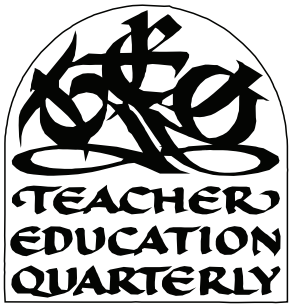

Candidate Variables as Predictors of Success on the Special Education edTPA Portfolio

Katherine B. Green & James R. Schwab

Abstract

The current study investigated candidate predictors of performance on the Educative Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA) special education teacher portfolio at a rural university in the southeastern region of the United States. As educator preparation programs across the United States continue to grapple with common standards for licensure, certification, and entry into the teaching profession, many states and universities now use the edTPA teacher portfolio as a standardized assessment to determine teacher certification. This study examined observable variables to seek predictors of candidate performance on the special education edTPA assessment in a rural university. A multiple regression analysis was run to determine if (a) grade point average (GPA), (b) scores on state-mandated certification exams, (c) sex, (d) race, (e) socioeconomic status, (f) degree and major, (g) age at graduation, or (h) year the edTPA was taken served as predictors for special education edTPA total scores. Results indicate that the variables explained

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16.6% of the variation of scores. However, only candidate GPA was a significant predictor of edTPA performance. The implications for special education teacher preparation for edTPA are discussed. Directions for future research are proposed.

Introduction

For many years, states across the United States have searched for common standards for licensure, accreditation, certification, and entry into the teaching profession (American Federation of Teachers [AFT], 2012). This search for common standards was also a call to "raise the bar" in teacher education (AFT, 2012) and determine novice teachers' readiness. Many professions outside of education have common standards for entry to the field, such as a lawyer passing the bar examination or a medical doctor passing a board certification. One measurement used in universities across the United States is the Educative Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA). According to the American Association for Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE; 2021), 936 educator preparation programs in 41 states and the District of Columbia currently participate in the edTPA teacher portfolio.[1] In many states, teacher candidates are required to meet the state's passing criteria of the edTPA portfolio to attain certification. In fact, as of 2021, approximately 21 states have a policy regarding edTPA and teacher certification (AACTE, 2021).

Description of edTPA

Created by teacher educators who sought to develop a more authentic assessment of teaching (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2013), the edTPA is a performance-based, subject-specific assessment designed to measure the knowledge and skills of beginning teacher candidates (Parkes & Powell, 2015). The edTPA teacher portfolio was developed by teacher education faculty and staff at the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity (SCALE). As the edTPA became a national assessment, SCALE contracted with Pearson Education Inc. for administering, collecting, and scoring edTPA portfolios. The assessment has been revised and clarified over time.

The edTPA has versions in 27 different teaching fields covering early childhood, elementary, middle, and secondary education. To maintain consistency when rating each submission, Pearson Education hires educators from around the United States to attend reliability training. The portfolio submission currently costs teacher candidates $300.00. Some institutions incorporate this cost within institutional fees, while others require the teacher candidates to pay the expense out of pocket (Donovan & Cannon, 2018).

Although each teaching field has a unique edTPA portfolio, some similarities exist between all edTPA portfolios. For example, each portfolio is submitted in the candidate's final semester, and each portfolio is organized with tasks, rubrics, required

lesson plans, and video(s). Because each was designed for a specific discipline or field, there are several differences between the portfolios. For example, the elementary education portfolio includes 4 tasks and 18 scoring rubrics. The elementary edTPA has three tasks in elementary literacy, with the fourth task focused on mathematics. The elementary edTPA considers all students in the classroom, including those with disabilities, but the candidate focuses on three learners. In their final semester of internship, teacher candidates submit all four task commentaries, three to five lesson plans, work samples, and a 3- to 20-minute video of instruction to Pearson Education.

The special education edTPA teaching portfolio currently consists of three tasks: (a) planning commentary, (b) instruction commentary, and (c) assessment commentary. Each of the three tasks has 5 rubrics, with 15 rubrics in total. The teacher candidates are scored on a scale of 1–5 on each rubric. The teacher candidates plan, instruct, and assess one focus learner with a disability on one learning goal for three to five consecutive lessons. In their final semester of internship, teacher candidates submit all three commentaries, three to five lesson plans, work samples, and a 3- to 20-minute instructional video to Pearson Education.

