Pass or Fail: Recent Graduates Sound Off on the edTPA

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PASS OR FAIL: RECENT GRADUATES SOUND OFF ON THE EDTPA

Article by Darryn Diuguid and Karee Nasser

Abstract

Many states now require education students to pass the edTPA, a national performance assessment created by Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning and Equity (SCALE) and scored by Pearson Education Services, before becoming licensed to teach. One key component of the edTPA is the desire for the assessment to become an educative tool for candidates (SCALE, 2015). For this study, a survey instrument was completed by 148 new graduates to gather their perceptions of this unique assessment. Results suggest that students were able to plan instructional supports, link learners' prior learning to new learning, and provide more thorough feedback to students. Conversely, participants did not feel it helped them connect theory to practice, teach and model lessons more effectively, and identify patterns of learning in assessments.

Keywords: Teacher performance assessment, teacher preparation, edTPA, educative tool

Introduction

The edTPA, a national performance assessment created by Stanford University and scored by Pearson, was first piloted in 2013 and eventually adopted for use in 40 states by 2018 (edTPA, n.d). It is a rigorous and high-stakes assessment which requires student teachers to plan, instruct, and analyze student learning in a 3-5 lesson learning segment. According to the Illinois State Board of Education, which implemented the assessment early in the process in 2014 and made it consequential in 2015, competencies that must be included in the portfolio are "video recordings of the student teacher interacting with students, lesson plans, student work samples, analysis of student learning, planning and assessment documentation, and reflective commentaries" (Illinois State Board of Education, 2016, para. 2). Preservice teachers tend to think of the edTPA as another hoop to jump through on their path to licensure; therefore, this research investigated the intended benefits of the edTPA beyond teacher candidate preparation and the student teaching experience.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to survey recent graduates who have completed the edTPA in order to identify their perspectives on the benefits and drawbacks it has on professional teaching. The researchers have been working with the edTPA since its inception in the university teacher education program and were curious about student teachers' perspectives. The following overarching questions helped guide the research project: how does the edTPA help prepare educators in the area of planning, how does the edTPA help prepare educators in the area of instruction, and how does the edTPA help prepare educators in the area of assessment.

The Design of the edTPA

The edTPA is a performance assessment used to analyze teacher readiness of individuals during their student teaching semester. The assessment includes performance tasks within the clinical experience with academic language and reflection components with the three primary tasks being planning, instruction and assessment of student learning. These tasks put emphasis on "(1) drawing from students' prior knowledge and experience as instructional assets; (2) representing the subject matter in ways that meet diverse students' needs; (3) analyzing classroom interactions and student work; and (4) using the results of those analyses to inform ongoing practice" (Meuwissen & Choppin, 2015, p. 6).

In the majority of edTPA content areas, the three tasks (planning, instruction, and assessment) are assessed using 15 rubrics or 5 rubrics per task on a scale of 1-5. Scoring a 1 indicates the teacher candidate is considered a new teacher who lacks the sufficient skills in that area while a 5 is thought of as a highly skilled new teacher (Parkes & Powell, 2015).

Task 1 focuses on the planning component of the learning segment which is where student teachers create three to five lessons depending on the length of their learning segment. Additional materials submitted as evidence include a Context for Student Learning, instructional materials, and an assessment plan. These materials are used to score the five rubrics that assess: (1) planning for content-specific understandings, (2) planning to support varied student learning need, (3) using knowledge of students to inform teaching and learning, (4) supporting academic language development, and (5) planning assessments to monitor and support student learning (SCALE, 2017).

The focus of Task 2 is to analyze instruction, and most candidates submit two ten minute videos with their explanations recorded in the written commentary. The candidate's materials are scored using the next five rubrics that assess: (6) learning environments, (7) engaging students in learning, (8) deepening student learning, (9) subject specific pedagogy, and (10) analyzing teaching effectiveness (SCALE, 2017).

Finally, Task 3 is used to measure the candidates' ability to assess and analyze student learning. For example, student teachers collect work samples from three focus students, provide feedback to each of the students based on the lesson objective, and explain the next steps for instruction. The final five rubrics aligned to Task 3 assess: (11) analyzing

student learning, (12) providing feedback to guide learning, (13) student use of feedback, (14) analyzing students' academic language understanding and use, and (15) use of assessment to inform instruction (SCALE, 2017).

