

ASSURING QUALITY OR OVERWHELMING TEACHERS?
HIGH QUALITY PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT IN AMERICAN PRE-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION

Introduction

Seven years ago, the Japanese U.S. Teacher Education Consortium (JUSTEC) was held in the U.S., in Portland, Oregon, about a two and a half hour drive from where I live. It was a stimulating conference that year, hosted extremely well by our colleagues at Portland State University. As with all JUSTEC conferences, the Japanese and American attendees were invited to experience some local culture and a few city highlights. One of our main tours was to the Portland Japanese Garden, which sits in the beautiful hills just above downtown Portland. The Portland Japanese Garden is a fabulous garden, a remarkable achievement, and as you can read on its website – considered “the most authentic Japanese Garden outside of Japan.” We had a lovely afternoon at the Garden, walking, observing, and conversing with our conference friends. The Portland Japanese Garden website tells us a number of other things about the Portland Japanese Garden– for example, that the garden is “a 5.5 acre haven of tranquil beauty,” and that the Garden is not just one garden but in fact 5 Gardens. There is the Flat Garden, the Strolling Pond Garden, the Tea Garden, the Natural Garden, and the Sand & Stone Garden. We learn that the Japanese garden “is a living reflection of the long history and traditional culture of Japan – being influenced by Shinto, Buddhist, and Taoist philosophies...,” and that simple arrangement of stone, water, and plants are the essential elements of the design.

I am not an expert in gardening, Japanese gardens, or horticulture, but I was struck by a conversation I had with one of my Japanese colleagues that day. As we walked the 5 acre garden, admiring the layout and diverse arrangements of stone, water and plants, my colleague finally admitted that he was somewhat puzzled or surprised by this garden. He said that the Garden was extremely impressive, and in many ways a remarkable reflection of Japanese aesthetics; but, he observed, he had in fact never seen such a garden in Japan. While the art of the Garden seemed authentically Japanese,

something concerned him about the scale. It seemed, in a word, too big. “Never,” he said, “have I seen a Japanese garden of this size.” He finally told me, with a kind of amusement, “This is an American-sized Japanese Garden.”

My colleague’s comment was illuminating for me – it reflected the reason we get together at international conferences like this— to help remind each other of our own cultural perspectives, of the things we take for granted, and how easily we can impose one cultural ideal onto another, even when we are trying to be “authentic.” Until our conversation, never had I considered that the Portland Garden might be “too big” – or that there was something peculiarly “American” reflected in this Japanese Garden. Our discussion continued briefly, as we talked about the American desire for “big things,” like big homes, cars, boats, and bathrooms. We noted that America certainly has lots of geographic space, but our conversation focused more on a kind of mindset, an American desire to “go big,” to take things “to scale,” to have “big impact.” Although these generalizations are always dangerous, we agreed that Americans sometimes like to maximize, rather than minimize. This mindset, my colleague pointed out, seemed to be reflected even in the authentic Japanese Garden in Portland.

I share this story, because in talking today about a new American assessment for beginning teachers, something called the Teacher Performance Assessment, or the TPA, in some ways I will be describing another American effort to “go big” in what we do, to maximize the notion of assessment, to take something to scale while also attempting to be authentic. Whether this big attempt at assessing teachers is a good idea or not, or the extent to which it is a good idea, is the basic question I want to ask today. In fact, I will share my general thesis here at the start – namely, that the TPA is an ambitious assessment that, in its current form, threatens to overwhelm beginning teachers as much as to improve their practice. Such an assessment needs vigorous, continued debate and refinement, if it is to become meaningful and sustainable for beginning teachers and programs; and the American teacher education community must continue to calculate the potential costs of the TPA as much as its benefits. To go one

step further, we may need the insights of an international community of teacher educators like this one here today to help us even see what we are doing. As with my own experience of the Portland Japanese Garden, we may need your insights to help us understand what it is we are creating.

So with these introductory comments, my paper today has three primary aims. First, I want to clarify what the TPA is - to inform my international audience here in Japan of the rationale for, and shape of, a major American teacher assessment for beginning teachers. Second, I want to provide early data from my own teacher education program on the experiences of those using the TPA – especially student teachers and mentors. Finally, I hope to raise a few critical questions for our consideration and discussion.

What is the TPA and Why is it Here?

Background

The Teacher Performance Assessment (TPA) is a summative performance assessment, required of pre-service teachers as part of their student teaching internship. It is part of a national initiative to provide credible and reliable information, both to the wider public and to teacher education programs, on the readiness of pre-service teachers for teacher certification. As the map shows below, roughly 25 states have taken up this assessment and are now involved in a national consortium called TPAC, or the Teacher Performance Assessment Consortium. Many teacher education programs in these states agreed to participate in the pilot of the TPA in spring 2012. States in blue have had state legislative involvement plus some institutions of higher education (IHEs) participating. Accelerated states, in red, have legislative involvement plus wide participation of IHEs in the TPA pilot and field test. For example, in Washington State, all 21 university-based teacher education programs piloted the TPA this spring, and passing the TPA is on track to become a state-level certification requirement in 2013. States in green do not yet have legislative involvement but do have some IHEs participating in the pilot.

States Involved in National Assessment

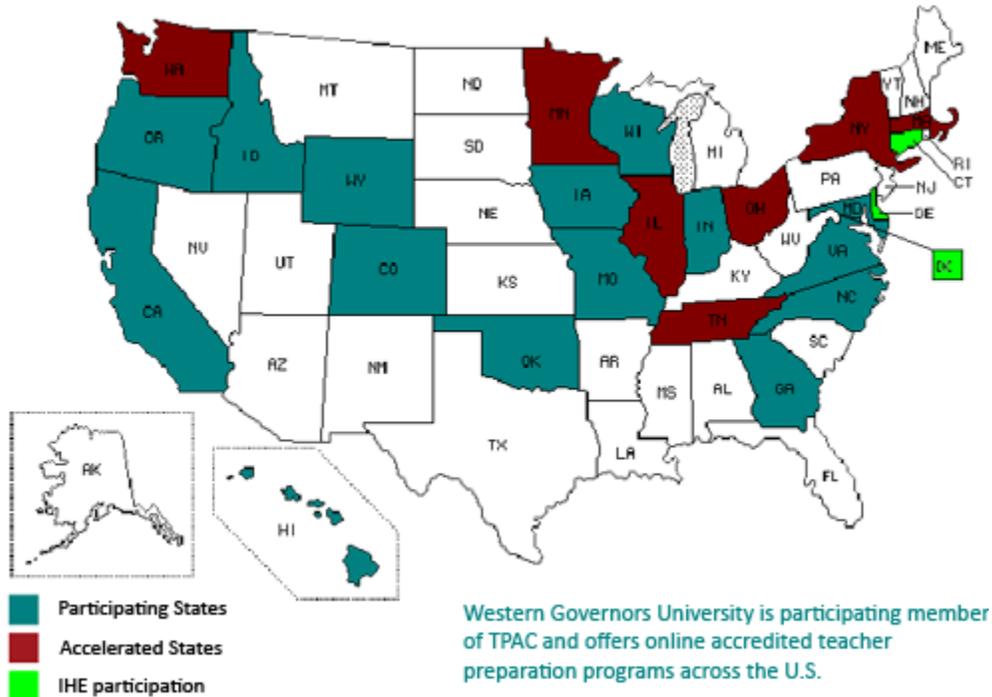


Figure 1: Map of States involved in TPA (from TPAC website)

