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What About Bilingualism? A Critical Reflection on the edTPA With Teachers of Emergent Bilinguals

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What About Bilingualism? A Critical Reflection on the edTPA With Teachers of Emergent Bilinguals

Tatyana Kleyn, Dina López, and Carmina Makar
City College of New York, CUNY

Amidst the debates surrounding teacher quality and preparation programs, the edTPA (education Teaching Performance Assessment) has emerged to assess future teachers through a portfolio-based certification process. This study offers the perspective of three faculty members who participated in an experimental configuration of edTPA implementation for student teachers in Childhood Bilingual Education, Bilingual Special Education, and TESOL in a large teacher education program. This article highlights implications of the edTPA for bilingual education and TESOL students and faculty. The findings reveal how the edTPA does not directly address teaching bilingually and the resulting ramifications of teacher candidates’ clinical experience and preparation to work with emergent bilinguals.

INTRODUCTION

Amidst the many debates surrounding teacher quality and teacher education programs, the edTPA has emerged as the most recent effort to assess and strengthen teacher preparedness through a portfolio-based certification process. Teacher education programs have been accused of failing to adequately prepare educators for the realities of present-day classrooms (Levine, 2006). The systems put in place to evaluate teachers, and subsequently future teachers, have also come under fire. One reaction to the latter issues has been to reform state certification assessments from mostly computer-based short-answer and essay exams to the inclusion of a performance assessment that requires teacher candidates to do precisely what they will do in their classrooms—plan, teach, and evaluate. The extent to which this new edTPA assessment, which is making its way into
states across the nation, will impact the quality of teacher education programs and the teachers they produce remains to be seen.

Since its inception, there have been a plethora of voices shaping the discourse around the edTPA. Our study contributes to this dialogue from the perspective of three faculty members who participated in an experimental configuration of edTPA preparation for student teachers in Childhood Bilingual Education, Bilingual Special Education, and TESOL in a large teacher education program in New York City. This article reports on our collaborative self-study to highlight implications of edTPA for bilingual education and TESOL students and faculty. As such, findings highlight how edTPA does not directly address teaching bilingually as an area of specialty and the resulting ramifications of students’ clinical experience and preparation to work with emergent bilingual learners (EBLs).

WHAT IS THE edTPA?

The edTPA is preservice performance-based assessment designed to gauge if prospective teachers are ready for their own classroom. Designed as a teaching portfolio, the edTPA relies heavily on candidates’ written accounts of their teaching, as well as short video clips, as they respond to several prompts around three key tasks in their subject area: (a) planning instruction, (b) delivering and analyzing instruction, and (c) assessing student learning. The assessment, formerly known as TPA (Teacher Performance Assessment) was developed by faculty at the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity (SCALE) drawing on their work with assessment of teaching. The design and review team included faculty from across the U.S., organization representatives (e.g., NCTE, NSTA, etc.), and P–12 teachers. The first iteration of the edTPA started in California and has since been scaled to include additional states that have implemented edTPA as official policy, such as Washington, Oregon, Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, Georgia, Tennessee, and New York. Other states have begun to participate without declaring it official policy yet. In New York, the edTPA became an official requirement for initial teacher certification as of May 2014.

The edTPA is subject specific and has versions in 27 different teaching fields covering Early Childhood, Elementary, Middle Childhood, and Secondary. The handbooks include prompts and questions candidates must address, as well as instructions regarding uploading and submitting. Each handbook contains different tasks, which have their own assessment rubrics. For example, the Elementary Education handbook contains four tasks that students must complete: Planning, Instruction, Assessment, and Mathematics. There are 18 rubrics that are used to score these four tasks, an example of which is presented in Table 1.

For the Elementary Education handbook, the minimum passing score is 49, which means on average candidates must score a 3 or higher on every task in order to pass. Per the handbook:

The rubrics used to score your performance are included in this handbook and follow the directions for each task. The descriptors in the five-level rubrics address a wide range of performance representing the knowledge and skills of a novice not ready to teach (Level 1) to the advanced practices of a highly accomplished beginner (Level 5). (Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity, 2013a, p. 5)

As part of their tasks, candidates must submit artifacts and commentaries. Artifacts represent authentic work completed by the candidates and their students, such as lesson plans, copies of
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 1</th>
<th>Level 2</th>
<th>Level 3</th>
<th>Level 4</th>
<th>Level 5</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Candidate identifies language use that is superficially related or unrelated to the language demands (function, vocabulary, and additional demands). OR Candidate does not address students’ repeated misuse of vocabulary.</td>
<td>Candidate provides evidence that students use vocabulary associated with language functions.</td>
<td>Candidate explains and provides evidence of students’ use of the language function as well as vocabulary OR additional language demand(s).</td>
<td>Candidate explains and provides evidence of students’ use of the language function, vocabulary, and additional language demand(s) in ways that develop content understandings.</td>
<td>Level 4 plus: Candidate explains and provides evidence of language use and content learning for students with varied needs.</td>
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*Source.* Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity, 2013a, p. 37.
A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THE edTPA