Positive Aspects of the edTPA

With the introduction of any high-stakes assessment, there are many opportunities to look at both the benefits and drawbacks. Currently, only a few articles discuss in detail the perceived advantages of the edTPA. An essay by Adkins (2016) listed a variety of advantages such as the final score reports which provide candidates with their strengths and areas for improvement, and this assists them in creating a professional development agenda. Additionally, the assessment helps university programs by aligning with teacher evaluation procedures and provides times for collegial communication and collaboration. Adkins added that although the edTPA is expensive for a teacher candidate at $300, the feedback is more valuable than traditional teacher licensure exams which were previously in use.

Butler (2015) described the perceived benefits of the edTPA in three areas: (1) accountability to students, (2) analysis of teaching performance, and (3) relating theory to practice. Butler acknowledged that the edTPA's requirements of knowing your students and identifying their individual strengths and weaknesses helped improve teaching effectiveness. The ability to deeply reflect on one's instruction was another benefit identified by Butler as he became aware of how to analyze his teaching practices through these methods. Relating educational theory to practice was a final benefit observed by Butler as he explained that it was beneficial to use strategies he learned in the education program, and then reflect on its use while writing in response to the commentary prompts. Butler concluded his essay by stating that the assessment was challenging, but that he appreciated hands-on concept of it while gaining a greater respect for the profession.

One study that did identify positive aspects directly from students was conducted by Heil and Berg (2017). The researchers performed case studies with seven music education majors, and results indicated that participants liked the 3-task structure of the edTPA. One student commented, "I love how it taught me to look at my language and anticipate how my words will be… (mis)understood" (p. 187). Overall, however, the majority of positive comments related to the support students received from their institution and were not related directly to the assessment. Additionally, the researchers noted that the small size of participants leads to an inability to generalize the results to a larger population

Criticism of the edTPA

Recent years have been challenging times for educators with the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, addition of the PARCC tests, and the requirement of the edTPA in many states. In many teacher preparation programs, student teachers are already challenged with a 16-week intense senior capstone course including the typical

four-week intensive portion. In addition, these preservice teachers have to meet the requirements of their teacher education program such as observations, reflections, and portfolio documents. Now, the edTPA has arrived at a time of increased pressure on state programs and the teaching profession in general.

Au (2013) outlined some of the initial concerns of the edTPA early in the implementation. Au explained that the edTPA would have a significant influence on the work of teacher education programs. Additionally, the cost of the assessment along with the workload could contribute negatively to teacher preparation. "The edTPA will cost our credential students an additional $300-$350, a price set by Pearson. Cooperating teachers are resisting taking student teachers specifically because the edTPA feels too intrusive and is driving the student teaching experience" (p. 24). Au also listed concerns regarding the involvement of a large corporation like Pearson. Because of issues with development, scoring and logistics, Au expressed concerns with using private businesses to administer such an assessment.

Parkes and Powell (2015) explained much of the criticism that has been shared by many. The authors are concerned about the scoring methods that Pearson has implemented with the edTPA, such as disproportionate ratio of scorers, solicitation methods of scorers, and possible scorer fatigue. In the initial stages of the assessment, each scorer was required to score at least 18 portfolios, and the authors questioned whether the numbers were too high since many scorers have full-time employment duties in higher education and in the K-12 setting. Some of the first scorer demographics showed that 50% were teacher preparation faculty and 50% were K-12 educators, and concerns grew whether the same types of scorers would continue scoring it. To reach new scorers, Pearson adopted the unusual method of placing robot type calls to prospective scorers. Scoring fatigue also seemed to be a concern by Parkes and Powell "if scoring is a task the scorers conduct in addition to their regular employment, fatigue and diminishing focus may impact their consistency despite back-scoring and calibration exercises by Pearson" (p. 105).

