

The National Board Certification of Professional Teaching: A Miss or A Match for Special Education?

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The most insightful way to understand society is to consider it from the perspective of the professions that have emerged to contain its failures. In this sense, special education can be understood as the profession that emerged in 20th Century America to contain the failure of public education to educate its youth to full political, economic, and cultural participation in democracy (Skrtic, 1991, p. 24).

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) is “a growing part of the national effort to strengthen standards for the teaching profession” (National Education Association, 2002). It has been argued for many years that a rigorous assessment for teachers will elevate respect for our much maligned profession, much as the control of

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standards and demanding exit exams have done for the professions of law and medicine (Berliner & Biddle, 1995).

As of August 2001, the National Board Certification offered exams for 24 areas of expertise, including one for teachers who work with Special Needs students K-12 (see Table 1).

What has not yet been demonstrated, however, is the legitimacy of a national assessment of special education teaching. We propose that the field of special education is unique, and these unique aspects must be considered prior to wholesale adoption of these or any other standards associated with teacher competence and credentialing. If “professional certification” is defined by the nature of the work performed by its specialists (Skrtic, 1991), we caution that the nature of the “work” done by special education teachers who serve a clientele that is disparate and continually changing and that is controlled by Federal

Table 1
National Board Certificates Available as of August, 2001

1. Early Childhood/Generalist (students ages 3-8)
2. Middle Childhood/Generalist (ages 7-12)
3. Early Adolescence/Generalist (ages 11-15)
4. Early Adolescence/English Language Arts
5. Early Adolescence/Mathematics
6. Early Adolescence/Science
7. Adolescence and Young Adulthood/Mathematics (ages 14-18+)
8. Adolescence and Young Adulthood/Science
9. Early Adolescence/Social Studies-History
10. Adolescence and Young Adulthood/Social Studies-History
11. Adolescence and Young Adulthood/English Language Arts
12. Early and Middle Childhood/Art (ages 3-12)
13. Early Adolescence through Young Adulthood/Art (ages 11-18+)
14. Early and Middle Childhood/World Languages Other Than English
15. Early Adolescence Through Young Adulthood/World Languages Other Than English
16. Early Childhood Through Young Adulthood/Library Media
17. Early and Middle Childhood/Music
18. Early Adolescence Through Young Adulthood/Music
19. Early and Middle Childhood/Physical Education
20. Early Adolescence through Young Adulthood/Physical Education
21. Early Adolescence through Young Adulthood/Career and Technical Education
22. Early and Middle Childhood/English as a New Language (ages 3-12)
23. Early Adolescence through Young Adulthood/English as a New Language
24. Early Childhood through Young Adulthood/Exceptional Needs (ages birth-21)

Reference: <http://www.nea.org/nationalboard/background-facts.html>

legislation (e.g., Public Law 94-142, now PL-105-17) is highly complex and difficult to describe. In this article, we examine the National Board Certification process and the legitimacy of this process for teachers of special needs children.

A Brief History of National Board Certification

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) is a nonprofit organization commissioned by the Carnegie Foundation for the purposes of enhancing the professionalism of education and teachers. The NBPTS was modeled after a similar Carnegie program dating back to 1910, when the medical profession was in need of standardization of its training programs and a booster shot (pun intended) in the area of public image. The Carnegie Foundation funded a study of the medical profession, which was subsequently published in the *Flexnor Report: Medical Education in the United States and Canada*. The findings of this report were quickly adopted by the American Medical Association (American Medical Association, 2001) and its recommendations served as the impetus for establishing national standards for the medical profession and its medical schools. The Flexnor Report provided significant momentum for the rapid enhancement of the medical profession and the growth of medical schools throughout the United States and Canada (NBPTS, 1988). Thus, the NBPTS has invested in this model with the hope of similar returns for the teaching profession.

The NBPTS is composed of a cross section of education professionals and some business leaders whose initial duty was to establish a set of competencies leading to a national certification of teacher competence. At present, certification is recommended only for the seasoned teacher, and is completely optional. However, according to a report from 1988, it was originally established to guide beginning teacher certification in order to improve the image of teaching and public education, provide for a standardization of teacher training programs nation-wide, solidify education as a true profession, raise the level of professional prestige, serve as a stimulant to increase teacher salaries, and, ultimately, to guarantee a better quality of public education. Additionally, as Shulman and Sykes (1986) noted, such a national certificate of competence would allow for teacher mobility by unifying state to state certification requirements. Finally, NBPTS was created as a reaction to concerns about a lack of unification in the teaching profession outlined in the Carnegie Forum Report of 1986, titled "A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century." All of these goals are laudable, and have the intention of raising the status of the teacher in society to that enjoyed by other professions.

Present Status of the NBPTS

At present, the NBPTS is not concerned with beginning teacher training per se, but certifies experienced teachers after completion of a series of specific assessments in various areas of teaching. The National Education Association (National Education Association, 2002a) declares that the NBPTS is professional development - perhaps the most powerful professional development experience available to teachers who are interested in improving their teaching practice. National Board Certification also is an advanced credentialing process, with its certificate signifying that the holder has met the highest standards established for the teaching profession.

