

The Impact of the Special Education edTPA as an Assessment and Professional Development Tool

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Abstract:

The edTPA, the first national performance assessment which has been adopted by a total of forty-four states, requires teacher candidates to plan, instruct, and analyze an assessment in their content area. Candidates must receive a passing score established by their respective state of licensure. This research study focused on the special education content area and how beginning and novice teachers perceived this unique teacher licensure requirement. The researchers interviewed nine participants and the following themes emerged through the semi-structured interviews: positive components such as importance of preparation and self-reflection; negative components of excessive time and work, repetition, technical issues, and narrow focus; and professional development tools such as an effective alignment to teacher evaluations, authentic experiences, and preparing them to improve future student assessments. In addition, inequitable practices of the edTPA are explored and recognized.

Introduction

In 2015, the edTPA became a high-stakes, performance assessment for teacher candidates in several U.S states. Since then, forty-four states and the District of Columbia have adopted the edTPA as a tool to measure teacher readiness (SCALE, 2020). This assessment requires

preservice teachers to thoughtfully develop and evaluate their teaching in the areas of planning, instruction, and assessment. Throughout the process of completing the edTPA, teacher candidates hone their skills and results provide these individuals with feedback regarding strengths and needs regarding their practice.

Over twenty-seven content areas have specifically designed assessments including the area of special education. The special education edTPA has specific components that are unique to the content area. One individual focus learner is the subject of the special education edTPA. Participants are required to plan, instruct, and assess a focus learner by identifying the student's individual strengths and needs as well as targeting student interest. Additionally, the special education edTPA requires a section on the focus learner's communication skills including a discussion on the student's expressive and receptive needs (SCALE, 2019).

While every content area is designed to address the unique aspects of each area, the overall goals of the edTPA are improve student outcomes; improve the information base guiding improvement of teacher preparation programs; strengthen the information base for accreditation and evaluation of program effectiveness; be used in combination with other measures as a requirement for licensure; and guide professional development for teachers across the career continuum (AACTE, n.d.).

The purpose of this study was to identify special education edTPA completers' (who are beginning or novice special education teachers) perceptions of the positive and negative aspects of the edTPA. Additionally, edTPA goal #5, "guide professional development for teachers across the career continuum," was investigated to determine how the edTPA served as a guide for professional development for practicing special education teachers. Specifically, the researchers addressed the following research questions:

1. What did participants recall as the positive components of completing the special education edTPA?
2. What did participants recall as the negative components of completing the special education edTPA?
3. In the areas of planning, instruction, and assessment, how did participants view the special education edTPA as a professional development tool that has an impact on current teaching?

Review of Related Literature

To professionalize teaching, the edTPA was created to serve as a summative performance assessment comparable to exams in other professional fields (Rice & Drame, 2017). States introduced the edTPA as a high-stakes assessment tied to licensure. “In some states... a teacher cannot be certified even if they pass all other assessments and program-specific requirements, but do not pass the edTPA” (p. 255). The edTPA has been used as a high-stakes performance assessment in several states for teacher candidates since 2015. Available research has primarily focused on the overall perceptions of recent edTPA completers (Beal-Alvarez & Scheetz, 2016; Davis & Armstrong, 2018; Greenblatt, 2019; Heil & Berg, 2017; Meuwissen & Choppin, 2015; Paine, Zhou, 2018), student teaching supervisors (Donovan & Cannon, 2017), and cooperating teachers (Seymour, Burns & Henry, 2018).

Additionally, little research exists in specific content areas including special education, and especially connected to the edTPA performance assessment. When conducting an article search through the ERIC database using the Boolean/phrase “special education edTPA” only four articles were generated. The first article, “edTPA: Assisting Rural Special Education Teacher Candidates to Incorporate Self-Regulation Skills in Planning and Instruction,” focused

on self-determination as a common theme in the special education edTPA. The results of this study explained how a teacher preparation program assisted their pre-service teachers in incorporating self-regulatory behaviors in lesson plans to help promote self-determination (Rivera, McKissick & Adams, 2020). The three other articles that appeared from the ERIC database search all dealt with general special education edTPA issues including an analysis of edTPA policy (Bartlett, Otis-Wilborn & Peters, 2017), emerging issues with the special education edTPA (Bergstrand Othman, Robinson & Molfenter, 2017) and a qualitative study on teacher perspectives of the edTPA from 2017 (Bacon & Blachman).

