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The Start of a Conversation with Critical Friends: Can the CalTPA be Used as a Catalyst for Program and Professional Inquiry?

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Abstract

Performance assessments of teachers and/or teaching (TPA) are becoming part of the educational accountability landscape on an international scale. This article presents insight into the process three teacher educators have followed as their research evolves from a critical document analysis into a collaborative self-study of their programs and practices. The work is framed by critical race theory and guided by practices undertaken in becoming critically reflective educators. This piece represents the conversations and connections to research around the critical need for educators to examine bias-based assumptions and internalized deficit-thinking. The tools we have developed for our next steps into collaborative self-study will be presented as useful for any teacher education program or faculty who wish to embark upon a similar journey for research, professional growth, or in pursuit of equitable and socially just practices.

Keywords

Teaching Performance Assessment, CalTPA, Teacher Education, Critical Race Theory, Professional Development

Author Statement

We represent three diverse universities within a large state university system in the United States. Our research areas are diverse, but all intersect in our commitments to social justice, equity, and emancipatory educational practices for supporting TK-12 students in public education.

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“...the language and logic of accountability have become so deeply embedded in the everyday discourse and practice of teacher education that they are now difficult to discern as policy and practice alternatives. Instead, they are often presumed to be self-evident and inevitable, more or less a “baked-in” part of teacher education.” (Cochran-Smith, Carney, et. al, p.15)

Performance assessments of teachers and/or teaching (TPA) are becoming part of the educational accountability landscape on an international scale. Whether they be used for initial teacher credentialing in the United States or Australia (Charteris, 2019), for review of higher education faculty in Portugal (Sánchez,& Moreira, 2021) or for in-service teachers in Indonesia (Yenti, & Sumarmin, 2020) the use of TPAs as part of a standards-based system is spreading internationally (Sato & Abbiss, 2021). The first TPA developed in the United States was created in Connecticut in 1986, and California was the first state to call for the development of required TPAs as part of credentialing in 1998 (Gurl, et. al, 2016). Three TPAs were developed for use in California - the first was called Performance Assessment for California Teachers (PACT), followed by the Fresno Assessment of Student Teachers (FAST) and later the California Teaching Performance Assessment (CalTPA). These have been in use in the credentialing system since 2008. In 2016, California updated the state adopted teaching standards, the Teaching Performance Expectations (TPEs). This revision resulted in a need to redevelop or revise the TPAs. The PACT was replaced with the edTPA, FAST was updated by the university that developed it, and the CalTPA was redeveloped by a design team consisting of teacher education experts, with the support of the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) and Evaluation Systems personnel.

Professional teaching standards are situated in neo-liberal policies and approaches to globally reforming teacher education (Call, 2018; Lewis, Savage, & Holloway, 2020; Mockler, 2020) in the name of accountability. While this high-stakes use of standards can be seen as performative, some research has found that teacher candidates find professional teaching

standards useful as a “common language” for conversations about teaching practice. (Call, Christie, & Simon, 2021; Loughran and Ellis, 2016).

Programs participating in accreditation activities in California have been encouraged to utilize the TPEs and data from the TPAs for program review and revision since their adoption in 2008. Recent reviews of literature and practice (Peck, et.al, 2021) continue to encourage teacher education programs to utilize the structures and data of TPAs as critical reflection points for program improvement. While there are challenges in exploring the validity of scoring of TPAs such as initial data access for inter-rater reliability on the new TPAs (Lyness, Peterson, & Yates, 2021), programs and individual professors can utilize the TPA manuals as catalysts for reflection and conversation on necessary shifts in teaching practice.

At the beginning of the 2020-2021 academic year, three faculty from different California State Universities embarked upon a research journey to explore how the revised 2020 CalTPA might be an avenue for cultivating anti-racist teaching pedagogies in our personal and programmatic practices. We had been conducting a document analysis (Bowen, 2009) of the 2020 version of CalTPA cycle one using both critically reflective (Brookfield, 2017) and Critical Race Theory lenses.

