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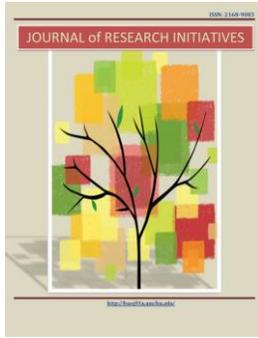
About the Author(s)

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Keywords

Praxis Core, K-12, PK-12, standardized testing, Praxis I, African American students and Praxis Core



PRAXIS CORE: A SYSTEMIC APPROACH TO HELPING MINORITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

The purpose of this article was to provide potential solutions for teacher education programs with regard to assisting minority students with Praxis Core, a standardized test that's mandatory for many teacher preparation students throughout the United States. The article not only examines solutions for minority students, especially African American students, but also it highlights the disparities between Caucasian and African American test takers in regard to Praxis Core. A major portion of the article discusses a three-point system that has proven to be effective in helping minority students to successfully pass Praxis Core, and the article explains the structures that must be in place in order to effectively implement such a system.

Introduction

The disheartening and small number of African Americans K-12 teachers in the United States is not breaking news. In fact, Nettles, M. T., Scatton, L. H., Steinberg, J. H., & Tyler, L. L. (2011) stated that in 1994 African Americans only comprised of 5% of all undergraduate degrees awarded in education. There are an array of issues and problems that likely contribute to this pedestrian number of African American K-12 teachers, all of which will not be addressed in this article; however, one issue that will be discussed is a standardized test roadblock called "Praxis Core". Praxis Core (previous known as Praxis I) is an educational assessment administered by the Educational Testing Service that measures students' ability in three core areas: reading, writing, and math.

Previous Research

Nettles et.al. (2011) research focused on achievement gaps between African Americans and White test-takers regarding Praxis I (or Praxis Core) and Praxis II. It points out some alarming results regarding the gaps between whites and blacks, but it doesn't provide many solutions with regard to reducing this gap. One factor that could be fueling this problem is highlighted by researchers Dahlin and Cronin. According to Dahlin & Cronin (2010), African Americans have traditionally been omitted in the standardized test-making process, and since African Americans have restricted roles in the formation of these types of assessments, and they often lack adequate resources, the expectation for accomplishment among African American test participants has (and likely still is) low. Poor expectations result in poor outcomes.

According to some theorists, African American learners will not succeed as well as white learners on standardized exams (Dahlin & Cronin, 2010). It's unfortunate that those within the academy have not focused more attention in this area of research. Those in these academic setting should worry more about the reality of homogenous tests and insinuation of some research that there is little to worry about regarding the consequence (Jackson, 2012) for non-whites test takers.

Other scholars have begun their discussion pertaining to these inequalities and prejudices regarding academic success rates of underprivileged groups by opening the dialog with

environmental influences (Landale & Pong, 2012). These social facets are the root for some academic failure and subsequent inequalities. Some social drawbacks considered were migration status, monetary status, and placement statuses (Nogura, 2003) and (Dahlin & Cronin, 2010). Nogura (2003) conferred how these societal shortcomings have impacted underprivileged groups within an academic setting.

African Americans have witnessed inequalities for many decades in the academic setting, particularly regarding the examination factor (Dahlin & Cronin, 2010). Some scholars stated that African Americans have experienced social cruelty, financial drawbacks, and scarce training, which are all aspects that have caused low scholastic success rates (Nogura, 2003). Due to this, it is imperative that minority students are given the opportunity to receive sufficient training regarding test-taking techniques, and strategies to off-set what others normally receive at home. This additional training is even more particular important for, Praxis Core test-takers. The best practices section that follows is an example of what that training could and should look like.

According to the Education Testing Service and the National Education Association, minority students encompass approximately 41% of the public-school learner demographics and minority teachers encompass approximately 17% of the teaching population (Tyler, Whiting, Ferguson, Eubanks, Steinberg, Scatton and Bassett, 2011). Due to the limited number of minority teachers, and the achievement gaps regarding the Praxis Core test-takers, it is imperative to more accurately reflect and produce educators that reflects the actual diverse student demographic (Tyler, et al., 2011).

