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Secondary National Board Candidates and Attitudes Toward Assessment: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the impact that National Board certification had on the assessment practice of secondary candidates in Eastern Washington. The study was framed by three research questions: (a) To what extent do National Board candidates think about the place of assessment in their classroom practice before they begin the process? (b) Does the National Board certification process impact their beliefs about assessment so that they see assessment in a different light by the time they complete the process? (c) Do teachers who have undergone the National Board certification process change the type of assessments used in their classroom practice as a result of going through the process? The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with six candidates in September 2007 and June 2008, before and after the certification process, and then coded and analyzed the results. All six participants revealed they had an idea about the place of assessment in their classroom practice before the process. Five of the six indicated that the process caused them to see assessment from a different perspective by the end of the year. Finally, five of the six indicated their classroom assessment practice had changed as a result of the National Board certification process.

INTRODUCTION

Assessment literacy has been one of the pervasive changes in teacher preparation programs during the past 15 years. Once an elective—if offered at all—in many teacher-training institutions, the foundations course in assessment has become a curricular staple for a steadily rising number of preservice teachers. As more classroom practitioners become acquainted with the principles of assessment, an increasing number of teachers will be able to integrate assessment seamlessly into their instruction rather than having it as a pedagogical afterthought.

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certification process requires

candidates to reflect on their classroom practice. An integral part of this reflection focuses on how assessment fits into instruction. The third of the Five Core Propositions of the National Board asserts that “[t]eachers are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning” (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2007, p. 2). One aspect of this proposition notes that National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs) can use a variety of methods to measure student growth and understanding. Accomplished teachers must know how to use both formative and summative assessment tools to track their students’ progress and be able to interpret this progress for students, parents, and other school stakeholders. In addition, they must also use assessment to adjust curriculum to meet student needs (Airasian & Russell, 2008; Shepard, Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, & Rust, 2005). This variety of methods—what Shulman (1988) called “a union of insufficiencies” and Popham (2003) referred to as “a ‘mix and match’ approach”—will increase the accuracy of the assessment snapshot of students to more effectively determine their mastery of academic material. This is a quantum leap from the traditional view of assessment as mere grading of student work. O’Connor (2002) succinctly summarized this shift in framing the function of assessment: “Teachers will integrate assessment into instruction so that assessment does not merely measure students, but becomes part of the learning process itself” (p. 25). Indeed, as Savage, Savage, and Armstrong (2006) have noted,

When properly used, assessment is a natural part of teaching that leads to improved teaching and learning, increased student confidence, better decisions about the allocation of resources, and increased confidence by the public in the performance of teachers and schools. (p. 344)

With the increasing emphasis on standardized testing because of No Child Left Behind, teachers must grapple with the essential question of whether assessment drives instruction or instruction drives assessment.

Assessment must not simply be an afterthought to instruction: the caboose to the pedagogical train, if you will. Rather, it needs to be integrated into the rolling stock of instructional objectives as well as tasks and activities that prepare students for a variety of both formative and summative assessment instruments (Shepard et al., 2005; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Only when this relationship of instructional objectives, tasks and activities, and assessment becomes seamless does teaching and learning become a mutually enriching process.

For this study, I chose to focus on NBCT candidates who teach middle school or high school in Eastern Washington to examine how their attitudes toward assessment relate to the content area they teach as opposed to the across-the-curriculum assessment concerns elementary candidates have. Although this is a more modest effort than Sato, Wei, and Darling-Hammond’s (2008) study in terms of number of participants and time, it nevertheless provides information about the impact that the National Board process had on candidates’ assessment practices in their classrooms.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To determine the way secondary NBCT candidates think about assessment and its relationship to classroom instruction as a result of the National Board process, we must ask three specific questions: (a) To what extent do National Board candidates think about the place of assessment in their classroom practice before they begin the process? (b) Does the National Board certification process impact their beliefs about assessment so that they see assessment in a different light by the time they complete the process? (c) Do teachers who have undergone the National Board certification process change the type of assessments used in their classroom practice as a result of going through the process?

METHOD

I conducted semi-structured interviews with

six secondary National Board candidates at two times during the 2007-2008 academic year: (a) before they began their National Board process and (b) after they completed their National Board portfolio and assessment center battery. I then coded their responses to the interview questions by theme and analyzed them to determine the impact that the National Board certification process has had on the candidates' attitudes toward assessment and its relationship to instruction.

PARTICIPANTS

The six candidates I chose to interview represented a variety of academic content areas as well as geographical distribution in the Eastern Washington region, known as the Inland Northwest. Further, they also spanned urban, suburban, and rural schools within the region. One candidate was pursuing certification at the Adolescent and Young Adulthood level (ages 14-18) and one was pursuing certification at the Early Adolescent through Young Adulthood level (ages 11-18). Though four candidates were pursuing certification at the Early Adolescence development level (ages 11-14), the participants were evenly split in their teaching assignments: three at the middle school level and three at the high school level. This was because one candidate's teaching load was primarily 8th graders with some 9th graders. I have used pseudonyms to preserve the confidentiality that some of the candidates requested. Aside from their names, all other details are accurate.

