Commentary on the Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Disparities in School Psychology Praxis Exam Outcomes

This commentary provides an external perspective on NASP’s first public report on racial and ethnic differences in exam outcomes. These data demonstrate racial disparities in pass rates but do not provide information regarding the causes of these disparities. This report underscores the need for expanded public reporting of Praxis data in order to facilitate research into program contexts for student success and whether there are systemic disparities in pass rates attributable to programmatic (e.g., type of institution, program training components and quality) and systemic considerations (e.g., racism, systemic oppression, bias among test content). Although we must maintain competencies for the practice of school psychology, the way in which we evaluate such competencies and the interpretation of Praxis test score data should be considered through a social justice lens. The report begins what we hope will be more transparency and ongoing dissemination and use of Praxis exam data to support equity.

Keywords: Praxis, school psychology, racial/ethnic disparities, graduate training

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Nicholas Affrunti, National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Hwy, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814; 301-657-0270, ext. 245; erossen@naspweb.org.

Over the last 40 years, professional competency exams have become increasingly common and accepted ways to determine eligibility for credentials. The Praxis Exam in School Psychology is taken by many graduates of National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) accredited/approved programs, among those pursuing the National Certification in School Psychology, and for certain state school psychology licensure requirements. This commentary provides an external perspective on NASP’s first public report on racial and ethnic differences in exam outcomes.
CONTEXT

In the early 1980s, educational reform efforts led several states to adopt legislation which required educators to pass a professional competency examination to be considered a “qualified professional” (Williams & Mennuti, 2016). This included school psychology, and by the mid-1980s, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) and NASP began collaborating to discern competency domains and items for an initial version of the Praxis Exam in School Psychology. By the late 1980s, the exam was developed, piloted, and normed. Since then, ETS and NASP have remained collaborators, periodically updating the exam using input from school psychologists, with the mission of measuring knowledge and skills that a school psychologist should possess, endeavoring to ensure the test reflects current research and practice. In its current form, the test is a selected-response written exam designed to assess both knowledge and application. In the 2008 revision, changes were intended to ensure items aligned with NASP’s standards for training. Subsequent revisions aim to align items with NASP’s Professional Standards (NASP, 2020).

Currently, the Praxis School Psychologist Exam is a 125-constructed response and multiple-choice item computer-administered test. A passing score is required (a) by many graduate preparation programs to complete program requirements, (b) by several states for certification and licensure purposes, and (c) by NASP for individuals pursuing the Nationally Certified School Psychologists (NCSP) credential. Items on the most recent version of the exam cover four areas: (a) professional practices that permeate all aspects of service delivery; (b) student-level direct and indirect services for children, families, and schools; (c) systems-level direct and indirect services for children, families, and schools; and (d) foundations or school psychological service delivery. Test takers have 2 hours and 5 minutes to complete the exam.

There have been few published analyses of school psychology Praxis data. In 2016, NASP published a research report indicating graduates of NASP-approved programs scored significantly higher on the Praxis than graduates from non-NASP-approved programs (4–13 points, depending on program type; Rossen et al., 2016). Prior to that, an independent researcher conducted a phenomenological qualitative study of 12 masters-level school psychologists indicating that participants described the Praxis to be an anxiety-provoking process, a gatekeeper to the profession, and an unrealistic conception of the professional role (Kane, 2014). Subsequently, another independent research team published a quantitative study stating program accreditation and type of training program (i.e., doctoral versus specialist) may be significant predictors of passing scores on the Praxis (McGill et al., 2017). To our knowledge, there has not been a prior report issued by NASP (or previous independent study) to investigate racial, ethnic, or gender disparities with Praxis exam results.

THE 2023 NASP PRAXIS REPORT

This initial report (Affrunti & Rossen, 2023) demonstrates NASP’s increasing commitment to furthering equity, inclusion, and diversity in school psychology. Unfortunately, the report provides little insight into the extent to which there are disparities in exam outcomes because of how restricted the analysis is in scope with its focus solely on racial and ethnic differences in highest test score in a single year of test administration. That said, the report begins what we hope will be more transparency and ongoing tracking of Praxis exam data as well as critical conversations about the purpose and interpretation of such data.

These Praxis data demonstrate racial and ethnic disparities among 2021–2022 test takers. Using the comparison of White Praxis test takers, multiple other racial and ethnic groups were less likely to pass the Praxis test (see NASP Praxis report for specific data). Although these data demonstrate disparities in pass rates, these data do not provide information regarding the causes of these disparities. Additional research
is needed to investigate disparities in pass rates as there are programmatic (e.g., type of institution, program training components and quality) and systemic considerations (e.g., racism, systemic oppression, bias among test content) that must be evaluated. Further research is also needed to better understand unique processes within groups, and the way intersecting identities might impact student experiences in school psychology programs.

There are numerous limitations to these data. First, a large number (11.3%) of test takers did not report race. It is possible that restrictions regarding racial and ethnic identity reporting contributed to these missing data. For example, test takers may identify as multiple races and be limited in terms of response options. In addition, the racial category of “other” may be pejorative to some test takers. Ultimately, the reporting of race and ethnicity should not be considered in isolation and should be accompanied and considered in conjunction with other sociodemographic factors (Flanagin et al., 2021). In addition, these data were collected between August 1, 2021, and August 1, 2022. The context of the global pandemic may have influenced test taking practices, as research has indicated the wide-ranging effects of COVID-19 on minoritized communities (Sullivan et al., 2021; Sullivan, 2022). The number of test takers from certain racial groups is extremely small and difficult to allow reliable estimates or generalizable inferences, a limitation attributable to the field’s glacial progress in racial diversification (Proctor & Owens, 2019). For example, only 14% of school psychologists identify as coming from one or more minoritized racial or ethnic groups (Goforth et al., 2021).

