Preparing Middle Grades Candidates for edTPA in Uncertain Times

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Abstract

Teacher candidates in North Carolina must earn a passing score on the edTPA assessment to get certified. The middle grades education program at Western Carolina University integrates aspects of the edTPA assessment throughout pre-student teaching coursework and field experiences to prepare candidates for this high-stakes assessment. Some of the edTPA practice assessments serve as key assessments that help the middle grades program faculty evaluate the program and make decisions about curriculum. The pivot to remote and blended learning formats on campus and in partner middle level schools affected the implementation of edTPA-related assignments. The authors share some challenges of implementing edTPA practice portfolios during the pandemic as well as insights gleaned from their assessment of the data.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, edTPA, teacher candidate assessment, teacher preparation

Introduction

The edTPA assessment is a performance-based portfolio assessment of the knowledge and skills beginning P–12 teachers need to be successful. Developed by the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity (SCALE) and administered by Pearson Education, Inc., edTPA is used in approximately 20 states to assess preservice teacher performance (Pearson Education, 2021a). North Carolina adopted edTPA in 2018, and the assessment became consequential in September 2019 (North Carolina State Board of Education, 2021).

In this article, we describe how edTPA is implemented at Western Carolina University (WCU) and how the Middle Grades Education program adapted its efforts to prepare candidates for edTPA during the COVID-19 pandemic. We first provide some background information about edTPA in our state and at WCU, then we describe how candidates in the Middle Grades Education program were given opportunities to prepare for edTPA during the 2020–2021 academic year. We conclude with some lessons learned and plans for the future.

About edTPA

SCALE began developing edTPA in 2009 and made it available in 2013–2014 following a period of pilot testing (Will, 2019). As depicted in Figure 1, edTPA assesses candidate performance in three domains, or "tasks": planning, instruction, and assessment. The assessment is customized to 27 areas within P-12 education, including Middle Childhood English-Language Arts, Middle Childhood History/Social Studies, Middle Childhood Mathematics, and Middle Childhood Science (Pearson, 2021b). The portfolio format includes lesson plans, video-recorded teaching segments, and student work samples, paired with narratives for each task written by the candidate from a series of commentary prompts. Depending on the grade level and subject area, candidates are assessed with 13 or 15 rubrics, and each portfolio is assessed by a scorer trained by Pearson.

edTPA is aligned with Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) and Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) standards as well as Common Core State Standards, and the assessment is endorsed by the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE). Thus, the assessment "can be integrated with other teacher candidate assessments such as clinical evaluations, embedded signature assessments, and content knowledge examinations to guide and support program improvement, inform program completion, or as a metric for licensure" (SCALE/AACTE, 2013, p. 1).

Many educator preparation programs (EPPs) in states that have adopted edTPA integrate aspects of the assessment with coursework and field experiences. Such alignment raises concerns about "teaching to the test" and reducing professional practice to the technical process of completing and submitting the edTPA portfolio (Madeloni & Gorlewski, 2013), yet it also offers opportunities to engage candidates in critical, reflective thinking about their teaching. If done meaningfully, as Thornton (2021) argued, middle grades teacher educators "can focus on relationships, responsiveness and professionally grounded decision making, instead of the rote procedures of didactic teaching or the technical steps of "doing" the edTPA ... [and] ... capture [teacher candidates'] thinking and understanding as new teachers" (p. 29).

