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## Curricular reflections in the USA: Teaching teachers the edTPA

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### Abstract

The Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA) is an evaluation tool currently used across several states. The supposition is that teacher candidate performance can be measured. The express purpose of this instrument is to determine whether teacher candidates are ready to enter the classroom. Creators of the edTPA believe that this evaluation tool and the standards-based movement of which the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC), the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) play a part is more “rigorous” than other measures and will raise the bar for teachers entering the profession. Proponents and opponents alike expect the edTPA to radically reform the teacher preparation profession. The following essay explains why and how teacher education is changing due to edTPA. I reflect upon what are the curricular implications for teacher candidates, education faculty and teacher preparation organizations as a result of increased regulations, standardization, and an audit culture that reduces teaching and learning to the acquisition of mechanistic knowledge (performativity).

**Keywords:** edTPA; teacher preparation reform; standardization.

### Introduction: edTPA and the audit culture

The edTPA is a “consequential” assessment for teacher licensure, which means that teacher candidates must pass this test in order to become a teacher of record in Illinois public school classrooms. It signifies the growing encroachment upon teacher education of an audit culture. As such it is also emblematic of the privatization of public education, if not outright “corporate takeover” (Price, 2013).

Teacher education has historically been offered as a field within the school of education and across various disciplines (pedagogy, philosophy, and psychology, for example). It operates under state licensure rules. Those rules are increasingly changing in response to perceived market pressures that several scholars have noted are linked more to neoliberalism and less to student, teacher, school and community needs. Neoliberalism has been defined as the process of “liberating free enterprise or private enterprise from any bonds imposed by the government (the state) no matter how much social damage this causes.” These rules are uniformly adopted, in for example national systems like the Common Core State Standards:

“The new Common Core education proposal is one that Liberals and Conservatives commonly share because they both accept that capitalist growth requires what David Brooks calls a “mechanistic intelligence” and that the young should be schooled in that sort of intelligence. Neither party sees education as

giving the young an opportunity for liberating themselves from this mission to "grow the economy" under the direction of Market Rule. Both parties agree that this Common Core best serves the needs of corporate human resources, ignoring how obsolete high-tech training becomes in our high-tech world" (Natoli, 2014).

Natoli's grim assessment corresponds with Marilyn Cochran-Smith's (2001) astute observation: that strident claims to evidence circulating throughout education reform debates coalesce around preparation for work and to compete in a globalized economy.

If we take at face value that a globalized economy calls for a certain type of worker, the organization of school systems to meet these demands can be pre-determined by developing behavioral objectives, intended learning outcomes, and strategic goals. This standardized, curriculum architecture may be fully "aligned" (the favorite word of education reformers) such that students, teachers, administrators, school boards, and communities are all on the same page, working from the same lesson plan, and drawing from the same playbook as the multi-national corporations whom define the greater global economy.

Of course, this schema does not ensure an individual student's needs are being met. One of our own teachers, a graduate student, reflected specifically on the challenge of working in a confined space that does not feel like her own:

"One fear that looms throughout our school is that if an administrator walks into your classroom and views your lesson, they should be able to walk into the next classroom (same grade level) and basically pick up where you left off. Since we all should be teaching the same lesson at the same time, we should all be teaching the same thing. I have a big problem with this, because I feel as a teacher I need to use the teachable moments in my classroom".

Likewise, the stated premise of the latest teacher candidate assessment tool, the edTPA, needs to be seen against this broader context of neoliberalism and growing corporate influence on teacher education:

"Aspiring teachers must prepare a portfolio of materials during their student teaching clinical experience. edTPA requires aspiring teachers to demonstrate readiness to teach through lesson plans designed to support their students' strengths and needs" (edTPA, 2015).

In the United States it hardly bears worth repeating: high stakes, standardized testing has become a frequent source of irritation and contestation. Not only among teachers and students who are engaged in the actual teaching and learning process for which standardized testing has played such a major part, but increasingly parents are finding fault with the system, even choosing to "opt out" by pulling their children out of taking the tests. It is not possible to seriously discuss the edTPA without deference to this sociological backdrop.

