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## **The Implementation of edTPA in Special Education Teacher Training Programs: Putting Teacher Development Over Passing Scores**

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*Since edTPA's nationwide availability in 2013, it has been adopted by almost 900 education preparation programs in over 40 states. A few states, including the authors', have required a passing score for teacher licensure. While the edTPA has been heralded as a means to improve teacher education programs and the teachers those programs produce, it has also faced criticism for detracting from programs' ability to train its students, as well as the student teachers' experiences during their preparation in general, and student teaching in particular. The field of special education shares the implementation challenges faced by other areas of teacher licensure, but the unique nature of IEP delivery across various points on the continuum of placements, the frequent mismatch between student teaching placements and environments conducive to high edTPA scores, and the requirement for passing scores in this era of special education teacher shortages have all placed additional stresses on training programs. When the authors' state was an early adopter of a cutoff score for licensure, its training program focused overtly and extensively on helping its students achieve passing scores, arguably at the expense of career preparation. More recently, it found ways to return teacher development to the fore while still maintaining a high edTPA pass rate for its students, thereby helping them get past the hurdle of licensure while being properly prepared for their careers.*

For decades, teacher preparation programs across the country have had common characteristics such as requisite general education preparation, subject-specific training, methods courses, practicum experiences, and a capstone student teaching experience (Kilpatrick, 2016). Programs within a state must address state-specific requirements for licensure but have the academic freedom to stress or de-emphasize certain pedagogical approaches or other facets of the enterprise of teaching based on the background, training, or expertise of its faculty. Arguably, this level of autonomy has been impacted by the rapid and widespread adoption of the Teacher Performance Assessment known as the edTPA, particularly in states that require a certain score on the edTPA as a condition for licensure (Olson & Rao, 2017). Indeed, opponents of the edTPA “have cited concerns about the corporatization of education [and the] over-regulation/standardization of teacher education” (Hanley-Maxwell & Wycoff-Horn, 2017, p. 260). Nevertheless, as of this writing, over 40 states have rules requiring a performance

assessment--with the edTPA being an approved instrument, and it is being used by more than 900 teacher preparation programs (edTPA, n.d.).

### **The Use of edTPA in Teacher Preparation Programs**

The edTPA was designed by the Stanford Center for Learning, Assessment, and Equity (SCALE) and is “intended to be a capstone, summative assessment that contributes to a multiple measures assessment system already required by states” (Whittaker, Pechone, & Stansbury, 2018, p. 3). Subject-specific handbooks were developed by SCALE for 27 of the fields within teaching. The edTPA requires the planning of a 3-5 day learning segment, the recording of a portion of at least one learning segment, submission of related artifacts, and a self-critique by the teacher candidate regarding planning, instruction, and assessment (Olson & Rao, 2017). The results are externally scored by Pearson using 15 rubrics that rate the teacher candidate in those three areas. Each adopting state determines its own method of implementation and, if applicable, sets its own cut scores for licensure (edTPA, n.d).

### **Early Research About the Implementation of edTPA**

Since the declaration by SCALE in 2013 that edTPA was “fully operational and ready for use around the country” (edTPA, n.d), it has been researched on several fronts, including its validity as an assessment of a teacher-candidates’ readiness (Lalley, 2017; Parkes & Powell, 2015) and teacher candidates’ experiences with it (Meuwissen, Choppin, Shang-Butler, & Cloonan, 2015). Research about the implementation efforts of Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) and Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) is limited (DeVoto 2016) and largely focuses on a college or university’s entire EPP. Examples include studies by De Voto (2016), Fayne and Qian (2016), and Miller, Carroll, Jancic, and Markworth (2015). As perhaps could be expected, “varying perspectives and responses to edTPA [exist, ranging] from resistance and advocacy, to thoughtful reflection and programmatic changes to best prepare teacher candidates for success” (Olson & Rao, 2017, p. 377). The dearth of guidance in the literature *for* the field of special education training programs needing to implement the edTPA, however, is troubling and has been compounded by concern *from* the special education EPPs regarding the implementation of the edTPA. Despite Rosenberg’s and Walther-Thomas’ (2014) assertion that the progression of special education preparatory programs was “energetic” (p. 79), other researchers have noted that:

compared with other teacher fields, the special education edTPA has presented unique challenges. There have been multiple handbook editions, there is a lack of data and feedback provided to teacher candidates and performance, [and] there are questions about the extent to which the assessment content and skills represent what makes new teachers ‘ready for the job’...that have created an unstable, sand-like state of affairs (Bartlett, Otis-Wilborn, & Peters, 2017, p. 288, 293).

