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Ready or Not, Here We Go! Preparing for the Education Specialist Teaching Performance Assessment

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ABSTRACT

In the state of California, the Education Specialist Teaching Performance Assessment (EdSp TPAs) is the latest accountability measure to be required of aspiring education specialists. Existing literature has been overwhelmingly critical of the TPAs (Dover, 2022; Valdez et al., 2020). And now, in the dawn of the EdSp TPAs, there must be a candid conversation about preparing candidates sufficiently for the TPAs in order to avoid exacerbating the field that is struggling to recruit teachers. This article discusses three significant obstacles in preparing candidates for the assessment: challenges associated with identifying focus students, insufficient preparation among mentor teachers, and program timelines.

KEYWORDS

EdSp CalTPAs, teacher preparation, special education, high stake assessments

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In 2020, the Learning Policy Institute (LPI) published a report highlighting that while total student enrollment in California had declined about 1 percent from the 2014-15 to 2018-19 school years, the numbers of students identified with disabilities had increased by 13 percent (Ondrasek et al., 2020). The data presented by LPI demonstrates that there is an increased need for teachers to support students with disabilities. Not only that, but it is also hard to ignore the fact that even prior to the Covid pandemic, schools throughout the country were experiencing teacher shortages in certain areas, one being special education (Larios et al., 2022; Peyton et al., 2021; Rosenberg & Anderson, 2021).

Although the state of California offers teacher candidates multiple pathways to earn a special education teaching credential, attaining one is not an easy endeavor. Prospective teachers are required to complete a series of examinations prior to being fully admitted into a credential program. The exams associated with the admission requirements create a major obstacle for teacher candidates and teacher preparation programs (Ondrasek et al., 2020), especially for prospective teachers from minoritized communities (Dover, 2022; Petchauer et al., 2018). The data presented by Ondrasek et al. (2020) regarding California's special education teacher shortage is alarming. In the dawn of yet another requirement for prospective special education teachers, the teacher performance assessments (TPAs), teacher educators and districts are once again being tasked with shifting away from preparing teacher candidates for an authentic student teaching experience to one that focuses on preparing teacher candidates to pass an additional assessment hurdle. In the following sections, we provide a brief history of the TPAs. We describe the two most common pathways for credentialing in the state of California. Next, we look at the current mentorship structure along with the potential challenges associated with the TPAs. Lastly, we discuss potential tensions for teacher preparation programs as the California Commission on Teacher Credential (CTC) rolls out the TPAs.

History of the TPAs

Past and present policies on teacher instruction and accountability not only affect teachers but impact students and teacher candidates. While Connecticut was the first state that developed and created the Teacher Performance Assessment (TPA) in 1986, California became the first state to require the TPA as a component of multiple and single subject credentialing in 1998 (Gurl et al., 2016). As of 2008, the TPAs have been systematically used in California's credentialing system, which was first the Performance Assessment for California Teachers (PACT). Afterwards, the Fresno Assessment of Student Teachers (FAST) was developed and then updated as the CalTPA. Since the Teacher Performance Expectations (TPEs) were updated in 2016, there have been redevelopments of the TPAs for general education, including the EdTPA (which replaced PACT) and the CalTPA (which transformed from FAST; Ervin-Kassab et al., 2021).

Major concerns are associated with the high stakes state-mandated TPAs. Along with numerous requirements teacher candidates need to meet, the TPA adds additional stress for the teacher candidates (Valdez et al., 2020). Teacher educators and teacher candidates perceive this standardized assessment as dehumanizing and degrading, especially as teacher preparation programs prepare teacher candidates to be social justice agents and advocate for their students. The high stakes TPA brings about doubt, undermining the joy the teacher candidates envision working in classrooms (Dover, 2022; Valdez et al., 2020). Moreover, teacher candidates are forced to shift their attention from meeting the needs of diverse students to focusing on meeting requirements of the standardized TPA, leaving teacher candidates defeated and questioning whether they should continue their path to becoming an educator (Valdez et al., 2020). Dover (2022) reported that teacher candidates felt they had not learned anything completing the TPA.

