

Introduction: Pre-service TESOL Teachers Speak Out About edTPA

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We are stalwart advocates of public school education, and not just because we hold dear the notion of all citizens having access to the body of knowledge and critical thinking skills that they will use for the rest of their lives. We support it because we love it. There is nothing quite like walking through the doors of a bustling public school, and immediately being hit with the slightly musty smell of aging linoleum floors, seeing the sometimes crumbling but often lovingly decorated walls, and hearing what sounds like the chaotic noises of the students. When we step closer, however, we usually hear and see something that isn't so much chaotic, but rather, remarkable: growth-in-action. We see children-- younger or older-- who represent a plethora of cultures, speak many languages, and come from all walks of life. Within earshot or line of vision of these children, we see someone else, too. We see someone who cares deeply about learning, someone who has probably spent hours upon hours drawing up lesson plans and grading papers, and most importantly, someone who sincerely cares about these children, and thinks and worries about them far beyond the confines of the classroom. We call that person the teacher.

Teachers in New York state—indeed all over the United States-- have been under scrutiny. There has been more pressure from them to ‘prove’ effectiveness through the results of students’ standardized tests. There have been formulas derived to quantitatively determine the value that a particular teacher adds to a school. The latest to be implemented in New York is edTPA, (formerly Teacher Performance Assessment) a multiple-measure portfolio assessment designed for pre-service teachers. EdTPA began as a grassroots movement created by teachers and teacher educators who strove to develop a way for pre-service teachers to demonstrate readiness to enter the profession. Today, for those wishing to teach in New York public schools, edTPA is a high-stakes performance assessment, designed at Stanford University and operated by Pearson Incorporated, that serves as a statewide gatekeeping measure. Quite simply, as of 2015, if you do not achieve the cutoff score from edTPA’s rubrics, as determined by a scorer who is hired and normed by Pearson, you do not earn the title of public school teacher in New York.

Unsurprisingly, edTPA has polarized the profession. The National edTPA Conference was held at Barnard College in March 2014. The atmosphere there was electric. Catherine was in the audience that day, and while listening to voices both for and against edTPA she was at times inspired by the courageous students and faculty member from all over the country who spoke out about the future of teacher training given this new, outsourced assessment. Other times, she was frustrated at the conflicting information concerning what was expected of pre-service teachers in order to successfully complete the portfolio, as well as the underlying suggestion that edTPA is needed because teacher training, as it stands, is failing. At the same moment, Amanda was student teaching in a New York City public school classroom, thinking about her budding edTPA portfolio. It struck us both when we talked about the conference a few weeks later that many of the people most affected by edTPA were not in the audience that day. As the first crop of student teachers saddled with the task of completing edTPA, they were instead student

teaching, and trying to compile their portfolios. We decided that it was those voices that needed to be heard, the ones of the pre-service teachers faced with preparing edTPA.

This forum compiles the stories of five pre-service TESOL teachers who successfully completed edTPA in the content area of English as an Additional Language in New York City this past year. We asked them write about anything they wished with regards to edTPA—from the larger context in which they completed it, to the smaller technical issues that either helped or hindered them as they put the portfolio together. We made a conscious effort to explain that any viewpoint concerning edTPA was welcomed. Amy Proulx highlights the benefits of edTPA, but argues that those benefits are often lost in implementation. Niove Theoharides, while discussing her own planning process to complete edTPA, has advice for future student teachers who must also complete the task. Stephanie Chiu looks back on her own student teaching seminar, noting that the rich conversations about teaching and social justice took a backseat to portfolio preparation as pre-service teachers navigated edTPA. Amanda McKenna recounts her student teaching practicum experience as well, likening the undertaking of edTPA to the psychological states of grief. Finally, Justine McConville discusses the performance aspects of edTPA, and the frustrations of ‘doing’ an assessment that, in her view, is disconnected from teaching.

We would like to thank these young professionals for taking the time to reflect on their edTPA experience, particularly considering the time pressure and performance scrutiny they endure as pre-service teachers. We are hopeful that these conversations about edTPA—what it means in the context of teacher training, how it is implemented during the student teaching experience and in a classroom full of students, and its significance in the development of pre-service TESOL teachers and TESOL teaching standards--- will continue, because as advocates for public schools, we are also advocates for future public school teachers.