Based on the Performance Assessment of California Teachers (PACT) which was created by a coalition of California colleges and universities in the early 2000's, the TPA "...uses multiple sources of data (teacher plans, teacher artifacts, student work samples, video clips of teaching, and personal reflections and commentaries) that are organized on four categories of teaching: planning, instruction, assessment, and reflection (PIAR)" (Pechone & Chung, 2006, p.23). The TPA requires teacher candidates to represent and analyze their own teaching in these four key areas of teacher practice, as part of their student teaching experience. The TPA is considered a "performance assessment," meaning that it occurs during teaching and is based on collections of evidence of a teachers' practice. It is thus similar in structure to the National Board Certification process in the US (Ellis et al, forthcoming), which involves evidence from the central practices of good teaching -- planning, engaging students, analyzing student learning, and reflection. Like National Board Certification, the TPA requires a great deal of

writing from teacher candidates. In the TPA, teacher evidence is presented in combination with multiple pages of “commentary,” in which a candidate explains and interprets the evidence presented, based on prompts that are provided. A common TPA assessment will have 20-25 pages of single spaced writing – and along with the evidence presented (lesson plans, materials, student evidence), a completed document can easily exceed 40 pages.

The TPA should also be understood as an assessment coming from within the teacher education community in the US – to an extent. It is perhaps best understood as a kind of pre-emptive response – an assessment meant to “head off” the imposition of simplistic measures of teacher quality at the state and even national level. For example, some state legislatures have proposed assessing student teachers by the test scores of their pupils (Archer 2004). Pecheone & Chung (2006) likewise point out that the PACT grew because teacher educators in California “were dissatisfied by the content and format of the state’s teacher performance assessment, which was designed as a generic assessment that applies across all grade levels and subject areas” (22). Indeed, across the US, state legislators, under pressure to improve student achievement, have put significant pressure on teacher education programs to clearly identify high standards for teacher preparation – and to assure the quality of beginning teachers to the public. Paper and pencil tests are commonly required at the state level to guarantee that teachers are qualified in basic areas as well as in specific subject areas, but there is broad acknowledgement that these assessments are not predictive of quality teaching.

Fearful that states will impose a simplistic measurement of teacher quality, university-based teacher educators in several states have sought to create a high quality performance assessment that would maintain integrity for teaching programs and reflect teacher development. The PACT, and now the TPA, represent such an attempt – namely, to “develop an integrated, authentic and subject specific assessment that is consistent with the core values of member institutions while meeting the assessment standards required by the state” (Pecheone & Chung, 22-23). In this sense, the TPA is sometimes touted

as a professionally designed evaluation process coming from within the profession, and to an extent it is. On the other hand, the instrument has at least partly been developed under duress – with the fear that if teacher educators do not come up with such an assessment, someone else will force an assessment (and probably not a good one) upon us.

What Does the TPA Require?

As mentioned above, to complete the assessment, students must present both evidence of teaching practice and written commentary in four major tasks. Candidates are asked to:

1. Plan a learning segment of 3-5 days
2. Teach the learning segment, videotaping the segment for analysis
3. Assess student learning, collecting and analyzing student work
4. Reflect on the segment as a whole.

For example, in addition to providing detailed lesson plans for the planning segment, students must write up to 10 pages of commentary answering a series of prompts to explain the plans. See Appendix A for a brief description of each task.

We have sometimes found that conceptualizing the entirety of the TPA can be difficult, so one of my colleagues uses the metaphor of a “sandwich” to help explain the TPA to students. In this metaphor, the “meat” of the sandwich is the learning segment, or the 3-5 lessons. As you can see in Figure 2, these lessons must be related to each other within a unit, but not necessarily day to day. Each lesson involves its own plans, materials and assessments, plus daily reflections. The top piece of “bread” of the sandwich is the Planning Commentary (Task 1), in which a candidate explains the goals and rationale for his or her learning segment. Within the “meat” of the sandwich, Tasks 2 & 3 take place – the videotaping of some aspect of the lesson, plus collecting and analyzing one assessment of student work. The bottom piece of bread is the Final Reflection (Task 4). We have found that metaphors like

these have helped students make sense of the different dimensions of the TPA as a whole – or as we say, “to see the forest for the trees.”

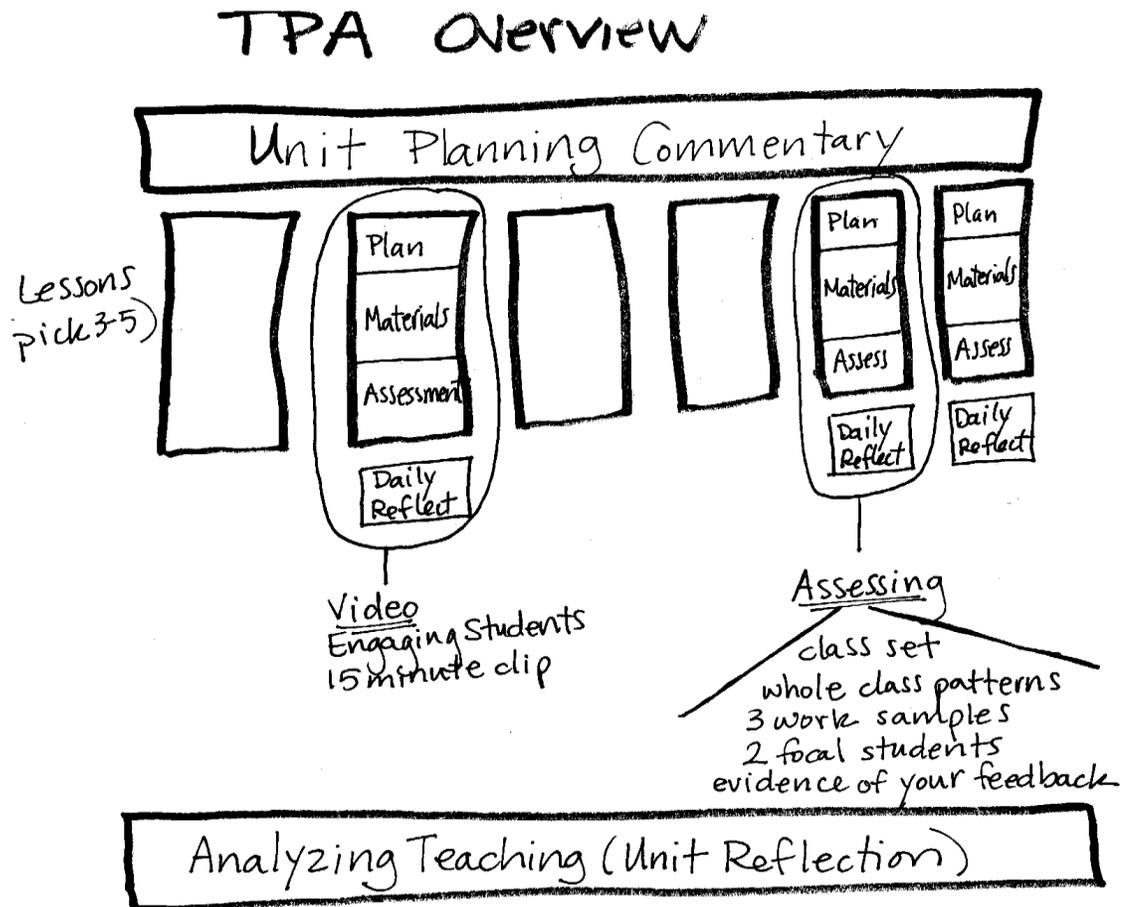


Figure 2: TPA sandwich metaphor

Teacher candidates taking the TPA are given a booklet of about 45 pages in length, which provides detailed explanation of each task, detailed rubrics, plus a glossary of terms.