Rethinking Schools, a nonprofit national organization dedicated to changing education for the better, have also been critics of the edTPA. In "Wrong Answer to the Wrong Question: Why we need critical teacher education, not standardization," Rethinking Schools authors Madeloni and Gorlewski (2013) were concerned that the edTPA implementation has taken time away from more pressing issues such as creating critical multicultural educators and advocating for social justice. Another criticism is that the assessment defines good teaching as what is included in the learning segment and not what should be included: deep conversations with students, dramatic activities in the classroom, debates about going to war, and building relationships with students. This assessment also takes time away from discussing good teaching; unfortunately, in student teaching seminars around the country, conversations in the seminars have been reduced to unpacking rubrics and what kinds of evidence is appropriate in specific tasks. Finally, the researchers were critical of Pearson and their involvement in teacher education: "edTPA is a welcome mat for Pearson Inc. to enter teacher education, reap

huge profits, exploit the privacy of students and teacher candidates, and outsource teacher educators' labor" (para. 15).

Greenblatt (2016) continued to explain how the edTPA could be a deterrent to future students entering the teaching profession. The researcher wrote about the stress levels of student teachers during the beginning years of the high stakes assessment: "10 of my 14 student teachers were reduced to tears because of the pressure they felt to pass the edTPA while keeping up with their other personal and academic responsibilities" (p. 52). Other issues facing student teachers were that it was too time consuming and the assessment lost its authenticity when the "teaching portfolio became a vast collection of lesson plans, videos, assessments, and student work sample. Finally, many researchers are saying it will have a detrimental impact on the diversity in the teacher workforce due to the "test's language and writing demands" (pg. 53). This cumbersome language will force out non-native English speakers from the teacher profession.

Survey research conducted by Paine, Beal-Alvarez, and Scheetz (2016) had similar findings. Teacher candidates who had completed the edTPA responded that while they viewed Task 1 as the easiest part of the assessment, they were most challenged by the amount of time it took to write responses in the commentaries, fully understanding what the prompts were asking, and how to put all materials together for submission.

While limited research has been conducted on the topic, the relative newness of the assessment leads to a need for additional studies (Evans et al., 2016; Russell & Davidson Devall, 2016). This study seeks to add to the literature in the area of perceived benefits and drawbacks of the edTPA.

Research Design and Methods

The purpose of this study was to measure recent graduates' perceptions of whether the edTPA is an educative tool. In order to address the overarching guiding questions, the researchers created a survey that included seventeen questions on a Likert Scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). These first 17 questions were aligned to the 15 rubrics of the edTPA. Questions 1-6 were aligned to the Task 1 rubrics. Questions 7-13 were aligned to the rubrics in Task 2. Finally, survey questions 14-17 were aligned to Task 3. A specific question regarding academic language was not asked in the final section of questions because survey question #5 already addressed this area. In addition, an open-ended question was used to gain further perspectives from educators regarding their thoughts on the edTPA's impact on planning, instruction, and assessment in the "real-world" classroom setting. Finally, the last seven questions of the survey collected participants' demographic information.

Convenience sampling was the ideal method for disseminating the instrument as the surveys were distributed in two ways: via a Survey Monkey link sent to recent graduates via social media and through a link shared with teacher candidates at the conclusion of their student teaching experience. A total of 148 surveys were completed which provided an adequate number of responses for a descriptive study.

The participants in this research study were student teachers who completed the edTPA within the past four years. All of the participants received an initial teacher license to teach at the elementary, middle or secondary areas including those seeking licensure in the areas of special education, music, and physical education Their content areas ranged from elementary literacy to students enrolled in the secondary science licensure program. Given the sampling technique, the participants could have come from all edTPA content areas.

The researchers chose standard survey demographics to best explain the participants (see Table 1). The largest group in the sample population were newly hired teachers (44.9%) with graduates (42.2%) making up the second largest group. New graduates were defined as students who have recently completed the assessment for licensure but have yet to find employment. Females made up 80.7% of the participants while males were 19.3%. Two individuals identified as gender neutral. Initial teacher licensure programs have both undergraduate and graduate students in their programs. Participants with a bachelor's degree made up 77.9% of the responses while 21.4% were graduate students. One student was at the Master's plus 30 hours designation. The youngest age group of 18-24 represented 63.3% of the participants while 36.7% were above age 24.

