

**The Impact of NBPTS Participation on Teacher Practice:  
Learning from Teacher Perspectives**

*Susan M. Tracz      Jody Daughtry      Joan Henderson-Sparks*

*California State University, Fresno*

*Carole Newman  
University of Akron*

*Sarah Sienty  
Texas A & M University, Commerce*

*This study presents the results of qualitative interviews of teachers who completed the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) certification process. Teachers (N=25) were asked a series of questions about how the NBPTS process impacted their teaching. The findings revealed that the themes of reflection, assessment, and professionalization of the field emerged as areas in which teachers perceived the greatest effects.*

It is now 18 years since the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) was established, and 10 years since the first teachers were certified (See [www.nbpts.org](http://www.nbpts.org)). It was anticipated that National Board certification would be a means of assessing accomplished teaching. Research is beginning to shed light on the complex nature of the teaching as illuminated by the National Board certification process with both quantitative studies which analyze differences in student achievement and qualitative studies which examine NBPTS teacher candidates' professional development experiences.

The National Board has conducted extensive research on the reliability and validity of its certification process (Bond & Crocker, 1996; Bond & Linn, 1996; Haertel & Traub, 1996; Hattie, 1996; Jaeger, 1996). In addition, a number of studies have focussed on the effects of the NBPTS certification process. One study, the *Accomplished Teaching Validation Study* (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2000), was conducted by an independent research team at the University of North Carolina. The subjects in this study were 65 teachers who had sought certification, including 31 who achieved it. Teachers who had been certified were compared to those who had not on 13 dimensions of teaching practice thought to have the greatest impact on student learning and 2 measures of student learning. In 11 of the 13 comparisons involving dimensions of teaching, there were statistically significant differences between the two groups, favoring the Board certified

teachers. On one of the two measures of student learning, researchers found the work of students taught by Board certified teachers to be superior. On the second measure, no significant differences were found.

During the first National Board field test and before certification results were known, researchers (Tracz, et al., 1995) found that participants perceived that their teaching skills significantly improved in six areas including creating a positive learning environment, planning and designing instruction, delivering instruction to all students, demonstrating subject-matter knowledge, diagnosing and evaluating student learning, and participating as members of a learning community. In addition, qualitative data gathered from teacher interviews found an overwhelmingly positive response to the certification process. In a later study, about two thirds of the teachers reported that participating in the certification process had one or more beneficial effects on their teaching, while one third reported no changes in teaching behaviors (Tracz, Newman, Daughtry & Sienty, 2000). Another study indicated that teachers used more varied formal and informal assessments and modified instruction based on these assessments as a result of the process (Athanases, 1994; Darling-Hammond, 1999). They also reported having a better understanding of the relationship between development and learning, and their implications for planning.

This study presents the results of semi-structured, follow-up interviews of educators who completed the NBPTS certification process. The purpose of this research is to examine these teachers' perceptions of the specific impact that this process had on their teaching practice. The following questions were asked: How has going through the National Board certification process helped you to: 1. create a positive learning environment? 2. plan and design instruction? 3. deliver instruction to all students? 4. demonstrate subject-matter knowledge? 5. diagnose and evaluate student learning? 6. participate as a member of a learning community? These areas of teacher improvement were derived from the six California Standards for the Teaching Profession (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 1997; Moir & Garmston, 1992).

## **Methods**

### *Subjects*

The subjects were 25 individuals who had gone through the certification process for the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Of these 25, 22 (88%) received certification, 1 (4%) was banking points and 2 (8%) did not receive certification. The two teachers

who were not certified and not banking points had no plans for undergoing the certification process again. Nine (36%) were from California, 15 (60%) were from Ohio, and 1 (4%) was from Texas. Teachers were predominantly white ( $n = 24$ , 96%) with one teacher not indicating ethnicity. Teachers averaged 18.20 years ( $SD = 8.94$ ) in teaching with a mean of 3.08 years ( $SD = 2.73$ ) since participating in the certification process. Candidates completed the following certificate requirements: Early Childhood/ Generalist ( $n = 7$ , 28%), Middle Childhood/Generalist ( $n = 3$ , 12%), Early Childhood through Young Adulthood/Exceptional Needs Specialist ( $n = 3$ , 12%), Early Adolescence/ Generalist ( $n = 2$ , 8%), Early Adolescence/English Language Arts ( $n = 4$ , 16%), Early Adolescence through Young Adulthood/Art ( $n = 1$ , 4%), Early Adolescence through Young Adulthood/English Language Arts ( $n = 3$ , 12%), and Early Adolescence through Young Adulthood/Science ( $n = 2$ , 8%).

