The edTPA for Elementary/Middle Educators: Expectations for Meeting the Needs of Students with Disabilities

Marleen Pugach & Ananya Mukhopadhyay, University of Southern California

and

Alison Ford, Karen Rigoni, & Judy Winn, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Wisconsin is one of many states that have adopted the edTPA ("ed" Teacher Performance Assessment) as a requirement for teacher licensure. In this performance assessment, teacher candidates are required to demonstrate the knowledge and skills needed to help all students learn in real classrooms, which includes students with disabilities (http://edtpa.aacte.org). The edTPA handbooks include an evaluation of a teacher candidate’s original teaching materials, a video-taped teaching sample from a “learning segment,” and a series of written commentaries.

The purpose of this Redesign Initiatives Brief is to understand the edTPA as it relates to the expectations of the general education teacher candidate for meeting the needs of students with disabilities who are involved in the learning segment. To do this, we analyzed the edTPA handbooks (September 2013 versions) with elementary and middle general educators in mind. Our primary focus was on the Elementary Literacy Assessment Handbook.† We also reviewed the edTPA Elementary Mathematics and Middle Childhood Handbooks in relationship to how teacher education candidates are to document their work with students who have disabilities; the expectations in all of these handbooks are essentially the same, so the depth of detail in relationship to the edTPA for Elementary Literacy should serve as a useful guide. At the end of this brief we have included a short section on a few minor differences among the various Handbooks. Our thinking is that this brief might be useful as special and regular education faculty work together to review how their preparation programs align with the specific requirements of the edTPA.

The edTPA is organized around three major tasks and scored through 15 associated rubrics:

- **Task 1-Planning:** This task includes describing the context for learning (type of school, classroom, curriculum, etc.) and developing and submitting lesson plans for a “learning segment” (3-5 lessons), including related instructional materials and assessments. Candidates must also provide a “commentary,” reflecting and justifying why selected lessons are appropriate both for delivering the selected content as well as for engaging the particular group of students. [Task 1 is assessed using Rubrics 1-5].

- **Task 2-Instruction:** This task is organized around one or two video clips (together totaling no more than 15 minutes running time) of the candidate teaching the lessons from Task 1. The commentary for this task requires the candidate to reference parts of the video to establish how a positive learning environment is promoted, how students are actively engaged, how student learning is deepened, and so forth. An optional third video (no more than 5 minutes in length) is allowed to provide evidence of students’ language use. [Task 2 is assessed using Rubrics 6-10].

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† A brief description of the Assessment Handbook and reference is provided at the end of this document.
• **Task 3-Assessment:** In this final task, candidates include student work samples and evidence of feedback provided to the learners (the evidence can be written, audio, and/or video). Like the other tasks, a commentary is required; it focuses on analyzing student learning, reflecting on the feedback given, providing evidence of the student’s use of academic language, and using assessment to inform language. [Task 3 is assessed using Rubrics 11-15].

In this brief we provide an overview of how the edTPA is oriented to assess the extent to which candidates address the individual needs of students with disabilities in their teaching. This brief focuses on elementary/middle school educator (1-8) programs. As mentioned, to make the analysis manageable, we present an in-depth analysis of the edTPA Elementary Literacy Handbook. We examined each of the three tasks teacher candidates are required to complete, and where in those tasks attention to meeting needs of students with disabilities is either implicitly alluded to or explicitly emphasized. All references to page numbers in the tables below come from the edTPA Elementary Literacy Handbook (September, 2013).

**Explicit and Implicit References to Students with Disabilities**

There are two ways the edTPA categorizes meeting the needs of students with disabilities: a) implicitly in repeated references about meeting the needs of a “variety of learners” or “students with specific learning needs,” and b) explicitly by asking candidates to address students with IEPs or 504 plans.