### **Concerns Specific to Special Education**

Concerns about the use of the edTPA in special education are many. Some of the concerns are shared with other domains of teaching, e.g. decisions about how and when to educate teacher

candidates about its nomenclature, time commitment (of faculty and its students), and the cost to students (Othman, Robinson, & Molfenter, 2017), but the use of an edTPA in special education EPP poses unique issues. One such challenge is the potential mismatch between the edTPA's approach to measuring planning, instruction, and assessment vs. the complexities of K-12 special education service delivery and EPPs' approaches for delivery, an example of which is provided by Kuranishi and Oyler (2017). Adam Kuranishi completed a yearlong, co-teaching internship. "Although [he] did exceptionally well in all of his courses and received extremely positive reviews on all program assessments, including 12 clinical teaching observations and four formal three-way evaluations [with his field supervisor and mentor teacher]" (p. 299), he failed the edTPA. This failure prevented Adam from licensure since it occurred in New York, which requires a passing edTPA score. Kuranishi and Oyler postulate it may have been in the very act of fulfilling his program's expectations regarding pedagogy (e.g. Universal Design for Learning), cultural responsiveness, commitment to meeting the needs of a diverse range of learners, and even delivering instruction in inclusive settings that resulted in the low edTPA scores due to the mismatch between those traits and the "particular pedagogical practices the Pearson-authorized scorer has been 'calibrated' to reward" (p. 301).

A second challenge has been the confusion caused by three revisions to the edTPA special education handbook (Bartlett et al., 2017), more than any other area (edTPA, n.d.). If a special education EPP revised its program with a passing edTPA score as the ultimate goal for its students, then it and its students have faced a moving target. Changes have been made to the handbook regarding the number of focus learners as well as the number and nature of the learning targets. These changes require EPPs to revamp and potentially resequence curricula or courses, and, at least for certain cohorts of future teachers, complete a different requirement during student teaching than they had prepared and practiced for during their coursework and practicum placements. Even for programs who embedded edTPA instead of making it a primary emphasis, revisions needed to be made.

A third concern about the implementation of edTPA in special education EPPs is the 3-5 lesson unit. As a matter of law, the specially designed instruction a special education teacher provides could occur anywhere along the continuum of placement options with students whose disabilities could range from mild to significant. While the edTPA *Making Good Choices* (2018) resource states that the amount of content in a learning segment should account for "the capacity of your students to learn within the allotted time" (p. 11), many student teachers in special education EPPs have expressed concerns that "their placement may not provide a sufficient opportunity for them to showcase their competence in the learning of their focus learner in 3-5 lessons...[particularly when the] focus learners have severe challenges and require more time to show maintenance and generalizability of skills" (Othman et al, 2017, p. 274-275). If a student teacher's placement is in a self-contained setting of students with, for example, profound autism, is it a realistic expectation that, in a three-lesson unit, the student with autism will be able to acquire, generalize, and maintain a newly-taught skill from a practicing teacher who is just learning the profession, while also being provided in those lessons opportunities for self-determination and self-assessment? Given the possibility that not all placements may be conducive to optimal edTPA scores, does the EPP structure its program so that completion of the edTPA occurs in the practicum or placement site most likely to produce optimal results, even if it means its graduates may not be prepared for more challenging caseloads?

Pragmatic concerns such as the availability and nature of student teaching placements and clamors from K-12 districts in low-income, rural, and urban areas regarding teacher shortages, raise additional implementation issues for special education EPPs. Dohrer (2016) noted that “the quality of a candidate assessment can be affected by school context [and] support by teachers and administrators” (p. 2-3), factors that can be particularly acute for special education, where caseload size, resources, and building culture and practices can dramatically impact a teacher candidate’s ability to demonstrate the dispositions sought by edTPA. The Illinois Council for edTPA Rule Change (2015) stated that “student teaching occurs in a wide variety of contexts which cannot always provide a consistent or supportive environment for a high-stakes assessment like the edTPA” (p. 2). Finally, Othman, et al. (2017) expressed concern that “in special education, factors related to school and district philosophy of inclusion, application of standards-based instruction and curricular decisions, and classroom and cooperating teacher assignment heavily influence teacher candidate completion of the edTPA” (p. 273). A special education EPP thus faces a decision when implementing the edTPA: does it revamp its placement criteria for student teaching and risk alienating nearby local districts on whom it depends for practicum and placement experiences, have students complete the edTPA prior to student teaching (e.g. see Muth, Kremer, Keiper, Schnake, & MacCudden [2018]), or take some other approach in order to provide its students the best opportunity to maximize their edTPA scores?