Another concern regarding the TPA is the deficit-based language within the assessment that is associated with focus students in Cycle 1. In particular, when valuing students' assets and bilingualism, alternative terms should be considered instead of "English learners," such as "multilingual" and/or "plurilingual" students (Ervin-Kassab et al., 2021). In addition, causal assumptions are associated with focus students further perpetuating deficit thinking. For example, deficit thinking is illustrated not only in labeling students and disregarding their assets, but also by

positioning students' academic needs as deficiencies resulting from home or life circumstances, culture, and/or personal characteristics. If teacher preparation programs aim to prepare teacher candidates to value just, equitable, inclusive and anti-racist education, the TPA contradicts such values, especially as teacher candidates and teacher educators have voiced these concerns (Dover, 2022; Ervin-Kassab et al., 2021; Valdez et al., 2020).

Common Certification Pathways

Due to the demand and growing need for teachers, the state of California offers multiple pathways for individuals to earn a credential. To provide context to the complexities associated with preparing teachers who have the option of multiple pathways, we discuss traditional and alternative pathways to attaining licensure to be a special education teacher. The options described in the following sections demonstrate a few of the major considerations that teacher preparation programs must keep in mind when planning and implementing fieldwork, coursework assignments, and the distribution of the TPA cycles.

Traditional Programs

The most common way to attain a special education teaching credential in the state of California continues to be through a traditional pathway, usually consisting of courses in theory, methods, and fieldwork. In the state of California, individuals interested in earning an education specialist credential through a traditional pathway apply to the program after earning a four year degree. Although traditional pathways are the most common, they are often inaccessible to people from minoritized communities because of factors such as time and the costs associated with program completion. As a result, there is a greater number of minoritized teacher candidates who enter the profession through alternative pathways.

Alternative Pathways

Individuals who participate in an alternative pathway to earn their credential are also known as interns. They are hired as the teacher of record while concurrently completing their teacher preparation coursework (CTC, 2022). Interns are provided guidance and supervision by the university where they are completing their program and the employing school district. Specifically, the district provides ongoing professional learning opportunities and an on-site mentor. The university provides direct support from a clinical coach during their fieldwork experience along with indirect support through their coursework (Larios et al., 2022).

In the state of California, during the 2020-21 school year, the number of credentials issued to individuals participating in an intern program for education specialists increased by 98.1 percent (CTC, 2022). Individuals seeking university intern credentials compared to those seeking intern credentials through a district/county, increased by 13.8 percent during the 2020-21 school year. Although alternative pathways grant aspiring teachers the opportunity to gain experience and get paid while working towards their credential, researchers have found that the demands on interns created unique challenges. Larios et al. (2022) found that first-year interns struggled with juggling school and work. One participant in their study opted to reduce their course load in order to be successful. Carver-Thomas (2018) noted that alternatively certified teachers are 25% more likely to leave the field when compared to their colleagues who received credentials through traditional

teacher preparation programs. Regardless of the pathway that an aspiring teacher has chosen, mentorship is an instrumental component of their training.

Mentorship for Teacher Candidates

Throughout the course of any program, there are various opportunities for a teacher candidate to gain first-hand experiences working in a classroom. A program milestone known as clinical fieldwork allows support providers to work with teacher candidates in various capacities. Teacher candidates should receive support from both a mentor teacher and clinical coach. The amount of support, however, varies based on multiple factors.

Mentor Teachers

Mentor teachers play a critical role in the learning and experiences of teacher candidates. A mentor teacher is a practicing teacher in whose classroom a teacher candidate is placed to engage in clinical practice teaching experiences. This pairing is crucial for the teacher candidate since they spend a substantial amount of time collaborating with their mentor teacher to engage in teaching practice (McGee, 2019). The resources, practical experience, and expertise in melding knowledge and practice make practicing teachers ideal mentors for teacher candidates. In ideal pairings, mentors support teacher candidates' ability to synthesize all that has been learned across a multitude of aspects of teaching including academic instruction, assessment strategies, classroom management, etc.

