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A Disability Studies in Education Analysis of the edTPA Through Teacher Candidate Perspectives

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Jessica Bacon¹ and Sheila Blachman²

Abstract

This analysis of the Special Education edTPA is written by two professors who co-taught a student teaching seminar at one institution and supported the first groups of teacher candidates required to submit the edTPA for certification in New York State. Data were gathered over three semesters and included open-ended student surveys, student journals, and public documents. Findings describe (a) how the edTPA requirements impacted teacher candidate learning, (b) the emphasis on one focus learner in the exam, (c) the discourse and language demands in the edTPA, and (d) how the edTPA and videotaping impacted fieldwork. We describe these findings and discuss their implications for inclusive and Special Education as understood through a disability studies in education perspective.

Keywords

disability studies, inclusion, teacher preparation practices and outcomes, edTPA, educational policy, teacher preparation policy/service delivery

The Teacher Performance Examination (edTPA) is a standardized assessment required for teacher candidates (TCs) enrolled in teacher certification preparation programs in many states, including in New York State (NYS). Two professors who co-taught a student teaching seminar and supervised student teachers wrote this disability studies in education (DSE) informed analysis of the Special Education edTPA. Over three semesters, 39 TCs who were enrolled in student teaching and who used the Special Education edTPA Handbook participated in this study. In this article, we draw on experiences of TCs and consider how the Special Education edTPA impacted the instructional and field experiences of TCs.

Research on the edTPA and Special Education

It is important to offer an analysis of candidates' experiences with the Special Education

edTPA Handbook, as very little research has done so, despite a growing body of research on the impact of the edTPA more generally. Questions raised by researchers ask what competencies modern Special Educators should gain during teacher preparation (McCall, McHatton, & Shealey, 2014) and what role the separate Special Education exam plays in defining those competencies (Ledwell & Oyler, 2016; Pugach & Peck, 2016).

McCall et al. (2014) reviewed literature to determine key competencies that should be assessed for Special Education TCs. The

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authors found that a diverse array of skills were deemed essential for Special Educators including “skills and knowledge related to academics, behavior, collaboration, and transition; dispositional factors including attitudes about disability, inclusion, and diversity; and authentic, field-based assessments, including measures of candidates’ impact on students and their induction experiences” (p. 51). McCall et al. explained that TPAs have yet to be systematically studied in Special Education literature, have hidden curricula, and disregard competencies that the broader literature base finds vital.

Pugach and Peck (2016) conducted a comparative content analysis of the Special Education and the Elementary Education edTPA Handbooks from Washington State, with a goal to “illuminate some of the ways in which contemporary teacher preparation policy tools may contribute to the reproduction of practices that divide general and special education” (p. 16). The authors found substantial differences between the two assessments, particularly noting that the Special Education edTPA requires TCs to learn about individual students, rather than about a collective classroom learning process, as is required in the Elementary Handbook. They also found that the two handbooks treated curricular expectations quite differently and that the Elementary Handbook focused primarily on academic standards, where the Special Education Handbook required candidates to work with one focus learner to acquire and generalize specific skills.

Cronenberg et al. (2016) found that many programs have made substantial programmatic and curricular changes to align to the demands of the edTPA, and many instructors began teaching to the test. Similarly, Ledwell and Oyler (2016) conducted research on the resultant gatekeeping and curricular changes that various programs undertook in response to the edTPA at Teachers College in New York City. They described a range of programmatic responses to the edTPA and faculty described paradigm conflicts between coursework and the demands of the edTPA as curricular changes were developed. Important to our study, Ledwell and Oyler (2016) highlighted struggles that those working

with the Special Education Handbook raised related to the excessive attention given to the single focus learner at the expense of a universally designed approach to instruction. Similar to Pugach and Peck (2016), Ledwell and Oyler also raised concerns about the potential role the edTPA might play in dictating the content and direction of Special Education teacher education programs. The literature base provided context for which to understand our data.

DSE

We draw upon DSE literature to theoretically ground the results of our data. DSE is broadly defined as a field that focuses on issues surrounding people with disabilities as they relate to academic and social exclusion and oppression. Scholars of DSE consider economic, political, and historical issues about disability, as viewed through a social lens (Danforth & Gabel, 2006), and believe “that disability is a social phenomenon” (Taylor, 2006, p. xiii). Davis (2006) details how disability developed as a socially constructed concept through statistical application of the bell, or “normal” curve, which was used to demarcate boundaries of human difference. Davis furthers his analysis by explaining how “normalcy” has served as a hegemonic tool to devalue disability and privilege an average ideal. DSE scholars promote nuanced, strength, and identity-based conceptions of disability, rather than such normed, medicalized, or deficit understandings.

