Teacher Education and Special Education
2017, Vol. 40(4) 314–321

DOI: 10.1177/0888406417705320
journals.sagepub.com/home/tes
SAGE

The edTPA as an Occasion for Structuring Faculty Dialogue Across the Divide? A "Checklist Manifesto" for a More Inclusive Teacher Education

Marleen C. Pugach[1]

Abstract

Collaboration across teacher education in the service of a more inclusive preservice pedagogy is now taking place within a context of high intensity accountability that includes the widespread adoption of the edTPA. This analysis explores how teacher educators in special and general education might advance the preparation of preservice students for inclusive teaching when faculty are obliged to use the edTPA to measure candidate learning. Drawing on Atul Gawande's (2009) work in the field of medicine related to the value of using checklists to improve outcomes among experts in practical settings, the author proposes the Teacher Education for Inclusion Checklist. This tool is designed to help overcome the underappreciated power of the historical divide between general and special education, which often serves as a default position for how teacher educators work together, and to provide guidance for how faculty might engage in dialogue across the assessments mandated by the edTPA.

Keywords

teacher performance assessment, edTPA, inclusion, teacher preparation practices and outcomes, Atul Gawande, collaboration, preservice teacher education

Today, the preparation of special education and general education teachers has become inextricably linked as a way of making good on the promise of a more inclusive educational practice on the part of the nation's teachers. That every teacher should be prepared for inclusive classrooms and schools has increasingly become a reliable trope within preservice discourse. Given the consistency of the call for all teachers to be ready to teach students with disabilities—those in general education classrooms as well as their special education counterparts—it seems both valuable and timely to consider the function of current teacher performance assessment tools, such as the edTPA, in terms of their role in fostering productive collaborative relationships among teacher educators. Ideally, faculty engage in relationships that would enable them to draw on the data that performance assessments generate as a way of energizing the preservice curriculum around the agenda of a more inclusive educational practice—one that retains a strong respect for the differential expertise of special and general education teachers, while also valuing their collaboration.

[1]University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, USA.

Corresponding Author:
Marleen C. Pugach, PO box 413, Milwaukee, WI 53202, USA.
Email: mpugach@uwm.edu

However, we have been at the project of improving the preparation of general and special education teachers in relationship to inclusive practice for quite some time—in fact, since the inception of modern special education law in 1975 (Pugach, 2005; Pugach, Blanton, Mickelson, & Kleinhammer-Trammill, 2013). Given this long history, and in light of the ongoing difficulties children and youth with disabilities continue to experience in their school outcomes, the purpose of this exploration is twofold. First, I describe how the historic divide between general and special education often functions as a durable, implicit default in terms of how general and special education faculty conduct their work together. This default dynamic can serve as a powerful deterrent to collaboration in the context of how performance assessment data are used, and as such, can subtly undermine the goal of joint preservice work across the various kinds of expertise teacher educators possess. If this situation is not attended to deliberately, the way faculty engage with the data generated by the performance assessments mandated by the edTPA—notwithstanding its flaws—could well be subject to this same problematic dynamic.

As a way of counteracting the risk of this default, I propose a new tool designed to support teacher educators in bridging the longstanding divide between special and general preservice education. Based on the work of Atul Gawande (2009), noted doctor and medical journalist, related to the role of checklists in practical settings to maximize the effectiveness of outcomes, this proposed tool is a checklist designed to support faculty when they are obliged to use the edTPA as a principal measure of candidate learning. As teacher educators work together to more effectively advance the curriculum for preservice candidates, such a checklist has the potential to help offset the divide in which we still seem to be mired.