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The fields of bilingual education and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) are undergoing a paradigmatic shift in the way bilingualism and language learning are conceptualized (García, 2009; Taylor & Snoddon, 2013). Long thought of as the possession of two separate linguistic codes and repertoires, scholars of bilingualism are moving away from a conceptualization of language as a bound system to an emphasis on how people use language. Similarly, early theories of second language acquisition focused primarily on how individuals acquired sets of rules for grammar, syntax, and usage with scant attention to the social and dialogical dimensions of language (Lin, 2013). Thus, language learners were seen as incomplete and deficient, and the task of teachers was to address this deficiency by providing them with a discrete knowledge of the new language. Given these shifts, García, Kleifgen and Falchi (2008) has argued for the use of the term emergent bilinguals, rather than the more prevalent label of English Language Learners, or even Limited English Proficient. Such a seemingly small change in how emergent bilinguals are educated can make a significant difference between a deficit perspective and a more holistic and strengths-based approach. The conceptual framework for this article presents the theoretical underpinnings for what we consider to be critical and progressive approaches to the education of EBLs and to the preparation of teachers who work with them. We use this framework as a lens to analyze our edTPA experiences with teacher candidates in relation to questions of language, literacy, and bilingualism.

Language as a Social Practice

The work of Street (1984) and others put forth the notion that language is not something that people “have” or possess, but rather, it is something we do with other people in particular communities of practice (Gee, 1992; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Thus, in addition to being a system of grammatical rules and structures, language is a social practice—a theoretical move that has important implications for the education of emergent bilinguals. Educators who understand language as social practice will thus understand that language learning is not simply an issue of mastery over vocabulary and grammatical structures, but it is also about the development of language competencies and practices within a range of situated discourses. EBLs in K–12 settings come to the classroom with their own language histories and practices. Most come from households in which languages other than English are spoken, but it would be injudicious to assume that this is all educators need to know about their emergent bilingual students. How are students using language and literacy in their daily lives? What are their communities of practice? How do their immigration histories play a role? Answers to these questions require that teachers know their students in meaningful ways. Making connections between school and out-of-school language and literacy practices is an important way for educators to draw on the funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) of students’ families and communities.
The language as social practice perspective also brings to the fore the idea that each classroom is its own discourse community with particular rules and conventions about how language is used. Students develop language competencies as they participate in language socialization processes that include both explicit and implicit guidance by teachers as well as more proficient peers (Duffy, 2010). In addition, EBLs will acquire language structures and practices associated with the discourse of the content area being taught (Walqui & Heritage, 2012). As such, social studies classes have a different set of language demands than math classes, for example, and EBLs participate in these classes in contextually specific ways. As we examined our experience with the edTPA, we considered how the various tasks required teacher candidates to think about and reflect on the language and literacy practices of their students both in and outside of their classroom discourse communities.

Dynamic Bilingualism and Translanguaging

As previously mentioned, early conceptualizations of bilingualism regarded bilingual people as essentially two monolinguals in one (Cummins, 2007). The educational implications of such theories were that, in ESL classrooms, the use of the home language was discouraged, while in a bilingual programs, the two languages were maintained in strict separation. These practices continue to this day. In ESL classrooms across the United States, it is not uncommon for students—and even adults—to be reprimanded when speaking in their home languages, as many well-intentioned teachers believe that English-only environments will help students develop their English skills at a faster rate. Makar (2014) describes instances in which Spanish has been officially prohibited in schools: In 2010 a school secretary in Charlotte, North Carolina, was fired after speaking Spanish to a parent in violation of the school’s no-Spanish policy. Years before that, Esmeralda County’s local school board in Nevada instituted a policy forbidding students from speaking Spanish in school buses. Before that, Endeavor Alternative School in Kansas City suspended Zach Rubio when he said “No problema” in violation of the school’s no-Spanish policy. While these cases made the headlines over the last decade, these are not isolated incidents but rather the result of English-only movements and sustained efforts to regulate language in the classroom, which often stem from misconceptions around bilingual education and the perceived benefits of English-only instruction (Tse, 2001).

In dual language bilingual programs, there are often two teachers who deliver their instruction in one language (the new and home language) without making reference to or drawing on the connections between them. Dynamic views of bilingualism challenge and depart from both subtractive and additive perspectives as they promote the use of the home language as a foundational starting point for teaching and learning an additional language (Cummins, 2007; García 2009, 2010). A dynamic theory of bilingualism takes into consideration the range and complexity of language practices in bilingual communities. As noted by García, Flores, and Woodley (2012),

The language practices of today’s bilinguals do not respond to an additive or subtractive model of bilingualism. In today’s flows, language practices are multiple and ever adjusting to the multilingual multimodal terrain of the communicative act; that is, bilingualism is dynamic. (p. 50)

Rejecting the concept of a “balanced bilingual,” García (2009) argues that it is more appropriate to think of bilingualism as “an all-terrain vehicle, which adapts to both the ridges and craters of communication in uneven terrains” (p. 42). As such, the everyday language practices of
bilinguals include translanguaging, a concept that refers to the wide range of discursive practices of bilingual people who draw strategically on their linguistic repertoire to communicate effectively across contexts (García, 2009). García emphasizes the “sensemaking” dimension to these practices as bilinguals draw on their various linguistic resources to make meaning and negotiate situations.

