The Teacher Performance Assessment and Student Voice:

Challenge for Teacher Education, Opportunity for Teaching

The Teacher Performance Assessment is a mandated assessment required for teaching certification in Washington State. The TPA is still in the pilot phase in Washington and about 25 other states that have aligned themselves to varying degrees with using TPA scores as part of the licensure process for pre-service teacher education. Unique to the TPA in Washington is the “student voice” element, which challenges teacher candidates to engage learners in “on-going reflective self-assessment… as important evidence… of student understanding of his/her own learning process and progress toward the learning target(s)” (Stanford Center, 2013, p. 50).

After working as an instructor teaching four cohorts of teacher candidates in a course designed to support completing the TPA, I have come to recognize both the challenge of and the significant potential benefit from injecting the student voice perspective into the process of learning to teach. In this article, I explain the student voice expectations built into the TPA, briefly describe the context of TPA support provided in our program, explore the implications for learning to teach infused with a student voice perspective, and identify some particular challenges for teacher candidates and teacher educators in meeting the student voice expectations of the TPA. I argue that the student voice perspective in learning to teach has a potential transformative impact on teacher candidates, yet the level of expected performance on this dimension of the TPA is both unrealistic and unfair to candidates given the context and time frame of a student teaching placement in someone else’s classroom.
Student Voice Expectations in the TPA

The common structure of the TPA, across grade levels and subject matter specialties, involves teacher candidates in planning, teaching, assessing, and analyzing a “learning segment,” or mini-unit of 3-5 hours of connected instruction for a consistent group of students. Candidates submit artifacts, including lesson plans, teaching materials, student work samples and self-reflections, and video clips of instruction, as well as three commentaries in which they address specific prompts related to Planning for Teaching and Assessment, Instruction and Engaging Students in Learning, and Assessing Student Learning. The kinds of evidence they might include to document student voice include:

- Evidence that students know the learning targets and what is required to meet them
- Video clips / student self-reflections in which students explain the learning target(s) in their own words, express why they are important, and describe how they will demonstrate that they have achieved them; describe their own progress toward the learning target(s) and explain what they are doing well, what they need to improve, and what they will need to do to make the identified improvements; identify resources needed to close any gap between present performance and the learning target(s)
- Evidence that students know how to monitor their own progress toward the learning target(s) using tools (checklists, rubrics, etc.) (Stanford Center, 2013, p. 50)

Teacher candidates have two general options in presenting student voice evidence. They may identify it in one or more video clips of teaching and/or they may identify it in student work products and self-reflections. Three rubrics are used in evaluating student voice evidence and the analysis of it presented in commentaries, which have the following headings:

- Rubric 16: Eliciting Student Understanding of Learning Targets
• Rubric 17: Supporting Student Use of Resources to Learn and Monitor Their Own Progress

• Rubric 18: Reflecting on Student-Voice Evidence to Improve Instruction (Stanford Center, 2013, p. 36-38)

Candidates’ opportunity to both learn about and enact the student voice expectations of the TPA are heavily dependent upon the context of their teacher education experience and the steps their program chooses to take in scaffolding their development with respect to ideas and practices associated with student voice.

The Context of TPA Support in Our TE Program

The Western Washington University teacher education program that I work in prepares candidates for elementary teacher certification and features a three-quarter-long internship at the end of the program. During quarter one, interns are in a classroom two half days per week while continuing to take certification course work. During quarter two, they are in the same classroom two full days per week, also taking course work. In quarter three, they are in the same classroom full time. They may begin the internship in any quarter. We have created a sequence of course work designed to match the expanding classroom experience across the first two quarters, and to scaffold the TPA process. During quarter one, interns have a general methods course in which they use the Understanding by Design framework (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) to develop and teach a mini-unit similar to that in the TPA, although in any subject area, and respond to a number of prompts drawn from the TPA tasks. They are also engaged with ideas about academic language and student voice through this mini-unit assignment.

