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ABSTRACT

The 1996 report "What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future" features a 3-part proposal which consists of teacher education program accreditation, initial teacher licensing, and advanced certification based upon a set of shared knowledge, skills, and commitments for professional teaching. A study explored one facet of this proposed framework for the improvement of teaching: the pursuit of accomplished teaching practice and advanced certification as defined by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. The study focused on the certification process as experienced by five teacher candidates, veterans in the subject area of English Language Arts, and further, described the network of support provided for those candidates in their school district through professional development coursework, team meetings of candidates, and mentoring by a National Board certified member. Data gathering and analysis occurred simultaneously over a 5-month period in a midwestern urban school district with a magnet school system. The study was conducted using qualitative methods, particularly participant observation, group meetings, the semi-structured interview, and document analysis. Findings suggest that a variety of mentoring forms emerged from the data as supporting the candidacy of this group of teachers. Team talk, which predominated, centered on: format and requirements of the portfolio; reflection on current and future practice; support from multiple sources; and the writing process required by this new genre of representing practice in the portfolio. There appears to be some evidence that the experiences of National Board candidates working with a team with a National Board certified teacher as mentor created a learning community of teachers. (NKA)

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Toward a Professional Development Community: A Descriptive Study of the Experiences of National Board Candidates

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Toward a Professional Development Community:
A Descriptive Study of the Experiences of National Board Candidates

In a truly rational society, the best of us would be teachers, and the rest would have to settle for something less. (Lee Iacocca, cited in *The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future*, 1996).

In recent years, there has been growing concern regarding the quality of public education, and the recognition that the most important element in the improvement of student learning is accomplished teaching (Darling-Hammond, 1998). The National Commission on Teaching & America's Future in its 1996 report, *What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future*, propose a "three-legged stool of teacher quality" to guide teacher learning across the career. Their proposal consists of teacher education program accreditation, initial teacher licensing, and advanced certification based upon a set of shared knowledge, skills and commitments for professional teaching. This study explores one facet of this proposed framework for the improvement of teaching: the pursuit of accomplished teaching practice and advanced certification as defined by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

The National Board was instituted in 1987 to establish rigorous standards and assessments for certifying accomplished teaching. The Board's evaluation of candidates consists of a year-long portfolio that illustrates teaching through lesson plans, samples of student work over time, videotapes, and reflective analyses of their teaching; and a six hour test of content and pedagogical knowledge. In short, the process requires teachers to document and analyze their practice.

Given the importance of accomplished teaching practice to student learning, the purpose of the present study is to explore the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certification process as experienced by five teacher candidates in the subject area of English Language Arts. Further, this study seeks to describe the network of support provided for these candidates in their school district through professional development coursework, team meetings of candidates, and mentoring by a National Board certified teacher. It is hoped that this study may provide a more complete understanding of the pursuit of accomplished teaching, and the experiences that assist and nurture candidates working toward advanced certification, and more effective practice.

Questions which guided this study are: Are there patterns in the needs and concerns voiced by teacher candidates in the certification process? Are there aspects of the support provided for the candidates that appear to address these needs and concerns, and create a learning community? What is the nature of mentoring in facilitating this process of teacher growth?

A Frame for Thinking About Teaching and Learning

Yinger & Hendricks-Lee (1992) propose the term *ecological intelligence* as a multi-fold systems theory that asserts that knowledge is widely dispersed in systems such as schools. They describe working knowledge as jointly constructed by participants.

This study suggests that ecological intelligence is appropriately applied to the complex system of National Board certification. Teacher candidacy is facilitated through the interaction of the knowledge systems of Board standards and portfolio requirements; the context of teaching; peer discussion and mentor modeling and advocacy.

Some Ideas From the Literature

Due to the relative newness of this teaching reform, there is little research at the present time regarding the nature and effects of the pursuit of advanced certification in teaching. Yinger (1998) proposes that standards such as those created by the National Board are a way to professionalize teaching. Burroughs, Hendricks-Lee and Roe (1998) suggest that the National Board standards indeed provide a national discourse about teaching, and as such are critical in creating a discourse community of practice. In their research, however, some teachers found it difficult to enter this discourse, especially in terms of representing their knowledge about practice in writing. Further, candidates varied in their response to and utilization of professional coursework designed to support and assist candidates in their pursuit of certification.