DSE scholars have long promoted fully inclusive settings, which have overwhelmingly proven beneficial both academically (e.g., Cosier, Causton-Theoharis, & Theoharis, 2013) and socially (e.g., Fisher & Meyer, 2002). DSE scholars advocate for integrated access to academic and standards-based curricula, rather than reliance on separate or functional curriculum (Clough & Corbett, 2000; Ryndak et al., 2014). The inclusion movement has made recent gains, and 90% of children with disabilities are now educated in general education settings for at least part of the day, often with a General Education teacher as a teacher of record (Blanton, Pugach, & Boveda, 2014).

Despite gains toward inclusion, perspectives about the necessary direction of the field are multifaceted around issues like segregation, definition of disability, and curricula for students with disabilities (Allan & Slee, 2008). Allan and Slee (2008) described the risk that is presented to novices entering the field of Special Education because of divisions present from varying and discordant ideologies. Furthermore, teacher preparation policy decisions have often missed the opportunity to further integrate the knowledge base and skills required of General and Special Educators (Blanton et al., 2014). We therefore draw on a DSE perspective as an analytical tool to understand the experiences of TCs who participated in the edTPA.

Method

Study Setting and Participants

Data for this project draw from the experiences of TCs who participated in student teaching and connected seminar to receive certification and master's degrees in Special Education during the spring 2014, fall 2014, and spring 2015 semesters. The certification programs that students were enrolled in included early childhood and childhood dual certification programs (general and special education, bilingual and special education) and early childhood, childhood, and adolescent Special Education. During the spring, 2014 semester, the authors co-taught weekly 2.5-hour student teaching seminars, as well as supervised TCs in the field. The second author taught the student teaching seminar and supervised student teachers during the fall 2014 and spring 2015 semesters.

The program educates TCs through a philosophy of recognizing diversity as a foundation of teaching and learning, and strives to support TCs to become inclusive minded educators who are aware of inequities and social injustices. The student teaching experience allowed TCs to experience all the intricacies and daily workings of a Special Education teacher through the immersion into an inclusive, or Special Education, setting. In addition

to completing the edTPA, TCs participated in weekly seminars, were supervised teaching several lessons in the field, completed weekly journals, and were assessed by supervisors and cooperating teachers on dispositions.

Data Sources

Data used for this project came from multiple sources gathered over three semesters. Primary information on student perspectives was drawn from the responses of 39 anonymous surveys that TCs filled out at the end of the semester. TCs were given computers and approximately 45 to 60 minutes to respond to 12 open-ended survey questions during class time. Open-ended questions were designed to learn about TC experiences with the edTPA, what supports were helpful or lacking, how the edTPA impacted their field experiences, and general benefits or drawbacks from experience with the edTPA process. At the time the surveys were distributed, most TCs had submitted final edTPAs but had not yet received scores. During the spring 2014 semester, we also analyzed journals that 19 students submitted weekly during student teaching, which were general reflections on their student teaching settings.

Secondary data for this project came from edTPA and policy documents that were publicly available through Internet searches. The public documents that we analyzed were (a) edTPA handbook (Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning & Equity [SCALE], 2016), (b) an edTPA report (SCALE, 2015), and (c) NYS edTPA policy (New York State Education Department [NYSED], 2013).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through a qualitative coding process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Authors read data from survey responses and journal entries separately three times each, before coming together several times to discuss common themes. After subsequent semesters of data were collected, this process continued with the addition of using AtlasTi7 software to manage analysis. Analysis of data

of subsequent semesters confirmed original common themes and provided more evidence for each theme.

Findings

Emergent themes related to the experiences of TCs and faculty with regard to the special education edTPA include (a) edTPA requirements and TC learning, (b) emphasis on one focus learner, (c) discourse and language demands, and (d) fieldwork concerns and videotaping the edTPA.

edTPA Requirements and TC Learning

In this section, we look at the reported benefits and drawbacks related to content learning that TCs described due to participation in the edTPA.