We have chosen to situate the TPA during quarter two, when interns have a course focused upon supporting the preparation of the TPA, and a math practicum course. Because of
the latter, we have chosen to have all candidates complete the Elementary Mathematics TPA. This course focuses on helping candidates investigate the key content, typical developmental issues, and misconceptions associated with their chosen TPA content topic. Having these simultaneous TPA support courses as candidates are completing their TPAs is regarded as extremely helpful by our candidates, most of whom now describe the actual TPA event as challenging but ultimately familiar.

**Student Voice and Implications for Learning to Teach**

At its heart, student voice is about fostering metacognitive awareness in learners about their own experiences with learning. Expecting students to be aware of learning targets and take responsibility for working toward them, recognize resources for helping them, self-assess progress, and generally share with the teacher a sense of the value and importance of learning, involves a considerable degree of “self-regulation” (Moss & Brookhart, 2012, p. 59) on the part of the learner. Such an aim is also fundamentally related to the learning culture in a classroom. Students need to be inducted into such a perspective to challenge the more prevailing culture in classrooms where students tend to assume that learning is regulated by their teacher. If they can come to recognize and assume their own responsibility for learning, and adjust their participation accordingly, the potential impact on their future learning is powerful. “Self-regulation fuses skill and will and develops as students learn to plan, control, and evaluate their own success within a specific context” (Moss & Brookhart, 2012, p. 59).

Fostering self-regulation involves a sophisticated effort by the teacher toward supporting identity development for learners, through the use of “choice words,” as Johnston (2004) has argued. By “noticing and naming” the skillful and effective actions taken by learners, teachers can give feedback to “help children build the bridges between action and consequences that
develop their sense of agency. They show children that by acting strategically, they can accomplish things, and at the same time, that they are the kind of person who accomplishes things” (Johnston, 2004, p. 30). Johnston (2012) explores how this kind of effort on the part of the teacher helps learners develop a mindset that recognizes the dynamic nature of learning, and how learners can develop an identity around the kinds of strategic learning efforts associated with self-regulation. He asserts:

The strongest thread in the warp of the dynamic learning fabric is attention to processes: observations of the form “You did this so this happened.” “Look how you figured that out together. You made a plan, you listened to each other, you made a diagram… I don’t think you would have figured it out without doing that.” (Johnston, 2012, pg. 31)

Fostering dynamic learning experiences in which students are assisted in recognizing the kinds of resources and strategic efforts they have made use of, and in developing self-regulating mindsets, happens in one-on-one interactions between teacher and learner, but it also requires a culture of thinking (Ritchhart, Church, & Morrison, 2011) in the classroom, whereby all students become accustomed to working strategically at problem-solving and collective thinking about learning and themselves as learners.

Working collectively and publicly on learning targets, as encouraged by the TPA, moves teacher candidates toward tapping into these larger and more significant underpinnings of student voice. Moss & Brookhart (2012) describe how teachers can use learning targets to “feed learning forward” (p. 61) using a “formative learning cycle” (p. 69) featuring five phases:

- Phase 1: Model and Explain
- Phase 2: Scaffold Learning, Goal-Setting, and Self-Assessment Through Guided Practice
- Phase 3: Engage Students in a Performance of Understanding
• Phase 4: Provide Formative Feedback
• Phase 5: Give Students the Opportunity to Use the Feedback to Improve Their Performance

Moss and Brookhart (2012) argue that this kind of instructional process develops “assessment-capable students” (p. 79). This emphasis on engaging students as partners in learning through the public investigation and pursuit of learning targets, and through providing high-quality feedback and fostering student self-assessment echoes the student voice or metacognitive demands of the TPA, and underscores the level of expertise and nuanced practice demanded of candidates to be highly successful on the TPA. In a recent course session for interns in their first quarter of the internship, my students shared their challenges with engaging their students in honest self-assessment in the context of classrooms where students felt they were expected to get the highest grade or score on every assignment. One intern developed an exemplary approach in which she was able to engage her students over the course of several lessons in developing a rubric for their performance in understanding how to convert improper fractions to mixed numbers and vice versa. She then had them use that rubric to self-assess their progress in the unit and the results reflected a more honest and informed assessment on students’ parts.

