

National Board Certification: A Professional Development Model

Vickie Trent, Ed. D.
Director, Iowa Office for Staff Development
College of Education
University of Northern Iowa

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) is a private, non-profit organization whose mission is to "establish high and rigorous standards for what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do; to develop and operate a national voluntary system to assess and certify teachers who meet these standards; and to advance related education reforms for the purpose of improving student learning in American schools" (NBPTS, 2002, p.1).

In the past seven years, the number of candidates seeking National Board Certification has grown dramatically. Nearly 16,037 U.S. teachers have achieved National Board Certification, and another 17,564 teachers are seeking the credential this year. In Iowa, 321 teachers have achieved this symbol of professional teaching excellence and 180 Iowa teachers are in the process of pursuing certification. Teachers in Iowa have been provided with the opportunity to participate in free support sessions through the Iowa Office for Staff Development in the College of Education at the University of Northern Iowa. This support includes programs via the Iowa Communications Network and related one-on-one mentoring services. In many states, including Iowa, monetary awards are granted to teachers who have successfully completed the National Board Certification process. The process itself is becoming known throughout the educational community as a forceful professional development experience. Teachers are strengthened in their practice, and the beneficiaries of their improvement are the students in their classrooms, their peers, and their communities.

Currently, there are 24 certification fields, each with specific standards and performance-based assessments. The standards incorporate the skills that not only address what teachers do in their classrooms, but also emphasize other practices outside the classroom. Such practices include teachers' collaboration with other stakeholders in education, their continued professional development and reflective practice, and their continued contributions to their profession through the provision of other professional services. The process of becoming certified involves developing an extensive portfolio that includes student work samples, videotapes, verification forms and multiple "reflective commentaries" written by teachers to validate why and how the NBPTS standards for their particular content areas and developmental age levels are implemented in their classrooms on a daily basis to increase student achievement.

During 2001, research was conducted at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) to investigate the effects of the National Board Certification process on teachers' professional development. Surveys were created to examine 1) teacher group differences based on certification status; 2) perceptions that teachers have about the effects of

certification after their involvement in the process; and 3) perceptions of principals who have teachers in their schools who participated in certification (Dethlefs, 2001, p.ii).

This research parallels an early 2001 comprehensive research survey developed by the Educational Research Group (ERG) of Princeton, NJ that also investigated the impact of the assessment process on teachers who have achieved National Board Certification (ERG, 2001, p.1).

Design of the Studies

The design of the UNI study employed a self-report survey that was sent to three groups of teachers: National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs), candidates or those teachers nearing completion of the certification process, and a stratified random sample of teachers who have not been involved in the certification process. Overall, 564 (55%) of the 1018 teachers surveyed responded. In addition, 287 principals of teachers who have been involved in certification also were surveyed and 134 (47%) responded.

The design of the ERG study developed and analyzed two surveys in the winter and spring of 2001. ERG sent surveys to a random sample of 600 of the 4,804 teachers who achieved National Board Certification from 1994 through 1999. Two hundred thirty-five (41%) of the surveys were returned.

Professional Development Results

The results of the UNI study indicated that surveyed certified teachers and candidates were involved in significantly more professional development activities than teachers not involved in certification. Specifically, they were more likely than teachers not involved in certification to have participated in a number of professional development activities including having had colleagues critique their teaching, observing other teachers teaching as part of their own professional development, being active in a professional organization(s), making presentations at professional meetings, attending state or national professional association meetings, and participating in professional development beyond licensure renewal requirements. Of 11 different professional development activities presented, the median number that NBCTs and candidates reported participating in during the past 12 months was six compared with four for teachers not involved in certification.

The results of the ERG study indicated that eighty-percent of the NBCTs surveyed said the certification process was better than other professional development experiences. Sixty-one percent of NBCTs surveyed said the process had a greater impact on them than receiving the certification itself.

Professional Services Results

In the UNI study, surveyed certified teachers and candidates provided significantly more professional services to their school districts than teachers not involved in certification. They were more likely to have developed curricular materials for their department, conducted professional development activities for colleagues, critiqued the instructional approaches of their colleagues, served as a resource for their colleagues, presented

demonstrations of successful teaching practices, served in leadership capacities in their comprehensive school improvement plan, served on a school or district curriculum committee, and provided other professional services to their school or school district. Compared to teachers not involved in certification, NBCTs and candidates were more likely to have provided eight of the 11 services listed, including the above.

In the ERG study, seventy-four percent of respondents said achieving National Board Certification had affected their roles and activities within their school, district, or community. Of these 173 NBCTs, the most frequent new professional roles and activities were:

- *serving on committees in school, district, community, or union (39%);

- *mentoring NBCT candidates or advocating for NBPTS (37%);

- *mentoring, advising, or sharing ideas with colleagues (33%).

(No changes = 23%; No response = 3%. Percentages reflect multiple answers given by respondents, so do not total 100%).

About half of the respondents said being an NBCT has affected their roles and activities outside their school district. Of these 114 NBCTs, the most frequent new professional roles and activities were mentoring NBCT candidates or advocating for NBPTS (37%); serving on regional, state, or national education-related committees (31%); and increasing interaction with colleagues, including presenting at conferences and workshops (31%). (No changes = 47%; No response = 4%. Percentages reflect multiple answers given by respondents, so do not total 100%).