Mentor teachers are hired via formal agreements between universities and school districts, and teacher preparation programs must adhere to state guidelines when hiring mentor teachers. For example, the state of California requires teacher preparation programs provide mentor teachers with “a minimum of 10 hours of initial orientation to the program curriculum, about effective supervision approaches such as cognitive coaching, adult learning theory, and current content-specific pedagogy and instructional practices” (CTC, n.d., p.12). Additionally, teacher preparation programs must ensure that mentor teachers remain current in their knowledge and skills related to teacher candidate supervision and program expectations. In California, intern teachers are assigned a district-assigned support provider, not a university-assigned mentor. The amount of support provided to the alternatively certified teacher varies greatly from school to school and district to district (Larios et al., 2022) and has been found to inform teacher retention for that subset of teachers (Zhang & Zeller, 2016). The university preparation program may have minimal interaction with the support provider.

Clinical Coaches

Another significant person who impacts the teacher candidate's development is the clinical coach with whom they are paired. Clinical coaches are employed by the teacher preparation program and have expertise in the area in which the teacher candidate is pursuing a credential. A primary responsibility of clinical coaches is to observe the teaching of the teacher candidate and give feedback. The work of clinical coaches is often relegated to new faculty, graduate students, adjunct faculty, and/or retired teachers with little guidance offered by more senior teacher preparation faculty (Burns et al., 2016). As with mentor teachers, teacher preparation programs must follow state guidelines pertaining to clinical coaches. The state of California requires clinical coaches to

be credentialed or have equivalent experience in educator preparation. Clinical coaches must also be experts in the instructional area of the teacher candidate being supervised and have, “recent experience in school settings where the curriculum aligns with California’s adopted content standards and frameworks and the school reflects the diversity of California’s student population” (CCTC, n.d., p.11). Teacher preparation programs must provide clinical coaches with information about the program’s expectations and ensure they are knowledgeable about program curricula and assessments, including the TPA.

Current Program Expectations for Clinical Coaches and Mentor Teachers and Areas Related to the CalTPAs

Collaborative relationships between teacher preparation programs and school districts result in a multitude of positive outcomes; however, we must consider a crucial question: do effective classroom teachers always make strong mentors for preservice teachers? This question is crucial because teacher candidates often feel better prepared to teach when they have had strong mentorship during their clinical practices (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). The importance of this teacher candidate/mentor teacher experience is magnified when we factor in CalTPAs because lack of mentor teacher knowledge about CalTPAs can have a negative impact on the teacher candidates’ perceptions of how well-prepared they are for the assessments (Clayton, 2018). For special education, in particular, another challenge arises when we consider teacher candidates placed in single subject classes. For example, there will be teacher candidates placed in secondary math classrooms who need a scenario in which they can conduct ELA lesson(s) for the assessment. In these situations, the mentor teachers will be tasked with assisting the teacher candidate in making these arrangements. Additionally, it is likely that the mentor teacher will not have content knowledge outside of their area. If the mentor teacher is not able to support the teacher candidate in a content area, this may negatively impact the teacher candidate’s preparedness for the assessment.

The same challenge arises when we consider clinical coaches. Although these individuals possess vast knowledge of teaching practices, the supervision in which they engage with the teacher candidate is often impacted by strength of personality, interpersonal relationships, and their own experiences rather than by a shared mission and knowledge base (Burns & Badiali, 2015). Burns and Badiali’s qualitative study found that while university faculty have been making curricular and programmatic changes to prepare students for the CalTPAs, less attention has been paid to ensuring those who work so closely with our teacher candidates, the mentor teachers and clinical coaches, are knowledgeable about the assessments. With this initial introduction of CalTPAs, teacher candidates will likely experience what has been reported by other teacher candidates in states where CalTPAs are already in place (see Dover, 2022): time that would otherwise be spent learning to teach will now be lost to time spent on the teacher candidates explaining the CalTPAs to the mentor teachers and clinical coaches.

