

The Leverage of National Board Candidacy:

An Exploration of Teacher Learning

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Abstract

The vast majority of teachers who engage in the process of National Board certification describe it as the best professional development they have ever experienced – even when they do not achieve the certification. Learning leverage, an interactive dynamic characterized by rigor, reward, and risk, is what makes the certification process such a powerful learning experience for teachers. The leverage of National Board candidacy is an uncomfortable yet positive pressure that usually leads to substantial teacher learning. It occurs naturally among National Board candidates, but varies from individual to individual.

This article explores research on teacher learning as it occurs through the process of National Board candidacy, then introduces and illustrates the concept of learning leverage based on the experiences of three teachers who pursued NBPTS certification during the 2004-2005 school year. By understanding learning leverage as it occurs through the process of National Board candidacy, teachers considering the pursuit of NBPTS certification can approach the process better prepared for a successful certification experience.

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) was established over 20 years ago. Since 1987, over 120,000 teachers across the United States have voluntarily completed the certification process and 63,821 have become National Board certified (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards [NBPTS], 2008). In order to earn National Board certification, a teacher must demonstrate accomplished teaching practices through four multifaceted portfolio entries and a challenging written assessment. The entire process takes one to three years, during which time candidates dedicate an extensive 200 to 400 clock hours to the endeavor (Boyd & Reese, 2006; NBPTS, 2008).

The vast majority of teachers who engage in this unique certification process describe it as the best professional development they have ever experienced – even when they do not achieve the certification. What makes National Board candidacy such a powerful learning experience for teachers? The key is *learning leverage* – an interactive dynamic characterized by rigor, reward, and risk.

This article explores research on teacher learning as it occurs through the process of National Board candidacy, then introduces and illustrates the concept of learning leverage based on the experiences of three teachers who pursued NBPTS certification during the 2004-2005 school year. By understanding learning leverage as it occurs through the process of National Board candidacy, teachers considering the pursuit of NBPTS certification can approach the process better prepared for a successful certification experience.

Characteristics of National Board Candidacy that Promote Teacher Learning

Research identifies several characteristics that make the pursuit of National Board certification such a powerful form of professional development for teachers. For example, the certification process provides a framework for self-evaluation, a benchmark for accomplished

teaching, and a structure for examining teaching practice through evidence and artifacts (Sato, 2000). In addition, it engages teachers in active learning by connecting teaching standards to classroom instruction, promoting collaboration between teachers, demanding persistence in the midst of challenge, and requiring a high degree of accountability (Chittenden & Jones, 1997). Further, high levels of teacher learning are sustained throughout the certification experience due to a combination of structure, through the NBPTS standards, and pressure, through the task of portfolio completion (Keiffer-Barone, Mulvaney, Hillman, and Parker, 1999).

Candidate Interaction with the NBPTS Discourse

Research also demonstrates that National Board candidacy is dynamic since its processes are dependent on teacher interaction with NBPTS standards, expectations, and requirements. As candidates read the NBPTS descriptions of accomplished teaching, apply research-based teaching practices in their classrooms, select samples to represent their overall teaching performance, and engage in the ongoing process of reflection and analysis, they interact with the discourse of the National Board (Burroughs, Schwartz, & Hendricks-Lee, 2000). This interaction customizes teacher learning as it occurs through the NBPTS certification experience.

Two recent studies indicate that candidates' interactions with the NBPTS discourse affect the nature and degree of learning that occurs during National Board candidacy. The first study describes variations in teacher learning based on four different candidate types (Lustick, 2002).

Type A candidates demonstrate a high degree of alignment with the NBPTS standards before ever beginning the certification process, so their professional practices are affirmed rather than transformed through the certification experience. Although Type A candidates do not learn a great deal through the certification process, they achieve the certification because they are able to authentically demonstrate accomplished teaching.

Type B candidates begin the certification process without close alignment to the National Board standards but make significant changes to their teaching practices during the course of the experience. These candidates learn a great deal through National Board candidacy and achieve certification as a result.

