Teacher Educators' Initial Impressions of the edTPA:
A "Love-Hate" Relationship

Kathryn Davis   Winthrop University
Abbigail Armstrong   Winthrop University

The edTPA Teacher Performance Assessment was implemented at a regional public university to replace the previous paper-and-pencil assessment of teacher candidates' teaching effectiveness. To determine the teacher educators' impressions of using the edTPA as an assessment of readiness to teach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 full-time teacher educators from 11 content areas. Findings consisted of a wide range of responses to the edTPA, from deep edTPA integration to a surface level implementation of the assessment tool. Both positive and negative impressions were found during edTPA implementation in regard to the advantages and disadvantages of the edTPA instrument.

Educator preparation programs (EPPs) have always been challenged to prepare teacher candidates who are effective and successful teachers. As educator preparation moves toward an accountability-based model of preparing teachers, many EPPs are turning to performance-based assessments for evaluating their candidates. Some states are beginning to require standardized performance-based assessments for licensure requirements, and others are in the process of doing so. "Performance assessments that measure what teachers actually do in the classroom… are a much more potent tool for evaluating teachers' competence and readiness, as well as for supporting needed changes in teacher education" (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p.5). One assessment created due to the necessity for a performance-based assessment is the Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA).

The edTPA is a content-specific teaching assessment created by teacher educators and P-12 teachers through the Stanford Center for Learning, Assessment, and Equity (SCALE). As of April 2017, the edTPA is the most frequently used instrument in the United States for assessing teacher candidates' teaching effectiveness, with participating sites in 40 states (SCALE, 2017). The edTPA focuses teacher candidates' attention on these critical skills of teaching: (a) planning for student needs, (b) engaging in purposeful reflection on instructional data, and (c) evaluating student learning to determine the next steps of instruction. It was designed to ensure that new teachers are "profession ready" to teach on their first day (Ressler, King, & Nelson, 2017).

The requirements of the edTPA are based on teaching practices that all teacher candidates should develop. The Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity (SCALE, 2017) cites six advantages in using the edTPA for the assessment of teacher candidates: (a) it is subject-specific for 27 different teaching fields; (b) it aligns with InTASC, Common Core, and the Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) Standards; (c) it is modeled after the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards

certification of veteran teachers; (d) it was created by P-12 teachers and teacher educators in content-specific subjects from across the country; (e) it is scored by the profession; and (f) it has been shown to be a valid and reliable assessment of teaching effectiveness. The edTPA assessment has the potential to inform EPPs about areas of strength and weakness in preparing candidates, possibly leading to curriculum improvement (Darling-Hammond, Newton, & Wei, 2013). Others have acknowledged that the edTPA clearly assesses good teaching and has the potential to be a quality educative assessment (Ressler et al., 2017). However, there are also concerns about the use of the edTPA in evaluating future teachers, as there are concerns about using any type of standardized assessment for licensure purposes.

Methodology

This research study involved focused ethnography with semi-structured interviews to better understand the EPP faculty's perspectives toward the edTPA implementation at our university. Focused ethnography is mainly utilized in research studies having specific research questions on a special topic, utilizing intensive interviews as the only method of data collection, and involving researchers with inside background knowledge of the cultural group (Richards & Morse, 2013; Wall, 2015). As participant researchers, we have designed our study on the theory that teacher educators create important, but often unused, knowledge related to teaching practice and educational reforms (Ledwell & Oyler, 2016).

Research Context

The situation at our regional public university is unique in that we have not been compelled to use the edTPA, which means our shift to using the edTPA has been entirely voluntary. Our EPP became interested in switching to the edTPA because of its similarities to our previous summative assessment, the Internship Work Sample (IWS). Further, because the edTPA includes a video sampling of instruction, it provides a more authentic view of teaching performance than our former paper-and-pencil IWS assessment (Goldhaber, Cowan, & Theobold, 2017). Even though the edTPA is not currently mandated as the state licensure assessment of candidates (it is currently one of three options), our shift to the edTPA was a reaction to policy implementation in our neighboring states, all of which have adopted some level of edTPA implementation. Many of our graduates become teachers in those states.