These findings regarding support structures are echoed by Wilson (1999) who found that:

Formal support structures can be constructed to provide the needed collaboration and mentoring. They must, however, take into account the real needs of candidates and the understanding of the stages of concern that these participants experience. Adequate time, freedom from responsibility, and trusted collaborators are major needs. (p. 18).

Wilson, however, found little evidence of change in practice and discourse as a result of pursuing National certification. It is interesting to note that half of her informants worked independently with limited interaction with other candidates.

Also a new area of inquiry is the nature of mentoring in the development of accomplished teaching. Hawkey (1997), in her review of the literature at this time, suggests that mentoring relationships are extremely complex. In addition to teaching skills

and competencies to be developed, there are a host of interpersonal and contextual factors that color the mentoring relationship and the growth of the mentee. She suggests the establishment of principles of mentoring, with attention to appropriate support systems and challenges for the teachers involved. These findings, based on over sixty studies of mentoring relationships, appear to reinforce the constructs of the need for local ecological intelligence (Yinger & Hendricks-Lee, 1992), common language (Burroughs, Hendricks-Lee & Roe, 1998), and support systems that provide feedback (Wilson, 1999).

Method

This study was conducted using qualitative methods, particularly participant observation, the semi-structured interview, group meetings and document analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Data gathering and analysis occurred simultaneously over a five month period.

Context of the Study

The site selected for this study was a large urban school district in the Midwest, where a magnet school system has been in place for over fifteen years. The district piloted the National Board certification effort, and has a series of professional development courses in place to support candidates, as well as financial incentives for both pursuing and achieving certification. These courses are held in the district's teacher center, and meet bimonthly to support the development of candidates' teaching portfolios.

Informants. The subjects in this study were five veteran English Language Arts teachers who chose to pursue National Board certification. Their experience ranged from five to nineteen years in teaching; three were female and two male; and one was an African American candidate. Three taught in the same high school which was considered a magnet

school in the district, and two taught in neighborhood schools. In addition, the magnet school in this study was involved in a university-school partnership as a Professional Practice School whose focus was the induction of novice teachers. All informants taught in schools which were over 80% minority, and where 50% of students met the Title I definition of poverty.

These five subjects formed a team of teachers with a National Board certified teacher as facilitator and mentor. They worked together over a five month period at the bimonthly professional development sessions, with each of the five candidates meeting individually with the mentor as needed.

Design and Procedures

The study began with entrance interviews and reflective writing by the five subjects regarding their views of the National certification process, and of their expectations of mentoring in assisting them in completing the portfolio. The bimonthly meetings (8 total) of the five subjects and their mentor were audio-tape recorded as they discussed and developed their products. Portfolio drafts and mentor feedback were photocopied for analysis. Each subject met once or more individually with the mentor to discuss their progress, and field notes were taken. Final drafts of the five portfolios were photocopied, and exit interviews were conducted with the candidates to discuss their experience of the process, and the aspects of the support provided which they deemed most helpful.

Data analysis. Content analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) was used to interpret the data in three areas critical to understanding the development of accomplished teaching practice through the National Board process: patterns in the needs and concerns of the candidates, venues of support and the nature of mentoring in providing the support

necessary to meet those needs. Data sources were coded for similarities and differences in informants' perceptions, document portrayals and participant observations for these three areas.

In addition, the team of five candidates and their mentor met twice to review the findings of the research. A university research team also interrogated the data and offered additional insight regarding the experiences of the candidates, and the nature of mentoring that occurred. Notes were taken at these meetings, with subsequent modifications of the results.

The findings of this study thus reflect triangulation of findings (Bodgan & Biklen, 1992). Multiple sources of data (field notes, documents, interviews, meeting transcriptions) as well as multiple perspectives in data analysis (participant, researcher, research team) support the findings of this study.

Narrative of Findings

This narrative of findings proceeds in three interwoven sections. First, the work of the professional team of National Board candidates was interrogated to establish the venues of advocacy and mentoring which the team utilized, and found supportive of their candidacy. Second team talk, as evidenced in the transcripts of team meetings and written feedback on portfolio drafts, is categorized and discussed. Finally, the nature of mentoring of accomplished teachers is hypothesized, as evidenced by the interactions of the team with each other and their mentor over the course of the study.