Benefits. When describing the benefits of the edTPA, TCs overwhelmingly identified five key areas where they felt practice was improved upon: (a) reflection, (b) planning, (c) assessment, (d) planning for their focus learner, and (e) alignment throughout planning. TCs made comments such as “the reflective piece made me a better teacher,” “the edTPA provided me with insight as to the thought process I should be going through every time I plan a lesson,” “I learned how to identify target behaviors and how to collect data on them,” “I improved implementing lessons to ensure IEP goals are being met,” and “I learned that everything must be aligned and if you align the objectives with the goals on the IEPs it is better.” When asked what benefits TCs gained from the experience of the edTPA, they described the elements that connect exactly to the requirements of the exam. Because the student teaching seminar was heavily influenced by the demands of the edTPA, we taught, and TCs learned and gained skills in what the edTPA required: planning, assessing, and aligning IEP goals to lesson plans and becoming a reflective practitioner.

Drawbacks. TCs repeatedly described missing out on key aspects of their student teaching

experience because of the requirements of the edTPA at the expense of unraveling complex and inclusive related competencies. TCs made comments such as “I would have enjoyed and gained more from talking about teaching practices and curriculum. As educators, we are stressed out when we are only teaching our students to pass a state test. I feel like student teaching also focused mostly on this test” and “I was frustrated because . . . [the edTPA] has taken away from other techniques and practices that could have been learned and applied to better my teaching.” Another TC lamented that he or she did not get to discuss how universal design for learning (UDL) and inclusive pedagogy could be more authentically applied to her classroom. She stated, “I spent two whole semesters focusing on the edTPA instead of learning about [these] important practices.” An additional TC noted that the edTPA stifled his or her ability to be creative in their planning and instruction: “I was unable to enjoy my student teaching experience and was unable to become creative because I felt I had to focus on passing the edTPA.” As seminar instructors, we also struggled a great deal with missing out on in-class reflection and discussion, spending time reading and discussing praxis-oriented books for inclusive educators, and having students complete other final portfolio assignments that connected to the philosophy of the program and department.

Emphasis on One Focus Learner

Another important theme that came from TC surveys brought to light questions about the way the assessment emphasized the instruction of only one focus learner through its requirements and rubric scoring processes. We had taught prior coursework in our program that emphasized lesson planning with individual students needs in mind, while planning for the whole class. We recognized that meeting the varied needs of individuals is a legal cornerstone of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), and it is important that TCs learn this competency, yet TCs noted a contradiction between this exam

requirement and an inclusive approach to planning where individual needs are met and embedded into the general education curriculum and classroom.

One student stated the he or she felt that

the edTPA for special education is unrealistic in the sense that the majority of classes do not teach JUST ONE student with needs. Therefore, to create a lesson with just one focus child in mind is unfair and ignores so many aspects of being a good teacher.

Another candidate noted, “Teaching is about all children. I do not understand how a task that focuses on one child is supposed to measure if a teacher is ready to teach.” Other TCs made comments about planning for just a focus learner and made comments that it “affected other students negatively,” “contradicted the whole idea of educating all students,” and led to giving “less attention to other students who could have benefitted from the extra attention.” In addition, a TC explained in his or her journal that he or she set up an activity for the whole class to engage in, and then pulled the focus learner to videotape on “a one-to-one basis to work on his IEP goals.” Overall, candidates expressed concern that the edTPA overemphasized the planning for only one learner, yet we understood the intense pressure candidates felt to focus on one student to pass the exam, as noted by the student who taught her focus learner in isolation while videotaping.

Discourse and Language Demands

In this section, we will (a) focus on TCs’ responses to language used in the Special Education handbook and glossary and (b) provide an analysis of several excerpts from the Special Education Handbook.

TC concerns and programmatic responses. One way the edTPA contributes to the induction of TCs into the field is through the academic language of the exam. Of this, many TCs felt that neither job experiences in the field nor prior coursework prepared them to understand the language that appeared throughout the edTPA.

Candidates made statements such as “The academic language was tough to navigate,” “[Time was] wasted on learning new vocabulary,” and “The fact that the exam came with a glossary stressed me out. This meant that the language was different, [and] I could have easily misunderstood one of the prompts based on lack of new vocabulary understanding.” Another TC stated that the “the language incorporated in the edTPA was very different from language used to [previously] instruct us.” Some examples of novel edTPA language include (a) a “learning segment” defined as a series of three to five lessons and (b) a “learning task” defined as an activity that a focus learner engages in that relates to learning objectives (SCALE, 2016).

Furthermore, the language in the Special Education Handbook was surprisingly different from other disciplines. In fact, our Dean’s office led an annual edTPA orientation for TCs that included a segment on academic language—this portion of the orientation was held separately for Special Education candidates because the glossary was so distinct from all other handbooks. Due to the separate and novel discourse used in the Special Education edTPA Handbook, we feel that the edTPA differentiates the language used from other fields, while concretizing a particular version of Special Education that attempts to straddle multiple perspectives.