Type C candidates approach the certification process in distant alignment to the standards but demonstrate willingness to learn and grow professionally. Even though these candidates learn a great deal through the process, they are unable to align their teaching practices closely enough to the NBPTS standards to achieve the certification.

Type D candidates are teachers whose professional practice aligns only minimally to the National Board standards at the outset of the certification experience and remains relatively unchanged throughout the process. Type D candidates learn little during National Board candidacy and are not successful in earning the certification.

In a second study exploring the interactive nature of teacher learning during National Board candidacy, Lustick and Sykes (2006) estimate that about 50% of all National Board candidates experience *dynamic learning*, or meaningful, immediate changes in teaching practice, during NBPTS candidacy. An additional 25% of candidates experience *technical learning*, described as utilizing new teaching strategies during candidacy for the sole purpose of earning the certification. The remaining 25% of candidates experience *deferred learning*. Although evidence of deferred learning is not visible during or immediately following the NBPTS certification experience, it encompasses the possibility that new information about accomplished teaching practice may be acted upon at some later time.

A third study, which explores the teaching performance of six teachers who successfully achieved National Board certification, implies that variations in teacher learning during NBPTS

candidacy can be evidenced following the certification experience as well. Pool, Ellett, Schiavone, and Carey-Lewis (2001) observed the classrooms of six National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs) in six different schools within one large school district. Additionally, each NBCT was interviewed, as were administrators and colleagues at each of the six schools, in regard to their impressions of the level of teaching quality exhibited by each NBCT. Surprisingly, the observations and interviews revealed considerable variation in the quality of teaching and learning occurring in the classrooms of the six NBCTs. Two were found to demonstrate outstanding teaching practices, two were determined to be about average, and two were considered by the researchers to be quite ineffective.

To summarize, research articulates that the NBPTS certification experience is characterized by high standards, a structured process of self-evaluation, and a great deal of pressure. Further, studies reveal that candidates approach the certification experience at different levels of readiness, which affects the nature and degree of teacher learning that occurs through the process. A close look at three teachers' NBPTS certification experiences illustrates teacher learning as it occurs during National Board candidacy and provides a basis for introducing the concept of learning leverage.

Three Teachers' NBPTS Certification Experiences

Anne, Barbara, and Jamie, sought NBPTS certification as Middle Childhood Generalists during the 2004-2005 school year. At the time of their National Board candidacy, all three teachers taught in financially healthy, large suburban school districts (Hunzicker, 2006).

Anne

Anne, a fifth grade gifted teacher with 16 years of experience, was ready for a new professional challenge but did not want to leave the school in which she taught. After

withdrawing from the NBPTS certification process a year earlier due to extenuating circumstances, she returned to the pursuit enthusiastic and determined to succeed. During her certification year, Anne persistently strived to improve her teaching practice to more closely align with the NBPTS standards. Reflecting on the experience, she believes that the process positively influenced the teaching and learning that occurred in her classroom despite the fact that she had a very challenging class that year.

More than anything, Anne values the “lens” that the NBPTS literature provided for reflection and analysis. “It made you think about decisions you were making in your classroom instead of just showing up and saying, ‘Okay, let’s start on this chapter today,’” she explains. “Sometimes, I would read the descriptions of accomplished teaching and think, ‘Whew! I’m doing this!’ Other times, I would realize, ‘I don’t do that as often as I should.’ It was a constant reminder.”

Anne achieved National Board certification on her first attempt. Describing the experience as a once-in-a-lifetime endeavor, she thinks that part of her success is due to the fact that she works in a school that expects and encourages creativity on a daily basis. In addition, Anne believes that much of her teaching was in alignment with the NBPTS before she embarked on the certification process, which made it easier for her to successfully complete the requirements. “If you aren’t doing many of the standards already, you have a lot of work cut out for you,” she cautions.