A few technical aspects of the TPA are also important to clarify. For example, given the scope of the TPA, and the number of states, programs and candidates involved, Stanford University has partnered with Pearson, an educational resource and testing company, to organize the logistics of scoring the TPA for so many candidates and across states. Upon completing the TPA, candidates upload their materials to an online platform, run by Pearson (see <http://tpafieldtest.nesinc.com/>), and each TPA is scored through this system. Scorers are trained by Pearson online (see <http://www.scoretpa.pearson.com/>), and so far scorers seem to include university supervisors, teacher educators, retired administrators, and anyone who qualifies after going through the training process. In time, the idea is that passing the TPA will be a requirement for receiving a teacher credential at the state level; however, only the “accelerated” or red states in the map above are moving in this direction at the current time.

Certainly, multiple questions are possible at this point -- both technical and philosophical. Some on the technical side are: How long do candidates have to complete the assessment? How are scorers trained exactly? How much are they paid? What does the TPA cost a candidate? What is Pearson’s profit? What happens when a candidate fails? On the more philosophical side, we might ask: What is the relationship between the TPA and improved teaching of beginning teachers? To what extent does this kind of assessment actually bring about changes in teacher education practice, and are the changes for the better or the worse? What are the dangers of initiating an assessment relationship between university programs and a commercial entity like Pearson? Is “objectivity” in assessing teacher performance ever possible?

Answers to these questions go beyond the aim of this paper, although they are being discussed actively at state and national levels. My goal today, instead, is to present the experiences of one small

teacher education program, my own, with the TPA pilot this spring. My goal is to provide a portrait of one set of experiences with the TPA – providing a glimpse of how those “on the ground,” especially candidates and mentors, are experiencing this assessment. In what follows, I first provide some context on our program and the data collection we undertook; then I report findings from students and mentor teachers who completed the TPA just a few months ago.

One Program’s Experience with the TPA

Context

Teacher education programs in the US are not all alike. In fact, dramatic differences in size, program structure, program length, and teaching practices are common. With regard to the University of Puget Sound’s teacher education program, key information includes:

- Masters program at a small liberal arts university (2500 students overall)
- 25-35 teacher candidates each year
- 15 month program
- 6 Full time faculty
- 3 Internship Experiences (two 6-week placements, followed by student teaching for 15 weeks)
- 30-40 mentor teachers in 20-30 schools per year

Our program is highly integrated, with courses that are linked to field experiences – and faculty communicate extensively about courses and often co-teach courses. We develop partnerships with local schools and invite mutual exchange between teacher education faculty and local teachers and principals. One aspect that stands out from our program is its small size. One benefit of this size is that we are able to provide considerable personal attention to our candidates.

Data Collection

In gathering data on the TPA, we have used a few different methods this year. We have collected:

- notes from a focus group that included mentor teachers and student teachers involved in the TPA at the time
- written assessments by students (26 of 26 responding), after the TPA was complete; see Appendix B for the assessment form
- survey data from mentors teachers (20 of 33 responding), after the TPA was complete; see Appendix B for the online survey questions
- informal notes on discussions with mentors, observations of students, & coursework materials

Qualitative data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach, reviewing notes and assessments multiple times, applying initial codes, developing themes, and reviewing materials again in light of themes/codes. We have not received scores back from Pearson on our students' TPAs this year, so I will not be reporting passing rates or scores.

Below, then, are the primary themes of our data. I will first present three aspects of the TPA that candidates and mentors both found valuable and helpful. After this, I will present two aspects of the TPA that candidates and mentors together found problematic. Third, I will draw on the mentor survey specifically to make a few quantitative findings visible regarding mentors' relationship to the TPA.

Finding Value in the TPA

Most candidates and mentors from our program found certain aspects of the TPA valuable and helpful. Even those who claimed to hate the TPA admitted in some form that the TPA also contributed to their growth. As one student asserted in our focus session, "I hate it, but I know it's good for me." It is rare to find either a candidate or mentor who were uniformly negative about the TPA. Several primary themes emerged in the data regarding the benefits of the TPA, and below I focus on three

areas: the TPA as a vehicle for reflection, as a support for being intentional in the classroom, and as a way to engage mentors around the curriculum.

Increased Reflection & Questioning: Among the various benefits experienced with the TPA, the most common is that it aided candidates in reflecting on practice. Student teachers were consistent in saying that the TPA helped them, and sometimes forced them, to see their teaching in new ways. The individual comments below suggest, for example, that without the TPA requirement, such reflection on teaching might not have occurred:

“Helped me reflect a lot on my teaching and assessments – what was working for my students... (otherwise hard to do in student teaching).”

“Forced reflection – reflecting on what worked well, what didn’t – was helpful.”

“Forced us to really plan lessons reflect on them heavily – notice things we wouldn’t if doing a quick reflection.”

“Forced me to think about why I make particular choices when developing a lesson.”

“Planning & reflecting helped me focus and think about my teaching in a productive way.”

The repetition of the term “forced” in these comments suggests that reflection on teaching is not easily afforded during student teaching, and that powerful structures are needed to push such reflection to the forefront. Candidates find this “helpful” and “productive,” even as they find it “stressful” and sometimes “uncomfortable.”

Candidate comments sometimes specified that reflection in particular areas was helpful. This seemed to be especially true for the “video” task (Task 2) and the “assessing student learning” task (Task 3) of the TPA. Students note things like:

“Video reflection – watching myself teach gave me biggest insight ... I grew most from this portion.”

“Watching myself teach then reflecting upon viewing. So much happens that I don’t see, so it was very valuable.”

“Time to reflect on assessment ... very useful.”

“Allowed me to really analyze the assessments that I am giving in the classroom.”

Candidates and mentors also mentioned that the TPA forced them to reflect on multiple aspects of teaching, diversifying their thinking:

“I realized different dimensions of teaching... while I was writing” (candidate)

“The TPA helped me with looking at all sides of a lesson...” (candidate)

“The TPA provided the opportunity to look at the different elements of teaching and learning while simultaneously infusing more practical aspects of the profession.” (mentor)

“The TPA forced them to look at the whole of teaching (the forest) and the trees (specific tasks).” (mentor)

Mentor teachers likewise found that teacher candidates grew in their ability to reflect during student teaching. In the comments below, mentors note candidates’ abilities to raise good questions and to consider student learning more carefully:

“I am noticing that [my candidate] is asking good, in-depth questions because of the TPA. I do think TPA is helping to create more reflective practice. It’s causing [my candidate] to think: Why do I think that? What am I doing that? It’s helping with these habits of mind.”

