

The Social and Cultural Context of National Board Certification: Reflections on Issues of Representation

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Researcher: "How many National Board Certified teachers in your school have ethnically diverse backgrounds?"

School Principal: "None. I have 20% ethnically diverse teachers and 82% of the student population is also ethnically diverse. The numbers don't match, do they?"

The National Board Certification process functions as an intense professional development experience. It offers opportunities to demonstrate a high level of proficiency in the field, to form networks of colleagues for mutual support and recognition, and to qualify teachers for a variety of state and district-based financial awards. The National Board Certification process incorporates multiple strategies for evaluating

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teaching excellence, including documentation of candidates' collaboration in the professional community and outreach to local families, performance-based assessments such as analyses of videotaped teaching and student work, and written exercises to demonstrate subject matter knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge.

This variety in evidencing proficiency is consistent with recommendations for supporting ethnic diversity in the profession. Additionally, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) has a diverse board of directors who express the goal of reaching all teachers, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds who may be disenfranchised in traditional settings or by the use of standardized exams to demonstrate excellence in the profession.

Despite these efforts, we see small numbers of teachers from ethnically and linguistically diverse backgrounds participating in the process. Although firm records are not maintained on the ethnicity of local National Board Certified (NBC) teachers, out of nearly 120 NBC teachers in the local county, our research suggests that only 5-10% are persons of color. This information causes concerns mirroring those based on demographics which show the percentage of teachers of color decreasing even as the percentage of K-12 students of color in the United States rapidly increases (Lewis, 1996).

Increasing and maintaining diversity in the teaching profession is important, not only to provide positive role models for children of color and English Language Learners (ELL), but also to increase the range of expectations, experiences, and exposure to different cultures by all teachers and children. The interplay of different backgrounds, approaches, and ideas promotes creativity and sensitivity (Michael-Bandele, 1993). There is evidence that teachers tend to perceive the abilities of children from various ethnic groups differently (Plata, Masten, & Trusty, 1999; Rasekoala, 1997). Diversity among teachers at a school site can provide support to all teachers in the use of strategies and skills to effectively teach children with backgrounds different from their own (Dilworth, 1990). Despite years of dialogue and research about the importance of a diverse teaching population, the teaching force remains predominately White (non-Hispanic, European-American). In the county in southern California where this study was conducted, 78% of the K-12 teachers are White (Rand California, 2001).

Clark (1999) reports that by the year 2030, White students will likely make up less than 50% of the national enrollment of elementary students. Locally, this is already a reality. California State demographics compiled by the California Department of Education, Educational Demographics Unit, showed over 1.5 million English Language Learners

(ELLs) state-wide in the 2001-2002 academic year. In the same academic year, only 35% of K-12 students in California were White (California Department of Education, 2002).

The need to recruit more teachers of color if we are to have a teaching force representative of the greater community has been documented (Lewis, 1996). The decrease in teachers of color may be attributable, in part, to high-stakes standardized competency tests (Flippo & Canniff, 2000) as well as to increased opportunities for higher paying positions in other fields (Webb, 1986). There have been programs to encourage and assist underrepresented teaching candidates, including projects to provide support for teaching certification completion when followed by a return to diverse communities upon entering the profession (Meyers & Smith, 1999). These recruitment efforts, however, are neither systemic nor comprehensive.

Of equally great concern, but less well studied, are efforts to retain and support teachers of color. Teachers of color are more likely to leave the profession than White teachers (Lewis, 1996). There is some evidence that a focused effort to increase the support of faculty of color can make a qualitative and quantitative difference. Blanchett and Clarke-Yapi (1999) found cross-cultural mentoring of doctoral students to be extremely important for the professional development of ethnic minorities, particularly for imparting an understanding of the culture of higher education. However, cross-cultural mentoring can be challenging and requires sensitivity by all involved parties (Ayyazian, 1997). Most school districts only offer mentoring for novice teachers. Issues related to ethnic diversity are rarely focused upon in the mentoring process or in other professional development venues.

