THE IMPACT OF NATIONAL BOARD CERTIFICATION FOR SCHOOL LIBRARY MEDIA SPECIALISTS

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Abstract  
The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) offers a unique opportunity for school library media specialists in the United States to apply for certification as a National Board Certified Teacher (NBCT). Almost 1200 school library media specialists have successfully undertaken this opportunity for workplace learning, referred to by most candidates as the best professional development experience they have ever had. The process is rigorous and voluntary, with a low passing rate for first-time attempts. This paper explains the process for school library media NBCT candidacy, and discusses some impacts the certification process has had on continuing education for U.S. school library media specialists.

Introduction  
The workplace is a center of learning activity for workers in all job categories and institutions. Learning happens constantly in the workplace, with every job task acting as an opportunity for learning. Sometimes this learning is casual and trial-and-error, such as learning a more efficient way to perform a task, or learning a new source of information. At times the learning is structured, with organized continuing education opportunities such as workshops or coursework. The impetus for the learning can also vary. Structured workshops are usually planned by management for the benefit of workers, while unstructured learning opportunities can be at the discretion of the workers.

Barbara Allan notes that learning which occurs in the workplace can have more benefits than more structured activities. Firstly, it is cost-effective, since it does not usually involve travel, worker time, or tuition. Secondly, when the learning is based directly on the tasks associated with the job, there is a higher level of skill development and more retention of learned knowledge. And finally, the learning can occur at the best time for the task, for the worker, and for the institution.  

There is evidence that workers themselves prefer workplace learning rather than formal workshops. Ritchie places workplace learning in the context of improving professional practice, and reported findings from an American Library Association (ALA) survey that found that workers spent up to three times as much time on independent self-directed workplace learning as they did in structured workshops. She notes that workplace learning requires “practical application of new knowledge and skills learned and the transfer of training back into the workplace”.  

This paper explores a workplace learning opportunity for school library media specialists in the United States that combines both the structure of formalized continuing education opportunities and the flexibility and transferability of work-based learning.
The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) was conceived as a result of a national study on the recruitment and retention of teachers. The published findings called for a national board to be formed that would identify the components of good teaching, devise a process to identify the best teachers, and encourage states and school districts to reward these teachers accordingly. Its purpose was to encourage accomplished teachers to remain in the teaching profession, rather than to seek promotion or alternative careers that would take them away from direct contact with students.

NBPTS was formed in 1987. Its three-part objective is to “advance the quality of teaching and learning by:

• Maintaining high and rigorous standards for what accomplished teachers should know and be able to do,
• Providing a national voluntary system certifying teachers who meet these standards, and
• Advocating related education reforms to integrate National Board Certification in American education and to capitalize on the expertise of National Board Certified Teachers”.

The first step in the process was to identify the elements of good teaching that would apply to teachers in all subject areas or grade levels. These core propositions are the basic principles underlying what teachers should know and be able to do.

Figure 1 NBPTS Five Core Propositions (www.nbpts.org)

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<th>Five Core Propositions</th>
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<td>Teachers are committed to students and their learning.</td>
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<td>Teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to students.</td>
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<td>Teachers are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning.</td>
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<td>Teachers think systematically about their practice and learn from experience.</td>
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<td>Teachers are members of learning communities.</td>
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After the five core propositions were established NBPTS formed subject-specific standards writing committees to formulate standards and assist in the development of assessment procedures for teachers in each subject area. Each standards committee was required to be composed of mostly classroom teachers currently teaching in that subject area. The process of developing the subject area standards was time-consuming and slow. NBPTS
purposefully formed only a few subject committees at a time, slowly adding certificate areas in which teachers could be certified.

**NBPTS school library media**

The school library media standards writing committee was formed in 1998. As with the other standards committees, over half of the committee were building-level school library media specialists. The rest of the members were a mixture of library supervisors and library educators. The committee developed ten library media standards, forming the basic building blocks of what school library media specialists know, what they do, and how they grow as professionals.

