“Perhaps These Are Not Poetic Times at All”: Using Poetry to Cope with and Critique a High-Stakes Teacher Performance Assessment

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This study takes a fine-grained look at the inaugural implementation of a high-stakes teacher performance assessment (the edTPA) from multiple perspectives and chronicles how participants used the reading, writing, and discussion of poetry to cope with and sometimes critique the edTPA. Teacher researchers sought to understand multiple perspectives of stakeholders associated with the English education program in which each played a role. Other participants included seven English education teacher candidates and five mentor teachers from candidates’ student teaching placements. Data included lesson plans, instructional materials, and student work from the seminar candidates took during student teaching, email messages among stakeholders, official edTPA communications, field notes, and stakeholder interviews. Findings are organized around the functions of poetry for managing the edTPA revealed by the analysis. The study suggests that reading, writing, and discussing poetry can assist candidates and teacher educators in navigating a high-stakes assessment through reflective practice.

Nikki Giovanni (1996) penned her well-known poem, “For Saundra,” in the 1960s when she was involved in the Civil Rights Movement. In it, she states that she originally wanted her poem to rhyme, “but revolution doesn’t lend / itself to be-bopping.” Giovanni’s narrator describes a conversation with a neighbor about why she doesn’t write on pleasant subjects such as nature, topics she dismisses as untenable given the era’s injustice. The text concludes with three wry lines, given that Giovanni has just written a beautiful, provocative poem:

perhaps these are not poetic
times
at all (p. 59)
During the fall 2013 semester, Kelly read “For Saundra” and nearly 20 other poems to preservice English teacher candidates in the seminar they took with her during full-time student teaching. This cohort was the first required to pass the edTPA, a teacher performance assessment, to be eligible for New York certification. Kelly undertook study of the inaugural implementation of this requirement with two co-researchers, Sarah and Janine. Although we began the work with reservations about New York’s embrace of a high-stakes assessment administered by a global corporation, we expected our ability to navigate the new mandate with our students and field collaborators would be enhanced by practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Two research questions guided the study:

- What are preservice English teacher candidates’, mentor teachers’, field supervisors’, and teacher educators’ perspectives on the purpose, design, and implementation of the edTPA as mandated for teacher certification in New York?
- What strategies do these stakeholders use to manage the edTPA process over time?

This article focuses on the second of these two questions (see Chandler-Olcott & Fleming, 2014, for consideration of the first). As we engaged in preliminary analysis focused on the edTPA management strategies used by stakeholders, we encountered this comment in a student’s course evaluation for the seminar: “It was important to include poetry, and readings like Christensen’s book, Reading, Writing, and Rising Up, because they help to ground us as humans in this experience.” The statement struck us as significant, particularly in light of the emotional and relational dimensions of the edTPA process that became salient during the semester, and we decided to mine the data for other transactions with poetry. Our analysis revealed that these data were worth highlighting in their own right, rather than as part of a more comprehensive discussion of stakeholders’ strategies.

In this article, then, we chronicle how study participants used the reading, writing, and discussion of poetry to cope with and sometimes critique the edTPA. We provide context for the adoption of this high-stakes assessment and related reform initiatives in New York, as well as review literature on teacher performance assessments in general. We describe our methods and then share our findings about poetry and the edTPA process. After discussing implications, we close with an original poem.
The U.S. educational reform movement has gained momentum in recent years, seeking to address perceived problems in K–12 public education by evaluating and improving teacher quality (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Lewis & Young, 2013). Teacher performance assessments are key to this agenda, with potential models coming from California, which has required teacher candidates to pass performance assessments since 1998. One of these assessments, the Performance Assessment for California Teachers, was designed by staff and faculty associated with the Stanford Center on Assessment, Learning, & Equity (SCALE) in collaboration with representatives from multiple institutions of higher education in the state. In 2013, under the name of edTPA, the assessment was revised and nationally validated through what SCALE calls its “operational” partnership with Pearson Learning (https://scale.stanford.edu/teaching/edtpa).

Although numerous universities have used the edTPA or its precursors voluntarily for some time, New York was the first U.S. state to mandate the Pearson-administered version for all candidates seeking initial teacher certification. Candidates assemble lesson plans, classroom video, and student work samples and write up to 25 single-spaced pages of commentary in three areas, called tasks: (1) planning, (2) instruction, and (3) assessment. With a $300 fee, these materials are submitted online to Pearson for scoring with 15 rubrics. The process represents dramatic change for New York, which previously required only written certification tests.

Such changes are part of a larger set of P-20 education initiatives in the state, commonly known as the Regents’ Reform Agenda and funded by a federal Race to the Top grant. These initiatives include implementation of the Common Core State Standards using state-recommended curriculum modules, development of data systems to measure student learning, efforts to “turn around” low-performing schools, new teacher certification examinations including but not limited to the edTPA, and inservice teacher evaluations called Annual Professional Performance Reviews, or APPR (NYSED, 2012). Although the certification exams affect preservice candidates most directly, the other prongs of the agenda influence curriculum adoption, instructional delivery, and morale in schools where they student teach.

Advocates of teacher performance assessments contend that they capture teaching’s complexity better than written tests (Darling-Hammond, 2006) and that they facilitate the preparation of teachers “ready to enter the profession with the skills necessary to help all their students learn” (Bartolletti, Connelly, Domenech, & Robinson, 2014). Supporters also argue that such
assessments create opportunities for reflective inquiry and program renewal (Peck, Gallucci, & Sloan, 2010), perhaps countering criticism of teacher education institutions (Greenberg, McKee, & Walsh, 2015). Opponents argue that the assessments narrow the curriculum and create too much corporate influence (Rennert-Ariev, 2008). Others raise concerns about inadequate time for institutions to prepare candidates and inconsistency with existing regulations about student teaching (United University Professions, 2014). In accounting for equity, scholars take conflicting positions: some posit that performance assessments undermine social justice–oriented teaching (Madeloni & Gorlewski, 2013), while others claim they require candidates to enact “non-deficit perspectives” in practice (Lynn, 2014).

