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Singin' in the Rain: The Rewards of National Board Certification for Language Arts Teachers

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"Wow, congratulations. So now you can, like, teach in any state you want to, right?"

This is often the type of comment I hear when I tell other people, teachers and non-teachers alike, that I have earned National Board Certification (NBC) through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS).

It seems that many people have vaguely heard about this certification and know it takes a lot of work, but they don't understand what it is and what it can mean both personally and professionally. There are many pressures on teachers as they work through the stages of their careers, such as connecting with parents, learning and developing curriculum, and earning credits necessary for re-certification. Many language arts teachers must decide how to best prepare students for state and district assessments without steering away from known best practices. Given these issues, what motivation do language arts teachers have to continue working in this career that never ceases to throw new challenges at them?

Imagine the scene in *Singin' in the Rain* when Don Lockwood knows it's raining out, but he is so in love that he revels in it. He dances his way down the street, stomping in puddles, turning his face to the clouds, and singing passionately. Teaching can offer this kind of satisfaction. Even with all the pressures, both locally and nationally, teachers can seek professional growth and personal pride through the pursuit of NBC.

When I started my journey toward NBC, I heard a lot about the rejuvenation it offered to more experienced teachers, but I heard very little about young teachers, like myself, seeking inspiration and validation in the early stages of their careers. The meaning, rewards, and resulting professional growth that come as a result of NBC need to be clarified so that all teachers understand this powerful process.

NBC is a voluntary certification process that is open to anyone with a baccalaureate degree and at least three years of teaching experience while holding a state teaching license. The National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers created NBPTS. The goal was to create national standards for what teachers should know and be able to do. NBC is the process teachers can go through to show they meet these national standards.

Certification is available in 24 instructional areas and the certificate lasts 10 years before renewal is required. In Language Arts three certificates are available: Early and Middle Childhood (ages 3-12), Early Adolescence (ages 11-15), and Adolescence and Young Adulthood (ages 14-18+). The fee for NBC is \$2300, which may deter some teachers. However, many scholarships and grants are available.

The process of NBC includes a portfolio and a computerized, standardized test. The portfolio consists of four parts, three of which are classroom-based entries. Two of these classroom-based entries are videotaped segments that require the candidate to complete a written analysis of the required teaching demonstration. The third classroom-based entry requires some type of analysis of student work. The last entry requires documentation and analysis of the teacher's work with families, the community, and other colleagues. The test focuses on the teacher's content knowledge. It is a six-part test that was

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developed by other practicing teachers in that content area. Each portion of the test is allotted up to 30 minutes and there are hundreds of assessment centers around the country. For more specific information about the requirements of NBC or scholarship information visit: www.nbpts.org.

There are now 40,209 NBC teachers according to the NBPTS web site. Research is beginning to document the positive impact of this certification on student learning. The students of NBCTs (National Board Certified Teachers) show higher gains on year-end math and reading tests (Goldhaber and Anthony 17). In an Arizona study comparing 35 NBC elementary teachers and their non-certified colleagues, the students in the NBCTs' (National Board Certified Teachers) classrooms were at least one month ahead in academic gains than students of non-certified teachers (Vandevoort, Amrein-Beardsley, & Berliner 36). Students can benefit from a teacher's decision to pursue NBC.

There are other advantages for teachers pursuing NBC. When I earned my NBC I earned SB-CEUs and extra years on my state teaching certificate. I received letters from my superintendent and the Michigan Education Association congratulating my efforts. Next year I will have a pay raise because of my certification. Also, a publishing company contacted me and I have reviewed books for them, which has been a wonderful opportunity. While I have not taken advantage of it, I could apply for graduate credit for going through the NBC process. There are states, like Indiana and Illinois, that will automatically certify NBCTs. Other states, like Pennsylvania, will certify NBCTs who also hold a valid teaching certificate from another state. Many states and school districts offer incentives for earning NBC and a list of these appears on the NBPTS web site.

There are issues related to who achieves NBC that are distressing. There is no way to search for NBCTs by age on the NBPTS site, but I have met few teachers like myself who began the NBC process in their fourth year of teaching. Also, research shows that teachers in wealthier schools with higher achieving students are more likely to earn NBC

(Goldhaber, Perry, and Anthony 23). Also, certain states are gaining NBCTs faster than others. For example, North Carolina has 8,280 and Florida has 6,361, while Michigan has only 168 ("Statistics Show" 18). Teachers of all ages and backgrounds should be encouraged to apply for NBC since the certification offers benefits for both students and teachers.

My own journey began when I started wondering whether or not I was doing my job well. I was, and continue to be, a language arts teacher in an urban middle school where more than seventy percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. Occasionally, an administrator would come to my classroom to do a visitation and would assure me I was on track. My mentor teachers, all older teachers whose hearts were certainly in the right place, had no time to come into my classroom to observe. They were quick to hand me old files of theirs and tried to give advice based on their experiences. Also, I would ask my students to fill out evaluations and offer suggestions. All of these things gave me some type of feedback to work with, but it wasn't enough. I questioned myself and began to wonder whether I was on my way to being a successful teacher. I needed validation and reassurance and working on my master's degree wasn't enough.

I heard about NBC and went to a small informational meeting held by my district. I learned that I could be certified in Early Adolescence/English Language Arts. I found out that both the state of Michigan and the Michigan Education Association offered grants to prospective NBC candidates. I decided to apply for the grants. I got both and sent in my application. The requirements for NBC are rigorous and I took the winter semester off from my graduate classes and focused solely on putting together the videos, student work, and analysis required by NBPTS. It was challenging, exhausting, and thought provoking work. I had to examine my teaching and my professional growth up to that point. After completing the portfolio and the testing, I breathed a sigh of relief and anxiously awaited my results.

In November of 2003, I found out I didn't make it. I was within a few points of the required overall score and I was devastated. However, I looked over the results, did a bit more examination of my entries and teaching practices, and I decided to reapply. NBPTS banks scores for two years and a teacher can apply to redo any part of the portfolio or test. Just as the brochures and articles said from the beginning, NBC was a journey. I redid one of my portfolio entries and was able to use grant money to pay the fee for this as well. The lesson I did for my retake entry was a teaching strategy I had wanted to try and had not felt confident enough to do so. I videotaped and analyzed the lesson and I learned something new about teaching and student learning along the way. Again, I sent in my product and waited.

In November of 2004, I found out I had earned my National Board Certification. I cried. I was so proud of myself on a personal and professional level. I knew I had earned the certificate and, even though administrators and mentors had said the same, it validated that I was on the right path in my teaching and learning.

Has my certification allowed me to settle in and use the same teaching practices day after day? No. I find myself seeking new avenues for professional development and continuing my growth as an educator. In my heart, though, I dance and turn my face up to the clouds, because all the pressures of teaching often make this career path seem like an impossible one to continue on. However, knowing that I achieved NBC and having that recognition has given me cause for singing in the rain. I believe it can do the same for many language arts teachers who need reassurance they are on a quality path toward professional growth.

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About the Author:

Andrea Burke has been teaching language arts, mainly at the middle school level, for seven years. She earned her National Board Certification in English Language Arts/Early Adolescence and her Master's degree in organizational communication in 2004. Currently, she is teaching 7th grade language arts in the Kalamazoo Public Schools.