Barbara

Barbara, a fourth grade teacher with 19 years of experience, postponed her pursuit of NBPTS certification for several years because she did not want to take the written assessment. In planning for retirement, she reconsidered. “The state stipend is \$3,000 a year, and my district

pays a percentage of the base salary,” she explains. “I realized that I had the background experience to accomplish it, and that gave me confidence to try.”

Barbara also was motivated toward National Board certification because she believed it would increase her credibility as a teacher. “It will give me free reign in my classroom,” she commented shortly after making the decision to pursue the certification. “If I am NBPTS certified I can say, ‘I am certified in this area, and I feel that this is a better choice.’ It gives me that authority.”

As she completed the NBPTS certification requirements, Barbara sometimes made adaptations to her teaching practice only to complete a particular portfolio requirement, but mostly she relied on the knowledge and experiences she has refined throughout her teaching career. “With the portfolio, it’s not so much trying new strategies as it is learning to reflect on what I’m already doing,” she observed in the middle of her certification year. “As I’m planning the portfolio entries, I’m reading, and when I’m reviewing what I’ve done and writing my analyses, I’m re-checking my professional books, making sure that my goals and objectives are matching up, and reviewing what to look for as I analyze my students’ work. These are things that I wouldn’t be doing if it wasn’t required.”

Barbara also achieved National Board certification on her first attempt. She feels that, because she is an experienced teacher, her scores showcase her teaching ability more than they reflect her learning. She explains, “In order to earn National Board certification, you have to use assessments to guide your teaching and decision-making. If I were a teacher with fewer years under my belt, the portfolio entries would be more of a learning process because I would be questioning my teaching more. However, I was already doing a lot of the things the National

Board expected, so for me it involved showcasing what I already do. The challenge for me was trying to fit what I do into the NBPTS format.”

Jamie

“I wanted to take more graduate courses, but there weren’t any left to take,” recalls Jamie, a fifth grade teacher with 20 years of experience. Then, watching two colleagues complete the NBPTS certification process, she decided to give it a try. However, as she worked toward completion of the certification requirements, she began to question the process. Doubting whether four portfolio entries and a timed assessment could adequately demonstrate a teacher’s knowledge and skill, she began losing confidence that she could successfully showcase her teaching practice through the medium of the NBPTS portfolio. Further, because she felt strongly that the purpose of National Board certification is to demonstrate accomplished teaching, she emphasized only teaching practices and instructional activities that she had previously used in her classroom.

Jamie also felt that the self-reflection emphasis of the process was not as helpful to her as a collaborative sharing experience would have been. “Documenting what I already do was okay, but I would have liked the whole experience more if I’d had a chance to see what other teachers do. Then, I think I would feel like I improved more,” she comments.

Although she believes that she grew professionally during her National Board candidacy, Jamie has difficulty articulating her learning. Reporting that she learned “little things” as a result of the certification process, she reflects at the conclusion of the experience, “It didn’t really improve my teaching like I thought it would.” At the same time, Jamie anticipates that she is likely to be influenced in the future by her NBPTS certification experience. Even so, comparing

the time and effort that she invested to her learning outcomes, she wonders if the process is overrated.

Jamie did not achieve National Board certification at the end of her first year of candidacy. Though she shares that she did not really expect to pass the first year, she was very disappointed when no explanation accompanied her certification results. She points out that, with no examples provided during the certification process and no feedback offered to support her final scores, it is difficult to identify areas of weakness. “It all seems to be a guessing game,” she remarks. “Since I am not sure exactly what I did wrong, I don’t know how to correct my errors.”

The NBPTS certification experiences of Anne, Barbara, and Jamie provide actual examples that begin to illustrate how learning during NBPTS certification can vary from individual to individual. To complete the illustration, the concept of learning leverage is introduced.