Studies of teacher performance assessments, including but not limited to the edTPA, have been situated, not surprisingly, most often in California and suggest that teacher educators take varied stances toward implementation (Kornfeld, Grady, Marker, & Buddell, 2007; Lys, L’Esperance, Dobson, & Bullock, 2014; Miller, Carroll, Jancic, & Markworth, 2015; Okhremtchouk, Seiki, Gilliland, Ateh, Wallace, & Kato, 2009; Parkes & Powell, 2015; Peck et al., 2010; Sandholtz & Shea, 2012). For example, Kornfeld et al.’s (2007) self-study found that while most secondary education faculty resisted state intrusion and argued that the mandates had little influence on their self-described “progressive, learner-centered” program (p. 1902), discourses of compliance nonetheless infiltrated their language and caused concern. Peck and colleagues (2010) also documented California teacher educators’ responses to a performance assessment mandate, but their findings were framed more optimistically, suggesting that an inquiry stance, rather than one concerned with either resistance or compliance, led faculty to a “renewed sense of commitment and identification with the program” (p. 459). Teacher educators’ stances on performance assessments were influenced by how well they felt the assessments matched the values undergirding their programs.

Although these studies offer useful glimpses of the potentials and pitfalls for teacher educators in attending to performance assessment mandates, few focused on English education specifically, most took place in a single state, and most were conducted prior to national conversations about teacher quality. This study is valuable, then, because it takes a fine-grained look at edTPA implementation from multiple perspectives at a pivotal time, when many states have adopted or are debating adoption of a performance assessment for teacher licensure, and considers that implementation in a discipline-specific context.
Chandler-Olcott, Fleming, & Nieroda > Poetry and Performance Assessments

Theoretical Perspectives

The study was situated within a tradition of teacher research intended to understand and improve practice in a particular context while contributing to a broader research base (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Shagoury & Power, 2011). Like Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), we see practitioner inquiry as encompassing (1) a set of approaches for gathering and analyzing classroom-based data and (2) “a way of knowing and being” that “links individuals to larger groups and social movements intended to challenge the inequities perpetuated by the educational status quo” (p. viii). In recent years, teacher communities in the United States and elsewhere have used collective inquiry into policies and mandates “to retain their identities while managing top-down regimes of accountability” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 21) such as the Regents reform agenda.

Both the study and the pedagogy in the student-teaching seminar were also grounded in sociocultural theories (Bakhtin, 1986; Gee, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007) that frame endeavors such as learning to teach and learning to read and write as socially situated. In this view, “human action [is] mediated by language and other symbol systems within particular cultural contexts” (Lewis et al., 2007, p. 5). Individuals use language, whether in a poem, on a test, or in a classroom lesson, to participate meaningfully in a community and to construct identities through that participation that are recognizable to others. This perspective suggests that the implementation of a performance assessment intended to promote national standards of teacher quality will be experienced variously in different contexts—for instance, when embedded in two different teacher preparation programs. Such a lens also hints at the value of fine-grained documentation of language and literacy practices used by members of a particular community, including those with various social locations (e.g., teacher candidate, field supervisor).

Method

This study took place during the 2013–14 academic year in an English education program at a private university in New York. Participants included candidates pursuing full-time student-teaching placements, their mentor teachers, their field supervisor, and their instructor for a campus-based seminar designed to accompany their placements. Our team of teacher-researchers employed qualitative methods to collect and analyze a variety of data sources associated with typically occurring teaching and learning activities in both the field placements and the on-campus seminar, as well
as data such as transcripts from one-to-one interviews intended to capture individual stakeholders’ perspectives on the edTPA’s inaugural implementation in this context.

Program Context

The English education program is situated within a large private university located in an urban center in New York State. With a long institutional history of valuing inclusion and access, the program is field-intensive, drawing undergraduates and preservice master’s candidates together for a multi-semester sequence of methods courses and field placements, including at least one sustained experience (seven weeks or more) in a high-needs school context. Over the years, alumni participating in accreditation-related evaluations have reported valuing the program’s intimate size; its integration of theory, research, and practice; and its close ties to area schools.

During the fall 2015 semester, students were enrolled in the second of two required student-teaching placements. They worked full-time for 11 weeks in a local middle school or high school, having completed a seven-week, part-time placement at the opposite level the previous spring. For each candidate, Janine, the field supervisor, organized five observations followed by three-way conferences involving herself, the teacher candidate, and the mentor teacher. These observations and conferences typically took place every other week.

In addition to student teaching, students took a campus-based seminar with Kelly, the faculty member, that met weekly for two hours, following 12 hours of intensive instruction during the first week of university classes. The seminar focused on assessment, classroom management, and professional identity construction. Class sessions featured discussion of students’ placements, exploration of assigned readings, and peer and instructor feedback on assignment drafts; students also posted to a Blackboard discussion board. Seminar was the locus of support for the edTPA, although there were limits, stipulated by SCALE/Pearson, on how much guidance students could receive on their actual submissions. In mid-December, after their placements and the semester concluded, candidates transmitted their edTPA submissions to Pearson for official scoring via Taskstream, an online portal.

Prior to fall 2013, Kelly’s primary use of poetry in the student-teaching seminar she led was for read-ins, a name she coined for short teacher read-alouds to transition students into their on-campus class from their all-day placements in the field. Poetry’s brevity was useful in an often-crowded seminar agenda, and she liked the model the read-ins provided of valuing a
genre often relegated to test preparation in schools. She typically selected poems she could link to relationship building, planning, and assessment.

Participants
Study participants included representatives from the four stakeholder groups playing significant roles in the English education program. These included seven of the eight candidates in the fall 2013 student-teaching cohort (one declined to be in the study). Six of seven candidate participants were undergraduates, seniors completing a four-year bachelor’s degree with dual majors in English & Textual Studies and in secondary education, and one was a preservice graduate student completing certification requirements along with her master’s degree in English education. The candidate group included one African American female, one African American male, four White females, and one White male. All reported being native speakers of English, and nearly all attended high school in the northeast United States.