In the field of TESOL, there is a burgeoning body of research that reflects a similar theoretical shift vis-à-vis “the dynamic integration of languages within an individual’s linguistic repertoire” (Stille & Cummins, 2013, p. 631). According to studies of “plurilingualism,” people’s lived histories and their relationships with language are not fixed, meaning that their linguistic practices are dynamic, continually evolving, and contingent on social context (Taylor & Snoddon, 2013). Scholars are increasingly calling attention to ways in which ESOL teachers are drawing on the full range of linguistic repertoires of their bilingual and multilingual students. Such approaches to the education of emergent bilinguals view bilingualism and plurilingualism as a point of departure for language instruction and as a goal for all language learners.

Using translanguaging as a pedagogical strategy is one way in which educators are working to apply these theoretical insights to the classroom context. According to García (2012), “translanguaging pedagogical strategies use the entire linguistic repertoire of bilingual students flexibly in order to teach both rigorous content and language for academic use” (p. 2). Given that our teacher education programs are committed to dynamic views of bilingualism, we were highly vigilant of this area of practice among our teacher candidates—taking note of how the edTPA tasks promoted or inhibited the use of translanguaging strategies in both bilingual and ESL classrooms.

The Hegemony of English

Though not the official national language, English has maintained its dominant status in the U.S. public domain beginning in the colonial era and solidified during the Americanization movement of the 19th century (Pac, 2012). An English-only ideology emerged in schools as a way to promote national unity and identity. Within such a social and political context, languages other than English and bilingualism were seen as a threat to “American” identity and were thus devalued and minoritized through assimilationist language policies (García & Mason, 2009). The 1980s and 1990s saw the reemergence of a strong English-only movement and with it the passage of English-only measures such as Proposition 227 in California and similar language-in-education policies in Arizona and Massachusetts, which effectively banned bilingual education in the name of English monolingualism in schools. With the passage on No Child Left Behind, this English-only legacy continues to dominate, and languages other than English are largely seen as a problem rather than a resource to be drawn upon (Hornberger & Link, 2012). As Pac (2012) argues, “English-only campaigns of the twenty-first century exploit nativist sentiments appealing to social amnesia about historical multilingualism in the U.S. and ignorance about the benefits of bilingual English acquisition” (p. 197).

The practice of bilingual education thus requires bilingual teachers and administrators to be watchful of the local manifestations of dominant monoglossic language ideologies, which threaten the promotion of bilingual and multilingual communities. Bilingual education programs and bilingualism in education play a crucial role in responding to and preparing students for our globalizing world. As we collectively analyzed our experiences, we paid close attention to how
the edTPA affected the ways in which students valued and used languages other than English in their instruction and the development of their portfolio.

METHODS

Epistemological Groundings

In line with our theoretical framework, our mode of inquiry is centered on understanding how we collectively made sense of the edTPA in its first phase of implementation in New York. Our methodological approach attempted to capture salient themes over the course of our own experience with the edTPA by grounding this qualitative study in an understanding of teaching and learning as social processes. To reflect on the dialogic understanding of our edTPA experience, we framed this research as a collaborative self-study with a focus on reflective dialogue, that is, our collective representation of the experience.

We build on the work of traditional understandings of Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP) (LaBoskey, 2004; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009), paying particular attention to Laboskey’s (2004) call for systematic and rigorous work in self-study research. In addition, we were informed by Louie, Drevdahl, Purdy, and Stackman’s (2003) on self-study research, which indicates that self-study is usually grouped into three categories that identify the primary focus of the inquiry: teacher identity, the relationship between teaching beliefs and practice, and collaboration. We locate our study within the third category as a methodological umbrella that uses collaboration as a vehicle for critical examination of the issues that emerge through peer input and collegial relationships in education. Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) argue that the aim of self-study research is “to provoke, challenge, and illuminate rather than confirm and settle” (p. 20), and it is through this culture of reflectiveness (Schoenfeld, 2006) that we approach our study.

Participants and Setting

Positionality drives key methodological understandings of self-study research (LaBoskey, 2004). We approach this research as a collective endeavor by including our students in the process of meaning making and position ourselves as facilitators of the task. The three of us are faculty in the programs of Bilingual Education and TESOL in an urban teacher preparation program in New York City who have been working together for the past three years. We all have different areas of expertise. Kleyn is a former elementary school teacher whose research focuses on multicultural education, translanguaging, and migration. She has 10 years of experience teaching the student-teaching seminar, both on her own and collaboratively. She is an immigrant from the Soviet Union whose home language is Russian and new language is Spanish. López has over 12 years of experience in the field of TESOL and 4 years in the field of Bilingual Education—working predominantly with adolescent and adult immigrant populations as an instructor, program coordinator, curriculum developer, researcher, and teacher educator. She is a first-generation immigrant from Guatemala and is a Spanish/English bilingual. Makar was born and raised in Mexico, and she has spent the last 10 years working in New York City on issues around critical teacher education, bilingual education, transnational education, and
school-community partnerships. She has taught elementary school, coordinated P–12 clinical outreach programs, and participated in grassroots organizations. López and Makar had taught collaboratively before but not in the context of the student-teaching seminar.