Teaching Quality Results

Where measured by classroom teaching practice in the UNI study, the extent of teaching quality varied across the three different subgroups of teachers. These differences were seen between certified/candidates and uninvolved teachers on NBPTS standards that address the core classroom teaching practices. Differences seen in these two propositions suggest that certified/candidate teachers better understand how knowledge in their subjects is created, organized, and linked to other disciplines; command specialized knowledge of how to convey subjects; and generate multiple paths to knowledge compared to teachers not involved in certification. Further, the certified/candidate teachers more frequently use multiple methods to meet their teaching goals, use group learning, value engagement, and assess student progress compared to uninvolved teachers. Sixty-nine percent of the NBCTs surveyed reported positive changes in their students' engagement, achievement and motivation. Since achieving the NBCT credential, teachers said they have received increased recognition and respect and that they are more often sought out for their ideas and opinions.

Seventy-five percent of the NBCTs surveyed in the ERG study said they have incorporated new instructional techniques as a result of National Board Certification.

These results are also supported by Lloyd Bond's 2000 study at the University of North Carolina where he found that NBCTs outperformed their non-certified counterparts on every one of 13 generally recognized measures of good teaching, and the differences were dramatic on 11 of them. For example, the NBCTs were better at improvising when

faced with the unexpected, understanding why students succeed and fail on a given academic task, engaging students without overwhelming them, and anticipating difficulties students might have with new concepts. Nearly three-quarters of the NBCTs produced students whose work reflected deep understanding of the subject being studied compared with less than one-third of non-certified teachers (Bond, 2000, p.3).

Collaboration Results

Results of the UNI study indicate that certified teachers and candidates are participating in significantly more collaborative activities than teachers not involved in certification. Specifically, higher percentages of certified teachers and candidates reported that they are collaborating with teachers outside of their school district to improve student learning, as well as with educators from colleges, universities or other institutions and agencies to improve student learning.

Reflective Practice Results

The UNI study indicated that certified teachers and candidates in this study also are participating in significantly more reflective practice activities than teachers not involved in certification. Higher percentages of surveyed teachers and candidates reported that they incorporated feedback from parents to evaluate and improve their teaching, incorporated recent research findings into their teaching, and used student work to assess their teaching.

The ERG study found that ninety-one percent of surveyed NBCTs said that National Board Certification has positively affected their teaching practices and eighty-three percent said they have become more reflective about their teaching.

Perceptions of the National Board Certification Process

Certified teachers and candidates near completion of the process rated the National Board Certification process very positively as a professional development experience with almost all respondents rating it as either excellent or good. Almost all also reported that they probably or definitely would recommend the National Board Certification process to their colleagues.

Consistent with the group differences described above, almost all teachers agreed or strongly agreed that since beginning the National Board Certification process, they have become better teachers. Almost all (80% or more) agreed that they have developed stronger curricula and improved ways to evaluate student learning and that they spend more time reflecting on their teaching and ways of improving it. Similarly, almost all teachers agreed that the levels of engagement in learning by their students and themselves have increased. At least two-thirds of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they more often involve parents and other community members as resources to support their teaching practice, more easily connect their district's standards and benchmarks to their day-to-day teaching practice, and that their collaboration with other teachers is more focused on issues of teaching and student learning.

Principal's Perceptions

In the UNI study, almost a third of the principals reported that their teachers' involvement in certification had improved the culture of learning or learning climate in their school to a moderate or great extent. More than half, however, reported that it had improved the learning climate to a small extent or not at all. Well over half of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that NBCTs at their school developed stronger curricula and improved ways to evaluate student learning; were better teachers; more easily connected the district's standards, benchmarks and performance assessments to theory day-to-day teaching practices, increased the level of engagement in learning by their students and themselves; were more focused on issues of teaching and student learning; enhanced the instructional strategies they use; enhanced course content in their classrooms; and reflected more on their teaching and ways of improving it. More than half (54%) of the principals believed that their teachers were better or more innovative because of the certification process while slightly less than half (46%) said the teachers were about the same. Almost 40% of the principals perceived that there was increased student learning in the classrooms of the NBCTs, while a third said they had not perceived this, and another 30% said they did not know.

Conclusion

The general findings indicate that teachers who have been involved in National Board Certification are more involved in professional development activities, collaborative activities, and reflective practice activities; provide more professional development services to their school districts; and differ in their teaching quality compared to teachers who have not been involved in the certification process. One limitation of the studies is the reliance on self-report data. Another limitation is that causality cannot be inferred from it. Teachers who complete National Board Certification may be different from those who do not prior to participating in the process. A more thorough examination of the effects of certification would include a longitudinal design to examine the changes in professional activities, teaching practices and student achievement.

It is noteworthy that teachers and principals, to a lesser extent, perceived positive changes in their professional development and teaching quality after they had been involved in the process. Overall, the two studies clearly establish the value of the National Board Certification process in its ability to:

1. serve as an excellent professional development opportunity;
2. improve teaching practices, and to positively transfer those practices to the classroom and to teaching peers;
3. lead to increased professional recognition and interaction with colleagues;
and
4. improve student engagement, achievement and motivation.

For additional information about National Board Certification, please contact Dr. Vickie Trent, Director, Iowa Office for Staff Development, University of Northern Iowa, at 319-273-7401 or via email at vickie.trent@uni.edu.

References

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