

edTPA: An Assessment that Reduces the Quality of Teacher Education

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As one of the first students in my TESOL teacher education program to complete my edTPA submission, I recently shared my experience with a class where the majority of the students were at the beginning of their program. Afterwards, one of my classmates expressed that while my presentation was informative, it was also very depressing.

My student teaching seminar this past semester should have been one of the most valuable and insightful experiences of my teacher development program. My class consisted of peers whom I have grown to respect over the course of our program, and a legendary professor who is able to espouse the ideals of teaching and working with emergent bilinguals and their families, while also tackling the realities of teaching in an urban public school. Nonetheless, my peers and I ended the semester describing our edTPA-focused student teaching seminar not as “inspiring” or “practical for our teaching,” but rather as “painful” and “as smooth as possible” considering the circumstances.

Pre-service teachers should be taught how to use teaching and learning as opportunities for self-empowerment and advancing social justice. We should be taught how to critically reflect on issues of identity, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, as well as question the historical, sociocultural, and political contexts in which education is situated. Our student teaching seminar should be a supportive space to share successes and challenges, to discuss strategies, and to troubleshoot problems. Instead, ours revolved around issues such as how to best capture our students on video, how to interpret and answer the edTPA questions to receive a top, or at least passing, score on the rubrics; and which rubrics corresponded to which questions.

As educators, we understand how high stakes, standardized tests and the ensuing test preparation narrow our teaching and the learning our students experience, yet these detrimental conditions are being replicated in teacher education programs. On the one hand, if teacher education programs tailor classes to teach teacher candidates how to complete edTPA, they foster the same test preparation culture that they argue against. On the other hand, if teacher education programs do not adequately prepare their teacher candidates for edTPA, the candidates risk failure. With the high stakes nature of edTPA, failure means not obtaining teacher certification.

Some may argue that edTPA has benefits for teacher development. In fact, my peers and I were able to think of several examples of what we have learned through the edTPA process. For instance, Task 1 (Planning) pushes teacher candidates to use backwards design by requiring them to explain the planned assessments at the planning stage. My peers and I felt that we were able to deeply reflect on our instruction by watching the videos of our teaching that we took for Task 2 (Instruction). Finally, in Task 3 (Assessment), teacher candidates can practice identifying and addressing whole-class and individual student learning patterns. However, the negatives of edTPA outweigh these positives for one main reason: all of these positives can be taught and practiced outside of the context of edTPA and in traditional teacher education classes.

Although edTPA is supposed to draw from real life teaching, completing the process is rather artificial. Teacher candidates must explain their instruction to fit a certain mold, often backtracking and making up or misrepresenting details in order to produce a narrative that would be judged well according to edTPA standards. Despite the fact that modifying instruction in the

moment in response to students' immediate needs and reactions is a key component to effective teaching, there was no opportunity to describe this. By the time teacher candidates write about future instruction they would implement based on their students' learning needs that they have gathered from assessments, they very likely have already delivered their follow-up instruction and moved on from the learning segment that their edTPA submission focuses on. The intensity of edTPA does not allow teacher candidates to complete it during the several days that the learning segment takes place or the several days that immediately follow. The world within the various edTPA tasks is unrealistic, and the task demands do not take into consideration the real-life demands of teaching in a public school classroom.

Even after reading a description of the classroom context, the scorer still might not completely understand it and expect perfectly compliant learners. As a result, knowing that they must complete edTPA, student teachers may be reluctant to work in difficult settings with challenging students, even though they could potentially have an impact on the students and develop even more as teachers. Teacher candidates are less likely to take risks in their teaching, such as using progressive, critical pedagogies, for fear of losing points for deviating from teaching ideologies and practices that have been described in the edTPA rubrics and that are already widely accepted and used by the teaching community.

EdTPA depersonalizes the craft of teaching. A distant, anonymous scorer does not know me, my students, or my teaching context, nor is she/he invested in any of these. My cooperating teacher, my field supervisor, and my professors are the ones who best understand me, my students, my teaching context, my teaching skills, and my growth over time. EdTPA ignores the expertise of the teacher educators who are best positioned to judge my current abilities and potential to further develop as a teacher. Instead, teacher candidates must pay \$300 to the state of New York (from dwindling savings accounts, as student teaching is unpaid) for scorers to review a massive project that took the teacher candidates months to complete. Pearson's proven record of blurring the line between non-profit charity and for-profit business, as well as their perpetuation of casual, outsourced labor with no job protections, demonstrates their untrustworthiness (Hernández, 2013; Madeloni and Gorlewski, 2013). Nonetheless, teacher candidates like me are now being required to risk our own privacy, the privacy of our students, our money, and our future credentialing to let a distant scorer to reduce our teaching down to a few numbers.

Ironically, supporters of edTPA claim that it professionalizes the teaching profession by setting high standards for teacher candidates to meet. However, teacher education programs now must dedicate time specifically to teaching teacher candidates how to pass edTPA. Therefore, they reduce opportunities for teacher candidates to have the types of conversations that would genuinely help them become stronger, more effective, and more compassionate teachers. EdTPA is certainly not an impossible feat, and I say this having completed it while simultaneously student teaching full-time, finishing my research thesis, and taking one additional core graduate class. However, it was a stressful burden that took away from the further learning and critical reflection I could have experienced if I were able to have devoted all my time, energy, and focus to my main educational responsibilities.

REFERENCES

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