

## **Trouble with the edTPA: Lessons Learned from a Narrative Self-Study**

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*This paper is written by faculty, staff, and graduate students responsible for preparing a group of 100 elementary/middle school licensure students for the edTPA portfolio assessment. It is a narrative self-study analysis of our experiences doing so during the pilot year. The edTPA is a performance assessment that requires future teachers to plan, teach, assess, and reflect—all of which are at the heart of any teacher education program. We considered this performance assessment to have significant advantages over a multiple choice test and we debated for a year how best to implement it. Our plan was to integrate what students needed to know into our courses rather than to prepare them directly for the test. We approached this with a positive attitude but emerged with a skeptical one. The pressures we, and our students, experienced were unexpected as we unwillingly slid into a test preparation mode that appeared unavoidable. Instead of preparing students to be teachers, i.e., to plan, teach, assess and reflect we felt trapped by the practical realities of the test, i.e., doing things “the right way” in order to score well on the rubrics. This report uses narrative self-study methods to analyze the move from preparation for teaching to preparation for taking the test.*

As teacher educators we have long discussed the pressures of high stakes testing with our teacher candidates. Our general goal was to raise their awareness of the influences of testing on teaching, including the tendency to narrow the curriculum, the pressures to teach to the test, the effects of testing policies and mandated curricula, and the psychological effects on both students and teachers. We wanted our students to be ready for the current realities of teaching, to be able to think critically about the issues they would face in schools, and to give them strategies to push back against the negative influences of testing. Research on the negative effects of high stakes testing abounds, especially in urban schools, yet it has had little impact on policymaking.

When high stakes assessment, in the form of the edTPA, arrived on the doorstep of our teacher education program, we thought we were well prepared to meet this challenge. We appreciated that it was not a standardized bubble test like the state content tests that the students already were required to take; the edTPA was a performance assessment requiring students to plan, teach, reflect and assess. None of these were new to our teacher education program. Students were already videotaping their teaching during early field experiences and reflecting on their pedagogy and student learning; we used *Understanding by Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005)* as a model for instruction that required careful attention to goal setting, designing performance assessments, planning lessons, and then instruction and reflection. Much of this was important for developing an edTPA portfolio. We felt fortunate to have an assessment that aligned well with our program goals; we were optimistic about making it an integral part of our program rather than an add-on, test preparation process.

The seniors in the College of Education take two classes during their final spring semester, while they are student teaching and, this particular year, completing the edTPA. One is the literacy methods course and the other is known as our pedagogy course. The literacy methods course in the elementary program examines writing methods and a review of reading methods. The pedagogy course examines teaching in the elementary grades with a focus on topics that include classroom management, instructional design, personal and professional attributes of effective teachers, and multicultural perspectives. The pedagogy course instructors were saddled with making sure that portfolio requirements for the test were completed properly and uploaded on time to the Pearson website. As such these instructors (4 of our authors) were at the center of students' preparation for the edTPA.

The coursework of the 5 methods courses taught during this semester are integrated with field assignments in public elementary schools and is designed to be a synthesis of theory and practice. The schools in which the students are placed are by and large diverse because we are situated in a small university town with diverse faculty and a large number of international students, particularly graduate students. The demographics of the students in the certification program generally reflect the undergraduate university student population, which is less diverse than the surrounding city, with a majority of white population and approximately 4% African Americans, 8% Latino/a, 10% Asian Americans.

### **Getting Ready (2013-2014)**

Our yearlong preparation (2013-2014) for the edTPA had been thorough. We poured over rubrics and extended our assignments to make sure they would provide students with preparation for all aspects of them. To do this we worked together as instructors much more intensely than in previous years and this seemed to be a positive outcome. During the year of implementation, we had weekly meetings to discuss our content specific courses and monthly meetings across courses within each student cohort. Some of us did the official edTPA scoring training—all of us did a training provided within the Department.

By the time the fall semester of the pilot implementation year began (2014-2015), we thought we were ready and that our planning had enhanced collegiality and positive program development. One reason for our initial positive outlook was our varied experiences with the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). Several of the instructors (doctoral students and clinical faculty) were National Board certified. They generally considered their experiences in this process, while demanding of time and energy, to be strong professional growth experiences. In addition, one of the doctoral students in the Department had recently completed a case study dissertation with Board Certified teachers that identified the positive professional influences of the NBPTS process (Krause, 2014). We wanted this kind of growth experience for our teacher candidates.

The knowledge that Linda Darling-Hammond, along with scholars and educators nationally, had shepherded the NBPTS and the PACT (Performance Assessment for California Teachers) assessment in California, gave us hope that their continuing influence on the edTPA at the Stanford SCALE center (<https://scale.stanford.edu/>) would make it a valuable portfolio

learning experience for our students. In addition, AACTE (American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education) was promoting the edTPA, giving it the backing of a large professional organization.