The relatively small number of racially and ethnically minoritized test takers is also associated with broader concerns about the openness of school psychology and its graduate education programs for systematically minoritized individuals given its complicated history, epistemic and methodological restrictiveness, and overall complex relationships with minoritized communities (e.g., Clark et al., 2012; Golson et al., 2022; Grapin & Fallon, 2022; Parker et al., 2023; Proctor et al., 2018; Proctor 2022; Sabnis, Newman, et al., 2023; Sabnis, Tanaka, et al., 2023). Taken together, this context suggests a need to consider how the learning environment of graduate programs—from pedagogy to climate—influences everything from recruitment and retention in programs to outcomes, including on the Praxis exam and postgraduate retention in the field.

Finally, most test takers (eventually) pass the Praxis exam, per this 2023 report. Thus, disparities may not be as pronounced as other professional exams with lower pass rates or more diverse constituents. Furthermore, the 2023 report only considers test takers’ highest scores, which doesn’t allow for consideration of whether certain groups have lower initial scores or require more attempts to pass, which would provide vital information about outcomes of their learning in graduate education relative to the exam content and compared to other groups. Such information is critical to understand test outcomes and to evaluating the extent to which programs are supporting students’ success.

**PROFESSIONAL EXAM REPORTING IN ALIGNED FIELDS**

This initial release of school psychology exam data provides an opportunity to consider how other fields have approached evaluation of potential exam disparities. In particular, we can consider similar exams in education, psychology, and other related service professions to consider what purposes, types of examinee data, and analyses are featured to evaluate these exams and inform future efforts in school psychology. For example, we can look to examples from teacher preparation (Putman and Walsh, 2021), psychology (Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards, 2023), and social work (Association of Social Work Board [ASWB], 2022), where credentialing/licensing exams are widely used and where evaluations have considered factors related to differences in initial test scores, number of administrations, and highest
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test scores. Common considerations have included differences by several statuses, including sociodemographics (e.g., race, ethnicity, language, gender, age), candidates’ institutions and program features, and the intersectionality thereof. In some analyses, these data were evaluated to consider the number of test takers in each state and the number of test takers by institution, which included these test takers’ first attempt and best attempt pass rate data, respectively. In other analyses, test takers’ data were further analyzed to consider the number of first-time pass rates by year and eventual pass rates, which was disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender, race or ethnicity and gender, race or ethnicity and age primary and language, respectively.

The reports have then offered inferences regarding the challenges that test takers from historically marginalized groups must overcome, such as reduced access to comprehensive, quality exam preparation materials, sufficient time to prepare for the exam, and availability of financial resources (ASWB, 2022), important considerations given systemic disparities in educational opportunity and economic resources. Importantly for prospective students, the Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards (2023) also provides publicly available test outcome data by institution, department, and program, so that applicants can make more informed choices about where to pursue their graduate preparation. NASP also provides limited publicly available data pertaining to Praxis outcomes by graduate programs. These data are available for the most current calendar year only (i.e., prior years data cannot be accessed) and are not broken down by racial or other demographic groups.

The evaluation activities in these other fields provide examples of how different associations have approached the use and dissemination of aggregate data from credentialing exams. Although variable, they provide examples of far more expansive reporting and evaluation approaches that can be used by ETS, NASP, and independent researchers to support continuous improvement at the level of program accreditation and program delivery where diversity and equity are concerned. By looking at published outcome data from other related professional fields, NASP may be inspired to take a similar approach in terms of how these data are reported and make these data available for public review.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We appreciate that some outcome data are finally being shared and assert that far more data are needed in the interest of transparency and formative evaluation. At present, there is little utility in the current data analysis provided to inform program or NASP efforts, or to provide transparency to prospective test takers.

Yet, the examples above provide some guidance on how to improve future reporting. In particular, we recommend annual reporting of scores by first and highest exam scores, and number of attempts to pass, by test takers’ race, ethnicity, gender identity, language status, degree type, program approval or accreditation status (e.g., nothing, NASP, NASP and American Psychological Association), and intersections thereof, as well as program or university to the maximum extent possible. In doing so, we recognize that it might be necessary to examine 3- or 5-year pass rates given potential low cell sizes. Such data would allow for more nuanced consideration of examinees’ success with the exam and allow for identification of social statuses that may be associated with differential opportunities to learn. Such data are necessary both for transparency in recruitment (prospective applicants deserve to know if the programs to which they are applying are associated with positive exam outcomes generally and for their community in particular) and evaluation of the exam and programs to help justify continued use of the exam and support program enhancements in curriculum, instruction, and student supports.

More research is warranted pertaining to the test structure in general. Additional analyses such as differential item functioning and measurement invariance can be conducted, as well as analyses across
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multiple identities (such as race and languages spoken) to greater understand intersectional identities. Additional consideration is needed when accounting for racial, ethnic, and gender identity responses provided by ETS, and whether they account well for individual identity and thus accuracy of reporting. ETS should also make data available for external evaluations and studies.

Given the extremely narrow scope of the current report, it’s hard to know what analysis and inferences are feasible from the test-taker data, but it’s conceivable that we may be able to identify groups of programs that differentially support examinee success, which could, in turn, inform efforts to investigate and understand how instruction, curriculum, and student supports within programs are associated with outcomes. As a field, we must continue to examine potential disparities in outcomes. In the case of the Praxis, disparities in pass rates may contribute to the low recruitment of minoritized school psychologists. Although we must maintain competencies for practice of school psychology, the way in which we evaluate such competencies and the interpretation of Praxis test score data must continue to be equitably considered.

REFERENCES


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