Pre-Service Teachers' Reactions to Education Teacher Performance Assessment: Challenges and Constraints of Implementation

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Abstract

The purpose of study was to explore the experiences of teacher candidates about being assessed by the Education Teacher Preparation Assessment (edTPA) requirements during their student teaching practicum. Fifty-six elementary and adolescent majors working for a Master of Science Degree in Education participated in the study by responding to open-ended survey questions. The study aimed at answering two research questions: (1) What are the challenges/concerns that the student teachers report about their experiences of edTPA during their student teaching placements? (2) Do teacher candidates suggest edTPA remains as part of the teacher education program requirement? The findings of the study indicate that the teacher candidates are adamant about their unfavorable experiences of edTPA implementation. They expressed that they found edTPA requirements to be an additional burden, not beneficial, a distraction, and they suggest that edTPA should be discarded from current teacher education programing. While such findings call for considerations to revisit aspects of edTPA for improvement, further studies are suggested to add insight into the nature of edTPA implementation.

Keywords: edTPA, teacher education, assessment, educational policy, survey

Many states in the US have recently introduced Education Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA), designed to improve the quality of teacher education programs and to determine the teacher candidates' preparedness to become qualified, certified educators. Accordingly, several educational programs in American colleges and universities are implementing the new edTPA during the teaching practicum of their respective pre-service programs. The stated intention is to provide a comprehensive and authentic analysis of the teacher candidates' ability and potential of becoming effective classroom teachers. Despite its objective to improve teacher education, some research indicates strong concerns about the specific requirements of the edTPA in its early years of implementation (Chiu, 2014; Meuwissen, Choppin, Shang-Butler, & Cloonan, 2015).

In the US, edTPA evaluates teacher candidates in terms of their competencies in planning, instruction and assessment. As an entry level, licensing assessment mechanism, edTPA provides evidence that individuals who plan to become teachers, exhibit the required preparedness concerning the following knowledge, skills, abilities and attributes: planning lessons for particular groups of learners; implementing and delivering the lessons, and assessing the learners' progress towards achieving explicit, measureable objectives and outcomes. However, by taking the assessment steps even further, edTPA requires that teacher candidates videotape one of their teaching segments and write a commentary (a reflection and analysis) of

their teaching and the students' learning. The videotape and commentary are submitted for external assessment (Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity, SCALE, 2018). In the assessment process, the candidates accomplish three tasks: (1) planning a learning segment of 3-5 lessons of instruction, (2) instructing students on the learning segments, and (3) assessing students' learning.

In fall 2013, after two years of field testing, edTPA was nationally available. The new assessment mechanism was developed through a partnership between Stanford University and the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Educators (AACTE). It included input from more than 1,000 educators across 29 states and 450 colleges and universities. The goal was to develop a multiple-measure examination which correlates with state and national standards, including Common Core and InTASC (Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium) principles. Intended to serve as a summative assessment for prospective teachers, the assessment was envisioned as being comparable to licensing examinations in other professional fields. As such, edTPA supposedly, offers evidence of a candidate's teaching readiness to manage a classroom and the acquisition of the abilities and skills of planning, instructing, and assessing students' learning. Most of the American states and the District of Columbia utilize edTPA in some form. New York State, the site of our research study, began requiring edTPA for all candidates seeking certification after April 30, 2014.

Following the implementation of the edTPA, some of the reported experiences of pre-service teachers appeared to be unfavorable. One of the concerns is the perceived lack of professionalism in regard to the assessment of teacher candidates by remote personnel. The assessors are portrayed as individuals with little or no connections and background experiences with the teacher candidates and the schools in which the pre-service teachers are placed. Other concerns about edTPA from the pre-service teachers' perspectives include: (i) loss of anonymity and confidentiality in handing over video recordings of their classes for evaluation by an employee/representative of a private-for-profit corporation, (ii) the standardization of teacher education assessments, (iii) lack of feedback (formative assessment) and rigid reliance on summative assessment, (iv) little if any, advice and support for improvement, (v) burdensome workloads for teacher candidates, (vi) unnecessarily, lengthy write-ups in journals and logs of the teaching, using biased and rigid rubrics, (vii) lack of human interactions between teacher candidates and assessors, and (viii) the privatization of teacher education (Wu, 2013; Heil & Berg, 2017; Christine, 2018).