There are some significant differences between the special education edTPA and the other portfolios. For example, the special education edTPA never focuses on a learner in an interactive or collaborative group; instead, there is a lack of focus on collaboration between colleagues or students. While the other students in the classroom are briefly considered concerning a positive learning environment, the focus learner is allowed to be taught in a one-on-one setting. Thus the teacher candidate never discusses how the focus learner interacts within the larger group within the portfolio (Pugach & Peck, 2016). Additionally, the special education edTPA has a clear focus on the importance of students' generalization and maintenance of newly acquired skills, while the general education edTPA portfolio does not emphasize these skills. Finally, the special education assessment task has a narrow focus on quantitative data, whereas the general education edTPA focuses on both qualitative and quantitative data. Because, in many states and universities, teacher candidates must pass the edTPA to obtain their teacher licensure, researchers have conducted empirical studies to better prepare teacher candidates for the edTPA.

Possible Predictors of edTPA Success from General Education Research

Though a limited number of quantitative studies have been conducted on edTPA, some findings have emerged. Evans and colleagues (2016) analyzed edTPA data from 43 graduates of an early childhood education program to determine variables that predict edTPA success. The researchers found correlations between teacher candidate major grade point average (GPA) and edTPA overall scores. Notable significance was found for Task 3 (assessment) on the edTPA with a positive correlation with teacher candidates' major GPAs. Also, the authors ex-

amined benchmark assessments with the overall task performance on edTPA. One particular benchmark assessment, a case study, was correlated with edTPA overall and task scores. Conclusions suggest that teacher candidates who generally do well on course assignments also do well on edTPA. Russell and Davidson Devall (2016) investigated correlations between the world language edTPA scores and the outcomes on several measures of world language teacher preparedness, including university- and state-mandated standardized assessments for seven world language teacher candidates. They found that edTPA scores were not highly correlated with mentor teachers' and supervisors' evaluations. Furthermore, measures of teacher content knowledge on a state standardized measure and target language proficiency did not correlate with candidates' edTPA scores.

Goldhaber and colleagues (2017) examined longitudinal data from Washington State for 2,362 teacher candidates in early education to determine the predictive validity of edTPA on employment, teaching effectiveness in reading and mathematics, and the Washington Educator Skills Test–Basic (WEST-B), an assessment of basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. Goldhaber and colleagues found that the WEST-B predicted edTPA success, suggesting that state-mandated assessments might be a possible predictor. Also, they found that students who identified as Hispanic were three times more likely to fail the edTPA. Greenblatt and O'Hara (2015) suggested that recent data indicated that some groups, including teaching candidates of color and those from linguistic minority groups, were failing edTPA at disproportionate rates, suggesting that race could also be a predictor of edTPA success. These studies have indicated some possible predictors, but it is difficult to compare studies in general education when each subject area has its own state-mandated assessment for licensure.

Special Education–Specific edTPA Literature

Much of the literature specific to edTPA in the field of special education has focused on the perspective of special or inclusive educators, as well as teacher candidates (e.g., Rice & Drame, 2017). Researchers noted a mismatch between the realities of today's special education classrooms and the edTPA assessment (Othman et al., 2017), particularly the focus on one isolated student and a lack of consideration for the student working with groups or within a larger context. The edTPA special education portfolio is not compatible with today's collaborative teaching environments. Other issues included the financial burden of the assessment ($300 per submission), time commitment, stress, variability of school environments, and lack of rubric clarity (Othman et al., 2017), which could suggest a student's socioeconomic status (SES) may impact edTPA scores. From the special education teacher candidate perspective, teacher candidates noted that edTPA preparation took the place and time of other important curricula, such as universal design for learning (UDL), particularly since the special education edTPA is only focused on

one learner as opposed to a learner in the context of a larger class (Bacon & Blachman, 2017). In fact, Kuranishi and Oyler (2017) wrote about how some teacher preparation programs are not in alignment, or rather are in direct conflict, with the special education edTPA. For example, one particular teacher preparation program in special education focused on UDL and culturally sustaining pedagogy, which felt out of alignment with the special education edTPA.