The assessment process consists of two basic parts. First, candidates are required to submit a comprehensive portfolio reflecting various components of their teaching abilities. This process includes a robust set of documentation (video, audio, work samples, etc.) designed to reflect the NBPTS competencies. The second part of the assessment process involves reporting to an assessment center where computer-based exercises are utilized to uncover the dynamics of teaching strategies specific to the age of the teacher's students as well as the content dynamics of the subject matter involved in the teacher's areas of assessment. According to NEA, candidates report that the National Board's assessment focuses more on teaching and learning than any other test they have been exposed to. Many say it was the most rigorous but helpful professional growth experience they have ever had (National Education Association, 2002b).

According to the NEA report, the rate of passage of the assessment process is approximately 60%, when re-takes are figured into the picture. The justification for the rigors of this process are accounted for by the complexities of the teaching process as much as the fact that the NBPTS is considered an advanced certification process contrasted with the typical credentialing process utilized in teacher education training programs. An external form of "justification" for the rigors and intensity of the certification assessment process is implicit in the hopes of the NEA as well as the NBPTS and other agencies supporting the standards process; namely, that school districts will offer monetary incentives in the form of salary enhancements. Given the fact that teacher salaries are and have been low, this attribute of national certification would offer considerable incentive to attract a significant number of potential candidates.

An October 2000 report by researchers at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro indicated that National Board Certified teachers ranked higher on indices of teacher effectiveness than teachers who did not achieve National Board Certification (NBC), and that students of

NBC Teachers demonstrated deeper comprehension of subjects taught (National Education Association, 2002b). This conclusion, however, should be weighed against the data from Ehrenberg and Brewer (1995) and Ferguson (1998) which reported a positive relationship between teacher verbal abilities and student test scores. Perhaps inherent verbal aptitude of a given teacher has as much to do with student achievement as does advanced education and training. Perhaps teachers with advanced verbal aptitude have a higher rate of passage of the NBPTS than do teachers with lower verbal aptitude. And, finally, perhaps teachers with higher verbal aptitude are more inclined to take the challenge of the NBPTS in the first place.

The Future of Board Certification

The debate on the effectiveness of National Board Certification for all teachers will continue in coming years. We do not propose to enter this debate nor to question the legitimacy or the need for a National Board Certification process in general. As Philip Bigler (2000) states, “most people cannot do what teachers do daily - walk into a classroom and motivate, engage, and teach young people. Society must learn to respect the teaching profession; educators must advance its cause” (p. 49). National Board Certification is a step in the right direction for elevating teaching as a profession. Teaching special needs students, however, is a highly complex process. In this regard, it can almost be considered a separate profession from teaching in the general education classroom. Thus, we ask, can an external set of “standards” organized within the framework of national certification be established for the broad spectrum of disabilities education?

Special Education: A Complex Profession

In *Disability and Democracy* (1995), Thomas Skrtic provides a definition of professionalism:

A profession is an autonomous community of members who, through strong socialization and common exposure to a body of specialized knowledge and skills, share a perspective on the world, their work and their clients, and themselves . . . Professionalization produces individuals who are certain that they both know and do what is best for their client . . . (p. 11)

The nature of professional work is by definition complex, and few professions are as complex as special education. The complexity of the

client (child with a disability) and the service delivery options which presently exist in the field of special education impose a spectrum of demands that are so complex in nature that even to train professionals at the beginning level of credentialing who 'are certain that they both know and do what is best for their client' is significantly daunting. As Pugach (1996) noted, "More than anything, it is [special education professors'] unique function to prepare teachers to be accountable for the education of students identified as having disabilities" (p. 240). Anyone involved in the credentialing process for special education is acutely aware of the multiple dynamics of the various types of disabilities, the degrees of disabilities within each type, and the difficult programmatic aspects of where, how, and what kind of services are delivered to maximize a child's potential for learning. Considering that the performance of many special education students with severe disabilities is at times difficult if not impossible to measure, and often far below that of typically achieving students, this accountability is strained when advanced certification requires teachers to show evidence of their teaching effectiveness.

As an illustrative example, consider the area of emotional disturbances. Individuals with mild to moderate degrees of emotional instability (mild depression, behavior disorders, attention deficit disorders) need a totally different set of services than those with serious degrees of emotional disability (violent, bipolar, schizophrenic). Compounding the problem is the Federal mandate to deliver academic, as well as a socialization content to these individuals, as prescribed by an individualized education plan (IEP). Finally, there is the issue of fulfilling the spirit as well as the letter of the IEP in various schooling settings. At the mild levels of this particular disability, the delivery will probably be within the context of a general education setting. At the more extreme levels of this disability, the delivery might be in a more restrictive setting, perhaps even a psychiatric hospital environment.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) currently identifies 13 specific types of disabilities that can occur alone or in combination. As with the students in the example above, each type or combination of disability presents a continuum of degrees of severity. Each of the degrees of severity, in turn, imposes a unique set of demands on the delivery of services. The delivery of services considered within the construct of the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and the IDEA mandate for considering inclusive placement in the general education setting also represent an infinite set of options related to teacher competence in the area of environmental settings. Finally, there are the academic, social, behavioral, vocational, and other types of Designated Instructional Services (DIS) articulated within the Individualized Educa-

tion Plan (IEP) that the special education teacher must account for in his or her daily routine of teaching and educating individuals with disabilities.