Frameworks: CRT and Critical Reflection

Although we each teach at different institutions within a state university system, each of our institutions’ teacher education programs are dedicated to social justice and fostering emancipatory pedagogies in future generations of public school teachers. Additionally, we have all been involved in the development or alignment (to standards) processes of the development of the CalTPA. All three of us have, at some point, participated in the scoring process of the CalTPA as lead scorers as well. Each of us participated in the CalTPA processes with the intent to advocate for socially just practices being included in the assessment. In the ongoing work described in this article we are attempting to explore how the 2020 iteration of the CalTPA reflects and/or provides opportunities for us to explore practices that align with Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Brookfield’s (2017) methods for becoming critically reflective educators, especially those of being aware of and taking action on biases.

CRT positions racism in American legal and educational systems as the norm, not the exception (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). With this framing in mind, we committed ourselves to holding one another accountable for exploring the ways in which white supremacy is or could be present in our reading of the CalTPA and our reflection on our practices. Our goal was to confront systemic language that influences teacher practices that reinforce invisibility, self-doubt, and subordination of people of color (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Our goal was to identify aspects of the CalTPA that could reinforce or confront the “whiteness” in educational policies and standards, with the intent of identifying opportunities for teacher educators and teacher education programs to challenge oppressive structures, interrupt current practices, and explore opportunities for more equitable approaches to education (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Solorzano (1997) challenges teacher education programs and educators to examine the ways in which racism pervades the structures of teacher education, perpetuating the continued oppression of students of color. We intentionally take up this call in our ongoing analysis and conversations around the assessment, our programs, and our personal pedagogical practices.

One of the greatest challenges in doing the work of applying CRT to the analysis of the CalTPA and our own practices is in recognizing internalized, racist, ableist, and patriarchal biases, which present themselves in assumptions about our work as well as in programmatic and state policies. To this end, we delved into the descriptions of different types of assumptions we might face as we continued deepening our discussions about the work. Brookfield (2017) outlines three types of assumptions to probe as we critically reflect on programmatic and personal practices and policies. The first type of assumptions we interrogated were paradigmatic. We discussed specific terms and phrases, and how they reflected the paradigms of systemic oppression present in educational policy and traditional teaching practices. As participants in the development and/or scoring of the CalTPA, the second set of assumptions we found ourselves discussing were prescriptive- assumptions about how we expected candidates, teacher educators, and program leadership “should” interpret and enact given activities and practices valued in the assessment. Our sharing of our programs’ policies and practices provided us with insight into how our expectations could be erroneous assumptions.

Finally, we found our conversations began to unearth causal assumptions, we shared our programs' and personal expectations for what would happen when certain actions in the CalTPA were enacted juxtaposed with published research of diverse voices that pushed us to reflect on how these causal assumptions functioned through a CRT lens.

This article represents the transition in our research from an open-coded document analysis study and an upcoming collaborative self-study. The self-study was inspired when we realized that many of our conversations around specific terminology used in the CalTPA were designed to assess performance on several TPEs. These discussions prompted reflection on how standards language, utilized in the CalTPA is shaped by state and national policy, how research on standards/TPA in education could be used for pedagogical improvement, and how being a reflective educator converge to create opportunities for teacher education programs and professors to examine their own practices in pursuit of social justice, anti-racism, and equity. Research into how teaching performance assessments (such as the EdTPA) can claim to be tools for change, but often points to the role of the program in contextualizing the changes that impacts the professional learning of candidates (Cochran-Smith, et. al., 2018; Peck, et. al, 2021; Sato & Abbiss, 2021). CalTPA leadership has consistently provided professional support to programs including virtual office hours, webinars, and in-person support trainings. These supports are invaluable, however they must lead to program-wide and personal reflections and conversations to explore how the assessment aligns with program missions and goals. To this end, the research questions we are currently exploring are:

- In what ways do we see the CalTPA providing a “common language” for discussing our programmatic practice and for critical reflection on educational policy?
- How do the conceptualizations of focus students in cycle one foster the shift from deficit to asset-based perceptions of students?