The students in the class were all initial certification students. Thirteen of the students were Latino/a, and one was Asian. A key characteristic of the classroom configuration was the integration of three programs: Bilingual Special Education, TESOL, and Bilingual Childhood Education, with graduate students in the first two groups and a mix of graduates and undergraduates in the third group. There were a total of 14 students in the class, 10 women and four men. We all participated in all class sessions and alternated general lecturing/large-group discussion with small-group instruction. In small groups, Kleyn worked with Bilingual Special Education students, López worked with TESOL students, and Makar worked with Bilingual Childhood education candidates.

Procedures

The self-study was carried out over the course of 16 weeks in the first semester of the implementation of the edTPA in New York State (Spring 2014). Each of the three subgroups in the class had an edTPA handbook targeted to their specific certification area. Students in TESOL worked with the English as an Additional Language (EAL) handbook, Bilingual Special Education students worked with the Special Education handbook, and Bilingual Childhood students worked with the Elementary Education handbook.

Class was held once a week, from 4:50 to 7:30 p.m. As part of our data collection procedures, we engaged in weekly pre- and postclass sessions, meeting twice a week to inform the design of our practice as we fine-tuned course strategies and goals. In our preclass sessions we planned for the following week; shared and outlined strategies, resources, and concerns, and took the pulse of the course as it moved along. In our postclass sessions we reflected and took notes on how the class developed, how the students reacted, what needed to be improved, and what should inform our planning for the following session.

Our data collection procedures were driven by our conceptual understanding of collaboration in self-study research (LaBoskey, 2004). In our efforts to make sense of the data we collected, we distilled the reflection around our edTPA teaching practice to include three methodological components: peer observation, student observation and dialogic classroom development. Peer observation encompasses all data that resulted from our observation and reflections on each other’s teaching, student observation includes our individual and collective appraisal of the experience of our students as well as the dialogue established and documented through e-mail correspondence, and dialectic classroom development refers to how our classroom design was the result of ongoing dialogue. These three domains function as the methodological umbrellas within which we began to make sense of our data.

Analysis

Our body of data includes the weekly notes that we uploaded to our shared Dropbox folder, e-mail exchanges, notes from our meetings, notes from our reflections, and the feedback we provided
students as they moved forward with their edTPA portfolio. These notes were analyzed for recurrent patterns and themes on a continual basis. We sifted through our corpus of notes on a weekly basis and wrote up thematic and analytic memos. We interacted with the data and refined our understanding of the experience. We understand this iterative analytical process as progressive focusing per the traditional definition of Parlett and Hamilton (1972). Our notes served as analytic memos, and we were in a constant process of analysis. At the end of the semester we held final debriefing sessions in which we outlined salient categories that drove the analysis. At the core of our analysis is the understanding that was afforded by our collaborative effort. Indeed a valuable methodological finding for us is the transformative quality of analysis-in-dialogue, which multiplied our ways of reading the data by juxtaposing our different perceptions and our deeply nuanced appreciation of the experience.

The process of analysis yielded two salient tensions in the experience of the edTPA. We framed these tensions as challenges and opportunities and then developed a set of categories that emerged organically from within. Table 2 outlines the distilled analytic categories that frame our findings section and are elaborated upon there.

### FINDINGS

The semester we cotaught a course that combined the student teaching seminar and the edTPA (which we fondly referred to as the Semi-TPA) brought about a range of opportunities and challenges. The findings from our self-study are framed around the opportunities and challenges presented by the edTPA, as they relate to the preparation of teachers who work with emergent bilinguals. Here we outline the key themes that emerged in both categories.

#### Opportunities

**Collaboration**

Given that we structured our student teaching seminar and edTPA workshop as a coteaching model, we understood that some form of faculty collaboration would be a given. However, the newly mandated edTPA brought about a number of unexpected opportunities for both faculty and students, even during its first implementation. Notably, we witnessed increased collaboration among faculty and students alike. The three of us each had an assigned edTPA subgroup: bilingual childhood, bilingual special education, and TESOL. There were two TESOL, four

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<th>Challenges</th>
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<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Language policy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rethinking our practice</td>
<td>edTPA driven instruction</td>
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<td>Knowledge of students</td>
<td>Handbooks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment strategies</td>
<td>High stakes for students and instructors</td>
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TABLE 2
Coding Matrix
Bilingual Special Education, and eight Bilingual Childhood candidates. Kleyn worked with the four Bilingual Special Education candidates, López worked with the two TESOL candidates and two Bilingual Childhood candidates, and Makar worked with six Bilingual Childhood candidates. The crux of the course required us to plan together and think through how the needs of the groups were similar and unique. To that end, we held weekly virtual planning meetings and also met after each class to reflect on the day. During our planning meetings we were able to support one another in trying to understand the requirements of the edTPA as we considered and learned from each other’s strengths. This peer learning took place within our meetings and also during class sessions where we led segments that allowed us to share our areas of expertise with each other and the student teachers. This type of collaborative work is less common in higher education, where clear boundaries among programs and courses are drawn and where faculty conversations are often limited to logistical and administrative matters, as opposed to content and research (Kleyn & Valle, 2014).