To begin to discuss edTPA is to acknowledge controversy, including the greater controversy surrounding high stakes, standardized testing nationwide. Among one of the more controversial features of edTPA is that the professional role of teacher education faculty appears to be diminishing, subsumed under neoliberal educational reform: the logic of a "new managerialism" and audit culture (Apple, 2007; Taubman, 2009; Price, 2014). Historically, one portion of a faculty member's most important responsibilities is to evaluate his or her own prospective teachers. This function is now being compromised, outsourced to an external, private contractor, Pearson Inc.

In Illinois, for example, a teacher "candidate" is required as of September 1,

2015 to submit the edTPA portfolio for review by a Pearson Inc. recruited and trained scorer, essentially a piecemeal worker who produces the score. Similar licensure requirements are in place or are planned for use in New York, Georgia, Wisconsin, Washington State, and Oregon. University level teacher researchers have taken great offense at this usurpation of their roles as teacher education clinical faculty. Among the protests include recent writings by faculty at Northeastern Illinois University, who have issued “a call for independent, peer-reviewed scholarship regarding the validity, reliability, and impact of high-stakes, privatized, teacher performance assessment.” (Dover, Schultz, Smith, & Duggan, 2015).

Our own experience as a critical educator bears witness to this slow moving, yet readily discernible shift in the locus of responsibility for assessment and evaluation. With the rolling out of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) in 2002, our teacher education students experienced firsthand the school report cards and, in several instances, sanctions should a school fail to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). As a result of NCLB and the requirement to meet the expectations of the AYP mandate, a cottage industry of educational for-profit organizations grew, seemingly overnight. The most prolific of these organizations include 1) *Supplemental Educational Service* (SES) providers of tutoring and test preparation; 2) *Pre-packaged curriculum programs* such as *Understanding Backwards Design* and *Reading First* for example (programs such as *Reading First* narrowly focus on phonics and phoneme recognition: important for passing the standardized tests); and 3) *Educational Maintenance Organizations* (EMOs) whom profit from managing the “turn around” of “failing schools”.

Outsourcing and the privatization of public education, two fairly prominent features of corporate takeover, are growing at a steady and demonstrable pace. Of no small import during this No Child Left Behind period (2002-2014) was the requirement that every teacher be “highly qualified” according to the federal government’s definition. As a result of various reauthorization bids, the idea of the “effective” teacher became *more* paramount. Thus creating the “highly effective teacher” became of great interest to would-be education reformers.

### **A formative assessment being misused as a summative experience**

The development, dissemination and implementation, of edTPA are largely facilitated by the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity (SCALE). SCALE basically intends for this tool to be used in a formative fashion. Nonetheless, even a key representative from SCALE confirmed criticism that the edTPA is not being used as it was designed in states that are using it consequentially for licensure.

At one of the professional development days held at my own university, the presenter, an accomplished quantitative researcher from SCALE, argued (ironically I thought) that edTPA was not the ultimate answer to teacher effectiveness. His presentation was interesting because even though he worked for the organization that created edTPA, he cautioned the faculty to use it properly. edTPA, he taught, should be understood to be only one of the components that go into the determination of what counts toward moving a

candidate forward. Clinical hours and observations, with teacher education faculty, university supervisors and cooperating teachers are equally, arguably much more important. .

Furthermore, this SCALE representative advocated, critically so, that edTPA be used *in a formative manner, not as a high stakes test*, that it not be “consequential”. By this he meant that it should not be used as the sole gatekeeper for determining whether candidates went forward or not. He even pointed out how early rollout of the tool in other states flopped. The point was apparently lost on the Illinois State Board of Education, which ignored this advice; the edTPA as mentioned previously became consequential on September 1, 2015.

Nearly verbatim, I documented the testimonials from other institutions that were gathered that day, among them one from an administrator at a private Wisconsin college who with enthusiasm stated that these were the same knowledge(s), skills and dispositions that institutions of higher education/teacher preparation programs already teach. Hence, to her the strategy for IHEs should be to embrace the challenge, “rock the standards” and go beyond the requirements (Price, 2014).

### **Resistance to the edTPA**

But not everyone is so enthused. Since this initial presentation, there has been resistance, including a campaign to defer the consequentiality of the law which moves the state of Illinois in the direction of making edTPA the de facto gatekeeper for teacher candidates aspiring to be teachers of record in the teacher education field. Julie Peters, a faculty member in history from the University of Illinois, Chicago, with Larry Sondler a long time educational consultant, launched a campaign to get the Illinois State Board of Education to reconsider making the edTPA other than what it was designed to be, a formative assessment tool. As Peters reflected, the high stakes testing assessment for teacher candidates seems to be in response to a “crisis” that can only be met by enacting higher standards for teacher education.