All seven of the mentor teachers who hosted candidates’ 11-week, full-time placements also agreed to participate in the study. This group included five White females and two White males, again all native speakers of English. All of the mentors were veteran teachers with at least a decade of experience, and all of them had successfully mentored candidates from the program in previous years. Four worked in different schools in the same large urban district; three others worked in three different suburban districts, respectively.

Also participating in the study because of its teacher-research orientation were Janine, a White female serving as field supervisor for student teaching placements, and Kelly, a White female serving as the seminar instructor. Their backgrounds are discussed separately below because of their dual role as researchers.

Researcher Roles
At the time of the study, Kelly had more than 15 years of experience as a teacher educator, including a decade as seminar instructor. She was the lead researcher. Janine was a full-time doctoral student and former secondary English teacher. She contributed to discussions in seminar and conferred with individuals during work time, but her chief instructional role involved field observations and debriefing conferences. Rounding out the team was Sarah, a full-time secondary English teacher and White female who formerly mentored student teachers in the program and was now a part-time doctoral student. Sarah conducted interviews and served as a participant observer in seminar but did not play an instructional role. Analysis and writing were
done jointly by all three of us, drawing on a rich variety of data sources, discussed next.

Data Sources
Data collection for the study took place between August 2013, when the seminar began, and January 2014, when follow-up interviews concluded. As is common with teacher research, data sources included a wide range of texts generated during typical teaching-learning activities, both within the field placements and the seminar. These included Kelly’s lesson plans and other seminar materials (e.g., readings, rubrics, in-class handouts), copies of student work (e.g., discussion board postings, in-class writing, draft edTPA submissions), copies of the documentation related to field placements (e.g., Janine’s supervisory reports, mentor teachers’ candidate evaluations), and electronic mail sent and received by various stakeholders in the program (e.g., exchanges between candidates and Kelly related to seminar assignments, messages including Kelly, Janine, and a mentor teacher related to a particular candidate’s performance). We also saved all official edTPA communications such as candidate handbooks and state memos that were available on the State Education Department website or distributed to stakeholders so that we could trace origins for edTPA-related discourses on which some participants drew.

To capture perspectives on edTPA implementation that were expressed orally, Sarah took field notes during seminar meetings as well as during meetings of the research team when Kelly and Janine shared information with each other across their instructional roles. Sarah also conducted, taped, and transcribed formal, one-to-one interviews of 40–60 minutes each with candidates, mentor teachers, Janine, and Kelly. To facilitate comparison and contrast of perspectives across groups, the interview protocol included these questions for all: (1) Tell me what you know about the edTPA, (2) What do you think is the purpose of the edTPA? and (3) How does the edTPA compare with your vision of teaching or preparing teachers? Additional questions were tailored to certain groups (e.g., What advice would you give next year’s student teachers about edTPA? for candidates only). This mix of formal and informal sources yielded a rich set of data for analysis and reflection.

Data Analysis and Writing Process
Our analysis and writing process had numerous phases that were often recursive, as is typical of teacher research. As recommended by Shagoury and Power (2011), we began data analysis just several weeks after the seminar
—and corresponding data collection—commenced. We met as researchers every two weeks during the fall 2013 semester, audiotaping our discussions to capture emerging understandings and discussing our impressions via more than 100 emails in between face-to-face meetings. During these exchanges, we kept track of pedagogical moves to recommend to others working in earlier program phases, as well as changes for Kelly to make in seminar the following year.

In late November, as the seminar and semester were coming to a close, we began inductive coding, starting first with artifacts such as lesson plans and student work and moving later to interviews and field notes. Some codes were literal descriptors, such as participant references to each of the edTPA’s required three tasks. Other codes were more inferential, such as the conceptions of teaching expressed or enacted by participants with reference to the assessment. Through discussion, we came to consensus about a shared list of codes to use, going forward, that included but did not privilege poetry as a genre explored in the seminar.

In January, as Kelly was reviewing course evaluations for the recently concluded seminar, she encountered the student comment about poetry shared at the beginning of this article. We discussed this comment as part of conversations focused on strategies for managing the edTPA process—the area of focus for one of our research questions. This discussion revealed that some strategies helped Kelly to manage the implementation as a teacher educator; for example, weekly research meetings created a safe space to process her instructional decision making. Other strategies were more focused on managing the process from a candidate perspective—for instance, the day-long writing retreat that Kelly hosted, with food, to give candidates time to draft their submissions. Transactions with poetry, however, involved and supported multiple groups of stakeholders, including candidates, Janine as the field supervisor who attended seminar, and Kelly as the instructor of that seminar. This insight prompted us to reread the existing data to create a subset of material (a little less than 20 percent of the overall corpus) with explicit and implicit references to reading, writing, and discussing poetry. To that subset, we applied codes resembling what the edTPA handbook for candidates calls “language functions”—the various purposes, represented by active verbs—served by poetry over the semester: for example, to establish broader purposes or create space for questioning. Borrowing, and resituating, this language function construct from the edTPA for edTPA-related data analysis felt satisfying and appropriate to us.

After rereading data and discussing the patterns revealed by these layers of analysis, we decided to represent our findings with a chronological
narrative, employing subheadings reflecting the poetry functions and noting the source and date of each piece of data we cited. Such an approach allowed us to (1) convey changes in perspective and practice over time, (2) write ourselves into the story as teacher-researchers, and (3) emphasize the narrative’s constructed, deliberate nature. We employed the third-person perspective because it was the least awkward way to describe the varying roles each of us played during the semester, including but not overemphasizing Kelly’s prominent role as seminar instructor.