“It appears the TPA does help a great deal with looking at one’s teaching and self-analysis of their efforts.”

“The TPA seemed to cause my student teacher to be more reflective on student achievements, academically and also on their attitudes.”

Although sometimes “forced” into the equation, mentors and candidates both found a variety of ways that the TPA aided reflection on teaching. However, from these brief data, the term reflection itself remains quite broad, and it is sometimes difficult to know precisely what reflection looked like or meant for individual teachers or mentors.

Greater Intentionality & Deliberateness in Planning: The second most commonly mentioned benefit of the TPA, shared by both candidates and mentors, involved intentionality in planning, including an increased focus on students and student learning. Representative comments include:

“We are both being a lot more intentional because of the TPA. Lessons are diverse, making sure there is group dialogue. We’re not forcing things but are definitely more intentional in planning.” (mentor)

“The TPA IS making me more deliberate in what I do...” (candidate)

“It kept our conversations and student learning goals more grounded because of the accountability attached to the TPA.” (mentor)

“Made me be very deliberate in planning & instruction...” (candidate)

In these comments, the TPA brings about deliberate practice in multiple areas, including planning, teaching, assessment, and conversation with mentors.

Leverage to Engage the Curriculum, Stronger Curricular Conversations: In some cases, the TPA also reinforced values of the university program, giving the candidate leverage to suggest changes to otherwise traditional or limited curricula. In the focus group, one candidate spoke of having few ways to raise difficult questions about the curriculum with her mentor teacher. The TPA gave her the power and courage to do so:

“The TPA has been a good resource for curriculum in my class – in deciding what the school or department seems to want vs. what I need to do. It’s forced me to talk about the TPA – ‘I need certain things in class to do the TPA...’ The TPA requires things I didn’t see in my class – so I have to build these things in – like a math conversation, actually talking about math.”

In this case, when school-based practices differed from student teacher beliefs or goals, the TPA provided permission and agency to speak up regarding the need for “talk about math” in a math classroom. Another candidate in the focus group agreed:

“It reinforces practices in how to teach math. Allows us to speak to something – like when there are disagreements between program and placement. It’s a great way to force that conversation.”

One mentor teacher in the focus group agreed that the TPA sponsored stronger and needed conversations:

“The TPA allowed us to have some deeper level conversations about the importance of proper planning, implementation and evaluation of lessons that we would not have had otherwise.”

Some research suggests that conversations between mentors and candidates focus too often on situational adjustment and emotional support -- “putting out fires”-- at the expense of deeper conversations about teaching, learning, and curriculum, especially in relation to subject matter (Feiman Nemser 2001; Valencia et al 2009). The comments above suggest that the TPA, in some cases, served as a tool for engaging and modifying the curriculum, and for sponsoring richer conversations about teaching and learning subject matter.

Problematic Aspects of the TPA

Despite these strengths, student teachers and mentors were unified in leveling consistent criticisms at the TPA. Although many specific issues were raised in our surveys and evaluations, one criticism was unmistakably clear: Candidates, mentors, and supervisors reported consistently that the TPA requires excessive time and energy during the student teaching experience, and that the net result is to create an overstressed teaching candidate. This critique is particularly worrisome given that student teaching is already one of the most demanding and stressful experiences for beginning teachers. Below I provide qualitative evidence for the following assertions: 1) that pre-service candidates experienced significant stress in completing the TPA, and 2) that the TPA divided their energies during student teaching in problematic ways.

Stressed Candidates: During our focus group, which occurred midway through student teaching and while candidates were managing the TPA, clinical supervisors from our program expressed concern about the demands placed on candidates because of the TPA. One experienced supervisor said:

“I’ve never heard the stress articulated as much as I do now. We’ve addressed the TPA as much as we probably could – but still there’s confusion and an increase in ‘I’m not sure I can do this’ comments. I’m flooded with them now.”

Another supervisor echoed this concern, pointing out that some mentor teachers were alarmed about the increased load expected of their candidate.

“When I’m in the field, mentors are questioning the amount of work the TPA demands during student teaching. People question whether this is a ‘realistic load’ during full-time student teaching.”

Mentors expressed such concerns directly. In our survey following student teaching, one mentor wrote:

“I felt that my teaching candidate was too stressed about the TPA and all its requirements to get a full picture of what teaching full time is all about. I tried to take some of the burdens of full time teaching away from him so that he could focus on the gathering and analyzing and writing portions of the TPA.”

Several mentors echoed this concern, either in individual conversation, during the focus group, or through the survey. The following are representative comments:

“5 weeks of full time teaching is not enough to sufficiently gather the data, analyze it and write all the sections for the TPA. My candidate was very stressed about the depth of the TPA and it affected his teaching, especially towards the end of his tenure.”

“Reflecting is brilliant ... [but] doing the TPA during full time student teaching is insane and counterproductive... My student teacher is already maxed out – and to add in immense writing assignment is unhelpful at best and quite harmful at worst.... How is that helping a student become a student teacher?”

Mentors with National Boards experience suggested, based on their own experience of a major performance assessment, that the amount of work expected of beginning teachers through the TPA may be overwhelming – and one pointed out that National Boards doesn’t even let teachers take on such a major self-assessment during teaching until their 3rd year. In short, mentor teachers showed a high level of concern that the TPA would potentially overwhelm their teacher candidate.

For their part, student teachers consistently pointed out that “time” was a major issue faced in completing the TPA – and that the assessment significantly increased their stress.

“I didn’t really expect the degree of stress and anxiety that came with the TPA ...”

“There isn’t time to do the TPA during student teaching.”

“Incredibly time consuming in a time that was already extremely busy.”

“Very difficult to find the time to write a huge 30 page paper while trying to teach and plan for the day to day stuff.”

“Despite a mentor who gave me time.... I still found myself spending long evenings in the library in order to finish. [The most difficult part was] time and how all-consuming the assessment was.”

Almost all of our student teachers found the workload of the TPA during student teaching to be rather excessive, pushing them in some cases beyond capacity. Even capable candidates whose mentors reduced their teaching schedule to accommodate the TPA found themselves “spending long evenings in the library” to finish.

Divided Energies: Candidates and mentors pinpointed a specific negative effect of the TPA – that it split candidate energies during student teaching. For example, mentors noticed how the time needed to fulfill the TPA diminished possibilities for thorough planning, and it reduced some collegial interactions. One mentor said:

“The TPA has impacted our time significantly. Just the time taken to video has been big – how to tape, when to tape, did it work, reviewing the tape in time to see if we need to tape again – this has taken away planning time. We over-videtaped to be safe, but this took away from lesson planning.”

Another mentor wrote:

“There is a limited amount of energy each person has in a day. As the TPA needed more attention, she didn't have as much energy to spend on lesson planning and relating with students. ... I can't help but wonder how much better she could've been.”