Note: The critiques present in this article are created from ongoing discussions around the CalTPA, however we want to recognize the constraints faced by the developers due to the need for TPE language being used as a foundation of the assessment. The TPE language is derived from state and national social conventions (such as “English Learner” to represent plurilingual students “who have been designated by the system” as ELs) grounded in a system of supremacy

and patriarchy. It is in the spirit of engaging in common language, while exploring the systemic issues of race, ethnicity, ableism, gender, and class entrenched in this language, that we present this article. This article is intended to connect the surfacing themes from our conversations with voices from critically important research. At the end of the article, we will be sharing the structures and questions we will be using in our upcoming self-study work.

The data presented in this article centers on the first cycle of a two-cycle CalTPA. In the first cycle, teacher candidates select three “focus students” who will function as “bellweather” students for exploring, developing, and reflecting on evidence to support student-centered practices. The first two focus students provide candidates opportunities to learn about, design for, and reflect upon their practices in teaching multilingual learners and students with dis/abilities or “gifted” designations. The third student is described as a student whose “life experience(s) either inside or outside of school that may result in a need for additional academic and/or emotional support.”

Conversation Point 1: Common Language and Confronting Race in Language Acquisition and Disability

Within the US Department of Education, there is an office with “English Language Acquisition” in the title. In federal, state, and local conversations around bi(multi)lingualism, the common parlance tends to be centering English as the goal language for academic success. As Flores and Rosa (2019) call attention to, this framing fosters extremely deficit thinking about multilingual students of color. Both the TPEs and the CalTPA promote asset-based approaches to connecting with and teaching students, however the persistent use of “English Language Learner” as a student descriptor could directly confront this asset-based approach. One of us teaches a course in building learning communities, and was inspired by our collaborative conversations to create an activity in which teacher candidates read Flores and Rosa’s (2019) article, then have a rich discussion about how we might shift our own thinking and practice by utilizing alternate terms such as “multilingual,” “plurilingual,” or “designated as” when thinking about, planning for, and discussing our “English Language Learners.”

Our conversations have also centered on the opportunities present in CalTPA cycle one's "getting to know your students" activities. The first "focus student" assessment candidate "get to know" is an identified "English Learner." Research illustrates the power of teachers approaching their work with "EL" students with an asset-based lens (Umansky, Poza, & Flores Gutierrez, 2021) and of valuing students' bilingualism instead of focusing on English as the center (Umansky & Dumont, 2021). Our conversations have also delved into the subtle presence of hierarchical language valuing such as how Spanish and Japanese first-language speakers are viewed and valued (Umansky, Poza, & Fores Gutierrez, 2021), and how to guide our candidates to be aware of and act to counter this paradigmatic bias (Brookfield, 2017).

Our conversations around focus student 2, a student with an individual educational plan (IEP), 504 plan, or identified as gifted and talented (GATE) delved into causal assumptions about teacher perceptions of disability, race, and the intersections thereof with a focus on how perceptions would likely shape instructional practice. We discussed over-referral and under-support for students identified with learning disabilities and how race/ethnicity and language compounds these practices (Cooc, 2017; Morgan, 2020). We found common ground in our prescriptive assumptions when discussing the roles of race, gender, and language in who is identified as GATE and who is not. We discovered commonalities in how the paradigmatic assumptions underpinning access to IEP/504 plan information for teacher candidates with the realities of district and school policies limiting access for student safety and privacy.

Conversation Point 2: "At-Risk Student" and "Student Placed at Risk"

The selection of the third focus student (FS3) is less straightforward and provided us with a rich opportunity to unpack deficit-centered descriptions of FS3 as influenced by the TPEs. Our conversation led us to refining the description in the CalTPA from a list of potential qualities to realizing that FS3 is a student who is Placed at Risk by macro, meso, and micro contextual factors (see table 1 below).