In our EPP, a more incremental phase-in of the edTPA was used, involving initial pilot trials by two content areas (middle level and physical education) over a four-year period. In the fall of 2013, the middle level program began its edTPA implementation with Internship II (which involves full days in the schools). The physical education program initiated the edTPA during a secondary methods course the same semester. These pilots occurred prior to all EPP programs implementing the edTPA in their content areas during the spring of 2017. This study focused on the initial impressions of the edTPA by teacher educators in our EPP. The specific research questions that guided the researchers were:

1. What were the teacher educators' initial positive impressions of the edTPA as a tool for assessing candidate teaching effectiveness in their specific content areas?
2. What were the teacher educators' initial negative impressions of the edTPA as a tool for assessing candidate teaching effectiveness in their specific content areas?

Participants and Data Collection

Prospective participants at our university were full-time teacher educators who were required to meet one of three criteria: (a) teaching a methods course or other program course that implements the edTPA, (b) supervising interns who went through the edTPA process, or (c) serving as a program director for one of the EPP content areas. We contacted each prospective teacher educator by email in order to gain permission to include them in the study. The target participants totaled 17 teacher educators (N = 15 females, 2 males; 12 European American, 3 African American) in 11 content areas (art, dance, early childhood, elementary, math, middle level, music, physical education, secondary science, secondary social studies, and special education) within our EPP. There were three content areas that had faculty members who chose not to participate. The teacher educators in this study had experienced full edTPA implementation in their content areas for only the Spring 2017 semester, so the data in this study truly represent initial impressions of the edTPA assessment tool.

The primary method of data collection was the face-to-face semi-structured interview. All interviews were done with individual teacher educators, with the exception of faculty in three content areas who asked to be interviewed as a group. The structure of the interviews included a combination of demographic questions, in addition to the primary questions (see Table 1). Each interviewer was allowed to ask follow-up questions to further explore and probe the participants' responses to ensure depth and clarification. The interviews ranged from 20-85 minutes in length, depending on participant engagement in responses. They were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a paid transcriber. The transcripts were edited for accuracy before we engaged in data analysis.

Table 1.
Interview Protocol and Primary Interview Questions

Protocol: Our research team is working to find out how each teacher education program at [our university] is modifying their curricula to implement the mandated edTPA Teacher Performance Assessment. We are seeking to find the connections between what programs value and what the edTPA seems to value. We would also like to hear your thoughts on the pros and cons of both the edTPA and program-level methods of implementing it into the curriculum.

1. Has the edTPA helped to improve your candidates' internship teaching experience? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. How has the edTPA been helpful to teacher education faculty in your program area?
3. What does the edTPA do a good job of assessing? What does it miss?
4. What, in your opinion, are the limitations of using the edTPA as an assessment tool?
5. What curriculum-related changes have been made in your program as a result of your edTPA implementation?
6. Is there anything you want to talk about, related to the implementation of the edTPA in your program, you haven't had a chance to discuss?

Data Analysis

Analysis of the qualitative data (transcribed interviews) proceeded in several rounds, as follows: (a) reading and rereading of interview transcripts to consider emerging

themes and patterns; (b) coding of data according to key themes/patterns found, and (c) data analysis by looking at the frequencies in responses to the interview questions and their variations between participants. The researchers began with "topical coding," or categorizing common ideas among participants, and then proceeded to "analytic coding," or developing theoretical themes based on previous literature and/or co-researchers' ideas or common themes (Richards & Morse, 2013).

One limitation of this study is that our context is a regional public university which may not represent other university populations. Our scope and sequence of studying faculty reactions to the edTPA was narrow. Because the edTPA was phased in over time in our EPP voluntarily, and it was not a "high stakes" assessment at the time of the interviews, our findings and their implications may not be the same as in institutions where the edTPA is extremely "high stakes" and state-mandated.