“Variety of Learners” or “Students with Specific Learning Needs.” These are the terms used to draw the candidate’s attention to students who “may require different strategies or support” (p. 46). Reminders like the one below occurs in highlighted text, across all three tasks:

Consider the variety of learners in your class who may require different strategies/support [e.g., students with IEPs, English language learners, struggling readers, underperforming students or those with gaps in academic knowledge, and/or gifted students (p. 10, 11, 12, 20, 28, 37)].

**Students with IEPs and 504 Plans.** Explicit awareness of students with disabilities, and more specifically students qualifying for special education, can be found within the edTPA as well. Most notably, and significantly, the following explicit references are made as part of the rubric descriptions in two of the 15 rubrics:

**Rubric 2. Planning to Support Varied Student Learning Needs.** “Candidate attends to requirements in IEPs and 504 plans.” (p. 14)

**Rubric 5. Planning Assessments to Monitor and Support Student Learning.** “Assessment adaptations required by IEP or 504 plans are made.” (p. 17)

Thus, there is an expectation in the edTPA that elementary/middle school general educators demonstrate the ability to address the needs of students with disabilities and other students with varied learning needs. It is true that the broader, “varied learning needs” term would potentially allow candidates to demonstrate how they plan for, instruct, and assess students with other types of unique learning needs; nonetheless, the intent is there. The language of *varied learning needs* draws attention to the fact that students with disabilities are included in the general make up of a classroom and are part of the array of student needs every teacher will be expected to meet and for which every teacher must accommodate.
A Walk-through of how the edTPA is Oriented to Assess the Extent to Which Candidates Address the Individual Needs of Students with Disabilities (and Others with Varied Learning Needs) in Their Teaching

As candidates progress through the Assessment Handbook, a number of opportunities arise to display their knowledge and comfort level in addressing students with disabilities and other specific learning needs. This section is intended to provide a walk-through of these opportunities so that teacher educators have a fuller sense of the areas of preparation that might be discussed in those “edTPA curriculum-mapping sessions.” A table is provided for each edTPA task, highlighting directions from the Assessment Handbook that ask candidates to address students with specific learning needs. The table also includes the evaluation rubric language that coincides with the directions. (The italicized information in the tables represents exact quotes and bold format from the Handbook, along with the page number.). Finally, the table contains a brief example of how a candidate might respond in the commentary portion of the assessment.

**Task 1: Planning.** Right from the start, candidates are asked to provide “Context for Learning Information” which includes information about the students in the class. In addition to descriptive information, the following direction is given:

