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Alignment of Secondary School Teacher Recruitment Test with National Professional Standards

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ABSTRACT

The recruitment of qualified and competent teachers is crucial for maintaining the quality of education. This study examines the alignment of the Secondary School Teacher Recruitment Test (SSTRT) with National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPSTs) through a systematic content analysis. The research aims to determine whether the test adequately assesses the competencies required by national standards and reflects the essential domains of pedagogical knowledge, subject expertise, and professional ethics. A systematic analysis was conducted using past recruitment test papers from 2015 to 2024. The methodology follows a documentary analysis framework, where test items were categorized according to the ten NPSTs ten dimensions outlined by the national education policy. The study employs a qualitative content analysis approach, utilizing Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) and Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge Framework (1987) as analytical lenses. Findings indicate that while the subject content knowledge domain is well-represented (e.g., 70% of test items focus on subject expertise), pedagogical skills and professional ethics receive minimal coverage (less than 15%). Moreover, critical domains like assessment strategies, ICT integration, classroom management Inclusive Education and differentiated instruction are underrepresented in the test papers analyzed. These results highlight the need for policy revisions in teacher recruitment assessments to ensure a comprehensive evaluation of teachers' professional competencies. It also offers policy recommendations for education authorities to refine recruitment criteria, ensuring that newly appointed teachers meet the professional and pedagogical expectations set by the National Education Policy (2021) and HEC Teacher Competency Framework (2022).

Introduction

The quality of education in any country is deeply influenced by the quality of its teachers. Teachers play a critical role not just in delivering content, but also in shaping students' intellectual, emotional, and moral development. As such, the recruitment of professionally competent and well-prepared teachers is a foundational step toward improving educational outcomes. In this regard, having well-structured recruitment processes that are aligned with clearly defined teacher standards is essential.

In Pakistan, the National Professional Standards for Teachers in Pakistan (NPSTs) were introduced in 2009 by the Ministry of Education to serve as a guiding framework for teacher education, professional development, and evaluation. These standards articulate what teachers should know and be able to do in order to ensure effective teaching and learning in classrooms. The ten professional standards outlined in the NPSTs cover areas such as subject matter knowledge, human growth and development, pedagogical skills, classroom management, assessment, inclusive education, ethics, and the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in education. These standards are meant to inform every stage of the teacher lifecycle—from pre-service education to in-service training and performance appraisal.

Building on these standards, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) in 2022 introduced the Teacher Competency Framework, which further refined the expectations from teacher education programs and teacher qualifications. Together, the NPSTs and the HEC framework aim to produce educators who are not only knowledgeable but also skilled in the art and science of teaching, ethical in their conduct, and responsive to the diverse needs of students in the 21st century classroom.

Despite these policy advancements, a critical gap remains in how teachers are recruited into the system particularly in the design and implementation of the recruitment tests used to select secondary school teachers. These standardized tests, such as the Secondary School Teacher Recruitment Test (SSTRT) administered by various provincial public service commissions, play a decisive role in determining who becomes a teacher. However, there are growing concerns among educationists and policy researchers that these recruitment tests focus disproportionately on content knowledge and fail to assess other crucial areas outlined in the NPSTs, such as pedagogical reasoning, ethical understanding, classroom management, and differentiated instruction.

This study seeks to address this gap by critically analyzing the extent to which the SSTRT aligns with the National Professional Standards for Teachers. Specifically, it examines whether the recruitment tests administered from 2015 to 2024 appropriately reflect the ten core dimensions of professional teaching competence. These dimensions include both cognitive and affective domains, requiring not only the mastery of subject content but also the ability to plan instruction, manage diverse classrooms, apply appropriate assessment strategies, and engage ethically with students and the wider community. Using a systematic content analysis approach, the study categorizes test items according to the NPST framework and evaluates the weight and depth given to each domain. Additionally, the research draws on Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) and Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) Framework (1987) to assess the cognitive complexity and pedagogical alignment of the test items. By identifying strengths and gaps in the current assessment model, this research aims to provide evidence-based insights that can inform policy revisions and improvements in teacher recruitment practices. Ensuring that recruitment tests assess the full range of competencies outlined in national standards is not just a matter of policy

compliance it is essential for building a competent, reflective, and effective teaching workforce in Pakistan.