Examples from the Special Education Handbook. There have been significant changes in the glossary in the most recent 2016 Special Education handbook, which appears reflective of continued debates in the field. On one hand, we are encouraged that all handbooks have critically defined the term “deficit thinking” and give lower rubric scores to candidates who focus on

what students cannot do based primarily on learners’ cultural or linguistic backgrounds, the challenges they face outside of school, or from lack of family support . . . [which can] lead to a pattern of a candidate demonstrating low expectations relative to the learners potential. (SCALE, 2016, p. 54)

In this regard, we are optimistic that the edTPA promotes high expectations and a strength-based perspective of students, families, and communities.

Concomitantly, several terms in the handbook indicate a different perspective about the field. Previous handbooks have used the euphemism *exceptionality*¹, which was changed to “*disability*” in the 2016 handbook but kept the same definition for both terms: “Patterns of strengths and needs common to groups of learners who are significantly different from an established norm. These strengths and needs may be cognitive, emotional, behavioral, medical, social, and/or physical” (SCALE, 2016, p. 55). This definition of disability assumes that “normal” and “abnormal” binaries (Davis, 2006) are adequate to define who qualifies as a child with a disability or exceptionality, rather than accepting a social model perspective. This way of understanding disability promotes a deficit perspective of disability, despite the contradictory definition of deficit thinking that the handbook seeks to mitigate.

The edTPA handbooks have changed during revisions regarding nonacademic curriculum expectations for students with disabilities. Another change in the 2016 Handbook was the removal of the requirement that candidates identify secondary nonacademic curricular areas such as functional/adaptive skills or motor skills. This change may be in response to curricular divides assumed necessary between disabled and nondisabled students (Clough & Corbett, 2000). One nonacademic curricular expectation that remained throughout revisions was the requirement that self-determination be accounted for to receive high scores on 11/15 rubrics (Bacon & Blachman, 2016). The handbook cites the work by prominent scholars in the field of Special Education who have defined self-determination for students with disabilities (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998; Wehmeyer, 2002), and only the Special Education Handbook refers to these theories. DSE scholars have critiqued the constructs of self-determination because they are based on medical and normalized views of disability, the constructs are culturally biased, and that

emphasizing these skills often does not promote access to inclusive environments as they are commonly taught separately and then later generalized to real-world scenarios (Cowley & Bacon, 2013; Smith & Routel, 2010).

Fieldwork Concerns and Videotaping for edTPA

Another important theme revealed how the edTPA impacted students, families, and teachers in the field. In particular, our TCs questioned whether the evaluator would understand the diverse and urban contexts they were teaching in. TCs made comments such as “[the edTPAs] expectations are not realistic [because] a teachers job is so much more complicated in an urban setting” and “can the exam really account for all contexts, especially the Bronx?” Some examples of these concerns came to life in the experiences of TCs in the field. One TC described facing difficulty in obtaining permission slips, stating, “most parents refused to sign the consent form to record their children.” Another TC, who completed student teaching in an urban community, detailed that it was difficult to obtain permission slips because “many of the parents did not hold legal immigration status and felt intimidated when I showed up with permission slips for them to sign.” This TC was able to get eventual permission because he or she spoke Spanish and met with parents to assure them that the project would not impact immigration status.

Other TCs experienced issues with having videos in their classroom. Several TCs commented on the videos, stating, “My students . . . felt like they were being watched by the camera and would get nervous and not work to their full potential” and “students became agitated and distracted by the camera.” Another TC journaled about a circumstance that occurred in a pre-K inclusive classroom located at a public housing building. In this class, a 3-year-old student who was being evaluated as a child with a disability due to behavioral problems thought that the video camera was a monster. The presence of this video upset the student so much that he stabbed another student with a pencil. The TC had to diffuse the situation (all students were

OK), but the TC was unable to use that section of the video for submission. Another TC indicated that the requirements of the video posed problems related to the co-taught classroom he or she taught in, stating, "It was difficult to do the video without using the co-teacher in the co-taught classroom because the students did not know who to go to and what to do."

Discussion

TCs in this study were among the first to complete the edTPA in NYS amid constantly shifting state policy. The teacher preparation program that TCs were enrolled in had substantially revised its student teaching seminar curriculum and altered assessments for student teaching to support TCs through the edTPA process. The results of this study show that TCs felt that their student teaching experience had been greatly affected because of mandated participation in the edTPA.