Although the faculty collaboration within a coteaching context is to be expected, we did not foresee the natural collaboration that was fostered among the student teachers as they bonded together and supported one another in their edTPA successes, obstacles, and understandings. The collaborative relationships student teachers forged came across in e-mail correspondences with their clinical supervisors, who in this case was also one of their Semi-TPA instructors:

Amelia (pseudonym) and I have commiserated this week, we are nervous about our upcoming observations, will you be able to observe us both? We are lucky to be in the same school working together, I videotaped Amelia this week and she will do it this week for me, it really makes everything so much easier. I am not alone! (03/12/14)

Beyond student teachers at the same school supporting one another, the edTPA experience fostered a close-knit community of student teachers who also looked out for one another and shared resources with their peers: “Dear Prof, here are some links I found that can help us with task 3, can you forward to our edTPA dynamic quintet? Hope it helps everyone!” (03/24/14).

Over the semester we also noticed how our students came to rely on each other to make sense of the tasks and keep each other accountable. One student shared a scheduling app to help her peers with time-management issues. Another spent time assisting her fellow student teachers with technical issues with videotaping. Every week, students supported each other by providing candid feedback to their lesson plans and giving each other suggestions.

While we provided a space to share strategies and concerns during class, their collaboration went beyond the classroom, as we witnessed our students meeting outside of class, spending time at each other’s homes, and giving each other moral support to successfully complete the edTPA. This type of student-initiated collaboration was not something typically seen in the seminar to this extent before, or even in other classes where collaboration is often imposed—and often pushed back against—via group projects and papers. The edTPA certainly brought students and us as faculty closer together as we learned about and supported each other through the sometimes-bumpy journey.

**Rethinking Our Practice**

In the same way that the edTPA required our students to think more critically about their students and classrooms, it created opportunities for us as teacher educators to look more deeply
at our own practice within the context of the seminar and workshop. We no longer had the option to remain too comfortable with the way things had been done, as we were forced to consider how to set up a course within a new context of externally imposed mandates. Although we did not agree with all of the requirements set forth, the challenge of incorporating our nonnegotiable content and integrating it with the edTPA set up a space where we had to deliberate and be creative around course content and pedagogical approaches that would foster a positive student teaching experience while guiding students through the completion of a standardized performance assessment.

As the course progressed we were able to see both the natural—and not so natural—connections between our seminar and the edTPA requirements. The edTPA cycle of effective teaching (planning, instruction, and assessment) reminded us of how we should be taking into account our own students’ needs, modeling effective student-centered teaching, providing useful and meaningful feedback on the tasks, and then assessing their understandings. This model was naturally incorporated into our own development of the course as it mirrored and modeled what our student teachers were being asked to do as well.

We frequently had explicit conversations about our candidates’ edTPA needs, while also ensuring that we were not losing seminar content that was essential in helping them think about issues of bilingualism and bilingual/ESL classrooms. Our session on translanguaging really challenged us to think creatively about not only how to apply theories of the concept, but also how to convincingly justify this approach to an audience that might not be familiar with this concept, including edTPA reviewers, cooperating teachers, and principals. During one of our small-group conversations, the TESOL candidates spent a lot of time discussing how they might approach the use of translanguaging pedagogies, despite the fact that their cooperating teacher used an English-only approach. Ultimately, they decided to incorporate some translanguaging strategies—albeit in a limited way—reviewing key vocabulary in English and Spanish and allowing for home languages to be used by students when needed.

**Knowledge of Students**

A notable strength of the edTPA, particularly for teachers of emergent bilinguals, is the extent to which students were required to learn about their students, schools, and communities. From the initial stages of the edTPA and as part of the Context for Learning section, candidates were required to know and understand their students. This in-depth knowledge ranged from the labels imposed upon children (i.e., ELLs, gifted, and students with disabilities) to their cultural and community strengths and resources. Additionally, in-depth understandings about their classroom’s bilingual or ESL models and curricula required the student teachers to ground who and what they would be teaching throughout the semester. The emphasis on three diverse focal students in the elementary and EAL edTPA and one focal learner in the special education edTPA required an even greater depth of knowledge about particular students, the work they produce, and how to best support them. It also created a space to focus on students who were emergent bilinguals, especially for those taking the elementary or special education edTPA, which did not assume a bilingual setting or an EBL student population.

When a colleague from our department from a different program conducted a peer-observation of our course, she had the following to say about the emphasis on emergent bilinguals for the students completing all three versions of the edTPA:
I think I learned more about bilingual students in this session than I have in any other place! I think the work you are doing is strongly supportive of English language learners, and although I was surprised about how much of the edTPA is present in the student teaching seminar, I was also interested to see how much it allows students (candidates) to get to know their students and think of specific strategies for them. (Postobservation conference, 05/05/14)

The edTPA’s persistent emphasis on considering the variety of learners in the classroom and describing students with specific learning needs as well as asking candidates to restate how their knowledge of students informed their practice was a good opportunity for our students to enact their knowledge on emergent bilinguals. Students asked for literature, resources, and strategies specific to emergent bilinguals as they worked on their tasks. Student teachers placed in the same classroom would spend small-group time discussing the needs of specific students and helping each other brainstorm approaches to differentiating their lessons in order to engage these students in more meaningful ways. Prior to the edTPA, student teachers thought more about the class as a whole, rather than the needs and strengths of specific students.