Participants in this study were recruited from rosters of teachers who attended one of three university support classes in three states to assist them in preparing their certification materials. Of 27 teachers whose phone numbers were current, 25 agreed to participate in the study.

#### *Procedure*

Four authors conducted semi-structured, open-ended interviews of the teachers by asking the questions given above. Interviews were conducted by telephone and lasted 30 to 90 minutes. Data was collected either by taping the phone conversations after receiving permission and then transcribing the audiotapes, or by taking intensive notes during the interview. Two authors thoroughly read all transcripts and notes, devised the initial coding categories, coded all responses, and jointly recoded all the data. Where frequencies and percentages are reported, they routinely sum to more than 100% since each teacher usually had several comments in response to each question. Such multiple comments coded into categories are common in qualitative research (Berg, 2004). However, not every teacher comment was relevant to the questions asked, and if so was not included in the results or discussion. All teacher verbatim comments are italicized and placed in quotation marks.

### **Results**

*Question 1: How has going through the National Board certification process helped you to create a positive learning environment?*

Fifteen (60%) of the teachers said they had not created a more positive environment as a result of seeking National Board certification

because they already had established such an environment before starting the certification process.

“The districts with good professional [development] plans in place are already fostering the kind of skills necessary to develop a positive learning environment.”

“I’m finding those people who passed, already created a positive learning environment.”

Five (20%) said their environments had become more positive. Four (16%) of the teachers discussed specific changes that they had made in their teaching to improve their environments including more interactive lessons, different assessments and more small group work. One (4%) of the teachers said she now strives harder to create an environment which promotes learning.

“I think the whole process helped me to really tune into all the teaching practices that I used and always to create a positive environment for my students.”

*Question 2: How has going through the National Board certification process helped you to plan and design instruction?*

In responding to this question, teachers made 25 comments about teaching practice, and 12 comments were about positive changes in their planning. National Board participation influenced three (12%) of the teachers to think and plan holistically, two (8%) of the teachers to “*start planning with the end in mind*,” and one (4%) of the teachers to set goals. Another (4%) teacher became more aware of her own learning styles when planning. Two (8%) of the teachers said they “*cut things out*,” and one (4%) teacher is more careful about staying within her curriculum.

“I found I started planning with the end in mind, specifying what outcomes and what expectations I want of students, and worked backwards and not just from the textbook. Textbooks are resources, not a lesson planning devise.”

“I planned more time for classroom interactions, debates and relevancy, taking time to help students form relevancy.”

“Some things were not affecting student achievement, I was just doing them because I always did them, and there were other

things that I needed to include that I wasn't doing. It made me rethink everything I did in the classroom."

"I looked into the smaller parts of my planning and to make small changes based on assessment instead of assuming I was being successful with students."

Two (8%) of the teachers said they now are more aware of varying student learning styles and abilities as they plan.

"You think of students when you design a lesson and work on your unit."

Seven (28%) teacher comments focused on standards and planning. National Board participation helped four (16%) teachers focus on or learn more about standards, and another (4%) teacher said the standards helped him "to see the big picture." Two (8%) teachers noted the ease with which they were able to use the National Board standards because the national standards matched their district standards and training so closely.

"I've always done things intuitively, but now I'm more conscious of the standards, which I'm easily using already."

"It helps you to see the big picture and the means of getting to the big picture with the standards."

*Question 3: How has going through the National Board certification process helped you to deliver instruction to all students?*

Again, reflection was a prominent focus of teachers' comments with 16 (64%) teachers indicating that they now reflect more about the delivery of instruction to all students. Ten (40%) teachers said they are more aware of individual students.

"Through my reflection process, which is the most important part of the process, it helped me to understand better what I was doing."

"I'm more aware of individual student's needs, varying needs, meeting students at an individual level so there's more success for the individual. Did you allow them to have a personal goal?"

"It helped me to focus on things that individual students really need."

When discussing student differences, several teachers (n = 6, 24%) mentioned multiple intelligences or different student learning styles, and three (12%) teachers spoke of using varying teaching styles to accommodate different learning styles.

“I always have been tuned in to that, understanding Gardner’s multiple intelligences, therefore, National Board was a natural fit for me.”