In the discussion, however, we opted instead to use first-person plural (“we”) rather than third person (“they”) to represent ourselves as a research team. Distinguishing between our instructional and research roles mattered less to that section, and we wanted to emphasize the collaborative nature of our meaning-making and synthesis. While drafting, we chose to add a poetic element to the discussion, in keeping with our topic. We used a process deliberately parallel to an instructional activity Kelly had led earlier in the seminar. Separately, all three of us wrote for 20 minutes in response to this prompt: “How does Nikki Giovanni’s idea of ‘poetic times’ resonate for you in light of your experiences with the inaugural administration of the edTPA?” In a face-to-face meeting, we exchanged our prose writing, selected evocative snippets, sequenced them, and crafted them into a poem. An edited version of this text concludes our discussion.

Findings

Here we share our findings from the first semester when English student teachers from one New York university participated in the edTPA as a high-stakes assessment, with a focus on the reading, writing, and discussion of poetry as strategies for managing that process. We chunk the chronological narrative into five subheadings linked to the functions of poetry in the process: (1) establishing broader purposes and big ideas, (2) balancing agendas and competing concerns, (3) creating space for questioning, (4) acknowledging fear and frustration, and (5) honoring persistence and perspective. We argue, ultimately, that these various uses of poetry helped to create a discourse community where teacher candidates, the field supervisor, and the faculty instructor could construct meanings together to help navigate a process that might otherwise have been experienced far more negatively.
Establishing Broader Purposes and Big Ideas

During the first week of classes, when the university was in session but schools were not, the seminar met intensively, logging four three-hour sessions. The centerpiece of the first session was a demonstration lesson adapted from Linda Christensen’s *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up* (1999), a text Kelly assigned candidates to read over the summer. After examining George Ella Lyon’s (1993) “Where I’m From” poem and several others authored by Christensen’s students in the same style, all seminar participants, including Kelly, Janine, and Sarah, drafted and read poems about themselves. The activity, which Kelly had used for years, was meant to build community and establish the seminar as a space where students would themselves read and write. This excerpt from Kelly’s lesson plan reveals how she intended to explain the retention of this long-time activity to students:

Say that I have overhauled almost all of my daily class plans significantly . . . BUT I decided that I was going to keep this first class largely what it has been for a number of years because I wanted to make a statement—to them and to myself—that our program is still about some enduring ideas—that not everything’s changing just because a lot of things are. (Lesson plan, 8/26/13)

Sarah documented in her field notes that Kelly shared in class almost exactly what was in her lesson plan. In a journal entry about the class, Janine recorded her feeling that this moment reminded everyone connected to the seminar that the need to prepare for a new assessment did not trump the humanity intrinsic in teaching.

Later that week, Kelly led two class sessions with Helen Doerr, seminar instructor for mathematics education, in a partnership intended to model co-teaching as well as support both faculty in addressing the new mandate. One session, titled “edTPA Boot Camp,” involved students in brainstorming and sharing lists of edTPA-related knowledge before undertaking close readings and group presentations of sections of the edTPA handbook (Lesson plan, 8/29/13). These activities took up an entire 165-minute instructional block, suggesting both instructors’ concern about sending students into the field with a clear understanding of the assessment’s demands. But the English candidates’ first experiences in seminar downplayed the edTPA on purpose, to foreground broader aims for the class and for candidates’ futures.

During the weeks of class following students’ entrance into their field sites, Kelly used poetry to frame each session around key principles and practices. While some constructs were also relevant to the edTPA, she did not foreground the assessment when discussing them. For example, she chose
two poems by Mary Oliver, “Some Questions You Might Ask” and “The Summer Day,” to open class #7, focused on monitoring student learning (Lesson plan, 9/19/13). After reading the poems, she explained to students that she chose them because they emphasized the importance of looking closely at varied student data, including that generated by observation, and asking questions about what those data meant. This poetic launch to the class gave way to students (1) reflecting on their week in the field in writing and (2) analyzing a curriculum unit from a local district to identify opportunities for assessing student learning, including around academic language components emphasized in the edTPA. The Oliver texts were intended, as were all the read-in poems, to frame these activities with some big ideas about assessment, student learning, and teacher identity construction that would spiral through the semester. It was becoming clear, though, even in these early weeks, that toggling between these big ideas and edTPA preparation was going to be challenging.

**Balancing Agendas and Competing Concerns**

Around this time, during the first month of their field placements, students were pursuing an initial practice cycle of the edTPA. Kelly intended this cycle to familiarize students with the assessment requirements, including the scoring rubrics and a host of edTPA-specific terms. She also wanted to provide more specific instructional scaffolding and feedback than would be allowed during the second edTPA cycle, the one that students would submit to Pearson. On September 23, students were scheduled to turn in a first draft of Task 1, the planning portion. Kelly judged the quality of students’ work to be low, as indicated in this message to Sarah:

> I’ve already done extensive (maybe too extensive) feedback. They are pretty awful. . . . I just walked about 6 blocks around the building with [another colleague] to get over my stress! . . . It’s feeling like we need edTPA triage.  
> (Email, 9/25/13)

In seminar the next day, Kelly and the students were blunt with each other. Kelly shared her disappointment with the fuzziness of students’ learning objectives and the paucity of connections to theory and research to justify their choices to an outside audience. Students confessed their difficulties with mastering the edTPA terminology: “I know what I’m doing and why I’m doing it, but it’s really hard to put into words!” confessed Nina, to which Grace replied, “In their words,” referring to the language of the SCALE handbook. Kelly admitted that the early drafts had made her “feel
like throwing up” because “If we submit what we have right now, we will fail” (Field notes, 9/26/13). That Kelly felt deeply, personally implicated in this potential failure was indicated by her pronoun choice—“we”—as well as her public acknowledgment that she did not think the inaugural cohort had been well served by the state, which had not yet released the cut scores for passing, or the university, which had been slow to address edTPA preparation in previous semesters. By the end of the discussion, however, she reassured students that success with the second, high-stakes cycle was within reach if everyone in the learning community, including herself, worked a little harder and supported each other.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the next two class meetings—October 3 and October 10—were devoted to what Kelly called “edTPA triage,” save for brief poetry read-ins and 20 minutes of small-group discussion each week about assigned readings. Students used the Task 2 rubrics to analyze their own classroom videos as well as online videos of experienced teachers from the Teaching Channel—a task at which they were initially awkward—and they worked in pairs to give each other feedback on their Task 2 commentary. Both end-of-class quickwrites implicated the edTPA explicitly: “What are you feeling most confident/most challenged by with reference to the edTPA? Your placement in general?” (Lesson plan, 10/3/13) and “How is your teaching going? What do you anticipate will be the central focus for your Cycle 2 learning segment? What will you video?” (Lesson plan, 10/10/15). The edTPA focus took a toll, however, as Kelly confessed with irritation near the end of the second “triage” day that she needed “something in our class to be other than that damned test!” with which Mandy vigorously agreed. Jon, a Harry Potter fan, muttered softly that edTPA was like the Potter series’ villain Voldemort: “We can’t say its name” (Field notes, 10/10/13).