Lessons From the Multiple and Single Subject CalTPAs

Mentor teachers are equipped with various levels of experience, including a number of years in the classroom. An important note is that in special education, there are fewer special education teachers at any given site, which means it is harder to identify potential mentor teachers. However, since the CalTPAs have been redeveloped over time (Ervin-Kassab et al., 2021), some mentor

teachers may have different knowledge and recollections about the CalTPAs. Regardless, a large number of teacher candidates report their mentor teacher has little knowledge about the TPAs, which causes confusion for both the teacher candidate and the mentor teacher (Kriewaldt et al., 2021; Margolis & Doring, 2013).

Although mentor teachers are supportive in general, unfortunately, there is some confusion when it comes to the CalTPAs. More specifically, some mentor teachers are not familiar with particular terminology used within the CalTPAs; thus, leading to their limited support provided for teacher candidates (Kriewaldt et al., 2021). In addition, teacher candidates' attention shifts from their mentor teachers' instruction. Particularly, Buchanan et al. (2020) noted teacher candidates' concerns with lack of authenticity in teaching when more focus and stress was on meeting the CalTPA requirements rather than focusing on learning from their mentor teachers' teaching.

Due to the varying levels of mentor teachers' knowledge of the CalTPAs, coupled with the support teacher candidates need to successfully complete and pass the CalTPAs, it is clear that mentor teachers' needs require attention. It is essential that mentor teachers are supported, especially when they play an important role in teacher candidates' success in teaching and completion of the CalTPAs. One way to support mentor teachers is to provide clarification in their roles, responsibilities, and expectations when it comes to supporting their teacher candidate. This support can be provided through ongoing training. Margolis and Doring (2013) reported one meeting alone did not suffice for mentor teachers to fully understand and receive clarification regarding expectations and their roles in how to provide CalTPA support for teacher candidates. Thus, these multiple trainings should cover basic information about the CalTPA, including the content, requirements, and guidelines for how to support their teacher candidates throughout Cycle 1 and Cycle 2. Moreover, mentor teachers should be provided an opportunity to ask any CalTPA-related questions and discuss concerns, including how to support their teacher candidate. In addition to training, another way to support mentor teachers is providing them with access to resources, including the CalTPA Assessment Guides, to further familiarize themselves with the terminology and requirements of the CalTPA cycles. If mentor teachers were provided with multiple trainings, access to resources, and opportunities to clarify questions regarding their role and expectations, they would be better prepared to support their teacher candidates with the TPA.

Moving Forward With the EdSp CalTPA for MMSN and ESN Candidates

Typically, teacher candidates who enroll in a teacher preparation program plan to complete coursework to be credentialed to work with a specific population. Some programs, however, have begun to offer dual credential programs combining coursework from various areas to ensure teacher candidates are able to work with a wide range of students upon completion of the program. In that case, CTC has recommended that teacher candidates complete the EdSp CalTPA for the area they would like to teach full time. To date, the EdSp CalTPAs have been approved for mild to moderate support needs (MMSN) and extensive support needs (ESN), formerly known as moderate to severe. As a result, before a teacher candidate registers to take the EdSp CalTPAs, they must decide for which area they would like to complete both cycles of the performance assessment. While the MMSN and ESN TPAs are similar and heavily informed by the multiple subject TPAs, there are differences.