There is a paucity of research on the effectiveness of professional development and support for teachers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This study explores the experiences of local teachers of color exposed to the professional development opportunity of National Board Certification.

Research Questions and Methods

The following were the primary questions in this study exploring the issue of diversity among NBC teachers:

1. Who are the local teachers, particularly those of color, who participate in the National Board Certification process?
2. Are there barriers to certification for teachers from underrepresented groups, and if so, what are they?

3. How can we better support teachers from underrepresented groups?

Background Study

To learn more about the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) and the certification process, one of the researchers met with NBPTS trainers and subsequently attended the Facilitators' Institute 2, a NBPTS training workshop. She also attended county candidate support workshops and met with individual candidates and facilitators. Both researchers attended a statewide retreat for university faculty interested in the National Board process. One of the researchers attended a national meeting for the development of National Board research and evaluation. Following the meetings, a local task force to assess the role of the university within the National Board framework was developed. Board certified teachers or candidates were participants or presenters at most of these workshops and meetings. The paucity of Board certified teachers and candidates of color prompted the questions for this study.

Individual Teacher Interviews

A list of local National Board Certified (NBC) teachers was compiled and schools with multiple NBC teachers were identified for further study. Initially nine NBC teachers, each from a different targeted school, were contacted by telephone for an interview. Eight of the teachers agreed to be interviewed. Individual interviews ranged from 20 to 65 minutes. Semi-structured interviews explored the issues of ethnicity, professional development, and National Board Certification. An interview protocol included the following questions:

Why did you decide to participate in the National Board process?

What kinds of support did you receive (with follow-up prompts asking if they received other financial, administrative, personal, or professional support)?

What barriers did you face?

What is your opinion regarding the ethnic diversity of the pool of candidates?

What was the most difficult part of the process for you?

Can you think of any barriers other teachers might face, especially teachers at other grades, teachers of color, etc...?

Audio-tapes of interviews were transcribed, sorted for themes, and

compared among stakeholders for similarities or differences warranting follow-up questioning (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As part of the interview protocol, NBC teachers were asked about the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the faculty in their schools. It quickly became apparent that most of the schools with multiple NBC teachers had very little ethnic diversity among their faculty. Of the eight teachers from eight different schools interviewed, most had not thought about the lack of teachers of color in their National Board support groups until the interview questions raised the issue. One teacher was of Latino descent and she reported noticing that few Latino teachers were involved, another reported knowing one Filipino teacher who had completed the National Board process, and one teacher mentioned seeing an African-American teacher at a county NBPTS information session. These responses highlighted the difficulty in finding local NBC teachers of color. Most interviewed teachers stated that there simply were not many teachers of color at their schools.

Although many of the local schools have significant numbers of Latino or African-American teachers, these were not the schools with NBC teachers. There was one notable exception. One of the high schools with multiple NBC teachers also had a large percentage of Latino teachers. None of these Latino teachers, however, had participated in the National Board process. This school, referred to here as California High, was identified for additional study.

Principal Interviews

Two principals from the original list of targeted schools, one elementary and one secondary, agreed to be interviewed. They were interviewed individually and field notes were taken. The interviews ranged from 30 to 40 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured with questions aimed at eliciting information about support provided to teachers to participate in the National Board process, who participated, and barriers to participation, especially for ethnic minorities. Questions included the following:

How many teachers at your school have gone through the NB process?

Why do you think these teachers went through the NB process?

How have you encouraged other teachers on your staff to pursue NB certification?

If so, how do you decide whom to encourage?

Have you observed any negative outcomes for NBC teachers?

What is the ethnic and linguistic background among your teachers?

Why do you think there is such a low level of ethnic diversity among NBC teachers?