The Leverage of National Board Candidacy

Due to the high standards and rigorous requirements of the NBPTS, the prestige of earning National Board certification is substantial. As candidates work to complete the process, they often discover that gaps exist between the National Board standards and their teaching practices. This motivates them to modify their teaching in order to increase their chances of earning the certification (Hunzicker, 2006; Lustick & Sykes, 2006). Through this process, considerable teacher learning occurs. However, the experience is not always comfortable. In fact, many NBPTS candidates describe their certification year as extremely challenging and highly stressful (Burroughs, Schwartz, & Hendricks-Lee, 2000; Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning [CFTL], 2002; Linquanti & Peterson, 2001; Rotberg, Futrell, & Holmes, 2000). This

discomfort is essential to the certification experience because it fuels motivation, which leads to teacher learning (Hunzicker, 2006; Chittenden & Jones, 1997; Keiffer-Barone, et al., 1999).

This distinctive blend of conditions - the rigorous certification requirements, the prestige of becoming National Board certified, and the high levels of challenge and stress – creates the leverage of National Board candidacy, an uncomfortable yet positive pressure that usually leads to substantial teacher learning (Hunzicker, 2006).

Three Dynamics of Leverage: Rigor, Reward, and Risk

The learning leverage that occurs during National Board candidacy consists of three dynamics: rigor, reward, and risk. The first dynamic, *rigor*, embodies the high expectations of the NBPTS. In order to achieve National Board certification, teachers must demonstrate accomplished teaching practice as described in the NBPTS literature. Using research-based methods, candidates must exhibit intentional teaching and respect for students in addition to presenting evidence of individual student progress over time. Only the highest professional standards are acceptable.

Reward, the second dynamic of leverage, encompasses the prestige of National Board certification. Because the certification is very difficult to achieve, becoming a NBCT is a significant accomplishment. In addition to increased status, respect, and professional authority, many NBCTs receive salary increases and/or state stipends. These “carrots” are highly motivating to many teachers who choose to pursue National Board certification.

The third dynamic, *risk*, accounts for the fact that only about half of NBPTS candidates earn the certification on their first attempt (Boyd & Reese, 2006). Seeking National Board certification involves huge professional risk because it is both public and confrontational. Unlike earning a masters degree, which can be accomplished quietly and even sporadically over time,

National Board candidates complete the certification process within a specified timeframe, are forced to confront and remediate their professional weaknesses, and receive their pass-or-fail certification results on the same well-publicized date nationwide. Because of the professional risk involved, many teachers never attempt the NBPTS certification process, and those who do often feel anxious throughout the experience.

Together, the dynamics of rigor, reward, and risk create the positive yet uncomfortable pressure known well by teachers who have experienced the NBPTS certification process. To visualize the leverage of National Board candidacy, picture a triangle. Made up of three sides, the triangle itself represents leverage while its three sides represent rigor, reward, and risk (see Figure A).

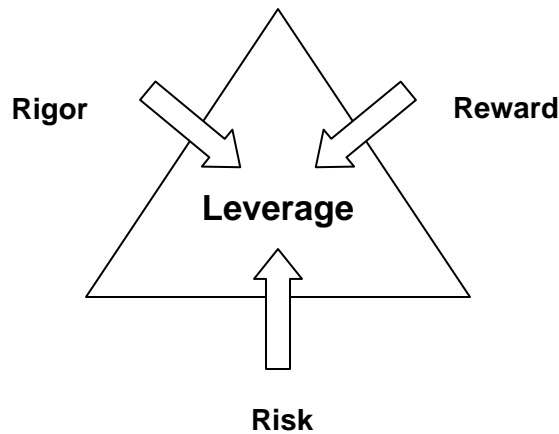


Figure A
The Leverage of National Board Candidacy

Just as a triangle must have three sides, all three dynamics must be present to create learning leverage. However, while the dynamics of rigor, reward, and risk are part of every teacher's certification experience, the degree of each dynamic varies from individual to individual (see Figure B).

Candidates who respond strongly to the dynamic of rigor are those most interested in learning through National Board candidacy. They are invigorated by challenge and determined to achieve NBPTS certification. Teachers motivated by the dynamic of reward are most interested in the prestige of National Board certification. Confident in their ability to demonstrate accomplished teaching, these candidates seek professional recognition and affirmation. Teachers most concerned with the dynamic of risk are motivated by fear. Worried that they may not be successful in completing the NBPTS certification requirements, they either become passive in their doubt and skepticism or redouble their efforts toward certification to avoid the embarrassment of failure.