The Divide as Default: An Underappreciated Problem

In computer science, the term *default* is conceptualized as a preexisting standard (Technical Terms: Default, 2016); it is the fallback in the absence of a readily available option. Similarly, the historic separation between preservice general and special education, with all its attendant explanations and regrets and baggage, functions as a kind of default in relationship to inclusive teaching practice. When we fail to envision an alternative, we can all too easily backslide to what we know and have always done, the equivalent preservice "standard operating procedure." As the default, this deep division between general and special education lurks in the background; it is what we revert to when no explicit alternate preservice path is apparent. In contrast to the collaboration and coordination that are required to move forward jointly—as well as to capitalize on the distinctive expertise among teacher educators that can work in a mutually reinforcing relationship—in the specific case of advancing teacher education relative to a more inclusive practice, that standard operating procedure tilts toward this deep-seated duality. And what is most familiar and comfortable and easiest in teacher education is separating the responsibility for "general" and "special" education; it is what we know best and it is the way business has typically been done.

Cochran-Smith and Dudley-Marling (2012) identified three main issues they believe contribute to maintaining such a divide. They include the following: (a) the different disciplinary influences foundational to special and general education, in particular, special education's behavioral roots compared with an emphasis on sociocultural learning in general education; (b) negative connotations associated with the prefix "dis" in disability relative to the social construction of failure in school; and (c) the contrast between a commitment to access to the general education curriculum on the part of special education and the social justice goal of redefining the curriculum in relationship to an equity agenda on the part of general teacher education. But it is how such divisions play out in the routine daily interactions among teacher education faculty that undergird the notion of and resonate with the idea of the divide as the default position.

For example, the well-established messages that are enacted daily in terms of faculty communication and discourse illustrate this

default. They can include the overt or implied belief that "it's not my job"—that is, "it's not my job" to know and/or teach about either general or special education in the preservice curriculum. Subtle blaming of faculty for not being more interested in or knowledgeable about relevant general or special education issues can also take place—usually outside of formal meetings. Furthermore, an imbalance is often conveyed in terms of who is viewed as the learner among the faculty; this often appears as a one-way street where those in general education are expected to "learn" about special education—less often the other way around. Yet, there is ample expertise to be appreciated and called upon across teacher educators—in academic content areas, in multicultural and bilingual education, in critical theory and critical race theory, in learning and development, in culturally relevant pedagogy, as well as in special education. Despite the best of intentions, and depending on the context, messages like these can work in intentional, unintentional, conscious, unconscious, subtle, tacit or overt ways to undermine building strong, reciprocal relationships across teacher educators that can help overcome the distance. As such, messages like these form the discursive backbone of the default.

The divide is also apparent in day-to-day decision making regarding teacher education. At the local level, it can be represented in how assumptions about leadership of local, state and national teacher education reforms are enacted, for example, failing to create shared leadership across general and special education for any variety of initiatives, or including only a token general or special educator (or none at all) on a given relevant project or grant application. In the absence of such shared responsibility, opportunities for joint, collective dialogue, action, and policy making are short circuited from the outset.

Given over 40 years of history of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), with its commitment to fostering a more inclusive practice, such questions about the relationship between general and special teacher education should have been settled long ago. Failing to acknowledge the influence of the divide in terms of how teacher education is carried out on a day-to-day basis is likely to be holding us back from making greater progress in figuring out how best to prepare every teacher for his or her work with students who have disabilities. I would like to suggest that *the divide between general and special education is a vastly underappreciated problem that requires unflinching, consistent transparency to counteract its effects*. As such, the challenge for the next generation of teacher educators is to better address the complexity of the enterprise of preparing teachers for inclusive practice. This complexity includes overcoming not only the day to day trappings of the divide but also dealing with seminal issues such as the place of disability within the larger commitment to social justice (Cochran-Smith & Dudley-Marling, 2012; Pugach, Gomez-Najarro, & Mukhopadhyay, 2014), the potential coexistence of a range of instructional strategies that may seem at odds philosophically but that may all be needed to respond effectively to the full range of students, and the structure of clinical experiences.

The edTPA as a Manifestation of the Divide

The vision of teaching reflected in the edTPA as it relates to general and special education serves as one illustration of the dominant role of the divide as default. In a comparative analysis of the 2013 edTPA Special Education Assessment Handbook with the 2013 Elementary Literacy Assessment Handbook, Pugach and Peck (2016) documented the clash of pedagogies and philosophies revealed across these two teacher performance assessments. Drawing on Cultural Historical Activity Theory, they argued that in light of the fact that these assessments represent such different views of pedagogy and philosophy, the edTPA appears to function as cultural tool that reproduces, however unconsciously, the historic divided relations between special and general education. For example, having teachers collaborate across general and special education—a staple

of inclusive practice—is not given emphasis in either the general or the special education assessment (Pugach & Peck, 2016).