Findings

In this section, the qualitative findings are included to answer the two research questions about: (a) faculty's positive impressions of the edTPA, and (b) faculty's negative impressions of the edTPA.

Positive Impressions of edTPA

All of the participants cited at least one component (planning, instruction, assessment, teaching analysis, video, reflection, academic language, content-specific nature) of the edTPA as being a strong aspect of developing teaching effectiveness. However, the participants were particularly vocal about three strengths of the edTPA as an instrument: (a) video documentation of teaching, (b) reflection and the analysis of teaching, and (c) academic language.

Video component. In regard to the strengths of the edTPA, 10 of 17 teacher educators thought that the video component was one of the best aspects of edTPA in assessing teacher effectiveness. The teacher educators felt, in general, that it was very valuable and reflective for the candidates to see their own teaching through video, as noted by one participant:

> One of the things I think it does is it really forces our students to be critics but not just in a negative way. Because some of our [candidates] will watch a video and they will see all those things they missed and because they have to go back to that video over and over again, they notice some of the [other aspects of their teaching].

Another participant mentioned the reflective nature of using video to assess teaching: "They videotape and that's always strong when they watch themselves teach and they have to reflect on it, but I just think it is an instrument that helps them reflect to improve."

Reflection component. Ten of the 17 participants gave detailed comments about the value of reflection to their candidates' teaching practice. Many participants shared that the reflective piece of the edTPA helped the candidates improve their teaching: "I think it makes them more reflective about their teaching overall, perhaps on a deeper level. I do think that any reflective practice, and edTPA feels deeply reflective, should help them improve across the board in their teaching." An especially helpful part of the edTPA is the candidate's evaluation of students' learning needs and using that data for reflection: "They are more reflective because they have stronger data to talk about. I can say that has helped them be more reflective, be more intentional

about their reflections, using the data to reflect on."

Academic language component. Academic language is the oral and written language used for academic purposes in specific content areas to engage students in learning (SCALE, 2017). Academic language was a focus for all content areas in our EPP because, during this initial implementation phase, each content area had to define its own academic language. Academic language was the thread that connected the planning, instruction, and assessment tasks of the edTPA. As noted by one teacher educator, once the candidates were able to discuss examples of academic language, they began to organize it in their minds:

I am convinced that the academic language focus is the biggest thing. I was convinced of that within three weeks of that first semester's implementation. It's like it was magic. The second week, when we were still working on [academic language], I knew [the Dean] was still working late. I actually called and asked her to come over for a little bit to see what was happening [with my candidates], and she was equally impressed. It was just wonderful.

Another participant stated during the interviews, "Getting to the academic language, that's one thing that we don't necessarily make a big stink about but it's really valuable. It focuses their attention. It helps the [candidates] use these terms so I think that's a favorable thing."

Negative Impressions of edTPA Implementation

The teacher educators in our EPP also had negative impressions of the edTPA as a candidate culminating assessment. Several of the participants cited at least one component of the edTPA instrument as a weakness, but a lack of emphasis on class management and pre-post-testing were mentioned by the participants the most as negative impressions.

Class management component. Several teacher educators expressed concern over a lack of emphasis on class management within the edTPA. Even though there is an edTPA rubric which focuses on the learning environment, one critical aspect of a new teacher's practice is being able to handle class management and student behavior issues. One teacher educator noted, "I don't know that it really addresses the classroom environment so much. The overall environment, and teaching that part of it. Some of that comes from experience, other than that, I think it really for the most part is thorough." Another teacher educator stated, "It also misses classroom management, which includes both the organization of the [learning] tasks as well as student behavior management." Another K-12 teacher educator remarked, "One of the hardest things for them is classroom management initially, so they have to manage those 40 students… It's like, we are asking them to do that and they are just learning." Many of the participants were surprised by the fact that explicit accountability for class management is assumed, and not required, by the edTPA instrument.