**Figure 2 School library media standards** (www.nbpts.org)

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<th>Library Media Standards</th>
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<td><strong>What Library Media Specialists Know?</strong></td>
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<td>Standard 1</td>
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<td>Standard 3</td>
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<td><strong>What Library Media Specialists Do</strong></td>
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<td><strong>How Library Media Specialists Grow as Professionals</strong></td>
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<td>Standard 10</td>
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Standards 1-3 outline the knowledge foundations of the school library media field. The field of school library media is based in two professions: library science and education. These professions are compatible, but each is composed of distinct knowledge and skills. School library media specialists must acquire the knowledge base of each of these professions in order to be considered accomplished at both.

The focus on learners is an important concept in all NBPTS standards, and is also compatible with the library science profession. Librarians have always been interested in the patron as the end-user of print and electronic resources. Education, from a different perspective, considers resources as the end-use of an instructional process. Regardless, knowledge of the learner is the first step in either process.

Standards 4-6 are the instructional heart of the school library media program in the school. School library media specialists collaborate with classroom teachers to integrate
information skills instruction into classroom content. They are skilled in the use of information technology, and use technology as a tool to increase access to information resources. They encourage reading by deliberate planned instruction and events, and by selecting and organizing the library collection so as to have resources for the use of students and teachers. In addition, school library media specialists organize and manage the library program to maximize access to materials and services.

Standards 7-10 reflect the library as a learning community. The interconnection of all types of libraries and the professional attributes of continual learning make this set of standards especially appropriate for school library media specialists. The concept of ethical access that meets the diverse needs of users is a basic premise underlying the library field. Creating partnerships to advocate for strong library services is something that all librarians do.

The NBPTS Library Media Standards are based on the foundational aspects of the school library media field. Accomplished school library media specialist know the content outlined in standards 1-3, implement the concepts outlined in Standards 4-6, and create a personal learning environment in the library as outlined in Standards 7-10. Becoming certified by the NBPTS requires more, however, than just proving awareness of the standards.

The NBPTS process

Along with identifying the standards belonging to a level of excellence for school library media specialists, NBPTS also devised a process that could reflect both content knowledge and performance-based elements of teachers. The structure of the process is roughly the same regardless of the teaching specialties. Candidates for national board certification complete four portfolio entries. The first three are specific to the teaching specialty and require samples of student work, videotaped instruction, and written commentary. The fourth portfolio entry is the same across teaching specialties, and requires candidates to provide evidence that shows that professional accomplishments have benefited student learning in the school.

The written commentary is a critical element of the portfolio process. The reflective writing cycle, consisting of describing the instructional context and the instructional sequence of the lesson, analyzing the results of the instruction, and reflecting on the instructional process in the context of the school setting, is key to providing what NBPTS refers to a “clear, consistent, and convincing evidence” that the candidate has met the standards.

Candidates report that the portfolio process requires about 200-400 hours of work, and must be completed within the span of a few months. For school library media, the portfolio entries are the following:

- **Entry One: Instructional Collaboration**
  Candidates must co-plan, co-teach, and co-assess an information skills unit with a classroom teacher. Candidates are required to send 10 pages of written commentary describing, analyzing, and reflecting on the instruction, work samples from two students, and documentation of the collaborative planning process.

- **Entry Two: Literature Appreciation**
  Candidates must demonstrate that they have organized the library media center and services to encourage reading and the use of literature in all formats, and teach a lesson demonstrating how they encourage students to interpret the literature they read. Candidate must send a 2-minute narrated videotaped pan of the library and a 15-minute unedited segment of a single lesson.
required written elements are twelve pages of written commentary and up to four pages of instructional materials used in the lesson.

- **Entry Three: Integration of Technology**
  Candidates must demonstrate that they can integrate technology into an instructional lesson. The lesson must be based on classroom content, and must include elements designed to teach ethical and legal uses of information. Candidates must send two 10-minute segments of a single lesson, designed to show growth in student understanding, and 10 pages of written commentary. Up to four pages of instructional materials used in the lesson can also be included.

- **Entry Four: Documented Accomplishments**
  Candidates must demonstrate that professional work outside of the instructional setting; with colleagues, professional associations, professional development activities, and work with families has had an impact on student learning. Candidates may review eight accomplishments centered in three main categories: as a partner with students’ families, as a learner, and as a leader/collaborator.