“I’m aware of at-risk children and ways you can teach to various learning styles so it can be offered to all students and not just gifted students.”

Teachers mentioned numerous changes or accommodations in their teaching as a result of their increased awareness of students. Two (8%) of the teachers said they set higher standards for students. Two (8%) of the teachers have changed their grouping practices, and one (4%) is more consistent in her delivery of instruction to all students. Another teacher (4%) commented that the focus should not be exclusively on reaching content goals. Five (20%) of the teachers discussed how the video taping influenced them. Three (12%) learned that their actual teaching was different from their perception of their teaching. Other teachers said that the videos helped them to see individual children (n = 1, 4%) and to demonstrate constructivist teaching (n = 1, 4%). Two (8%) of the teachers said they now work more with other teachers.

“You expect higher output from students, expect them to rise, no slacking off.”

“The video showed me that my monitoring of kids was not what I thought.”

“I analyze and monitor their work constantly.”

Fourteen comments noted the lack of change with a recognition that good practice was already in place. Nine (36%) teachers said they did not need to change their practice to deliver instruction to all students because they already did that. Four (16%) teachers, who worked in special education, indicated that delivering instruction to all students did not apply to them since they work with students individually, and one (4%) said that it was district policy to teach to all students.

“I don’t think this was the National Board program. I always have been tuned in to that.”

“I didn’t change a great deal. Because of my special education background, I was always doing a lot of adaptive things.”

*Question 4: How has going through the National Board certification process helped you to demonstrate subject-matter knowledge?*

Of the 25 candidates responding to this question, 13 (52%) said the National Board certification process definitely helped them to demonstrate subject-matter knowledge; 4 (16%) said it did not help in any way; and 8 (32%) were ambivalent, at first saying it did not help in any way, but then saying the process was helpful in some small or insignificant manner. The teachers identified three main ways in which the process impacted their subject-matter knowledge: by motivating them during and after the assessment period to take a variety of steps to increase their knowledge, by causing them to look more closely at their rationale for decisions regarding subject matter, and by simply increasing their focus on content-related matters.

“I always read journals, but I read even more now. I now subscribe to four journals to keep current.”

“Now I research things a little deeper, not just use the manual. I dig into the subject matter deeper, not just on the surface.”

The most frequently cited benefit of the process was in motivating or requiring them to increase their subject-matter knowledge in preparation for the assessment. Seven (28%) said that they had learned more about the content they teach as they readied themselves for the assessment.

“The assessment center tests were really rigorous. I had a stack of lit books about three feet high I had to tackle. For an old dog like me, it was a refresher.”

In addition to literature, other content areas cited specifically were science, composition, and business. To expand their subject-matter knowledge, teachers reported taking classes, reading books and journals, consulting web sites, and attending meetings. Two (8%) teachers volunteered that the National Board certification process continues to have an impact on their expansion of subject-matter knowledge.

Six (24%) of the teachers indicated that the National Board certification process has made them more reflective about the rationale for the subject matter chosen. They reported increased attention to how subject matter relates to national, state and local content standards; societal trends; and personal interests of students. Four (16%) of the teachers concluded that they had simply become more subject-matter conscious. For example, an early childhood educator said,

“It made me look at the subject matter I was including. We have no mandated curriculum. This was the hardest part of the National Board for me.”

*Question 5: How has going through the National Board certification process helped you to diagnose and evaluate student learning?*

Among the 25 teachers who responded to this question, 19 (76%) cited benefits of the process, 4 (16%) reported that the process had not been helpful, and 2 (8%) were uncertain about its effects. Benefits described by the teachers included increasing the amount and quality of evaluation done, the degree to which teachers focus on the diagnosis of individual students, and the use of the results of diagnosis and evaluation. As a result of participating in National Board certification, three (12%) of the teachers indicated that assessment had become more of an on-going process in their teaching. Six (24%) of the teachers reported using a broader range of assessments, including anecdotal notes, observations, running records, and portfolios. Four (16%) of the teachers viewed their assessment methods as being more authentic as a result of the process.

“The assessment areas that we worked on, like the student work samples, were very helpful. They helped me to see the progress my students were making and how I was facilitating this or not. My class is project-oriented and it takes time to analyze the outcomes differently than a multiple choice test.”

An increased focus on evaluating individual student progress and diagnosing individual problems was reported by 5 (20%) of the teachers.