The research to date on students' responses to PACT and early reports on the edTPA (Falk, 2015; Knight et al., 2014; Peck, Singer-Gabella, Sloan, & Lin, 2015) indicate that it was challenging but that desirable learning occurred. This was supported by preliminary findings that performance assessments, like the PACT, are predictors of teacher effectiveness measured by students' value-added gains (Burns, Henry, & Lindauer, 2015; Newton, 2010; Steiner, 2013).

There is literature written by teacher educators that describe ways to integrate edTPA preparation and program goals. While they admit to challenges, these are generally positive accounts (Lys, L'Esperance, Dobson, & Bullock, 2014; Miller, Carroll, Jancica, & Markwortha, 2015; Peck, Gallucci, & Sloan, 2010). Ginsburg and Kingston (2014) compare the evaluation systems in other professions to teaching, arguing that teaching is caught in a "vice" in this "era of accountability." They conclude that the situation is complex and none of the approaches offer an assessment that is not "prone to error and misuse" (p. 2).

There is a smaller body of literature that is critical of the edTPA. Sato (2014) assesses the underlying conceptions of teaching reflected in the edTPA and issues of validity. Some critics have questioned the validity and reliability of the edTPA and of Pearson's scoring (Duckor, Castellano, Téllez, Wihardini, & Wilson, 2014; Wilkerson, 2015). There are increasing critiques of the policy contexts, particularly related to the scoring standardization and lucrative involvement of Pearson as provider and scorer (Au, 2013; Berlak, 2010; Dover, Schultz, Smith, & Duggan, 2015; Madeloni & Gorlewski, 2013; Hernandez, 2013; Winerip, 2012). We join some of these critics, using a neoliberal economic perspective to examine ways in which the edTPA represents a further encroachment of business models and multinational organizations into education (Dover, Schultz, Smith & Duggan, 2015; Sleeter, 2008; Sturges, 2015).

## **Our Dilemma**

Problems emerged late in the fall semester when students began asking questions about what was required to get a *good score*. Their questions progressed down a slippery slope from

questions about the content (pedagogy and curriculum) to how to do well on the test. Most of the portfolios were to be scored by Pearson (the fees were paid by the University Council on Teacher Education); edTPA trained instructors from our program would score only a small sample in order to look closely at students' work. Although portfolios were to be scored by Pearson, the scores were non-consequential for students this first pilot implementation year. Students were told that they must complete the portfolio "with integrity" without a specific score set for passing. In this context, we felt there was room to experiment and learn from the results; we did not expect the intensity that developed because the scores were inconsequential. The threat of a test seems to have conditioned us all to stress about potential failure.

The edTPA scoring rubrics, as with any coding scheme, need criteria in order to achieve the required level of inter-rater reliability done by outside raters. This coding detail and the outside scoring were the dual sources of our problems. Preparing portfolios to match the details of standardized rubrics in order to get a passing "score" raised the stakes for students and pressured us toward teaching to the test. We began the year determined not to do this, not to narrow our curriculum, and not to take away time from important coursework and field experiences just to "score points." Yet, each of us, in different ways and at different times, consciously and/or inadvertently, slid from *teaching* to *compliance*. Getting it right did not require better teaching, planning, assessing or reflection on our part or the students; it did require preparing students to write the portfolio materials in the correct way and put them in the correct format.

Variations in the construction of portfolio materials or in the way scoring codes are applied are both problematic in high-stakes situations. Consistencies in producing the product and in applying the criteria for evaluation are both necessary for standardization. What we initially thought was a portfolio to demonstrate good teaching became an exercise in following directions, manipulating texts in particular ways, and getting everything labeled correctly and submitted to the correct web portal. Critical thinking, social justice concerns, innovation, and critical reflection took a back seat to "getting it right." Our dilemma then was not the portfolio itself; it was the tension between preparing the kind of teachers our program aimed to encourage and teaching them to do well on the test.

## **Narrative Self-Study Methods**

We chose narrative inquiry as a research method because it gives voice to teachers' experiences through the stories (Bruner, 1990) that emerge from "storied lives" (Clandinin and Connelly, 1990). As we met to plan and discuss our teaching during the implementation of the edTPA, there were continual stories about how our teaching was impacted by this assessment. Our narratives initially expressed excitement but then became more and more worried, puzzled, and threatened.

Milner (2007) argues that "narratives can be a 'door opener' to discuss and think deeply about complex and taboo issues" (p. 595). Narrative allowed us to document our experiences and the ways our teaching was being influenced by the edTPA assessment, even when our puzzlements did not match the mostly positive views in the literature and in our program.

Diamond (1992) wrote some time ago,

In order to gain a deeper understanding of their experience, participants in the inquiry recover and reconstruct their narratives. Narrative provides both phenomenon and method for the re-emphasis of the personal meaning of what it means to teach and to do research. Narrative allows teachers and researchers to declare that they themselves are the subject of their own inquiry. By partaking more fully of their experience, they can transform it. (p. 69)

As the "subjects" of our inquiry, we wrote about and analyzed our own experiences. To emphasize this reflective aspect of our research, we adopted the term "self-study." Rather than a researcher gaze that focused on the experience of others, we used our research as a mirror to examine ourselves in order to describe and analyze our teaching experiences (Johnston, 2006).