Pre-post testing component. The edTPA instrument also does not require an actual pre-post test in any learning domain; it is assumed that candidates will automatically do pre-post testing. This is a critical feature of Task 3 about the assessment of student learning because candidates are asked to analyze student learning as individuals and as part of a class. In addition, in some content areas, the analysis of student learning must be done in more than just the cognitive domain. One teacher educator stated, "The edTPA misses the importance of administering a pre-test

and post-test; while it assumes that interns do a pre-post test, it doesn't specifically require it." Another teacher educator remarked, "I think one thing that it overlooks is the pre and post assessment idea, providing data about where your students are before and plan instruction to teach where they are and then showing growth from the pre to post. It doesn't do that."

Discussion

This study grew out of an interest to share with others what our EPP learned from the implementation of the edTPA as an assessment for teacher preparedness. The central finding of this study was that teacher educators had more positive impressions of the edTPA implementation as a culminating assessment of our candidates than negative impressions. It is often found in the research about edTPA that teacher educators acknowledge flaws in the edTPA, but they incorporate the edTPA into their teaching because they perceive it to have more advantages than drawbacks (An, 2017). Because our EPP was voluntarily engaged in local evaluation of edTPA portfolios at the time of the interviews, instead of being a part of "high stakes" assessment, it is likely the context played a role in the positive impressions by the faculty.

In answer to the first research question, our findings suggest that the teacher educators' positive impressions were mainly focused on the edTPA as an assessment instrument of good teaching. In regard to the use of video, all of the participants felt it assisted their candidates with analyzing and reflecting on their teaching. The teacher educators felt that the video raised the candidates' awareness of their own teaching process and it helped them improve through multilayered reflection. The video of teaching was something they could actually see; it was not

a perception of how they think they were doing. Video shows candidates actually interacting with students in real time, when the candidate must respond to the unpredictability in the class. Other research studies about the edTPA have also found that both faculty and candidates see the video recording of teaching as the most helpful and authentic piece of the edTPA (Darling-Hammond et al., 2013; Ressler et al., 2017). As DeMoss stated in 2017, "edTPA's video-based teacher candidate assessment practice should probably be a feature in all preparation programs, given how influential watching and reflecting on real teaching experiences can be" (p. 37).

The participants also had many positive impressions about the extensive reflection and analysis of teaching, and the emphasis on teaching academic language specific to the content areas. They felt the candidates were more reflective using the edTPA because they had stronger assessment and video data to analyze. The learning segment taught in the edTPA process allows candidates to reflect on a complete cycle of teaching: from initial planning for teaching to assessment of student learning to determining changes for future lessons. This is analogous to the idea of a "reflective practitioner," or someone who reasons and thinks through their pedagogical decisions while they are teaching (Chung, 2008). Many of the teacher educators interviewed also thought it was particularly helpful for candidates to learn how to plan and teach the content-specific academic language within their lessons. They felt as though analyzing and categorizing the different language demands of their content areas helped them to become better teachers of the content. Academic language, as a dimension of teaching, was also found to be a significant predictor of teaching effectiveness in a study by Darling-Hammond et al. (2013) about the

Performance Assessment of California Teachers (PACT).

In answer to the second research question, the participants also expressed some negative impressions about the edTPA that could be improved. The teacher educators interviewed had negative impressions of the edTPA as an assessment instrument in regard to: (a) a lack of focus on class management and (b) a lack of any pre-post testing requirement. In regard to class management, the participants felt that the edTPA addressed the overall class climate, but it missed the organizational and behavioral management of teaching for which many beginning teachers struggle. In a study of teacher educators' impressions of the edTPA in New York, Ressler et al. (2017) discussed the absence of a focus on classroom management: "Given the importance of effective classroom management on teacher efficacy and performance evaluations in the field, its omission from the edTPA calls into question how comprehensive of a teacher assessment tool it may be considered" (p. 125). Many of the teacher educators interviewed also felt that the lack of a pre-post test requirement for Task 3 was an oversight of the developers of the edTPA because they felt that pre-post testing assisted with determining students' prior knowledge and overall improvement. While the edTPA assumes that pre-post testing is done as a regular practice of candidates, many of the teacher educators interviewed perceived a lack of emphasis on determining student needs based on multicultural concerns. "The benefits of exploring the impact on student learning of a pre-study and post-study analysis is no longer possible given the attention that must be devoted to the required edTPA components" (Ressler et al., 2017, p. 131).

