



## Where Practicum Meets Test Preparation: Supporting Teacher Candidates Through EdTPA

A strong focus on teacher performance is resurfacing in teacher-preparation programs across the US. EdTPA, a teacher-performance assessment designed to determine K-12 teacher candidates' readiness for the classroom, has become central in teacher-preparation programs in several states and promises to be implemented in more states in the coming months. A multidimensional portfolio compilation, the edTPA requires candidates to submit teaching artifacts (e.g., lesson plans, samples of students' work) along with narrative writing tasks that detail a teacher's instructional approach and teaching reflections. This article highlights 3 ESL teachers' experiences with and perspectives about the New York State requirement of edTPA for English as an Additional Language (EAL) certification over 2 semesters of a student-teacher practicum. These teachers' experiences provide insights into the nature of certification assessment and the perceived benefits and challenges of completing the edTPA portfolio. This article also offers suggestions for the growing number of educational programs that will experience the impact of edTPA during the coming decade.

### EdTPA: A Consequential Certification Requirement

The new implementation of edTPA in teacher-education programs throughout the US is having a significant effect on teacher candidates pursuing K-12 certification. Formerly called the Teacher Performance Assessment (TPA), edTPA is a multiple-measure performance assessment designed to answer "the essential question of whether new teachers are ready for the job" (Pearson Assessment, 2014; AACTE, 2014). EdTPA was developed by educa-

tors, professionals, and faculty throughout the field of education as an assessment measure to further learning for teacher candidates, and to predict teaching effectiveness and its relationship to student learning in the classroom (NYSTCE, 2014; Pearson Assessment, 2014; SCALE, 2014).

EdTPA comprises three overarching components related to classroom teaching: planning, instruction, and assessment (SCALE, 2014). To showcase these aspects of their teaching, teacher candidates submit multiple components in their edTPA portfolio for evaluation, including two 5-10-minute video clips of classroom instruction, lesson plans for the instruction presented in video clips, classroom artifacts, student work samples with feedback, and assessments. All of these components are accompanied by extensive prompted narrative commentary in which teachers explain and defend different aspects of their pedagogical practice. Each edTPA portfolio is discipline specific. For example, Task 3a pertains to the planning component of English as an Additional Language (EAL) and poses the following prompt for teacher candidates to answer:

Justify how your understanding of your students' prior academic learning and personal/cultural/community assets guided your choice or adaptation of language tasks and materials when planning to provide English language development within content-based instruction. Be explicit about the connections between the learning tasks and students' prior academic learning, assets, and research/theory (SCALE, 2015a).

Completing edTPA is, by all accounts, an extensive task. Guidelines provided to candidates suggest that original commentaries should not exceed 25 single-spaced pages (SCALE, 2013a), and combined with the required assessments, lesson plans, and student artifacts, submitted portfolios can consist of 50 pages or more.

At the time of writing, preparation materials included a support guide that outlined the required tasks all candidates needed to complete (SCALE, 2013b), as well as the *EAL Assessment Handbook*, a 48-page document detailing the specific requirements for students taking the EAL test (SCALE, 2013a).<sup>1</sup> Fifteen rubrics used for portfolio evaluation were provided for candidate reference (SCALE, 2013a; 2015ab), including five rubrics that were designed to evaluate aspects of planning phases, five for instruction, and five for assessment as demonstrated within the unit plans. Trained edTPA raters score the portfolios based on these same 15 rubrics, with a scoring range from 1 to 5. The current cutoff score to pass the EAL edTPA in New York is

41 (NYSED, 2013a); a score of three on each of the 15 rubrics would result in an overall score of 45.

In the state of New York, completing and passing edTPA was made consequential for initial teacher certification in 2013; that is, teacher candidates wishing to teach ESL in public schools needed to complete and pass the EAL portfolio to be licensed.<sup>2</sup> Resulting from this new requirement, familiarity with edTPA and portfolio preparation has become a strong focus across New York State's teacher-education programs as faculty and staff collectively grapple with how best to guide teacher candidates through this new, impactful performance assessment. How much curricular attention to focus on edTPA—whether to make edTPA a mandatory task incorporated into master's graduation projects, or to offer support to candidates through elective preparation sessions, or to expect students to rise to the edTPA challenge independently—is becoming a common topic of discussion among TESOL faculty across institutions.