Narrative and self-study research both have a substantive history. Narrative inquiry flows from the work of Ricoeur (1983), through the work of Bruner's influential book, *The Acts of Meaning* (1990), feminist writers (Elbaz, 1983; Lightfoot, 1994), and the work of Connelly and Clandinin (e.g., 1988; 2013), and many others. In the field of teacher education particularly, self-studies have provided an important avenue for research. Zeichner wrote in 1999, "The birth of the self-study in the teacher education movement around 1990 has been probably the single most significant development ever in the field of teacher education research" (p. 8). Conferences, a journal, books, and handbooks demonstrate the development of these self-study reflective

methods (Clift, 2004; Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2000; Hamilton, 1998; Loughran, Hamilton, LaBoskey, & Russell, 2004; Lunenberg & Samaras, 2011; Zeichner, 1995).

During the pilot implementation year (2014-2015) we met weekly. The topic of edTPA came up in one way or another every week, whether or not it was on the agenda. As the spring semester approached and students were in the process of developing their portfolios, the time spent in our classes discussing edTPA related issues and problems increased exponentially. Exhausted from our spring experience, we waited until the summer to work on our research. In this process, dialogue was critical. We used each other to examine and question the development of our narratives; we were each other's critical friends (Schuck & Russell, 2005). Alongside dialogue was our writing. What we wrote prompted more dialogue, which prompted more reflective writing; self-study is a process of talking and writing about one's own experiences in the company of others (Amalia, Johnson, Johnston-Parsons, Shen, Shin & Swanson, 2015).

Our data included personal journal writing, meeting notes, audiotapes of our meetings, and the many drafts of our narratives. These data supported the development of our narratives, as we checked information and the accuracy of our memories. Dialogue and writing were our most important tools in this inquiry, pushing us to think critically about our narratives and to construct a deeper analysis of our experiences. This 2-year dialogue, writing, and rewriting has shaped the paper we share here. We used our insights as insiders to construct a shared, multi-perspectival analysis of the insertion of the edTPA into our teacher education program.

### **From the Perspective of Policy**

Our initial use of the edTPA assessment sits in the midst of larger issues. For more than 40 years, a steady stream of critiques of schooling has influenced what happens in schools and how the public and policy makers think about teachers, teacher education and schooling (National Commission on Excellent in Education, 1983; Project, 2006). A consistently critical public rhetoric has constructed the rationale for the increasing use of tests to evaluate students, teachers, administrators and schools. Underlying this critique is the assumption that testing will identify and describe failures and that standards and testing score expectations will provide the motivation for change. Beginning with *A Nation at Risk* and continuing through *Race to the Top*, legislators have promoted standards, set scoring expectations, offered funding

competitions, and punished schools for poor performance, all with the goal of helping schools to improve. Requiring learning gains and using standardized tests as the sole metric of learning opened the door to a raft of commercial programs, curricula, and test production materials meant to support teaching and testing. Attempts to align curriculum and programs that aimed to raise test scores flooded into schools; scripted programs that restricted what teachers and students could do in order to raise test scores replaced teacher and principal choices and judgments. Publishers and private enterprise made huge profits as schools spent their limited funding on materials to help them “do better” on the tests.

Stephen Ball (2012), in his book *Education Inc.: New Policy Networks and the Neo-Liberal Imaginary*, demonstrates how persistent critiques of education have created openings for the corporate world to usurp professional judgments in favor of programs and tests. The conjunction of private and political interests created a cozy nest for the collaborative workings of policy makers and corporate America. This same phenomenon is now found globally, with corporations like Pearson selling programs, curriculum, and tests around the world. Privatizing schooling with charters and the fast entry of unprepared teachers into urban schools (e.g., Teach for America) are further examples of this private enterprise take-over of many aspects of education. Our research sits in the midst of these critiques and issues.

## **Our Stories**

As authors we are instructors and staff in the elementary/middle school education preservice program at the UIUC College of Education, but with different ranks and responsibilities. We had similar as well as different experiences with the edTPA and its influence on our program and ourselves as instructors, advisers, and supervisors. Here are some samples of our stories.

### ***A Game of Tug-of-War, Stacey Korson***

*I am a fifth year doctoral student who has taught the pedagogy and literacy methods courses, as well as supervised students in their school placements. I am in the process of writing my dissertation. I found that preparing for the edTPA took time away from my course; the students' desire to focus on test preparation rather than course content created a tug-of-war between us.*



I was not anticipating many changes to the literacy methods course, except for a few modifications to the lesson plan we had been using to include some of the edTPA language (e.g., language function and language demands) and edTPA type questions. I thought this would be sufficient to maintain our goals of teaching the students to understand the intricacies of planning, teaching, and assessing small group literacy instruction--while being responsive to their need to prepare for the edTPA.