Given that a student teaching placement for one or more of the above reasons could cause, as Adam Kuranishi can attest, a failing edTPA score, and given that the number of available placements is limited, an EPP is potentially faced with an ethical dilemma unique to or at least predominantly found in special education. Does it direct its Teacher Candidates [TC]’s to create, within their placement, manufactured teaching situations in order to meet edTPA expectations, even if doing so causes a deviation from the IEP or from the school’s or district’s practices? Othman et al. (2017) suggest there may be a need to “examine the extent to which the edTPA rubrics and prompts can capture the diverse, versatile, and unique nature of special education services” (p. 274) due to concerns such as this, but how do special education EPPs implement edTPA for its current students who face this dilemma?

A final area in which implementing edTPA causes unique challenges for special education EPPs is the shortage of highly qualified special education teachers. The University of [masked] System, of which the authors are a part, is guided by “The [masked] Idea”, which signifies “commitment to public service” (Board of Regents, 2019). An example of public service for an EPP is preparing teachers in areas of need. The shortage of special educators, nationally and in [masked], has been chronic and severe. Samuels and Harwin (2018) analyzed national data and determined that there has been a 17% decrease in special education teachers since 2008, while the special education population decreased only 1%. In [masked], approximately 60% of licensures from alternative programs during the 2012-16 time period were in cross-categorical special education (Goff, Carl, & Yang, 2018), and the number of emergency licenses issued to teach early childhood or cross-categorical special education increased 180% from 2012-13 to 2017-18 (DeGuire, 2019).

### **Additional Challenges to edTPA in Teacher Preparation Programs**

Another area of need in addition to a shortage of special education teachers is the “longstanding challenges [of] attracting teachers to urban and rural areas” (Goff, Carl, and Yang, 2018, p. 27). A June 2019 newspaper article by Johnson and Litke in the [masked] describes a “mass exodus” of teachers from [masked] Public schools that results in “a hodgepodge system in which students are taught by teachers on emergency licenses, or teachers’ aides and subs”, a problem to which the edTPA may be contributing because “new teacher licensing exams [the Foundations of Reading Test and the edTPA], may restrict an already narrow supply of teachers” (Goff et al., 2018, p. 27). A special education EPP serving the public in [masked], in which a passing edTPA score is required for licensure, faces at least two difficult questions regarding edTPA implementation in an effort to serve: does it emphasize passage of the edTPA strongly and explicitly in its curriculum and programming in order to produce as many licensed teachers as possible (in contrast to a more embedded approach), and does it intentionally minimize student teaching placements in low-performing schools--often found in the urban and rural areas it is trying to assist--because, as contended by graduate students and the University of Illinois-Chicago during their edTPA boycott--“The edTPA discourages candidates from performing the assessment in high-needs schools, where challenging classrooms may reflect poorly on a student’s score” (Olson & Rao, 2017, p. 392), even though doing so would leave them unprepared to work in those same schools?

These concerns suggest the need for caution in edTPA’s implementation. SCALE (2014), regarding edTPA’s use in all teacher preparation programs, acknowledged that “teacher preparation programs need time to...create an organizational infrastructure to ensure effective implementation of the edTPA” (p. 1). Further, implementation of the edTPA comes at a financial and programmatic price for the EPP and its students. Rosenberg and Walther-Thomas (2014) assert that IHE’s must receive the necessary funding and that its faculty be trained and ready to “ensure that teacher preparation candidates are prepared to meet the edTPA requirement” (p. 81). Public IHEs in [masked] were arguably provided neither the time nor the money as the state was an early adopter of the edTPA at a time when funding for the [masked] System was cut (Hanley-Maxwell & Wycoff-Horn, 2017). [masked] required simple completion starting in the fall of 2015 and passing scores by fall of 2016. Given this edTPA mandate, implementation needed to occur at the authors’ institution, despite the aforementioned concerns regarding the edTPA generally and the specific issues applicable to special education.