A key distinction between the multiple subject TPAs and education specialist TPAs is that the three focus students for education specialists must have an IEP. For both the MMSN and the

ESN EdSp CalTPAs, specifically, focus students must meet the following criteria: focus student 1 should be an English learner, focus student 2 is a student who has received and/or is receiving related services, and focus student 3 should have life experience(s) either inside or outside of school that creates a need for additional academic, emotional, or behavioral support(s) (CTC, 2022). While processes for categorizing students are not necessarily inherently harmful when occurring via intentionally constructed and fixed identities and values, individuals, and in this case students, are positioned as inferior or superior (Szelei, 2021). This positioning perpetuates deficit thinking among our teacher candidates. Also problematic is that focus student 3 must have a behavioral or social emotional need or have experienced trauma (CTC, 2022). The experience of trauma is not defined by CTC, but in the detailed description of the acceptable criteria, trauma is listed as a descriptor. Mentor teachers may know students' histories well enough to be able to identify a student who has experienced trauma. However, it is not possible to predict what may be upsetting or retraumatizing to those who have experienced trauma (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). A great deal of care and intention must be utilized when engaging with students who have experienced trauma (Thomas et al., 2019), and it is conceivable that in cases where this is not known, teachers run the risk of inadvertently retraumatizing students when attempting to identify a student who fits this category.

Student Confidentiality

When looking at the CalTPAs in relation to special education, an important factor to consider is how teacher candidates identify the three focus students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) to successfully complete the first cycle of the CalTPAs. Students who qualify for special education have an IEP, which means they are protected under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Specifically, Parts B and C of the IDEA and FERPA, require the protection of privacy of student education records (Surprenant & Miller, 2022). Under these acts, schools must have written permission from the parent or eligible student in order to release any information from a student's education record, with some exceptions. One exception that warrants further unpacking when considering the CalTPAs is the ability for schools to disclose records without consent to school officials with record legitimate educational interest.

According to the United States Department of Education (n.d), a school official includes a teacher, school principal, president, chancellor, board member, trustee, registrar, counselor, admissions officer, attorney, accountant, human resource professional, information systems specialist, and support or clerical personnel. Since teacher candidates are not always technically the teacher of record, or in many cases, not an employee of the school, the privacy of student education records can come into question when considering if teacher candidates are authorized to access the IEPs for the three students. Another challenge related to student confidentiality is filming of students when parents/caregivers demonstrate a reluctance to allow their child to be video-recorded for the assessment. One way around this is to ask teacher candidates to only film the back of students, but then, teacher candidates must review their video clips to ensure student faces are not visible in the footage. This requirement, inadvertently not only assesses an individuals' digital literacy skills, but it requires the teacher preparation program to devise a support structure for teacher candidates so they are able to successfully record, annotate, and ensure that students' confidentiality is not breached.

Program Timelines and TPA Timelines

Since there are two cycles of EdSP CalTPAs, teacher candidates would ideally complete them over the course of two semesters. Doing so allows ample time for the teacher candidate to prepare for the assessment and also allows time to retake the assessment if necessary. In some teacher preparation programs, teacher candidates complete field experience/clinical practice with one of two semesters in a general education setting. In this instance, the teacher candidate would not be able to complete a cycle in a general education setting as many general education settings do not have three students with IEPs.

Remediation and Credential Delay

At the beginning of each semester, there are established timelines and strongly recommended submission dates for the CalTPA. However, ultimately, it is the teacher candidates' responsibility and decision to submit their Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 of the CalTPA. Teacher candidates are also aware that the CTC provides multiple submission dates. For the majority of teacher candidates, there are many factors that impact their ability to submit the CalTPA according to the program's recommended due date. In addition to other program requirements, including coursework, fieldwork, and student teaching, many teacher candidates work and have family responsibilities.

There are two specific consequential actions if teacher candidates do not pass the CalTPAs. More specifically, they undergo remediation, and there is a delay of receiving their Preliminary Teaching Credential. The current remediation plan involves the CalTPA Coordinator providing individualized support to the teacher candidate to successfully resubmit and pass the CalTPA. Upon sharing the score report and all submission materials with the CalTPA Coordinator, the coordinator and the teacher candidate will review their original submission with a specific support rubric designed with suggestions based on the received score. After the teacher candidate reviews their work with the support rubric, the CalTPA Coordinator and teacher candidate meet to discuss the plan of action for resubmission, including the areas that need to be revised and a timeline for resubmission.