The principal at California High was also interviewed. He was interviewed twice, once prior to interviews with teachers at his site and once after, for a total interview time of nearly three hours. Principal interviews were also analyzed for themes and compared with other stakeholders (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Teacher Focus Groups

The difficulty in identifying NBC teachers of color prompted the formation of two focus groups. One focus group included ethnically diverse, bilingual teachers who had not entered the NB process, but had NBC colleagues in their schools. The other focus group consisted of NBC teachers from California High. Teachers were invited to participate in focus groups conducted at local school site after school hours. Four White female teachers and one White male teacher from California High attended the NBC focus group. Three Latina, one Latino, and one bilingual teacher who self-identified as Caucasian attended the focus group for ethnically and linguistically diverse non-NBC teachers. Focus group prompts for the non-NBC teachers included:

Have you heard of NBPTS?

Do you know anyone who is certified?

Have you thought about becoming certified? Why or why not?

Have you been encouraged or supported by any of your colleagues in the process? If so, how?

Based on your experiences, does it appear that there is adequate representation of teachers from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds becoming NB certified?

Focus group prompts for the NBC teachers included:

How did you first hear about NBPTS?

What prompted you to become certified?

What type of support did you receive?

Before you finally decided to go through the process, what was your greatest hesitation about beginning it?

Have you encouraged or supported other colleagues in the process?

Based on your experiences, does it appear that there is adequate representation of teachers from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds becoming National Board Certified?

Teacher Participants

This study supports the literature which reports that teachers who engage in the National Board Certification process were, and continue to be, leaders within the educational community (Williams & Bearer, 2001; NBPTS, 2001). Teachers in this study were peer-mentors, university cooperating teachers, adjunct university faculty, professional grant or exam assessors, and workshop leaders. In a narrative about NBPTS, Wiebke (2000) stated that she decided to be one of the first people in her state to attempt the certification, not only to improve her teaching, but because “someone has to get the ball rolling.”

The NBC teachers in this study, all but one of whom were White, were not only leaders, but were also the type to take the initiative and “get the ball rolling.” All of the participants had more than five years teaching experience. One of the NBC teachers had been in the profession for 21 years. One of the principals mentioned that some of his teachers from diverse backgrounds were also leaders and exemplary teachers, yet they had not engaged in the NB process. The interviews suggest several likely reasons for the low ethnic diversity among NBC teachers.

Results

Dissemination of Information

All of the teachers in the bilingual, non-NBC teachers’ focus group stated that they did not personally know anyone who was certified, despite the fact that there were NBC teachers at their school. They reported not knowing enough about the process to form an opinion regarding attempting certification. One teacher said, “that is my concern, why haven’t we been informed about this? It seems that every district would want to have a large cohort of NBC teachers.”

One of the principals, viewed as an advocate for teachers and students, is an administrator in an elementary school in which one out of every four teachers is a person of color. This principal admits that he has been meaning to learn more about the process. He said, “I don’t know enough to educate my teachers on it.” He wasn’t sure if there were any NBC teachers on his staff or if there was district support for the process. Following the interview he was eager to gather information and asked

the researchers for references and recommendations for guest speakers on the topic.

There appear to be two possible explanations for the perceived lack of information flow about the National Board process. It may be because many of the teachers of color are located in low-performing, highly diverse schools, where the teachers and administrators are bombarded with more immediate concerns and do not attend to the information disseminated at district-wide meetings. The school culture may also promote less discussion of non-urgent topics such as long-range professional development when talking informally at the school site. Although the non-NBC teachers reported knowing no NBC teachers personally, there were certified teachers in their schools, which suggests limited communication among the school faculty.

Interestingly, all of the NBC teachers expressed reactions similar to that of a White secondary school NBC teacher in an affluent school district, who responded to the question of how he first became familiar with the NBPTS by saying, "It was everywhere. Everyone was talking about it, in the newspapers, and colleagues at school. The monetary rewards....\$10,000 was on everybody's minds. There was a lot of curiosity." The Latina NBC teacher said she heard about the National Board Certification at a school meeting when a district representative visited as well as from colleagues. This is the same district in which the teachers from the ethnically diverse non-NBC teacher focus group are employed, but the economic and performance levels of the schools differ greatly. The NBC teacher is in a high performing school in a moderately high socio-economic section of the city, whereas the non-NBC teachers are in a much lower income area and in lower-performing schools.