There is also a lack of research exploring the potential benefits of the edTPA as a professional development tool for new teachers. In a research study that attempted to explore the long-term benefits of the edTPA, Zhou (2018) conducted case studies of four first year teachers in an elementary education classroom and concluded that passing edTPA scores were not indicative of teacher readiness. In an Othman et al. research study (2017), the authors concluded that the edTPA assessment benefits are short-lived and that more research is needed. In fact, they suggested researching edTPA's potential benefits would be better during the first three years after completion as they pondered that novice teachers may "assimilate to the expectations of their school out of a fear of failure (p. 276). Research on the continued benefits to special education teachers in their teaching careers has not been explored, and that is where this research study intends to fill the gaps of missing research. In addition, we wanted to see if our participants thought that a summative performance assessment was a fair way to measure a teacher candidate's teaching ability.

Inequitable Practices of the edTPA

Having a one-size-fits-all assessment is a struggle with special education when there is so much variability in classroom settings from self-contained classrooms to co-teaching environments to inclusion (Bacon & Blachman, 2017). The variability in levels of support needed by individual students can also cause difficulty with the one set of assessment requirements for the special education edTPA. While reading the “one size-fits-all assessment” edTPA description described by Bacon and Blachman, it made these researchers think about the inequitable practices involved in a high stakes performance assessment such as the edTPA, and it would be unfair of us to not mention these. These practices, including increased financial burden, time constraints, and academically dense language, impact both university students and faculty when preparing and executing this complex assessment.

On the path to becoming licensed educators, preservice teachers are hit with a host of fees or financial burdens due to the various state licensure testing requirements. For example, these education students must pass the basic skills test and a state subject content test before moving on to the student teaching semester, and these costs range from \$250-350. Then, during the student teaching semester, these same preservice teachers must pay an additional \$300 fee for the edTPA. One group that struggles to meet these financial burdens is first generation college students (FGCS) since they often do not have the necessary funds to complete a teacher education program. This group is not small with Short (2021) noting that one in six future teachers are part of this demographic. For these students who are struggling or who must take remedial college classes, they still have the dream of being an educator and must take the content test and edTPA several times to receive a passing score. Another financial burden of the edTPA is having access to video equipment which is a requirement of this performance assessment. For small higher education institutions, these schools cannot afford to purchase the latest video

equipment, nor provide IT support to help students edit videos, compress video clips, or upload videos to the Pearson site. For FGCS, these additional financial burdens would cause extra stress and time away from the student teaching experience.

In terms of financial burden for the university, some public and private universities with smaller budgets may have fewer or no faculty serve as the edTPA coordinator or give them a significant amount of release time to provide support for preservice teachers in the critical student teaching semester. After a quick Google search, one can see that some edTPA coordinators receive 6 hours of release time while others receive 1 hour. These coordinators stay updated on the edTPA changes, train and keep fulltime and adjunct faculty up-to-date, conduct student seminars, explain the edTPA rubrics, provide video support if IT is unable, support students who must retake the edTPA, and store edTPA support materials on the learning management systems such as Blackboard, Moodle, and Canvas.

Time constraints are also an equity issue for teacher candidates since they are often graduate students who have children and fulltime occupations while completing their student teaching semester. The requirements of student teaching have not been reduced; rather, they have been increased with the edTPA component added on to it. As Othman et al (2017) point out, “the edTPA completion and submission draw faculty and candidate attention and effort away from the critical teaching tasks” (p. 269), and yet, the candidates’ time is focused on a passing yet another high stakes assessment. One cannot forget the student teachers who come from low-income areas and *must* work a part-time or fulltime job to make ends meet. Another time constraint is that education faculty are now “teaching to the test” and miss out on those teachable moments in the university classroom which are so worthwhile in the profession.

Another issue in terms of financial and time constraints is training the fulltime and adjunct faculty along with the student teachers' cooperating teachers on the edTPA. All educators are confronted with many responsibilities; many times, they are unwilling to attend training unless it is during the school day or if there is a financial incentive. Underfunded universities and K-12 school systems may not have the financial resources to properly train the associated faculty, and therefore, the students in these programs may suffer due to a lack of knowledge and support by these stakeholders. Peck et al. (2014) support our claims: "the costs of supporting faculty and staff participation in training and scoring for a TPA are not trivial," and while some schools have provided supports such as additional training, "these kinds of organizational supports for teacher collaboration and learning are the exception and not the rule in higher education" (p. 23).

Academically dense language used in the edTPA evaluation could also be an inequitable practice since many teacher education programs across the country are forced to use language which is associated with Stanford University's teacher education program and not their own. In a quick glance of the edTPA glossary found in all the required assessment handbooks, one would find the following terms: discourse, syntax, learning segment, language demands, language functions, and assets, among others. These academic terms might be easier to explain to students whose first language is English, but one can only image the difficulty for teacher candidates who are low income or English language learners. Across the country, higher education institutions are trying to diversify the teacher education population, not homogenize. Barmore (2016) found that an additional financial strain such as the edTPA and other new teacher testing requirements became an issue when trying to diversify the future teacher population. In addition to Barmore's findings, Chung and Zou (2021) found that the edTPA reduced the new teacher population, and

especially “hurt minority candidates in less selective programs” (p. 32), and these researchers are extremely worried about the continued whiteness of new teachers.