During the fall semester I was able to keep edTPA as a side bar. There were moments where students made insightful comments about the parallels between the state testing required of students in their field placements and the edTPA, as well as some questions that focused on edTPA terms. In January I overheard a conversation in which students were questioning the need for the edTPA lesson plan we had developed, stating that it was only needed to prepare them for the edTPA so “they didn’t need to use it anymore.” While the purpose was in part test preparation, it also included valuable planning segments necessary to provide quality literacy instruction. I realized that the edTPA lesson plan format had set-up a dichotomy or a tug-of-war for the students between the edTPA and writing instruction. It became also a tug-of-war between the students and myself. The first tug occurred without me even noticing.

While I had always had to maintain a balance between course requirements and student teaching expectations, the tension between the course content and edTPA continued to grow throughout the spring semester. Because the students were being asked to do more, in the same amount of time, I adjusted my instruction to include more work time for course assignments during class meeting time. I tried to make the modifications and assignment adjustments clear for students but they continually asked for more leeway. Their emails routinely asked for clarification of what was due and how to do things, often blaming edTPA for their confusion. These small repeated pulls on the rope caused me to lose ground. In April I received an email written on behalf of the class, asking if “[they] could simply skip” the writing unit assignment because of the “amount of work that we are being given due to edTPA.” I began to feel that I had lost too much ground to edTPA. During class late in the semester students had been unprepared; not one student had read the assigned readings and discussion fell flat. Knowing that they were in the final edTPA push I gave them a pass for the evening and reminded them that assigned readings needed to be completed for the next class. Feeling that I had developed a good relationship with the students, I left class thinking that the warning would be enough.

However, in the next class it was evident that again the readings had not been completed. I was discouraged because they were not thinking critically about the course content. However, the more I tried to encourage them, the more their attention seemed to be focused on the edTPA. I was worried that they were not getting what they needed to be effective writing teachers. EdTPA was winning the tug-of-war.

Chui (2014) wrote about her student experiences completing edTPA while student teaching. In her narrative she referred to edTPA as a burden that detracted from her main educational objectives. She argued that completing edTPA “took away from the further learning and critical reflection I could have experienced” (p. 28). The struggles Chui articulated were displayed by the students in my literacy methods course. The learning, application, and reflection that should have occurred between the course content and the student teaching placement was overshadowed by the time and focus required by edTPA.

### ***The Logistical Versus the Personal, Alexis Jones***

*I am a third year doc student in the process of collecting my dissertation data. I have taught the pedagogy methods course for three years and have supervised students in their field placements. I became increasingly concerned about the standardized scoring and the distance between those who scored the portfolios and those of us who knew the students well.*

Ironically, I believed the goals of the edTPA were appropriate. Our program had for years required students to create a series of high quality lesson plans that built on one another. Students videotaped themselves more than once and wrote reflections on their practice. I felt that the edTPA process would dovetail nicely with the goals of our classes.

However, I discovered that the goals and tasks required by the edTPA were not the problem so much as the standardized rubrics and anonymous scoring procedures. Consider a fourth grade teacher who gives a math test to her students. She can grade it with her knowledge of students in mind; she knows which students have done their best work, and who might benefit from a chance to review their mistakes; she can also use the information gained to further her instruction. None of this is true of the standardized tests that the elementary students take or the edTPA that our teacher candidates take.

Two of my students did poorly on the edTPA pilot. However, their stories were vastly different. For the first student, our group of local scorers exchanged several emails about her lack of attention to the correct format and naming of documents. She had been late with two commentaries and had to rewrite one quickly in order to be scored by the final deadline. The second student had other difficulties. When we discussed her writing in a scoring meeting, we found it lacking in thoughtfulness. Her responses were brief and provided little to no evidence for why she made instructional decisions.

Had these two students been scored by Pearson's evaluators, both would certainly have "failed." However, their similarities ended there, and the contexts in which they were completing their portfolio became quite important for us because their situations were very different. For the first student, family funds were tight, so she worked more than one part-time job while taking four courses, and engaging in a full-time student teaching placement. Yet throughout the year, her coursework was excellent. As her supervisor, I could attest to the fact that her students received her full attention and she treated them with enormous respect. During the edTPA/student teaching semester she gave priority to her students not the test. The second student's story was quite different. She gave her work in my course little attention. She frequently asked for extensions and opportunities to revise and resubmit her work, though the difference between her original and later submissions were slight. It seemed to me that she spent the year doing just enough to not fail her classes. In line with this history, the edTPA also got little serious attention. If these two portfolios had been scored nationally, both students would likely have failed, yet as students and teacher candidates, they had vastly different levels of commitment and performance in all areas of their work.

Endres (2007) examined how teachers are situated at the pivot point between the personal and the bureaucratic. He describes the tension between accountability and the human, learner-centered aspects of education. My concern with the edTPA was that it took this one step further. Requiring that teachers must pass yet another test in order to be certified results in teacher educators having no voice in the final decision for licensure. Teacher educators' knowledge of students' contexts, their classroom practices, and their commitment to social justice are removed from the final assessment.