After conducting an analysis of first-time Praxis I and Praxis II test-takers between November 2005 and November 2009, the authors highlighted an apparent disparity amongst minority and majority students in the test-taking realm (Tyler, et al., 2011). African American students who took the Praxis I test had approximately over 35% lower passing scores when compared to Caucasian students (Tyler, et al., 2011). The lower passing rates were higher for African Americans than the other minority groups. Figure One illustrates the approximate Praxis I passing rate disparities.

Figure 1: Disparity in Praxis I Passing Rates of Minority Students

Race Ethnicity	Praxis I Math	Praxis I Reading	Praxis I Writing
The disparity between African American and White test-participants	-41%	-41%	-35%
The disparity between Hispanic and White test-participants	-21%	-17%	-17%
The disparity between Asian and White test-participants	-7.0%	-24%	-16%
The disparity between Native American and White test-participants	-19%	-16%	-22%

Data revealed that Caucasian learners are more prone to take the Praxis I test early in their collegiate career in comparison to minorities. Additionally, Caucasian learners who take the exam within their first two years of college score approximately two points higher on their exam and African American learners who take the Praxis I test within their first two years of college have scored up to three points higher (Tyler, et al., 2011). Due to the aforementioned numbers in figure 1 of early test-taking by African Americans and the achievement disparities, it is essential to incorporate a sound learning system early to assist minority students with test-taking, test-passing, and ultimately obtain their teaching credentials.

The focus of this article is not, however, to harbor over the inequities with regard to having a seat at the standardize testing table, but to suggest ways in which to assist instructors, practitioners, and others tied to teacher preparation with regard to Praxis I (Core). The researchers are former college instructors who have worked directly with African American students at Historically Black Colleges/Universities (HBCU's) and African American students at Predominantly White institutions (PWI's) with Praxis I (Core) in the southeastern part of the United States. We would like to bring attention to, as others have done, the systemic imbalance of standardized testing, while also providing some concrete ideas that could be implemented at any willing institution.

Best Practices

To ensure that future educators (learners) are cognizant of the three components being tested on the Praxis Core exam: reading, writing, and mathematics, a well-structured program should be in place to ensure testing success (Dhalin & Cronin, 2010). The Praxis Core structure that is shown in the illustration demonstrates three core components that are utilized by Praxis

Core experts. Those components focus on grasping the needs of learners, capturing the key components of the exam, and focusing on capitalizing on the strengths of learners. The Praxis Core three-point system, that’s being referenced, encompasses a structured program to gather students on a consistent basis to focus on Praxis Core content, courseware to assist students outside of the classrooms and to provide them added assistance regarding testing areas, and supplemental instruction which includes added facilitation from peer-tutors and other instructional support.

The Three-Point systematic approach allows learners to feel inspired, and to ensure that all learning styles are being met within the classroom. The minority learner tends to learn better when seeing those in the classroom who mirrors them and who they can relate to their experiences (Chinn & Gollnick, 2009). Therefore, having peer-tutors would aid in the development of the future educators as well as having a sound learning atmosphere. This system aids with incorporating the three main learning styles, cognitive styles that associates with information processing patterns representing the students; general means of recognizing, thinking, problem-solving and retaining information: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic into the learning program (Gailbraith, 2004).

Figure 2: The Praxis Core Three-Point System

Structured Program	Courseware	Supplemental Instruction
A class or learning session for learners meeting at least twice weekly	Computer software to be utilized that concentrates on Praxis Core Content and/or developmental concepts for learners needing extra help	Student-peer tutors who have taken and passed the Praxis Core examination
Praxis Core Workshops focused on specific areas of the examination	Praxis Core textbooks, web-tutorials, etc.	Have instructors who are focused on reading, writing, and math available to assist
Pre/Post assessments to evaluate students’ strengths and weaknesses		

Benefits to Practice Core Curriculum

It has been the experience from the research of this article that a program or plan that provides structure for students to learn is more successful than allowing students to attack this test on their own. It is essential to have a fluent Praxis Core program, in which there is an instructor or facilitator who is knowledgeable of the contents of the examination, has basic knowledge of reading, writing, and arithmetic. The instructor/facilitator should have the ability to assess and evaluate a learner’s progression (Dahlin & Cronin, 2010) and create an environment where students are comfortable working with their peers and the

instructor/facilitator. Learners should be engaged because this tends to lead to higher levels of success rates. Some of that engagement should come in the form of social interaction amongst students and their peers. An, Bullock, Cone, & Ritchie (2013) believed that social interaction was important to the application of social modification. This somewhat unorthodox modification of the classroom environment can lead to positive peer interactions. Therefore, constant engagement of learners by incorporating the three-point system would ensure constant engagement and more than likely, success by these learners. Although, minority learners' standardized test achievements have been disproportionately lower when compared to Caucasian learners', the three-point Praxis Core system can be utilized for all future educators, not just African Americans.