Many candidates for their part felt they were placed in the position of having to choose between the TPA and their students, or between the TPA and other teaching duties like careful planning in areas unrelated to the TPA. For example, after student teaching, one candidate wrote:

“I wasn't able to focus on my student teaching as much, and I sometimes went with vague and not finished lesson plans for the day – right in the height of full time teaching.It's too exhausting...”

Another student wrote:

“Since it was so time consuming, I felt that some of my other instruction suffered. Since I was focusing so much on math I couldn’t give everything to reading.”

One student during the focus group elaborated on this point at length:

“I guess I want to say I put my students first, but it’s not always true. It’s easy to lose sight of the 20-30 kids when doing the TPA – focusing on kids – when you are trying to meet the requirements and get the paper done.... My TPA area was math, and other subjects have fallen off my radar – I barely have plans for those subjects some days. My math teaching is better, there is intentional assessment & thinking about kids – but to the detriment of everything else. The TPA IS making me more deliberate in what I do, but it’s so intense, that it’s hard to spread this deliberateness & intentional teaching across the whole day.”

Another student, looking back at TPA, said the following:

“The TPA was the most stressful part of my student teaching experience. During the TPA I was completely scattered. I had to make a choice to turn my attention away from my students to the TPA writing. Rather than being there for my students, I was doing things for me. I felt like I let myself down, my mentor down, and I let my students down during this time. I felt like I was being greedy, asking for things from students – things I needed, like assessment examples.”

Other students wrote similarly:

“It took up all my time! I was so focused on the TPA and the lessons I was doing for it that the other subjects suffered, and my focus was somewhat off. The kids weren’t getting my best, and I wasn’t happy with my lessons in other subjects during that time.”

“I felt as though I was taking precious time and attention off my students and what needed to be done on a daily basis to answer repetitive questions.”

One noticeable aspect of these critical comments is the division that candidates perceive between the TPA and their daily commitment to students. As one student above says, “I had to make a choice to turn my attention away from my students....” As another says, “The kids weren’t getting my best...” A third student felt the TPA put her in an ethical quandary – that she was being “greedy” by focusing more on her own need to complete the TPA requirements than on her students’ learning needs. Although the TPA aims to be an authentic assessment that reflects the actual practices of teachers, one that seamlessly fits into an internship, our candidates in fact struggled to integrate it. They felt it pulling

them away from key parts of their classroom teaching. Candidates expressed a concern that the TPA began to compete for precious time – time required for planning, engaging students, and working with their mentor. In light of this competition for resources, time and energy, several candidates stated that the TPA in its current form was too big of a task to complete during student teaching.

“The TPA is a good idea, I just think it is way too much to expect for it to be done during student teaching.”

“The size of the TPA document was overwhelming to me....”

“Would be much more relevant and manageable if it was scaled down.”

“There isn’t time to do the TPA during student teaching.”

Mentors’ Relationship to the TPA

In this section, I provide quantitative data based on our survey of mentor teachers following the student teaching term. Approximately 61% of our mentors responded to the survey (20 of 33), which consisted of 10 questions. This data provides a few basic and early trends regarding mentor teachers’ experience, with and relationship, to the TPA.

Most mentor teachers report having a moderate understanding of the TPA as an assessment. However, the vast majority did not feel that were involved with the assessment in a significant way. Figure 3 shows that 65% of mentors felt they had at least a moderate understanding of the TPA. Such understanding could come from existing National Boards experience (an assessment similar to the TPA), from simply reading through the document or talking with a candidate during student teaching, and/or from a brief orientation to the TPA offered by our program at the beginning of the student teaching semester – in which we discussed the primary TPA tasks and gave mentors and students time to work with one rubric. Mentors in general felt they could converse adequately with candidates about the TPA, though not with strong confidence. That only 5% of mentors reported having a “thorough”

understanding of the TPA almost certainly reflects the early pilot phase of this work – but it also reflects a general mentor detachment from the TPA, which I will discuss below.

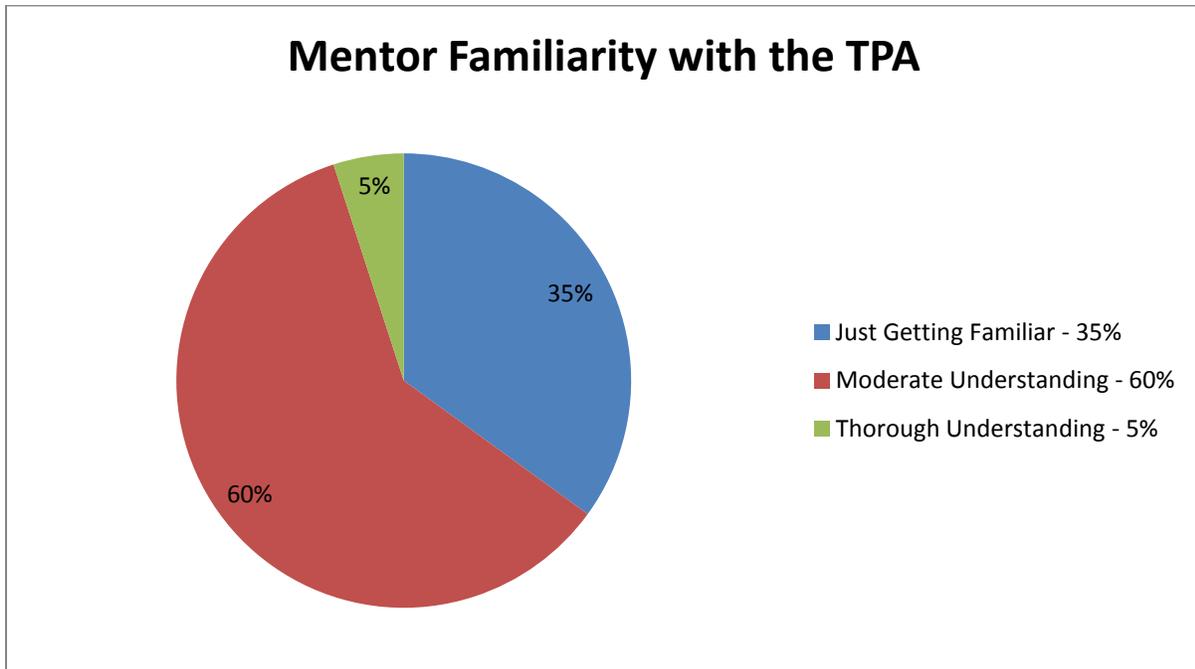


Figure 3: Self-reported Mentor Familiarity with the TPA (N = 20).

Despite mentors' general familiarity with the document, far fewer reported that they were involved with the TPA process to a significant degree. In Figure 4, the numbers are reversed, with just 35% of mentors reporting that they were, at least, "moderately involved." Most mentors, it seems, stepped back to let the candidate complete the assessment on their own. There are several possible reasons for this lack of involvement, related to the TPA as a new assessment. For example, mentors were possibly unclear on their role and unsure of how much involvement they should have. As a new assessment, our program provided few parameters for mentors regarding the nature and extent of their involvement, and to a significant extent we were unsure ourselves of what those parameters should be. Can mentors help with TPA lesson plans, coach candidates through a lesson, or review and discuss videos with candidates? Can they read or review TPA writing to make suggestions? Should mentors intentionally

“step back” to let the candidate show what they can do independently? We were unsure ourselves, and we left it to mentors to use their own judgment.