Furthermore, the vision of instruction represented in the edTPA special education assessment is limited to a narrow band of pedagogy (Ledwell & Oyler, 2016; Pugach & Peck, 2016), consistent with Cochran-Smith and Dudley-Marling's (2012) identification of conflicting philosophies of learning as one factor contributing to the split. In addition, the edTPA does not emphasize ways to create learning opportunities and "access points" to the general education curriculum (Ledwell & Oyler, 2016, p. 129). The revised 2016 version of the edTPA special education assessment handbook has not altered this situation significantly, as it sustains a focus on the individual student in isolation, minimizing the classroom context in which most of the education of students with disabilities takes place today. In Ledwell and Oyler's (2016) inquiry into the early effects of this assessment on the preservice curriculum, one of the participating faculty observed that the edTPA "just seems to have very little to do with what actually happens particularly in inclusive environments" (p. 129). The development of the edTPA, then, constitutes a robust expression of the dominance of the default position relative to the relationship between general and special education, and however unintentionally, is a stark reminder of the need to interrupt the default in a purposeful manner.

"Minding the Gap" as a Path Forward

In Europe and in the Middle East, one often sees a warning in train stations to "mind the gap" as you cross from the platform to the train. The idea of "minding the gap" seems fitting here: How might we better "mind the gap" between teacher educators in general and special education? In this case, the gap can be viewed as the distance between our conventional, dualistic ways of behaving (the "default"), and ways of behaving that might more productively, and jointly, lead to improving the preservice curriculum and clinical experiences such that new teachers have greater skills and confidence to work not only with students with disabilities, but to expand their pedagogical range for all students. This gap is complicated by the fact that there is valuable expertise on the part of both general and special educators alike that needs to be drawn upon to solve the complex problem of preparing new teachers well for effective inclusive practice. Furthermore, teacher educators face challenges both in figuring out how disability and diversity fit together (Cochran-Smith & Dudley-Marling, 2012; Pugach, Blanton, & Florian, 2012; Pugach et al., 2014; Villegas, 2012) and over what kinds of curriculum and instruction might best support an inclusive practice across the division that exists (Cochran-Smith & Dudley-Marling, 2012).

How might we overcome these limitations and "mind the gap"? How might we move from tacit to transparent, and from incidental to consistent, in how we work together? How might we more consistently push back against the default position? One path forward is to generate structured, practical tools to help interrupt the discourse and culture of division, tools that instead have the potential to facilitate a richer discourse of inclusion in teacher education, leading to more productive action. This is precisely where Atul Gawande's work on checklists comes in.

Gawande's Checklist Manifesto: A Tool for Minding the Gap

Atul Gawande, the renowned surgeon and medical journalist, is the author of numerous articles and books that bring unusual clarity to a host of medically oriented issues—among them his 2009 book titled *The Checklist Manifesto*. In it, he describes the value of checklists used by highly skilled professionals (e.g., surgeons, builders, and airplane pilots) to assure a higher quality of practice and improved outcomes. What is striking about his descriptions, which include several vignettes about the effectiveness of such checklists in various professional settings, is their simplicity and

directness, as well as the fact that they have been effective in improving both practical outcomes *and* communication among high-end professionals—professionals who possess a great deal of knowledge and talent. Gawande (2009) argues that checklists are "simple tools aimed to buttress the skills of expert professionals" (p. 128). They can be most important assuring more positive outcomes, he notes, "when expertise is not enough" (p. 31). He maintains that

> when we look closely, we recognize the same balls being dropped over and over, *even by those of great ability and determination*. We know the patterns. We see the costs. It's time to try something else. (p. 186, emphasis added)