After the portfolio entries are completed, candidates sit for 6 assessment center exercises. For each exercise, candidates are presented with a scenario and a question, and have 30 minutes to write an answer. The six assessment centre exercises for school library media are:

- organisational management,
- ethical and legal tenets,
- technologies,
- collection development,
- information literacy,
- knowledge of literature.

Each of the 10 assessments described above are assessed by building-level school library media specialists trained by NBPTS. Figure 3 below shows the weighted percentage of NBPTS assessments.
Each entry is scored on a 1.0 – 4.0 scale. Candidates must average 2.75 to achieve the status of National Board Certified Teacher. Candidates failing to achieve the 2.75 average can choose to bank high-scoring pieces of the portfolio or assessment center entries, and retake low-scoring sections. Candidates may retake low-scoring sections up to two times within a 24-month period following the initial attempt. For this reason, attempting NBPTS certification is sometimes referred to as a three-year process, even though the actual process of preparing the portfolio entries and taking the assessment center exercises spans only a few months.

Cost-benefit analysis

National Board Certification has the potential to be the one of the best examples of workplace learning. Firstly, the NBPTS process is voluntary; participants choose whether or not they wish to seek National Board certification. There is no penalty in the workplace for making the decision not to apply. It is not a requirement for hire in any school district, nor is it currently a part of any advanced degree program.

Secondly, the NBPTS process is rigorous. The passing rate is approximately 49% for candidates attempting to achieve the requisite score on their first try. Participants who are successful report that it was the best professional development experience that they have had, confirming the perception that the rigor of the process equals the perceived value.

And thirdly, the rewards for becoming a National Board Certified Teacher are both internal and external. NBCTs are a fraternity of accomplished teachers. Success in completing the rigor of the process is a mark of respect in the education and library science professions, and many teachers are proud to place the letters NBCT after their signature. Some financial rewards also exist for some NBCTs, either as a salary increase or as a cash bonus. This reward
is dependent on the salary schedule of the state or school district, and varies from several hundred to several thousand U.S. dollars.

There is an emotional cost in attempting NBPTS certification. The 49% passing rate ensures that many candidates each year will fail to achieve NBPTS certification. The process is public, requiring school and parental permissions for videotaping. Parents, school colleagues, and administrators are aware of the certification attempt and the emotional toll of the process. It is rare in public service that librarians or teachers attempt a task with such a high emotional cost and such a high risk of failure.

The financial cost is high as well. The cost will rise in spring 2005 to US$2500 from US$2300 in 2004. Retaking low-scoring sections is an additional cost, currently US$350 per section.

The benefits of the NBPTS certification process are acknowledged even by critics of the process. Most candidates, whether achieving NBCT status or not, praise the effect that the learning process had on their teaching and the resulting impact on students. The rigour of the process and the deep level of learning required ensure that achieving board certification is a change process.

The financial benefits of achieving NBPTS certification are mixed. Education in the United States is delegated to the authority of the individual states. States differ in the organization and management of school districts. States with a high degree of control over schools and teachers, such as the state of North Carolina, have chosen to reward teachers for achieving NBPTS certification. North Carolina reimburses the $2300 application fee for all candidates who complete the application process, and awards a 12% salary increase for the life of the certificate (10 years) providing that the teacher remains in direct contact with students. Other states have rewarded NBCTs with cash bonuses or one-time awards upon receiving certification.

Still other states, particularly those with teacher unions, have found it more difficult to provide rewards for NBPTS certification. Paying teachers more if they are NBCTs is basically merit pay, something that some teacher unions have staunchly resisted. In these states, depending on the teacher union contract in the individual school districts, there is still some financial support for candidacy or rewards for achieving NBCT status.

Figure 4 below indicates the strength of financial incentives for NBPTS candidacy. The list of NBCTs by state clearly shows that rewarding teachers who achieve NBCT status has an impact on the number of teachers who complete certification. North Carolina (NC), Florida (FL), South Carolina (SC) and Georgia (GA) all provide some type of incentive, which has had an impact on the number of NBCT school library media specialists in that state. The total number of school library media specialists in each state is not a factor. The list of the states with the most school library media NBCTs rank in the number of school library media specialists from 3rd to 27th.
Figure 4  Top-ranked NBCT states

Other school library media impacts

Financial benefits are not the only incentive that may have encouraged NBCT candidacy. In states with a high number of NBCTs, the NBPTS process has impacted other forms of continuing education. Workshops on achieving board certification abound at professional association conferences in these states, usually taught by those who have achieved certification. Colleagues attempting certification create informal networks for peer coaching and emotional support. In states with few school library media NBCTs, candidates have little face-to-face contact with other NBCTs. The decision to attempt certification is very personal, and may be made without a thorough understanding of the process.