Price: “What is the edTPA and how do you understand it?”

Peters: “What I understand the edTPA to be is two things: what it was designed to be, and what it has become. What it was designed to be was a way to codify and measure how we teach teachers in response to some sort of perceived crisis . . . and I’m not quite sure what the crisis is. But the idea [became] somehow that those teachers are bad and that if we can make teachers better, then the crisis will be solved”.

What Peters alluded to can be traced back to the 1983 report, “A Nation At Risk” which began a national campaign to increase educational standards so that the United States could remain competitive in a global economy. From the premise imposed by this report sprang the next logical iteration of accountability: teacher education. If students were falling behind, then ultimately teachers, and teacher educators, might also be to blame. As Wayne Au explained, proponents of auditing teacher education came from teacher educator professionals themselves, as a way to counteract the conservative attack by the National Center for Teacher Quality (NCTQ) (Au, 2013). In response to an increasing call by NCTQ to do away with what it considered to be inferior teacher education

programs, educational scholars at Stanford University created what eventually became known as the edTPA. Proponents of the edTPA see the assessment as an alternative to attacks by NCTQ and, ultimately, as a way to save teacher education by professionalizing it and by raising standards.

During an Illinois Association for Colleges of Teacher Education (IACTE) meeting in October of 2013, Peters and Sondler convened a group of concerned faculty members. It was decided by the group that although the edTPA was seemingly inevitable, consequentiality was not. The idea emerged to formally oppose the implementation timeline of this tool and the plan to use it as a high stakes assessment for licensure. By the end of the meeting, the group had a name: *The Illinois Coalition for edTPA Rule Change*. Eventually, the group circulated a petition among some 350-teacher educators throughout the state; the petition was signed by more than 250 stakeholders and was presented to the Illinois State Board of Education in April of 2015. The petition stated:

“It is our belief that the edTPA is not yet sufficiently developed for use as a high-stakes assessment for licensure, damaging to the purpose and goals of student teaching, and too costly to our students and institutions of higher education”. (Peters & Sondler, 2013).

The petition echoed what many critical educators have argued, that the edTPA should not be used as a high stakes assessment for teacher licensure.

In New York State, a much more widespread movement to push back against use of the edTPA for licensure resulted in the state’s Board of Regents creating a two-year “safety net” to compensate for student teachers who were otherwise deemed qualified but who failed the edTPA.

Stephen Farenga, a professor and director of the Science and Education program at Queens College expressed strong reservations concerning the use of the tool given cost, lack of quality, and the precarious direction in which it appeared to be taking teacher preparation:

Price: “Can you tell me about the students you teach?”

Farenga: “The majority are first generation working class students. Queens College is one of the most ethnically diverse colleges in the US. My class is primarily composed of graduate students”.

Farenga explained that compounding the increased standardization as a result of edTPA, the K-12 students and their families in New York were resisting the latest wave of standards:

Farenga: “New York State has not adopted Common Core for Science, there was such blow back from the Math and Language [Common Core components], that they’ve halted the Science standards and are backpedaling on it. [Also] 20-25% of the K-12 students refused to take the state standardized testing”.

Price: “edTPA emerged from some of the other standards and education reforms, how did it arrive in New York?”

Farenga: “edTPA comes on the heels of INTASC—another top down directive—based on the Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) from larger states, who have neither taught nor been trained in curriculum development. We don’t know how edTPA got here but it is political, CCSSO are driving educational policy. It is an authoritative direction for education and not democratic. National Board Standards (NBPTS) again is another outgrowth of NCATE; NBPTS were also on one of the 22 members organizations to make up the NCATE board. NBPTS was supposed to

professionalize the field, but constrained and quantified best practices; practices not identified by schools. They [educational reformers] keep calling it a science but you can't quantify or delimit the variables to one place, student population, teachers or curriculum".

More recently, teacher educators at Northeastern Illinois University published two articles summarizing critiques of the use of the edTPA. In particular, the authors raised the issue of a new cottage industry of edTPA test preparation services designed to assure students they would pass the assessment and gain their license (Dover, Schultz, Smith & Duggan, 2015). The initial article sparked counterpoint from proponents of the edTPA, namely Dr. Ameer Adkins of Illinois State University (Adkins, Spesia & Snakenborg, 2015). Dover and her colleagues responded with a subsequent article. The debate signaled a return to critiques by academics in teacher education, one that had begun to emerge early in the process but which failed to gain momentum until Teachers College Press published the Dover critique.