Figure 1

The edTPA Tasks and the Cycle of Effective Teaching
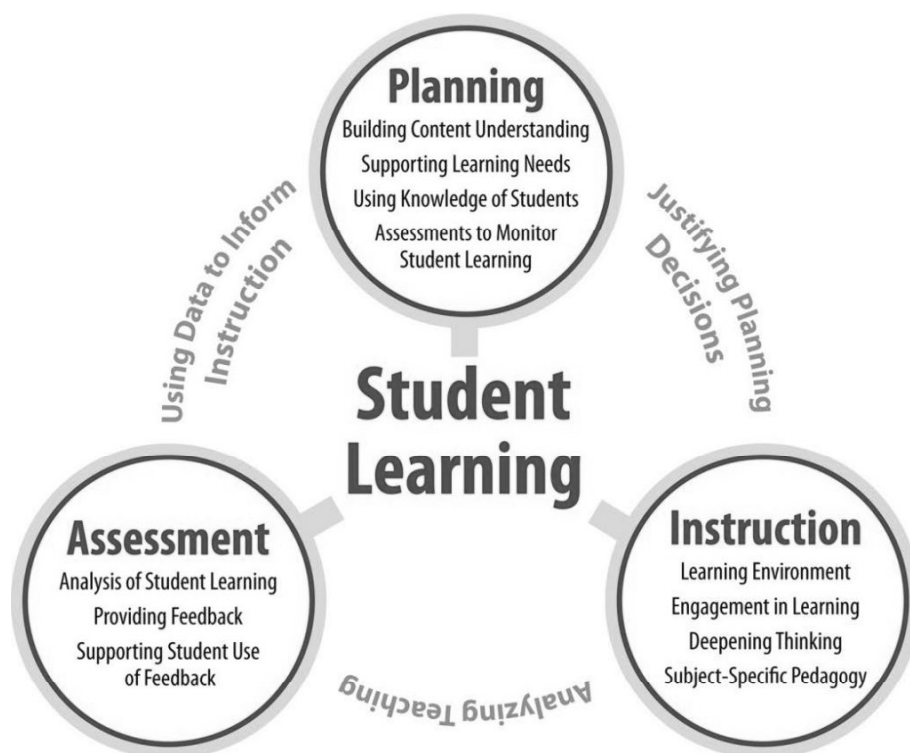
Source: SCALE (2016a, p. 2).

In addition, Thornton emphasized the clear connections between the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) teacher preparation standards (AMLE, 2012) and the edTPA handbooks, which call upon candidates to "design your lessons to provide challenging and responsive opportunities for young adolescents to learn" (SCALE 2016a, p. 2). This also connects to *This We Believe* (Bishop & Harrison, 2021) with the expectations that educators are prepared with depth of understanding of content and can plan lessons that are challenging, exploratory, integrative, and diverse. Each middle level handbook also has indicators towards appropriate use of interdisciplinary connections, something AMLE advocates.

edTPA at Western Carolina University

The North Carolina State Board of Education adopted edTPA as a licensing testing requirement in 2018, and it became consequential in 2019–2020. However, the edTPA journey for the Middle Grades Education program at WCU began many years earlier in the summer of 2012. Alisa Chapman, VP for Academic and University Programs in the University of North Carolina General Administration, extended an invitation to EPPs throughout the state to participate in the piloting of edTPA. In spring 2013, the College of Education and Allied Professions (CEAP) at WCU decided to implement edTPA in all initial teacher licensure programs. Portfolios were scored locally by WCU faculty, some who went through Pearson's edTPA training and others who were trained by SCALE with a local train-the-trainer model. All faculty members were trained to score, which then gave faculty an in-depth understanding of the portfolio components. This, then, led the EPPs in the college also engaged in curriculum back-mapping to identify ways edTPA could be integrated with coursework and existing

assessments. The CEAP Leadership Council and the WCU Professional Education Council jointly established an edTPA Commission to govern the implementation of the edTPA pilot.

edTPA Practice Implementation 2020–2021

The Middle Grades Education program at Western Carolina University integrates aspects of the edTPA assessment throughout pre-student teaching coursework and field experiences to prepare candidates for this high-stakes assessment. Middle grades candidates begin the professional education sequence in the fall of the junior year, and they are introduced to edTPA during their professional education coursework. Candidates are introduced to the structure of edTPA and how it assesses their use of academic language and the impact of their instruction on student learning, and they begin using lesson plan templates that align with edTPA. Some of the edTPA practice assignments serve as key assessments that help the middle grades faculty evaluate the program and make decisions about curriculum.

Block Semester

When the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the United States in the spring of 2020, junior-level candidates the WCU Middle Grades Education program were enrolled in the "block" practicum experience. The block experience requires candidates to plan and implement several lessons and work in the classroom one day per week, or two half days, for a minimum of 10 weeks. During block, candidates are enrolled in 17 hours of professional education coursework, 14 of which are specific to middle grades: Differentiated Instruction (3)/Seminar for Differentiated Instruction (2), Language Arts Methods (3), Science Methods (3), and Digital Literacy Methods (3).