Yet, as noted by Black and William (1998), achieving the kind of self-regulated engagement in learning and assuming the responsibility for self-assessment in relation to learning targets called for in the TPA is a major challenge for students in typical classrooms where they are not provided with a clear statement of learning targets, intended outcomes, or goals, and where they are more accustomed to taking a passive role in their own learning.
To overcome this pattern of passive reception requires hard and sustained work. When pupils do acquire such an overview, they then become more committed and more effective as learners. Moreover, their own assessments become an object of discussion with their teachers and with one another, and this discussion further promotes the reflection on one’s own thinking that is essential to good learning. (Black and William, 1998, p. 6)

As the TPA pilot phase continues, it remains to be seen whether teacher candidates can be successful in carrying out the kind of “hard and sustained work” needed to initiate the student voice perspective about teaching and learning in the classrooms in which they are completing their TPA assessment. Pilot phase scores from candidates, reported to participating teacher education programs, suggest the student voice scores were well below expectations. Statewide scores among the 1,767 candidates whose scores were reported during Winter-Spring 2012 by the Washington State Professional Educator Standards Board averaged 2.5, 2.6, and 2.7 out of a possible five points for the three student voice rubrics. These were the lowest figures among average scores for all TPA rubric areas in Washington State. If these kinds of performance results are to be improved in the future, candidates and their teacher education programs will need to do a better job of understanding and enacting ideas associated with student voice.

**Challenges for Teacher Educators and Teacher Candidates**

**in Meeting the Student Voice Expectations of the TPA**

The student voice perspective emphasized in the Washington version of the TPA has the potential to drive teacher education in powerful directions toward preparing beginning teachers capable of harnessing this metacognitive dimension of teaching and learning. It also calls attention to the need for teacher educators and teacher education programs to recognize
challenges faced by candidates to not only develop the understandings, knowledge, and skills necessary to cultivate student voice, but to implement them in other teachers’ classrooms. The particular nature of school-based teacher education experiences and the relationship between teacher educators and school contexts present a range of challenges for meeting the student voice expectations of the TPA.

**Working in Someone Else’s Classroom**

Perhaps foremost in the challenges of enacting the student voice expectations of the TPA is the fact that teacher candidates are working in the classroom of another teacher whose perspective and approach to teaching typically define the kinds of learning experiences and the opportunities for self-regulation available to students. If students have no prior experience with thinking about learning targets or with taking responsibility for considering their own progress toward them and engaging in self-assessment, it is a major challenge for a teacher candidate to initiate such a process in the course of a relatively small period of time in a position of limited authority in that classroom. On the other hand, if a candidate is placed in a classroom where the kinds of student voice activities described here are typical features of daily life, the candidate has a tremendous advantage. However, few, if any, teacher education programs are able to ensure this kind of advantage to all candidates, given the typical variety of placements, and the relatively recent emphasis on student voice aspects of teaching.

We have attempted to address this disparity by engaging our interns in introducing aspects of student voice in their classrooms as they design and teach a unit in the quarter before their TPA work. There may also be advantages to be drawn from the emerging Washington State Teacher/Principal Evaluation Project that begins to move experienced teachers toward aspects of student voice. In our program we are beginning a collaboration with one elementary school that
involves, among other things, joint consideration of the student voice aspects of the TPA and the TPEP.

