How Have Music Student Teachers Done on the edTPA so Far?

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The edTPA will be required of all student teachers in Illinois starting in the fall of 2015. Several Universities have already been piloting this new assessment, yielding some data that can help all of us better prepare our student teachers for when this assessment begins for real next year. SCALE (Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning and Equity) has released the results of student teachers participating nationally for the 2013/2014 academic year. In addition, 32 Illinois State University (ISU) music student teachers went through the assessment and were evaluated by Pearson evaluators both in the Fall of 2013 and the Spring of 2014. Results from both groups overall are very positive and scores from ISU music students are even higher than national averages. There are however, some rubrics that consistently score lower than other rubrics in the edTPA both with the national sample and the music students at ISU. It is the goal of this article to take a closer look at these rubrics and give some possible explanations as to why they scored lower than the others and also give some supports for future student teachers taking the edTPA.

Before we get into the results from these two reports, let’s review briefly what is involved in the edTPA. The edTPA includes a review of a student teacher candidate’s teaching materials (including lesson plans, supplementary handouts, assessments and contextual information about the student population) and short videos of the candidate teaching to document and demonstrate their ability to effectively teach his/her subject matter to all students.

Student teacher candidates are assessed in the areas of Planning, Instruction and Assessment using reflective writing assignments and video critiques of their own teaching. These performance–based portfolios are then assessed by outside evaluators who are themselves professional educators trained by Pearson. The Planning, Instruction and Assessment tasks are further broken down into 5 rubrics each for a total of 15. Each rubric has a possible high score of 5. There has been a cut score determined by the state of Illinois for passing this exam. Illinois is going to do something similar to Washington State and start with 35 as the cut score but eventually move up to 41 as the passing score by 2019, according to Elisa Palmer in the Lauby Teacher Education Center at Illinois State. A quick mental calculation reveals that a student teacher candidate must be averaging between a 2 and a 3 on each rubric in order to pass. A closer look at how student teachers have scored on these rubrics should provide some helpful information for all of those who work with future educators.

The highest scores were found in rubric 2 under Planning, rubric 6 under Instruction and rubric 15 under Assessment after averaging both semesters together for the ISU students. Rubric 2 is titled, “Planning to support varied student learning needs”. The candidate must specifically address students with IEP’s and 504’s in their lesson plans and commentaries to score above a 1 on this rubric. It is indeed encouraging news that these students did well on rubric 2. It appears that music teacher candidates can create supports for diverse learners within a music classroom. Rubric 6 deals with the learning environment. Specifically, teacher candidates must point out and reflect on specific instances in their videos that
demonstrate good teacher rapport and respectful interaction between teacher and student. Finally, rubric 15 asks the teacher candidate to reflect on the next steps in their instruction based on what they have learned from their assessment of the students in their class. Candidates are asked to substantiate these proposed supports for student learning with current research or learning theory to achieve the highest score.

On the flip side, rubric 4 under Planning, rubric 10 under Instruction and rubric 13 under Assessment had the lowest scores for both the national sample and the ISU students. A closer examination of these three rubrics and what they require the teacher candidates to do should be helpful for those in the teacher preparation profession. Rubric 4 (which will be addressed later in this article) involves identifying and supporting language demands. Rubric 10 asks the candidate to analyze teaching effectiveness and Rubric 13 includes commentary on how the students being taught will use the feedback provided by the teacher candidate. As mentioned above, Rubric 10 requires teacher candidates to comment on how they would change their instruction to better meet the central focus of the lesson and improve student learning. While many candidates address how they would improve their own delivery of the content or improve classroom management they do not actually address their students’ learning. As with all of the edTPA, the focus of the reflection and the proposed changes should always be on the student’s learning. It’s important that we instruct our student teachers to take the focus off themselves when watching the video and focus instead on student learning and how they (the students) are doing in relationship to meeting the lesson objective. Rubric 13 has some inherent problems for student teachers with limited exposure to their selected class. This rubric requires candidates to reflect on how they will apply the information learned from their assessment of these students to future lessons. Many teacher candidates do not have opportunities to work with the selected class again after their edTPA segment is over or if they do, they move on to a new topic or a new piece. Both scenarios listed above could then adversely affect a candidate’s score.

The language demand portion of the assessment (rubric 4 and 14) deserve a little extra attention in this article because these two rubrics tend to address issues music student teachers are not as familiar with. The language demand section is very unclear both in the student handbook and in scorer training. Teacher candidates are asked to pick one “language function” for all 3 lessons, identify supporting vocabulary, and identify an additional language demand, either syntax or discourse. The “language function” should be the verb used in the learning objective, e.g., identify, analyze, compare, perform, create, etc. Not all candidates clearly understand this and often pick a language function unrelated to their lesson objective. The students being taught need to demonstrate their understanding of the vocabulary necessary for the lesson in some way. Too many teachers simply call on select students to define vocabulary as proof of mastery. The teacher candidate needs to structure the lesson so that the students are actually using the vocabulary during the lessons. The additional language demand required by the edTPA allows the teacher candidate to select either discourse or syntax. It has been observed that candidates have difficulty engaging in discourse. Discourse or class discussion (student to student, teacher to student) must focus on the main learning objective using proper vocabulary to be evaluated with a passing score. The final option for an additional language demand is syntax. Nobody seems to know what syntax means in a musical context. The definition of syntax is “conventions for organizing
symbols”. For those of us in the music teaching profession, this can include the governing principles of reading music, i.e., rests, notes, and musical staff according to the test designers and evaluators.

The 2013 ISU student teachers had an overall mean score of 44.7 and the 2014 ISU student teachers had a mean score of 45.1. With a proposed cut score of 41 in Illinois, it appears that these students would have had no difficulty passing the edTPA evaluation. This is good news for those in the teacher education profession. Though the edTPA is new and still unfamiliar to many of us, our student teachers have proven they can be successful and even shine using this assessment. It is important to remind everyone with a stake in this assessment that the *edTPA K-12 Performing Arts Student Handbook* available through SCALE provides the essential helps for our student teacher candidates to be successful in completing the edTPA. An updated version of the handbook will be available in September of this year. Each of the 15 rubrics discussed in this article are included in the handbook along with suggestions on what the candidates need to do and write to complete that portion of the assessment. Another supplemental handbook titled “Making Good Choices” (also put out by SCALE) is an excellent resource for completing the evaluation. The ISU student teachers mentioned in this article had regular seminars (5 times over the student teaching semester) that went through the handbook provided by SCALE and specifically addressed each rubric to be used in the assessment. Future classes at ISU will actually see examples of previous student’s written commentaries, sample assessments and lesson plans. All of the music education faculty will require their students to use standardized lesson plans that address the required elements in the edTPA, and they will also require reflective writing assignments during their clinical teaching events that align to the various prompts in the portfolio. It is hoped that this added preparation will both strengthen the instructional skills of future teacher candidates and continue the trend of passing scores on this evaluation.