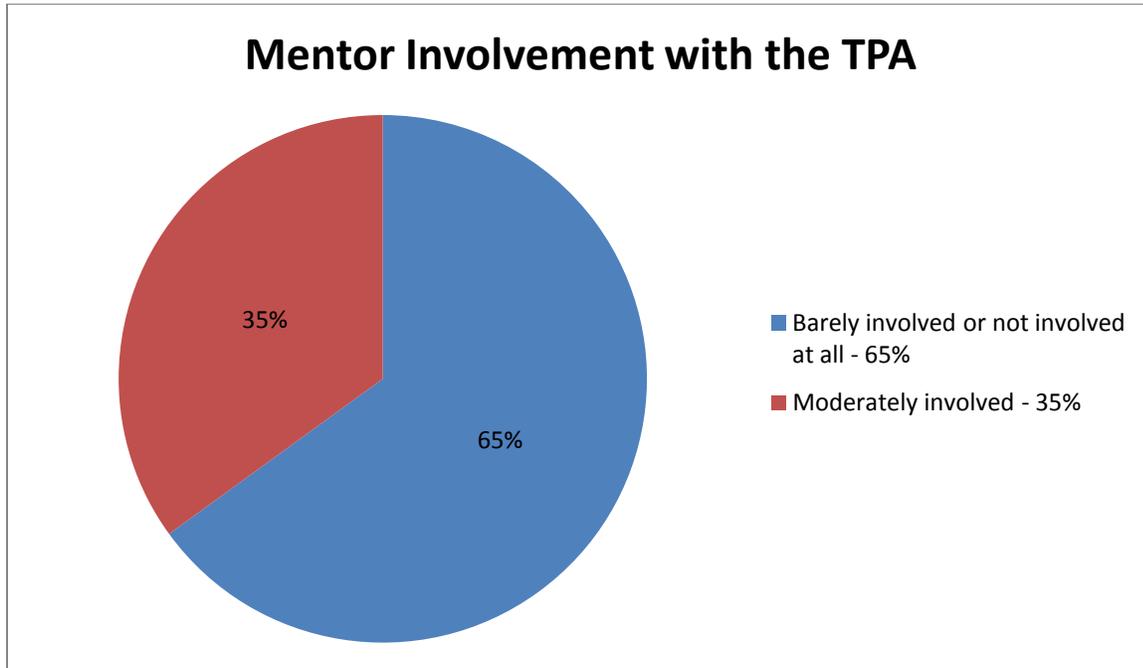


Figure 4: Mentor Involvement in the TPA (N=20)

Other mentors felt they lacked enough understanding about the assessment to become more involved. As one mentor said in the focus group:

“I read through it once – awhile ago. But now I’m getting questions. And I’m nervous answering questions. [My candidate] will ask: ‘What do you think this means?’ And I have an answer, but I always tell her to check with someone else at the university to make sure. Lots of times there are vocabulary issues – what do specific terms mean... I’m worried about giving off-base advice.”

Another mentor said:

“I feel really ignorant of that document. I went to the orientation. I read the example rubrics. We talk on a more surface level: How are you doing? Are you going to video today? Our real conversations are focused on good teaching. I don’t want to get into jumping through hoops, meeting a checklist.”

In this case, the mentor suggested that different factors combined to create a somewhat distanced involvement with the TPA. The first factor was simply her own ignorance of the document, but the second was her sense that she and her candidate already were having “real” conversations about teaching, and the TPA in some sense represented a threat to the integrity of this dialogue, something that would possibly turn their authentic talk about teaching and learning into something artificial or externally motivated. Such comments raise important questions about the ways in which the TPA may affect mentor / candidate interaction during student teaching. Will the TPA increase substantive interaction or potentially decrease such interactions? Will it create a more instrumental or technical set of interactions – focused more on “meeting requirements” and “getting the assessment done?”

Surveyed mentors indicated, interestingly, that the TPA had minimal impact on their own role as a mentor. Figure 5 shows that 75% claimed that the TPA represented “no change” with respect to their role as mentor during student teaching. 70% felt that their relationship with a teacher candidate was not affected by the TPA. The data from the first three questions reinforce the idea that mentors took up a somewhat distant or detached role in relation to the TPA, and that they were not impacted much by the TPA. A small percentage (20-25%) felt that the TPA enhanced their role as mentor, and a very small percentage (5%) found that the TPA detracted from their mentor role.

On the other hand, mentors felt that candidates’ experience was changed significantly by the TPA. Figure 5 shows that mentors found significant and mostly positive changes associated with the TPA regarding candidates’ relationships with students, knowledge of teaching, and engagement with content. Here, for example, over 60% of mentors felt that the TPA affected their candidates’ “knowledge of the teaching profession” for the better. Only 21% felt that there was no change in this category, and 5% felt that the impact was for the worse. Likewise, 65% of mentors felt candidates’ engagement with content knowledge in the classroom was enhanced because of the TPA, compared to 15% who felt there was no change and 15% who felt the TPA detracted.

Mentor Perceptions of the Impact of the TPA

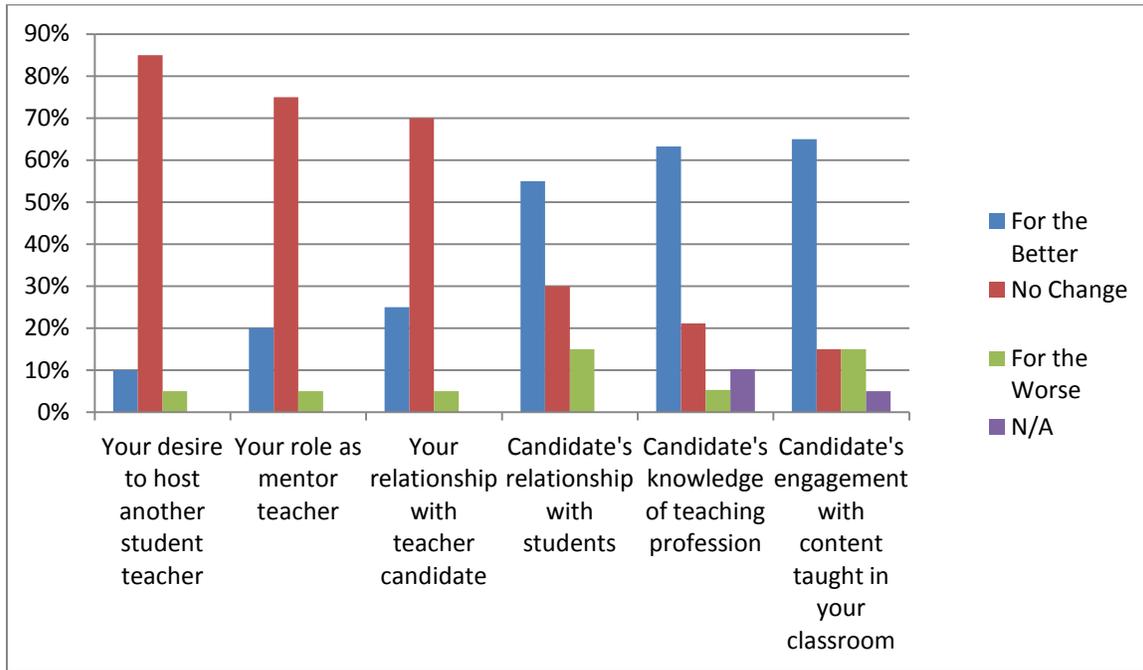


Figure 5. Mentor Responses to the Question: To what extent did the inclusion of the TPA in student teaching affect.... ?

