

Teacher Certification as Personal and Professional Development

In considering the merits of the national teacher certification effort, I would like to look at the problem from two angles. First, I would like to describe my highest hopes for the current National Board of Professional Teaching Standards Early Adolescence/English Language Arts (NBPTS EA/ELA) certification process. Then I will look at some of the factors that could undermine the potential benefits that a national teaching certificate can have on the profession. A project of this type can transform both the people who go through the process and the profession as a whole; this transformation helps to explain why efforts of this type inevitably run into problems. My goal is to encourage middle school teachers to support the project as long as it retains its current integrity.

My Background in the NBPTS EA/ELA Project

Prior to my entry into the process, the NBPTS project had completed three major stages. A committee developed a set of standards that described exemplary English/English language arts teaching at the middle school level. Next, a group centered at the University of Pittsburgh spent several years developing assessment tasks that served "as opportunities for individuals to create knowledge in a recursive process involving them in teaching, in reflection on teaching, and in critical reflections on professional issues" (Petrosky, 1994, p. 30); the tasks also allowed them to reveal their performance in light of the NBPTS standards. The third step involved a pilot group of nearly 250 teachers completing these tasks as the first candidates for NBPTS certification.

At that point, two groups submitted bids to get the assessment contract for determining how candidates had performed on these tasks in light of the standards. I was brought in as an outside critic to help evaluate and make a recommendation about which bid to accept for the NBPTS EA/ELA assessment contract. At that time I had no history with the project and no idea that I would have a future with it. I must confess that I was suspicious of standards projects at that point because I believe that good teaching can be accomplished in a variety of ways, and that good teaching in one context is not necessarily good teaching in another. I therefore entered my role as a skeptic, and hope that I have maintained a critical stance throughout my subsequent involvement in the project.

The panel that I worked with in evaluating the assessment bids recommended accepting the proposal submitted by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), noting that it had the best potential for being developed into a workable assessment tool. ETS was sufficiently impressed with the panel's critique of their own bid that their project director requested our participation in their subsequent development of an assessment vehicle to score the first group of candidates to go through the NBPTS EA/ELA certification process. I then worked for ten months with a reconstructed version of the panel to develop a means of evaluating these first candidates.

This project is, in the eyes of many, corrupt and harmful to the profession. While it is undoubtedly problematic, I have come to believe that the project can serve as a landmark in developing and promoting professional standards among teachers.



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well-publicized reward system for teaching in ways that bring the standards alive in classrooms.

The NBPTS standards document describes one vision of exemplary teaching, one that is strongly grounded in Deweyan progressivism. No one is saying that this is the only possible way of teaching effectively. In some situations, other approaches are no doubt appropriate and effectual. The NBPTS is not trying to impose a narrow view of teaching on the profession, but rather is offering to certify those who teach effectively according to the standards they have outlined. If other views of teaching are seen as exemplary by other groups (I imagine that E. D. Hirsh would disapprove of those developed by the NBPTS), then they can develop their own certification efforts.

Let's assume then that the vision presented in the standards is understood by administrators and they support teachers' efforts to seek NBPTS certification. What benefits accrue to the teachers who go through the process, aside from the possible glamour of getting certified? In my view, if the product—that is, certification—is all that matters, then the certification effort will not achieve its own goals, and in fact will perform in contradiction to the vision of learning presented in the standards themselves. To me, the process is primarily worthwhile if it changes the people who go through it. And I strongly believe that, with continued revision of the tasks presented to candidates, this certification can be an important source of professional development. I have come to embrace an *instrumental* view of education; that is, I believe that the real value of education is how a person grows through experiencing the process of engagement and through making things that are important to them. In this view, what really matters is how educational experiences change people in terms of their cognitive and emotional complexity.

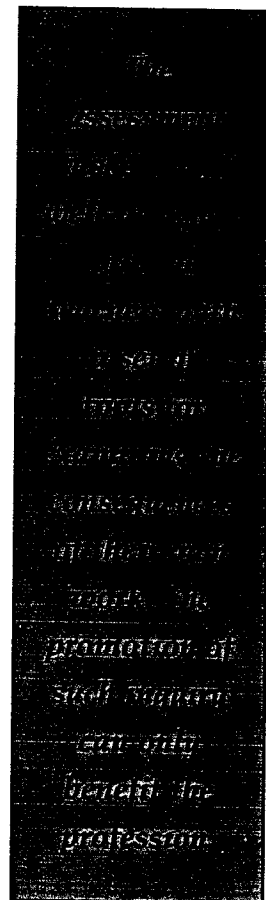
In simple terms, this view favors process over product. For the NBPTS certification project to work, the people who go through the certification process must change in ways that they recognize as beneficial. If certifica-

tion only serves to separate the grain from the chaff—a typical goal of this sort of assessment and seemingly a goal of any assessment effort that emerges from school critics outside education—then I feel it ought to be abandoned. “Rewarding good teachers” is often cited as a goal of merit programs. In my view, “transforming teaching” is a more worthwhile goal for a national certification effort.

