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**The National Board for Teaching Professional Standards and the Culturally
Responsive Pedagogy of African American Teachers**

by

Jacqueline Jordan Irvine and James W. Fraser

"That's enough of your nonsense, Darius. Your story does not make sense. I told you time and time again that you must stick to the theme I gave you. Now sit down." Darius, a first grader trying desperately to tell his story, proceeds slowly to his seat with his head hung low. The other children snicker as he looks embarrassed and hurt. What kind of teacher could say such words to a child? Most would agree that the teacher would not meet any local or national performance standards and certainly would not pass the rigorous screening to receive certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

Ironically, Irene Washington, an African American teacher with 23 years of experience, is a recognized model teacher in her predominantly African American school and community. Like thousands of African American educators across the country, Irene Washington, teaches her African American students with a sense of passion and mission that is based in African American cultural traditions and history that she shares with her African American students. James Vasquez¹ calls these African American and other teachers of color "warm demanders" who provide a tough-minded, no nonsense, structured and disciplined classroom

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environment for kids whom society has psychologically and physically abandoned. Strongly identifying with their students and determined to give them a future, these teachers believe that culturally diverse children not only can learn but *must* learn. These above descriptions are reminiscent of the much acclaimed teaching style of Marva Collins, the African American teacher who started her own school in Chicago, and Jaime Escalante, the Hispanic teacher in Los Angeles who produced amazing results with his high school math students.

When asked about the teaching episode involving Darius², Irene Washington provided insight about the culturally responsive style she uses:

"Oh that little Darius is something else. Now he knows that there are times I will allow them to shoot from the hip. But he knows that this time we're working on themes. You see, you've got to know these students and where they're coming from--you know, talk the talk. He knows what's expected during these activities, but he's trying to play the comedian. I know he knows how to develop a theme and I won't let him get away with ignoring my instructions."

She explains that her comments to Darius were motivated out of a peculiar set of negative environmental circumstances and a sense of urgency to not only teach her children well but to save and protect them from the perils of urban street life. She explained:

"Darius is street smart, street wise. You see he has older brothers who are out there on the streets, selling and using. I know if I don't reach him, or if I retain him, I may lose him to the streets this early. That's what I'm here for--to give them opportunities--to get an education and the confidence. I certainly don't want them to meet closed doors." She ends her interview in a pensive and reflective mood. "When I look at these children, I see myself. I know what it is to grow up black."

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There is growing research evidence that teachers, like Irene Washington, use a culturally specific pedagogical style that is substantively different from the pedagogical approaches described and prescribed in the effective teaching research. In addition, this research reveals that African American teachers' unique teaching style is related to achievement gains by black students. Researchers like Gloria Ladson-Billings, Asa Hilliard, Michele Foster, Lisa Delpit, Etta Hollins, Joyce King, and Jackie Jordan Irvine have described the characteristics and teaching behaviors of effective African American teachers who used this pedagogy. For example, culturally responsive African American teachers:

- perceive themselves as parental surrogates and advocates for their African American students;
- employ a teaching style filled with rhythmic language and rapid intonation with many instances of repetition, call and response, high emotional involvement, creative analogies, figurative language, gestures and body movements, symbolism, aphorisms, and lively and often spontaneous discussions;
- use students' everyday cultural and historical experiences in an effort to link new concepts to prior knowledge;
- spend classroom and non-classroom time developing a personal relationship with their children and often tease and joke with their students using dialect or slang to establish this personal relationship;
- teach with authority or as Foster discovered, students in her study were "proud of their teacher's meanness" and thought that she pushed them to achieve, limited the amount of disruptions, and ran the class in ways that contributed to students' achievement.

In spite of the research evidence that supports these findings and the acknowledged principle that good teaching is related to context--teachers' and students' ethnic and cultural experiences, as well as their needs and motivation--newly implemented standards aimed to increase teacher quality and accountability have ignored the cultural pedagogical style and beliefs that African American teachers bring to their classrooms.

Nowhere is this situation more problematic than in the work of The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). According to the most recent data available to these authors', the pass rate for all applicants is 40%. Although the pass rate for African American teachers was 20% during the 1996-97 testing period, the overall pass rate for African American candidates to date is 11%.

