Preparing Pre-Service Teachers for Performance Assessments

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Abstract

Performance assessments have become one way that many teacher education programs use to evaluate the effectiveness and readiness of pre-service teachers. These assessments allow teacher candidates to demonstrate their ability to plan, instruct, assess, and reflect. Teacher education programs can make changes to the curriculum and provide various support structures that allow teacher candidates to successfully complete a performance assessment. This article describes the support systems that one university has initiated for teacher candidates submitting a performance assessment, the improvement the assessment has made on the program, and the impact it has made on the teaching effectiveness of graduates.

Teacher preparation programs strive to produce quality graduates who have the skills, experiences, and dispositions to be effective educators. The goal of these programs is that every graduate will be ready to teach and able to impact the learning of students in the local schools. In order to better prepare graduates, many programs have implemented performance assessments for their pre-service teacher candidates. Okhremtchouk et al. (2009) studied the perceptions of pre-service teachers who had participated in a performance assessment during their student teaching. The teacher candidates felt the experience of completing a performance assessment helped them become better teachers. They reported that they responded more appropriately to students, and felt they were able to plan better lessons and develop more effective assessments. In addition, pre-service teachers believed they were better prepared to meet the diverse needs of students after participating in a performance assessment.

Performance assessments provide important data for the teacher preparation program. Pre-service teachers are scored on the various aspects of teaching, such as planning, instruction, assessment, and reflection. The resulting data can be used to guide curricular changes, and can aid in the accreditation process (Darling-Hammond, 2010). These assessments are increasingly

seen as a way to demonstrate that graduates are adequately prepared to enter the teaching profession, and used as one of the indicators to identify strengths and weakness in teacher preparation programs (Lit & Lotan, 2013). Although many universities use performance assessments as a requirement for graduation, some states have also chosen to also use successful completion of a performance assessment as a condition for teacher licensure.

Performance Assessments

The National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) program was developed as an assessment for experienced and accomplished teachers. This assessment allows veteran teachers to demonstrate their effectiveness in advancing student achievement ("National Board of Professional Teaching Standards," n.d.), and by 2013, over 100,000 teachers in 50 states had achieved National Board Certification (www.nbpts.org). In the 1980's, Connecticut developed a summative portfolio system for beginning teachers called Beginning Educator Support and Training (BEST) program ("Consortium for Policy Research in Education," n.d.). It requires teachers in that state to develop and submit content-specific portfolios that demonstrate their teaching effectiveness during their second year of teaching. The goal was to improve student learning by improving teaching. While National Board addresses the competency of practicing professionals, and BEST was designed for beginning teachers, it was only recently that attention has been given to providing the same level of assessment for pre-service teachers. California, in response to State Senate Bill 2042 passed in 1998, developed several performance assessments for pre-service teachers such as the Performance Assessment of California Teachers (PACT),

the California Teacher Performance Assessment (CalTPA), and the Fresno Assessment of Student Teachers (FAST). FAST was a locally designed system, and was approved by the Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) to be used by Fresno State University (Togerson, Macy, Beare, & Tanner, 2009).

Many felt that the time was right for the establishment of a national performance assessment for pre-service teachers, and in response to this need, the edTPA was developed by Stanford University faculty and staff at the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity (SCALE). This assessment drew from the experience of other performance assessments, such as the NBPTS and PACT, and was written with input from teachers and teacher educators. For the edTPA, candidates are asked to teach a learning segment of 3-5 lessons in which they demonstrate their ability to effectively plan, instruct, assess, analyze, and reflect. They are required to submit artifacts such as lesson plans, instructional materials, video recording clips, assessments, student work samples, and written responses to commentaries. The accompanying rubrics highlight the importance of the work being student-centered and not teacher-centered. It is designed as a pre-service assessment to identify if teacher education graduates are ready and equipped to assume the responsibilities of a teacher ("edTPA," n.d.).

As more states learned about the edTPA, the Teacher Performance Assessment Consortium (TPAC) was formed. Tennessee was one of the pilot states to join the Consortium, and by 2013, thirty-three states and the District of Columbia were implementing the edTPA at some level. Some states have used the edTPA for licensure or program completion,

some to inform the program and provide data, and still others have been at an exploratory level to learn about the possibilities ("edTPA," n.d.).

Austin Peay State University (APSU), located in Clarksville, Tennessee, began implementing the edTPA with teacher candidates in 2011. The number of edTPA submissions has grown each semester since initial implementation. In spring 2011, 29 edTPAs were submitted in three content areas. During the academic year of 2013-2014, a total of 187 edTPAs in 16 content areas were submitted for national scoring.