The Specifics of the edTPA

The edTPA assesses teacher readiness through three separate tasks that must be completed with students in a classroom setting. The main components of the edTPA can be divided into three tasks which are grouped as Task 1, Task 2, and Task 3, and the tasks are completed during a “learning segment” or 3-5 lessons of interconnected content. SCALE’S (Stanford Center on Assessment, Learning, and Equity) explanation provides an insight into what they expect from preservice teachers: “edTPA is intended to be used as a summative assessment given at the end of an educator preparation program for teacher licensure or certification and to support state and national program accreditation” (AACTE, n.d.).

With the assistance of “more than 1,000 educators from 29 states and the District of Columbia and more than 450 institutions of higher learning helped develop, pilot, refine and field test edTPA” (AACTE, n.d.), SCALE eventually settled on fifteen rubrics or 5 rubrics per task in the special education content area. Within each rubric, a teacher candidate’s performance is based on five levels:

1 means a performance level that is unacceptable to teach

2 means the candidate has some skills to teach,

3 means the candidate is at a level that is acceptable for a new teacher

4 and 5 levels mean the teacher has exceptional skills for a beginning teacher (Atkins, 2016).

Student teachers are expected to score around a 3 performance level or acceptable for a beginning teacher on most rubrics with a cumulative score ranging from 35 to 41, depending on the individual state's qualifying score.

To provide background information for those unfamiliar with the edTPA, the researchers provide an insight into the complex assessment. As part of task 1, “candidates submit contextual documentation (information about students, including those with special needs, along with school and community data), lesson plans, planned assessments that will be used in the learning segment, and extensive written commentary explaining the justification for their plans” (Parks & Powell, 2015, p. 104). Task 2 is slightly different for each content area since there is a video component embedded in this task. Since this research study connects to the special education content area, qualifications for the video portion of Task 2 will be detailed. The *edTPA Special Education Assessment Handbook* (SCALE, 2019) explained the video(s): “Select 1–2 video clips (no more than 20 minutes total). The interactions in the clip(s) should demonstrate how you (1) establish a positive learning environment and (2) engage and support the focus learner (along with other learners in a group setting) in developing and applying the new knowledge and skills related to the learning goal” (p. 8). This video requirement combines with the written commentary in that preservice teachers explain their actions with time stamps and quotes commonly referred to as evidence. The edTPA culminates with Task 3 as preservice teachers analyze a key assessment in their learning segment. SCALE provides test takers with the *Understanding Rubric Level Progression* (2018) document that explains each rubric and its corresponding 1-5 performance level score in detail. This document summarizes the 5 rubrics in Task 3 as follows: analyze the focus learner’s performance, provide feedback to guide further learning, learner understanding and use of feedback, explain the focus learner’s use of

communication, and use assessment to inform instruction. With rubric 15 or “use assessment to inform instruction,” the cycle of effective teaching is complete as teachers prepare the next set of instruction via teaching tools, the next steps in terms of curriculum, and/or a reteaching of material.

The Special Education edTPA

The edTPA has specific assessments in 27 content areas ranging from early childhood, elementary mathematics, middle childhood science to secondary English-language arts (edTPA, n.d.). The purpose of this study is to focus only on the special education edTPA. The special education edTPA is unique in a several ways. “For example, the Special Education Handbook has a requirement of reflection and analysis based on the progress of a focus learner with multiple learning needs rather than a classroom of students” (Rice & Drame, 2017, pp. 255-256). Some practical issues have arisen as a result of working with only one student. According to Bergstrand Othman, Robinson and Molfenter (2017), best practices and current classroom trends like grouping become counterproductive working with a focus learner.

As a matter of fact, and in addition to the benefits of working in groups, many schools can only afford in-class special education support when there is a group of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) rather than just one student. In many situations and while preparing for the edTPA, teacher candidates struggle with the need to pay more attention to the focus learner than to any other student in the group, especially for the sake of showing their best performance while working with that focus learner (pp. 273-274).

One other component of the special education edTPA that is different from other content areas is the section on communication skills. While other content areas require teacher

candidates to identify and support academic language including language function, language demands and vocabulary, the special education edTPA requires completers to identify one communication skill with planned supports (SCALE, 2018). According to the *edTPA Special Education Handbook* (SCALE, 2018), student teachers should:

Choose one communication skill that the focus learner will need to use to participate in learning tasks and/or demonstrate learning related to the learning goal. For a focus learner with a learning goal in the academic curriculum, this should be the language used in the appropriate discipline (literacy, mathematics, social studies, science), if appropriate for the learner. Explain how you will support the learner's use of the communication skill (p. 6).