“Being made to look at one particular student before I looked at all of them--just answering all those questions about one student



helped me to learn to diagnose student learning. Then I used what I learned with everyone.”

Eight (32%) of the teachers attributed their making better use of the results of diagnosis and evaluation to their having participated in the certification process. One important use of the results was to guide future instructional choices. As one teacher put it:

“Going through the process made me really start looking more at not just testing them and giving them a grade, but after I gave them a test or assessment, looking at the results and using that to plan my instruction or to go back and review things or reteach things for students who were still struggling with certain areas.”

They also described how the process helped them to use assessment results to communicate more effectively with students and parents about learning. One (4%) teacher reported that he had gotten “better at talking about learning in terms of standards.” Other teachers indicated that the process of documenting diagnosis and evaluation of student learning reminded them to contact parents more often about their children’s progress (n = 1, 4%), enabled them to communicate more specifically with parents about their children’s accomplishments (n = 1, 4%), or encouraged them to engage parents in the assessment process (n = 1, 4%).

Interestingly, although most (n = 19, 76%) of the teachers viewed the certification process as enhancing their skills with regard to diagnosis and evaluation of student learning, two (8%) of the teachers reported that they were less confident about their abilities in this area after undertaking the process.

*Question 6: How has going through the National Board certification process helped you to participate as a member of a learning community?*

Of the 25 teachers responding to this question, 19 (76%) found the process to be helpful in this regard, 3 (12%) did not, and 3 (12%) were uncertain. Among the benefits cited were the increase in communication with colleagues, the expanding of their learning communities’ boundaries, and the opening up of opportunities to contribute to those communities.

Five teachers (20%) pointed out that the process itself required them to increase their contacts with colleagues. For example, one teacher

described how she was forced to collaborate with peers when asked to design something that would benefit the whole school community. Another teacher said that the verifications required in the process caused her to network with other teachers. The need to work with teachers in other academic departments to create integrated lessons was another example cited by a high school teacher. Still another teacher described how this practice of interacting with colleagues has continued for her.

“I also talk with colleagues much more now, due to the process. For example, one of my colleagues and I sat down and watched a video together and really homed in on the teaching.”

Another benefit of the process reported by 18 (72%) of the teachers was its role in enlarging their educational community.

“It connected me with my profession at large—broke down the isolation.”

“[It helped] in breaking down provincial thinking that keeps things stagnant.”

“Working with other teachers from all over the country was probably one of the best things I’ve ever done.”

“I met university people and other teachers with different perspectives and with emphases in different subjects. This was very helpful to my teaching.”

Coming to view parents as part of the learning community was also an outcome for at least three (12%) of the teachers interviewed.

“[I] truly attempt to utilize the parent ideas that I get now.”

“I notice that my conversations [with parents] changed to more academic task and less social talk.”

Three teachers related how the process encouraged them to share more with their learning community. For example, one teacher explained:

“By going through the Board process, I do not feel threatened by sharing with colleagues, and I do not feel the need to possess what I have designed.”

Sharing journals, sharing ideas via e-mail with colleagues, and sharing on the National Education Association website were also

mentioned as practices which had been encouraged by the certification process.

The way in which the process opened up opportunities to play a more prominent role in the learning community was the benefit most frequently cited in response to this question. Of the 25 respondents, 13 (52%) said that becoming Board certified had led to their playing new leadership roles at one or more levels.

“You’re recognized as an accomplished teacher who has a voice.”

“[After Board certification] you went beyond the building level more easily to district, regional, state and national roles.”

“It helps open doors for you. You get more information, more opportunities. People listen to what you have to say, seek your advice.”

At the local level after Board certification, five (20%) of the teachers were asked to become cooperating teachers for student teachers, mentor teachers for new teachers, and/or facilitators for cohorts of National Board candidates. The positions were described as opportunities not only for leadership but also for professional development. One teacher described her experience as a facilitator for a university-based cohort of National Board certification candidates this way:

“I spent my spring break reading entries of colleagues going through the process. I am as enthusiastic for them as I was for myself. One is in special education, one a middle school generalist. I’ve had to stretch myself to understand their standards and where they are coming from.”

Four (16%) of the teachers interviewed were asked to serve on one or more additional school or district committees. One (4%) attributed her promotion to a program specialist’s position to having Board certification.