Because partner schools and WCU pivoted to remote instruction, candidates were unable to plan and implement lessons throughout the semester as planned. Typically, candidates would have opportunities to make connections between their experiences in the block placement and their methods courses. In the Seminar for Differentiated Instruction, they would create four edTPA-aligned lesson plans developed with clinical educators (i.e., the teachers hosting the candidates) in the block placement classroom, teach the lessons and video record two of them, and self-evaluate their performance in a reflective summary.

edTPA Practice Portfolio – Fall 2020

Candidates develop a complete practice edTPA portfolio during the fall of the senior year in EDMG 420: Responsive Assessment and Classroom Management while they are concurrently enrolled in Internship I. Internship I is a two-day-per-week field experience in which candidates begin assuming responsibility for planning, implementing, and assessing lessons as well as managing student behavior and carrying out non-instructional duties under the direction of a clinical educator.

The edTPA practice portfolio assignment follows the format for an actual edTPA portfolio, and candidates receive the edTPA handbooks for their subject areas as well as other supports. The instructions, commentary prompts for reflection narratives, and scoring rubrics are derived from the edTPA handbooks for middle childhood English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies (SCALE, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2016d) with a few modifications. For example, the practice portfolio requires candidates to plan a "learning segment" that consists of two consecutive lessons or, if teaching within a large time block, one hour of connected instruction. The edTPA handbooks, however, state that candidates must plan for three to five

consecutive lessons or three to five hours of connected instruction. These parameters would not be practical for most candidates in Internship I because they seldom teach consecutive days in their placement schools due to their fall semester course schedule. The edTPA portfolio includes detailed commentaries written by the candidate that follow specific prompts. We reduced the commentary page limits by half for the practice portfolio—three to five pages instead of six to ten pages. Finally, though the scoring rubrics are the same as the rubrics in the handbooks, they are weighted to emphasize Tasks 1 and 3 as the areas of instructional planning and assessment are most relevant to the EDMG 420 course objectives.

Because the practice edTPA portfolio is based on artifacts and video recordings of lesson implementation in the classroom with students during Internship I, the pivot to remote and blended learning formats on campus and in partner middle level schools during the pandemic affected the ability of some candidates to thoroughly complete all components of the portfolio as well as other clinical-based assignments (see Pinter, 2020; Virtue, 2020). For example, in some school settings, classes were split with some students participating remotely and others in-person with masks. All partner schools experienced issues with attendance. These conditions made it difficult for candidates to know their students well and complete Task 1, Rubric 2 (Knowledge of Students to Inform Teaching), with fidelity. Some candidates also had difficulty getting all students, particularly remote learners, to submit work. This affected their data sets for Task 3: Assessing Student Learning. There were a myriad of abnormal circumstances impacting each component of implementation. The key to implementing the practice portfolio during the pandemic was flexibility to address all these factors.

edTPA Practice Portfolio – Spring 2021

Based on feedback from senior candidates who completed the fall 2020 practice portfolio, we decided to implement a practice edTPA portfolio earlier in the program during the junior spring. Candidates in the EDMG 411: Differentiated Instruction in the Middle Grades course completed a portfolio while they were concurrently enrolled in their block field experience. Normally the block placement would give candidates ample opportunity to plan, implement, and assess student learning, however spring 2021 was not a normal semester. COVID-19 vaccines had not yet become widely available at the start of the semester, and most school partners would not allow early, pre-internship field experiences in their buildings. As a result, all middle grades candidates completed the block experience virtually with the same team in one middle level school. While we strived to make the best of the situation, candidates would not be able to teach a learning segment sufficient to complete an edTPA practice portfolio.

Again, the key to implementing the edTPA practice portfolio during the pandemic was flexibility—coupled in the spring with a bit of creativity. We decided to simulate a classroom environment on campus using peer teaching. The candidates became middle schoolers, and several of them played the part well. The candidates and instructor made learner profiles indicating learning styles, cultural and community assets, and subject area preferences. The assignment followed the same guidelines as fall 2020, but because we were limited to our on-campus class time, the candidates only had 20 to 30 minutes to teach and video-record a mini lesson. Also, the scoring rubric emphasized Task 1, which reflected the emphasis of the EDMG 411 course. To improve reliability, the EDMG 411 instructor and the Differentiated Instruction Seminar instructor co-assessed the portfolios, and the assignment counted as a grade for both courses.

edTPA Practice Outcomes

The scores for the fall 2020 and spring 2021 edTPA practice portfolios are summarized in Tables 1 and 2 below. A score of 1 and 2 are interpreted as below proficient. A level three indicates proficient, and levels 4 and 5 are considered advanced. Mean scores are shown for each rubric.