One final issue that has been somewhat unique to the special education edTPA has been the number of revisions to the *Special Education Handbook* (Bartlett, Otis-Wilborn & Peters, 2017; Bergstrand Othman, et. al., 2017). In the beginning, the special education edTPA required student teachers to identify and plan for two focus learners using two learning targets. Later, the handbook changed to one focus learner with two learning targets. Eventually, the handbook settled on one focus learner with one learning goal. Having multiple handbook editions has caused stress to teacher education programs working to prepare their students for the special education edTPA (Bergstrand Othman, Robinson, & Molfenter, 2017).

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to identify beginning and novice teachers' perceptions of the special education edTPA and investigate how the edTPA serves practicing teachers as a professional development tool (see edTPA goal #5 above). Practicing special education teachers

who had completed the special education edTPA during their student teaching experience were interviewed as part of a focus group.

Participants

After these researchers determined that a focus group study about the above topics would be essential to the teacher education field, we contacted nine graduates from both the undergraduate and graduate special education programs at our small, Midwestern university. These students were some of the first to complete the special education edTPA through this teacher education program. The researchers used purposeful sampling for this focus group study by inviting all nine graduates to participate. A group email was sent to all special education graduates who had completed the edTPA to gauge interest in participating in the focus group interview about the special education edTPA. In the solicitation email, the participants were told the purpose of the study was to gather data regarding the special education edTPA assessment tool. The researchers sought to identify the positive and negative aspects of the edTPA, and the ability for the edTPA to serve as a professional development tool for future teachers.

Participants were offered the incentive of a free meal at a local restaurant as part of their involvement in the study. Since the edTPA is a high-stakes performance assessment tied to licensure and completed during the student teacher semester, educators who had completed the special education edTPA were enthusiastic to share their views about the performance assessment. Within a day of sending out the email invitation, all nine graduates accepted the invitation to participate.

In total, six practicing educators and three new educators recently completing their student teaching took part in the focus group interview. Of the full-time educators, two taught at the high school level, three taught at the middle school level, and one taught at the elementary

level. These same participants had various teaching experiences: one for three years, two for two years, two for one year, and one for four months. Of the nine participants, six completed the teacher education program as graduate students and three as undergraduate students. Three of the participants were newly licensed teachers who had not yet started their first-year teaching. Table 1 contains participant information of each focus group participant.

Table 1
Participant Information

Participant	Years since completing edTPA	Current teaching position
Participant A	2 years	K-3 EBD
Participant B	Less than 1 year (4 mos.)	H.S. Resource English/Social Skills
Participant C	Less than 1 year	Not currently teaching
Participant D	3 years	M.S. English, Math/RTI
Participant E	2 years	M.S. EBD
Participant F	1 full year	H.S. Resource
Participant G	1 full year	7 th Grade Resource
Participant H	Less than 1 year	Not currently teaching
Participant I	Less than 1 year	Not currently teaching

Setting

The group of 9 participants and 2 researchers gathered at an area restaurant that was centrally located 7 miles from the university campus. A private dining room was reserved, and the focus interview was conducted with all individuals sitting at one, large table. The private room allowed for uninterrupted discussion and provided minimal distractions from ambient noise in the restaurant.

Research Design

The researchers specifically chose semi-structured interviews within focus groups for several reasons. The group participants had a chance to explain their thinking to fellow group members, and we classified that as “thinking out loud” time. In addition, the researchers had the chance to observe how interviewees explained whether they agreed or disagreed with each other. During the focus group experience, we observed several benefits to this format: the researchers

felt the participants were free to share what thoughts came to mind in a nonconfrontational atmosphere, and we also had the ability to ask participants if they had the same experience as others.

This qualitative research study was exploratory in nature due to the limited research available on the special education edTPA and the perceptions of practicing educators who had completed the edTPA while in their student teaching experience. An exploratory method permits “open-ended investigation” (p. 80) and provides a preliminary investigation into a newly established phenomenon (Saldana, 2016). The researchers explored practicing teachers’ thoughts on the special education edTPA as a training tool once in the K-12 field using open-ended questioning and discussion.

Data Collection

Prior to conducting the focus group interview, the nine participants and two researchers shared a dinner in a private room at a local restaurant. The researchers were careful not to discuss the edTPA or any of the participants student teaching experiences in an effort to avoid potential bias in the interview that was going to take place after the meal.

The expense of the meal was covered by a faculty engagement grant awarded to the researchers. The premise of the grant encouraged faculty to become active researchers in their content areas. The time spent sharing dinner allowed the participants to become acquainted with the researchers and feel more comfortable with the setting. After dining, a semi-structured interview or what Brinkman (2012) describes as “planned, yet flexible interviews with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of specific experiences of the interviewees” (p. 85), was conducted over a 50-minute time period. The interview script including the list of ground rules and questions is available in Appendix A.

