knowledge and skills enter into professional practice."²

The newly introduced "teacher testing program" has been vigorously debated by teachers, teacher federations, teacher educators, teacher candidates (TCs), parent groups, and other stakeholders concerned about the quality of education in schools. Although teacher organizations in Ontario favour excellent teaching and continuous professional development, they have strongly critiqued the nature of the proposed testing program on the basis of available research. For example, the research offices of the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO) and the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation (OSSTF) have stated that research shows that the proposed "teacher testing program" will not meet the OME's stated goals of ensuring high professional standards in schools.³

The major purpose of our study was to investigate the two major arguments adduced by the OME in favour of the present format of the Ontario Teacher Qualifying Test (OTQT): that the test will serve as an appropriate means of accountability and that it will secure excellence in teaching. More specifically, the study aimed at providing a critical analysis of TCs’ perspectives on the potential impact of OTQT on (a) the content and process of teacher education programs and (b) teacher knowledge and professional development.
A survey was conducted during April and May 2002 with TCs from 3 major faculties of education in Ontario. The survey consisted of two parts: Part I consisted of 12 questions based on a 5-point Likert scale seeking TCs’ perceptions of the content and process of the test, its utility as an evaluation tool (that is, whether the test predicts the level of competence of future teachers and whether passing the test will secure appropriate teaching performance), and its potential impact on teacher education and professional learning; Part II consisted of 6 open-ended questions that sought elaboration on and creative solutions to the issues raised in Part I. The survey was completed by a total of 603 TCs; 40% of the TCs completed the survey prior to the test, 60% completed the survey within two weeks of having taken the test. The data obtained before and after the test was taken as well as those data from the three faculties of education showed similar patterns in their results. Focus group interviews conducted with TCs after they had taken the test also showed similar patterns in the responses. Candidates were selected randomly, and in two of three sites focus group interviews were conducted.

This study was guided by a critical democratic perspective that values divergent and dialogical inquiry, open-mindedness, critical abilities and questioning, equity, and taking alternatives seriously. From this theoretical stance, it is crucial to elicit and examine TCs’ perspectives about the test and their insights regarding the possible impact of such testing on teacher education programs, and their own beliefs and teaching practices. The voice of the TCs ought to be included in considering the relevance and utility of such a test. Indeed, other than those who have constructed the test and evaluated the responses, TCs are the only ones who have interacted with the test in its entirety.

PART I: SURVEY FINDINGS

- An overwhelming number of students (91%) state that the test results would not predict the level of competence of future teachers, and 89% of the participants disagree that there is a positive correlation between test performance and teaching performance.

- An equally impressive number of students (83%) state that the qualifying test does not ensure educational accountability.

- 79% disagree that the testing program is democratic in nature.

- With regard to the specifics of the test, 69% of the participants believe that the content of the test excludes divergent knowledge and perspectives; 78% disagree that the multiple choice questions and the OTQT case studies test the critical knowledge required for the teaching-learning process; and 76% feel that the multiple choice questions do not encourage divergent and critical inquiry. It is interesting to note that the majority of participants (60%) felt that the case studies given on the test discourage divergent and critical inquiry.

- With regard to the issue of standardization, 59% of the participants claim that testing for standardized knowledge will potentially de-professionalize and demoralize teachers, while half of the participants claim that testing for standardized knowledge will potentially limit teachers’ pedagogical skill development.
• With regard to impact on teacher education programs, 65% of participants fear that the OTQT will eliminate the autonomy and uniqueness of teacher education programs.

PART II: QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

The following are the highlights of the major issues arising from the TCs’ responses to the six open-ended questions.

A. TCs’ perceptions of OME motives for introducing the test

The overwhelming majority of participants felt that the OME launched a teacher-qualifying test for purely political reasons rather than for educational concerns.

Specific reasons identified for political motivation are:

• The government aimed at (a) exercising power and control over the teaching profession, saving face for a “failed” education system resulting from challenges brought by budget cuts and inappropriate curriculum reforms, and (b) appeasing parents and the public by shifting blame and negative publicity onto teachers.