It is also possible that the dissemination of information is not consistent throughout the county. It wasn't clear if district representatives visited all schools or only those in which they were encouraged by teachers or administrators; certainly only the NBC teachers remember any such presentation at their schools.

Collegial Support

Without exception, the NBC teachers reported they would not have completed the process without collegial support. All of the NBC teachers interviewed completed the certification process with at least two other teachers from their own school site. Comments such as, "I couldn't have done it without my teaching partner" were common. Small groups seemed to make a big difference in the completion rate. Teachers said, "at different points all three of us wanted to quit, but the others pulled us through, saying after all this work what a shame it would be to quit" and

"I talked her into sticking it out when she felt overwhelmed by it all. I told her she could do it."

The collegial support was more than just morale building, though. Several of the NBC teachers said that members of their small groups divided up the reading and also attended different support groups offered by districts, the county office, and through the teaching unions. In this way, they could share the knowledge they gained about the process and save precious time. They also critiqued each other's portfolio entries and videotapes. Perhaps most importantly, the small groups of colleagues spurred them to begin the process, where they might not have done so alone. An important question to ask is why these ad hoc groups have not formed among the exemplary ethnically diverse teachers in the low performing schools. Nor do there appear to be cross-cultural NBPTS work groups in the low performing schools, even when there are White NBC teachers at the site.

Administrator Support

The support, both emotionally and fiscally, by principals varied more by school than by whether or not there were NBC teachers. The range of support included principals who had little knowledge of the process or the NBPTS core propositions, principals who stated that they would begin to show support when there was evidence that certification "made a difference," and principals who facilitated the process by searching for funding, providing substitutes for work days, freeing up media technicians for videotaping, excusing faculty from meetings to allow them time to work, holding celebrations for certified teachers, and acknowledging the achievements in assemblies with parents and students.

At California High, an ethnically diverse school with White NBC teachers, one teacher said, "I was certified in 1998, thanks to the help of our principal; he really cared that I completed what I had started." Another stated, "My principal supported me financially and morally, he advocated for district support for many of us wanting to go through this process." In describing his attempts to encourage teachers, this principal said:

I asked our NBC teachers to share with their colleagues, at a staff meeting, how to go through the process. But most importantly, the benefits of becoming National Board Certified. They followed up with an in-depth presentation to demystify the entire process. This created a very provocative dialogue among the staff.

Despite the level of support by this principal, it is important to note that two Latina teachers at this school indicated in the interviews that they had received little or no information about National Board certification.

Not all of the NBC teachers at other schools, though, felt their principals were particularly supportive. One teacher said she didn't think her principal really knew what she was doing and another stated he thought the principal "didn't really care one way or the other." Yet, this wasn't viewed as a barrier. None of the NBC teachers expressed a desire for more administrative support, although all acknowledged the benefits of financial incentives, due to the high cost of the certification process.

Targeting Ethnic Diversity

When asked what steps had been taken to promote certification for teachers from ethnically diverse backgrounds, one principal said, "Well, in all honesty, I have not gone out of my way to personally approach teachers of color to encourage them to go through this process." The attitude among the principals tended to be that all teachers had access to the same information. An example of this is evident in a principal's comment, "I guess I have not really thought about this lack of representation. When I encouraged my teachers to pursue this, I did it as a general invitation to all." He ended the interview by saying:

This becomes a very provocative question: how can we make the process friendlier for our teachers of color? All I can say is that my future plan is to continue to encourage everyone; in addition to this open invitation, I will meet with the ethnically diverse teachers on my staff to share the under-representation of ethnically diverse NBC teachers. It is important to hook them up with the county support network to help demystify the process and help them create a road map to assist them in obtaining their certification.

Responses from principals and teachers suggest that principals tended to have one of two attitudes toward NB certification. Either they were supportive of their teachers participating, or they wanted to wait and see if there was hard evidence that it made a difference before encouraging the time commitment. Regardless of the overall attitude toward the process, the principals assumed that the opportunities were equal for all teachers.