### **Accommodation as a response**

Nonetheless, despite individual or collective misgivings, teacher educators have begun to accommodate the edTPA.

The IL-TPAC conference, held in September of 2015 was optimistically titled "Moving Forward," and featured speakers and workshops addressing various challenges in implementing the consequential edTPA in Illinois. Dr. Ameer Adkins, dean at ISU and the director of edTPA implementation in Illinois opened a conference in September, 2015, for edTPA coordinators throughout the state by discussing "where we've been" as a teacher preparation field.

The edTPA is indeed a change initiative, she noted, but "change is learning" and she argued that we might consider "what am I going to learn about my practice as a result?" Adkins argued that teacher education programs might consider reframing their approach, considering how they work together and what might be learned during this new process.

Adkins offered that this could be a scholarly process, referencing two critical readings that informed her own work. The first she cited was *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (1966) by Berger and Luckman. Drawing from that reference and speaking about edTPA implementation she urged us forward in "taking responsibility for the effects of that construction". The other reference she offered was *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) by Paulo Freire. In this instance Adkins argued that the change we were embarking upon was tantamount to a new movement for social justice. "edTPA has become a catalyst for intercampus collaboration and problem identifying and problem solving," Adkins concluded.

A laundry list of items that IL-TPAC would be thinking about and discussing at this conference included: academic language, targeted student learning, videotaping, assessment practice, mutually developed strong rigorous insight, common assessments vetted by the profession, establishing priorities, monitoring progress, and moving to the next priority. Adkins main emphasis concerned the collaboration efforts that we would be engaged in and the "sharing out what we learn" while protecting student anonymity.

A Lake Forest College faculty member reported that her institution in 2012-13 implemented edTPA for the first year and conducted a pilot in the second, 2013-14. "All the teachers submitted for official scoring. We did a curriculum map with additional focus on academic language." She continued, "all our full time faculty members are official scorers".

Another faculty member, this time a department chair of Early Childhood Education at St. Xavier said that her school "started talking about it in 2013" and began to have more intense discussion, "incorporating the jargon, articulating a little bit better." "You can't put it on, fake it" [you] need to bring it into a repertoire of skills." They spent time creating online modules and matching the preparation work with "concurrent field experiences". They worked through their assessment courses aiming to "fine tune some of our course assessments" and conducted a 2010 small pilot, backwards mapping into our programs. Given this early implementation, by 2013 her college was "full on board". Two thirds of the students in 2013 and, by 2014, two thirds of the teacher candidates were working on the portfolios.

Subsequent workshops attempted to clarify what was meant by "discourse and syntax" in the edTPA rubrics on academic language; retake policies, which ranged from resubmitting a single section of the portfolio to possibly repeating student teaching, and "condition codes" (which indicate sections of the portfolio deemed not able to be scored). Discussions included concerns and various understandings about the extent to which faculty are allowed to offer feedback to candidates as they create their portfolio.

Regardless of whether faculty from various institutions represented at the conference that day fully supported the edTPA, it was clear that they were taking seriously efforts to wrestle with challenges and to accommodate and correctly implement the now high stakes nature of the edTPA.

My own school, the Advanced Professional Programs in the National College of Education, National Louis University includes Educational Leadership, School Psychology and Educational Foundations and Inquiry. We opted to review curriculum offering in lieu of the edTPA demands. Reviewing curriculum is a normal procedure and occurs with and without state mandates, but certainly stringent state mandates get attention.

Cross-disciplinary discussions between my foundations and research faculty and our colleagues in teacher preparation are generally spirited and evoke interesting insights. The general thinking was pragmatic; we were already doing much of what edTPA calls for. Hence, what could we pro-actively consider to be helpful to move forward, given the legal mandate that we were now under?