In our program, we have made some adjustments to our seminar curriculum to support our candidates' completion of edTPA. Candidates complete two semesters of student teaching, one placement in an elementary context (K-6) and one placement in a secondary context (7-12). Logistically, we have found that requiring students to complete the planning and video component of edTPA during their fall elementary ESL placement gives them the necessary time to complete the task, to submit it for evaluation, and to receive their scores in time to be certified for teaching positions available the following academic year.

Our elementary methods course and student teaching seminar have become the natural context in which to touch base with students related to edTPA; here, we help with troubleshooting, establish deadlines, and encourage peers to share their experiences, pitfalls, and successes. What has evolved as a result of this process is that edTPA has become an organic part of these courses. Lesson planning, though always a strong focus in these courses, has taken on new importance as we consider which elements of edTPA planning are aligned with our curriculum and which are not. For example, using *leveled questions*, or questions adapted for differing proficiency levels (Herrell & Jordan, 2014) is an area included on edTPA, and upon reflection as to their pedagogical value, we have decided to dedicate time within our courses for candidates to develop their skills in this regard. Similarly, some vocabulary has been purposely infused into our seminar discussions to increase candidates' familiarity with the edTPA lexicon, for example, *modalities*, referring to the four skills, *learning segments*, referring to sequencing of cohesive lessons, and *academic language*

*competencies*, referring to grammatical, pragmatic, discourse, and metalinguistic aspects of language.

Each year, we as a faculty have revisited our policies regarding the role that edTPA should play within our TESOL K-12 certification program. In 2013, the first year of the edTPA portfolio requirement, edTPA completion dominated our TESOL K-12 MA portfolio requirement because of the haste in which it was instituted by the state. In subsequent years, a modified edTPA portfolio has constituted one component of several within our MA portfolio; however, we are still evaluating what degree of importance to give this test, based on our perceptions of its educational value and its alignment with our program's pedagogical philosophy.

A natural part of this evaluation process has been to learn more about candidates' opinions of the edTPA experience in relation to their formation as teachers. We have also been interested to hear their opinions about programmatic support that they received to better hone our expectations and refine or augment the institutional resources allotted to this test. For this article, the voices of three recently graduated TESOL K-12 teacher candidates from our master's program, Alison, Brianna, and Tracy, are presented to provide insight into the place and function of edTPA within their graduate work and instructional development as teachers. Here they shared retrospective accounts relating to reflection through video and their impressions of the educational value of edTPA. Finally, they offered advice from their own experiences for students and programs preparing for edTPA submission.

To introduce these candidates further, information related to their ethnic, teaching, and linguistic background was collected insofar as it informed their insights related to edTPA. Alison, an international student, self-identifies as a Brazilian-born Taiwanese woman who received her education in US schools. She lived in Brazil until she was 18, at which time she moved to Taiwan for college, and she eventually came to New York City for graduate school in 2013. Her teaching experiences include tutoring third-grade EFL in Taiwan for several years, teaching kindergarten in São Paulo for a semester, and tutoring EFL high school students for a year. Brianna is a native New Yorker who was a teaching assistant in a NYC charter school for three years before pursuing her master's degree in TESOL. During her teaching experience, she was able to observe a number of teachers and take on some teaching responsibilities, such as small-group support. She speaks English and Spanish. Tracy is native to the West Coast and identifies as culturally Jewish. She taught in a private Jewish boarding school for several years before pursuing her master's degree in TESOL.

She is a native English speaker and has a command of Hebrew and Spanish, which she developed from a language-study group she led in Costa Rica. All three women share the characteristic that they are in their mid-20s. Their experiences and backgrounds are not unusual compared to those of other students in our program, but it should be noted that these three students were especially strong academically.