Roberta, the first candidate, has 29 years of classroom teaching experience. She has worked at three schools in two school districts. Roberta earned a bachelor's degree in elementary education and a master's degree in reading, both from Ohio State University. A candidate in English Language Arts at the Early Adolescence level (ELA/EA), she currently teaches English at an urban middle school. She is 61 years old.

The second candidate, Tammy, has been in the classroom for 10 years, all at the same rural high school. She earned a bachelor's degree in

education from Eastern Washington University and a master's in education technology at City University. Tammy's National Board certificate area is Career and Technical Education at the Early Adolescence through Young Adulthood development level (CTE/EAYA). She is 33 years old.

Adrienne, the third candidate, has six years of classroom teaching experience, all at a single middle school. She earned a bachelor's degree in elementary education and a master's degree in education, both through Eastern Washington University. Adrienne's National Board certificate area is mathematics at the Early Adolescence development level (MATH/EA). She is 28 years old.

The fourth candidate, Paula, is a veteran of 18 years in the classroom. She has taught in two schools, both in the same school district. She earned a bachelor's degree in education and a master's degree in computer science education, both from Eastern Washington University. Paula's National Board certificate area is mathematics at the Adolescence and Early Adulthood development level (MATH/AYA). She is 53 years old.

Kathleen, the fifth candidate, has also taught for 18 years. She has worked in four schools in two different school districts. She earned a bachelor's degree in physical education at Iowa State University as well as a master's degree in mathematics education at Eastern Washington University. Kathleen's National Board certificate area is mathematics at the Early Adolescence development level (MATH/EA). She is 55 years old.

The sixth candidate, Janet, has nine years of classroom teaching experience between two schools in two different districts. She earned a bachelor's degree in mathematics from the University of Washington as well as a master's in mathematics education at Eastern Washington University. Janet's National Board certificate area is mathematics at the Early Adolescence development level (MATH/EA).

She is 47 years old.

The mean teaching experience of the six participants is 15 years while the mean for National Board candidates across Washington State during the 2007-2008 cycle is 12 years. The mean age of the six participants is 46 years. No database exists that reveals the mean of age for National Board candidates in Washington State.

RESULTS

Perhaps the most revealing detail about the participant responses are their answers to the query if they had an assessment class as part of their teacher preparation programs. Roberta, who finished her undergraduate program at Ohio State University in 1969, said no. Indeed, she observed that “we didn’t even use the word ‘assessment.’” Adrienne, who finished her program at Eastern Washington University in 2001, said she had an assessment class but didn’t elaborate. Paula, who graduated from her preparation program at EWU in 1988, said she had a class in assessment but all she could remember was “we talked about standard deviations...and how to build tests.” Kathleen, who finished her preparation program at Iowa State in 1974, said she did have an assessment but wouldn’t elaborate. Two of the participants, Janet and Tammy, who completed their preparation programs in 1982 and 1997, respectively, didn’t remember if they had an assessment class.

Another set of responses that was revealing concerned the amount of inservice training in assessment. Three of the participants indicated that they had some inservice training on assessment provided by a variety of sources. Kathleen, for instance, noted that when the state standardized test (the Washington Assessment of Student Learning [WASL]) was first released, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction dispatched a staff member to help teachers at her school. This included “trying to make sure our normal unit tests [had] questions that were modeled on the

WASL: deeper questions, higher-level thinking questions, trying to nudge the kids toward deeper thinking.” In addition, the OSPI staff that provided the training in Kathleen’s school focused on inter-rater reliability to ensure consistency in scoring. Paula indicated that the district she works in had provided teachers with training on the district assessment tool, the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP). Roberta noted that her district sent two teachers to an assessment conference in Portland, Oregon, but that it provided little in the way of preparing for the WASL. The other three participants said they had received no inservice training specifically on assessment although one indicated she had read several monographs and articles on assessment.

A third question that provided an important frame for candidate attitude toward assessment dealt with how the participants saw the relationship between assessment and instruction in their classroom practice both before and after the National Board process. Roberta, for example, saw assessment as the driving force behind instruction both before and after the National Board process. This singular vision, perhaps, may be due to her nearly three decades of experience as a classroom teacher. Paula, however, revealed some change in her opinion about assessment. Before the process, she noted that “hopefully in the ideal world assessment would drive instruction.” She also mentioned that assessment could take formative as well as summative forms. After the National Board process, Paula observed specifically that she had realized that her closure strategies could be improved as a means of formative assessment. She also indicated that she, along with other members of her department, would investigate means whereby they could receive additional professional development training on refining their closure strategies. Kathleen, too, showed a change in attitude toward assessment from the beginning to the end of the National Board process. Though she noted she did some preassessment before she began a unit, “mostly I just do a test for assessment.” By the end of the process, Kathleen reported that her view