Given these patterns, Kelly crafted a lesson plan for October 17 intended to allow students to process their field placements with a lens beyond the edTPA. She was feeling more comfortable about students’ command of the assessment’s demands, and she, Janine, and Sarah agreed that students benefited from its requirement to align their instructional and assessment practices. But she had begun to worry again about the seminar’s focus narrowing to test prep in ways similar to what Hillocks (2002) revealed about high-stakes writing assessments’ impact on K–12 contexts. She was also concerned, based on Janine’s reports during their regular meetings related to field supervision, about needing to mediate and complicate students’ understandings of issues in their school sites related to other aspects of the Regents reform agenda beyond the edTPA.
The most obviously pressing of these reform developments was local districts’ implementation of new teacher evaluation systems, APPR in New York parlance. Teachers were discussing the rating systems in all school sites, but the rhetoric was particularly sharp in the urban high school where Sophia was placed. That school had received national attention recently, first for hosting President Barack Obama to highlight local college readiness efforts and then later when every teacher received 0/20 points in a category associated with student improvement on state tests—guaranteeing that no one in the building could receive a 4 (“highly effective”) rating. Several reporters framed the story as an example of arbitrariness and injustice in the evaluation system, and staff were feeling bruised, eventually staging a schoolwide demonstration of solidarity by wearing black clothing and entering/exiting the building exactly at contract-specified times.

Drawing, again, on insights from Christensen (1999), Kelly decided to use poetry to acknowledge and unpack the discourses circulating around such events. She framed the lesson with the language captured in her teaching notes:

Say, “In reading Blackboard postings and interacting with some of you outside of class this week, it’s clear that you’re aware of complicated issues that are playing out right now in your schools, districts, and in the education realm more broadly. This is a challenging time to enter the profession, though it could also be a time of opportunity, as a lot of things are in flux right now.” (Lesson plan, 10/17/13)

She then invited students to write for five minutes on this prompt: “What’s on your mind right now as new professionals, with reference to those issues?” Kelly, Janine, and Sarah wrote along with students, as they had done with the “Where I’m From” activity during the first class.

When time was up, Kelly led construction of a collective poem (Wilhelm, 2002). She collected, shuffled, and redistributed the papers so that everyone received someone else’s piece of writing. After directing each person to underline one or two sentences that seemed powerful or important, she facilitated the group’s sequencing of the snippets into a coherent whole. This process required participants to work together in a line at the front of the room, reordering their bodies as they resequenced the snippets. It resulted in the following poem:

The system is broken.
This is the resounding sentiment
that I hear expressed
by teachers and administrators
every day....
I am worried about this because
these are extremely experienced teachers
receiving low performance grades.
The numbers I hear attached to individuals
seem so off--
one friend gets a 5,
And I honestly think it's a gift;
another gets a 2,
and that's a travesty.
She's the kind of teacher
schools should be going
out of their way
to keep....
It makes me wonder
what I would put in my binder.
Without all the statistics,
would I get
fired
too?
I'm not the type
to worry about things
until I have to deal with them.
What this means for us...
there might be a lot of
vacant positions
next year,
but also
a lot of
red
tape. (Collective poem, 10/17/15)

The group’s last oral reading of the poem prompted murmurs of approval, even as students’ expressions and body language acknowledged the heaviness of its content. Someone commented that it was bleak and beautiful (Field notes, 10/17/15), a response that captured a tension at the heart of the activity. On one hand, it linked candidates’ edTPA travails to broader changes creating anxiety in their schools, which could be discouraging, even overwhelming. On the other hand, the explicit acknowledgment of these tensions was comforting, ensuring students they were not alone. It
also appears to have provided permission to use poetry to question aspects of their student teaching, including edTPA.

Creating Space for Questioning

Some of this questioning was sparked by Kelly’s simple nagging. After Jon missed two deadlines, Kelly sent him this email to inquire about his drafts’ whereabouts:

To: Jon  
Subject: still nothing in my box from you...  
...What’s the status of Task 1 and 2?  
(Hmm, a little couplet.)  (Email, 10/16/13)

Jon wrote back, complimenting Kelly on her impromptu poem (“Brava, nice couplet”) and negotiating more time to work. The day after the seminar coauthored its collective poem, he sent the drafts with an update and his own poem:

I accomplished the grading of a quarter of the essays I’m looking at as my assessment for Task 3. I’m going to finish the rest in planning and after school tomorrow.

I also see your couplet and raise you a haiku:

Robots or rebels  
you must find the middle ground  
this is the First task.  (Email, 10/18/13)

Jon’s reference to “Robots or rebels” invoked ideas from both the collective poem and the individual writing that sparked it, where Grace documented a union leader’s dismissal of APPR, the new in-service teacher evaluations, as a “a flaming pile of crap” and where Sophia noted, “Teachers need to unite!” (In-class writing, 10/17/13). That Jon capitalized “First” to modify “task,” a term from the edTPA handbook, suggests he was appropriating the assessment’s language to critique it. Although he complied with the requirement to submit edTPA drafts—which he knew enhanced his chances of passing—he took additional time, even with his grading incomplete, to craft a poem about the identity construction in which he and his peers were engaged. Grounded in dialogue with Kelly and his classmates, Jon’s poem relied on ambiguity and the potential for multiple interpretations, the very qualities that could yield poor scores on edTPA rubrics rewarding explicitness and elaboration.
qualities that could yield poor scores on edTPA rubrics rewarding explicitness and elaboration.