If the National Board becomes the arbiter of the definition of good teaching, as seems more and more likely given the range of governmental and foundation support which it is receiving, and if its dismal failure to certify African American teachers continues, then the current crisis-level shortage of African American teachers is sure to continue and get worse. Of course, there could be multiple explanations for the 11% certification rate for African American applicants--racism that continues to assure limits on the preparation of people of color at every stage of their schooling; lack of mentoring and adequate professional development; cultural specific styles of writing and reflection; and assessor race by candidate race interactions. But there are probably a more complex explanations than these. School systems are not putting forward the average teacher of any racial group for National Board review. And if the very best of African

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American teachers, as identified by school districts willing to pay the considerable costs of National Board review, are still failing at a 89% rate, then there is more to be considered here. We believe that there is a very strong possibility that the National Board's review process, in spite of its many technical psychometric reports that declare adverse impact but no bias, contains a deeply flawed cultural bias in favor of white, middle class teacher norms--and against the norms which are seen by many African American educators as most effective.

As the National Board continues its work, we urge more attention to the "adverse impact" issue and more open discussions on how the problem might be solved. A competent, culturally diverse teaching force is imperative, and good teachers should be rewarded and acknowledged for their hard work and their success with their students, not excluded because of a culturally insensitive assessment process which biases the definition of good teaching in a way which privileges white, middle class and suburban teachers and penalizes teachers like Irene Washington. Although the National Board is attempting to address these issues, more attention and resources must be directed to addressing some basic questions before additional teachers are recruited for assessment. These questions include: Who is setting and defining the standards? Is the implementation process and not the standards the reason that African American teachers fair so poorly? Do teachers who work with privileged students have an advantage over teachers who work with poor students? Does the process disadvantage teachers from districts with limited resources? Do the standards favor teachers who use a constructivist teaching style and penalize teachers, like some African American teachers, who employ more didactic strategies? Since board-certified teachers serve as assessors of applicants, will the

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cultural bias in the current standards become a self perpetuating cycle? Will assessors be trained to recognize and appreciate the culturally relevant styles of African American teachers? Will the low pass rate of African American teachers contribute to the declining numbers of persons of color who enter teacher education programs?

These questions do not imply that the National Board standards specifically or the standards movement generally be eliminated. We want high standards for all teachers as much as anyone. Nor do we imply that African American teachers be held accountable to a different or less stringent set of standards. The question is *whose* standards and *which children* do the standards serve? These issues are presented for two important reasons. First, we raise the questions to ensure that excellent African American teachers claim their deserved place among America's most accomplished teachers. We find it untenable that 89% of the African American teachers who take the National Board of Teaching Professional Standards fail in the profession where African Americans have historically excelled. Second, we believe that standards that define excellence in teaching must be sensitive to and inclusive of culturally responsive pedagogy which has reversed the cycle of school failure for the growing numbers of diverse children, like, Darius, whose future depends on Irene Washington's firm yet loving guidance. Unless this is done, one of our generations most significant reforms is going to make the educational future for students like Darius even more bleak. We cannot allow an effort which is aimed at improving every child's education result in such an ironic and tragic outcome.

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¹ Vazquez, J. A. (1988). Contexts of learning for minority students. *The Educational Forum*, 52 (3), 243-53.

² Bell, P. J. (1997). *An African American Teacher and African American Students: Interaction around Text Production* (Doctoral Dissertation, Emory University, 1997).

³ Conversation with Philip Kearney of NTPS on 4-27-98 and AERA paper presentation of Lloyd Bond on 4-16-98. NBPTS will not release data on pass rate of teachers by ethnic/racial group.

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COMMENTARY SUBMITTED TO EDUCATION WEEK - May 8, 1998

By: SHARON DRAPER

1997 National Teacher of the Year

National Board Certified Teacher

Member, Board of Directors, National Board for Professional Teaching Standards

"I believe in you, Darius. Now let's get this act together." The example of an African-American teacher quoted in the recent commentary by Jacqueline Jordan Irvine and James W. Fraser, "The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and the Culturally Responsive Pedagogy of African American Teachers", would probably finish her remonstrances to the boy with words of encouragement and approval. To omit those words of affirmation seems to imply that negativity and harshness are the only indicators of the cultural differences demonstrated by African American teachers. The article asks whether culturally responsive teaching styles are included in the process of National Board Certification. As an African-American National Board Certified Teacher, and a member of the board of directors of NBPTS, I can give personal assurance that not only does the National Board include intense attention to cultural and ethnic differences in teaching styles, the National Board also seeks to recognize language barriers, teaching demographics, or historical inequities that might affect a candidate's certification.