Perhaps the most commonly reported concern is that the excessive workload of edTPA can detract from achieving the full benefits of student teaching. Reporting her experiences of the implementation of edTPA in her student teaching seminar, Chiu (2014), for example, states that "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" (p. 29). Likewise, Lachuk & Koellner (2015) report that the heavy workload was a major source of concern: "Since edTPA is both new and required for certification, it placed a huge burden on our teacher candidates, producing a lot of anxiety" (p. 93). Christine (2018) reported similar experiences. She notes "the time spent on their edTPA was time taken away from other experiences perceived as more valuable during student teaching" (p. 11).

Chiu (2014) contends that edTPA is a high stakes test for which teacher education programs should prepare their candidates to do well. Further, Chiu indicates that completing edTPA requirements was artificial and not reflective of real-life teaching. It forces a narrative that fits the standards, and provides no opportunities to modify instruction based on feedback. She adds that despite the benefits that edTPA may bring to teacher education "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" (p. 29). The benefits that Chiu thinks may arise from edTPA relate to opportunities for teacher candidates to exercise skills in planning, delivering and assessing their lessons.

Clearly, the implementation of edTPA as a new approach to teacher candidates' assessment warrants further review. "As teacher educators consider how and to what extent they might adapt their programs to the edTPA, an important step in that process is to better understand teaching candidates' experiences with and perspectives on the assessment" (Meuwissen, K., Choopi, J., Shang-Butler, H., & Cloonan, K., 2015, p. 1). A study designed to investigate the experiences of teacher education students about edTPA is important in order to understand the potential impacts, contributions, and areas of challenges and concerns associated with the new policy. Hopefully, analyzing the firsthand experiences of pre-service teachers will inform efforts to improve edTPA.

Within the context of the critiques of the new policy's implementation, this study was designed to investigate the experiences of teacher candidates who were assessed by the edTPA. The study explored the challenges and constraints identified by teacher candidates as they experienced the requirements of the edTPA system during their student teaching placements.

Research Questions

This study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges that the student teachers report about their experiences of edTPA during their student teaching placements?

2. What are the concerns that teacher candidates report about edTPA assessment during their student teaching placements?

3. Do teacher candidates suggest edTPA remains as part of teacher education program requirement?

Methodology

Fifty-six participants at an American university, responded to the survey questionnaires following two rounds of student teaching placements at their schools. Because the university is located close to the Canadian border, some respondents lived in Ontario and some in New York State, therefore student teaching placements occurred in the US and Canada. All participants were completing a Master's degree in either elementary or adolescent education and all will seek certification in New York State, which is a prerequisite for future certification in Ontario in the case of the Canadian students. Questionnaires were anonymous and did not seek demographic information, but as a subset of the larger population of students in the program, respondents are primarily female and white with ages ranging from 24 to 40. Understandably, this range of ages

is associated with differences in educational levels and life experiences. Some teacher candidates were pursuing Masters' degrees, immediately following university graduation. While some were returning to university to change careers, still others planned to return to work after taking parental leave. In all cases, students were required to successfully complete the edTPA examination as part of the certification process. Because the exam was new at the time of data collection, the curriculum at the teacher education program had not yet included course content to prepare the pre-service teachers for the exam. Students did, however, attend a mandatory one-day "boot camp" to expose them to the requirements, structure, and expectations of the exam. During their student teaching placements, all candidates were guided in the collection of the necessary teaching-learning artifacts and encouraged in the completion of the edTPA commentary by their college supervisors.