### ***Crossing Lines, Stephanie Cronenberg***

*I am a fifth year doctoral student completing the writing of my dissertation. I have taught the pedagogy course for 3 years and this year also taught 2 courses in music education (my field). In this narrative I worry about the ways in which the pressure on some students to get things right on the test caused me to lose my sense of myself as a teacher and to respond to students in ways different than is typical for me.*

What kind of teacher do you want to be? As a teacher-educator, I regularly ask teacher candidates to think critically about the kind of teacher they hope to become. I hope that this enables them to stand on a firm foundation of examined beliefs about teaching and learning.

But, contrary to my own examined beliefs, I found myself consumed, in helping my students to prepare for the edTPA, assuming a rule-following “just give them what they want” mentality. What I demonstrated to my preservice undergraduates this year was that the only way to succeed was to fill in the bubbles, completely, with a number 2 pencil, and to be sure not to color outside the lines. My insistence that students respond to each part of each question on the edTPA commentaries, name their files exactly, break their questions into paragraphs, and create files with the correct number of pages or items completely contradicts how I think about teaching and learning. Meanwhile, I encouraged them to think critically about structures in education, contemplate how they might react in particular situations, and solidify their philosophical grounding. Like a buzzing overhead light that gradually fades from consciousness, my words about thinking critically and reflecting became background noise and my actual message was received loud and clear: follow these rules and you will become a teacher.

Philosophically, I crossed a line with my absorption with the rules and regulatory bureaucracy of the edTPA. The regret I have over this has plagued me for weeks, making me exhausted, sad, and angry in a cycle of emotional turmoil from which I struggle to escape. While students appreciated my help on the edTPA, I am completely deflated by my preoccupation with the rules. What kind of teacher do I want to be? When my beliefs are tested, where do I stand?

A second consideration had to do with drawing a thick line between my personal and professional life. I like working one-on-one with students, yet I have never given my phone number or Skype contact information to students and do not feel comfortable doing so.

Doctoral students often get consumed by their teaching responsibilities and forget that they are also students who need time for studying as well as some personal time to stay healthy and maintain relationships. But during edTPA preparations, I crossed this line with students who urgently needed my help; consequently, my dissertation research, health, and personal life suffered.

In February, for example, I was traveling through a snow-filled northeast for my dissertation research when I got a panic e-mail from a student because she simply did not understand how to get started with the edTPA process. While it might be easy to say, “read the handbook,” I have not found that strategy productive. Instead, I summarized, in an e-mail, the main parts of the portfolio (which she had undoubtedly heard on multiple occasions prior to February) and sources of detailed advice. This same student followed about a week later with a Skype phone call focused on questions she had about the mathematics task.

In March, I was again traveling when I had an e-mail from a student entitled “EDTPA HELP!” This e-mail chain about her assessment task led to a phone call to help her proceed through the portfolio. Several subsequent phone calls and Skype conversations with this student were necessary to assuage her edTPA anxiety, anxiety that proved unfounded when scores were finally returned. She forwarded me her passing results with the e-mail message “this is thanks to you.” The e-mail made me proud of the support I was able to provide.

I felt pressured to provide attention when *they* needed it. I was happy to help but did I need to let this work seep so heavily into other aspects of my life? Could I have facilitated their needs, as I have so many times in the past, using only e-mail? Why was the edTPA different?

I crossed my personal line with some students and am left wondering about those who didn't ask. Were they uncomfortable asking? Did the anxious concerns of some students prevent me from providing attention to those who weren't vocal about their struggles? I think the answer is yes. My one-on-one work with students' anxieties consumed me. The individualized attention demanded by some of my students left others outside my field of vision.

Zembylas (2003) suggests that the “teacher self” (p. 213) is not an individual creation, but is constructed through institutional and socio-cultural interactions. The identity of the teacher is dependent on power and agency, and investigating the emotions involve di identity

can develop a greater understanding of one's professional self. Rather than ridding oneself of difficult emotions, these "can become sites of resistance and self-transformation" (p. 214). My conflicts caused me to examine, in the critical light of the edTPA context, what kind of teacher I wanted to be.

### ***A Drastic Shift, Dorian Harrison***

*I am a first year doctoral student and this was my first year teaching the pedagogy course and supervising student teachers. While I had experienced testing pressures as a classroom teacher, shepherding students through this kind of high-stakes test turned out to be a very different experience from what was described at the beginning of the year.*

This was my first year as a teaching assistant at the university. Having taught seven years in elementary classrooms I felt well prepared to share my classroom experiences as a tool to prepare teacher candidates for the profession. During the fall semester, conversations around teaching practice and learning went very well. Students were interested in my teaching experiences in the South as well as the RTI and PBIS pushes/programs that were in effect. While I discussed the edTPA in relationship to what they were learning, it was not the primary focus for instruction. This was the environment in the fall semester; but I was ill prepared for what was to come in the spring.