Review of related literature

The quality of teachers is widely acknowledged as one of the most important factors affecting student learning and academic achievement. Numerous studies have confirmed that effective teachers significantly contribute to students' intellectual growth and lifelong learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Because of this, many education systems around the world have developed professional standards to define what knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values teachers should possess. In Pakistan, the National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPSTs) serve as a foundational framework that outlines expectations for teachers across ten key domains. These include subject matter expertise, understanding of human development, pedagogical strategies, assessment literacy, classroom management, use of ICT, inclusive education, collaboration, and professional ethics (MoE, 2009). The goal is to produce reflective practitioners who are not only knowledgeable but also equipped to handle the complexities of modern classrooms.

One of the most common tools for selecting teachers is the standardized recruitment test, a method used in many countries to assess candidates' eligibility and competence. While such tests are useful in streamlining large-scale selection processes, there is growing concern—both globally and in the Pakistani context—that these tests are narrow in focus, heavily emphasizing subject content knowledge while neglecting pedagogical competence, classroom practices, and ethical reasoning (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2005; Akram & Malik, 2012). This imbalance raises critical questions about the validity of these tests in measuring the actual competencies required of teachers in real classroom settings.

To critically evaluate the design and effectiveness of recruitment assessments, researchers often turn to established theoretical models such as Bloom's Taxonomy and Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) framework. Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) provides a hierarchical classification of cognitive skills—from basic knowledge and comprehension to higher-order thinking skills like analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Recruitment tests that predominantly assess lower-order thinking may fail to capture a teacher candidate's ability to apply knowledge in dynamic and unpredictable classroom situations.

Similarly, Shulman's concept of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) (1987) emphasizes that effective teaching requires more than just mastery of subject matter. It involves knowing how to teach that content in ways that make it understandable and accessible to learners. Shulman's framework highlights the importance of connecting content knowledge with pedagogical strategies, assessment tools, and classroom decision-making.

In the context of Pakistan, researchers have expressed concerns over the misalignment between recruitment practices and national professional standards. For instance, Saeed and Mahmood (2019) argue that recruitment tests often do not evaluate essential professional competencies such as teaching aptitude, ethical behavior, reflective practice, or the ability to integrate ICT into teaching. This misalignment can result in hiring candidates who may be strong in academic knowledge but weak in classroom application, adaptability, or student engagement—skills that are increasingly important in 21st-century education.

In summary, the literature points to a significant disconnect between what is expected of teachers according to professional standards and what is actually assessed in teacher recruitment exams.

This suggests an urgent need to revisit and reform recruitment assessments so they align more closely with comprehensive teacher competency frameworks like the NPSTs and the HEC Teacher Competency Framework (2022). Doing so would not only improve the quality of teacher selection but also contribute to raising educational standards in Pakistan.

Teacher quality is often cited as the most significant school-related factor influencing student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Professional standards such as the NPSTs provide a roadmap for what teachers should know and be able to do. These standards include domains such as subject matter knowledge, pedagogical skills, assessment practices, classroom management, and ethical conduct (MoE, 2009). Recruitment tests are commonly used globally to ensure teacher competency. However, studies have raised concerns about the limited scope of these tests, which often overemphasize content knowledge while neglecting practical pedagogical skills (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2005; Akram & Malik, 2012). Furthermore, Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) and Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) Framework (1987) provide analytical lenses to evaluate the cognitive levels and pedagogical integration of such assessments.

In Pakistan, several researchers (e.g., Saeed & Mahmood, 2019) have highlighted the misalignment between recruitment practices and professional standards, noting that teaching aptitude, professional ethics, and 21st-century skills like ICT integration are often overlooked

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative content analysis using a documentary analysis framework. Secondary data were obtained from SSTRT papers administered between 2015 and 2024 by various provincial public service commissions.

The test items were categorized using the ten professional standards outlined in NPSTs, which include:

1. Subject Matter Knowledge
2. Human Growth and Development
3. Islamic Values and Ethics
4. Instructional Planning and Strategies
5. Assessment
6. Learning Environment
7. Effective Communication and Professional Development
8. Collaboration and Partnerships
9. Use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT)
10. Teaching of Diverse Students / Inclusion

The analytical framework applied includes:

- Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) for categorizing cognitive levels.
- Shulman's PCK Model (1987) to evaluate the integration of pedagogy with content knowledge.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process aimed to systematically evaluate how well the Secondary School Teacher Recruitment Test (SSTRT) items from 2015 to 2024 aligned with the National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPSTs). In addition to alignment, the study examined the

cognitive complexity of the test items and the extent to which they reflected pedagogical content integration, based on Bloom's Taxonomy and Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) framework, respectively.