Jon was not the only student, however, who extended the in-class poetic conversation on October 17 to other spaces. Scheduled to graduate in December, not May, Grace was the only candidate not required to pass the edTPA for certification. Although she was, accordingly, feeling less stress than her peers, administrators in the suburban district where she student taught were seeking to adopt the state’s Common Core–aligned modules—curricular materials that many experienced teachers felt were limiting and developmentally inappropriate. She noted tensions around this decision and worried about her positioning as a new professional.

On the day after the collective poem in seminar, Grace submitted a Blackboard posting about these concerns. Instead of the reflective prose characteristic of students’ postings to date, she shared a free verse poem echoing the negative messages she heard from some veteran teachers, although not her mentor:

“You’ll never be able to get a job.”
“You’ll never find a position.”
“We haven’t seen the worst of this.”
“This is the wrong profession to be in.”
“We aren’t teachers anymore.”

Grace explored these messages with a series of poetically rendered rhetorical questions aimed at her fitness to enter the field, given her inexperience and commitment to social justice pedagogy:

How dare I think I can
make a change?
How dare I think I can
survive this calamity intact?

Although she acknowledged that the veterans’ comments “trapped” her “somewhere between/ fear and worry,” she wrote herself to a more hopeful place by recounting meaningful experiences with individual learners, concluding,

I will be here tomorrow,
because they will be too.
And that is all that matters. (Blackboard posting, 10/18/13)

A few days later, Mandy, an undergraduate placed in a different suburban district, responded to Grace’s poem with encouragement: “All
the awards go to you.” She also distanced herself and her cohort from the creeping reform agenda as she saw it:

> We love our content and we love kids and maybe modules and testing will define our education system but they can’t and won’t define us as educators. The happiness we feel when students finally understand something we’ve been trying to teach for 3 weeks or when they come to our class to pick out something to read . . . that’s for us and that’s why we’re doing this. . . . Chins up y’all. (Blackboard posting, 10/21/15)

Two days later, Kelly added “‘Chins up y’all’—class motto, anyone?” to the thread. It was becoming apparent that poetry was helping keep “chins up” in the seminar, and not just for students. Kelly, too, would use it to cope with and critique the edTPA before long.

**Acknowledging Fear and Frustration**

Kelly’s plan for the October 24 seminar meeting—the one following the collective poem activity—was dominated by what she called edTPA workshop, scheduled for 85 of 105 available minutes. During the workshop, candidates identified strengths and weaknesses in Nina’s Task 2 commentary draft, practiced providing feedback on student work, and designed rubrics to accompany their Task 3 assessments. The class was bookended by poetry, however. It began with a read-in of two poems by Nikki Giovanni, including “For Saundra,” and closed with Kelly’s rendition, by permission, of Jon’s “Robots or rebels” haiku. She then invited students to use the last 10 minutes of class to “Tell me what you need to tell me, but say it in [free] verse” (Lesson plan, 10/24/15). Kelly chose this prompt thinking that Jon might not be the only one to find a poetic frame useful in sparking reflection.

Most students finished these exit slips before leaving the classroom. They took quickly to using poems for reflective thinking—even Abigail, who began with “Poems were never my favorite” before admitting poignantly with a slant rhyme: “too many things on my mind/and we barely have any time.” Her poem concluded with lines reminiscent of “For Saundra” in their assertion that she had nothing to say after she just said something important:

> I can barely think of
  what to put on this page
  right now.  (Exit slip, 10/24/15)

Like Abigail’s, Sophia’s poem included traces of self-doubt and fatigue:
I’m caught between Task 1-Task 3
Periods 1/2, 4/5, 7/8, 9/10
and Year 4 of my
collegiate
rollercoaster ride
My life has been
compressed to
due dates I always
miss. (Exit slip, 10/24/15)

In Kelly’s experience, such feelings were typical for student teachers just past the placement midpoint, and she was not surprised to see them surface. But Sophia’s list of factors causing her stress suggested that edTPA demands and deadlines further complicated an already complex process of transitioning fully from student to certified professional.

Jon’s poem also took up identity construction and transition, both his own and what he imagined for his urban middle-school students. Unlike Abigail and Sophia, he did not finish his draft within the allotted time, leading him to ask Kelly if he could email it from home. He later sent the following:

Most of this I wrote in class, but to be honest I wrote the ending afterwards. It’s not [the] way I wanted to express this idea, but I keep thinking about this feeling I have to fight for and defend my kids. To protect them. And I felt this before I even really knew them at all. I wonder if this is in the heart of every teacher.

The explanation was accompanied by this poem:

A Teacher to “His Kids”

I don’t know what love means to you
At this coming of age,
As you stretch minds and arms wide,
As one who wakes with the sun,
Shaping the men and women that you will become.

If you have been neglected by the light of love
Whether that of man or God above,
I can only guess.
But for you, beloved strangers,
there is a place within my chest. . . .

. . . This is what keeps me up at night.
The pounding drum of instinct,
Demanding that I keep you safe,
That I prepare you for the world,
And protect you from it, from yourselves,
From my own imperfection.
This is the beating in my heart—
Good morning. (Email, 10/24/13)

Kelly was also feeling the sting of protectiveness about her students as they worked on their second, independent edTPA cycle. State officials had still not released the cut score, so she was working with the unconfirmed assumption that candidates needed a 3 or better on the various 5-point rubrics to pass. Because of Pearson’s nondisclosure agreement, she could not share any sample materials with which she had been trained, making it difficult to demonstrate successful performance concretely. She and students spent considerable class time debating shades of meaning for language functions such as “justify” and “synthesize” that were listed but not defined in the handbook, and they grappled with growing concerns that the edTPA prompts were easier to answer referring to lessons that, in Nina’s words, focused on “reading a complex text” than on writing an original one such as a memoir (Interview, 12/15/13).