The interview was considered semi-structured because interview questions were developed ahead of time based on information obtained in the existing literature, but follow-up questions were also allowed to gain more specific data. The researchers particularly embraced Brinkman's semi-structured interview philosophy of "the interviewer has a greater chance of becoming visible as a knowledge-producing participant in the process itself, rather than hiding behind a preset interview guide" (p. 85). Through this interaction, the researchers provided insight and clarification as needed.

Three recording devices were used to capture the thoughts and perspectives provided by the participants. One researcher served as the primary host and asked most of the questions while the other researcher took notes and asked follow-up questions as needed. All nine participants actively answered questions about their experiences with the special education edTPA.

Data Analysis

Focus groups were conducted after which the researchers transcribed the recordings, and it is important to mention that these being destroyed after completing this article in order to preserve anonymity. To begin the data analysis process, the lead researcher transcribed the focus group interview by listening to the recorded conversations. The next step was for both researchers to code the transcribed interviews separately to look for themes, and the main objective of this technique was to take an unbiased approach to the data and not be influenced by our colleague. Coding collaboratively as opposed to coding solo is viewed as an ideal approach. According to Saldana (2016), "Multiple minds bring multiple ways of analyzing and interpreting data... Ultimately, team members must coordinate and ensure that their sometimes individual coding efforts harmonize" (p. 36).

In general, the researchers desired to meet the qualitative goals outlined by Saldana (2011), “the purpose and outcome of data analysis is to reveal to others through fresh insights what we’ve observed and discovered about the human condition” (p. 89). While working individually the researchers sought to analyze the data by searching for patterns to put into categories as part of the coding process. "Category construction is our best attempt to cluster the most seemingly alike things into the most seemingly appropriate groups” (Saldana, 2011, p. 91). To build these categories, the researchers annotated the transcribed the interview with codes about potential themes and identified comments that fit these patterns from all participants. The researchers were then able to use deductive reasoning to draw conclusions from the collected evidence.

After the codes were established, the researcher came together to identify common themes that provided insight on the three research questions. “Unlike codes, which are most often single words or short phrases that symbolically represent a datum, themes are extended phrases or sentences that summarize the manifest (apparent) or latent (underlying) meanings of data” (Saldana, 2011, p. 108). The focus group interview generated several themes that guided the researchers as in identifying the results of this study.

Results

As previously discussed, the focus group interview was coded and categorized into themes based on common responses from participants. These shared themes will be discussed to analyze each research question with quotes being used to support.... Quotes have been edited to remove filler and improve readability.

Research Question #1

Research question #1 asked, what did participants recall as the positive components of completing the edTPA? Related themes that emerged from the focus group included 1) importance of preparation and 2) self-reflection.

Interviewees described the importance of systematic training and preparation prior to the student teaching/edTPA semester. Participants voiced that thoughtful and thorough support from their teacher education program prior to completing the edTPA was invaluable. Participant E, a middle school, special education teacher with 2 full years of classroom experience, said, “I do feel that some of the classes at my university really prepared me for parts of the edTPA, so I wasn’t nervous about many parts of it.” Other participants agreed that the training received in their teacher education program was a positive aspect of the edTPA process. Participant A, who has also worked for two years as a special education teacher, added, “back then, I felt really prepared for it because of the classes (I took). I mean I felt like my teacher education program prepared us well.”

Self-reflection also emerged as a theme related to the positive components of the edTPA. The edTPA requires all students to video their teaching and reflect on their perceived strengths and areas in need of improvement. Additionally, student teachers must provide reflections on their entire teaching process including their planning, instruction, and assessment. Participant B, a high school special education teacher, stated:

I think that learning how to defend what you do as a teacher is really important, and I think edTPA really taught us to do that because you don’t always think ‘oh, why do I do this as a teacher.’ The edTPA really made you think and evaluate and analyze yourself and your actions as a teacher.

Being able to thoroughly explain and fully understand “the why” behind teaching served as a powerful tool for edTPA completers. Participant A added:

I agree with that. I think that was something that was good for me... deciding why I do the things I do and sometimes realizing that I didn't have a good enough reason. And, exploring why you're doing what you're doing helps you either to expand on your strengths or at least see what your weaknesses are.

Research Question #2

Themes related to research question #2 regarding the negative components of completing the edTPA were 1) excessive time and work, 2) repetition, 3) technical issues and 4) narrow focus.

All focus group participants acknowledged that the edTPA is overly time consuming and an excessive amount of work. Participant G, a 7th grade resource teacher, described the edTPA as "a lot of work." Participant E said, "it was so long." Additionally, Participant H added that the edTPA was "daunting." All participants nodded in agreement that the edTPA was an overwhelming process especially during their intense student teaching experience.