Structured Program

Singh (2013) stated that "Learning requirements and preferences of each learner tend to be different. Organizations must use a blend of learning approaches in their strategies to get the right content in the right format to the right people at the right time." Essentially, the purpose of the three-point Praxis process is to reach learners at different times, through different methods, with differentiated instruction and approaches. Although Singhs' article focuses more on blending technology to improve and differentiate learning, the concepts in that article, as a whole, are similar to what is being suggested by the researchers here in this article. By having structured programs, courseware and supplemental instructional, students are presented with three ways to acquire the requisite knowledge need to be successful on Praxis Core. In regard to the structure programs, below is an example of how teacher education programs can implement such programs

1. Develop a "Praxis committee" with the important stakeholders of the institution. This should include high-level administrator such as Deans, Associate and Assistant Deans, Chairs, faculty members and staff that's involved in the institutions' tutorial programs.
2. Gather data regarding incoming students and ascertain their level of proficiency or deficiency with regard to SAT and ACT score (especially in Reading and Math) or English and Math classes for community college transfer students.
3. Develop at least a one or if possible two-hour course that requires students to view praxis core information every week.
4. Insert class into all of your teacher preparation program on campus.
5. Hire an instructor to focus solely on Praxis Core (if possible) or develop a hybrid Praxis class.
6. Identify and hire peer tutors
7. Development of an emporium model to supplement the classroom instruction
8. Implement courseware into your emporium model
9. Develop a process for assisting students with test registration
10. Develop and Implement workshops to reinforce classroom teaching on Praxis Core content
11. Within the class use pretest and posttest as another data point for assessment and evaluation in order to drive instruction.

Courseware

There are several options and choices for courseware that students can use to assist them with Praxis Core. Northstar and Edmentum (Plato) are a couple options of courseware that institutions can use to assist students and provide additional help outside the classroom. The

benefit of these internet based tutorials is that students can access them (generally) at any time and work at their own pace when learning the material on Praxis Core. This courseware can also be used as part of the peer tutoring session if that is something that an institution implements along with the mandatory praxis course.

The cost of courseware can be a challenge in many institutions, which is why it's important to have high-level administrators involved in the planning, development, and implementation of the three-point Praxis Core system. Some courseware companies will decrease the cost per student and license of their product when an institution purchases the courseware for longer periods of use.

Supplemental Instruction

The courseware previously mentioned, peer tutoring, and one-on-one instructor to student lessons are all important aspects of an effective supplemental instructional program. Instructors of the praxis core class can also use online and hardcopy tutorial books by standardized test preparation leaders such as Princeton Review, Kaplan, Barron's and Educational Testing Service (ETS). The Educational Testing Service creates and administers Praxis Core, so their tutorial books are an invaluable asset to have for the test. However, the benefit to using the other test preparation leaders is that they sometimes explain the math, reading and writing in a different way, and this may assist in helping a student who otherwise might not fully understand the concept as explained by ETS.

Conclusion

African Americans have traditionally been omitted in the standardized test-making process, and since African Americans have restricted roles in the formation of these types of assessments, the expectation for accomplishment among African American test participants has (and likely still is) low. Due to the limited number of minority teachers, and the achievement gaps regarding the Praxis Core test-takers, it is imperative to produce educators that reflects the diverse student demographic. In order to do so, a system should be in place that encompasses components that students can utilize both inside and outside the classroom. To ensure that future educators (learners) are cognizant of the three components being tested on the Praxis Core exam: reading, writing, and mathematics, should be in place to ensure testing success. The Three-Point systematic approach allows for the learners (African Americans, Caucasians, and others) to feel inspired, and to ensure that all learning styles are being met within the classroom. Ultimately, there is never a right or wrong approach, the failure is not taking an approach to produce a diverse teacher population.

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