Complete the chart below to summarize required or needed supports, accommodations or modifications for your students that will affect your instruction in this learning segment. As needed, consult with your cooperating teacher to complete the chart. Some rows have been completed in italics as examples. Use as many rows as you need. (p. 37).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students with Specific Learning Needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>IEP/504 Plans:</strong> Classification/Needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Example: Visual processing</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other Learning Needs</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Example: Struggling readers</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This “Context for Learning Information” sets the stage for the directions, commentary prompts, and rubric measures that address students with disabilities and others with specific learning needs. This information along with a brief example of how a candidate might respond are contained in the table below. (Note: These are not intended to be complete responses.) The information in italics represents a direct quote from the Elementary Literacy Assessment Handbook (September, 2013).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task 1. Directions and Commentary Prompts Addressing Students with Disabilities (and others with varied learning needs)</th>
<th>Example of how a candidate might respond</th>
<th>Sections of Rubric that Address Varied Student Needs (from Level 4 of a 5 point rubric)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Lesson Plans**  
...should include the following information -- instructional strategies and learning tasks (including what you and the students will be doing) that support diverse learning needs. (p. 9)  
I am using my university’s lesson plan format which includes a column for differentiation. In that column, I note accommodations to instructional strategies, learning tasks and assessments for individual learners who need supports beyond those in my “universally designed” lesson. For example, note the accommodations made for one of the focus students – during instruction, I used smaller numbers but still focused on the concept of division as equal sharing; and during assessment I had this student explain orally how he solved the problem.  
Planning Rubric 2- Planning to Support Varied Student Learning Needs. Planned supports are tied to learning objectives and the central focus. Supports address the needs of specific individuals or groups with similar needs. AND Candidate attends to requirements in IEPs and 504 plans (p.14) | | |
| **Knowledge of Students**  
Describe what you know about your students with respect to the central focus of the learning segment. (p. 10)  
Candidates must explicitly demonstrate how what they know about students is used in planning, including prior academic learning and prerequisite skills and knowledge about students’ personal/cultural/community assets.  
Janeen’s IEP indicates that, in addition to her “at-level” small group reading instruction, she benefits greatly from the audio version of grade level literature. Presently, she is learning to use a new text-to-audio program that converts ebooks into audio books – which I will use to address prerequisite skills related to “independent” reading.  
Also, in planning this lesson on connecting literature to history, I conducted some informal conversations with my students to see whose families had come from the South at the time of the book, The Watsons Go To Birmingham.  
Planning Rubric 3: Using knowledge of students to inform teaching and learning. Candidate justifies why learning tasks (or their adaptations) are appropriate using: examples of students’ prior academic learning; and examples of personal/cultural/community assets (p. 15) | | |
| **Supporting Students’ Literacy Learning and Development through Language**  
Describe and justify why your instructional strategies and planned supports are appropriate for the whole class, individuals, and for groups of students with specific learning needs. (p. 11)  
As I planned for students to demonstrate comprehension of text, I decided to use the Edmodo app which allows for students and teachers to communicate online. I planned for three reflection groups and assigned Jason to a group where he had experienced success in the past. He was allowed, like all members of the class, to submit his thoughts by typing a message and/or attaching a file. One of Jason’s strengths is imagery and he often communicates his understanding by images he draws or finds on line.  
Planning Rubric 4: Candidate identifies vocabulary and additional language demand(s) associated with the language function. Plans include targeted support for use of vocabulary as well as additional language demand(s). (p. 16) | | |
(task) that help students understand and successfully use the language function and additional language demands... (p.12).

For every lesson, candidate needs to consider what kinds of supports students will need in terms of the language demands of the lesson.

**Monitoring Student Learning**  
*Explain how the design or adaptation of your planned assessments allows students with specific needs to demonstrate their learning.* (p. 12)

Discussion of assessments must include specific discussion of assessments for students with disabilities as students with “specific needs”

The assessment I am planning had students write a summary of the story with attention to plot and characters’ roles. For Rachel, who has difficulty writing, I provided a computer-based drawing program with a subtitle feature.

**Planning Rubric 5:**  
*Planning Assessments to Monitor and Support Student Learning*  
Assessment adaptations required by IEP or 504 plans are made. (p. 17)

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**Task 2: Instruction.** In the instruction task, teacher candidates are asked to follow-through on their plans (which involved differentiation for varied learning needs) and to consider the following:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Task 2. Directions and Commentary Prompts Addressing Students with Disabilities (and others with varied learning needs)</th>
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| **Promoting Positive Learning Environment**  
*How did you demonstrate mutual respect for, rapport with and responsiveness to students with varied needs and backgrounds and challenge students to engage in learning?* (p. 19) | At the beginning of the unit, when I set up my Cooperative Base Groups, I was careful to match students based upon their contribution academically and socially. There is one particular student in the class, Cheryl (not her real name) who has a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) and relies on three peers who are part of her “Team.” Cheryl and her Teammates have been coached on “tuning into her moods” and helping to redirect her or “talk her down” when her negative behavior is escalating. | Instruction Rubric 6:  
*Candidate provides a challenging learning environment that promotes mutual respect among students.* (p.21)  
[Also, it is important to take note of a Level 1 performance-  
- Candidate allows disruptive behavior to interfere with student learning. (p.21)] |

Candidates must both demonstrate and explain how they will ensure students feel secure about learning in the classroom given that many students will have varied needs and backgrounds. Candidates can not allow disruptive behavior to interfere with student learning.