Teachers had varying opinions. The Latina NBC in the study believed that the process was "color-blind" and there was "equal support" for everyone. She thought there was limited diversity at local and county support groups, depending on the district, but that it was simply the choice of many people to not seek certification. One of the White NBC teachers said that there wasn't much diversity in the teachers he saw going through the process, but it "represented the diversity of the teachers in the district."

The non-NBC teachers in the ethnically diverse focus group felt

strongly that there needed to be more done to support teachers from diverse backgrounds. In that group the following statements show the feelings of inequality. "First of all, as a rule, we are almost always underrepresented. Secondly, information seems to come to those of us in bilingual programs as an afterthought. This has to change before we can make any serious headway." Another teacher said, "We need mentors! Does anyone really care? What is the big picture?" This was followed by the recommendation of another teacher, "There is a need to have special recruitment for these underrepresented groups, otherwise we just continue to perpetuate the system...." A Latino teacher stated, "I don't believe that there is adequate representation, if we don't even know how to get certified, the first steps, how can we be part of these statistics? There is something wrong with this picture. This information needs to be more readily accessible to us!" A White NBC teacher who has encouraged several ethnically diverse teachers to go through the process, believes many of the Latino teachers on her staff are already involved in more activities and extra projects than the average teacher. She said:

They are pulled in so many different directions such as student special needs, parent concerns, curriculum needs, socio-political agendas, community events and the list goes on. They have so many skills and talents that are desperately needed, yet because of this, they are not able to pursue additional tasks or pressures that would lead them to certification. It is my belief that unless special attention is given to this population of teachers the representation of NBCT's will continue to be skewed.

Equity Issues in the National Board Certification Process

An issue not originally anticipated in this study was that the process itself may discriminate against teachers from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. None of the teachers in the non-NBC focus group had enough specific knowledge about the certification process to question the equity issues, but several of the White NBC teachers expressed concerns. The testing center exercises were described as much easier for teachers who are native English speakers and skilled writers and typists in English, primarily due to time constraints. None of the teachers were aware of the availability of materials in Spanish.

The portfolio entry portion of the process was criticized by some teachers as being biased toward particular teaching strategies and pedagogical language. One teacher said:

As we went through it, it became apparent what they wanted. There was a lot of minutiae and the younger teachers knew the terminology they were looking for better. There were very specific questions and things

they were looking for. You have to be able to play the game and not necessarily the best teachers on the campus know how to play the game.

Several of the teachers discussed a particular bias the National Board assessors had toward certain teaching styles. One teacher said:

I knew an African American teacher who was fairly rigid . . . made students do lots of memorizing . . . I thought the kids would hate her. They loved her, and considered her their best teacher. 'Ms. Jackson don't play,' they'd say. They obviously learned a great deal from her, and respected her. I don't think there's room in the rubric for National Board Certification for this kind of teacher.

Echoing this sentiment, one teacher said, "They wanted you to put out a question, in a Socratic manner, and then step back and let the discussion flow. Obviously, this is a lesson you want to do part of the time, but they have a bias. If you videotaped a great lecture lesson or directed questions . . . well . . . you just have to buy into their bias." The focus on standards and core propositions, while supported by the NBC teachers, was also an area of concern. One teacher said, "the standards point to a certain type of teacher. I've found that students need lots of different types of teaching modalities — and that there's an important place for lecture and direct instruction, especially as we work with students from cultures different from the mainstream. I think that's why I was so disappointed in the piecemeal evaluation of our portfolios. I am more than just the sum of my parts!"

Attitudes Toward National Board Certification

Despite some concerns, the majority of the NBC teachers believed they had learned a tremendous amount from the process. Many of them described how reflective practice became "natural" as they developed a much deeper understanding of their own teaching. They also reported having increased opportunities for networking with many excellent teachers. Even teachers who were very experienced and believed they were highly reflective prior to entering the process recommended certification, often citing the inspirational value of the collegial support and opportunity to view the videotapes of exemplary teaching by their peers. The benefits made the time worthwhile for all of the teachers. One teacher summed it up by saying:

Becoming National Board Certified has many rewards, the more work and thought I put into this, the more I got out of it. It is a way to reach a level of prestige in this field that is more often than not seen as a trivial job. It is important to be valued for our hard work and dedication! It is also a real plus to make more money for what I love to do.