In addition to the complexities of teaching in a “pull-out” special education environment, the dynamics of inclusive special education present yet another set of dimensions. To reiterate our point, it is one thing to be able to teach algebra to a given student in the 10th grade; it is an entirely different thing to deliver these competencies to an individual with moderate emotional problems in an inclusive setting, while collaborating with the general education teacher and perhaps a paraprofessional, and also adjusting the service delivery to accommodate the socializing demands of student peers. Not only must cognitive abilities be considered, but developmental and psychological dynamics must also be accounted for in the planning and delivery process. These factors compound the already strained demands on teachers to adjust the teaching process to account for the age and ability level of a given child whose learning is not mitigated by a disability.

The profession itself is one of balancing a myriad of dynamics of a highly complex nature. If a statistical model were designed to account for these complexities it would be a factorial design composed of 13 degrees of disability, by an infinite number of service delivery settings, by an infinite number of IEP demands ($13 \times N \times N$) for each child. The compounded nature of the degree of disability, the academic and social curricular demands, and the environmental settings of service delivery all portend a dilemma for identifying specific types of advanced competencies for an advanced type of credential in Special Education, such as one proposed by the National Board. It is similar to the complexities of the human genome project. We contend that not only would the set of competencies which truly reflect the nature of the “work” of the special education teacher need to be extensive, but the ability of all teachers taking the exams to operationalize the competencies required across this range of student and settings would be intimidating.

Another area unique to special education and the idea of a set of advanced competencies designed to enhance professionalism is the excessive burnout and attrition rate of special education teachers. Singer (1993) reported that the yearly attrition rate for special educators was as high as 10% per year for the first six years of employment for beginning special education teachers. The average length of stay in special education was six years. In addition, Billingsley (1993) found that special education teachers experience the burnout-attrition phenomenon at a much earlier rate than do general education teachers. Interestingly, it has been noted that teachers of students identified as gifted and talented tend to experience almost no burnout-attrition.

The specific issue with burnout and attrition is related to the interaction of experience and the process of advanced competency certification. The major benefit of advanced training and specialization is an artifact of reflecting and engaging in the assessment process only when there is an accumulated repository of wisdom from which to reflect. The NBPTS assessment process is more beneficial to an experienced professional who has been seasoned and tempered by the dynamics of teaching a number of students over a number of years, than it is to a rookie teacher lacking in the wisdom of experience. Sadly, with the high rate of attrition in the field of special education, the opportunity to benefit from being engaged in advanced training, such as is involved in the NBPTS, is mitigated by the fact that many teachers drop out of the field of special education too early in their career paths to gain the necessary wisdom that could benefit from advanced training.

A final consideration is the danger that a National Certification process will hinder growth in the field. In his critique of special education, Skrtic (1995) proposed that the institutionalized profession of special education operates under basic assumptions that “*disability is a pathological condition*, differential diagnosis is objective and useful, the current system of special education benefits students, and that special education instruction is a rational-technical process of incremental improvements in conventional diagnostic and instructional practices” (p. 75; italics added). However, he argues, if special education is to improve and grow as a profession, these assumptions *must* be challenged if we are to change the public perception of our profession as one formed to “contain the failure of public education” (Skrtic, 1991, p. 24). We argue that if the current profession of special education that is inherently complex and difficult to codify is legitimized through a National Board Certification process, these faulty assumptions will be reinforced and our profession will stagnate.

Any new or innovative approach in education that interferes with, or gives the impression of having the potential to interfere with, established traditions will always encounter resistance. This is simply an artifact of the change process (Fullan, 2001). We will consent to the point that advanced competencies are extremely valuable since they offer the potential to complement the entire teaching process and enhance the professionalization of the field of special education. However, we are not sure if special education itself can be codified into an advanced set of competencies, nor if special educators would benefit from the process to such a degree as to render the process worthwhile. On the political front, however, it may be worthwhile to the extent that such a process of advanced competence and the prestige of having National Board Certi-

fication might enhance the public image of the overall profession and bring about higher salaries and a more unified process of credentialing competence between the states. All of these support and benefit the teacher and, thus, appear to be worth the price of this process. In sum, we believe that National Board Certification is beneficial to the teaching profession at large, but for special education needs to be reconceptualized and reframed to allow for the flexibility to accommodate the unique nature of this profession.

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