• The government’s attempt to create a wedge between teachers and their unions to minimize teacher power on school/education policy and other decision-making processes.

• The government’s approach to OTQT masks the more serious concern about the eroding confidence in public education. This erosion, TCs believe, would encourage Ontarians to seek alternative (private) education.

• While perceived accountability is seen as another major motive, the majority of the participants challenged the view that testing ensures accountability and improves teacher competency. On the contrary, most participants fear that the test may aim at (a) producing teachers who all think and act uniformly, and (b) reduce teacher education faculties to factory-like institutions producing a “uni-standard product.”

B. Potential negative consequences of test

All but three respondents indicated that the test would negatively impact (a) quality and diversity in the teacher education curriculum, (b) flexibility for critical thinking of TCs, and (c) the democratic project of education. More importantly, the test would have negligible impact on students in the schools. More specifically:
• The test would adversely affect the quality of teacher education, i.e., faculties would “teach to the test” rather than provide opportunities for development of high quality teachers based on creativity, critical thinking, and concern for social justice and equity.

• The test would be unfair, in that, it might fail (exclude) “good teachers” and pass “bad teachers” based on test-takers’ capacity to perform adequately under “standardized testing” conditions.

• The test itself contradicted what TCs are taught about good education (e.g., flexibility and critical thinking), and such conflict would discourage and demoralize potential teachers. This would in turn lead to teacher shortages and create conflicts between teachers and administrators.

• The test would disadvantage and/or not directly benefit the children, given the emphasis on theory and conformity to standardization over in-class flexibility skills required in dealing with diverse student needs.

• The test was non-democratic in its construction and its implementation, and it would dis-empower teachers.

• TCs’ choices of teacher education programs would be influenced by a faculty of education’s pass/fail rates, rather than the quality and uniqueness of its program.

C. TCs’ recommendations for overcoming perceived consequences of OTQT

TCs advised their faculties not to succumb to tougher admission standards, standardized curriculum content, and “teaching to the test” as is the pattern of response to policy makers’ demands elsewhere. Instead, to avoid the potential consequences reported above, participants recommended the following:

• Faculties of education, and not the OME, are best equipped to provide guidance in developing assessment and evaluation tools for teachers.

• Faculties of education should not accommodate provincial standardized testing and, instead, should adopt holistic evaluation approaches that focused more on classroom teaching, and more generally, on teacher development that would ensure quality.

• Many also stated that faculties of education must take action to ensure that TCs passed the test by planning for the extra time and resources required.

• It was important to have some form of common curriculum evaluation; however, very few respondents believed that a standardized curriculum would establish a uniform level of competence for all new teachers.
• A variety of evaluation reforms should be made to (a) include testing as part of a broader assessment program; (b) encourage faculties of education to resist the test; and (c) substitute standardized forms of assessment by a combination of observations, interviews, and personal/practical assessments.

• It is not necessary to enforce tougher entry requirements to teacher education programs since the standards are already very high.

D. Marginalizing impact of standardization

The majority of TCs believe that the test may negatively impact groups that are educationally exceptional and “different” from the mainstream in their social identities, linguistic and cultural backgrounds and their perspectives on the teaching-learning process. Such groups fell into the following categories:

• English as second-language speakers, those educated outside of Ontario, especially new immigrants educated in other countries; those with teaching-learning experiences that are outside the mainstream of Ontario schooling (e.g., alternative schools).

• Those from low socio-economic status groups with “cultural capital” that is different from the dominant white, middle-class Anglo-Saxon culture. This group includes First Nations/ Native/Aboriginal peoples who were educated outside of the public school system and have a different orientation to knowledge production and acquisition (ways of knowing), and racial/ethnic/cultural/gender minority groups who may not share dominant group pedagogical perspectives and may respond differently to school (learning-teaching) situations. Consequently, these groups would respond “outside the expected norm” of the standardized test.

• Those with exceptionalities; e.g., special needs, gifted, multiple intelligences, those who are unique in their learning styles and think creatively and differently (divergent thinkers; those who “think outside the box”), and those who panic under test conditions (test anxiety).

