

# Embracing the Controversy: edTPA, Corporate Influence, and the Cooptation of Teacher Education

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*This commentary examines recent controversies surrounding edTPA, a high-stakes, standardized teacher performance assessment (TPA), focusing on the complex relationships among TPA policy, scholarship, and profit. We argue that TPA mandates have outpaced the research base, thus illustrating the influence of an intensely lucrative educational marketplace. We conclude this essay with a call for independent, peer-reviewed scholarship regarding the validity, reliability, and impact of high-stakes, privatized, teacher performance assessment.*

We recently published a commentary in *Teachers College Record* (Dover et al., 2015) critiquing edTPA, a high-stakes, privately-operated, standardized teacher performance assessment (TPA). In it, we argued that edTPA (the most widely implemented standardized TPA nationwide) undermines and de-professionalizes teaching and teacher education through its reliance on anonymous, external “scorers” who rate candidate competency based solely upon their review of 3-5 written lesson plans, 20 minutes of video, samples of student work, and candidates’ written narratives. Like other critics of edTPA, we questioned the practical and ethical implications of institutionalizing a reductive, standardized, and delocalized construction of “good teaching” (e.g., Au, 2013; Berlak, 2010; Madeloni & Gorlewski, 2013; Singer, 2015a, 2015b). Our commentary raised concerns regarding the insufficient analysis of equity issues associated with edTPA and other high-stakes TPAs, in terms of both scoring and impact. We also cited our own experience applying for, and being offered, jobs as edTPA scorers, as well as our interaction with a private edTPA “tutor” as examples of the validity risks inherent in this new, privatized assessment system.

The response to that commentary has been overwhelming. We have been contacted by teacher educators across the country, many of whom are themselves critiquing, challenging, or struggling to implement edTPA in their own institutions. Our commentary was also the subject of a formal rebuttal (Adkins, Spesia, & Snakenborg, 2015), written by faculty and administrators who have been instrumental in the development and promulgation of edTPA policy at the local and national level, and now act as spokespeople for edTPA (e.g., Layzell & Adkins, 2012; Adkins, Haynes, Pringle, Renner, & Robinson, 2013; Spesia, 2015; Snakenborg, 2014). Their rebuttal challenges our evidence and logic, using their experience as edTPA scorers, consultants, and policymakers to support the validity of edTPA as a national, high-stakes assessment.

While we question the motivation for this public defense of edTPA, we also consider this debate an excellent example of the type of dialogue that should be happening in our field. Teacher educators will not—and we believe *should* not—always agree regarding the best approach to new policies, the best means of assessing their candidates, or the contextually-specific needs of their school communities. Indeed, members of the edTPA design team themselves have acknowledged that deep ideological conflicts among different groups of teacher educators contribute to the controversy surrounding edTPA (e.g., Sato, 2014). However, the rapid onslaught of high-stakes TPA mandates, especially in the context of broader market-driven and neoliberal reforms, signifies a premature conclusion to this debate at the expense of individual candidates and the profession overall.

It is entirely possible that the proliferation of standardized teacher performance assessments has led to important conversation and worthwhile action in some contexts. For example, advocates suggest that, for institutions with limited experience preparing candidates to implement culturally responsive pedagogy, edTPA can increase their attention to issues of diversity (Lynn, 2014). Likewise, some educators—including those who publicly challenged our argument—claim that edTPA has been both a positive and transformative experience at their institutions. However, these claims, especially when made by scholars with a vested interest in TPA advocacy, do not negate the importance of critical, scholarly analyses of the many conceptual, practical, and fiscal implications of high-stakes, standardized, and privatized teacher performance assessment. Thus, our critique is not of teacher performance assessment per se, but rather of the inherent problems associated with the rapid institutionalization of edTPA as a high-stakes, standardized, privately-operated assessment, especially in the context of an intensely lucrative educational marketplace (see Oliver, 2015; Simon, 2015; Singer, 2015a, 2015b). Furthermore, we emphatically challenge Adkins and colleagues’ supposition that delocalized, standardized assessment is inherently superior to rigorously-developed local assessments that reflect contextual, multifaceted, and situated definitions of effective practice.