A sense of panic occurred in class the week before spring break and in the weeks to follow. The students, in addition to completing their classwork, discovered that the amount of time needed to complete their edTPA writing was much more than they expected. Even more alarming to me were the students who did not start their assignments at the appropriate times designated by our program. As the panic ensued within the cohort I also began to panic, afraid that I was not providing enough support for the students due to my lack of knowledge about the edTPA. I questioned many of my judgments and began referring their questions to others. Like Chui's (2014) reflections from a student teacher's perspective, I was burdened with aspects of the test as an instructor. The assessment took me away from teaching pedagogy to a focus on rubrics and test prep. The students and I were consumed with the rubrics and how to score well (Kohn, 2006) and paid little attention to the lesson plans that were developed for the class. Instead I was guiding students through the process of completing a performance assessment that

was supposed to highlight what they knew about good practice, but that took me away from my own teaching practices.

Unlike teaching the pedagogy course, I found the supervising role a good place to talk about student teaching experiences and pedagogy. In our supervisory meetings we took time to talk about teaching. Seeing students in the field and reflecting on their teaching challenges was a welcome break from walking on eggshells around edTPA production in class. Real conversations with my students about their lives in the classroom and my teaching experiences fostered long conversations that extended far beyond our time allotment. We had unadulterated expressions of self and how to traverse the murky waters of teaching in the schools.

But there were times when the edTPA crept into our discussions in the spring. More alarming were the effects on the cooperating teachers. The lack of time allotted to complete classroom assignments and the need to adjust the classroom learning environment posed key issues while students were at their placements. In addition to these challenges were the complications of filming when parents are not signing the permission forms, and classrooms where the teachers have a lack of control with their students. The ramifications of the stress placed on the students, cooperating teachers, and instructors during the spring semester was an unforeseen storm.

As I entered the doctoral program I had little training about the edTPA. I felt ill-informed to prepare students for this form of assessment. Fenner (2016) describes how the edTPA mirrors the high stakes testing environments that K-12 students endure every spring semester; the result is fewer instructional days due to test preparation. In addition, the logistics involved with filming the lessons, gathering permission forms, and finding appropriate accommodations for students who cannot be filmed add another layer of stress to the process. Meuwissen, Choppin, Shang-Butler & Cloonan (2015) report similar findings with their student teachers' experiences. Their students worried about the evaluation process, the lack of scoring transparency, and the time it took to film, compose, and synthesize information. Both studies suggest that there are logistical issues creating additional stressors associated with this assessment; this mirrors our experiences during this study.

### ***I Thought I Was Safe, Natasha Murray***

*I am a fifth-year doctoral student in the process of writing my dissertation research. I have previously taught the pedagogy course and supervised students during their field placement and student teaching. During the implementation year, I taught the social studies methods courses in the fall and spring, thinking that I did not need to worry about test preparation because it was social studies--not math or literacy. I was surprised to find this was not true.*

During both the fall and spring semesters, I taught a social studies methods course, focused on issues and practices in addressing diversity. The students in the spring semester were the same students I had in the fall. Because the edTPA does not assess social studies teaching, I thought I could ignore the edTPA requirements and simply *teach*. That proved not to be the case.

During the spring semester, my course was in an online format. As students began their student teaching, they were clearly pre-occupied with preparing their edTPA materials. We had encouraged them to think about integrating science and social studies because the previous year, portfolios with integrated lessons seemed to have more engaged student discussions in their videotapes and consequently higher scores.

In the beginning, I was relieved that my course had little to do with edTPA. Many social studies or science teachers feel this way about state assessments. But there were consequences. Students were losing out on social studies and science instruction as they chose to spend their time on the edTPA.

During the semester, I sent out numerous emails to keep in touch, reminding students of due dates for the online sessions. I asked individual students to respond to questions about their online posts, to provide me with updates on their book group discussion, and to let me know how I could support them. I rarely got responses. While the edTPA did not directly impact the course content, it did reduce the students' participation in the course. It seemed to me it impacted the energy they put into their assignments and the quality of their work. My course appeared to be sidelined because of their focus on the edTPA. I was reminded again that math and literacy are the important courses. While I have changed the grade level I teach, the impact of assessment did not change.



As a classroom teacher I experienced a narrowing of the curriculum as test preparation pressures increased in my urban school, as was now happening in my teacher education class. Ayers (2015), professor at the University of San Francisco, also argues that the edTPA “colonizes the curriculum of teacher education programs and narrows the focus on teaching as predetermined and top down delivery of lessons.” Similarly, Au (2013), teaching at the University of Washington, describes his experience with the edTPA as feeling

. . . very much like what we already know about such tests. Someone outside of and far away from my classes and students is taking control of my curriculum and teaching, and the end result is the distortion of teaching and learning—at both the university and K–12 levels. (p. 4)

It appears to many that a standardized test tugs us, and our students, away from the things we care most about in our teaching. My students’ testing worries pulled them away from the subject matter that prepares them to prepare students to live in a democratic society. What is left of schooling when our primary goal is to help students pass a test?