- **Table 1 - See attachment**

Findings

Preparing educators in the area of planning

This overarching question was analyzed using the first six items on the survey instrument. As discussed above, these first six items were linked to edTPA Task 1: Planning. These items were assessed on a Likert scale and descriptive statistics were utilized to analyze educators' perceptions of the impact the edTPA has on planning. Any score over a 3.0 represents general agreement with the item, while a score under a 3.0 demonstrates a level of disagreement. Additionally, an open-ended question was asked so educators could share comments on the impact the edTPA has had on their planning. Results for questions 1-6 which are aligned to Task 1: Planning are presented in Table 2.

- **Table 2 - See attachment**

In the area of planning, the results indicated that overall, practicing educators and recent graduates believe the edTPA has had a somewhat positive impact. Participants responded most positively to the its influence on planning instructional supports based on students' academic needs. Participants were least agreeable to it helping with understanding the importance of connecting teaching to theory. The results of this survey show that teachers found Task 1: Planning to be a helpful tool in preparing educators for the classroom experience.

Conversely, while the survey items present general agreement with the benefits of the edTPA in the area of planning, the open-ended questions often presented fewer positive themes. The primary theme that emerged was that the edTPA causes stress and takes valuable time away from practical planning. Individuals expressed concerns that the parameters of the edTPA took away from the practical side of planning. For example, individuals did not find a benefit in trying to squeeze a full lesson plan into the 4-page requirement. One participant stated, "The edTPA is a giant distraction from student teaching which is a much more valuable experience. It takes away from the time you spend doing the everyday lesson plans of the classroom. It doesn't promote any good qualities and makes the teaching experience tedious. You spend more time focused on crafting long drawn out fluff responses than you do focusing on the more important aspects, actually teaching the students." Another respondent added, "It was a big hoop to jump through, that I actually felt like it took away from the student teaching experience because rather than using my time to plan and implement really cool things in the classroom, I spent endless hours trying to figure out exactly what Pearson wanted me to say on each EdTPA prompt." One other participant discussed the way the edTPA impacted her confidence with planning. "I feel like the edTPA made me more unsure of my teaching ability. I started to overanalyze each lesson and second guess myself in a negative way." Finally, one individual summed it up by saying, "I thought that five intensive lesson plans while student teaching on top of a super intensive test such as the edTPA were horrible for student teaching. Honestly, I was horribly stressed out and completely miserable that entire semester and barely got to enjoy learning and teaching."

Some positive themes did emerge related to Task 1 that had to do with planning. According to one participant, "It (the edTPA) helped me to think of material as a part of the bigger picture. I had to think through the entirety of the learning segment how to make it all build off of each other." Another respondent added, "It made me think more about what and why I am doing a learning task. It has helped me align my objectives and my learning task to continue to help my students learn." Finally, a third individual stated, "The only part of the edTPA that has stuck with me in a positive manner is the idea of tying practice to theory and research." These positive themes and the descriptive results from the survey demonstrate that educators have found some components of Task 1 to be beneficial to their careers as educators.

Preparing educators in the area of instruction

Overarching question number #2 sought to answer how does the edTPA help prepare educators in the area of instruction. The next seven questions on the survey instrument were aligned to the rubrics in Task 2: Instruction. Table 3 provides the descriptive results of these questions. Compared to the results in Task 1, Task 2: Instruction scored lower overall. Results showed general disagreement that the edTPA improved educators' instruction with engaging classroom activities. Additionally, participants did not believe the edTPA taught the importance of demonstrating respect and rapport and it did not help educators with creating a challenging classroom environment. The item with the lowest mean score was, "I teach and model explicitly because of the edTPA."

Responses strongly showed that educators do not believe the edTPA contributes to the teaching and modeling they do in the classroom.

- **Table 3 - See attachment**

The open-ended survey question provided more specific information regarding why educators feel the edTPA is or is not beneficial in the area of instruction. One participant explained, "Having one assessment in which one person who watches your teaching for less than 20 minutes decides whether or not you are a qualified teachers is asinine. Especially since a candidate hand picks the best 20 minutes in order to show the exact thing edTPA wants to see. The one positive to edTPA was that I liked recording myself. It helped me realize that I teach to one side of the room and tend to call on one gender more than another." Another response related to Task 2 said, "The only reason I would say the edTPA made me a better teacher is because I was forced to video and watch myself teach. Writing out the analysis and plans was insanely time consuming and useless in my opinion. All of the teachers I worked with at my student teaching school couldn't believe how unrealistic everything I was required to do was."