The conversation continued in an Educational Foundations and Inquiry program meeting where faculty reviewed assignments, lessons, and activities that could reasonably relate to edTPA domains. The overarching takeaways included the conclusion that regardless of the edTPA, all faculty have a vested interest in better understanding how our candidates are doing in K-12 schools and how we as a college are preparing teachers. There are shared experiences and consequences across our college curriculum. We also concluded that potential existed to empower our candidates in foundations courses to understand where ideas supporting best practices came from, to use action



research to help engage candidates in examining their own practice, and to pay closer attention to P-20 learning while creating professional learning communities.

Thus, in all of these examples, some efforts to accommodate the edTPA resulted in potentially beneficial conversations among faculty around ways to deepen and improve practice.

### **Teaching complexity and the edTPA**

Teaching and learning is complex activity, not easily rendered as evidence, nor subject solely (if at all) to tabulation and quantification. Perhaps more significant to whether edTPA “works” or not is how it was conceived and consolidated. As part of a socio-political and historical-educational construction process, edTPA evolves from educational leadership efforts to strengthen teaching and learning standards. But just as crucially, edTPA represents the consolidation between educational school reformers from two decidedly different political agendas: the professionalization experts and the deregulation reactionaries (see Cochran-Smith, 2004).

Teacher preparation in the USA exists under an exceedingly strict condition(s) due in no small part to increased Department of Education (DOE) regulation(s) creating effectively an audit culture for higher education. Reflective of the general conditions described as “neoliberalism” (Harvey, 2006; Lipman, 2011; Watkins, 2013) public education as a whole is assigned to a narrow social space, serving predetermined market aims. Nonetheless, curriculum discussions continue in the academy and edTPA might as an unintended consequence provoke development of spirited social spaces for dialogue and inquiry.

It is a matter for philosophy to speculate on what edTPA ultimately means for teaching and learning, but from a curricular perspective, monitoring of teacher preparation is clearly increasing. It seems equally apparent that edTPA as a tool for measuring teaching performance is merely a proxy for authentic teacher effectiveness. Perhaps the best example of the increased monitoring and limited measurement generalizability of the tool can be revealed by the process which requires candidates to submit video footage, two clips of no more than ten minutes, as their teaching effectiveness evidence.

As long time teacher-educator Stephen Farenga noted, two ten minute video segments of a lesson plan are a fairly narrow sliver from the hundreds of hours spent by teacher candidates during clinical supervision.

The teaching and learning environment, in all its complexity, is reduced by this part of the edTPA to a series of objective, discrete parts. Put under analysis by a trained observer and against a rubric, the task is to determine if those parts disaggregated as such are equivalent to the desired upon, and pre-determined standard. The performing teacher is aware of the rubric’s intended learning outcomes, and trained in the edTPA domains (and certainly in the other teacher preparation knowledge, skills, and dispositions beyond edTPA). But everything is reduced to *just what is captured in the ten-minute video segments*.

While the edTPA video segments might be interesting, they are by default thin with respect to all that is happening in a classroom with teachers, students, text(s) and broader epiphenomenal contexts. Because of this thinness scorers might input information to the video, information that is not already there, in order

to make more meaning. Such is the nature of interpretation. The problem is not whether edTPA is subject to subjective interpretations; in fact professional judgment is valuable and what is called for when professionals by nature of their unique training, experience, and careful study of a field come together. Rather, the problem is in the notion that edTPA should be the penultimate gatekeeper as to whether a candidate goes any further toward becoming a teacher of record. As a gatekeeper, edTPA ensures that the faculty role in teacher preparation organizations will be deskilled, subsumed by edTPA preparation. edTPA will become, if we are not vigilant, literally perceived as excellent teaching and learning, instead of a proxy of the same thing.

The challenge with embracing the edTPA is that it effectively places teacher preparation under surveillance. If an institution fails to demonstrate that their candidates can pass the edTPA they will likely face censure, unofficially as well as officially.

A new teaching assessment such as the edTPA will not reveal what better teacher and learning looks like in its fullest dimension. Only flesh and blood can fully do so, and that work is happening day in, day out, off camera and behind the scenes. Proposals for reforming edTPA policy in Illinois include moving the assessment out of student teaching and into the more legitimate milieu of the teacher's own classroom. Videotape snapshots of teaching could be replaced with actual observation of the larger and fuller teaching environment, rather than being reduced to twenty minutes of video footage. Such reforms would push back against the reductive judgment of teacher effectiveness inherent in the edTPA and begin to return teacher preparation — as well as judgments about what makes for good teaching — into the hands of educators and away from the influence of the audit culture of standardization.

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