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Preparing elementary school teachers for social studies instruction in the context of edTPA



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ABSTRACT

In a context of high-stakes accountability in teacher education, concerns are emerging about challenges to the already tenuous position of elementary social studies teacher education. In this case study, the author administered a survey to elementary social studies teacher educators in Georgia and conducted follow-up interviews focusing on the impact of edTPA on elementary social studies teacher education and the ways in which they are navigating the new context of teaching elementary social studies methods. The findings reveal the possibility of further decline of social studies in elementary teacher education programs due to elementary edTPA's singular focus on literacy and math content pedagogy along with the high-stakes nature of edTPA process. Implications for future research on edTPA and elementary social studies education are discussed.

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Introduction

With today's educational climate stressing accountability and outcomes, many states have or are creating policies requiring colleges and universities to incorporate teacher performance assessments into teacher preparation and are naming edTPA as the preferred assessment (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2012; Sato, 2014). The edTPA is a nationally available, standardized, content-specific performance assessment of teacher candidates, which was developed by Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity (SCALE), and is currently operated by Pearson for scoring and delivering the results (American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, 2014a). The edTPA requires teacher candidates to provide evidence, such as lesson plans, video clips of teaching, student work samples, and commentaries, to demonstrate their ability to effectively teach their chosen subject. These artifacts are submitted for scoring to Pearson and assessed by external evaluators. Currently, edTPA is a requirement of teacher licensure in 12 states and "the long-term expectation is that institutions of higher education, state education boards and professional standards boards throughout the United States will adopt edTPA as a mandatory requirement for the award of an education degree and/or for teacher licensure" (American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, 2014b).

Advocates of the edTPA emphasize the benefits of such a performance-based, standardized assessment (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2014c; Peck, Singer-Gabella, Sloan, & Lin, 2014), whereas critics highlight the dangers of the high-stakes, outsourced, or standardized nature of the assessment (Au, 2013; Chiu, 2014; Haynes, 2013; Madeloni & Gorlewski, 2013a; Madeloni & Gorlewski, 2013b; National Association of Multicultural Education, 2014). In addition to these issues, a unique challenge of the edTPA to elementary social studies teacher education stems from the fact that elementary edTPA does not test teacher candidates' teaching performance in social studies. Aligned with the Common

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Core State Standards, elementary edTPA assesses content-specific pedagogy in literacy and mathematics but not in social studies or other subjects (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Would the common adage, “what gets tested gets taught,” apply to teacher education? Would the no testing of social studies in elementary edTPA result in marginalization of social studies in elementary teacher education?

Due to the relative newness of the edTPA, no research has yet examined the impact of edTPA on elementary social studies teacher education. The research study of Gerwin et al. (2013) is one of only a few examples of research on the edTPA regarding social studies teacher education. This article seeks to contribute to dialog among social studies teacher educators and others interested in the impact of the edTPA on teacher education by reporting the results of a case study (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2002). In Georgia, where the author resides, edTPA has become a part of the initial teaching licensure requirements for teacher candidates who student teach in the fall 2015 and afterwards (Georgia Professional Standards Commission, 2014). Using a survey and interviews with Georgia teacher educators teaching an elementary social studies methods course, the present research explored how elementary social studies teacher educators in Georgia experience, make sense of, and respond to the new context of preparing future elementary teachers for social studies education.

In the following, the relevant literature is reviewed to situate the research within the persistent and new challenges of elementary social studies teacher education with regards to increasing high-stakes accountability in P-12 and teacher education. The second part of the article describes the study itself and its findings. The article concludes with a discussion of crosscutting themes that emerged from the data and the implications for future research.

Literature review

Persistent challenges in elementary social studies teacher education

As the curricular home for citizenship education (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994), social studies in its great capacity can engage students in learning about and for social justice, and develop active citizens who have knowledge, skills, and passion to make their local and global communities more just and humane (Agarwal-Rangnath, 2013; Au, 2009; Ross, 2006; Stanley, 2005; Wade, 2007). However, social studies has historically been on the backburner (Goodlad, 1984; Houser, 1995; Weiss, 1978; Wood, 1989), and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation has contributed to its further regression (Au, 2009; McGuire, 2007). Particularly at the elementary level, teachers have been compelled to spend a substantial amount of time on literacy and math, with little time for teaching social studies because of NCLB's reliance on high-stakes testing in reading and math (Au, 2009; Boyle-Baise, Hsu, Johnson, Serriere, & Stewart, 2008; Center on Education Policy, 2008; Fitchett & Heafner, 2010; Leming, Ellington, & Schug, 2006; Rock et al., 2006; VanFossen, 2005).

In this context, elementary social studies teacher educators have been charged with a difficult task: inspiring and equipping future elementary teachers to teach meaningful social studies instruction in post-NCLB elementary classrooms (Agarwal-Rangnath, 2013; Fry, 2009; Lanahan & Yeager, 2008; Rubin & Justice, 2005). Indeed, this is not an easy task. First of all, research shows many elementary teacher candidates enter a social studies methods class with negative past experiences of learning social studies as a student, and thus tend to view social studies as boring, irrelevant, or meaningless (Henning & Yendol-Hoppey, 2004; McArthur, 2004; Owens, 1997; Slekar, 1998; Ukpokodu, 2003). Second, required coursework in elementary social studies content and pedagogy in teacher education programs tends to be minimal, which often leads to teacher candidates' lack of confidence in teaching social studies (Lanahan & Yeager, 2008; Logan & Butler, 2013; Owens, 1997; Passe, 2006; Rubin & Justice, 2005; Slekar, 2006; Thornton, 2001; Ukpokodu, 2003). Third, the marginalization of social studies in the elementary school curriculum means little chance for teacher candidates to observe or practice in meaningful social studies instruction during their field experience (Franklin & Serriere, 2010; Fry, 2009; Moore, 2003).

The edTPA as new challenge

In addition to these persistent challenges, elementary social studies teacher educators in many teacher education programs are facing a new challenge upon the arrival of edTPA. According to the AACTE (see <http://edtpa.aacte.org/state-policy>), more than 500 teacher preparation programs in 35 states and the District of Columbia are using edTPA at different levels. Some states have policies in place requiring a performance-based assessment – such as edTPA – as part of the teacher licensure and/or for teacher education program's accreditation, and others are exploring such policies.

Given the increased adoption of edTPA and its high-stakes nature, there is a growing concern and debate around the new assessment. Some early research on edTPA suggests edTPA may contribute to teacher candidates' learning in the areas of lesson planning, assessment, and reflection, as well as teacher education improvement through increased faculty collaboration (Darling-Hammond & Hylar, 2013; Peck et al., 2014; Wittenbrink, 2013). In contrast, other research and anecdotal evidence suggest edTPA may result in teaching to the test or narrowing of the curriculum in teacher education (Au, 2013; Berlak, 2010; Chiu, 2014; Denton, 2013; Madeloni & Gorlewski, 2013a, 2013b).

While proponents believe edTPA helps the professionalization of teacher education by establishing a common, standardized assessment of teacher candidate performances (Haynes, 2013; Sato, 2014), critics counter that the standardized rubrics of edTPA leaves out the complexity of critical multicultural education (National Association of Multicultural Education, 2014). While proponents underscore the performance-based nature of edTPA, which they argue is more valid than

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