All of the participants would encourage other teachers who felt confident in their teaching to undertake certification after learning about the rigors and understanding the time commitment.

Implications

Like most research, this preliminary work creates more questions than it answers. It is evident that the ethnic and linguistic diversity of NBC teachers is not representative of all teachers in our communities. The reasons are complex and difficult to tease apart. Is it that the socio-political climate pulls ethnically diverse teachers in too many directions? Is it just that many of the teachers of color are young and not yet ready for certification? Or is the answer more disturbing? Do the assessment processes discriminate against teachers of color? Do universities, schools and districts foster a climate in which teachers of ethnically and linguistically diverse backgrounds lack the support and collegiality to undertake a long and rigorous professional development task?

In an attempt to identify who pursues NB certification, we found that there are a small number of local NBC teachers from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The few we could identify did not believe there were any exceptional barriers and described the process and experiences related to certification as "fair." This is consistent with the writings of McReynolds (1999), an African American NBC teacher, who argues that the individual portfolio system inherently supports diversity. This viewpoint is important, but it is also necessary to examine the experiences of the majority of teachers of color and not simply assume, because a few ethnically diverse teachers succeed, that the climate and process are reasonable and equitable.

This work suggests that for many teachers of color, there are effective barriers, including lack of disseminated information, time to pursue certification, and a sense of support. These realities and their implications define a new mission for schools of education and for teaching, one that requires teacher educators to re-think the pathways and create spaces that provide equal access for teachers of color to become National Board Certified. As stated by a Latino Bilingual Cross-Cultural Language and Academic Development (BCLAD) teacher who intends to begin the NB process,

This is an important process for the professionalism and prestige of teaching. However, we must keep in mind that we are in an era of standards and more standards. With the new teacher license standards in the horizon will there be any possibility of integrating the pre-service, in-service and National Board Standards? Can we do it all and live to

tell about it? It seems overwhelming, particularly for those just entering the profession.

As evidenced by the interviews and focus groups, this is a sentiment shared by many teachers of color working in under performing schools. The question that begs to be answered is what can we do to increase the diversity of NBC teachers?

In one effort to address this issue, the Department of Policy Studies in Language and Cross-Cultural Education at San Diego State University has recently incorporated the core propositions of the NBPTS into the master's degree program. The primary purpose is to provide a social/cultural learning context that provides support and information about the NBPTS. The majority of the teachers who participate in this master's program are of Latino ancestry. The faculty members have revised their syllabi to include core propositions and to support teachers in reflective thinking and writing. Based on the needs expressed in the focus groups and the recommendations given by teachers who have gone through the process, as well as recommendations in the literature (Diez & Blackwell, 1999), the faculty will work collaboratively with NBC teachers to provide support groups to assist the candidates through the process. One faculty member stated, "It is our responsibility to develop pathways where children gain access to teachers of color who are more qualified and better prepared than in years past."

Strategies for advancing the professional development, through National Board and other venues, include opening a dialogue about the lack of representation. Wheat, Cramer, and Cramer (2000) make excellent recommendations for principals supporting candidates, but there is no mention of the small numbers of ethnically diverse teachers. Principals can follow the lead of the administrator in this study who is initiating meetings to individually encourage his exemplary teachers of color. White NBC teachers can make an effort to reach out to teachers of color to encourage them and invite them to participate in support groups.

The policy to increase the financial rewards for NBC teachers who stay in, or move to, low performing schools is laudable, but how much more powerful it would be if those teachers were representative of the ethnic diversity of their students. Researchers can focus attention and understanding on the social context and underpinnings of the NB certification process, and professional development in general. The major social challenge that remains before us is to ensure that the fundamental factors that have kept teachers of color from becoming certified be researched and addressed by those who have the mechanism and power to create a paradigm shift in the representation of National Board Certified Teachers.

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