The instrumental view of the certification process would see it as a form of teacher research. The tasks require candidates to present a facet of their teaching and then reflect intensely on it. They need to articulate how their teaching meets the standards and then present evidence to support their claim. In doing so, they must be highly reflective about their instruction over an extended period of time, and that, in the best of all possible worlds, will cause them to reconsider how they teach. The likely result is growth through the process of reflection and change. I have recently argued (Smagorinsky, 1995) that good research is actually a form of good teaching because the process of conducting research changes those involved, and that good teaching is a form of research because it consists of inquiry into how people learn. I strongly believe that the NBPTS certification effort can promote the teaching-research relationship in ways that will make research more a process of teaching, and make teaching more a process of research. The assessment tasks can, if well-designed, provide teachers with a set of tools for examining the consequences of their own work. The promotion of such inquiry can only benefit the profession.

NBPTS Teacher Certification: A Worst-Case Scenario

When I remove my rose-colored glasses, I see a project fraught with potential for uncertainty and ineffectiveness. The NBPTS effort has thus far been an easy target for critics who dislike standards efforts in general, who strongly dislike ETS and resent its role in the process, and who have not been



involved in this effort and feel left out of the power and privilege associated with granting national certificates. Furthermore, with fewer than half of the candidates likely to be granted certification, resentments are inevitable. Problems can potentially untrack the certification effort and make the ideal scenario I have outlined less likely to be achieved.

Problems can develop from both within the project and without. Within the project, the greatest threat—at least to my own hopes for certification process—lies in its emphasis. If the project seeks only to create a gulf between “good” and “bad” teachers, then I think it will lose credibility within the profession even as it gains credibility without. The emphasis must remain on *developing all teachers* rather than on recognizing an elite tier of already competent teachers.

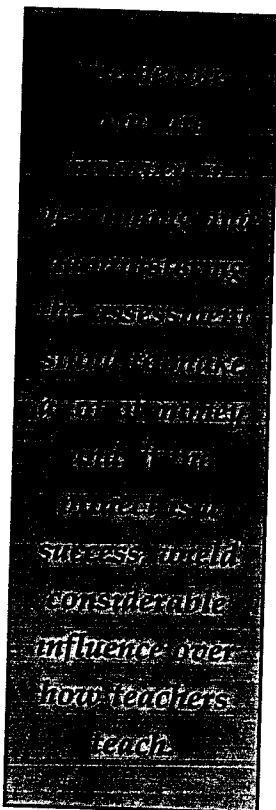
A second threat to the success of the project might come through efforts to sabotage it during its development. In *The Right Stuff*, Tom Wolfe described the public reaction to some of the tragedies in the space program. When a rocket or space capsule would explode, many people would say that NASA should be abandoned because of the obvious incompetence of the rocket scientists. Yet Wolfe reported that pilots and astronauts understood that prototypes always have problems that can only be identified by test runs, some of which have tragic endings; explosions are an inevitable part of the formative process, rather than indications of failure, and should serve to inform the development of the next stage of the process.

I see a similar situation with the NBPTS effort. This certification project is the first large-scale effort to identify and promote good teaching. As such it will have problems at every stage of development. Like the celebrated NASA disasters, some of the problems will be spectacular and result in calls for the abandonment of the effort. In my view, this is short-sighted and does not recognize the erratic performance of all prototypes. Without developing and testing the prototype, we never advance to the more sophisticated and efficient vehicles that are

the goal of all long-term, complex projects. All of the smooth-running machines that we now take for granted required a lot of crash-testing before being made available to the public. The NBPTS is being piloted in the field, and therefore its problems will be visible and subject to much scrutiny. I think that this scrutiny is necessary in order for the project to be developed responsibly; I hope, however, that problems in development are not taken as reasons to abandon the effort altogether.

Another problem I see threatening the success of this project is the dispute over power and authority that it has engendered. This is a big project. The results of the initial NBPTS certifications have made it into the national press, with front page stories appearing on the nation's biggest newspapers. The people who are involved in developing and administering the assessment stand to make a lot of money and, if the project is a success, wield considerable influence over how teachers teach. Becoming a “player” in national certification efforts is now important to people in terms of their egos, reputations, and bank accounts. People on the inside are happy to be there; people on the outside wonder why they're not included. The stakes are very high, and the discussion of who gets to be involved, and how they have been selected, has at times become nasty.