Supporting Pre-Service Teachers

In the process of implementation, it was evident at Austin Peay State University that supporting pre-service teachers needed to be a priority in order for the implementation of a performance assessment, such as the edTPA, to be successful. Faculty planned specific ways they would support teacher candidates in all aspects of the edTPA, beginning in the Foundation of Education course and continuing through the submission of the edTPA during their last semester of student teaching. This meant redesigning the curriculum, changing student teaching placements, and revising support structures before and during student teaching.

Curriculum Changes

At Austin Peay State University, it was important that elements of the edTPA be embedded in the courses, so that from the moment teacher candidates entered the teacher education program, they were practicing the edTPA, and in doing so, advancing their skills as a professional. Okhremtchouk et al. (2009) affirmed this practice in their study. They reported that

teacher preparation programs could support candidates by embedding aspects of the assessment into coursework, and providing effective feedback during the work. They also found that participants felt better prepared if they were given information about the assessment before the student teaching semester, and that participants who reported having the most positive experience, credited this to being well supported throughout the program (Okhremtchouk et al., 2009). Darling-Hammond and Snyder further asserted that performance assessments should not be viewed as add-ons in the program, but should be integrated in curriculum and instruction (2000).

Pre-service candidates were given opportunities during their earliest field experiences to practice planning, teaching, assessing, and reflecting, as they would in the edTPA. In their field experiences during the Foundation of Education course, they used the contextual information form to begin to view the class as individual students with diverse needs. In the instructional strategies course, they practiced lesson planning with special regard to the needs of students, effective strategies, and academic language. During their technology course, they practiced video recording with special emphasis on student engagement. The candidates learned the skills to record, clip, and upload their videos.

One particular area of curricular change was in leading the teacher candidates to analyze student work and learning. This practical task was essential in preparation of the candidates to not only be successful in the edTPA, but also to be successful as a teacher of record. Assessments were no longer viewed as simply paper and pencil tests, but as ways to focus planning future

lessons with specific goals and outcomes in mind (Shepard et al., 2005). They were asked to analyze student responses not only on formative assessments, but also by concentrating the work samples of two focus students. This type of analysis forced the teacher candidates to evaluate the needs and strengths of the students, reflect on the impact of their instruction, and plan for appropriate next steps. It helped them evaluate the impact that their instruction had on the students in the classroom.

Such structured performance practices throughout the curriculum provided the chance for the faculty and pre-service teachers to share a common focus in regard to a performance assessment and its demands (Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust, Shulman, 2005). Curricular changes can be challenging, but are an important part of the support system for candidates.

It may be the first and only time in a program that candidates and their instructors can see whether they indeed understand and can apply what they are supposed to be learning. Many programs have to make major changes to accomplish this, by integrating areas of knowledge, reducing fragmentation among courses and clinical experiences, increasing application to practice, and paying more attention to areas that have traditionally been underdeveloped in teachers' repertoires (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 19).

These opportunities to practice the edTPA, as a part of the curriculum, helped form the basis of the support system. They became important learning experiences in preparation for their student teaching.

Student Teaching

While pre-service candidates had been given many opportunities to practice elements of the edTPA as a part of coursework, specific and organized support was needed during the weeks and months that a candidate was preparing for submission.

At Austin Peay State University, teacher candidates participate in a Residency Year for student teaching. This affords them more time in their student teaching placement, and more time to prepare their edTPA. Residency 1 consists of five weeks in the semester prior to the student teaching semester, which is Residency 2. During Residency 1, teacher candidates work on completing the contextual information portion of the edTPA. They are required to identify the unique characteristics of their school and classroom. They must also be able to discuss the individual strengths and needs of the students, the curriculum, textbook, resources, technology, and any other information that would guide the planning of the lessons. Seminars planned throughout Residency 1 focus on topics such as academic language, video recording and clipping, effective assessment, feedback, and reflection.

To prepare teacher candidates for the edTPA, an additional learning activity was created during Residency 1. The focus of this assignment was teaching a set of lessons, planned to address the specific needs of the students in the classroom. The teacher candidates also completed the commentary, reflection, and analysis of those lessons, using the content-specific handbooks and templates of the edTPA. In consultation with the mentor teacher, the teacher candidates prepared 1-2 lessons to teach in the class. The candidate had to be

able to demonstrate that the lesson was based on the needs and strengths of the students in the class. For example, if during the contextual information, the candidate identified two English Language Learning (ELL) students, then during the planning, instruction, and assessment of the lessons, the needs of those students should have been reflected. University faculty members observed and evaluated the teacher candidate during the instruction and offered suggestions for improvement. Pre-service candidates video recorded their lessons and met back at the university for peer review and discussion. This preparation in Residency 1 is intensive, but gave the candidates a real sense of what would be required for the actual submission. One candidate spoke of the intensive feedback and mentoring from the university faculty. She said, "The one on one time, support, group meetings, and reflective feedback helped me grow to be a better educator (candidate, fall 2013)."