While much literature exists regarding the perspectives of teacher candidates and faculty of special education teacher preparation, little to no research has investigated the predictive validity of the special education edTPA, particularly at a rural university. With the special education edTPA differing from the other content area assessments, specifically with a focus on planning, instructing, and assessing one focus learner, as well as maintenance and generalization, the special education edTPA predictive validity may differ with this unique assessment. Research from earlier studies in general education (Evans et al., 2016; Goldhaber et al., 2017; Greenblatt & O'Hara, 2015; Russell & Davidson Devall, 2016) may give some possible predictors, but the majority of these studies have focused on correlations.

The purpose of the current study was to identify which variables, if any, can predict teacher candidate performance on special education edTPA portfolios at a comprehensive liberal arts rural university in the Southeast region of the United States. This study was the first quantitative study to examine this relationship for the special education edTPA. A multiple regression was computed to assess the relationship between teacher candidate scores on edTPA portfolio assessment and (a) GPA, (b) scores on state-mandated certification exams, (c) sex, (d) race, (e) SES, (f) degree and major, and (g) age at graduation. Understanding which of these correlations has a significant relationship will provide teacher education programs with important information that can help them to ensure that teacher candidates have the support they need to be successful. The research question was, Which teacher candidate variables predict performance on the special education edTPA teaching portfolio?

Method

Participants

After approval from the university institutional review board, data were collected from 115 graduates in a special education teacher education program from fall 2016 to fall 2018. All participants were enrolled in a university degree program at a public university in the southeastern United States. The university was located in a state where a passing score on the edTPA was required for teacher certification. The participants for the current study included 115 special education majors seeking initial teaching certification; 59 participants were in the bachelor of science in education program (BSEd), and 56 participants were in the master of arts (MAT) special education program. Forty-four students took the edTPA in 2016, 42 in 2017, and 29 in 2018.

The BSEd major required a minimum of 123 hours of coursework (63 of the 60 hours in professional education or major specific) and four semesters of variable hours of field experience (e.g., Practicum 1, Practicum 2, Practicum 3, internship), while the MAT degree required 33 hours of professional education coursework at a graduate level and two semesters of full-time internship. Data collected included (a) GPA, (b) scores on state-mandated certification exams, (c) sex, (d) race, (e) SES, (f) degree and major, (g) age at graduation, (h) year the edTPA was taken, and (i) edTPA total scores on the special education edTPA portfolio. The large majority of participants were female (97.4%) and White (72.2%). The average age of participants for both the BSEd and MAT programs was 28 years, with an average major-specific GPA of 3.49. Approximately one-quarter of the participants (24.3%) received the Pell Grant. See participant demographics in Table 1.

Table 1

Descriptives for Participants and Predictor Variables

Variable	*n*	*%*
Gender	115	
Male	3	0.03
Female	112	97.4
Age (years)		
M	28.49	
SD	7.907	
Race		
Caucasian	83	72.2
African American or other	32	27.8
Pell Grant		
Yes	28	24.3
No	87	72.2
Degree		
BSED	59	51.3
MAT	56	48.7
Year		
2016	44	38.3
2017	42	36.5
2018	29	25.2
GPA		
M	3.49	
SD	.335	
State Test 1		
M	261.43	
SD	16.49	
State Test 2		
M	259.20	
SD	16.82	

Note. Pell Grant measured socioeconomic status. BSED = bachelor of science in education. GPA = grade point average. MAT = master of arts in teaching.

Measures for Predictor Variables

Age was measured as a continuous variable and ranged from 22 to 54 years. SES was measured by participants' eligibility for the Pell Grant. SES was dichotomously coded as either yes or no. Gender was coded as male or female. Race was divided into two categories due to the small number of participants for each race we collected. Race was dichotomously coded as either White or other (African American, Hispanic, Pacific Islander). Degree was dichotomously coded as either bachelor's or master's for each participant. GPA was coded as a continuous variable. Year was coded for 2016, 2017, and 2018 and dummy coded before being entered into the model.