Venues of Advocacy and Mentoring

A variety of mentoring forms emerged from the data as supporting the candidacy of this group of teachers. Interestingly, the activities of the group and exit interviews suggest that both mentor and peer interaction provided valuable support and feedback for candidates. One candidate states:

The mentoring process-including the candidate/teacher mentee group- helped me get through the NB portfolio process by being a constant in the year long process. We met regularly to encourage one another and to critique writings.

Ten categories of advocacy and mentoring were identified: biweekly National Board team meetings; Professional Practice School team meetings; “Small Hall Conversations” (both mentor-mentee and peer); individual meetings with the mentor; peer videotaping and technical support; oral peer feedback from both candidate team and non-team teachers; phone time with mentor and peers; individual written feedback from mentor and peers; modeling by the mentor of both written and video portfolio pieces; and the nature of this action research project, which brought to the foreground for all participants the issue of mentoring through the initial surveys, interviews and consent forms.

Emerging Categories of Team Talk

In addition to venues of mentoring, specific categories of team talk emerged from the transcripts of team meetings and individual mentoring sessions. Initial coding of this data included format of the portfolio, the meaning of National Board standards, what “counts” as evidence to support that one’s practice meets the standards; sharing teaching ideas emerging from the portfolio, time management, Professional Practice School issues, and the punctuation of the team discourse about teaching and leaning with discussion of the teams’ families.

These initial categories were collapsed into four areas: format and requirements of the portfolio, reflection on current and future practice, support from multiple sources and the writing process required by this new genre of representing practice in the portfolio.

Format. The team talk which predominated in the early and final transcripts of team meetings center on the format of the portfolio and its specific requirements. This included problematic areas such as citing artifacts, equipment and personnel to do videotaping, and creating time to work on the portfolio. Also critical to the team in this area was the provision of sample entries by the mentor:

A candidate needs support in understanding the directions to fulfill the portfolio requirements. Being able to watch someone else's (a NBC teacher's) video portfolio is helpful. Looking through, reading a successful writing helps to "see" the standards. Even adult learners need visual examples of what the finished product might look like to help validate ideas the learner is formulating.

In addition, candidates found peer entries and critiques invaluable regarding format and content. All candidates reported being "saved" by a peer who noticed an obscure requirement of the portfolio directions and then sharing the information with the team. Further, team members videotaped one another, and gave thumbs up or down regarding video quality and content in the team meetings.

Reflection. All informants, including the mentor, report that the portfolio process demanded intense reflection on their teaching practice. This is not at all surprising, as each portfolio piece requires a reflective entry. What is interesting, however, is that the team process appeared to extend this reflection into change in practice. Several informants discuss incorporating colleagues ideas in their current and future classrooms, as

well as recognizing weaknesses in personal teaching methods as a result of engagement in portfolio writing:

I don't take written notes during conferences and that's something I might change next year...which was another strong aspect of this. I mean, examining your teaching so closely, it allows you to think about next year and plan and how can I do the same thing more effectively...And when you are forced to do something like this, your brain is forced to think about those things and you come up with solutions that, I think ordinarily, teachers wouldn't bother to come up with. They wouldn't sit around and think about their teaching like that.

Interestingly, this reflection is facilitated both by the portfolio process and by the "sit around and think about their teaching" process of team meetings.

Support. The category of support is discussed in two ways in the data: peer and mentor. As in the two aforementioned categories, both modes of support appeared invaluable to the informants.

Peer support occurred both within the candidate team and outside the group. Within group support included oral and written feedback on drafts and videos, technical support in videotaping, formatting and meeting portfolio deadlines, and a strong relationships and rapport that developed over time as candidates worked together through the year-long process. Sharing regarding time management; strategies to juggle family, teaching and portfolio; and "team whining" appeared to assist candidates in completing the task through an "we're all in this together" support system.

In addition to the team, candidates report strong support systems for portfolio completion in other aspects of their lives. All spouses served as readers, and two did most of the typing for the candidate. In addition, teaching colleagues not working on certification provided written and oral feedback for candidates, and videotaped. One

candidate shared student writing samples with other English teachers in her department, drawing in other perspectives to help her complete the process.