During Residency 2 (the student teaching semester), teacher candidates continued to receive support as they completed their actual edTPA, but the type of support changed in order to be within the acceptable level of support. It was important that the educative value of the edTPA not taken away from the candidates by offering too much directed support. Instead of rewriting or editing their written work, faculty asked open-ended questions that led the candidates to analyze and reflect on their work. They helped guide candidates to analyze and reach conclusions based on their own work.

Residency 2 seminars were developed to allow candidates to gather in peer groups according to content areas. In these groups, they were able to discuss their edTPA and to talk with each other about any challenges they were facing. Faculty facilitators guided the groups and provided additional information as needed. These sessions were very valuable to candidates. A former student, who submitted an edTPA in fall, 2013, stated,

> *I feel that I was very much prepared for the edTPA. If it weren't for the coaching and help from my University professors and my mentor teachers I would have been lost. The one-on-one time, support, group meetings (where all of the student teachers could talk to each other and grow from one another's experiences) and reflective feedback helped me grow to be a better educator and pass the edTPA.*

edTPA Scores

When edTPA was initially implemented, the submissions were scored by trained faculty members on campus. Beginning spring 2012, the edTPAs were submitted to Pearson to distribute for national scoring. A revision of the number of rubrics in spring 2013 from 13 to 15 makes it difficult to make exact comparisons before that date, but Table 1 shows Austin Peay's increase in scores for three consecutive semesters.

These increases are important to note because as the program as revised the curriculum, established seminars, workshops, and opportunities for practice, the scores have increased. Although there is certainly room for improvement, it appears from the data that the support systems are effective and yielding reasonable increases each semester.

Better Program, Better Teachers

As programs are more willing to make the necessary changes to prepare candidates to be successful in the edTPA,

they will in turn be improving their own program. Graduates have reported that the edTPA helped them be a better teacher. One beginning teacher reported, "The edTPA engaged me to think deeper about the impact of thoughtful planning on the long term development of students (candidate in spring 2014)." Another candidate who submitted in fall, 2014, felt that the edTPA prepared her for evaluations as a teacher of record. She said "the edTPA is based closely on what educators are evaluated on by their principals. This is a fantastic way to show them what they are clearly expected to do in the classroom."

Professors in the teacher education program have also noted an improvement since the implementation of the edTPA. "I think that the edTPA has made a substantial impact on the performance of our candidates. The edTPA provides a thread of consistency for our candidates to align a coherent teaching plan with the needs of students at the center of the process (reading professor)." In the area of Special Education, often the complex tasks of planning instructional strategies can be challenging for the pre-service teacher. "Composing the edTPA leads them through the process of using these goals and objectives to plan instruction based on student needs, instruct and engage the learner, and then assess the students' learning to develop future strategies (special education professor)."

The local schools will reap the benefits of these changes as they receive teachers who are confident in their ability to effectively impact the learning and achievement of students. Principals have been supportive of the preparation that APSU graduates receive, and appreciate the rigor. "I think that Austin Peay has really stepped up their game in regards to the preparation of their teacher graduates. The edTPA has helped prepare students for serious thought-provoking planning and work (elementary principal)". Principals have also noted that the experience they gained while preparing an edTPA has helped them be better prepared and equipped to enter the classroom. "They are able to plan backwards and know what student mastery of a learning target skill looks like in order to determine their explicit and direct classroom instruction. It helps them be more effective teachers (elementary principal)".

Implementing a performance based assessment for a teacher education program is not a small or easy task. It takes the faculty working together to revise the curriculum, and a well-developed support system including seminars, workshops, and peer group work. Students must be willing to accept the challenge, and put in the necessary work to be successful. The result can be a teacher education program that produces graduates who are more confident, more effective, and better prepared to enter the teaching profession.

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Table 1
edTPA Scores

	Average Cumulative Score (highest possible 75)	Average Rubric Score (highest possible 5)
Spring 2014	43.4	2.9
Fall 2013	42.3	2.8
Spring 2013	39.1	2.6

About the Author

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