### **Review of Research of the use of edTPA in Special Education Teacher Preparation**

As a framework for discussing how the authors implemented edTPA, we will use one of the few studies that specifically examined edTPA in special education EPP. Bartlett, Otis-Wilborn, and Peters (2017) identified three IHEs in states where the edTPA was required for licensure in special education and “elicited and documented perceptions of teacher educators as they appropriated edTPA policy in their programs” (p. 289). Data analysis identified three approaches to implementation: embedding, co-opting, and reifying.

### **Approaches to Implementation**

Bartlett et al. (2017) summarized the embedding efforts of the three departments: “Across institutions, teacher educators engaged in curriculum mapping activities that purposefully matched edTPA course and teaching experiences” (p. 291). While some of the professors found natural opportunities to embed edTPA content in their courses in an effort to familiarize students with its language and key tenets, over time, edTPA’s “creeping power” (p. 291) resulted in tangible and substantive changes to curricula, syllabi, content and ultimately the professors’ teaching.

Arguably, trying to embed edTPA into EPPs ongoing practices proved insufficient, as preparing students for the edTPA requirement meant explicit changes needed to be made to process and policy. While these changes were made in the interests of preparing students, it altered the autonomy and long-standing practices within the special education EPP. Bartlett et al. (2017) describe this reshaping of content and programming “co-opting” (p. 291) and provide the example of the lesson planning process. One institution changed its lesson plan templates to address what the edTPA deemed important even when edTPA’s “focus on one learner did not fit well with planning for inclusion, a major emphasis of their program” (p. 291). As co-opting continued, entire courses were changed and original content and areas of emphasis such as differentiations and the use of culturally sensitive practices were lost. When even those measures were not enough to prepare students, EPPs added courses or workshops to prepare their students. For some, their expertise in the field of special education seemed to become subordinate to the measures needed to prepare students for the edTPA.

### **The Incommodious Challenge of Incorporating edTPA’s Requirements**

For all three institutions, Bartlett et al. (2017) report, the alignment of course syllabi and content with edTPA tasks and rubrics ultimately became a requirement in an effort to so-familiarize students with the edTPA that meeting its expectations would become second-nature by the time it actually had to be written. Unfortunately, such proficiency with the edTPA was not universal, and, when EPPs sought to provide struggling students with more assistance, their efforts were hampered by the limited support they are allowed by edTPA to give and the limited feedback provided by Pearson.

The interviews conducted by Bartlett et al. (2017) suggest a level of frustration among teacher educators due to the loss of time, lost control of content, and the reduced ability to apply their expertise toward the benefit of their students. This frustration is not merely professional dissatisfaction from academics; their concerns are also for and shared by their students since both the teacher educators and the teacher candidates had little choice but to “focus on the edTPA as it was directly related to teacher education students’ access to the profession” (p. 294).

In sum, Bartlett et al. (2017) describe the “disruptive and disempowering impact” (p. 296) of implementing edTPA in special education EPP and suggest steps to make the process more democratic. Until such steps are taken, teacher educators and their institutions must ameliorate the negative aspects of the edTPA to avoid outcomes like Adam Kuranishi’s, the need or at least

the temptation to cherry-pick student teaching placements or create artificial lessons that put the needs of the student teacher above the child and retain the ability of the IHE and EPP to serve society. The authors of this article, while not having a panacea, developed an approach to edTPA implementation that may help other EPPs accomplish those ends. It is to these approaches that we now turn.

### **Authors' Practices Prior to edTPA**

Prior to the implementation of edTPA, the department of special education at the authors' institution required its preservice teachers to include several performance-based assessments. One example was lesson and unit planning during student teaching, using a specific template that incorporated pedagogical principles of learning targets, differentiation, formative and summative assessments, use of research-based strategies, and alignment to the Common Core standards. These requirements necessitated that the preservice teachers incorporate various strategies to represent information, engage students, and enable students using strategies with documented effectiveness in the literature. Teacher candidates are also required to incorporate students' strengths and interests and be sure that the lessons are directly related to the Common Core standards or met a unique need that was aligned to the standards. Assignments were graded using rubrics that were based on the InTASC Standards.