### **Reflection Through Video**

Recording two video clips of classroom lessons and reflecting extensively on their shown practice was a major component in students' edTPA portfolios. When discussing their impressions of the video as a device to encourage reflection, the candidates' opinions varied. Brianna and Alison thought that the video was one of the most valuable parts of the test. Brianna said, "I think videoing myself teaching gave me an interesting and new perspective on myself as a teacher." She thought that she gained new insight into her developing practice by monitoring herself in real time during the actual lesson, and then through the practice of reflecting in thought and in writing afterward. Brianna also thought that the video part of edTPA was useful in that it gave her experience with what would likely be a common occurrence in school: "I know a number of schools that video teachers as a part of teachers' professional development, [and] edTPA just gave a taste of this before stepping out into the field."

Alison also saw the value in using video to gain insight into her teaching:

The video was more for me than for edTPA, because I was able to see what I did right or wrong, what I forgot to do, or how the students were behaving at all times. It was beneficial to my growth because I was able to observe my own lesson from a different perspective.

She also mentioned that watching her own videos multiple times was an effective way to learn more about her instructional practices. "Perhaps I would not have seen [those things] had I not gone back to the footage." These comments suggest that the video component of edTPA had true pedagogical value in that candidates were able to see themselves from the perspective of a student and critique their practice analytically by seeing actual footage of their performance.

Nonetheless, the candidates also spoke to issues of validity in the evaluation of a 5-10-minute teaching segment and generalizing judgments to the quality of an entire lesson or to teaching ability in general. Alison explained that though she thought that edTPA had

the *potential* to accurately measure teaching competence, the system could be outwitted through strategic clip selection:

Not every lesson will have everything that edTPA is asking for within the same 10 minutes of the lesson, so I don't believe it's an honest assessment of what the teacher can do. Besides, maybe the rest of the lesson tanked, but the candidate showed 10 minutes that worked ... it's just not authentic.

Alison did not believe that an edTPA portfolio was an accurate depiction of a teacher's entire repertoire, and it would therefore be a skewed representation of a teacher's practice.

Alison also raised the issue of "testwiseness," or the ability to do well on a test because of implementing test-taking strategies. She reported that she used the rubrics extensively, "to see what type of responses merited a 3 or higher," so that she would be assured of getting a passing score. Upon further consideration, she thought that this was an inauthentic practice related to the real work of teaching: "The fact that I could do that shows that it was really 'typing to the test' and is not necessarily an accurate reflection of who I am as a teacher in an actual classroom setting." This comment further demonstrates Alison's mistrust of the test as a valid measure of her teaching abilities and suggests that she believed that edTPA may have been measuring some other test-taking ability, that is, analyzing rubrics.

Similarly, Tracy expressed an important concern that edTPA was not evaluating her on her practice, but rather on her ability to convince her audience:

I think that most of edTPA, including the video portion, was an exercise in persuasive writing. I am confident in my persuasive writing skills, but I found it a little worrisome that that is what I felt like I was being assessed on the most.

Tracy's comments suggest an important dimension that she perceived as critical to passing edTPA—that of defending her pedagogical decisions through writing. Rather than allowing evidence of actual teaching to be the sole criteria for evaluation, candidates' ability to explain their reasoning and rationales for actions within the classroom was perceived as a major criterion upon which their performance was assessed. Candidates' impressions that their writing was to be polished and persuasive suggests that they recognized a conflict between the audience for which they were writing their narratives and the actual audience of their lessons, the children they were teaching. Addition-

ally, the purpose of their writing, that is, to persuade the raters that all facets of their practice were well founded, was thought by candidates to be slanted because they did not think they could expose any shortcomings that they identified in their teaching as they completed their portfolios. In this way, the writing of an edTPA portfolio can feel like what one candidate called “writing propaganda” and may undermine the true constructive value of reflection, a skill that we work so hard for our candidates to develop.

### **Impressions of Educational Value of the EdTPA**

As a program, we were most interested in our students’ perspectives on the value of edTPA within their graduate school experience. All three candidates spoke to the challenge of completing edTPA around their course work and student teaching responsibilities. Brianna said that the edTPA-aligned lesson-plan format that was used in our methods and student teaching seminar courses helped her prepare for edTPA. “I appreciated the fact that, from very early on, our program had us using a lesson-plan template that incorporated most, if not all, of the components we were expected to plan for edTPA.” This lesson-plan template, which we continue to use, helped our candidates familiarize themselves in advance with the components and terminology of edTPA.