To capture these frustrations, Kelly wrote her own poem. When she was finished, she emailed Jon to acknowledge receipt of “A Teacher to ‘His Kids’”: “This . . . solidified my feeling that you are exactly where you should be, doing exactly what you should be doing.” Then, she introduced the newest installment in their poetic exchange with, “Here’s my response—several of the verbs in the language function chart are especially for you.” In the middle of the poem, reproduced below, she borrowed language and formatting conventions from the Task 1 instructions for the secondary English edTPA handbook (SCALE, 2013):

**The Teacher Educator’s edTPA Handbook**

> I keep waiting for SCALE
> to issue another handbook—
> a fifty-page PDF
> of over-specific specifications
> and under-elaborated purposes.
> But this time for me.
> Password-protected,
> on a website in the sky,
> with a non-disclosure form
> signed in sweat and tears,
> witnessed by Catherine,
the patron saint of teachers,
or hey Jude—
he of the lost causes.

Here’s the excerpt I imagine:

**Supporting English Teachers’ Development through Language**

*a. Language Function.* Identify one language function essential for student teachers within your central focus. Listed below are some sample language functions. You may choose one of these or another more appropriate for your learning segment:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Care</th>
<th>Connect</th>
<th>Encourage</th>
<th>Persevere</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Protect</td>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Sustain</td>
<td>Unite</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Heedless of the prompt,
I choose them all.

When the segment gets scored,
will my students have enough opportunities to practice
with all of those active verbs? (Email, 10/30/13)

Initially, Kelly did not intend to share her poem with the whole class—it merited no mention in her lesson plan for October 31. But Jon encouraged her to read it, so she did, right before inviting students to write list poems of “everything that’s in your mind that you think I might want to know”—a poetic exit slip for the second consecutive week (Lesson plan, 10/31/13). She did not ask students to comment on her writing, but several incorporated elements from it in their own poems, including Sophia, who opened with an admission of continued self-doubt—

edTPA
hanging in the balance
trying to juggle
failing at it
But still attempting
That counts right?

—and concluded with a clear intertextual connection to Kelly’s poem: “Active verbs govern my existence” (Exit slip, 10/31/15).

Everyone in the learning community confessed to similar feelings of self-doubt at one point or another. Poetry became one avenue for acknowledging these fears and seeking support from others. Near the end of the semester,
Honoring Persistence and Perspective

Students’ placements ended in the second week of November. The following week, they participated in an all-day, on-campus retreat to draft their second edTPA cycles, the ones they would submit to Pearson. Following a weeklong break for Thanksgiving, students returned to campus to fine-tune their submissions and complete seminar requirements.

Candidates’ final placement-related assignment was due in early December. Kelly gave students three choices of form—a poem, an essay, or a digital story—for a summative reflection about the semester, and all but two chose poems. The most striking feature of these poems, given end-of-semester interviews and other data, was not the edTPA’s presence but rather its absence. Directed to reread their Blackboard postings and ruminate on their experience, students focused on relationships and self-discovery. Only Mandy mentioned the performance assessment and only briefly (“Soon enough edTPA will be over and my grade will be posted”). She devoted the bulk of her 47-line poem, “Perfectly Imperfect,” to celebrating her students, who were “filled with curiosity and confusion” and offered smiles that were “crooked and bent.” In Mandy’s view,

They did not have it all together,
they did not always speak up in class
and I often had to tell them to stop talking
but they were perfect
in the way that musicians write heart breaking music
in the way that hometowns are trying but they’re always welcoming
in the way that smoke alarms go off every time I bake but cookies are the result
in the way that the winter always seems to bring the snow. (Blackboard posting, 12/9/13)

Posted before students received word about their edTPA scores or certification status, the poems nonetheless communicated confidence that they had learned important lessons from the semester. Sheldon prefaced “Everything that Mattered,” a list poem of fragmentary insights, with a note of realization: “As teachers dealing with adolescents, I think one of the biggest things we have to learn how to do is to find peace among the chaos” (Posting, 12/9/15). After complaining in October that poems were not her “favorite,” Abigail used the genre in December to convey how much she, not just her students, had grown during the placement:
Kelly had also learned from and with her students, as well as from her post-semester debriefings with Janine, Sarah, and her math education colleague Helen Doerr. In January 2014, Kelly made changes to a course taught earlier in the program that were intended to address weaknesses in her students’ edTPA submissions. These changes included greater attention to candidates’ facilitation of text-based discussions and a video requirement to promote reflection on such facilitation. Kelly and Helen also revised their seminar syllabi together in anticipation of fall 2014, with new readings on formative assessment and more attention to students’ use of theory and research to guide their decision making. Although both described the fall 2015 semester as the most harrowing of their careers, they acknowledged, in Helen’s words, that it “made us get better” (Interview, 5/26/14) at articulating expectations for candidates’ performance, particularly around assessing K–12 student learning, and then devising means of support for candidates to meet those expectations.

Discussion and Implications

We undertook this study expecting that a newly mandated high-stakes assessment for teacher candidates would complicate existing roles, relationships, and expectations for all stakeholders associated with our English education program. A number of studies (Lys et al., 2014; Miller et al., 2015; Okhremtchouk et al., 2009) suggested the implementation process would be disruptive, even for participants who viewed it as ultimately generative and productive. We positioned ourselves as teacher researchers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Shagoury & Power, 2011) seeking to understand multiple perspectives because we felt such a stance would help us adjust our practice to a changing external demand while contributing to broader conversations about the impact of such assessments on teacher education. Unlike teacher educators who see the edTPA as inherently incompatible with a progressive teacher education agenda (Madeloni & Gorlewski, 2013), we approached the mandate pragmatically, with the spirit of inquiry recommended by Peck et al. (2010). We did not—and still do not—dismiss the plausibility of Bartoletti et al.’s (2014) claims that the edTPA addresses skills and knowledge that new teachers should possess, and we must confess that we were delighted when the English education students who submitted materials to Pearson
all received passing scores, including all but one at the state-designated mastery level.