Mentor support of the candidates provided both focus and praise for candidate efforts. Focus included setting and distributing an agenda for team meetings which reiterated the requirements and standards of the portfolio piece under discussion, clarifying the directions in the portfolio guide, as well as providing samples of her own portfolio.

Interestingly, the feedback which emerges as critical from the mentor is not so much criticism of candidate efforts, but rather praise of the areas candidates have represented clearly, and questions posed to the candidate in areas of their writing which needed elaboration.

Finally, the fact that the mentor was a National Board certified teacher appeared especially important to the candidates:

A National Board certified teacher lends credibility to the mentoring process by sharing their personal experience and expertise in successfully completing the NB process. I think only a teacher who has participated in the assessment of portfolios might also be able to mentor somewhat successfully.

Peer and mentor support, then, appear critical to candidates. This support, in the variety of forms discussed, appeared to serve to “reflect back” to participants their perspective on the candidate’s teaching. This interactive process emerges as important to candidate learning.

Writing. The final category of team talk revolved around candidate discussion of the writing process required by the portfolio. Candidates struggled with what “counts” as evidence that one’s practice meets the standards of accomplished teaching. Discussion of

how to sample and reference student work in their writing also appeared problematic. Candidate attitudes about writing emerge in conversation, with candidates expressing renewed understanding of their own students difficulties in starting and completing writing tasks. Finally, candidates report struggling with representing their practice in writing, wanting someone to “come in and watch my class for a year” rather than write about their classroom performance and interactions.

The Nature of Mentoring Accomplished Teachers

The final area addressed by the data appears to be the nature of mentoring which occurred over this five month period. As expressed in the emerging categories of team talk, there appears to be some evidence that the nature of mentoring accomplished teachers is both peer and “expert” driven. Candidates discuss both peer and mentor feedback as invaluable. Team-based mentoring, where advocacy is distributed among the members, may be an avenue of exploration for creating and sustaining learning communities of teachers. However, such teamwork required the focus of the language of the standards and the task of portfolio completion. This common language and mission of the group appeared to sustain the learning and interaction of the group.

Conclusions and Implications

In conclusion, there appears to be some evidence that the experiences of National Board candidates working with a team with a National Board certified teacher as mentor created a learning community of teachers. The nature of the team-based mentoring provided by peers and facilitator were reported as integral to portfolio completion and quality. In addition, this model appears to address the need to provide the ecological intelligence (Yinger & Hendricks-Lee, 1992) necessary to meet the standards of

accomplished teaching asserted by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. The multiple perspectives and contexts of team members provided a window on the complexities of teaching, and how one goes about representing those complexities in writing, and in this case, on video. An additional advantage for this team was the opportunity for school district networking as the candidates taught at three different schools, yet with a common curriculum. Finally, the nature of mentoring that appeared most beneficial and valued by veteran teachers is a relationship where all participants contribute to the practice of other team members. This reciprocal advocacy created in the National Board candidate team may serve as a model for the creation and maintaining of learning communities of teachers.

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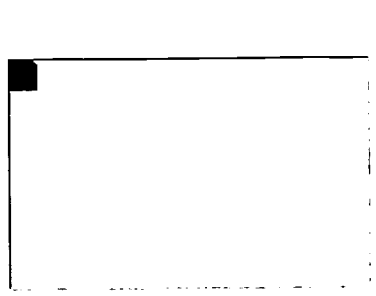
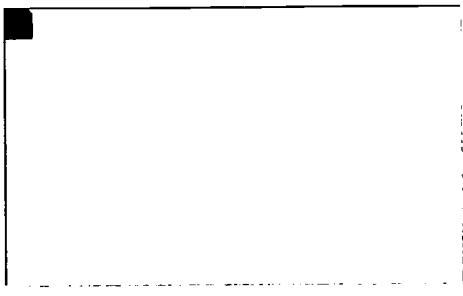
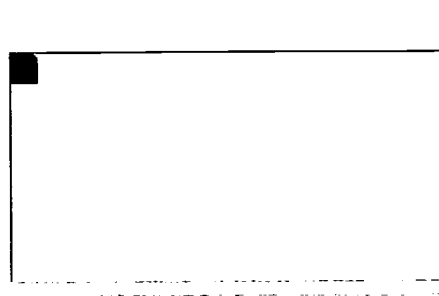



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Candidates


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