Preparing educators in the area of assessment

The final overarching question was connected to preparing educators in the area of assessment. Survey data for Task 3 indicated that students do not find the edTPA to have a strong benefit on their teaching and the area of assessment. Four survey items were used to assess this task. (An item on academic language was omitted due to that being discussed in Task 1). The only area that demonstrated agreement was that the educators provide more thorough feedback to students due to practice with the edTPA.

- **Table 4 – See attachment**

Specific comments that provided more details on participants' thoughts on Task 3 provided mixed sentiments. One respondent said, "The edTPA did not have any impact on my love for students, my desire to engage them or my interest in making unique and meaningful assessments. However, it did help me to notice the impacts my instruction had on my students through evaluating data and providing feedback. It also helped me to be prepared for my formal evaluations as a contracted educator." One other quote expressed a similar view. "I thought that parts of the edTPA were beneficial. I believe that I make use of much better questioning techniques as well as formal and informal assessments."

Discussion

This research study explored recent graduates' perceptions of the edTPA, a new summative performance assessment which has become consequential for licensure in many states. When looking at means of the questions related to planning, students leaned slightly positive related to the statement about planning instructional supports based on students' academic needs, and slightly negative about it helping students

understand the importance of connecting teaching to theory. The "connecting my teaching to theory" statement results could be reflective of College of Education and Human Services programs' commitment to include theory connections in lesson plans. Recent graduates may feel they already have those skills in place. For the statements connected to the instruction task, participants were very positive when asked about linking learners' prior learning to new learning, and the second part of the statement (I continue to do this today), may have influenced the high mean. A key component of many lesson plans is to activate prior knowledge before beginning instruction, and that could be reflective in the results. Conversely, the "teaching and modeling explicitly because of the edTPA" mean was low; this could be because modeling strategies and skills are key factors in good teaching, and new graduates are aware of that before completing it. Finally, four statements on the survey were connected to the assessment task. Participants leaned slightly negative when asked about identifying patterns of learning based on student needs and strengths because of the edTPA. We now realize that the phrase "because of the edTPA" may have influenced the results since key coursework already requires students to find patterns of learning, and participants do not think the edTPA has caused them to do this task. Survey results were slightly positive when asked about providing more thorough feedback on assessments due to practice with the edTPA. This hints at the need for education programs to continue to have new teachers practice providing feedback to students via assessments.

Respondents were asked open ended questions connected to the edTPA, and they were more than willing to share their perceptions. This was the tricky part because the survey was often given at the end of the semester, and sometimes, a few days after students received their score reports. While more often than not, almost 100% of the students passed the assessment, some were still feeling the effects of the Student Teaching semester and the drain of it. The "edTPA is a giant distraction from student teaching" theme was apparent through many of the responses, and individuals may have needed to vent. The survey instrument became just that: a hotspot to share how intense the semester was during student teaching.

Limitations of the Study

The major limitation of this research project was the low sample size with the inability to infer the results across content areas, teacher education programs, and states. While the authors solicited survey responses from individuals at regional universities, through social media platforms and through professional teacher education groups, it still provided a relatively small number of responses.

Another limitation is that this assessment is still relatively new and, therefore, many educators who completed the survey have not experienced many years in teaching to know the potential full benefits of its impact. Because the edTPA is in its infancy and all of the participants of this study are early in their careers, it is difficult to fully gauge the impact it may have on long-term educational practices.

Conclusions

Despite some perceived negative perceptions garnered by this study, research must continue in order to develop a full understanding of the impact the edTPA has on student teachers and practicing educators. While many participants provided open-ended responses describing the undesirable components of the assessment, perceptions of some rubrics proved to be beneficial. A longitudinal study over several years may provide researchers with a better understanding of the long-term benefits and disadvantages of this performance assessment. Additionally, studies with a larger number of participants may help to validate or, even possibly, invalidate the conclusions drawn in the present study. A study conducted by Evans et al. (2016) made similar recommendations for future research such as larger sample sizes as well as collecting data over a number of years. Furthermore, additional research studies based on content sub-groups may provide more detailed information regarding the different handbooks and content areas. Because the edTPA is still a relatively new assessment, continued research must be done to gain a strong foundation for this intensive, high stakes process.