Respondents expressed that answering the edTPA commentary prompts became repetitive. Participant F, a high school resource teacher with one-year experience, stated that the most negative aspect of the edTPA was "trying to answer the same question 15 different ways." Participant G added, "trying to type the same thing without typing the same thing." One researcher followed this up by asking "So, you felt like a lot of the prompts were redundant?" This was answered with a resounding "yes" and "repetitive" along with head nods from all members of the focus group.

A final common theme regarding negative aspects of the edTPA dealt with technical issues. Many respondents reported having issues with technology when trying to record and edit their teaching videos for Task 2. Participant E stated:

I remember the video was a little daunting... I remember thinking 'how am I going to edit? I don't know how to do any of this.' So, I think that was very technical for a person that's not into film.

Others also agreed that the technology component required by the edTPA caused a number of difficulties. Participant C agreed:

I had a hard time too because I had a Chromebook, and I was trying to transfer from an Apple (device) to a Chromebook, but luckily my husband is a techie and I went, 'fix this' and he did, but that was really difficult because there was no one in IT who could help.

Participant I shared, "I recorded myself on my grandmother's iPad, and I accidentally clicked slow-mo. My video was 2 and ½ hours long and I had no idea how to condense it."

One concern that is strongly related to the special education edTPA is the narrow focus on working with only one student. Most edTPA content areas require student teachers to work with an entire class, whereas the special education edTPA involves working with one student, a focus learner. Interviewees found this practice problematic since working one-on-one with an individual student is not practical in a typical classroom environment. Participant E stated:

The special education edTPA made you look at your student individually when planning so what's going to work for this student might not work for that student, so I may have to do something different. The special education edTPA only has you focus on one student, and I feel like you should focus on all of them. I feel like it was very narrow to only talk about one.

While some participants saw the benefit of working one-on-one with students with significant disabilities, most did not think this was ideal for the edTPA. Participant F added:

I feel like it's a double-edged sword because it's beneficial to focus on all of the students especially if they're at such different cognitive levels like I have right now in my current classroom. I have really high-functioning and I have really low-functioning so if I could have focused on different levels on my edTPA, I feel like that would have been more beneficial to me instead of just focusing on one focus learner.

Finally, Participant A agreed that the variability of students in special education causes different teachers to have different needs in different settings. It is hard to write an edTPA assessment for a content area that is so vast. She stated:

I think it kind of touches on just a problem in general we have for the special education edTPA which is that we're specialized. When I did my edTPA, I had a resource class and it was more like a small general education class so I think that it is like a double-edged sword in a lot of ways and one of those is that it just depends on which classroom you're in and special education is just a huge spectrum so it would be nice if there was a little more flexibility to meet your situation because each classroom is different.

Research Question #3

In response to research question #3, participants were asked to explain how they viewed the edTPA as a professional development tool and how it currently impacts their teaching.

Themes that emerged were 1) alignment to current teacher evaluations, 2) authenticity, and 3) strengthened assessment. Those who had completed the special education edTPA had strong beliefs that the edTPA assessment was an authentic tool that helped them improve their teaching and assessment practices and that it is very well-aligned to the teaching evaluations they are now using in their current role.

Participants spoke at length regarding how well the edTPA assessment is linked to current teacher evaluation tools. Participants discussed the process of using Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) as part of their evaluation process. Student Learning Objectives require teachers to provide two learning objectives; one must be a district-wide objective and the other one must be a classroom assessment. These objectives are used to assess students in a similar format as the edTPA. Participant E explained:

This was just like the edTPA. I think for SLOs, when you're getting evaluated, the edTPA was phenomenal because it teaches you how to do SLOs, it teaches you how to prepare. You provide a pre-test, you teach the students the lesson, you provide a post test, and your students' scores all have to go up a percentage.

Other participants discussed the teacher evaluation program called PERA, the Performance Evaluation Reform Act, used by Illinois public schools. PERA requires schools to

evaluate administrators and teachers on professional skills and student growth. Participant A said:

We've been talking about how it was kind of hard to read the edTPA rubrics and it was hard to understand them and that's a problem that teachers have too when they're getting teacher evaluations because if you're doing PERA, you have all these rubrics and it can be overwhelming and for me it was helpful to have the experience of trying to understand the edTPA rubrics before so as far as planning goes, looking at PERA and what I needed to do, I already knew how to plan for that because of edTPA.

Finally, Participant D, a middle school resource teacher with three years' experience, explained how well the edTPA aligns with his teacher evaluation process.

It lines up perfectly! You have to submit lesson plans, information about your students, your class, what your goals are, what you want the students to achieve. You upload the pre-assessments, what could go wrong... so you're actually thinking ahead. Then you submit the post-assessment and a reflection. It lines up perfect.