A second already-existing requirement was the necessity for TCs to record their teaching and reflect upon their instructional delivery and student outcomes. They needed to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of their presentation in light of sound instructional principles and also measure the growth in their students to determine their impact. This self-critique also required TCs to suggest areas of change and refinement for future lesson planning and teaching.

### **Authors' edTPA Adoption and Implementation**

While the Department's existing requirements contained many characteristics conducive to the natural incorporation of edTPA into existing practices, and the department planned to simply embed some new requirements to prepare students better for the edTPA, the minimal implementation window from first adoption of edTPA to the requirement for a passing score for licensure caused edTPA to co-opt the program, thus having the "disruptive" impact described by Bartlett et al. (2017). This was observed throughout our program, including initial practicum, advanced practicum, and student teaching.

The program's initial practicum experience typically occurred during the sophomore year. It consisted of two 3-week placements in different settings that provided TCs the opportunity to experience time in the field early in the program. The goal of this was two-fold. First, it helped ensure that students were truly interested in and well-suited for a career in special education. Second, it provided a modicum of experience that could be utilized in our earliest methods classes. During the advent of edTPA, the initial practicum experience became the insertion point for Context for Learning. Students practiced responding to the Context for Learning prompts, such as demographic information about the nature of the school, class they were teaching, and the focus learner as well as details specific to the focus learner's needs and characteristics. TCs were required to use a strength-based approach as they developed the learner profile.



Additionally, TCs were introduced to a new lesson planning template that ensured they considered all aspects of planning that would be needed to pass the edTPA. Through this process, candidates also were introduced to edTPA language regarding a targeted communication skill and the focus learner's use of expressive/receptive language.

The edTPA influenced many of the Department's practices as the lesson plan template was revised to familiarize TCs with its terminology and to be sure that the template sufficiently solicited alignment between goals, objectives, and assessment strategies. This meant that one cohort of students faced multiple lesson planning templates due to our efforts to prepare them for the edTPA, whose special education handbook changed multiple times in the first few years. In this way, our efforts were very much like the three institutions in Bartlett (2017) as our overriding emphasis became direct preparation for the edTPA requirements, perhaps at the expense of focusing on preparing TCs for the profession.

Our early edTPA efforts were just as blunt in the later elements of our program, the advanced practicum and student teaching requirements. In these cases, the terminology and requirements of edTPA's planning and instruction commentaries drove our methods classes, and edTPA Task 3 became the focus of our assessment courses. Just as other IHEs, we held edTPA writing days during the student teaching semester that painstakingly walked students through edTPA's forms and processes, dissected prompts, and scored their performance using edTPA-like rubrics all in an effort to help TCs pass the edTPA. As seen in Bartlett (2017), edTPA monopolized our courses, and edTPA success was becoming a litmus test for our program. According to our pass rates, our blunt approach to the edTPA achieved its desired goal of a 100% undergraduate pass rate (with a few needing a second attempt), but in reaching this goal we recognized it may have come at the expense of teacher development. Although passing the edTPA was a requirement for licensure in [masked] until July 1, 2020, we were doing our students a disservice if our program became so myopic in its focus on the edTPA that we lost sight of our commitment to prepare TCs for their teaching career, including careers with complex caseloads in districts with limited resources, teacher shortages, and high turnover. IDEA's mandate, and therefore that of our teachers, is to prepare the K-12 students with disabilities "for further education, employment, and independent living" (34 CFR 300.1). Fortunately, one of our actions early in the edTPA process that initially contributed to the edTPA controlling our programming later enabled us to re-examine our teacher training in order to restore our emphasis on preparing educators for the profession rather than training college students to pass one last exam.

In an early effort to accelerate the implementation process, we asked a subgroup of student teachers to replace existing assignments with completion of edTPA Tasks 1-3 that would be locally scored, without any support beyond the handbook and guidance documents. This helped us identify strengths and weaknesses in our program and our TCs. Examples of strengths included planning, differentiation, delivery of instruction, and reflection. Weaknesses were in the areas of assessment (despite two courses in this area), connecting research to theory, and our TCs ability to analyze--not just reflect--on their teaching and their students' learning.