The State Certification Tests 1 and 2 are computer-delivered assessments that have been developed by the state's Professional Standards Commission and ETS to help ensure that candidates have the knowledge and skills needed to perform the job of an educator in state public schools. The passing of both state tests is required for teacher certification. All assessments are aligned with the state standards for the P–12 curriculum and with state and national content standards. Scores are reported as scaled scores, where 220–249 is passing at the induction level and 250 is passing at the professional level. The scaled score was used for the analyses and measured as a continuous variable.

The edTPA portfolio consisted of three tasks in which the candidate (a) plans for instruction and assessment, (b) instructs and engages students in learning, and (c) assesses student learning. Each of these tasks was scored utilizing 5 rubrics for each task, producing a total of 15 rubrics. A score of 1–5 was assigned to each of the 15 rubrics. Trained scorers, hired by Pearson Education, scored the candidate's edTPA portfolio, resulting in a possible score ranging from 15 to 75. The total score was used for analyses and measured as a continuous variable.

Procedures

Data on all participants were collected from university records in 2018. Data were collected for the years 2016, 2017, and 2018. All data were compiled in an Excel spreadsheet and then transferred to SPSS software, version 25.0. Assumptions for multiple regressions were conducted before multiple regressions were run using SPSS. All assumptions were met for the multiple regression model. There was linearity as assessed by partial regression plots and a plot of studentized residuals against the predicted values. There was independence of residuals as assessed by a Durbin–Watson statistic of 2.279. There was homoscedasticity as assessed by visual inspection of a plot of studentized residuals versus unstandardized predicted values. There was no evidence of multicollinearity for the included variables as assessed by tolerance values, except for degree, which was removed from the model due to a tolerance value less than .01. Major was also removed from the model because

it had a high correlation with major. There were no studentized deleted residuals greater than ±3 standard deviations, no leverage values greater than 0.2, or values for Cook's distance above 1. The assumption of normality was met as assessed by a Q-Q plot. Power analyses using G-Power revealed a power of .95 with 115 participants. Correlations between independent variables can be seen in Table 2.

Data Analyses

To investigate which variables best predicted teacher candidates' edTPA total scores, multiple regression analyses were conducted (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). The dependent variable was the total edTPA score, and the predictor variables were (a) GPA, (b) scores on state-mandated certification exams, (c) sex, (d) race, (e) SES, (f) degree and major, and (g) age at graduation. All variables were entered into the model at once, because stepwise regression becomes less effective with a larger number of predictor variables (Smith, 2018). This study had 10 predictor variables, and all analyses were conducted in SPSS. There were no missing data; thus 115 cases were used for analysis.

Results

The current study investigated the predictors of teacher candidate performance on the special education edTPA teaching portfolio. Specific variables examined included (a) GPA at graduation, (b) sex, (c) race, (d) age at graduation, (e) scores on state-mandated certification exams, (f) SES, and (g) year the edTPA was taken. The research question was designed to investigate which variables predict performance on the edTPA teaching portfolio. The multiple regression model statistically significantly predicted edTPA total score, $F(7, 107) = 3.036$, $p < .05$, adj. $R^2 = .178$.

Table 2
Correlations Between Predictor Variables

	Year	*Pell*	*Gender*	*Race*	*Degree*	*Major*	*GPA*	*State Test 1*	*State Test 2*	*Age*
Year		.036	−.041	−.057	−.134	−.134	−.075	.138	.107	−.033
Pell	.036		−.292	−.012	.545	.545	−.235	.084	.009	−.262
Gender	−.041	−.292		−.089	−.171	−.171	.163	.005	.170	.116
Race	−.057	−.012	−.089		.214	.214	.040	.125	.153	−.182
Degree	−.134	.545	−.171	.214		1.00	−.305	.039	−.071	−.037
Major	−.134	.545	−.171	.214	1		−.305	.039	−.071	−.037
GPA	−.075	−.235	.163	.040	−.305	−.305		.091	.244	.276
Test 1	.138	.084	.005	.125	.039	.039	.091		.603	.091
Test 2	.107	.009	.170	.153	−.071	−.071	.244	.603		.178
Age	−.033	−.262	.116	−.182	−.037	−.037	.276	.091	.178	

Note. GPA = grade point average.

Regression coefficients and standard errors can be found in Table 3. R^2 for the overall model was 17.8% with an adjusted R^2 of 9.9%—a small size effect, according to Cohen and colleagues (2018). This model explains 17.8% of the variation in total scores for edTPA.