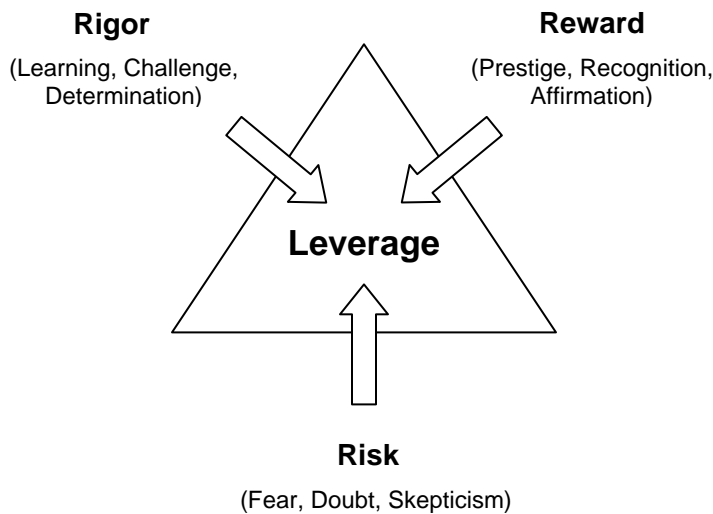


Figure B
The Leverage of National Board Candidacy with Teacher
Motives/Responses Shown

Varying Leverage for Different Candidates

Anne's, Barbara's, and Jamie's certification experiences illustrate how the leverage of National Board candidacy can differ from individual to individual. Determined to achieve NBPTS certification, Anne persisted in re-adjusting her teaching practice throughout her certification experience to more closely align with the standards and expectations of the National

Board (see Figure C). The longest side of Anne's leverage triangle is rigor because it was this dynamic that most motivated her during National Board candidacy.

In Anne's certification experience, the dynamic of reward was second most influential. Highly valuing the prestige that comes with being National Board certified, she constantly looked ahead to the reward that awaited her as she worked and learned throughout the certification process. While her awareness of professional risk was present, it was the least influential of the three dynamics that created her experience of learning leverage during National Board candidacy. For Anne, the dynamic of risk motivated her to sustain her efforts, even during periods of self-doubt.

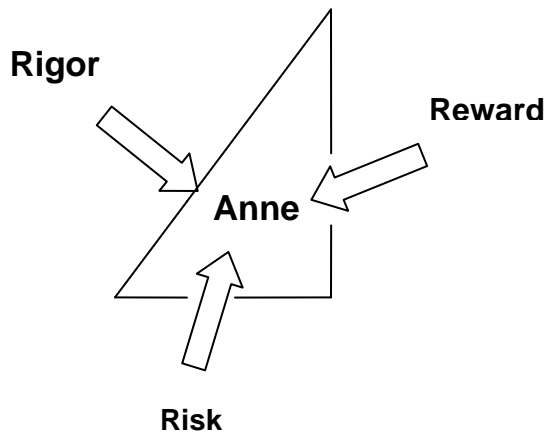


Figure C
Anne's Leverage during National Board Candidacy

In terms of Lustick's (2002) candidate types, Anne is most likely a Type B candidate. While she approached the certification process with some alignment to the NBPTS standards, she had to work persistently to meet the expectations of the National Board, and she learned a great deal as a result. In terms of Lustick and Sykes' (2006) learning types, Anne most likely experienced dynamic learning.

Barbara exhibits a different triangle of leverage (see Figure D). Above all else, she sought affirmation of her teaching practices through NBPTS certification. While she was interested in

learning through the experience, it was the reward that motivated her most. With the dynamic of reward creating the longest side of her leverage triangle, and rigor close behind, the dynamic of risk played the smallest role in Barbara's certification experience. Like Anne, the idea of not achieving the certification motivated Barbara to do everything in her power to successfully complete the certification requirements. However, because of her confidence in her teaching ability, her perception of risk was less pronounced than Anne's.