### **Refining Our Approach to edTPA**

Our initial use of this information resulted in the “co-opting” described by Bartlett et al. (2017), as we focused on language/terminology alignment with edTPA, revamping our lesson planning template so completion of it mirrored the requirements of Task 2, and providing direct support (e.g. edTPA writings days) when certain students still struggled with edTPA’s demands. More recently, however, a re-examination of our course sequence, curriculum mapping, and artifacts from our TC’s has given us the opportunity to shift away from edTPA success as our driving force in decision making to an approach that reinstates our focus on preparing TCs for a career in special education that will be dedicated to meeting the needs of students with disabilities. Now, early in the program, we teach how to describe students and settings positively and how to develop strong learner profiles. Only after our candidates have mastered these skills do we explain how this will be used in the edTPA and introduce more formal templates for the process. Later in the program, we teach effective research-based instructional methods and the range of assessment and progress-monitoring strategies available to them (and when & how to use them), and subsequently how these will apply to their edTPA work. At student teaching, we remind them that teaching three to five lessons is a tiny part of what is required of them as special education teachers, and work to help them manage their time so that they can build relationships with their students, engage with families, complete Individual Education Plans, develop Behavior Intervention Plans, and complete their edTPA’s

The outcome is a program similar to but stronger than the one we had before edTPA took over. The training of our TCs in assessment, the use of research and theory, and in analyzing teaching and learning through the use of quantitative and qualitative information is stronger. While we have maintained the lesson plan formats that were designed for edTPA, we expanded their focus so that they can address a wider range of settings and with more diverse student populations. They were helpful in supporting candidate understanding of the planning process, differentiation, accommodations, connections to research; and the importance of collecting baseline data before teaching begins.

Recently students who completed a practice edTPA were asked what they learned about teaching and themselves as teachers through that process. Their responses helped us to ensure that we were on the right track, focusing on teaching and reducing the focus on the edTPA itself.

Two of the researchers independently coded responses to these open-ended questions regarding their perceptions of edTPA and its impact on them as learners. As described, the edTPA requirements had enhanced already existing structures and assignments within the program. Thus, the 22 student respondents had difficulty differentiating between the impact of course requirements and the insights they gained from the completion of edTPA. While this demonstrates a strong integration of the edTPA into the program, it also made it difficult to evaluate the impact of the edTPA on students’ learning. These quotes demonstrate the difficulty in detecting the perceived changes being specific to the edTPA or development that occurs within a teacher preparation program.

"I was able to see how much work goes into every lesson plan."

"Realized how much work goes into every lesson throughout a whole school year."

“Even though I’m striving to have a well thought out detailed lesson plan, there will be times where I need to be flexible with my schedule. ...It was also confirmed to me that every day will bring something new, which is what I love about teaching.”

While they had difficulty describing the edTPA as a discreet experience, students in the post-course evaluation surveys portrayed edTPA as stressful, onerous, and time-consuming:

"It isn't is [sic.] scary as I thought. It can be challenging, but it is not impossible."

"Overwhelming."

"Biggest concerns about student teaching."

"I want to do well but do not think time will be on my side."

"I have also learned that the edTPA sucks but it will make teaching in the future easier and more thought out."

The edTPA both reinforced and brought some of these teacher candidates to question their preparedness for teaching, and others to celebrate their readiness for the classroom:

"This semester has tested my resilience."

"I am nowhere near ready/able to be teacher."

"Nervous that I don't have what it takes."

"I do not feel that teaching comes naturally to me, and in the past I have found my low confidence levels and anxiety about the work I produce to inhibit my ability to feel as though I belong in the profession.”

"I can be a good teacher."

"I have a strong ability to create an engaging lessons[sic] and create an environment where students want to learn."

"I learned that I was very natural when I was teaching my lessons."

"One good thing that I have learned about all of this is that I can do this, and I have the means to be a good teacher."

"I am always looking for ways to make learning easier [for] my students and I always look for ways to better explain how to do something.”

"With focusing and self-discipline, I will be able to be a great teacher, and get all my work done on time."

One area in which students felt strongly prepared was the ability to write about their decision-making process. Candidates reported not being able to articulate why made instructional decisions before edTPA and after completing the reflective component were able to describe the purpose of their instructional choices to a high degree.

"I am better at teaching than writing about teaching."

"I'm better at teaching and planning than explaining why decisions made."

"[I'm] better at talking than writing."

"I am not great at explaining myself in writing"

"One thing I learned about myself with Ed TPA in my teaching is that it is harder for me to be able to explain in commentaries why I am doing a certain lesson."

