NBPTS: Six Stages of Certification

By Nancy J. Larsen

"Why would you want to do that?" I had been asked this question about 100 times during the year I applied for National Certification, so I've done some soul searching to understand exactly why I spent nearly 300 hours completing the process for the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) Middle Childhood Generalist Certificate Area. As I've searched, I've become aware that I have moved through six stages of emotion during this ten-month process.

At stage one, the "naïve" stage, when I learned about NBPTS through the Idaho NBPTS Initiative which was funded by the J. A. and Kathryn Albertson Foundation, I was filled with curiosity and all the right reasons for accepting this challenge: "I'm ready for a new goal." "I want to be considered a professional educator," and, "I've worked hard before—I can certainly do this." Additional incentives provided through the Idaho NBPTS Initiative helped me to make the decision. The Initiative provided a grant to cover the $2000 registration fee; an expense account to cover copying and other incidental expenses; technology support; plus, a weekend retreat in Sun Valley with all the Idaho candidates. I was ready to jump on board and start planning for the six portfolio entries that provided documentation of my practice in the classroom. Our local group of seven candidates began the journey together.

Stage two, the "Oops! What have I gotten myself into?" stage, came too quickly. I received my NBPTS materials box in August. Wow! The 500 or so pages of instructions, requirements, examples, and scoring guides transformed my curiosity into self-doubt and worry. Would I be able to successfully complete the six entries including videotapes, student work, samples, documentation, and reflective writing while incorporating the eleven standards into my practice, and continue to fulfill my regular duties as a teacher?

By depending upon my University of Idaho facilitators, and through my belief in the NBPTS' Five Core Propositions listed below, I mustered the confidence to give it a go. These Five Core Propositions were at the center of my being as a teacher. They comprise the backbone of the NBPTS philosophy and I deeply felt their significance to best teaching practices.

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1. Teachers are committed to students and their learning.
2. Teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to students.
3. Teachers are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning.
4. Teachers think systematically about their practice and learn from experience.
5. Teachers are members of learning communities.

Stage three, the "depths of despair" stage, lasted too long and was exacerbated by my emotional state as a forty-something female. During Christmas break, as I was deep into my portfolio entries, I took time to write a desperate letter to my family explaining the difference between the agony of defeat and the thrill of victory; the letter emotionally began, "There comes a time in everyone's life...." They were patient with me and just left me alone; thank goodness they were so understanding.

During this stage I comforted myself with egotistical mind games: "You're a hard worker." "You're a good teacher." "Come on, show 'em what you've got!" And, all too often I would reward myself with a computer card game, to avoid the task at hand. I must have completed more games than the New York Yankees.

Near the end of this stage I really freaked out when I realized my perfect videotape of my mathematics activity had a flaw in it. After admiring the content of the tape for one final time I noticed a brief, even minuscule, break in the tape sequence. The requirements specifically state—20 uninterrupted minutes. I had to find a way to extend the unit in a meaningful way to get a new tape. I cried for days. I thank my sister candidates for rescuing me. They cajoled, gave hugs, and encouraged me to try again. I was the maniac on the ledge of a building ready to jump and they were the rescue squad who talked me down with empathy for what I was facing.

Then came stage four, the "anticipating the end" stage, and "hooray" for stage four. My six portfolio entries had been written and re-written so many times I lost track of the count; our recycling bin had runneth over. But my participation in the Northwest Inland Writing Project had taught me that by creating many drafts I ensure my best writing. The entries were as good as they were going to get.

On April 13, our box-packing day, my mood improved as we packaged our entries and taped the boxes shut. Our group of seven, success-seeking sisters celebrated over dinner with renewed energy; however, stage four was not over.

Upon leaving the assessment center, stage five, the temporary, "I'm so wonderful" stupor, descended upon me and my prior concerns lifted like a balloon pumped with helium. The anxiety was erased, tears were forgotten, and self-doubt was replaced with confidence. The approximately 300 hours (not including the computer card games) I took to complete the portfolio and prepare for the assessment center exercises were part of my history.

Stage six, the "back to Earth—waiting and wondering" stage, is where I live now. I have a good sense that I did my best work and I still deeply believe in the Five Core Propositions. Of course, I'll be disappointed if I don't achieve national board certification, but whether or not I achieve I'll continue to work hard every day in my classroom to be the best teacher I can be.

I've emerged through these six stages to consider myself a professional educator. I have an enhanced sense of quality in my teaching from the self-reflection that is built into the certification process. My self-reflection has become as automatic as brushing my teeth; I don't have to concentrate on the process of reflection to be fresher when the job is done.

Even though I am still waiting for the results, when people ask and they often do, "Would you do it again?" I have an unhesitating answer: "In a minute."

Since this piece was written, Larsen has been informed that she has earned National Board Certification.