When asked if edTPA should have taken a more central role in our student teacher seminar, all three candidates said that though they appreciated the support offered to them as they completed their portfolios, they did not think graduate course work should be further structured around the test. Tracy thought that the edTPA requirement should not dictate student seminar curriculum: “I do not want to give edTPA any more power than it already has.”

Alison, Tracy, and Brianna all agreed that there was some benefit to their professional development by submitting edTPA, but two candidates likened the requirement to a “hoop to jump through” in the course of obtaining state ESL certification. Alison and Tracy mentioned that repetitive prompts caused the test to become tedious and therefore lose educational value for them, with Tracy explaining, “So many of the questions were too similar that it lost its ability to be worthwhile. It existed in a dimension that was not reality.” Alison agreed that the wording of edTPA’s prompts, which intended to elicit reflective responses from candidates, was very confusing at times, “[It was] repetitive and not as meaningful as [it] could have been.”

EdTPA scoring procedures furnish test takers with a numerical score without formative feedback. This practice also contributed to

candidates' impressions of the test's educational value. Brianna spoke further to a concern about the qualifications of raters and not trusting the feedback they would provide her. "To be honest, I don't really value the feedback or opinion of an unknown scorer. When I got my edTPA score back, I just looked to see that I passed."

### **Advice for Future Teacher Candidates**

Having gone through the process of edTPA submission, Alison, Tracy, and Brianna offered advice to our faculty charged with conducting seminar with future cohorts of teachers. Most of the suggestions related to helping to decrease anxiety for future candidates, and they included suggestions of establishing deadlines for completion of each component before starting student teaching and debunking myths surrounding edTPA that were distracting and stressful for busy student teachers.

Time management was a very real consideration when compiling the edTPA portfolio. Tracy suggested that future candidates should be mindful of the time edTPA takes and plan accordingly:

I found that edTPA was only doable in the break between semesters. A lot of time needs to be dedicated to it, and I found I could not fully focus on it and my course work at the same time. I think it would be helpful to have a checklist of "what you need to get from your fall [student teaching] placement before you leave," i.e., the evidence you will need to complete the different sections of edTPA.

Brianna suggested:

Although it is helpful to address edTPA in student teaching seminar, I feel quite strongly that professors should carefully draw the line to make sure this assessment is not getting too much "air time" in class. I'd rather be learning how to design and implement lessons than venting my anxieties and hearing others vent about the assessment.

Tracy offered future graduate students the following advice:

I also think that I talked more about doing edTPA than actually doing edTPA. There is an element of fear and anxiety surrounding it that I wish it did not have. I want to tell future students that they should remain calm—don't let edTPA dictate what you do in your classroom or your life.



## Conclusions

As this era of educational accountability continues to have an impact on our teacher-education programs, we are all faced with important decisions as to how to allocate resources between the time dedicated to preparing candidates to successfully pass certification requirements and our larger mission of laying a scholarly foundation upon which future teachers can draw throughout their careers. How we make these decisions is intrinsically connected to perceptions of the validity and reliability of the test in question. If we believe that the task of completing and passing the edTPA portfolio measures, at least in part, whether a candidate possesses the qualities necessary to be a good teacher, then allowing edTPA to take a more central role in our graduate programs is a defensible practice. However, if we think that there are important factors to becoming a good teacher that are not measured through edTPA's portfolio, then its influence on educational programs and curriculum should be cautiously monitored. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of TESOL faculty to strike the delicate balance between *test* preparation and *teacher* preparation in graduate programs and courses, and to always forward the greater vision of improving teaching for English language learners in public schools.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The *EAL Assessment Handbook* has been updated with a 2015 version available (SCALE, 2015ab).

<sup>2</sup>To offset the consequences of such quick implementation, an alternate pathway to certification, called a “safety net,” has been available, but it is expected that this option will be phased out as EdTPA gains stature in New York (NYSED, 2013b).

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