At the regional and state levels, four (16%) of the teachers reported being asked to serve as advisors to teacher education programs at universities and/or to serve as part-time faculty for these programs. Four (16%) of the teachers also indicated that they had been asked to serve on statewide committees or boards, which help to guide statewide education policies. For example, teachers were asked to help formulate

state policies on proficiency testing, revision of state content standards and writing assessment issues.

Three (12%) of the teachers reported being asked to play a role at the national level. One teacher (4%) had made a presentation to new National Board members. Another teacher (4%) had been a member of a National Board advisory group. A third teacher (4%) had worked with a member of Congress on an education-related issue.

### **Discussion**

Although the interviews were organized around six open-ended questions that were derived from the California Standards for the Teaching Profession (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 1997; Moir & Garmston, 1992), the teachers often touched on concepts which were repeated themes throughout their discussions. The three salient themes which emerged were reflection, assessment and professionalism, and these themes combined to form a picture of the process of the development of teachers as decision-making professionals.

Although reflection is now such a commonly used term in education that its usage borders on the trite, it emerged as a very profound and consistently formative experience for teachers. The concept of reflection, to truly examine teaching practice, is intricately intertwined with the power to make decisions, to change what happens in the classroom, and to increase learning. Teachers often referred to canned curricular materials, district decisions about subject area content to be covered, and commonly accepted practices among other teachers in their buildings, as the starting points which they were exposed to and generally followed as beginning teachers. While such information and materials were offered in the spirit of helping teachers to be more effective and efficient, the tacit message was that teachers do not need to or have to make decisions about instruction. In a deceptively simple example, one primary grade teacher discussed her previous practice of having students spend time each day practicing penmanship. This was the way she was taught to teach, all the other primary grade teachers in her school taught this way, and initially, she never thought of any other way to teach. Yet as she reflected on her teaching practices, she was frustrated that she didn't have enough class time to cover other subjects more thoroughly. So she decided to assign penmanship homework each day, and now believes that her students are learning more because they have more class time for other activities. It is also noteworthy that this teacher discussed her decision with the conviction of a professional who

had the evidence to effectively argue a position which ran contrary to the common practice of her peers.

The second salient theme, which is related to evidence, is assessment. As teachers truly question, examine and modify their teaching practices, they begin to view assessment as a necessary tool to support their decisions about modified instruction, to guide them in further modifications, and to individualize instruction for students. Assessment then becomes a powerful tool for the individualization of instruction and the varying of instructional strategies. The assessment of individual students forms the basis for the assessment of their own teaching and underscores their ability to change and modify. As a result, teachers begin to conceptualize instruction, including assessment, as a whole.

The third salient theme is the professionalization of teaching. The prior discussion outlines the developmental process of moving from a consumer of teaching techniques and materials to a self-reflective, decision-making individual and assertive advocate for students and their families. This does not imply that certified teachers will view themselves as entirely autonomous decision-makers who do not follow school policies. It does mean that certified teachers will view themselves as the experts who know students and can manage their learning best, who can provide evidence that their instruction was effective by using assessment, who can best be advocates for the interests of students, and who command respect as professionals because they can discuss instructional evidence in ways that nonprofessionals cannot. Teachers also talked about how they were beginning to be publicly recognized as professionals. As they are asked to serve on a variety of local, state and national committees, they are shaping education for the future.

### **Conclusions**

Reflection, assessment, and professionalization emerged as the three salient themes from the teacher interviews. One of the most prominent findings was the pronounced increase in reflection that teachers engaged in after participating in the certification process. This reflection focused on students, standards and teaching practice and on the interaction among those components. Teachers indicated that they were much more aware of student needs and student differences. They also reported a renewed commitment to responding to those needs and differences by modifying their teaching practice. National Board teaching standards formed the structure around which teachers conceptualized the changes needed to facilitate student learning.

As teachers examined why they engaged in specific teaching practices, they made a wide variety of changes, the most prominent of which were changes in assessment. They focused more on assessment of individual students' progress, used a wider variety of assessment techniques and made assessment a more continuous process. Assessment results then increasingly shaped the planning of instruction. While no other major trends in modifying teaching practice could be identified, many specific curricular and pedagogical changes were attributed to the certification process, and all teachers indicated the certification process helped them improve.

All of the teachers interviewed perceived the certification process as enhancing their participation in the learning community or improving their teaching practice. Most teachers viewed the process as expanding the boundaries of their learning community and increasing their opportunities for influence in that community.

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