"I can tell someone why all day long and make up the lesson plans that go with them but when it comes to sitting down and writing out why I am doing something, my brain ends up getting off track and I cannot focus long enough to write it all out."

### **Refining Our Program by Gleaning from Our edTPA Experience**

One of edTPA's areas of emphasis is empirical reflection and subsequent adjustments that refine future lessons. Prompts in Task 3, for example, specifically require an examination of a lesson's successes and weaknesses, as well as suggestions about how to proceed. Due to the elimination of the edTPA by the state legislature as a requirement for licensure, the Department is now faced with its own Task 3 analysis. The college's motto expresses the idea of the "caring intellectual", and that is what we must be. We made progress during our edTPA journey, specifically moving away from having it drive the process to the detriment of overall teacher preparation to an embedded aspect of our program. With its removal, however, we must avoid the temptation of having it simply be another bygone initiative—a common lament in education—and instead take the best from it to make our program stronger. It appears that we can do so by maintaining edTPA's emphasis on critical aspects of quality teaching but focusing our TC's use and analysis of those aspects directly on the duties of teaching, e.g. delivering the next lesson and evaluating its impact, rather than responding to a series of prompts that all too soon becomes quickly removed from their job of teaching children.

The edTPA correctly impressed upon our TCs the complexity of the profession. Instructional design, delivery, and assessment are rigorous activities that require teachers' best intellectual work. Therefore, one aspect of the edTPA framework we must maintain is its ability to help our TCs see the interconnectedness in all that they do. Understood properly, the spirit of edTPA should result in the delivery of the specially designed instruction that the law requires and the outcomes of that instruction on student achievement. As stated by Hattie (2015), teachers must "Know Thy Impact." The elimination of edTPA as a requirement, and an adjustment we made in

our courses, will provide the time and the opportunity to keep the edTPA characteristics that improved our TCs preparation while removing the aspects that were detrimental to overall teacher development.

The elimination of the Advance Practicum sequence that provided separate courses in assessment and instructional strategies; our current, more integrated approach; and the additional time provided by the loss of the edTPA as a requirement provide the opportunity to develop students' proficiency in the continuous feedback cycle of assessment and instruction in ways that maintain the focus on the classroom. For example, our lesson plan template has maintained several features stressed by edTPA, including communication supports, planned opportunities for feedback, and the rationale behind the planning decisions, but TCs and instructors alike can keep the evaluation of those plans related to the clinical experiences included in every semester. Thus, our conversations with students are focused on delivering a better lesson tomorrow, not dissecting prompts to be sure we have responded to every detail. In other words, our program will improve by the direct application of edTPA's principles *on the day-to-day work of the profession*, not by completion of a document the student will never use after licensure.

For example, we can keep our TCs focus on the connectedness between the IEP's discussion of a child's strengths, interests, characteristics, and levels of performance, how the instruction must be specially designed as a result, and the use of data to measure outcomes and drive future decisions. Being able to relentlessly convey to students the importance of this sequence--while not having the extra component of needing to justify multi-faceted prompts--will better prepare them for the classrooms in which they will be employed. Students must still justify their decisions and the alignment between the instruction and assessments, but since the context of this justification remains on the act of their teaching, we would enhance the utilization of such requirements and improve the likelihood that our TCs would engage in such activities on the job, which they would almost certainly not do with the edTPA Tasks 1-3 documents.

Additionally, while we had a video reflection component prior to edTPA, due to the student response and instructor awareness of the students' enhanced abilities to describe their instructional decision making, a structured written reflection will be added to the students' video self-evaluation. This reflection will continue to keep the focus on classroom practices, so that students can directly improve their craft. In doing so, we have grown from edTPA's emphasis on reflection and will immediately impact the next lesson.

The department maintained an initial pass rate of greater than 90% throughout its time as a requirement for licensure. Our movement to a more embedded approach increased students' understanding and application of edTPA principles, but the nature of the Task 1-3 requirements still occupied time in our courses and consumed significant amounts of our TCs' time during the student teaching semester. The removal of edTPA as a requirement affords us with significant time to directly impact our TCs' preparation and will provide more time for our candidates to focus specifically on their students' achievement during student teaching. If this time can be used on the practice, implementation, and application of effective pedagogy, our TCs will exit the program better prepared for a career in special education.

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