TCs overwhelmingly noted benefits in learning aspects that connected directly to the requirements of the exam, but also lamented missing out on the opportunity to practice and be supported through the seminar on other key competencies that they had learned about in prior coursework, like UDL. Thus, we question whether the edTPA emphasizes and demands that TCs attend to the most important skills for competent educators to gain during student teaching. Perhaps as the exam continues to be more integrated into teacher preparation program curricula, teaching to the test may not be as apparent (Ledwell & Oyler, 2016). Nonetheless, Special Education TCs should be prepared to take on a range of roles in schools, and the planning, instructing, and assessing components of the job (that are the focus of the edTPA) are only one small piece of the larger puzzle (McCall et al., 2014).

One aspect of the exam that TCs questioned was the required attention to only one focus learner. This concern was exacerbated for TCs because all rubrics are scored solely based on the progress of one focus learner. To promote an inclusive mind-set to our TCs, we required TCs to plan lessons for the entire class, while considering individualized needs of the focus learner through a UDL approach

(which is surprisingly not mentioned in the edTPA despite being referred to in federal education policy as best practice; National Center on Universal Design for Learning, 2013). Nonetheless, TCs still shared that over-emphasis on one learner exacerbated their thinking about students with disabilities in an individualizing manner that does not promote their inclusion in the classroom.

As more states are adding the requirement for the edTPA to serve as a summative assessment required for state licensure, faculty and programs across the nation are likely to integrate the language and skills emphasized in the edTPA into curriculum throughout teacher preparation programs. Our TCs expressed their struggles with the particular language of the Special Education edTPA. Thus, we are concerned that the language and discourse privileged throughout exam will influence the field and will concretize segregating, medicalized, and deficit perspectives of disability. Our analysis of recent changes in the Special Education edTPA Handbook highlights ongoing tensions between various perspectives about the future of the field (Allan & Slee, 2008).

Finally, TCs expressed multiple concerns about how the requirements of the exam made their fieldwork challenging and missed the context of their diverse settings. TCs struggled to gain permission slips when families held immigration concerns and the videotaping increased instability in the classroom. Furthermore, TCs struggled with finding their place and role in a co-taught classroom during the completion of the edTPA. Of particular concern, the edTPA does not allow two teachers to use co-teaching best practices (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010) and instead requires the candidate to "take the lead in the work for edTPA" (NYSED, 2013, p. 18). In the SCALE (2015) report noting the challenges that are particular to the Special Education edTPA, they explain "placements of Special Education teachers often require collaboration with the general education teacher, which may further complicate planning and instruction" (p. 32). Thus, data from our study showed various challenges faced by TCs using the Special Education edTPA Handbook.

Conclusion

This study drew on pre-service TC surveys, journals, and secondary documents to understand the impact of the special education edTPA on the field of Special Education. From a DSE perspective, we question the existence of a separate exam for Special Educators. If the edTPA continues to be required for state certification, we recommend an integrated exam be created by age-level rather than maintain two separate exams. This would resolve our concerns about the potentiality of the exam to concretize deficit and individualizing notions of the field of Special Education and further the siloes between the fields. The General Education exam in Elementary Education, for example, already requires that the candidate plan for a focus learner in the context of the general education classroom. We believe this is positive because *all* TCs already have to consider students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) as they complete the edTPA.

Also, state certification requirements are an important factor toward determining the need for the continuation of the separate Special Education Handbook. For example, the first author now teaches in New Jersey, where the edTPA is newly required for certification. In New Jersey, the Special Education Certification (called Teacher of Students With Disabilities) is always a second certification; thus, no one in the state will use the Special Education Handbook because it is not his or her primary area of certification. Also, for dual certification programs, TCs have a choice of which edTPA handbook to use. Thus, from the practical consideration that some states will not at all use the Special Education handbook, and many programs may offer a choice to TCs, we question whether the maintenance of a separate exam is a worthy endeavor.

Several of our concerns have been raised by SCALE in the recent edTPA administrative report (SCALE, 2015); however, it does not appear that these inconsistencies are putting any pause on the implementation process. The struggles and evolution of the edTPA present an opportunity to confront the direction and discourses of the broader field of Special Education

that future TCs are inducted into. Our TCs engaged with the edTPA exam; many of their expressed concerns and struggles were reflective of contradictions between more traditional and DSE-oriented frameworks of the field. Thus, we believe that it is time to adopt a new lens for the field and call for teacher education assessments to keep up with what is best and just for all students.

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Note

1. See Baglieri and Shapiro (2012, pp. 45-47) for a useful critique of disability euphemisms, including "exceptional" common in the field.

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