Irvine/Fraser assert that the teaching practice of Irene Washington presented in their commentary would not meet local or national performance standards. Since Ms. Washington is a hypothetical case, and we do not have a full performance of her teaching practice, conclusions cannot be drawn. The description of Ms. Washington's culturally responsive teaching style falls within the NBPTS standards' expectations regarding contextual practice. In fact, current African American National Board Certified Teachers teach across the full range of teaching environments and utilize skills and teaching styles appropriate to their students. I am confident that with continued conversations, our already strong standards and assessments will continue to appeal to teachers of all backgrounds and teaching contexts.

When the board of directors developed the policy "What Teachers Should Know and Be Able To Do", which guides the development of all of our standards, we sought to include all teaching styles that result in improved student learning. This rich portrait of accomplished teaching captures the complexity and diversity of the profession in action. Within the mosaic of accomplished teaching practice described in NBPTS standards, the elements of instructional excellence that Irvine/Fraser and their colleagues have documented among effective African American educators are evident.

Irvine and Fraser cite teaching behaviors of effective African American teachers who are culturally responsive and effective with their students. Those teachers are described as teaching with a style filled with rhythm and response, working as advocates for their students, using cultural experiences to link new concepts, using slang to relate to the

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lives of their students, and teaching with authority and discipline to effect positive change. As an African American, National Board Certified Teacher, not only do I employ all of these methods and more in my classroom, but so do most of the most effective teachers I have met, regardless of race, in my travels across the country as National Teacher of the Year. An effective teacher must be culturally responsive to the students in his or her classroom, and the National Board has recognized and celebrated that fact since its inception through all of the standards and core propositions.

Each set of NBPTS standards requires that accomplished teachers know their students well and practice in a way that best advances the learning goals of their students. Candidates for National Board Certification must compile an extensive portfolio documenting their knowledge and analyzing their teaching skills in the context of knowing their students. Not only are multiple paths to knowledge allowed, they are required of accomplished practitioners. Accomplished teachers who respond to the needs of all students have a repertoire of strategies at their disposal and use them effectively.

As reported in the Irvine/Fraser commentary, African American teachers have achieved National Board Certification at a lower rate than candidates in other racial groups. In fact, because African Americans historically have experienced differential pass rates in standardized and norm-referenced testing, the National Board chose to develop and adopt a performance and criterion-based assessment, hoping this new type of assessment would avoid sources of alleged bias observed on other tests. The National Board decided at the outset to confront the issue of adverse impact head on in the development of its policies, standards, assessments, and by supporting an extensive research program to identify and eliminate all potential sources of bias that could threaten the fairness of National Board Certification.

The National Board has closely examined the outcomes of each assessment administration for sources of the adverse impact on groups. We were dismayed to learn that in our first few administrations, African American candidates did not perform as well as other groups on these assessments. Professors Irvine and Fraser suggest several explanations for the lower certification rate—"racism that continues to assure limits on the preparation of people of color at every stage of their schooling; lack of mentoring and adequate professional development; cultural specific styles of writing and reflection; and assessor race by candidate race interactions." Several of these factors are outside the responsibility of NBPTS, but the National Board has considered them all in an attempt to find either correlative or causative factors.

A part of NBPTS' ongoing research agenda focuses on assuring the equality of our standards and assessments across many teaching contexts. Studies examined interactions between assessor race and candidate race, candidate support, writing demands in the assessment, demographic factors, and teaching context. None of these studies revealed consistent or significant differences by race, teaching context, or educational background, that explain the lower pass rate for African Americans. Extensive studies of the scoring

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methodology revealed no differences between the way white or African American assessors score performances of white or African American candidates.

Nevertheless, these studies have helped us strengthen the certification system in many ways. We have identified ways to make instructions clearer for all candidates. We have made everyone aware of the demands of the assessment process and disclose scoring guides so that there is no mystery about the level or quality of performance necessary to achieve National Board Certification. We have encouraged and facilitated extensive local networks of support for all candidates. As noted by Irvine/Frazer, the pass rate overall has risen, and for African Americans, it has risen at a faster rate in the four years in which the system of National Board Certification has been available.