## SITUATING OUR CRITIQUE

We don’t make these critiques lightly. We are all former K-12 teachers, and have held a variety of faculty and administrative roles—including edTPA Coordinator, Program Facilitator, Department Chair, and Graduate Advisor—at an institution that focuses on preparing underrepresented candidates for careers as justice-oriented urban educators. At our

university, student teaching has historically been an intensive, educative, semester-long “performance assessment,” one that offers candidates, P-12 partners, and university faculty alike the opportunity to ensure candidates demonstrate the skills, dispositions, and impact required to be effective teachers. We have long required candidates to plan, deliver, and analyze the impact of their instruction as a prerequisite for student teaching placement, and continue to do so throughout their student teaching process. We expect student teachers to work collaboratively with their university supervisor and cooperating teacher as they develop action research skills, analyze student data, make instructional modifications on the basis of those data, and demonstrate a positive impact on student learning. Throughout the student teaching experience, candidates are mentored and evaluated by multiple stakeholders, each of whom provides comprehensive and longitudinal insight into their skills and areas for growth. If our candidates do not meet our criteria for success, we do not recommend entitlement for licensure.

edTPA, however, is changing our landscape. In 2013, we began redesigning our courses and programs to prepare candidates for new state-wide edTPA requirements. Then, during the 2014-15 academic year, our university conducted—at its own initiative and expense—a year-long, college-wide edTPA pilot, during which faculty underwent local evaluation training, candidates completed mini-edTPAs during early clinical placements, and student teachers submitted edTPAs for local and national scoring. The authors of this article were instrumental in implementing that pilot, writing institutional policy regarding edTPA, and providing edTPA-related professional development to our colleagues and students. Throughout this process, we attended regional and national edTPA events, examined trends in candidate scores, and modified our curriculum to better align to the particularities of edTPA. These experiences are, in part, what provoked our initial commentary.

For example, as part of our efforts to understand scoring processes, one of us tried to access SCALE’s curriculum for training scorers. However, the only way to get that training is by applying for a paid position scoring edTPAs for Pearson (Pearson, 2014), so this author applied. Despite Adkins et al.’s (2015) assertion that edTPA scorers are thoroughly vetted and interviewed, the author was offered a position after a six-minute telephone “interview” that focused primarily on the number of hours scorers are required to work on a monthly basis. The author never provided any written evidence of a teaching credential, and the only question asked of our university was whether the author was indeed employed there as a clinical supervisor. Given the limited scope and duration of scorer training, which includes 19-23 hours of online modules, webinars, and practice scoring activities (Pearson, 2014), we were left wondering just how and when the system evaluates scorers’ “expertise.”

Similarly, it was in the course of searching for edTPA-related materials that we discovered the rapidly growing industry of edTPA tutors, available on a fee-for-hire basis (see Singer, 2015b). These dubiously qualified individuals are widely available on Craigslist and social media sites to tutor, mentor, ghostwrite, review, and help candidates with edTPAs, thus illustrating the opportunities created by the commodification of teacher evaluation and the undermining of the integrity of a supposedly rigorous assessment (for discussion, see Dover & Schultz, in press; Singer, 2015b).

In all, our experience with the pilot did not inspire confidence, philosophically or pedagogically. Due to Pearson’s score reporting deadlines, our candidates began writing their edTPA portfolios during their first weeks in the classroom and had to submit them for scoring during week 11 of a 16-week internship. Our supervisors lamented losing valuable seminar time to necessary but mundane discussions of edTPA protocols and procedures. The demands of edTPA preparation and execution supplanted more comprehensive conversations that are specific to the urban context in which our students perform. Moreover, despite rhetoric regarding the use of edTPA to “deepen faculty and student understanding” (Adkins et al., 2015: para 3), scoring processes themselves undermined the educative value of the assessment. For example, while edTPA guidelines encourage faculty to “ask probing questions” about candidates’ draft portfolios, faculty are prohibited from providing specific critique or suggestions for revision prior to submission (SCALE, 2014). Then, once candidates submit their portfolios to Pearson, the candidates themselves no longer have access to their electronic portfolio, and their final score report contains neither feedback nor evidence to support scorers’ assessment. To complicate matters, our analysis of candidates’ score reports showed evidence of scoring irregularities that raised considerable concern: candidates with similar responses received very different scores, discrepancies that teams of faculty could not reconcile. However, the lack of transparency in edTPA scoring processes troubled our efforts to do any further analysis of these cases.

### CO-OPTING THE CONVERSATION

Developers and advocates claim that edTPA was developed “by and for the profession,” with the input of “hundreds of teacher education faculty and content experts,” representing a “collective professional voice influencing the development of this assessment” (Adkins et al., 2013). However, other early adopters describe a “sense of unease...about the TPA in practice, including the loss of local control and voice about teacher endorsement, issues related to privacy and ownership of portfolio data, and problems related to the direct linking of teacher certification to a for-profit corporation” (Cochran-Smith, Piazza, & Power, 2013, p. 17). These concerns are echoed in other analyses of standardized TPA policies over time. Reagan and colleagues (2015), for example, describe dramatic differences in approaches to state-level TPA implementation according to the relative involvement of corporate, academic, and political stakeholders.