### ***What Happened to Social Justice? Marilyn Johnston-Parsons***

*I am a professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. I taught the social studies methods course in the fall semester and I advise the doctoral students who teach the pedagogy course. I was on sabbatical and out of the country during spring semester but Skyped into many of the planning meetings. I could feel the angst of the slide into test preparation.*

It was late in the process of doing this research when issues of *social justice* and *deficit perceptions* entered our group discussions about the edTPA. During the summer when we were working on our research project, I gradually came to realize that conversations about social justice had been sidelined. In my journals of our meetings in the spring semester, there were no conversations about social justice issues and only one instance when we talked about deficit thinking related to the edTPA. This one discussion occurred when Dorian described her frustration, during her Pearson scorer training, that students could pass the edTPA even if deficit thinking about students was apparent in their portfolio writing. While there is language about deficit thinking in the Pearson scoring manual, our program has a more inclusive definition of deficit thinking than is captured in the scoring. The score of one of the students last year was not reduced for what we would have clearly determined was deficit thinking.

Whether students considered issues of social justice in their lesson plans or portfolio writing never came up in the scoring training sessions. Bunch, Aguirre and Tellez (2009) also found deficit language in Pearson students' mathematics portfolios but these were not assessed in the scoring.

A 2-page summary of a study posted on the AACTE resources page from the University of Maryland, College Park (Hyer, Yee, Carey & Barnes, 2013.), compares the 2011 edTPA handbook, which we were using at the time, against the five Culturally Relevant Practice (CRP) domains (Gay, 2010). It concludes:

. . . overwhelmingly the assessment allows space for candidates to demonstrate elements of CRP but does not require them to do so; while more than 70 percent of the edTPA text units provide opportunities or prompts for candidates to reveal CRP elements, opportunities outnumber direct prompts more than four-to-one.

Although there are “opportunities” for teaching in culturally responsive ways, this is clearly not required to get a passing score. Since I teach the social studies methods courses, I am centrally concerned with diversity and social justice issues in my courses and in schools in general; I am equally concerned that our teacher candidates view their diverse students as assets rather than children from families with ‘deficits.’ These topics were present in my course but disappeared as I worked with instructors and students on the edTPA portfolio.

The portfolio requires teacher candidates to demonstrate that they know their students and their communities, that they pay attention to individual needs and abilities, and that they can plan carefully and assess student learning; but when do we ask questions about equity and social justice? The strong focus on these issues in our program did not disappear from my course, but my attention to them waned, pushed to the side by the need to attend to edTPA rubric criteria.

### ***Advising Quandaries, Michael Parrish***

*I am an academic advisor working with pre-service teachers in the elementary education program in our college. I work one-on-one with undergraduate students supporting their academic needs, sit on committees within the college that pertain to undergraduate education, and facilitate a race dialogue course for students in the program under study.*

As an advisor, I don't generally interact much with seniors in our program—by their student teaching semester they should not need much in the way of academic advising. In past years that has opened up time to have conversations with seniors about their plans for the future, their goals, and talking about what they're seeing in their student teaching placements. This the Spring 2015 semester, though, most of my interactions with seniors involved discussion and complaints about the edTPA. They were more stressed than I have experienced before. It's easy to speculate why that might be—maybe we didn't do well preparing them; maybe it's the upheaval/changes in the college and program—but the reality is that we asked the seniors to do more this year and that more included the edTPA. The other changes to the program were internally motivated and responsive to feedback from past students; edTPA was externally motivated and our implementation was impeded by a lack of concrete information or decisions from the state.

In my role as an advisor I find myself constantly zooming in and out from micro to macro level concerns. On the one hand, I want what's best for students and want each of them to graduate and get licensed. On the other hand, I can't believe that I find myself directly supporting Pearson and a neoliberal education reform agenda that is so far from my personal values. At what point do I say no, I won't participate in that, even if protesting would mean students not getting licensed? What is my role is protecting or standing up for a vision of public education, including educating teachers, that differs substantially from that of the State Board of Education? What is my responsibility to my advisees?

## **Discussion**

Our self-study helped us to think more deeply about our practices as faculty, staff and graduate students within the larger context of teacher education. Our continuing goal was to support students to succeed in this particular assessment while not giving over our program entirely to test preparation. While this did not work well in Year One, what we learned from our research was useful in planning for Year Two. Writing this paper helped us to make suggestions to the larger program faculty and instructors.

After hearty discussions, we have put some changes in place. We have designated a part-time edTPA coordinator who meets with students to talk about the details of preparing for the edTPA. Instructors are no longer responsible for teaching the rubrics and the formats. The

edTPA coordinator will run sessions during fall semester to prepare them for their spring semester work on the portfolio. She will be the point person for questions; instructions and information will come from one source instead of multiple instructors and coordinators. The program has also adopted an online program (Edthena) that will facilitate uploading and labeling of the portfolio, which caused a lot of confusion last year, another dip into the corporate world in order to better facilitate *passing the test*.