Despite the fact that NBPTS commissioned studies have revealed no bias in our work, and no clear indicators of what might underlie the differential pass rates of African Americans, the National Board is not satisfied with the differential outcome and have expanded our studies and other program strategies. We raised the very questions about valuing culturally responsive teaching raised by Professors Irvine and Fraser. In 1996, Professor Lloyd Bond (University of North Carolina) launched five studies, working with a panel which included some of the people referenced in their commentary: Treana Adkins-Bowling, Ceola Baber, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Katy Dula (National Board Certified Teacher), Joyce Elliott, Michelle Foster, David Haynes, Tchaiko Kwayana (National Board Certified Teacher), Robert Linn and Paul Ramsey. Professor Bond reports that panel members were able to identify instances of cultural markers across performances, but not a consistent pattern of impact on teachers' assessment scores. The National Board is continuing its investigations and welcomes the participation of additional experts in the field.

The Irvine/Frazer commentary asks the question of "who is setting and defining the standards?", possibly implying the lack of African American representation. The National Board is an unprecedented coalition of teachers, school board members, administrators, governors, business leaders, and parents. A broad array of policies and procedures have been implemented to assure that racial, ethnic and gender diversity is included in every aspect of our work. Forty percent of the NBPTS 63-member board of directors, which creates the policies guiding our work, are members of minority populations; the largest number of these are African Americans. The standards committees, whose task is to create the high standards of accomplished practice against which teachers are measured, number almost 500 educators including 25% minority members. Similar levels of minority participation are found in the scoring system. These hundreds of outstanding educators have brought to the table exactly the sort of vigorous debate about including culturally responsive practice that is called for in the commentary by Irvine and Fraser.

Professors Irvine and Fraser indicate that school systems are putting forward "the very best of African American teachers, as identified by school districts..." for National Board Certification. A fundamental principle of National Board Certification is that it is, and must always remain, a voluntary process. The reality is that individual teachers, not

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schools or school districts, examine the National Board's high standards to determine whether they believe they are teaching at an accomplished level and are ready to pursue National Board Certification. It is a deeply personal decision that individual teachers make.

theme at end.

Irvine/Fraser present a variety of possible reasons for why African Americans have not achieved National Board Certification at the same rate as other candidates in the initial administrations. The National Board has addressed these issues aggressively. The National Board has always been, and remains, deeply committed to developing standards of accomplished practice and providing all of America's teachers with an assessment that measures whether they meet these standards. Each assessment must pass an examination by psychometricians trained to assure reliability, validity and freedom from bias prior to the certification results being accepted by the National Board. We are committed to remedy any flaw or source of bias identified.

Even more importantly, thousands of teachers have told us that the assessment is fair more than just a test - that, in fact, it is the most powerful professional learning experience of their careers. The system of National Board Certification functions to improve teaching by helping to create a professional place where accomplished teaching is encouraged and lauded.

The mission of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards is to improve teaching by helping to create a professional place where accomplished teaching is encouraged and lauded. I believe in the potential of National Board standards and performance assessments to improve teaching among all teachers - and thus, improve learning opportunities for all students. I am very proud to be a National Board Certified Teacher and an active member of the board of directors of an organization that welcomes conversation and discussion, recognizes and honors diversity, and celebrates accomplishment and excellence.

Fairness, Bias and Adverse Impact Discussion Paper

Introduction

The National Board has always been, and remains today, deeply committed to providing America's teachers with an assessment of accomplished teaching practice that is valid, reliable and fair. To this end, the National Board has developed and implemented a broad array of policies and procedures which encourage racial, ethnic and gender diversity throughout every aspect of our work. In addition, the National Board closely monitors the outcome of all assessment administrations for evidence of adverse impact on racial/ethnic and gender minority groups. Like other standardized assessments in the nation today, these studies indicate that African American candidates as a group do not perform as well as other groups on National Board assessments. However, unlike these other assessment programs, the National Board has faced this intractably difficult issue head on by developing and supporting an extensive research program designed to identify and eliminate all potential sources of adverse impact that could threaten the fairness of the National Board Certification system. In doing this, the National Board is providing important leadership within the testing community by modeling how all testing programs should confront evidence of adverse impact.

Ongoing Studies of Validity, Reliability and Fairness

From its founding the National Board has supported an unprecedented research program to identify and correct any flaws that might threaten the validity, reliability or fairness of the National Board Certification (NBC) system. NBPTS has pursued this program not only through sensitivity reviews conducted by its assessment development laboratories but also by establishing and funding an independent Technical Analysis Group (TAG) to mount a wide range of studies on these matters. Conducted at a level of intensity that is unmatched in the world of professional assessments, the TAG research program has since its inception in 1991 provided invaluable information to NBPTS about all facets of its certification system, and developed new methodologies to bolster the validity, reliability and fairness of the NBC system.