| **Analyzing Teaching**  
*Refer to examples from the video clips in your responses... What changes would you make to your instruction – for the whole class and/or for students who need greater support or challenge – to better support student* | By using literacy activity centers for groups, I could spend anywhere from ten to twenty minutes several times a week providing additional individualized time for three of my struggling readers, all of whom have IEPs. I could do a | Instruction Rubric 10:  
*Candidate proposes changes that address individual and collective learning needs related to the central focus.*  
Candidate makes connections |
### Task 3: Assessment

The assessment section is anchored by the evidence of three “focus students” selected by the candidate for analysis. An important condition of this Task is that, **“At least one of the students must have specific learning needs,”** for example, a student with an IEP (Individualized Education Program), an English language learner, a struggling reader or writer, an underperforming student or a student with gaps in academic knowledge, and/or a gifted student needing greater support or challenge.” (p.26)

<table>
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| **Analyzing Student Learning**  
*Use evidence found in the 3 student work samples and the whole class summary to analyze the patterns of learning for the whole class and differences for groups or individual learners relative to  
- essential literacy strategy  
- requisite skill (p. 27)* | After collecting reading logs after the first two weeks, I notice Henry, who has an IEP, has written only a one sentence summary for each entry, compared to the whole class pattern of writing up to a page in summary. I structured Henry’s writing work to provide a scaffold for his slowly increasing his writing output, using graphic organizers to plan his log entries. | **Assessment Rubric 11:**  
Analysis uses specific examples from work samples to demonstrate patterns of student learning consistent with the summary. (p. 30) |

**Feedback to Guide Further Learning**  
*Explain how feedback provided to the 3 focus students addresses their individual strengths and needs relative to the standards/objectives measured (p. 28)*

Candidates should use student work samples to highlight differences in learning patterns between individuals and the class. If the work of a student with a disability is one of the individual samples, this is the opportunity to identify the variation in pacing and extra support that might be necessary.

Candidates should provide balanced feedback that is personalized for each student in order to maximize a student’s perception of their own

When reviewing Tammy’s essay on government checks and balances, I included three areas of strength in her writing that I wanted her to continue using, and also multiple suggestions and opportunities for utilizing strategies we’ve discussed in class. For example, I talked about re-reading the essay to identify any information that is not related to her main points and then to ask herself if that information should

**Assessment Rubric 12:**  
Feedback is accurate and addresses both strengths and needs related to specific learning objectives.  
Feedback is provided consistently for the focus students. (p. 31)
abilities and how that compares to the learning task they are being asked to complete.

**Evidence of Language Understanding and Use**

*Explain the extent to which your students were able to use or struggled to use language (selected function, vocabulary, and additional identified demands) to develop content understanding.*

Candidates should consider discussion of students who may have additional language needs and how to determine whether such students are able to develop content knowledge.

After reading a non-fiction text on volcanoes, Michelle’s follow-up summary was surface level and incomplete in many ways due to her inability to utilize the new vocabulary she learned, such as “dormant” or “eruption.”

**Using Assessment to Inform Instruction**

*Based on your analysis of student learning presented… describe next steps for instruction -for whole class -for the 3 focus students and other individuals/groups with specific needs* (p. 28)

Discussion of proposed next steps for instruction should include an appropriate place to begin the next lesson for whole class, as well as options scaffolding/adaptation for students with “specific needs.”

In the unit on descriptive language in poetry, I noticed after the quiz that in the class as a whole, many students were incorrectly identifying metaphors and similes. Thus, I continued the next lesson on poetry with a few additional clarifying practice opportunities with partners to identify similes and metaphors.

In addition, during reading groups we will spend time reading a leveled poetry text and identifying similes and metaphors in the text at the end. For those students who are struggling, I will first model my thinking in identifying similes and metaphors, including the criteria I use and how I apply it in particular texts. Modeling thinking, or “thinking aloud,” is a component of the gradual release of reasonability model developed by Pearson and Fielding. It can be seen as the “I do” component. I will focus on the thinking, not just the procedure.