The responses of the participants to open-ended survey questions were analyzed based on categories and recurring themes regarding the challenges and constraints that the participants reported regarding the edTPA standards and requirements. The responses to the open-ended research questions were coded and categorized. These categories were further grouped under recurring themes relating to topics and issues that best describe the experiences of the participants about edTPA implementation. The emerging themes and sub-themes became the findings of the study representing the experiences of the student teachers. Content analysis and the adoption of a constant comparative interpretive stance provided the framework for the analysis of the qualitative data.

Findings

This section of the article presents the major findings of the larger study. The teacher candidates' candid responses to the new assessment mechanism, during their practicum, has shed considerable light, regarding the lack of effectiveness. Their critiques of the assessment's limitations, highlight specific areas which need re-examination.

In response to the question about challenges, the participants reported several issues that included the following: too much work and stress (45%); shifting focus away from teaching and learning to comply with the policy requirements (27%); videotaping of the teaching segment for external evaluation (20%); and other challenges (9%) for example, unfairness of the test because of its focus on writing; the structure of the new assessment policy did not fit within the school schedule; lack of preparation for the edTPA; resistance to new policy requirements by some school districts and associate teachers, and a lack of motivation to complete edTPA because its relevance to their future profession was not considered evident. The following section discusses the pre-service teachers' views:

Heavy workload. Participants reported that the excessively, heavy workload was a challenge in meeting prescribed requirements during their practicum. Most of the participants indicated that completing the requirements increased the already heavy workload. As neophytes, and not experienced teachers, it added to the stress and anxieties of the tasks of planning, instructing and assessing. Respondents expressed the following statements with regard to workload and stress created by the new assessment policy:

"Too much stress."
"It was very time consuming and stressful during my student teaching."

"It was so much unnecessary stress on me and my Associate Teacher."

"It caused a lot of stress which hindered my ability to teach the children."

"The edTPA was a tremendous amount of work that was difficult to keep up with at the same time as planning lessons."

"It is too much work and took away from my placements. I was too focused on everything for edTPA to fully enjoy my student teaching experience."

"Too much added work and stress."

"Too hard balancing work given while student teaching such as unit plans and doing lessons."

"There was too much of a workload for the edTPA. It was a constant struggle trying to schedule between working on edTPA and other student teaching requirements."

"Challenges -- the whole thing, trying to remember everything."

"Way too much work and it didn't let me put my full focus on student teaching."

"Having to plan units for classes and then doing edTPA on top of that."

"Added burden, confusing jargon."

"Time consuming, irrelevant, waste of time."

"Too long, time consuming and frustrating."

"Not having time to work on it. The edTPA does not consider AT (Associate Teacher) who dictated lessons and how to teach."

"Collecting documents from students; recording videos (there are interruptions); including additional information aside from the lesson plan – very repetitive."

"There were some parts of tasks that seemed unnecessary and busy work."

"No time to do on top of lesson plans and after a 10-hour day to go home have responsibilities as a mother, to be expected to not sleep or have personal time to complete this."

"It was challenging to plan lessons while ensuring details of the edTPA were fulfilled."

"Doing two things at once was frustrating and overwhelming all at the same time."

"It was very time consuming to write during planning for placement."

"There was a lot of extra work involved with the edTPA. Having time to write the tasks and plan for my lessons."

"It is such a large project to complete on top of actually learning how to be a teacher."

"Everything about it was a burden. I could not focus on my student teaching placement."

"Along with responsibilities from the College, my Associate Teacher, and my personal ambitions in learning everything possible from a real-school setting, edTPA's commitment was overbearing."

While participants indicate that number of tasks to be completed during their student teaching placements are too much, the participants also report, that the amount of time allocated for completion of the tasks was inadequate. Lack of time is reported as one of the foremost concerns of the participants in relation to the amount of work that the new assessment policy requires. On top of the heavy workload and time constraints, the participants believe that edTPA requirements demand multitasking. They indicated that they have to put their hands on so many tasks at the same time that it became unmanageable. The simultaneous, multitasking nature of

the new prescribed requirements, the participants believe, has impaired their practicum experience and made them less effective in their teaching.