Beginning in 1996, NBPTS' general contractor for assessment development and assessment operations, Educational Testing Service (ETS), assumed responsibility for continuing the National Board's research agenda subject to the review and advice of an independent Measurement Research Advisory Panel (MRAP) established by NBPTS. This research program has enabled us to advance even further the frontiers of performance assessment technology. TAG and ETS reports have concluded that all NBPTS assessments to date meet and exceed the highest professional standards promulgated by the educational measurement and testing community.

In reaching these conclusions the TAG and ETS have not only examined the NBPTS standards and assessments to establish evidence of their validity and reliability, but they have also sought to determine if any evidence of bias in the assessment system itself could be detected. From the first assessments administered by the National Board through today, very detailed studies which examine potential causes of bias show no evidence of bias in any aspect of the certification process. For example, the TAG examined the amount of writing in the assessment and found no evidence of bias. The TAG studies have examined the possibility that African American and white assessors might score candidates differently; however, these studies have found no link between assessor race and candidate race (i.e., African American assessors were just as tough minded or lenient as white assessors without regard to the race or ethnicity of the candidates whose performance they were judging). The TAG also investigated the levels of support received by candidates and concluded that from the candidate's own self-reports no evidence of bias was present. The National Board will continue to conduct these studies of potential sources of adverse impact over the next few years with financial support from the Spencer Foundation, as well as through the ongoing studies being carried out by ETS.

The National Board takes pride in the fact that to date there are no indications that the assessment process has been anything but fair. But fairness, or more specifically the absence of bias in the certification process, is no guarantee that all types of teachers from all types of settings will experience comparable results. When differential rather than comparable results occur for a group and the differences are significant, an assessment is said to have adverse impact.

The fact that our practices meet professional, technical and legal requirements is certainly reassuring, as are the findings that with respect to gender and location of school (i.e. urban, suburban, rural) no evidence of adverse impact has emerged. Nonetheless, we are concerned that of the candidates who have undergone the assessment to date, African American teachers have exhibited lower certification rates than white teachers. NBPTS acknowledges that the adverse impact issue may have salience for Asian, Hispanic and Native American teachers as well. However, given the extremely small numbers of candidates from these other minority group participating in field tests and other administrations, no conclusions about adverse impact with respect to these candidacies can be drawn.

Differential certification rates on assessments may result from a number of sources, including applicants' educational background, opportunities for professional development, differential access to professional or collegial help in preparing portfolio materials and many other factors beyond our control. Mere presence of differential results or adverse impact, *per se*, gives no clue as to what reason or set of reasons is operative. These must be investigated as a separate matter.

Other professions face similar circumstances and are confronted with results similar to those observed in NBPTS' initial assessments. While we have experienced clear progress in reducing adverse impact, it does not mean that adverse impact is no longer an issue, but it does provide some perspective on the magnitude of the current problem.

Policies That Promote Fairness

Beyond empirical studies of adverse impact, since its founding NBPTS also has mounted a vigorous campaign of clear and unmistakable actions to address issues of fairness, bias and adverse impact on a policy front. It begins with the NBPTS' by-laws and the composition of its board of directors in which attention to strong representation of teachers and others from all sectors of the education community, including representation by minority groups, was sought and achieved. In this latter respect the NBPTS board is representative of the larger society in which we live, even more so than some segments of the teaching population itself, in which minorities are underrepresented. This practice of diverse representation in all NBPTS activities continues as staff is hired, standards committees appointed, assessment development teams selected, pilot test candidates recruited, teachers identified and trained as assessors, and reviews of the standards and the assessment exercises conducted.

In its ongoing commitment to fairness, the board of directors maintains an Equal Opportunity Coordinating Committee composed of board members to monitor an action agenda which includes 1) continuing inquiries regarding the NBPTS standards and assessments, 2) using pilot testing to build the capacity of teachers to understand National Board Certification expectations, 3) targeting recruitment of promising candidates, and 4) offering substantive support of candidates for National Board Certification.

Having an inclusive and diverse group of people at each important table where key decisions are made and where professional judgment is exercised is one essential means of providing for a fair and unbiased certification system.