For us, teacher research into edTPA implementation represented a way to exert some control in a context that felt increasingly encroached by external forces, as such inquiry has done for other researchers investigating questions in their own K–12 and higher-education contexts (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Miller et al., 2015; Peck et al., 2010). We expected that varied strategies would be needed to manage the edTPA process. Nonetheless, we were unprepared for the rage and helplessness we felt at times during that process, despite our readings of research such as Kornfeld et al. (2007) that chronicled faculty members’ feelings of anger and estrangement from an external mandate. Poetry reading, writing, and discussion emerged as important strategies for coping with the unexpectedly difficult emotional work of edTPA implementation in a messy, real-time context.

As we compare composing poetry to writing for the edTPA, drawing on the sociocultural theories of literacy and learning that grounded the study, we realize that edTPA writing represented for us and our students what Wells (2006), drawing on Bakhtin (1986), called a monologic discourse. Such discourse is “authoritative, not open to questions or alternative perspectives” and “resists dialogue” (p. 169). One example of this was in the students’ submission of their materials to anonymous Pearson reviewers, whose scores were accompanied only by fragmentary comments literally cut-and-pasted from the official rubrics. In contrast, the poetry surrounding the edTPA in seminar was dialogic, intended to “generate new meanings” in social context (Wells, 2006, p. 169). Students and instructors wrote poems to and for each other; borrowed language and structures from other texts; and commented on those texts in shared space, online and face-to-face. Aligning well with the emphasis on argumentation and textual evidence in the Common Core, successful edTPA writing required specificity and explicitness to meet the needs of an unknown, distant audience. Poetic discourse, however, allowed for exploration of contextualized experiences with an intimate, sympathetic audience of self, peers, and teachers. Poetry’s accessibility, openness to multiple interpretations, and nonlinearity appeared to help teacher candidates cope with new and challenging expectations and demands.

Reading, writing, and discussing poetry did not resolve all of the tensions we identified around the edTPA process, and findings from the study—an exploratory one with limitations related to its small size and narrow
focus—should be interpreted with caution and care. Questions about how to maintain programmatic commitments in light of state and federal mandates and questions about whether such mandates will improve or degrade teacher quality remain, and they must be studied, with the most rigorous and best theorized approaches the field can muster. In the meantime, though, teacher candidates will continue to be subject to those mandates. They will look to those who prepare them for guidance in how to meet new standards and assessments as well as how to think about them as new practitioners in complex times. Our study suggests that poetry can provide opportunities for candidates to consider these problems through humanized and complex expressions of self, engaged in reflective practice. In future iterations of the seminar, Kelly will build those poetic opportunities deliberately into her instruction from the beginning, to ensure that she and other members of the seminar as a discourse community (Gee, 2001) take full advantage of poetry’s affordances. We recognize, however, that teacher researchers exploring the impact of the edTPA or other mandates who are situated in other social contexts may find it appropriate to employ other strategies to manage implementation and related inquiry.

Our study also suggests that preservice candidates weren’t the only ones who needed space and support for reflection when dealing with a complex mandate. According to Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), practitioner researchers have to “wrestle with their own doubts, fend off the fatigue of reform, and depend on the strength of their individual and collective convictions that their work ultimately makes a difference in the fabric of social responsibility” (p. 151). The practices of reading, writing, and discussing poetry with students and with each other supported this emotional work during the fall seminar, and they continued to do so during subsequent data analysis and writing. Poetry, more than any strategy, sustained us in coping with the challenges that arose for us as teacher educators playing various roles in the English education program.

Near the end of our analytical process, as we discussed earlier, we three researchers collaboratively constructed a poem about how Giovanni’s idea of “poetic times” resonated for us in light of our shared experiences with edTPA. Writing and editing that text reinforced how much we gained from being teacher researchers of the assessment’s inaugural implementation and how ambivalent about its impact on teaching and learning in our program we remain. We offer it here, as our poetic last words on the study and its evolving meanings for us:

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Chandler-Olcott, Fleming, & Nieroda > Poetry and Performance Assessments
Some people say these reforms are the civil rights issue of the day. These should be poetic times. We need new modes of expression, new ways to measure excellence. And yet we have only valued tests that, in some way, valued us.

Our students felt the mosquito-buzz of fear and frustration when what they knew would work for kids wouldn’t always “work” for the test. No poetic justice there. Their questions ping-pong off the walls: Do light-bulb moments count? Where is the space for that on those fifteen rubrics? Formed in the forge of rigor and challenge, they became their own poem, writing side by side with precision, with exactitude. Does this mean they’re ready? Are any of us? Full disclosure: Poetry was our
Chandler-Olcott, Fleming, & Nieroda > Poetry and Performance Assessments

lifeline to sanity,
space to
connect,
question, encourage,
and protect
each other.

Despite the passing scores,
new language functions nag:
Did we collude
with a system
that instead
we should resist?
Did we delude
ourselves?
Did edTPA leave room
for all we’ve
yet to become?

Next semester’s Task looms:
Script the unscripted.

Notes
1. All student teacher and mentor teacher names are pseudonyms.
2. In April 2014, at the end of the first year of required edTPA implementation, the New York Board of Regents approved a provision that candidates who fail the edTPA can use a passing score on the Assessment of Teaching Skills-Written, a previously required examination, for initial certification. This “safety net” was in place through June 2015 and was subsequently extended through June 2016 (NYSTCE, 2015).
3. We do not quote more extensively from the edTPA handbook here because of prohibitions in the nondisclosure agreements we signed to work with candidates.

References


Chandler-Olcott, Fleming, & Nieroda > Poetry and Performance Assessments


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