There was no statistically significant linear dependence of the mean of total test score on edTPA regarding age, SES, race, or year the test was taken. However, a statistically significant linear dependence of the mean of total test score on edTPA on GPA was detected with a *p*-value of .004. State Test 1 as a predictor was not significant, with a *p*-value of .079.

The coefficient for GPA was 5.537. The slope coefficient represents the change in the dependent variable for a one-unit change in the independent variable. As such, an increase in GPA of 1 point is associated with an increase in edTPA total score of 5.537 points when other variables are held constant.

Discussion

This study's purpose was to determine whether predictors existed between observable candidate variables and candidates' performance on the special education edTPA assessment portfolio. Within the current study, it was determined that age, race, SES, degree, major, and year could not be used to predict performance on the special education edTPA portfolio assessment. In fact, the only variable that was found to be a significant predictor of success was GPA. These findings are discussed in the following text.

First, the results indicate that age, race, SES, degree, and year were not predictors of higher total scores on the special education edTPA portfolio assessment in the current study. The finding that race was not a significant predictor in this study is interesting because earlier studies (e.g., Goldhaber et al., 2017; Greenblatt &

Table 3
Summary of Multiple Regression

Variable	*B*	*SE B*	β
Intercept	1.159	12.474	
Age	0.049	0.110	0.054
Pell Grant	−1.087	1.875	−0.066
Race	1.412	1.511	0.089
Gender	−0.003	1.654	0.000
Year	−1.912	1.552	−0.130
GPA	5.537	2.046	0.281*
State Test 1	0.089	0.049	0.197
State Test 2	−0.004	0.049	0.006

Note. GPA = grade point average.
*p < .05.

O'Hara, 2015) have suggested that teaching candidates of color and those from linguistic minority groups were failing the general education edTPA at disproportionate rates. However, Greenblatt and O'Hara (2015) noted this based on a pilot run of the edTPA in New York without a statistical test to determine if there is indeed a difference in passing rates between races. Goldhaber et al. (2017) suggested that Hispanics are three times more likely to fail the edTPA than White candidates. Owing to the number of participants in each race category, the current study was unable to separate between races, which may explain the different findings. Furthermore, there may be differences in scores between general education and special education edTPA portfolios because the two edTPA portfolios have different requirements. However, a selective sample certainly limits the generalizability of this finding in the current study. More research is needed for diverse candidate populations to determine if race is a predictor of edTPA total scores for general education and special education.

Second, scores on the state-mandated certification tests for special education were also not found to be predictors of performance on the special education edTPA portfolio. This is similar to the findings of Russell and Davidson Devall's (2016) study, which also found the world language state assessment as a nonpredictor. That said, the association between State Test 1 and edTPA was not significant relative to other variables, with a *p*-value of .079. This finding is surprising because, on the surface level, the State Test 1 objectives appear to align with the Task 1 (planning) and Task 2 (instruction) portions of the edTPA portfolio. The State Test 1 objectives include (a) knowledge of curriculum development and lesson planning; (b) how to organize, manage, and monitor the learning environment; and (c) knowledge of effective teaching strategies and techniques. Likewise, the test objectives include candidate understanding of assessment, which may align with Task 3 (assessment) of the edTPA portfolio. Future examination of the correlations between the edTPA tasks and state test objectives might be useful for determining patterns in teacher candidate performance.

Third, of all the observable variables examined, the only one that was found to be a significant predictor of performance on the edTPA portfolio assessment was GPA. This finding is similar to the results of Evans and colleagues (2016), who also found GPA to have a moderate positive correlation with general education edTPA test scores. Previous studies have shown GPA to predict preservice teacher success after graduation (Kirchner et al., 2010; Wilson & Robinson, 2012); therefore it is not surprising that GPA can predict a student's performance on the edTPA. Evans and colleagues (2016) suggested that the courses specific to education that make up the major GPA are critical in preparing preservice teachers to collect and analyze student data, understand student learning needs, and make adjustments to instruction to further student learning. These are all skills required from the special education edTPA portfolio, and the results from this study suggest that they are