In Illinois, edTPA mandates evolved rapidly over the protest of multiple teacher educators and administrators, especially those preparing diverse candidates in urban communities (e.g. the Council of Chicago Area Deans of Education and Illinois

Association of Deans of Public Colleges of Education, 2014). Requests to delay the individual consequentiality of this mandate to allow for wider investigation of its impact were denied by our State Board of Education, based in part, perhaps, on testimony by Adkins herself (e.g., ISBE, 2015). Similar processes occurred in other states, such as New York, where edTPA requirements outpaced the availability of candidate instructions (NYSUT, 2015). This resulted in multiple legal and practical dilemmas as policymakers tried to figure out how to handle skyrocketing failure rates and concerns about test validity, ultimately resulting in the creation of a last minute “safety net” for candidates who failed edTPA (e.g., Meuwissen, 2014).

Regardless of developers’ initial intent, it seems the speed of edTPA implementation—fueled largely, perhaps, by the intense profitability of the privatization of teacher preparation—has both outpaced and precluded scholarly engagement. Despite Adkins et al.’s (2015) claim that there are “readily available data” regarding edTPA, we find the publicly available data both insufficient and grossly negligent in terms of attention to issues of equity. As noted in our initial commentary, while edTPA advocates claim that, prior to adoption, edTPA underwent two years of field testing with 12,000 teacher candidates (AACTE, 2014a), published data from those field tests reveal that only 3,669 candidates successfully submitted materials for all 15 rubrics (SCALE, 2013). Of these candidates, 82% were White and only 3% spoke a primary language other than English. No data are available regarding the socioeconomic status of candidates, the universities they attended, or the demographics of their student teaching placement (Dover et al., 2015).

Additionally, while Adkins et al. (2015) suggest that more data are “forthcoming,” no such data are currently available through SCALE or AACTE. We find it extremely problematic that the only large-scale data set regarding edTPA has been curated and published by test developers themselves, with no opportunity for independent evaluation, or even peer review. For a movement so driven by the rhetoric of accountability, TPA advocates have been remarkably reluctant to hold themselves likewise accountable.

#### CALLS FOR CONTINUED SCHOLARSHIP

Research on edTPA is in its infancy, and has not kept pace with its statewide implementation. We fear this is a product of the lucrative nature of the corporatized educational market (Simon, 2015) and the resultant lobbying by those with a vested interest in edTPA itself (see, for example, SCALE, n.d.). Indeed, the controversies surrounding edTPA are illustrative of the need for ongoing research regarding teacher preparation, assessment, and impact. In addition to local analyses of outcomes associated with edTPA, we also see a need for wider, independent scholarship that examines the impact of the privatization and corporatization of teacher preparation and evaluation. Advocates claim that edTPA is “transformative for prospective teachers because the process requires candidates to actually demonstrate the knowledge and skills required to help all students learn in real classrooms” (AACTE, 2014); however, far more data are necessary to substantiate this claim, and to demonstrate that such a nationally-scored test is so far superior to locally-scored assessments as to make the costs associated with it worthwhile for candidates, teacher preparation programs, and the profession itself.

The pressures associated with accountability-driven education policy are many. It would be far easier, and less resource-intensive, to focus on teaching to the test rather than critiquing reforms that undermine and standardize our profession. However, while we are (re)designing syllabi, policymakers are institutionalizing an ever-increasing array of field-defining mandates. And thus, we embrace the controversies inspired by our initial commentary by inviting fellow scholars to join the debate: Does edTPA enhance your candidates’ learning about the many contextually-dependent dimensions of effective teaching, or does it reduce it to only those qualities measured by edTPA rubrics? How do you know? Are your candidates’ scores reliable? Valid? How does the standardization of teacher assessment impact your efforts to enact educational equity and justice? And, what is the relationship among TPA-related policy, scholarship, and profit in your state?

Advocates may not consider it necessary to wait for the research on edTPA to catch up with the policy (e.g., SCALE, 2015). However, as long as TPAs carry professional and fiscal consequences for candidates, and until there is a sound, peer-reviewed research base, we must collectively resist policies that are more responsive to the politics of privatization than our profession itself.

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