Discussion

As reminder, the TPA is in a pilot stage this year, and the data above reflects just one semester from one small program, with responses from 26 teacher candidates and 20 mentor teachers. However, the themes suggested here raise important questions that require our careful consideration and discussion. I am especially interested in the international perspectives and insights of those gathered here today.

The TPA seems to be an ambitious, multi-faceted assessment, focusing on crucial areas of teacher development. The assessment clarifies important dimensions of quality teaching and promotes significant reflection on practice. The TPA has well-specified rubrics (growing from the PACT) that have the potential to focus teachers productively – for example, on connecting knowledge of students with lesson planning, on eliciting thinking through discussion, on analyzing student understandings, and on

using such knowledge to anticipate next steps in teaching. The TPA is currently supported by our core institutions like AACTE and by some of the most respected members of our teacher education profession, like Linda Darling-Hammond. As indicated above, candidates and mentors in my own program believe that the TPA, in certain ways, led to significant reflection on teaching and to greater deliberateness in the classroom. Mentor teachers felt on average that the TPA led to stronger engagements with content in the classroom. In this sense, the TPA shows potential for raising standards for beginning teachers. As an example, when our program did a “pre-pilot” of the TPA in 2011, 10 of our 32 candidates did not pass the assessment, when graded by our own faculty, and each of these students had to revisit and rewrite some aspect of the TPA. Each of these 10 students had otherwise “passed” student teaching, but the TPA gave us the leverage and focused criteria to push these students further and in positive ways.

However, the overall impact of the TPA is less clear. From the perspective of candidates and mentors, our data reflect a conflicted mixture of strengths as well as significantly problematic aspects. A primary finding of this study is that, despite its virtues as an assessment, in its current form the TPA is likely to be overwhelming to student teachers. A term one of my teacher education colleagues has used is “unsustainable.” Both teacher candidates and mentors were consistent in this response – that student teachers were pushed to the extreme mentally and physically, and that candidates often had to sacrifice important aspects of their student teaching experience (planning of other subjects, conversations with mentors, focusing on students, attending after-school activities) to complete the process. As one mentor teacher wrote: *“There is a limited amount of energy each person has in a day. As the TPA needed more attention, she didn't have as much energy to spend on lesson planning and relating with students.”* In the words of one candidate: *“It's too exhausting.”* This dividing of energies, the collateral effect on other areas of student teaching, raises concerns about the ambitious nature of the TPA as an assessment and its overall impact on teacher learning. Here we return to my story about

the Portland Japanese Garden -- how something impressive and well intended and even in many ways “authentic” can compromise some of its authenticity and impact as it becomes “big,” as it tries to accomplish perhaps too much.

Two interpretations of the issue are possible here. One is that the TPA is over-ambitious and should be pared down in some way. Another is that student teaching itself must be changed or reduced in light of the TPA – that teacher education programs can no longer proceed with “business as usual” when it comes to a traditional student teaching experience. In this view, the “overwhelming” nature of the TPA is more of a technical problem that requires a set of program adjustments. My sense is that both interpretations are probably correct. On the hand, programs must make changes to the structure of student teaching in light of the TPA. However, the experience of our candidates and mentors reflects something deeper and more insidious—an ongoing tendency to add “too much” to teachers’ plates, to neglect the extensive labor involved in teaching. Apple (1986) argues that teachers are vulnerable to gradually increasing workloads and responsibilities, which he labels as forms of “intensification.”

Intensification is described as:

...[having] many symptoms, from the trivial to the more complex – ranging from being allowed no time at all even to ... have a cup of coffee or relax, to having a total absence of time to keep up with one’s field. We can see intensification most visibly in mental labor in the chronic sense of work overload that has escalated over time (p.41).

Feiman-Nemser (2012) likewise has claimed that the student teaching experience can produce in student teachers “a utilitarian perspective where getting through the day... [is one of] the main priorities” (36). Given that student teaching is already uniquely demanding, to what extent will the TPA simply encourage teachers to “survive” – or, as we have seen, to sacrifice some parts of their teaching for others? To what extent will beginning teachers simply learn that, in teaching, “too much” will be asked

of them? What costs do we as a profession incur if we overtax pre-service teachers in this way, at the onset of their careers?

Two specific aspects of the TPA, based on the data above, certainly require more attention. First, much attention has been given to the TPA document (tasks, prompts, and rubrics) and the scoring process, but surprisingly little attention has been given to the how teaching programs might have to restructure the student teaching experience as a whole to accommodate the TPA. Student teaching is a major teacher education structure, implicating multiple stakeholders, including districts, principals, mentor teachers, parents, and K-12 students. Yet, most programs like ours have been left to our own devices to “make the TPA work” with student teaching. Our program, for example, is currently in the process of deciding whether to shorten student teaching to allow time to write the TPA, have all candidates student teach half time, or lengthen student teaching. These are major decisions which will significantly impact stakeholders. Each option has serious pros and cons, and our answers to these questions will shape different conditions for completing the TPA. One question raised is about the very purpose of student teaching, and the extent to which the development and training intended during student teaching can become overshadowed by this major assessment. We need, it seems, a more rigorous national conversation about the very structure and purpose of student teaching in light of a major assessment like the TPA – from which suggested and recommended models can emerge. Indeed, international insights on this question would be useful, particularly in light of the fact that student teaching, in Japanese pre-service teacher education, is given less emphasis than in the U.S..

Second, the role of the mentor teacher has not been conceptualized enough in relation to the TPA. Our survey data suggests that most mentors were “barely involved” with the TPA, for several plausible reasons. While a few mentors claimed that the TPA led to more substantive conversations, most indicated that the TPA had a negligible effect on their role. The relative absence of the mentor from the TPA raises important issues. For example, it suggests that the TPA itself has seemingly been

conceptualized without the mentor teacher in mind, although mentor teachers play a significant role in the learning of student teachers (Brockbank & McGill 2006; Bullough et al 2008; Feiman-Nemser 2012, 2001; Orland, 2001; Valencia et al 2009). Feiman-Nemser (2012), for example, asserts that the mentor teacher plays a crucial role for student teachers, particularly by framing questions, modeling how to probe and extend candidate thinking, and prompting student teachers “to talk about reasons for their decisions and actions” (232). With the TPA, at least at this early stage, mentors seem to be understandably unsure of their role, but one potential problem in the future is how much mentors will feel the need to “step back” from the process to let the student teacher do the TPA “on their own.” To what extent will the TPA increase or decrease crucial interactions around teaching and learning? Will conversations between mentors and candidates be transformed substantively for the better, or in a more utilitarian fashion? Again, surprisingly little has been forthcoming about such questions. In some ways, mentors remain hidden players in this drama, reflecting again the relative invisibility of pre-service mentoring (Hamel & Jaasko-Fisher 2011), even within the teacher education community.