Table 1
Fall 2020 edTPA Practice Portfolio Scores

	TASK 1				
Rubric:	1	2	3	4	5
Avg. Score:	2.9	2.6	3.1	2.0	2.8
	TASK 2				
Rubric:	6	7	8	9	10
Avg. Score:	3.2	2.6	2.5	2.9	2.8
	TASK 3				
Rubric:	11	12	13	14	15
Avg. Score:	2.6	2.8	2.2	2.6	2.8

Table 2
Spring 2021 edTPA Practice Portfolio Scores

	TASK 1				
Rubric:	1	2	3	4	5
Avg. Score:	2.9	3.0	2.3	2.3	2.5
	TASK 2				
Rubric:	6	7	8	9	10
Avg. Score:	2.6	2.6	2.5	2.3	2.6
	TASK 3				
Rubric:	11	12	13	14	15
Avg. Score:	3.5	2.8	2.8	2.7	2.9

As depicted in Table 1, the overall mean for scores on the fall 2021 portfolios was 2.7 which is approaching proficient. Fewer than 10% of rubrics were scored at advanced levels (i.e., 4 or 5). The areas of greatest challenge for candidates were addressing misconceptions and academic language (Rubric 4) and using feedback from assessment to guide student learning

(Rubric 13). Areas of strength for this group were using knowledge of students to plan instruction (Rubric 3) and promoting a positive learning environment (Rubric 6).

The overall mean for each of the spring 2021 rubrics was 2.8, as depicted in Table 2. Fewer than 10% of rubrics were scored at Level 4 or 5. Areas of greatest challenge for this group were using knowledge of students (Rubric 3), addressing misconceptions and academic language (Rubric 4), and deepening student learning using subject-specific pedagogy (Rubric 9). Areas of greatest strength were using knowledge of students to inform teaching (Rubric 2) and analyzing student learning (Rubric 11).

Lessons Learned and Future Plans

The implementation of edTPA practice portfolios during the 2020–2021 academic year involved several pandemic-related challenges that could only be overcome with flexibility and creativity. Like what Kahn and Williams (2020) found, if we emphasize research-driven practices throughout the experiences we provide for candidates, we can at least help candidates hone their craft even in the absence of our traditional models. Perhaps we may even discover that these activities should remain in our toolkits based on their effectiveness with candidate learning. The results from the work here suggest that we need to continue emphasizing academic language in the program. Candidates need to understand how and why to use language to deepen learning of content. Moreover, program faculty must strategically align an emphasis on academic language across courses, and this should occur through a process of continuous, intentional program improvement. This is an element to consider for all middle level programs in terms of course alignment and backwards design. EPPs need to consider how to scaffold academic language in a developmentally appropriate way across courses. For example, candidates may be introduced to the concept of academic language in an early course by looking at examples and exploring language functions. In later courses they need experiences applying academic language in their lesson plans, and ultimately they need to have practice reflecting on the implementation of academic language in lessons they teach.

Finally, the results of the practice portfolios highlight the need for the program faculty to continue tracking edTPA data—both on the practice portfolios and the actual consequential portfolios—and to use the data to inform the program curriculum. Whether other programs choose to utilize practice portfolios or other parallel edTPA-related assignments, it could be fruitful for middle level educators to analyze where elements of edTPA are taught across courses and analyze the progress of candidates in their ability to plan, implement, and reflect on instruction. Just as candidates are required to analyze and respond to student artifacts of learning, we too should be analyzing our candidates' ability to implement the teaching cycle.

Conclusion

For nearly a decade, edTPA has been part of the Middle Grades Education program at WCU—even before the assessment became consequential in 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic brought unexpected challenges and changes, but flexibility and creativity on the part of faculty and candidates allowed the program to offer meaningful opportunities for candidates to practice and prepare for the edTPA portfolio while improving their teaching skills. Over time, the program has employed an iterative process of continuous improvement using edTPA scores to help inform key assessments and student learning outcomes in many courses. Regardless of what measure is utilized—whether edTPA or some future iteration of performance assessment—it is a

critical reminder to programs to continue refining our practices to best support teacher candidates using data to adapt and grow with the ever-changing landscape of teacher education.

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