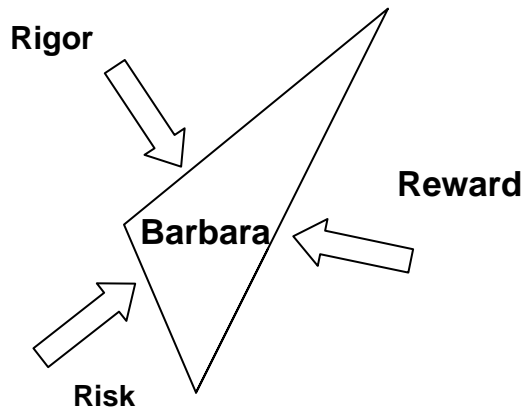


Figure D
Barbara's Leverage during National Board Candidacy

Barbara is most likely a Type A candidate in terms of Lustick's (2002) candidate types. She embarked on the certification in close alignment to the NBPTS standards, learned some new things, and achieved the certification. According to Lustick and Sykes' (2006) learning types, Barbara probably experienced a combination of dynamic and technical learning.

As might be expected, Jamie's triangle of leverage is shaped differently than either Anne's or Barbara's (see Figure E). Jamie welcomed the reward of becoming a National Board certified teacher and initially expressed willingness to learn from the process. However, doubt and skepticism overshadowed the constructive aspects of her NBPTS certification experience. Her growing distrust and eventual rejection of the NBPTS standards, expectations, and

requirements prevented the positive pressures of leverage from prevailing. Risk dominated her certification experience, and as a result claims the longest side of her triangle. Reward is the second most influential dynamic, with rigor the least dominant of the three.

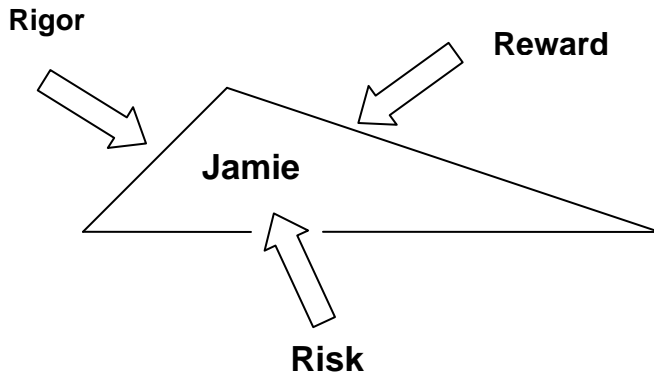


Figure E
Jamie's Leverage during National Board Candidacy

In terms of Lustick's (2002) candidate types, Jamie was most likely a Type D candidate. She was probably not in close alignment with the NBPTS standards at the outset of her certification experience and she was not successful in achieving the certification in her first year. Additionally, Jamie reports not learning very much through the experience, which is another indicator of Type D candidacy.

In terms of Lustick and Sykes' (2006) learning types, Jamie seems to have experienced a great deal of deferred learning, as evidenced by her self-reports of not learning much through the certification experience. However, it is important to remember that deferred learning is not necessarily non-learning. Rather, it can be learning that lies dormant until activated at some later time. This proved true in Jamie's case. She chose to continue her pursuit of National Board certification into a second year, during which time she accomplished her goal of becoming National Board certified. Most likely, in her second year of candidacy, Jamie was a Type B candidate who experienced a great deal of dynamic learning.

Summary and Conclusion

The vast majority of teachers who engage in the process of National Board certification describe it as the best professional development they have ever experienced – even when they do not achieve the certification. Learning leverage, an interactive dynamic characterized by rigor, reward, and risk, is what makes the certification process such a powerful learning experience for teachers. The leverage of National Board candidacy is an uncomfortable yet positive pressure that usually leads to substantial teacher learning. It occurs naturally among National Board candidates, but varies from individual to individual.

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