Table 1

Examples of Factors of Students Placed at Risk

	Examples of factors placing TK-12 students at risk	
Macro (society writ large, national level)	White supremacy Ableism Religious Persecution Capitalism	Sexism Nationalism Homophobia Immigration
Meso (local and school community)	Homelessness Community Conflicts Bullying/being a bully	School Policies Lack of Representation Community Marginalization
Micro	Hunger Neglect	Abuse Exclusion

We discussed the importance of helping teacher candidates see beyond the situation to the person. To encourage connecting with students in order to not only connect them with services but to create a classroom community that is a truly safe environment socially, emotionally, physically and academically. We discussed how persistent deficit framing at the systemic level of education and society results in the continued lack of academic, social, and emotional support for students who have been placed at risk by life circumstances and a culture of white supremacy.

Studies of the effects of teacher perceptions and actions of students' life situations often reflect a disconnect. Teachers are often unaware of the needs for security, stable relationships, understanding and support for trauma that foster and homeless students experience, and often perceive these students as less self-confident and engaged (LaCour, et.al., 2016; Lafavor, et. al., 2020; McGlawn & LaCour, 2018). Auwater et. al describe how teacher perceptions of socio- economic status, gender and race intersect and result in lowered expectations for boys who come from low SES backgrounds, when compared to girls and boys

from higher SES backgrounds. There is a need to acknowledge how these paradigmatic assumptions result in potentially damaging actions when they influence causal assumptions.

Similarly, there is a dire need to foster the confronting of paradigmatic and causal assumptions candidates have around sexual minority students. Unsupportive educators in this area pose risks to motivation, clinical depression and suicidal thoughts (Simons & Russell, 2021). We discussed the need to take action in developing teacher candidates who see intersections and the whole student, and who act to support students. Swanson and Gettinger (2016) describe research results that indicate that knowledge of legal and ethical supports for LGBTQIA+ students isn't enough, that there needs to be additional supports in the form of Gay Straight Alliances (GSA) and action-oriented professional development to result in actively supportive school climates. Cycle 1 of the CalTPA requires teacher candidates to create "positive and safe learning environments." To this end, we began to consider how student-teaching placements might benefit by looking for schools that have GSAs, in-service teachers who are committed to acting in support and protection of students "placed at risk" by life experiences, and that foster confronting assumptions when considering practice.

As we move forward in our own programs we are more extensively exploring the ways in which we can join our candidates in learning to cultivate genius and joy (Muhammad, 2020). Each of our programs has a goal of recruiting, supporting, and developing black, indigenous, people of color as future educators. Our conversations focus on how this goal is an urgent need (Redding, 2019) and how we interrogate our own assumptions to be able to foster the brilliance of our teacher candidates as they become educators.

Implications and Recommendations

As we have come together to discuss our findings, we have all grown as teacher educators. The opportunity to work across universities has led to us realizing that while we have a "common language" in the CalTPA and the TPEs, how each program operationalizes and interprets that language can vary widely. Our willingness as both a program and as individual teacher educators to be self-critical and to confront the assumptions we make about our educational system and students are essential to seeing the CalTPA as an opportunity to engage

in anti-racist conversations. When we “push back” on almost invisible cultural norms, we are able to see ourselves and our students as agents of change. When we seek opportunities for collaborative dialogue, we can continue to wrestle with daunting challenges facing programs that value anti-racist, socially just, and abolitionist (Love, 2019) teaching and learning. We may find ourselves pushing against the foundational principles of our programs, such as social emotional learning (SEL) and ask how to make these foundational principles inclusive, anti-racist, and empowering rather than a perpetuation of white norms and values. These conversations are critical in order for us to rethink not only the theory, but our candidates' resulting actions and experiences in confronting systemic racism in their future teaching. How are we equipping our candidates to push against, for instance, SEL programs in districts that are more “white supremacy with a hug” (Simmons, 2019) and to create spaces in which SEL is culturally sustaining (Alim & Paris, 2017; Simmons, 2021).