Finally, we must ask, what are the pros and cons of taking something like the TPA “to scale?” For some in the U.S., the TPA is on a trajectory to become a national assessment, where in theory every state will be using the TPA. Some see such an expansion as beneficial – creating a uniformity of high standards across the profession. Ironically, despite the American fascination with “the bigger the better,” our generous hosts in Japan are even more familiar and experienced with nationalized systems of curriculum and assessment. In this sense, you may be in a unique position to help American teacher educators see the benefits and costs of “going to scale.” For example, at least from an American perspective – and we are far less culturally homogeneous than Japan – creating a national assessment leads to predictable problems. One issue is that assessment loses its local character – the nuances and relationships that reflect a particular learning context, program, or even region. As some students at the University of Massachusetts have complained publically (Winerip 2012), a large-scale assessment like

the TPA can become a blind instrument disconnected from the unique conditions and teaching relationships that have shaped one's learning. They can be experienced as "corporate" rather than "communal" (Emdin 2008), producing in both students and teachers a set of distant and utilitarian attitudes. What might be the strengths of the TPA as a national assessment? What might be the problems? Today, I invite my Japanese and other international colleagues to draw on your experience to weigh in on these questions.

Conclusion

The Portland Japanese Garden is an impressive place. Whether it is "authentic" is a harder, more complex question. Similarly, the ambitiousness of the TPA is its strength and weakness. Social and political forces have pushed our profession to create a powerful assessment, and many of our most important values do emerge in the TPA – that teaching is reflective and intellectual activity, and that understanding students and reflecting on student learning is at the center of good teaching. But these same forces are also shaping something very big—something complex and multi-faceted, apparently burdensome for student teachers, high stakes, involved with a corporation (Pearson), something possibly national. The danger, as we take something to this size and scale, is that critical, local, and intimate dimensions of the work of teacher development can be lost, marginalized, or forgotten.

Questions we should continue to ask are:

- What is the relationship between learning to teach effectively and assessing effective teaching?
- What should the purpose of student teaching be in a teacher candidate's overall development?
- What kind of learning relationships do we want between student teachers and mentors?
- How can we keep the actual daily labor of teachers in mind in our effort to assure quality in the profession?

Is the TPA “assuring quality” or “overwhelming teachers”? The answer seems to be “yes.” Our data suggests that the TPA is a work in progress. We in America may need the insights and reflections precisely from those outside of our American system – from an international group like this one today – to help us see whether we’ve gone a bit too big, and whether we are asking too much from those entering the teaching profession.

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APPENDIX A

Teacher Performance Assessment (TPA) Assessment Components at a Glance

Task 1: Planning Instruction and Assessment

--Provide relevant information about your instructional context.

--Select a learning segment of 3–5 sequential lessons that supports students in building conceptual understanding and content knowledge. Create an instruction and assessment plan for the learning segment, and write lesson plans.

--RESPOND TO COMMENTARY PROMPTS (10 pages maximum, single spaced) to explain what you know about your students and the thinking behind your plans. Prompts are found in TPA booklet.

--Make daily notes about the effectiveness of your teaching for your students' learning.

Task 2: Instructing and Engaging Students in Learning

--Video-record at least one lesson of your learning segment

--Video-recording must show an instructional conversation where you are engaging students in conceptual understandings

--Submit one or two clips that do not exceed 15 minutes in total.

--RESPOND TO COMMENTARY PROMPTS (5 pages maximum, single spaced) to analyze your teaching and your students' learning in the video clip(s). Prompts are found in TPA booklet.

Task 3: Assessing Student Learning

--Select an assessment task from the learning segment and identify evaluation criteria for this task.

--Analyze class performance (an entire class set) using the criteria.

--Identify three student work samples that illustrate trends in student understanding within the class.

--Analyze the learning of focus students in more depth, based on both work samples.

--RESPOND TO COMMENTARY PROMPTS (8 pages maximum, single spaced). Prompts are found in TPA booklet.

--Identify next steps in instruction based on your analysis.

Task 4: Analyzing Teaching

-- RESPOND TO COMMENTARY PROMPTS (2 pages). Using notes you have recorded throughout the learning segment, explain what you have learned about your teaching practice and two or three things you would do differently if you could teach the learning segment over. Explain why the changes would improve your students' learning.

APPENDIX B

TPA Candidate Feedback Form

What was most valuable about the TPA process?

What was most problematic, frustrating, or least valuable?

What suggestions do you have for how the program might better support students with the TPA process?

What other comments do you have?

Mentor Online Survey Questions

1. How would you describe your awareness and understanding of the Teacher Performance Assessment (TPA)?

- I know nothing about the assessment (did not engage with it or was not involved)
- I am just learning about the assessment (heard about it at mentor orientation, have glanced at parts of the document, and/or have briefly talked about it with candidate)
- I have a moderate understanding and awareness (i.e. through reading the document, talking with candidate, and/or National Boards experience).
- Thorough understanding and awareness.

Other (please specify)

2. How would you describe your role with the Teacher Performance Assessment (TPA) as your candidate went through the process this spring?

- Not involved at all
- Barely involved
- Moderately involved
- Highly involved

Other (please specify)

3. To what extent did the inclusion of the TPA in the student teaching semester affect:

	Improved	Somewhat for the better	Not at all	Somewhat for the worse	Harm/worsen	N/A
your role as a mentor teacher	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/> A
your relationship with the teacher candidate	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
the candidate's relationship and engagement with your students	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
the candidate's knowledge of the teaching profession	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
the candidate's engagement with	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

the totality of the content matter taught in your classroom						
the release and/or sharing of primary responsibility for planning and teaching subjects or sections	<input type="radio"/>					
your ability to practice co-teaching methods	<input type="radio"/>					

Other (please specify)

4. Describe any challenges or difficulties with the TPA this term.

5. Describe any positive impact of the TPA on the student teaching term this semester.

6. Which description best captures your feelings about hosting a future teacher candidate during the completion of their TPA?

- Now more than ever it is important that I host a candidate
- The TPA did not impact my thinking about future mentoring
- Somewhat, I am still thinking it over
- I do not plan to host another candidate because of the TPA
- I wil wait to decide whether to host another candidate until the TPA is fully understood
- Not sure

Other (please specify)

7. Did your candidate have a positive impact on the students in your classroom?

- Yes

No

Not sure

Other (please specify)

8. Which best describes your overall assessment of your candidate's readiness to be an effective first year teacher? (your response will NOT be factored into any evaluation, nor will it be shared with a candidate)

Will exceed expectations for beginning teacher (highly accomplished)

Solid foundation in knowledge and skills for effective teaching

Acceptable level to begin teaching effectively

Some skill but needs more practice to be a teacher of record

Will struggle, not ready to teach

Not sure

Other (please specify)

9. What suggestions do you have that would help us improve the student teaching experience for you, as the mentor teacher?

10. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience as a mentor teacher this semester?