critical to helping students perform well on the edTPA. Also, a predictor between teacher candidates who perform well in their college courses also performing well on the special education edTPA assessment makes sense; however, this finding could also indicate that nonobservable characteristics (e.g., study skills, professionalism, self-directed learning) may be more responsible for overall success than other variables. GPA can encompass many factors that lead to success in college education programs. Another factor that may lead to a higher GPA, and thus a predicted passing score on the edTPA, is the time a student spends on their studies and on edTPA preparation. Students who work outside of coursework and student teaching may have less time to spend on their schoolwork and on preparing their edTPA portfolio. Understanding the factors that predict GPA may lead to helpful insights regarding the characteristics of teacher candidates who are most likely to perform well on the edTPA assessment.

Limitations

Though this study used a rigorous multiple regression design, it was constrained by some limitations. First, the study only included data for a group of participants from one liberal arts comprehensive university in a rural southeastern community. Thus the selective sample is certainly a limitation of the study. Second, diversity could not be effectively measured in terms of race or ethnicity. Among the participants, the majority (72.2%) identified as White (n = 83), and 23% (n = 27) identified as Black or African American. Only 1.7% (n = 2) identified as Hispanic, and fewer than 1% identified as Asian (n = 1) or Pacific Islander (n = 2). Thus the study results should be used cautiously, particularly in terms of the predictive validity of the edTPA for candidates of various races or ethnicities. Third, this study specifically used the special education edTPA as its dependent variable. Research has not yet been conducted to determine if there is a strong correlation between special education and general education edTPA portfolios. Because special education requires more components than other edTPA portfolios, the findings may not generalize to all areas. Fourth, one of the variables was state specific. For example, the special education content exam is a state-specific teacher certification exam, similar to the Praxis exams taken in other states. Thus the results associated with those exams cannot be generalized to other states in which teacher candidates take different certification tests. However, if the states have similar content in their state exams, then there may be similar findings.

Future Directions

There are several areas of future directions for the current study. First, future researchers should analyze predictors of success for each of the separate tasks of the special education edTPA. This study only examined the total scores, but future

researchers should see which variables impact the planning, instruction, or assessment tasks. Second, researchers should analyze specific program variables on edTPA success, such as field placements and key assignments in coursework. Some researchers have found discrepancies between edTPA performance and field placement performance (Greenblatt & O'Hara, 2015). Thus it is important to determine the relationships between edTPA and field placements because both may predict future teacher success. Also, key assignments in programs can have an impact on GPA, depending on whether the students in each year had the same core group of instructors or some were stricter graders than others. Although the year candidates took the edTPA was not a predictor, it is interesting to examine which instructor factors may impact edTPA performance. Finally, more research is necessary to determine if there is a significant difference between races on edTPA performance for special education and general education. Researchers are concerned that race discrepancies could lead to employment discrepancies because edTPA is becoming a significant part of obtaining teacher licensure. The issue of GPA and the factors that influence grades raise questions and concerns about equity and diversity. Future research may investigate the discrepancies and equity of diverse candidates. Though Goldhaber et al. (2017) did not find race discrepancies, it is important for researchers to determine if there is a significant difference to help ensure a diverse teacher workforce.

Conclusion

Standardized assessments for teacher certification appear only to be increasing in use across the United States. Although the edTPA is often criticized in the literature, there is also some positive support for the utility of this standardized assessment, such as the utility of the teacher candidate video reflection (Darling-Hammond & Hyler, 2013; Davis & Armstrong, 2018; Ressler et al., 2017). This study was the first quantitative examination for the special education edTPA and is one of a scarce number of quantitative studies on edTPA in general. The current study investigated predictors of teacher candidate variables and performance on the special education edTPA. It was found that the variable with the highest prediction of success was the teacher candidate's GPA at graduation. Thus, similar to Evans and colleagues' (2016) finding, teacher candidates who performed well in their coursework and made high grades were also successful on the special education edTPA. Through college professors continuing to empower their students to achieve in their coursework, students may perform better on the edTPA, earn their teacher's licenses, and succeed in the field, which will benefit all students.

Note

[1] See state requirement at: https://www.edtpa.com/PageView.aspx?f=GEN_StateRequirements.html

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