Assessment

The edTPA addressed all aspects of teaching, from planning to assessment and everything in between. This forced us to address an area that arose as a challenge for nearly all our students: assessment. Had the edTPA not dictated this, it could have easily been overlooked. Unlike prior seminars where student teachers taught individual lessons, the edTPA required them to create mini-units (referred to as learning segments) via backwards design. Thinking about a final assessment that would be the culmination of three to five connected lessons required student teachers to think bigger, as they had to start from and directly link to the final assessment. This took away a fixation new student teachers often have on the “how” or the instructional activity and placed it on the learning goal of the segment and having students demonstrate meeting the goal.

We noticed a common misconception among student teachers that assessments merely consisted of “a handout” or “worksheet # 2,” as opposed to an assessment strategy aligned to standards and objectives. After seeing this over and over, one of us jokingly brought in a gong to ring whenever an assessment was listed as a page number and not explained in relation to the objectives of the lesson and learning segment. We spent class time on identifying indicators, developing rubrics, and even planned an additional session on assessment strategies to better prepare our candidates.

This process forced us to activate our blind spots, as we were provided targeted evidence of existing gaps in our student teachers’ knowledge. Beyond this seminar, we were given data into ways we could strengthen our program’s pedagogy and curriculum to ensure that assessment design was adequately addressed in our coursework.

Challenges

Though the edTPA opened up new spaces for collaboration and learning for student teachers and faculty members, it also presented significant challenges and obstacles to our work as bilingual educators and teacher educators.
Language Policy

The edTPA brought about a number of challenges in both the design and implementation. This was especially pronounced when located within bilingual classrooms or settings with emergent bilinguals. We often remarked that anyone who came into our classroom may not surmise that we were working with student teachers in bilingual and TESOL settings, and this disturbed us greatly. This issue surfaced when student teachers began designing their learning segments with an emphasis on English, and only English. This was especially surprising, considering most student teachers were in bilingual programs where instruction alternated between English and Spanish each day. However, the requirements for translations of any materials or use of a different language in the videos (except for Spanish in the elementary edTPA) placed a time-consuming and arduous requirement on the student teachers, which most went to great lengths to avoid. This was compounded with the sentiment that English was the language that mattered, and the new curriculum schools were using was mostly being produced in English at the early stages of the Common Core implementation. Taken together, this created a de facto English-only policy for the edTPA that was in contradiction to the policies of New York state, which are tolerant and now leaning toward acceptance of languages other than English (see the New York State Blueprint for ELL Success: http://usny.nysed.gov/docs/blueprint-for-ell-success.pdf). However, we felt language restrictions like those in Arizona or Massachusetts were perhaps unintentionally seeping into our seminar, the student teachers’ edTPA tasks, and most dangerously, their views of teaching bilingually.

There was an overall lack of discussion around the importance of the home language in any of the three edTPA handbooks our students completed. The student teachers took note of this and would e-mail us questions such as, “Should we do our lesson in English or in Spanish?,” and even when we responded that they should maintain the language of the day/content area (for those in bilingual programs), they still hesitated. They would follow up with, “Will [we] be penalized if we do our lesson in Spanish?” and “Are you sure it’s okay to do the lesson in Spanish? I know it’s ‘officially’ okay, but do you think they will prefer to see it in English?” The student teachers did not want to take a chance on having a scorer not understand the lesson (even though the Elementary Education edPTA specifically indicated Spanish was acceptable and did not need to be translated), or have their lesson taken less seriously because it was in Spanish.

For the TESOL candidates, the writing demands of the edTPA, coupled with the requirement of translating any languages other than English in their lessons, meant that if any translanguaging strategies did exist in their lessons, they were superficial at best. During a small-group working session, they expressed concern over how time-consuming it would be to translate more than key vocabulary words and whether or not it would be a risk, given that the focus of the EAL edTPA was on the acquisition of English and not on how effectively they drew on the home languages of students, even if it was to serve as a bridge to English.

In spite of our reassurances and constant reinforcement of the importance of home-language instruction and/or translanguaging pedagogies, none of the bilingual or bilingual special education student teachers submitted lessons in Spanish. They all chose to submit their tasks in English. Chui (2014) argues that

Teacher candidates are less likely to take risks in their teaching, such as using progressive, critical pedagogies, for fear of losing points for deviating from teaching ideologies and practices that have
been described in the edTPA rubrics and that are already widely accepted and used by the teaching community. (p. 29)

Clearly this was the case for us, as we saw that our impact on students was negligible in the face of the edTPA.