When discussing the use of videotaping and self-reflection on teaching, multiple participants believed that the edTPA provided authentic training that helped them as teachers in their current classrooms today. Participant D admitted that the videotaping "was awkward... especially watching it, but I did pick up on mannerisms that would side-track the kids from learning. It was a good tool to see yourself." Participant I added:

I was nervous when I first used the camera. I was observed by my student teaching supervisor, and I filmed on the same day. I probably shouldn't have planned it that way because it made me nervous, but I found myself getting more comfortable the more I videotaped.

Aside from discussing the nervous component of using videotaping, participants believed that it authentically helped them reflect on their teaching. Participant E stated:

If I look back at my video today (I haven't watched it in two years, thank God!), but if I went back and looked back on it, I know over time I've definitely learned that I am very animated when I speak so when I'm trying to get the students to answer questions, I found I almost gave them the answers, and I've learned over time to stop doing that. Again, if I look back, I could definitely see that I prompted students verbally or facially without even knowing it so that would be something I probably should have learned back then, but I'm still getting it now.

Participants saw the value of video recording their teaching and reflecting on what they observed. A few participants said they hope to continue this practice in their current classroom setting in order to improve their teaching performance.

In the area of assessment, the focus group participants stated that the edTPA provided effective training that continues to be used in their classrooms. Participant B believed the Task 3 component offered a strong foundation in assessment practices in the special education setting:

I think edTPA helped me focus on the growth of my students instead of just grades and assessing them because there was a section where you had to chart how they did on the pre-assessment and the post-assessment. My focus learner started with a 45% at the beginning and throughout the whole lesson, she went up to a 90% and that just made me realize that those grades don't actually matter... just the progress that she made throughout those lessons really impacted me as a teacher and to focus more on how she was developing as a student.

Completers of the special education edTPA appreciated applying assessment best practices beyond basic grading and paper-and-pencil assignments and worksheets. Additionally, one component of Task 3 expects students to be a part of their assessment through self-assessment and self-monitoring practices. Participants saw the value in having students participate actively in the assessment process. Participant E stated:

I think of one of the big things I took away was student-led assessment and not always having to be a paper test. It can be anything so there's a lot of times in my classroom where now I'll say, "okay, we can either have a test or you guys can write a Kahoot" and then they have a choice and "you can either write an essay or you can do one more research topic and answer these questions." I think that was a big takeaway... giving the students more options.

Finally, Participant A praised the edTPA for the practical assessment training that was provided:

One more thing that has definitely helped is being able to tie in how we had the focus learner and we were really watching them work through their objective. I kind of brought that over with my current students and I don't think I would have done that without the edTPA so I do like that it taught me how to help the focus learner work toward their goal

and their learning objective at the same time. I didn't know how to do that before doing it for the edTPA.

Discussion

This study sought to gather the thoughts and perspectives of special education teachers who had completed the edTPA during their student teaching semester. The semi-structured interview was conducted as part of a focus group to gain input on the positive and negative components of the edTPA. Additionally, the members of the focus group provided thoughtful information regarding how the edTPA served as a professional development tool and still impacts their teaching today.

Overall, participants were pleased with the edTPA process and emphasized the importance of effective training prior to the student teaching semester. Interview responses demonstrated that a proper foundation provided in teaching preparation programs helps students to have a more positive edTPA experience. Additionally, teachers appreciated the self-reflective focus of the edTPA. The entire assessment encouraged participants to reflect on the reasons behind their planning, teaching and assessment. Being self-reflective forced these student teachers to identify their own strengths and areas in need of improvement.

Conversely, participants also expressed negative aspects to the special education edTPA. Primarily, interview participants strongly agreed that the special education edTPA is an overwhelming amount of work and overly time consuming. This outcome matches results from other edTPA studies (Cronenberg, et al, 2016; Bergstrand Othman, Robinson, & Molfenter, 2017; Whittaker, Pecheone & Stansbury, 2018; Greenblatt, 2019). A study conducted by Bergstrand, Othman, Robinson & Molfenter, (2017), stated, "...uploading documents that have been converted to appropriate formats, taping lessons, and watching them afterward to reflect,

and other edTPA requirements represent additional time pressures that take away from the focus on student learning at both the p-12 and teacher preparation levels” (p. 271).

The repetitive nature of the edTPA commentary questions and the technical issues that participants faced could also be related to the first negative theme relating to the amount of work and time needed to complete the assessment. Focus group participants expressed that the special education edTPA is overly repetitive as they found themselves repeating their responses to multiple commentary prompts. Interviewees believed the edTPA could be more effective and more efficient if the overall process were more streamlined. Additionally, technical issues also contributed to frustrations. For many, the edTPA requires technical proficiencies in the areas of recording and editing videos. Extra training may be required by some student teachers which again contributes to the excessive amount of time needed to complete the entire performance assessment.