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Table 1
Teacher Demographics

		#	%
Current Role			
	Teacher	66	44.9
N=147	Paraprofessional	6	4.1
	New graduate	62	42.2
	Instructional Coach	1	.7
	Other	12	8.2
Gender			
	Male	27	19.3
N=140	Female	111	79.3
	Gender Neutral	2	1.4
Educational Level			
	Bachelor's Degree	113	77.9
N=145	Master's Degree	31	21.4
	Master's Plus 30	1	.69
Age			
	18-24	93	63.3
N=147	25-34	37	25.2
	35-44	12	8.2
	45-54	4	2.7

Note: Total sample population by respondent =148. Respondents were primarily educators with less than 3 years' experience, female, holding a bachelor's degree, and in the 18-24 age bracket.

Table 2
The Impact of the edTPA on Planning

Survey Item	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	Mean
Completing the edTPA has helped me with aligning standards and objectives.	8.1% n=12	24.3% n=36	25% n=37	36.5% n=54	6.1% n=9	3.08
The edTPA has helped me to see the importance of making connections to students' interests.	7.4% n=11	29.7% n=44	16.9% n=25	33.1% n=49	12.8% n=19	3.14
The edTPA has helped me plan instructional supports based on students' academic needs.	6.7% n=10	20.3% n=30	22.9% n=34	38.5% n=57	11.5% n=17	3.28
The edTPA has helped me understand the importance of connecting my teaching to theory.	13.5% n=20	27% n=40	18.2% n=27	32.4% n=48	8.8% n=13	2.96
My knowledge of academic language has improved because of the edTPA.	9.5% n=14	26.5% n=39	15% n=22	36.7% n=54	12.2% n=18	3.16
I now see more of a need to include formal and informal assessment techniques.	12.8% n=19	19.6% n=29	19.6% n=29	37.8% n=56	10.1% n=15	3.13

Note: 1= Strongly Disagree; 5= Strongly Agree

Table 3
The Impact of the edTPA on Instruction

Survey Item	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	Mean
The edTPA taught me the importance of demonstrating respect and rapport in the classroom.	16.9% n=25	29.1% n=43	18.2% n=27	20.3% n=30	15.5% n=23	2.89
The edTPA has helped me see the need for a challenging environment.	14.2% n=21	25.7% n=38	24.3% n=36	25% n=37	10.8% n=16	2.93
My engaging classroom activities have improved because of the edTPA.	19.1% n=28	32.7% n=48	14.3% n=21	25.9% n=38	8.2% n=12	2.71
I have improved my questioning skills including the need to build and elicit responses in the classroom.	12.8% n=19	18.2% n=27	16.2% n=24	38.5% n=57	14.2% n=21	3.23
A component of the edTPA is to link learners' prior learning to new learning, and I continue to do this today.	4.7% n=7	10.4% n=15	6.1% n=9	51.4% n=76	27.7% n=41	3.87
I teach and model explicitly because of the edTPA.	38.5% n=57	29.7% n=44	12.8% n=19	14.9% n=22	4.1% n=6	2.16
The edTPA has reinforced the need to reflect on my teaching and make changes based on research and/or theory.	14.2% n=21	23.7% n=35	19.6% n=29	33.1% n=49	9.5% n=14	3.00

Note: 1= Strongly Disagree; 5= Strongly Agree

Table 4
The Impact of the edTPA on Assessment

Survey Item	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	Mean
I identify patterns of learning based on student needs and strengths because of the edTPA.	16.9% n=25	35.1% n=52	18.9% n=28	22.9% n=34	6.1% n=9	2.66
I provide more thorough feedback on assessments due to my practice with the edTPA.	14.2% n=21	22.3% n=33	14.9% n=22	37.8% n=56	10.9% n=16	3.09
Through the edTPA assessment, I am better at giving students opportunities to use and understand feedback.	12.8% n=19	22.9% n=34	27.7% n=41	29.7% n=44	6.8% n=10	2.95
After looking at student assessments, I am able to identify the logical next steps in instruction as a result of my participation in the edTPA.	14.3% n=21	24.5% n=36	20.4% n=30	30.6% n=45	10.2% n=15	2.98

Note: 1= Strongly Disagree; 5= Strongly Agree