**Developmental Issues for Supporting Student Voice at Different Age Levels**

The current framework of expectations for the TPA, as outlined in handbooks for elementary candidates, in particular, places a considerable extra burden on those who are placed in primary classrooms where students’ metacognitive thinking and writing abilities pose extra challenges in collecting evidence of student voice. This is further exacerbated if a candidate is placed, for example, in a kindergarten classroom during the fall period of the year when many students are just becoming comfortable with coming to school and understanding what it entails, let alone engaging in thinking about learning targets. In primary settings, candidates are likely to have to rely upon capturing video or audio recordings of students’ thinking, yet engaging young children in conversations about thinking and learning is developmentally challenging even for experienced teachers, let alone novices. Teacher candidates placed in primary grades within our program have been working hard to integrate visual models, physical movements, and inquiry-oriented conversation to engage their young learners in thinking about their own learning. While this provides excellent experience for teacher candidates in these settings, it requires additional time and strategic planning. The TPA scoring rubrics do not distinguish among these grade level differences.

**Addressing the Specific Demands of the Student Voice Rubrics**

In addition to anticipating the depth and sophistication of the student voice perspective during the design of their TPA units, candidates must also contend with a challenging array of particular expectations for producing student voice evidence. These are laid out in the three student voice rubrics.
Rubric 16: Eliciting student understanding of learning targets. Here, the range of scores is based upon the degree to which candidates both communicate the nature of the learning targets and involve students across the whole learning process from beginning to end in understanding what they mean and why they are important. To demonstrate this capacity, candidates need to both anticipate how they will do this in the Planning Commentary and point to evidence, in either video clips or student work samples and/or self-assessments, that they did so.

In order to meet the level three score on this rubric, which has been described tentatively as the targeted passing score, my students have found that they must introduce a whole routine into their classrooms around attending publicly to learning targets and taking time to refer back to them during and after teaching. They have experimented with various graphic models for learning targets, including the typical archery target as well as other goal graphics such as a soccer goal image, depending upon particular interests of students in their classrooms. Engaging students in re-visiting learning targets over the course of a series of lessons and prompting them to revise and strengthen their understanding by drawing upon academic language introduced in the unit has also helped to improve student performance in this area. Yet, if a candidate is introducing this whole idea of learning targets to a classroom, rather than simply engaging a familiar practice, it takes extended and systematic effort to achieve the kinds of results expected on the TPA.

Rubric 17: Supporting student use of resources to learn and monitor their own progress. Scores for this rubric are distinguished by the degree to which the candidate involves students in creating tools or strategies to help them with assessing their own progress toward the learning targets, and with identifying specific, individualized human and material resources to
support them in this process. Candidates must write about how they expect to support students in these ways in the Planning Commentary, and they must submit one or more examples of tools or describe strategies in the Assessment Commentary. They might also capture video of themselves working with students to create tools or strategies for monitoring their progress, but they are limited to a total of 15 minutes of video for addressing this as well as other aspects of their interactions with students.

My candidates have experimented with creating various kinds of tools and strategies to support students’ learning. For example, one candidate, in carrying out a unit on using place value language in carrying out the algorithm for multi-digit addition, created an annotated chart showing the process, a series of sentence frames with missing place value terminology for explaining the process, and an accompanying academic language word bank from which students were to locate appropriate terms for completing the sentence frames to explain their thinking.

**Rubric 18: Reflecting on student-voice evidence to improve instruction.** Here the score range is based upon the degree to which the candidate collects and reflects on both student reflections and student work to identify particular next steps for one or more students. Evidence for this is primarily presented in the Assessment Commentary and related student work samples and self-reflections.

Teacher candidates in our program have created a variety of post-lesson “exit slips,” or rubrics on which they ask students to reflect on their progress and identify appropriate next steps and resources, such as the rubric for converting improper fractions to mixed numbers described previously. Once again, for this rubric, candidates placed in primary settings are severely challenged to engage their students in self-reflection and to document such reflections.
Considering the set of student voice rubrics overall, only in one school district have our candidates experienced this kind of process to be a normal aspect of everyday teaching. In every other setting, they have been the ones to bring such a perspective to their classrooms and students. This challenge is compounded, as articulated above, when working with primary age students who are less familiar with school, less experienced with reflecting on their own learning, and less able, or unable, to use writing to record their thinking.