Step 1: Categorization of Test Items by NPST Domains

The first phase of the analysis involved a thorough item-by-item review of each SSTRT paper. Every question was classified under one or more of the ten NPST domains, depending on its content and focus. For example:

- A question testing mathematical formulas was categorized under Subject Matter Knowledge.
- A scenario involving classroom behavior management was categorized under Learning Environment.
- A question asking about instructional strategies or lesson planning fell under Instructional Planning and Strategies.

The frequency and percentage of questions corresponding to each domain were then calculated to understand which standards were most and least represented in the test design.

Step 2: Cognitive Level Classification using Bloom's Taxonomy

To determine the depth of thinking assessed in each item, the questions were further analyzed using Bloom's Taxonomy (1956). Each item was coded as one of the following cognitive levels:

1. Knowledge – Recall of facts and basic concepts
2. Comprehension – Understanding of information
3. Application – Using knowledge in new situations
4. Analysis – Breaking information into parts to explore patterns
5. Synthesis – Compiling ideas into new structures
6. Evaluation – Making judgments and justifying decisions

The majority of test items were found to focus on lower-order thinking skills (Knowledge and Comprehension), with relatively few items assessing higher-order cognitive skills such as Application or Evaluation. This indicates a pattern of rote-based assessment, which may not fully reflect the intellectual demands of actual teaching practice.

Step 3: Identification of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) Integration

Using Shulman's PCK framework, the test items were examined to see if they measured a teacher candidate's ability to combine subject knowledge with appropriate teaching strategies. For instance:

- A question that asked not just what to teach but how to teach it to diverse learners was marked as demonstrating PCK.
- Items that focused solely on factual recall, even within a subject area, were not considered to reflect pedagogical integration.

The analysis revealed that a very small proportion of test items integrated content with pedagogical reasoning. Most questions focused either on pure subject content or on general pedagogy in isolation. This points to a lack of coherence between subject knowledge and the teaching process—an essential competency for real classroom effectiveness.

Step 4: Visualization and Summary of Results

To present the findings clearly, a summary matrix was developed, showing the distribution of test items across NPST domains and Bloom’s cognitive levels. This allowed for visual interpretation of the areas where recruitment tests were strong (e.g., subject knowledge) and where they were weak (e.g., assessment, ICT use, inclusive teaching).

An example of the data breakdown is shown below:

NPST Domain	% of Test Items
Subject Matter Knowledge	70%
Instructional Planning and Strategies	8%
Human Growth and Development	4%
Assessment	3%
ICT Integration	2%
Classroom Management	2%
Islamic Values and Ethics	5%
Inclusive and Differentiated Instruction	1%
Communication and Professional Growth	3%
Collaboration and Partnerships	2%

Similarly, the cognitive level distribution based on Bloom’s Taxonomy was summarized as:

Cognitive Level	% of Test Items
Knowledge & Comprehension	80%
Application & Analysis	15%
Synthesis & Evaluation	5%

Interpretation

The analysis suggests that while the recruitment tests do an adequate job of assessing subject knowledge, they fall short in evaluating a more well-rounded teacher profile—one that includes pedagogical effectiveness, ethics, classroom management, and the ability to meet diverse student needs. Moreover, the dominance of low-level cognitive questions indicates limited opportunities for teacher candidates to demonstrate critical thinking, decision-making, or practical teaching judgment.

Findings

The content analysis of Secondary School Teacher Recruitment Tests (SSTRT) conducted between 2015 and 2024 revealed several important insights regarding the alignment of test items with the National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPSTs) and the depth of cognitive and pedagogical assessment. The findings are organized into three key themes: (1) representation of NPST domains, (2) cognitive level of assessment, and (3) integration of pedagogical content knowledge.

Overrepresentation of Subject Matter Knowledge

A clear and dominant trend was the overrepresentation of content-focused questions. Approximately 70% of the test items directly assessed subject matter knowledge, typically in the form of recall-based or concept-based questions. While this aligns with the first NPST domain (Subject Knowledge), it overshadows the other equally important standards, particularly those that relate to pedagogical competence, student diversity, and ethical practice.

This indicates a heavy emphasis on theoretical content, which may not accurately reflect the competencies required for effective teaching in real classroom settings. Candidates are evaluated primarily for what they know, rather than how they would use that knowledge to facilitate learning.