Checklists, he says, "remind us of the minimum necessary steps and make them explicit" (p. 36). So in operating rooms, for example, nurses and technicians might have to remind surgeons about what should be a routine practice that could minimize infection. Checklists can also be used to structure how meetings take place, for example, having each participant state their concerns at the outset, giving voice to all attending, and reducing the penchant to sit on one's concerns, which can stifle participation. But according to Gawande, the deeper purpose of a checklist is not "just ticking boxes" (p. 160). Instead, they can help professionals in "embracing a culture of teamwork and discipline . . . " (p. 160). Such a sense of discipline is not particularly evident in how we have been considering the preservice curriculum and clinical experiences relative to preparing new teachers for inclusive practice, nor in how we are obliged to assess their professional learning.

In our long-standing attempts to achieve robust teacher education redesign for inclusion, we have not yet found consistent answers, the same proverbial ball has been dropped over and over with regard to the division between general and special preservice education, and with few exceptions, our common patterns of discourse and practice have not been successful in assuring a more uniformly effective preparation for general and special education teachers with regard to teaching students with disabilities. That is likely one reason why we have arrived at a teacher performance assessment that reifies the divide. And that is precisely why Gawande's work seems to have relevance for this particular educational dilemma.

In many fields, Gawande (2009) noted, we tend not to attend to failures—nor do we especially like to. "We don't look for the patterns of our recurrent mistakes or devise and refine potential solutions to them" (p. 185). He continues, "but we could, and that is the ultimate point" (p. 185). Yet, despite the fact that checklists can be effective in purposefully reminding us that we have to be unambiguous about the things we want/need to get right, their use can also engender discomfort among professionals. About surgeons in particular, Gawande (2009) observed,

> We don't like checklists. They can be painstaking. They're not much fun. But I don't think the issue here is mere laziness…it somehow feels beneath us to use a checklist, an embarrassment. It runs counter to deeply held beliefs about how the truly great among us—those we aspire to be—handle situations of high stakes and complexity. The truly great are daring. They improvise. They do not have protocols and checklists. (p. 173)

Faculty in the academy are likely to respond similarly; we are comfortable with our expert status and tend to be less comfortable being put in a position where we have to engage in teamwork, share the stage, and perhaps even display our need to learn something new or take a different perspective. As a rule, those in the academy do not much care for not being right, for needing some kind of direction. Fundamentally, Gawande is telling us to get over it—that checklists might, just might, help.

The Teacher Education for Inclusion Checklist

The Teacher Education for Inclusion Checklist, displayed in Figure 1, is designed to provide a similar kind of support to skilled teacher