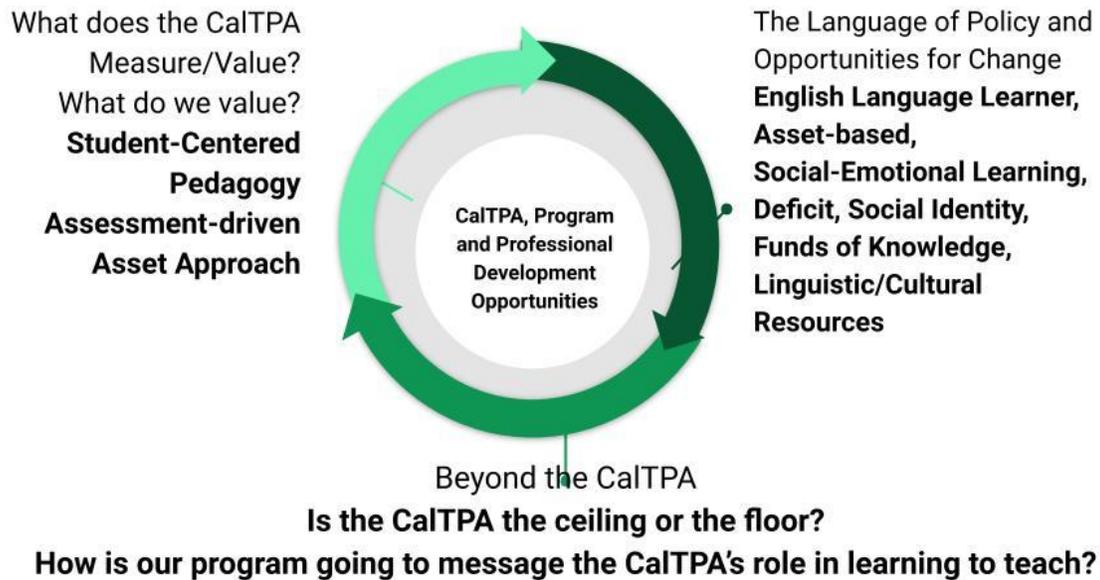
To these ends, we share the following framework and practices we have found useful in our collaborative dialogues:

- Be purposeful in inviting all voices, and specifically the voices of those who have been historically silenced, to the table and ensure that they are heard as you define the terms and concepts in the TPE/TPAs.
- Recognize the tension of utilizing a state- or nationally-generated common language while operationalizing and defining language and how you/your program will critically confront and determine how to use common language.
- Using Brookfield’s (2017) framework of assumptions and how they interact with being a reflective educator was a helpful lens for unpacking “implicit bias” and internalized racism/sexism/ableism/etc. present in the ways we currently interpret and use common language in the CalTPA and TPEs.

We also designed this framework for planning program dialogues:

Figure 1

CalTPA, Program, Professional Development Opportunities Framework



Once your collaborative group or program has determined the broad overarching questions represented in figure 1, you can utilize the CRT-focused reflection questions our collaborative is currently exploring, found in table 2.

Table 2

Solorzano's Five Themes of CRT with Questions

Solorzano's (1997) five themes of CRT we used as critical inspiration for our interrogation and reflection on practice and program were operationalized as follows:

Theme	Question
Recognizing the centrality and	How are the (micro) practices we utilize in supporting candidate progress towards the TPA (macro) centering or othering race, language, ability, class, and gender?

<p>intersectionality of race and racism.</p>	
<p>Challenging dominant ideology</p>	<p>How are we confronting, challenging, and countering institutional and individual conscious and unconscious forms of intersectional racism? How are we utilizing the TPA as a springboard or structure to challenge deficit-driven, white supremacist practices and (internalized) beliefs?</p>
<p>Actualizing the commitment to social justice</p>	<p>In what ways do we continuously circle back to our commitment to social justice? In what ways are we making this concept a reality for our teacher candidates?</p>
<p>Centering experiential knowledge</p>	<p>How are we listening to and centering our teacher candidates' experiences, especially those that might reinforce or counter institutional and individual beliefs and practices that perpetuate racism, ableism, classism, and sexism? How are we supporting them in developing agency to confront and transgress for social justice?</p>
<p>Maintaining an interdisciplinary perspective</p>	<p>How are we keeping historical and contemporary perspectives in mind as we cross boundaries by using interdisciplinary and nuanced perspectives in iterative cycles of reflection and practice?</p>

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