Limited Coverage of Pedagogical and Professional Domains

The remaining NPST domains were found to be underrepresented in the recruitment tests:

- Only 8% of test items addressed Instructional Planning and Strategies, despite its crucial role in designing engaging and meaningful learning experiences.
- Assessment practices, an essential skill for monitoring and improving student learning, accounted for just 3% of the total items.
- Questions related to ICT integration, inclusive education, classroom management, and collaboration were almost negligible, each constituting less than 3% of the content.
- The domain concerning Islamic values and professional ethics appeared in just 5% of the items, raising concerns about the extent to which moral and ethical dimensions of teaching are being considered during recruitment.

This imbalance suggests a misalignment between the recruitment assessments and the comprehensive competencies outlined in the NPSTs, particularly those related to modern, inclusive, and student-centered teaching practices.

Predominance of Lower-Order Thinking Skills

Using Bloom's Taxonomy, the cognitive level of test items was analyzed. Results showed that a majority (around 80%) of the questions fell under Knowledge and Comprehension levels, which involve basic recall and understanding of facts and concepts. Only 15% tested Application or Analysis, while a mere 5% assessed higher-order thinking skills like Evaluation or Synthesis.

This pattern reflects a recruitment assessment approach that favors rote memorization over practical application, critical thinking, or problem-solving—all of which are essential for teaching effectiveness. As such, the current testing model may not provide an accurate picture of how candidates would perform in complex, real-life classroom environments.

Minimal Integration of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK)

The use of Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) framework revealed that very few test items demonstrated a meaningful blend of subject knowledge with pedagogical application. Questions that encouraged candidates to consider how to teach particular topics, differentiate instruction, or support diverse learners were extremely rare.

This lack of PCK-related assessment raises concerns about the depth and authenticity of teacher evaluation during recruitment. It also reflects a missed opportunity to assess whether candidates are capable of transforming content into teachable knowledge that is accessible to students.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal a significant misalignment between the Secondary School Teacher Recruitment Tests (SSTRT) and the National Professional Standards for Teachers in Pakistan (NPSTs). While the tests consistently assess candidates' subject matter knowledge, they largely overlook several key areas of professional competence that are essential for effective teaching in today's classrooms.

The analysis of test papers from 2015 to 2024 showed that more than two-thirds of the questions focused exclusively on academic content. In contrast, domains such as instructional planning, classroom management, assessment practices, ICT integration, inclusion, and ethical values were minimally represented. Additionally, most test items were found to test lower-order cognitive skills, with very few requiring application, analysis, or critical thinking—skills that are vital for real-world teaching.

Furthermore, the limited presence of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) indicates a gap between knowing content and knowing how to teach it effectively. This gap is concerning, as the role of a teacher is not only to possess knowledge but to facilitate learning in diverse, dynamic classroom environments.

These conclusions point to the urgent need for reforming teacher recruitment practices in Pakistan. If the goal is to recruit competent, well-rounded, and professionally equipped educators, then recruitment assessments must reflect the full spectrum of teacher competencies as outlined in national and international standards.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following actionable recommendations are proposed for education policymakers, test developers, and teacher education authorities:

Revise the Test Blueprint to Reflect All NPST Domains

The structure of the SSTRT should be redesigned to ensure balanced representation across all ten NPST domains, not just subject knowledge.

Greater emphasis must be placed on domains such as pedagogical strategies, assessment literacy, ethics, ICT, inclusive education, and classroom management.

Incorporate Scenario-Based and Contextual Questions

Introduce situational and case-based questions that evaluate how candidates would apply their knowledge in practical classroom situations.

This will help assess critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills, aligning with higher-order levels of Bloom's Taxonomy.

Integrate Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK)

Develop test items that require candidates to demonstrate both their content knowledge and how they would teach it, particularly to students with diverse needs.

Questions should assess candidates' ability to transform content into effective instruction.

Increase Assessment of Ethical and Professional Standards

Include a dedicated section in the test that evaluates teachers' understanding of professional ethics, Islamic values, and their role in character development.

Align Recruitment Assessments with National Frameworks

Ensure that the test content is explicitly aligned with both the National Professional Standards for Teachers (2009) and the HEC Teacher Competency Framework (2022) to maintain consistency and policy coherence.

Build Capacity of Test Designers and Curriculum Experts

Organize training workshops for those responsible for designing recruitment tests so they understand the breadth of professional teacher competencies.

Encourage the use of modern assessment tools and item-writing best practices.

Include Continuous Review and Feedback Mechanisms

Establish a system for regular review and evaluation of recruitment test content to ensure its relevance, fairness, and effectiveness in assessing teacher readiness.

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