of assessment had changed: “The big thing that I got from National Boards and any other professional development is that we’re using assessment to guide instruction.” Before she began the National Board process, Adrienne distinguished between formal and informal assessment as being, respectively, checking for understanding through questioning and end-of-the-unit tests. She also noted that “[assessment] guides my instruction; it doesn’t drive my instruction.” By the end of the process, Adrienne said she relied on formative assessment more heavily in her practice: “It has played a lot larger role this year as a result of the reflection you have to do for National Boards.” Janet simply noted at the beginning of her process that “an assessment reflects student learning on the instruction that’s taken place.” By the end of her National Board process, Janet said that assessment was a more complex phenomenon: “Assessment is key. You assess before you instruct to make sure you know where you’re going, what the kids need, what the holes are. You assess to make sure they’ve come along with you. You assess when you think you’ve reached a stopping point and see how well they have achieved the goal. So, hand in hand: assessment and instruction.” Before she began her National Board process, Tammy noted that assessment consisted of either written tests or projects, depending on the classes she taught. By the end of the process, she observed that alternative modes of assessment were desirable: “I would say that it’s more important that [the students] do hands-on work and not so much what [they can memorize] for the end [of a unit]. You know, little assessments rather than larger, more comprehensive assessments.”

The most telling responses of this study deal with the question asking candidates how their classroom assessment practice will change after having completed the National Board process. Roberta, who had taught for 29 years, adamantly said her practice was not going to differ as a result of the National Board process because “I already assess the kids more than the normal teacher, and I grade everything they do.” This perspective is representative of

the traditional view of assessment as simply the grading of student work. But the remaining five candidates had responses that focused on a variety of themes about how their assessment practice would change as a result of completing the National Board process.

Tailoring instruction for students according to their learning styles was a common theme among the five remaining candidates. Kathleen, for example, noted that her classroom practice would reflect more flexibility. She said that she would “be willing to alter my instruction according to the needs of the kids.” Tammy indicated that her practice would include more projects in the future. Replacing the predictable end-of-the-unit tests with other types of activities, she noted, has proved to be not only more memorable for her students but more engaging as well: “I asked the kids what they remembered most about the class, and their first response was ‘I remember the mock trials because now I understand what a courtroom looks like.’”

Adrienne saw merit in having her students assess their own knowledge at the beginning of a unit before plunging into the material. This preassessment, she observed, will help provide her students with the scaffolding needed to increase their learning. This will also help her students so they “are reflecting on their own, so they can evaluate their own performance.” This sentiment neatly dovetails with Costa and Kallick (1992) who noted that

We must constantly remind ourselves that the ultimate purpose of evaluation is to have students become self evaluating. If students graduate from our schools still dependent upon others to tell them when they are adequate, good, or excellent, then we’ve missed the whole point of what education is about. (p. 280)

Janet observed that she will use a variety of assessment data to increase her precision in determining exactly what students need in reteaching and further instruction. During the National Board process, she observed that

she “was looking at their student assessment data, MAP testing, [and] WASL testing, seeing where their weaknesses were and trying direct instruction to help specific students with their specific needs.”

For Paula, the National Board process impressed on her the need to increase contact with the families of her students: “Every year I’ve been in teaching, I’ve thought that if I could contact every parent of every student, I could have a bigger impact with them to let them know how their child is doing.” She was able to contact all of her students’ parents, many of them via email. And the results were memorable indeed for her. “I got some great, great encouraging emails back from some parents that made you want to cry. It’s what makes teaching worthwhile, so I guess there’s some intrinsic motivation to do it.”

DISCUSSION

The first research question addressed to what extent National Board candidates thought about the place of assessment in their classroom practice before they began the process. The participants’ responses indicated that all six National Board candidates had an idea of what assessment was prior to the start of the certification process. The second research question asked if the National Board certification process impacted candidates’ beliefs about assessment so that they saw assessment in a different light by the end of the process. Five of the six participants indicated that going through the National Board process had indeed caused them to rethink their ideas about what assessment was and its relationship to instruction in their classroom practice. The final research question for this study wanted to determine if teachers who had undergone the National Board process changed the types of assessments used in their classroom practice as a result of the certification process. Again, five of the six participants indicated that their use of assessment in their classroom practice had changed to some degree. These changes included increasing communication with

family members, using assessment data to make informed curricular decisions, tailoring instruction and assessment to student learning modalities, and using preassessment strategies to determine instructional needs.

If these six participants’ experiences are indicative of how most National Board candidates rethink their use of assessment in their classroom practice, then we may see that the steadily growing number of National Board Certified Teachers—as well as teachers who have gone through the program without necessarily certifying—will increase the number of accomplished classroom practitioners who use assessment as a crucial component in their teaching.

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