Clearly, the teacher candidates are overwhelmed in trying to meet the additional assessment requirement simultaneously, with the stringent demands of student teaching. While there is much overlap between the two e.g., student teachers write formal lesson plans, teach lessons, and assess students' learning regardless of edTPA, the volume of written work demanded by the new assessment was excessive. Rather than viewing edTPA as the exploration, reflection, and explanation of thoughts behind their teaching decisions, in the candidates' views, the types of written work submitted was extraneous.

Shifted focus. The participants believe that edTPA has shifted focus away from the vital tasks of teaching and learning. Participants, for example, consider edTPA as a distraction from planning, delivery and assessment of instruction. Ironically, these are the three major tasks that the new assessment requires that pre-service teachers address. Furthermore, the participants believe that a shift in focus from teaching and learning to meeting the policy requirements is a challenging experience. They expressed the following concerns about the shift in focus experienced by themselves and their students in the following terms:

"edTPA makes students lose focus."

"It took away from my focus on teaching. It should not be a requirement during student teaching."

"It took time out of both placements and didn't give me time to focus on learners as much as I could have."

"It was just focusing on the edTPA. It took away my time and effort for student teaching."

"I feel like I wasn't given the opportunity to completely enjoy my placements."

"Too much time was spent on edTPA. I wish we had it to focus more on our lessons."

"I wanted to concentrate on student teaching and learning through my Associate Teacher, as I should have been!"

"Took way too much time."

"It was very difficult to focus on what I needed to do for the edTPA and focus on completing my student teaching requirements. I had to set aside the edTPA so that I could be successful in student teaching."

"edTPA is completely wrong. You can't concentrate on this and student teaching at the same time."

"To meet the edTPA requirements, I was forced to not learn and not teach well."

"It was a lot of work that took time away from in-class and useful work and learning."

"Parents not signing; children focused on the camera, not the teaching; focused on the writing [requirements] more than the actual teaching."

"Completely distracted from the student teaching experience; took a lot of time out of planning time; did not find the questions helpful – they were quite confusing and unnecessary."

"Too much time for edTPA, less time to focus on placement, lessons and classroom management."

The perception and belief that the new assessment detracted from, instead of enhancing, the student teaching experience is quite intriguing. Rather than viewing the new assessment mechanism as a guide to ensure high-quality instruction for students, which is its ultimate goal, the teacher candidates view it as an unnecessary hurdle to overcome.

Videotaping. Videotaping segments of the lessons during the practicum is a requirement of the new assessment. Candidates are required to submit video segments of their classroom teaching to an external scorer to assess their instructional proficiency. Some participants state that the videotape requirements are a distraction for the students in their respective classes. They report that their students are adjusting to being educated by a student teacher and are easily distracted by a video camera in the classroom. Their responses include:

"Video—parents saying no to it."
"Videotaping."
"Making sure videotaping is complete and all requirements are being met in addition to the load of student teaching placements."
"Videotaping. Some parents didn't give consent to kids to be videotaped."
"Making time to fit video recordings in the lesson/schedule."
"Videotaping/technology component; time consuming."
"I was not allowed to videotape in a classroom."
"I was not allowed to videotape and had to make other arrangements."
"Video recordings."
"The videotaping is something I did not feel comfortable with."
"I want to focus on teaching, not videotaping. What does 10 minutes tell you?"

As some of the above comments indicate, videotaping parts of their lessons present extra work, and increased the levels of stress and anxiety for the pre-service teachers. Understandably, several met resistance obtaining the required written permission from the students' parents. Additionally, some school districts would not allow videotaping of the students in their classrooms. Moreover, the respondents doubted the worth or accuracy of videotaping a short video clip to represent their teaching effectiveness. Although the videotaping is only one part of the assessment procedure, it seems to be a major concern.