**edTPA-Driven Instruction**

Beyond impacting our students’ views, the edTPA also took over our student teaching seminar. We had purposefully separated the course into two parts: the student teaching seminar and edTPA course, with each having their own syllabus, content, readings, assignments, and timeline. Yet despite our best efforts, the student teaching part became strongly infused with edTPA concerns. After getting started on Task 1, student teachers had to regularly be reminded that this was our seminar time. Specifically, we had a hard time getting them to reflect on their experiences that were outside of edTPA requirements, including the focus on teaching and developing students’ home languages and literacies.

During one of our seminar sessions we were focusing on literacy development practices in our student teaching section, and students kept asking questions regarding their edTPA learning segment. They were unclear about how it should be broken down, how to upload their tasks, how many folders they should use, and how they could include their artifacts as part of their task. In this case, the logistics overshadowed content that was relevant in and of itself.

As the semester moved along, our instructional practices were reshaped by the edTPA due to the time constraints. Over time we found ourselves wondering and worrying about how we would meet the edTPA deadlines. Students had to meet certain deadlines to submit their tasks to the State in order to get their results by a given date. Therefore, we had corresponding deadlines for them so we could provide feedback within the required timeframe. The goal was for us to read their full portfolio before the semester was over, because after graduation they would no longer receive the reading support we were providing. Given the tight deadlines, we saw no other option but to give up “regular” course requirements such as assigned readings and even the professional teaching portfolio student teachers were to create as a way to bring together their learning over the duration of the program. In the past, students had found their teaching portfolio, i.e., a physical and electronic teaching portfolio, a useful tool to take with them in their job search/interviews as they looked for teaching positions. This was all taken away in the name of the edTPA, as a way to ensure students would have the time to complete it and hopefully do so successfully. The takeover was far-reaching, and a great deal was lost in the process.

**Handbooks**

The handbooks themselves presented challenges for us as faculty as well as for the student teachers. Although each of the three handbooks differed, we found all of them to have areas that were unclear and put us in the challenging position of guiding students through tasks or questions we did not fully understand. This lack of clarity and confusion made providing feedback to students a frustrating and difficult experience.
Redundant and convoluted language made it difficult for candidates to understand how they should respond to commentary prompts. One student exclaimed, “It’s like asking how your weekend was and then asking how Saturday and Sunday were.” For example, in the EAL Handbook the Task 2 commentary asks students to respond to the following two prompts:

3a. Explain how your instruction engaged students in developing English language proficiency in content-based instruction with a focus on at least one modality (speaking, listening, reading, or writing) and at least one competency (grammatical, pragmatic, discourse, or metalinguistic).

4b. Explain how you supported your students’ development of English language proficiency in a meaningful academic context with respect to

- at least one modality
- at least one competency. (2013b, p. 21)

Given the overlap in these two prompts, students were quite confused as to how to best address them. We attempted to relieve some of this confusion by emphasizing that 3a focused on how their instruction addressed the modality and competency, while the 4b seemed to require a more specific analysis of how they actively supported the students in the process.

Some student teachers responded to this redundancy by copying and pasting their answers to these type of questions, but we pushed them to do what the edTPA did—say the same thing, but in a different way. The number of questions within each Task required students to develop stamina for writing but also had them write in a way that was atypical of requirements for most classes. Instead of writing papers that developed a thesis, the edTPA required short answers that had to be clear and precise—for example, describing a language function needed for a particular learning strategy. This type of writing presented a challenge as a new genre for our student teachers who were the first group to go through this process and thus had had only minimal “prepping” for edTPA requirements in their previous courses.

In addition to repetitive prompts and convoluted language, much of the terminology used in the edTPA handbooks differed from what we have used in our program and what our candidates had been exposed to. For example, our courses introduce students to the concepts of formative and summative assessments, while all the handbooks used the terms “informal” and “formal” assessments. These two assessment categories are not interchangeable but do have significant areas of overlap. The EAL handbook also uses a set of terms referring to linguistic competencies with which our students were unfamiliar. In fact, our faculty did not find the specific categorizations of discourse, grammar, pragmatic, and metalinguistic competencies to be aligned with the ways of conceptualizing language skills and competencies in the field of TESOL. These differed from the descriptions of academic language and language demands (vis-à-vis vocabulary, syntax, and discourse) in the Special Education or Elementary Education handbooks. TESOL candidates struggled in particular with the difference between discourse and pragmatic competence. The edTPA also presented a very narrow definition of these competencies, which didn’t align with TESOL candidates’ understanding of concepts such as “discourse practices” and “discourse communities.” The competence that was most clear to them was grammatical competence, and thus they chose to focus on vocabulary and structure, rather than tackle other more complex student skills that seemed more difficult to assess.

The handbooks, which ranged between 48 and 64 pages in length, certainly provided a great deal of information and detail about the edTPA required tasks. However, they simultaneously led to confusion on the part of faculty and students at different points in the process.
High Stakes

The implementation of the edTPA and the high stakes initially attached to it posed a significant challenge for our student teachers and subsequently for us as the faculty supporting them through this process. No longer could student teachers feel they had a safe place to try out different pedagogical approaches because all they could see was their future in the balance. In other words, they felt everything they wrote and taught for the edTPA had to be perfect or close to it. They believed that if they highlighted an area of weakness, this could potentially count against them and leave them at risk of not being certified to teach in New York state.