**Assessment Rubric 14:**

Candidate explains and provides evidence of students’ use of language function, vocabulary, and additional language demand(s) in ways that develop content understandings. (p. 33)

**Assessment Rubric 15:**

Next steps provide targeted support to individuals or groups to improve their learning relative to:
- essential literacy strategy
- requisite skills

Next steps are loosely connected with research and/or theory (p. 34)
Comparing Elementary Literacy, Elementary Mathematics Assessments and Middle School Assessments for Addressing the Needs of Students with Disabilities

The Elementary Literacy and Elementary Mathematics Assessment Handbooks call for the same evidence related to students who have disabilities and address the issue consistently in all of the directions and rubrics across all three assessments.

The Middle School Handbooks offer similar purposes and guidelines, but with an increased focus on providing developmentally appropriate challenging instruction for adolescents. They also have a specific focus on students interpreting and developing interdisciplinary connections in their learning, a focus that is not represented in the elementary assessment handbooks. Finally, the Middle School edTPA requires that teachers demonstrate how to help students develop requisite literacy skills.

Final Remarks

The edTPA Handbooks focus on teachers demonstrating that they can plan for, instruct, and assess a variety of learners in their classrooms, among them students who have disabilities. Due to the implicit and explicit references to meeting the needs of all learners, teacher education programs need to offer practical strategies and lesson-level analysis for how to differentiate instruction, as well as provide opportunities to acquire in depth theoretical knowledge on culturally competent and critical approaches to designing the classroom learning environment. So, “what is special ed about the edTPA?”

Minimally, based on this review, we think it comes down to this starter list of competencies for faculty to consider:

- The ability to routinely consider and describe (meaningfully) learners with disabilities and their needs and based, in part, on IEP or 504 plans
- The use of a lesson planning approach (and perhaps a lesson plan format) that addresses the wide range of learners from the start (universal design) and further reveals differentiation for students with specific learning needs
- An ability to justify decisions of lesson differentiation and outcomes related to learners with IEPs or students with other varied learning needs.
- The use of inclusive teaching methods that are engaging and produce meaningful outcomes for the varied learners in the class and the ability to justify them through research and/or theory
- A confidence in positive behavior support strategies for addressing students with challenging behavior
- A sense of accountability for the learning and meaningful accomplishments of all learners, including the students with IEPs in the class; and assessment methods and adaptations that provide clear evidence of these accomplishments
- A familiarity with some special education terminology, e.g., “IEP”, “504”, “Adaptations,” “Accommodations,” “Modifications”.

Finally, it is important to note that there are other critical competencies that the edTPA was not designed to address and yet will require the same type of scrutiny when faculty come together to ensure that the teacher candidates are prepared to teach students with disabilities. For example, general education candidates will need to know how to participate in an IEP team and contribute to its development and implementation. They will need to know quite a bit about Response to Intervention (RtI) and their role in providing “tiered supports.” They will need to have a repertoire of inclusive
strategies that go beyond the lesson-level assessed in the edTPA. And they will need to have successful practice in working collaboratively with special educators, paraprofessionals, and with parents of students with disabilities. The edTPA may offer a tool for renewed communication between special and general education faculty, but broader, equally important competencies (IEP Team Development, RtI, inclusive education strategies, collaboration) should not be left out of these critical conversations.

1 Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity. (September 2013). edTPA Elementary Literacy Assessment Handbook. [This is a 46 page Handbook that provides specific instructions on how to complete this performance-based assessment. It includes an introduction to the edTPA, followed by a detailed section on each of the three edTPA tasks (Task 1 - Planning for Instruction and Assessment; Task 2 – Instructing and Engaging Students in Learning; Task 3 – Assessing Student Learning). Each of these sections includes the specific prompts that must be addressed in the candidate’s commentary as well as the actual rubrics that will be used to score the submission. Finally, the Handbook includes a section on “Professional Responsibilities” an “Elementary Literacy Glossary” and some appendices.]