Finally, results indicated that the edTPA is well-aligned with teacher evaluation assessments being used in K-12 school settings. Interview participants were very pleased that the edTPA provided a firm foundation for their teaching which, in turn, helped with a quick understanding of an often-complicated teacher evaluation process. This result demonstrates that the edTPA does have another positive aspect as a professional development tool for future teachers.

Limitations

The researchers recognize that several limitations exist within this study. First, as a part of doing convenience sample, the participants included graduates from one institution who attended the university at different times within a 4-year span. The results also only represent the views of graduates from a private school. Additionally, participants were both in

undergraduate and graduate special education programs at the time of completing their edTPA. Demographic limitations also exist. All participants were Caucasian and working as teachers at public schools in the same region. Finally, the use of an incentive could be viewed as a limitation to this study. While it may have motivated individuals to attend the focus group meeting, the researchers do not believe this had any impact on the results of the study.

Recommendations

While broad conclusions could not be reached, the participants of the edTPA focus group were able to recognize both positive and negative aspects of the special education edTPA as an assessment and professional development tool. In future research studies, the researchers want to focus more on the complex issues associated with the edTPA.

At the forefront of our recommendations is for researchers to continue to examine the inequitable practices associated with such a large-scale performance assessment. Although it was not recognized by our focus group participants and perhaps due to their privilege and middle-class values often seen in the new teacher population, these authors recognize that financial burden and time constraints are the largest factors associated with equity by both students and faculty. Many states provide a reduced fee voucher system which is sponsored by the state and Pearson in order to reduce costs. The voucher system is small with only 1-4 vouchers provided each semester, and the specific distribution system is determined by the educator program with most choosing a random lottery system. From this point on, we will propose that our teacher education program use a needs-based application system for distribution instead of a random lottery type system.

In terms of academically dense language being an inequitable practice, these researchers recommend front loading courses with language that is part of this performance assessment. We

recommend that professors in each education course give clear and distinct definitions of terms associated with the edTPA, and we plan to create a matrix to ensure that all courses are preparing student teachers to pass this high-stake assessment.

In respect to what the participants noted in the focus group interviews, the researchers recommend future studies that address the limitations of this study. Additional institutions, both private and public, should study graduate's perceptions of the edTPA. Similar research should also be conducted with a more diverse panel of participants.

The results of this study should serve as a foundation to other content areas regarding the efficacy of the edTPA. While this study only looked at the short-term impact of the special education edTPA, all other content areas should receive similar scrutiny. Identifying how the edTPA can have a lasting impact on the teaching profession could contribute to positive attitudes regarding the use of this high-stakes assessment.

In addition to this qualitative study, it is vital that longitudinal, quantitative studies be conducted to build on this research and allow for inferential results. Existing edTPA research studies often shed a negative light on the assessment. Having more possible results that find value in the edTPA will allow current and future student teachers to have a greater understanding of why they are doing this work.

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Appendix A

FOCUS GROUP INTRODUCTION

WELCOME:

“Thanks for agreeing to be part of the focus group. We appreciate your willingness to participate.”

INTRODUCTIONS

Moderator; assistant moderator

PURPOSE OF FOCUS GROUPS

“Today, we will be conducting a focus group to glean information regarding your edTPA experience.

We need your input and want you to share your honest and open thoughts with us.”

“GROUND RULES

1. WE WANT YOU TO DO THE TALKING.

We would like everyone to participate.

I may call on you if I haven't heard from you in a while.

2. THERE ARE NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWERS

Every person's experiences and opinions are important.

Speak up whether you agree or disagree.

We want to hear a wide range of opinions.

3. WHAT IS SAID IN THIS ROOM STAYS HERE

We want folks to feel comfortable sharing when sensitive issues come up.

4. WE WILL BE TAPE RECORDING THE GROUP

We want to capture everything you have to say.

We won't identify anyone by name in our research. You will remain anonymous.

Are there any questions?”

Let's begin:

1. First let's do introductions. Please introduce yourself and tell us the following: What do you currently teach? How long have you been teaching? And how long has it been since you completed the edTPA?
2. Think back to the time you completed the edTPA. What was that experience like for you then?
3. What do you recall as the positive components of completing the edTPA?
4. What are your thoughts on having to film yourself teaching and reflect on what you saw?
5. What do you recall as the negative components of completing the edTPA?

6. Now let's think about your life now. Now, that you are in the classroom, can you reflect back on the edTPA and think about how it has impacted your teaching. Specifically...
 - a. How has the edTPA impacted you in the area of planning?
 - b. How has the edTPA impacted you in the area of teaching/instruction?
 - c. How has the edTPA impacted you in the area of assessment?
7. Have you found the edTPA to be aligned to your own teacher evaluation process? How so? Please explain?
8. What advice would you give to future special education student teachers who will be completing the edTPA?
9. If you were a policy maker at the state level, would you continue to require student teachers do the edTPA?