Nationally, candidate support networks have been developed, both formally and informally, to assist candidates in the process. Discussion lists, one of which has several thousand members, exist as a support mechanism for candidates attempting the process. Successful candidates tend to remain active members of the discussion lists to answer general questions about the process and for the encouragement of those candidates who were not successful at their first attempt.

Presentations at national conferences are another way that candidates have shared experiences and encouraged other school library media specialists to attempt the process. Successful candidates tell of their experiences and promote the process as one in which the intangible benefits are worth the time, expense, and risk of failure.

There is little indication that school library media preparation programs in the United States have implemented continuing education programs based on the NBPTS process. A review of the web pages of the top ranked programs accredited by the ALA revealed no hits when a search for ‘NBPTS’ was undertaken.

Shannon’s recent research on the school library media preparation programs provides some interesting context. It was evident from her survey of ALA-accredited programs that school library media may not be a focus of the professoriate in many library schools. Some preparation programs indicated that no one on their full-time faculty was considered school library media, yet the number of school library media students was a large percentage of the total student body. The presence of a largely adjunct professoriate in school library media
preparation, although maintaining closer ties to practice, does little to influence tenured and tenure-track faculty on matters of curriculum or policy.

Continuing education has not necessarily been a strong point with U.S. ALA-accredited library schools. Ann O’Neill reported in 1998 that only 30 percent of library schools reported providing any continuing education programs. In recent years, only one school library media program, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, conducted NBPTS workshops geared for school library media.

Conclusion

The NBPTS process has been available to school library media specialists for three years. In some states, such as Florida, South Carolina, and North Carolina, school library media specialists were aware of the process and had watched classroom teachers in other teaching specialties attempt and receive NBCT designation for some years. The financial rewards that these NBCTs received were undoubtedly an incentive. When school library media became an eligible certification area, school library media specialists in those states were prepared for the rigor of the process and had a high degree of success. In other states, the impact of the NBPTS process has been slow to develop. Six states out of the fifty United States still have no school library media NBCTs after three years of the process, and half of the fifty states have fewer than five school library media NBCTs.

Human resources director Jill Keally attributed the success of the University of Tennessee’s workplace learning program for support staff to four factors. She noted that as a result of the institutionalization of the program, the institution was able to provide a sizable salary reward to program completers, to motivate staff to engage in continuing education activities, to create workers who would view their job as a career, and to place a high value on learning in the workplace.

Seen through that lens, NBPTS has provided similar outcomes. It has created high standards for school library media specialists and created a process by which school library media specialists reaching those high standards could be identified. An increasing number of states and school districts are rewarding NBCTs financially, and providing incentives for candidates to enter the process. The intrinsic value of the NBCT certification for career school library media specialists is unequalled, and more and more states and school districts are providing extrinsic rewards as well.

Varlejs asks an important and unanswered question about continuing education for librarians, “Do they become more knowledgeable and skilled, and does this learning contribute to the improvement of the library and information service that they subsequently provide to their clientele?”. There is some indication that the NBPTS certification process does make a difference. Some studies have found that there is a higher level of student achievement in classrooms with NBCTs than those in which NBCT status was attempted but failed. There is, however, no research currently available on the effect of school library media NBCT status on student achievement. As a result very little is known about the almost 1200 school library media specialists who have achieved NBPTS status thus far. We are not able to make conclusions about preparation, program effects, or administrative support that leads to the designation of NBCT for school library media. Although there is some research available to indicate that students in classrooms with teachers who have acquired National Board certification have a higher level of achievement as indicated on test scores than students in classrooms with teachers who attempted the process but did not achieve certification, we do not know if that is true for school library media.
It can justifiably be claimed, however, that NBPTS has achieved the intention of workplace learning at its highest level. It is a rigorous and voluntary process to improve skills, improve services to users, and achieve a high level of professional growth.

References