Additional concerns. Some respondents indicate that edTPA is not an appropriate form of assessment. One participant said, "In my opinion it is an unfair test which only evaluates writing skills." Lack of motivation and skepticism were also cited as challenges when dealing with the new requirements: "The main challenge was finding motivation to complete something so irrelevant to my future profession. It was difficult to not be completely offended by a blatant cash grab." Thus some participants believe that the edTPA requirements and its implementation are financially motivated. Moreover, some participants cite: lack of clarity, confusing directions, and absence of adequate preparation, as other challenges associated with edTPA during practicum.

Discard the new assessment requirements. Unsurprisingly, when asked whether edTPA should remain as part of the teacher education program, the participants overwhelmingly rejected it. They indicate that they prefer to eliminate the edTPA requirements from their student

teaching placements. The following statements demonstrate the participants' disapproval regarding the new assessment:

> "I feel the edTPA should be taken out of the NYS teaching certificate. Has no relevance to effective teaching methods."
> "All should be excluded. It's a waste of time. They ask the same questions throughout the whole exam. Takes away from what is important which is focusing on student teaching."
> "Everything in the edTPA should be excluded."
> "The whole edTPA should be excluded from State requirements."
> "I was concerned with what my principals and teachers thought. They did not see the validity of it."
> "My in-class learning was beneficial."
> "I don't feel that the edTPA was helpful at all in requirements for teaching."
> "All should be excluded."
> "I think the edTPA should not be a requirement as it does not define our abilities to be successful teachers."
> "The edTPA should be excluded entirely."
> "All of the edTPA should be excluded as an evaluation of teacher candidates."
> "Overall, I think the edTPA is a big waste of money, and time."
> "Unnecessary requirements!"
> "I do not think that edTPA is beneficial at all."
> "Much of the work was unnecessary and unrealistic."
> "Hated the whole thing."
> "Hurt more than helped."
> "Every in-service teacher who saw what was required disagreed with it."

Conclusion

This research explored the types of experiences that teacher candidates encountered in complying with the edTPA requirements during their practicum. The findings of this study confirm the research reports regarding the increasing concerns with the impacts of edTPA on pre-service teachers during their field placements (Chiu, 2014; Meuwissen, Choppin, Shang-Butler, & Cloonan, 2015; Heil & Berg, 2017; Christine, 2018). Generally, the respondents had negative experiences with the new assessment requirements. The teacher candidates indicated that as neophytes, they found the assessment requirements to be an additional burden. The participants believe that it distracted from their teaching and learning experiences in their practicum. Furthermore they suggest that edTPA should be discarded from current American teacher education programs. It should be noted that the respondents were among an early cohort. It is likely that future teacher candidates may find the assessment examination more relevant as changes are implemented to coursework which keeps pace with more realistic expectations of the test. We suggest further research to discover firstly, the specific portions of the edTPA which contribute little to the pre-service teachers' instructional effectiveness during practicum, and secondly, to identify which parts could be modified and adopted to enhance existing teacher preparation programs. As importantly, we suggest that surveys of experienced, knowledgeable and critical associate teachers, college supervisors, and school administrators who are directly,

involved with the implementation of the new assessment policy would contribute invaluable insights concerning ways of effectively improving further iterations of edTPA. However, the findings of this small research project offer a cautionary note. The participants' responses highlight the need to develop a more well considered process to improve the edTPA assessment system, from its design, to the resultant policy, and through to its implementation procedures and practices. Moreover, we suggest the need to work with the pre-service teachers and find ways to reduce its negative impacts, while at the same time, to explore ways of enhancing the practicum experience. Thus, the re-designed edTPA will contribute to the effective education (in qualitative and quantitative ways), of candidates who will hopefully become exceptional educators, educational leaders and mentors of generations of teachers.

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