This pressure built up over time. Halfway through the semester one of our top student teachers, who was deeply committed to teaching and growing, nearly broke down in tears as he shared the frustration he felt with completing the edTPA. We deliberated if we should refer him to psychological services to ensure he could get through the semester without an unbearable amount of stress. Other students also shared this sentiment on the last day of class when we used a theater-based strategy where the class formed a circle and students used a movement and a sound to demonstrate how they felt about the edTPA. Typical actions included ringing their necks while making a choking sound, throwing hands up in the air as if in defeat, punching an imaginary enemy, or an exaggerated sigh of relief (presumably because it was almost over).

New York state eventually provided anyone taking the edTPA a safety net due by way of an exam called the ATS-W (Assessment of Teaching Skills-Written). This state certification exam was required before the edTPA took its place in the spring of 2014. In May of 2014, New York state announced that between the spring of 2014 and summer of 2015, teacher candidates who did not pass the edTPA would be allowed to submit a passing score on the ATS-W in its place. This temporary safety net was put in place due to the newness of the edTPA and some of the challenges presented here. Nevertheless, the stressful nature associated with high-stakes exams seeped into the seminar. One student, who we found to be a strong candidate and very hard worker, did not pass the edTPA and had the following reflection after learning of her score:

Thank you so much for the beautiful words. . . . They mean everything to me right now. I know that I’m “safe” with the ATS-W . . . but I’m just so disappointed. Disappointed in the sense that I worked so hard on this, and it still wasn’t good enough. It does on some level make me doubt myself because I do love teaching! Knowing that you feel I am ready to embark on this journey really helps the doubtful feelings subside, so again, thank you so much! Tomorrow is another day . . . (E-mail exchange, 06/19/14)

This illustrates her feelings of inadequacy due to her edTPA results, despite being excellent in the classroom, according to her supervisor and cooperating teacher. In contrast, another student who passed the edTPA and received a position at her student teaching site shared this correspondence with her supervisor:

Thank you Prof! I am thrilled to be working here, I love this school and feel so fortunate to have found a job. After all the work, I feel the edTPA really helped me and forced me to think about my preparation as a teacher. It was hard but I definitely think it’s a better assessment than all the other tests that don’t really have to do with teaching. (E-mail exchange, September 2014)
Clearly the edTPA pushed us and our students to deepen our teaching and required them to show their preparation for teaching by actually teaching—instead of filling in bubbles on an exam. However, it also posed onerous obstacles to student teachers who already faced a semester full of learning, teaching, and work before them.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The lessons learned from the first implementation of the edTPA with three groups of students within one student teaching seminar leave us with a range of insights and implications. We aim to contribute to the debate around the edTPA and performance assessments for future educators who not only teach a specific content area or grade levels but also will do so with emergent bilingual students at the center.

As discussed in our findings, there were ways in which the edTPA supported our efforts to prepare our teacher candidates with an approach that embraced a strength-based and language-as-social-practice perspective. The emphasis on researching students’ personal, cultural, and community assets provided candidates with the opportunity to systematically collect data on their students’ linguistic backgrounds, strengths, and needs. It also reinforced our candidates’ understanding of the relationship between context and language learning and the ways in which students negotiate language and identities in and out of the classroom. However, the edTPA also proved to be a hindrance with respect to issues of dynamic bilingualism. The logistical demands of the tasks along with the translation requirements for languages other than English created a working environment that was not conducive to translanguaging pedagogies and the consideration of home languages as resources for instruction. The high-stakes nature of the portfolio assessment also discouraged our candidates from experimenting with instructional strategies that could have benefited their emergent bilingual students.

For the field, this self-study allows us to understand the position of teachers who are working with emergent bilinguals in bilingual, bilingual special education, or TESOL classrooms as framed by a national performance assessment. It shows that while some attention is given to this group of students, as a whole, bilingual settings are still peripheral to how teachers are certified and given entry into the profession. However, these understandings can also be brought to the developers to inform and improve upon the current guidelines in order to be more inclusive of bilingual settings. We had the opportunity to provide our feedback to the edTPA developers at SCALE, the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning and Equity, and were encouraged to learn of their openness and witnessed their responsiveness to the changes we suggested. We shared the issues we saw with the embedded language policies with the team, who noted of our concerns and took them seriously. We were told our input, especially the explicit emphasis on the inclusion of students’ home language and translanguaging practices, would be taken into account for the next edition of the EAL handbook.

At the university level, where the edTPA may be a reality for the foreseen future—with its strengths and shortcomings—there are changes we have already made or plan to make within our program. To ensure this is not a new experience for student teachers, we have infused subsections of edTPA tasks across related classes. This will ensure that student teachers come to the seminar with some experience with the language and requirements of the edTPA handbook. Seeing the challenges student teachers had with the assessment task, we are also developing an
assessments for all students in the bilingual education, bilingual special education, and TESOL programs. And finally, we are increasing our efforts to better communicate with K–12 schools that host student teachers about the ways they will be impacted and can support the edTPA requirements. With changes at the conceptual, implementation, and school-based levels, the edTPA can become a more meaningful assessment for future educators of emergent bilinguals.

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