As instructors we continue to be committed to integrating the knowledge students need for the portfolio into our courses but we will not be teaching directly to the assessment. We have learned how to use the required terms to identify ideas and skills previously described in different ways; and we emphasize more than before both informal and formal ways to assess students' work. Using edTPA vocabulary, is compliance behavior, but requires only small changes in the language we use in our teaching; the latter, more emphasis on student assessment, is good regardless of the edTPA. Evaluating student learning is always a challenge for teacher candidates and emphasizing this more enhances our teacher education goals. In this way, the edTPA has influenced our program in a positive way.

Our major conclusion, however, is that the problems with this assessment, as it currently stands, outweigh the positive contributions. We have identified three limitations from our self-study. First, we have lost control over which of our students are licensed to teach. While we determined that all but 2 students "passed" the portfolio review last year, there were clearly stronger and weaker portfolios. Many of the edTPA scores coincided with the judgments of those who worked closely with the students (course instructors, cooperating teachers, supervisors); however, there were also scores that did not, as described in Alexis Jones' narrative. If students *write well*, even though they have a weak performance in student teaching and course work, they can still get a high score. The opposite is also possible. A student who is a star in his/her student teaching and course work but does not write well, or who chooses to spend more time on student teaching than on producing the portfolio, could have a lower score, or fail. The edTPA, like any other high stakes standardized assessment system, fails to capture the complexity of teaching and learning and in this sense is always partial and potentially inaccurate (Popham, 2005; Ravitch, 2010).

A second limitation is that of the edTPA scoring system. A multinational corporation, Pearson, has been designated to score thousands of edTPA portfolios at \$300 additional cost to

students. The test itself has had virtually little to no reliability or validity research to substantiate that the assessment reliably measures what it says it measures (Dover, Schultz, Smith, & Duggan, 2015; Singer, 2015); neither do we know the inter-rater reliability of the scorers, whose qualifications and training vary. Pearson is building an airplane while in flight as they continually change the scoring rubrics, and the state cutoff scores are yet to be determined. We seem to be holding students' professional lives in the balance while we wait to see if the airplane is safe to fly. It could be argued that the rush to put the edTPA in place outstripped solid preparation and pilot testing by Pearson, possibly putting profit motives above more thorough development of the scoring system (Dover et al., 2015).

The development of the edTPA is occurring within a context where Pearson and other lucrative entrepreneurial corporations are burgeoning. Standardized assessments are increasingly big business and increasingly farther removed from the programs and people who know the students best. Alongside the tests are new test-prep companies promising success on the edTPA, of course for a fee. Some of these companies advertise that they will coach students through the process, or even worse, collect their videos, and finish the portfolio for them (Dover et al, 2015; Singer, 2015).

A third limitation is the way in which the demands of the assessment detract from the goals of the assessment itself. The attempt to have students demonstrate their capabilities as a teacher is limited to one 20-minute videotape and written prompts requiring a particular type of writing to match particular scoring rubrics. The time and energy required to do this properly meant that our students had less time to plan for their "real" student teaching and less flexibility to respond to the needs of their students. Toward the end of fall semester and throughout the spring their thoughts and questions were laser-like focused on how to do the edTPA portfolio correctly. Nothing else seemed to matter. There were far fewer conversations about teaching and the challenges in their classrooms; they were frantic and frustrated. This no doubt was exacerbated by the fact that as instructors we were new to the system as well and not always sure how to answer their questions. Our response to this frenetic state was to cut back on the content in our program. We ended up deleting things that we thought were important in order to give more time for their work on the portfolio.

The fact that the portfolio preparation detracted from their learning to teach was the opposite of what we expected. We liked the way that the assessment paralleled what we were

trying to teach them to do. We expected that it would reflect their ability to plan, teach, assess, and reflect. We had been assigning video analyses and reflection for some time; we thought they were useful and gave us insights into students' teaching. They liked these assignments and learned from them. This same assignment for the portfolio, however, was a different experience when the scoring was *standardized*, tied to a rubric assessed by *outsiders*, and there were high-stakes consequences. It was no longer about learning but attempting to match your teaching to the rubric.

The requirement for "objective" outside inter-rater reliability narrows the scope of what students can write about, how they express themselves, how they show what they are doing in the classroom, and constrains their ability to be creative and spontaneous with students. Excluding the judgments of the people in the program who work intensely with them narrows what is assessed and opens the assessment to misjudgments. It also excludes any assessment of their wider participation in the teacher education program, including their ability to work collaboratively and get along with peers, their ability to sustain positive relationships with students, their leadership skills, or their social justice commitments.

The edTPA requires students to describe the context in which they teach because context matters to teaching. This assessment, to the contrary, removes the context of the teacher education program from the assessment of their teaching, thus denying its relevance and importance.

If this self-study and experience with the edTPA this first year has taught us anything it is that the attempt to accurately capture someone's ability to teach is not amenable to an assessment of a 20-minute videotape and formulaic writing to rubrics intended to be scored by those outside the context. In an attempt to help our students do well on this high-stakes assessment, we found ourselves teaching for compliance; we moved from talking about teaching to talking about rubrics. As teacher educators this was also a slide into oblivion as the evaluation of our teacher candidates is no longer within the purview of our professional judgments.

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