• Those who contest perceived ideologically/politically-based teacher testing and resist genuine participation in a process that conflicts with their own pedagogical views.

E. Potential impact of OTQT on teacher preparation

The majority of TCs expressed very serious concerns about the potential negative impact of the test on the future quality of teacher education. In general, they are concerned that the impetus to “teach to the test” will seriously jeopardize the quality of current teacher education programs that attempt to balance professional development with theoretical knowledge and practical experience, and the pedagogy of equity and social justice. The major specific impacts identified are:
• A negative homogenization of teacher education programs which in turn could lead to a diminution of autonomy and academic freedom.

• Decline of emphasis on teaching for equity, diversity, inclusiveness and social justice, and limitations to divergent modes of knowledge and creative thinking. It may also discourage non-traditional ideas and limit different worldviews that enrich teacher education curriculum.

• A change in the curricular balance of teacher preparation programs from a high focus on contextual issues in practicum settings to theory-oriented instruction, dominated by school law and human development issues.

• Added stress to an already over-loaded program of teacher preparation which will demoralize teacher candidates.

• A decline in the number of prospective candidates interested in pursuing a teacher education program if they perceive the test to be unfair, undemocratic and exclusionary.

F. Alternative competence evaluation strategies

An overwhelming majority of TCs expressed a desire for a focus on long-term performance-based evaluation, rather than a movement towards high-stakes teacher testing. A large number stated that policy makers are too far removed from the field of education (“steering from a distance”) to be effective evaluators of teacher competence. They suggested the following:

• In-class practicum observation and/or performance-based evaluation be undertaken by more experienced teachers, school administrative personnel, policy makers, and other “stakeholders” (education faculty, field-based practicum supervisors, etc.) would be the best method of evaluating teachers’ competence to teach. All those involved in this process would need to be trained in critical evaluation of teacher competency.

• Since single-visit evaluations do not take into consideration the progressive nature of teaching, policy makers and other “stakeholders” need to visit a teacher’s classroom repeatedly over an extended period of time in order to assess teacher development.

• Classroom observations need to be part of a larger model that includes a mentorship program and other professional development initiatives for new teachers. An internship or mentorship program with appropriate associate teachers should guide new teachers in emulating excellent teaching practices and providing feedback.

• On-going professional development as a key element in teachers’ commitment to life-long learning.
The TCs’ perspectives in this study raise serious issues which need to be considered in determining the evidential validity of the test. (“how well the test represents the construct being assessed; relevance, and utility”6). TCs’ responses raise fundamental questions about the aims of the test in its present format since they discredit its relevance and utility. According to the participants, the test neither achieves accountability nor does it secure excellence in teaching. TCs’ responses challenge the popular, yet at times empty, notion of accountability.7 Their responses should warn educators about false or “pseudo notions” of accountability. With regard to consequential validity (the test’s value implications and social consequences),8 the students identified several possible damaging consequences of the test, given its present content and format. The TCs’ concerns raise challenges to the consequential validity of the test.

The TCs’ beliefs about good teaching, learning, and evaluation, as well as the values associated with the dominant worldview that emerges from the TCs’ comments seem to be different and in conflict with those that emerge from the content and format, and the “hidden curriculum” of the test. TCs value creativity, critical thinking, flexibility, divergent knowledge and thinking, and the allowance for equity through diversity. In contrast, the messages that emanate from the test are ones of standardization, uniformity in teaching, and reductionism.

The TCs’ responses to the test and its possible implications, as well as their recommendations, echo the major concerns that emerge from the literature on teacher testing.9 Policy makers have to be more cognizant of and responsive to research-driven and philosophically sound, rather than exclusively narrow, politically-driven educational reforms.

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Notes

1 Statement, 15 October, 2001.


3 See, for example, Ensuring High Professional Standards in Ontario Education, ETFO 2001).


6 Sharon Murphy, “‘No-one has ever grown taller as a result of being measured’ revisited: More educational measurement lessons for Canadians.” In J.P. Portelli and R.P. Solomon (Eds.), *The erosion of democracy in education: From critique to possibilities* (Calgary, AB: Detselig, 2001), 154.