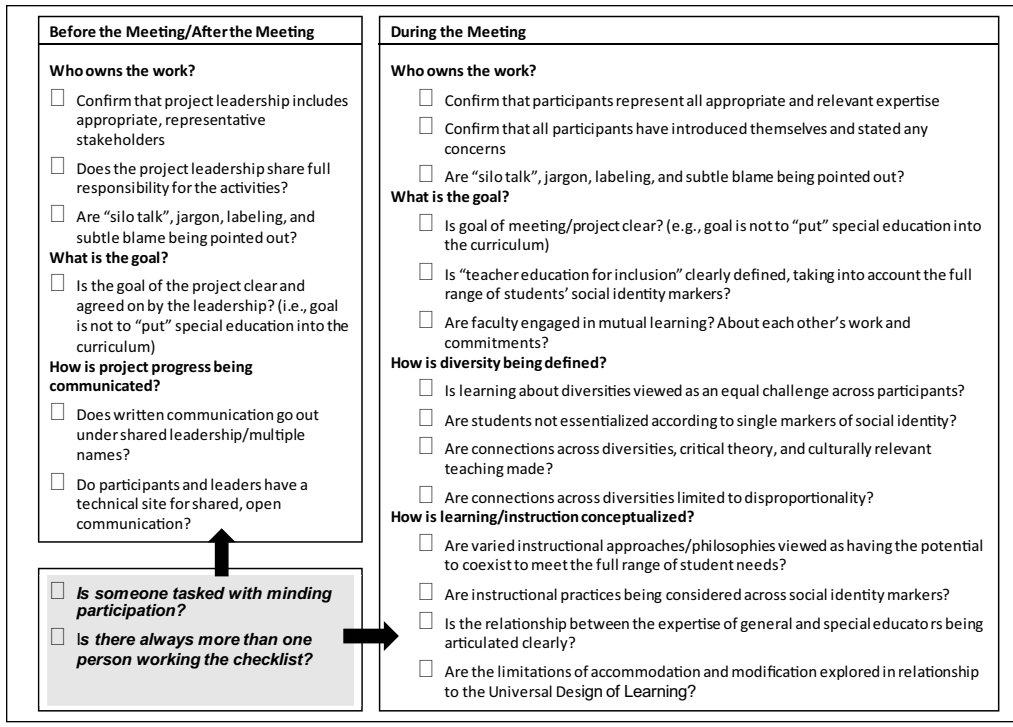

Figure 1. The Teacher Education for Inclusion Checklist.

education experts as the checklists Gawande (2009) is advocating. As Figure 1 indicates, it "checks up" on shared leadership and expanded participation across general and special education. This checklist begins to make explicit that faculty would approach conversations about the preservice curriculum and assessments relative to preparing teachers for students with disabilities as more open learners, more willing listeners, with an eye toward a more complex view of diversity as well as instruction, giving recognition to the role the default can play in such deliberations.

While checklists have been developed to support inclusive practice at the PK-12 level (e.g., Federico, Herald, & Venn, 1999; Villa & Thousand, 2016), tools such as these are designed as resources that PK-12 school faculty, and staff have the *option* of accessing to help guide their work. In teacher education, however, such tools are rare. Gawande's concept of the role of checklists, however, differs significantly from how they are typically used; he views their implementation as *essential* for improving practice. They are designed to make transparent what should be evident on the part of professionals. Furthermore, his vision is imbued with a sense of deep urgency in terms of the need to attend to the issues and practices any particular checklist is designed to address so that practice across professionals can be elevated to high levels of accomplishment.

It is this sense of urgency, coupled with a specific delineation of practices that continue to hold back the quality of joint work across teacher educators in general and special education, which provides the impetus for a checklist focused on teacher education for inclusion. The issues it represents are those that we may often think we have already moved beyond in our deliberations, things we think we may not have to attend to directly. In failing to attend to these issues directly, we may also be failing to build a solid foundation upon which to solve the more complex dilemmas of preservice practice across general and special education.

How might such a checklist function with respect to the edTPA? On one hand, as a reflection of the duality between general and special education, the edTPA poses a dilemma for teacher educators relative to the aspirational agenda of a more inclusive practice of teaching. On the other hand, performance assessments like these generate assessment data that can reasonably be expected to form an important source for faculty dialogue and collaboration across teacher educators from general and special education as they work to build better understandings regarding practices that may be viewed as "belonging" to general education and those that may be viewed as "belonging" to special education. As such, the edTPA generates data that represent a useful shared text to support greater faculty dialogue. Disciplined by the use of such a checklist, teacher educators have the opportunity to engage jointly in active interpretations of the assessment data, especially where similarities exist across assessments.

Examples of such similarities in educational concepts, as well as in the language of practice, exist across edTPA assessments in general and special education and include (but are not limited to) the following: the language demands of particular lessons and learning tasks, the importance of monitoring student learning, establishing and maintaining a respectful classroom environment for learning, and drawing on students' cultural and community assets (Pugach & Peck, 2016). These constitute an initial set of issues teacher educators might investigate together, using this focus as an opportunity to examine relationships across the content and structure of preservice programs in relationship to how candidates are responding to these aspects of the assessments.

The goal of such a checklist, then, is not to assist teacher educators in addressing candidate preparation for successful performance on the edTPA. Rather, its purpose is to stimulate greater inclusivity within teacher education, with the edTPA serving as an immediate, visible focal point around which teacher education faculty can come together in a more structured way. The checklist provides a set of transparent guiding steps that to date have not been made explicit, but which, if followed, might contribute to correcting conventional teacher education practices that have often stymied the pressing foundational work of program reform.