In addition to the remediation plan upon not passing the CalTPA, the teacher candidate is faced with a delay of applying for and receiving their preliminary teaching credential. This, in turn, causes additional stressors, such as meeting program requirements and other necessary assessments (RICA, CSET, CBEST). A preliminary teaching credential is necessary for eligibility to apply and interview for jobs. Thus, not passing the TPAs may result in delaying the preliminary credential, which will then delay applying for jobs and being considered as a potential teacher candidate in the workforce.

Recommendation Highlights for Special Education Teacher Preparation Programs

With one cycle of the CalTPAs under our proverbial belt, we put forth recommendations to ensure special education teacher preparation programs and faculty therein are sufficiently prepared to support teacher candidates in their quest to pass the CalTPAs.

- Faculty leading and coordinating TPAs should consult and collaborate with general education credential programs, who have successful experience with TPAs, for ideas related to instructional content and processes.

- Open communication and collaboration among all faculty in a department or program should be fostered to establish a sense of shared responsibility for the success of all students in passing the TPAs. TPA content and processes should be interwoven throughout programs rather than an emphasis in one class or a small subset of classes. Additionally, special education teacher preparation faculty should work together to establish clear expectations that distinguish the role of TPA coordinator vs. TPA content instruction.
- All faculty should be encouraged to participate in TPA workshops and training.
- TPA Coordinators should schedule orientations with mentor teachers and clinical coaches to support and answer questions regarding expectations (e.g., content, how to support teacher candidates, acceptable/unacceptable support, etc.). Since mentor teachers have expressed confusion regarding their role in supporting teacher candidates with the TPA (Margolis & Doring, 2013), participation in training/orientations would benefit mentor teachers, clinical coaches, and teacher candidates. Furthermore, targeted TPA training would offer clear expectations, roles, support, and responsibilities of all involved, especially mentor teachers.
- All programs should discuss and agree upon a policy for expected support, submission and pass expectations during the program, remediation plan, etc. The required protocol should then be clearly stated in the program handbook and communicated to the teacher candidates. This way, teacher candidates are well-informed and aware of requirements.

Recommendation Highlights for California Commission on Teacher Credentialing

We also have recommendations that are beyond our control at the university level, but that we feel are crucial in supporting the validity of the TPAs related to assessing teacher candidates' skills and abilities.

- Differentiate the EdSp CalTPA from the CalTPA considering the differences in characteristics between students with disabilities and those without. For example, an item in Cycle 2 requires students to self-assess. For students without disabilities, self-assessing is a relatively straightforward skill and concept. However, self-assessment for students with extensive support needs is quite challenging. Likewise, requirements surrounding communication between teacher candidates and the students should be carefully considered with an understanding of the differences in modes of communication utilized by students with extensive support needs.
- There are specific terminologies related to assessment used in different contexts and programs. Particularly in special education, a portion of Step 1 of Cycle 2: Plan in the assessment guide should be dedicated to define and distinguish what is meant by formal and informal assessments. Furthermore, this differentiation between formal and informal assessments should also be noted in the glossary of the assessment guide. Traditionally, in special education formal assessment refers to norm-referenced assessments students are given during initial and triennials to determine eligibility for special education services. Informal assessments are usually described as additional evidence to support goal progress and the formal assessment data.

In conclusion, while the TPAs are intended to be a holistic measure to assess teacher candidates' ability to teach students, the dangers they pose to the field that is continuously grappling with a teacher shortage is disturbing. Advocates, teacher educators, and policy makers need to reconsider

high stakes testing and do what is best for teacher candidates and their future students. If the field feels that the TPAs are the best way to measure a candidate's performance and ability to teach, then other assessments, such as the CSET and RICA, should be removed. CTC has announced that the RICA will be absorbed into the TPAs; if that is the case, then programs need ample time to prepare and candidates should not be penalized.

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