Problems like this are inevitable and not amenable to easy solutions. Opening up the process to be all-inclusive is the most democratic approach, but including everyone means that there will never be a consensus. The process of including all teachers would be unwieldy and unproductive, and from what I've seen, there is no way that the range of teachers practicing in the profession could agree on what the standards are or how we should determine if someone has met them. Perhaps limiting the discussion to those who are members of NCTE would make consensus more likely (though still unlikely), yet it would be just as undemocratic as the current system of having limited involvement; by restricting involvement to NCTE members, we would



be silencing the voices of the ditto masters, worksheet warriors, and scantron scions who seem to populate many of the schools I've visited, and who presumably have just as important a voice as the most Deweyan of progressives.

The current system seems to be undemocratic (i.e., limited in number and unelected), although it is, at least in theory, representative: small groups of reputable people are selected to (ideally) represent the various perspectives available across the profession, or at least across the profession as represented in NCTE-sponsored activities. These small groups of people thus can develop professional standards and assessment vehicles with relative swiftness, and presumably do so while representing the views of people like them. And I have been uniformly impressed with the knowledge, insights, and work ethic of the people who've been selected to develop this project. Could groups made up of different people perform with equal capability? Undoubtedly. The question and answer speak to the heart of the problem: Why are these people the anointed ones? Why not me?

The problem is no doubt irresolvable. The more streamlined the process, the more efficient it is; yet the smaller the groups involved, the more exclusive it appears and the more the process is likely to result in power struggles within the community over who gets control.

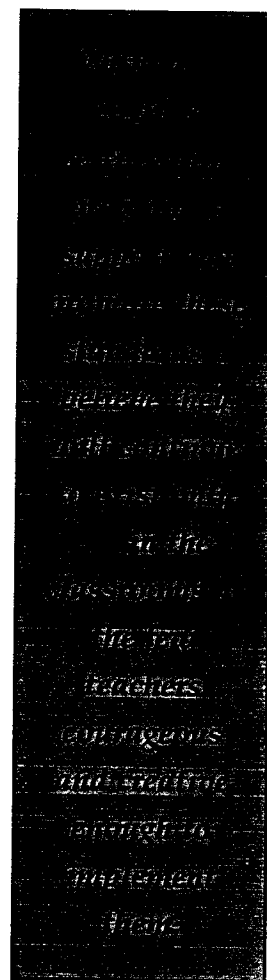
The involvement of ETS in the assessment is a problem for many people. Yet this assessment is different from the types of tests that most people associate with ETS. Tests like the SAT assess a great number of people at a low cost, and therefore cannot evaluate the nuances in a person's capabilities. The NBPTS assessment is offered to a limited number of candidates at a very high cost, and therefore is able to provide a glimpse into the complexity of teaching. The work of ETS on this job, then, has nothing to do with their efforts at standardized pencil-and-paper testing, and should be considered separately from their more familiar work.

Why Standards? Two Final Reasons

This project is not perfect. But I am convinced that this standards project represents a major step in moving teaching towards a student-centered approach which, as Larry Cuban clearly demonstrates, schools have rarely been structured to support or sustain. In my view, if we don't attempt to move ahead with this project and give it time to develop, then we cannot expect to change the climate that works against the promotion of an instrumental, learner-oriented pedagogy. With an external reward system in place, acting as a tail that wags the institutional dog, there is hope that an alternative vision of teaching can supplant the authoritarian schooling practices that have always dominated American schools.

I have two final reasons for hoping that this change takes place. One is that I have devoted almost half of my life to public education, and haven't seen it change much during that time. We need something dramatic to effect "reform" as envisioned by the standards, and this project is the best hope I have seen thus far. I believe it's worth trying a sustained effort towards developing this project into the best assessment possible.

My second reason is my daughter and son, who are now in elementary school. Before long they will be middle school students, and I want them to learn from teachers who meet the vision of quality instruction described in the NBPTS EA/ELA standards. Without a credible certification program to support and promote these standards, I believe they will continue to exist only on the pulpits of professional conferences, in the pages of unread journals, and in the classrooms of the few teachers courageous and creative enough to implement them, remaining unknown and unimportant to the legions of teachers who populate our nation's classrooms. This certification project isn't perfect, but it's the best one we've got. Its goal is to provide a process through which we can improve our own performance as teachers. I think it deserves our support.



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