Conclusion

Although as teacher educators we expect our graduates to engage in professional learning communities as they move into PK-12 practice, we are not necessarily that good at doing so ourselves. Teacher education faculty typically do not function, nor regularly view themselves, as members of a local professional community of learners across areas of teacher education expertise focused on the continuous improvement of preservice teacher education (Blanton & Pugach, 2017). When joint experiences do take place relative to preparing teachers for inclusion, they often tend to be decontextualized within specific courses or clinical experiences rather than as an organic function of the preservice curriculum. This dynamic pertains across an array of preservice practices, including how we assess candidates and how we use the data generated by such performance assessments to inform our work.

Perhaps because it is such an apt illustration of the isolated ways teacher educators tend to operate by default, even within a context that often reflects a philosophical inclination toward more rather than less inclusive practice, the edTPA provides a new occasion for faculty in teacher education to attempt to engage together in transformative programmatic dialogue. Functioning as a learning community, with a straightforward set of steps to counteract the divide, the opportunity exists to build a greater shared understanding and practice of what it means to learn to teach from a more inclusive perspective. *The Teacher Education for Inclusion Checklist* serves as one modest contribution toward creating a sense of urgency and professional responsibility to advance this crucial educational goal.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Several of the ideas in this article were first presented in a keynote address, *Imagining the Next Generation of Teacher Education for Inclusion*, presented at the 2016 annual spring meeting of the California Council on Teacher Education (CCTE) in San Jose, California. That address was jointly funded by CCTE and the Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform (CEEDAR) Center, University of Florida. CEEDAR is a project of the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Award No. H325A12003. Bonnie Jones and David Guardino serve as the project officers. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. No official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education of any product, commodity, service, or enterprise mentioned in this article is intended or should be inferred.

References

Blanton, L. P., & Pugach, M. C. (2017). A dynamic model for the next generation of research on teacher education for inclusion. In L. Florian, & N. Pantić (Eds.), *Teacher education for the changing demographics of schooling: Issues for Research and Practice* (pp. 215-228). Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Springer.

Cochran-Smith, M., & Dudley-Marling, C. (2012). Diversity in teacher education and special education: The issues that divide. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *63*, 237-244.

Federico, M. A., Herald, W. G., & Venn, J. (1999). Helpful tips for successful inclusion: A checklist for educators. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, *31*, 76-82.

Gawande, A. (2009). *The checklist manifesto: How to get things right*. New York, NY: Picador.

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

Pugach, M. C. (2005). What do we know about preparing teachers to work with students with disabilities? In M. Cochran-Smith, & K. Zeichner (Eds.), *Studying teacher education: The report of the AERA panel on research and teacher education* (pp. 549-590). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Pugach, M. C., Blanton, L. P., & Florian, L. (2012). Unsettling conversations: Diversity and disability in teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *63*, 235-236.

Pugach, M. C., Blanton, L. P., Mickelson, A., & Kleinhammer-Trammill, J. (2013, April). *A policy analysis of federal support for inclusive teacher education: Slouching toward transformation?* Paper presented at the annual meeting, American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA.

Pugach, M. C., Gomez-Najarro, J., & Mukhopadhyay, A. (2014, April). *Long overdue: Rethinking research on social justice in teacher education from an intersectionality perspective*. Paper presented at the annual meeting, American Educational Research Association, Philadelphia, PA.

Pugach, M. C., & Peck, C. (2016). Dividing practices: Pre-service teacher quality assessment and the (re)production of relations between general and special education. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, *43*(3), 3-23.

Technical Terms: Default. (2016). Retrieved from http://techterms.com/definition/default

Villa, R., & Thousand, J. (2016). *The inclusive education checklist*. Naples, FL: National Professional Resources.

Villegas, A. M. (2012). Collaboration between multicultural and special educators: Pulling together the threads in the conversation. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *63*, 286-290.

Author Biography

Marleen C. Pugach, PhD, is professor emerita, School of Education, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. Her areas of expertise include the reform of teacher education at the intersection of general and special education, dual certification, the relationship of diversity and disability especially for urban schools, and qualitative research methods.