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that teacher educators have a "love-hate" relationship with the edTPA by having both positive and negative impressions of the edTPA as a culminating assessment of readiness to teach. Previous research confirms the existence of this dichotomy in various forms, but usually with more negative impressions than positive impressions (An, 2017; DeMoss, 2017; Ressler et al., 2017). This study made an attempt at determining teacher educators' initial impressions of implementing the edTPA. Future research is needed to clarify candidates' impressions of going through the edTPA process, particularly comparing high-stakes contexts to more formative contexts. Because the present study was done during the initial year of implementation, longitudinal research over time would also provide a more complete understanding of the edTPA's effect on candidates. Questions also arise about comparing the edTPA to other teacher performance assessments, such as the Educational Testing Service's Praxis Performance Assessment for Teachers (PPAT). Because it is possible that positive or negative faculty attitudes toward standardized performance assessments may affect candidate performance, it would be important for future research to correlate candidate scores with faculty impressions of the edTPA process. Given the conflicting viewpoints and data from previous research and the current study, it is evident that there is a crucial need for more systematic research on the effectiveness of the edTPA in predicting readiness to teach.

References

An, S. (2017). Preparing elementary school teachers for social studies instruction in the context of edTPA. *The Journal of Social Studies Research, 41,* 25-35.

Chung, R.R. (2008). Beyond assessment: Performance assessments in teacher education. *Teacher Education Quarterly,35*(1), 7-28.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *Evaluating teacher effectiveness: How teacher performance assessments can measure and improve teaching*. Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress. Retrieved from: https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2010/10/19/8502/evaluating-teacher-effectiveness/

Darling-Hammond, L., Newton, S.P., & Wei, R.C. (2013). Developing and assessing beginning teacher effectiveness: The potential of teacher performance assessments. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability, 25*(3), 179-204.

DeMoss, K. (2017). New York's edTPA: The perfect solution to a wrongly identified problem. In J.H. Carter & H.A. Lochte (Eds.), *Teacher performance assessment and accountability reforms: The impacts of edTPA on teaching and schools* (pp. 25-46). New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Goldhaber, D., Cowan, J., & Theobold, R. (2017). Evaluating prospective teachers: Testing the predictive validity of the edTPA. *Journal of Teacher Education, 68*(4), 377-393.

Ledwell, K., & Oyler, C. (2016). Unstandardized responses to a "standardized" test: The edTPA as gatekeeper and curriculum change agent. *Journal of Teacher Education, 67*(2), 120-134.

Ressler, M.B., King, K.B., & Nelson, H. (2017). Ensuring quality teacher candidates: Does the edTPA answer the call? In J.H. Carter & H.A. Lochte (Eds.), *Teacher performance assessment and accountability reforms: The impacts of edTPA on teaching and schools* (pp. 119-140). New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Richards, L., & Morse, J.M. (2013). *User's guide to qualitative methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity [SCALE]. (2017, November). *Educative assessment and meaningful support: 2016 edTPA administrative report.* Stanford, CA: Author.

Wall, S. (2015). Focused ethnography: A methodological adaptation for social research in emerging contexts. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *16*(1). Retrieved from: http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs150111.

Kathryn Davis, Ph.D. is a Professor of Physical Education in the College of Education. Her research includes diversity in physical education, physical activity for special populations, teacher performance assessment.

Abbigail Armstrong, Ed.D. is an Assistant Professor of Middle Level Education in the College of Education. Her research includes literacy in the content areas and motivating diverse learners.