**What Teacher Candidates and Teacher Educators Can Do**

Teacher candidates and teacher educators can make an effort to educate cooperating teachers about the nature of the TPA and the student voice expectations in advance of the actual teaching done by the candidate for the TPA. It is often possible to get their assistance with incorporating conversations about learning targets into the classroom to help students become familiar with that process. In our program, we have the advantage of beginning this process three months before the formal TPA work by engaging in practice activities in school classrooms in the first quarter of the internship. This helps familiarize teachers, candidates, and students with student voice activities. Once candidates begin experimenting with these activities, they also generate examples that can be used as exemplars for subsequent candidates.

As noted above, in reference to meeting the demands of the student voice rubrics, the TPA is also a technical writing challenge in which candidates must attend carefully to numerous ponderously worded prompts and rubrics with a tight time frame during a period when they are under considerable other pressures associated with the normal progress of learning to teach. Candidates benefit from strategic coaching about how to anticipate and integrate the various aspects of prompts and rubrics in preparing their TPA.
In my own teaching of candidates in both their first and second quarters of our internship, I also work to emphasize the ideas outlined above regarding noticing and naming their own strategic actions and articulating the process of identity development and the growth of agency they are experiencing. As they begin to engage in practice with increasing intentionality and flexibility in their classrooms, I deliberately articulate the parallels between the process they are experiencing in their own efforts at learning to teach, and the process of learning they are fostering for students in their classrooms. In these ways, they move beyond seeing student voice expectations as yet another hurdle associated with the TPA, and come instead to appreciate the larger significance of ideas about student voice that are at the heart of good teaching.

Conclusion

The perspective on teaching and learning reflected by the student voice aspects of the TPA provides an important and worthwhile challenge to teacher candidates, teacher educators, and teacher education programs. By focusing attention on practices for engaging P-12 students as active collaborators in their own learning, the student voice perspective has the potential to transform classrooms. Research summarized by Black and William (1998) indicates that the kinds of formative assessment processes associated with student voice practices could have a profound effect on overall student achievement, as well as on the disparities in school success represented by the opportunity gap (Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee, WA, 2011).

Yet these same authors, cited in the TPA Handbook, advise that the process of achieving the kinds of changes in practice represented by the student voice perspective “will inevitably be a slow one” (Black & William, 1998, p. 11). Rather than mandate immediate changes in practice, as the TPA in effect does, they argue for a school-by-school approach in which experienced
teachers are encouraged and supported in developing new approaches to formative assessment. Teacher education programs can contribute to this effort, and work with mentor teachers in putting additional emphasis on these approaches as well. The authors also cite the importance of eliminating obstacles that stand in the way of these ideas, chief among them, the proliferation of standardized testing (Black & William, 1998, p. 11). In my experience to date in supporting about 50 teacher candidates in completing the TPA, they have experienced major challenges in simply finding time, within the ongoing tight schedules for teaching and testing of their classroom placements, for completing the teaching unit required for the TPA, let alone for changing the culture of thinking toward a collaborative investigation and pursuit of learning targets.

Because so much of the development of student voice practices on the part of teacher candidates must occur in classroom placements in schools, this initiative by its very nature requires teacher educators, teacher education programs, and schools to work together more closely in the development of the next generation of teachers. That is an excellent intention. However, at this point in time, as the pilot phase of the TPA administration continues, I believe it is incumbent upon policy makers to recognize both the transformative implications of the student voice perspective, and the unrealistic expectations for success by teacher candidates in achieving that impact on their own, at the level expected according to the TPA Student Voice rubrics, in the context and time frame of a student teaching placement in someone else’s classroom.
References


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