



Cathy McAlister has taught for 19 years at Hendron-Lone Oak Elementary in McCracken County, Kentucky. She is currently an instructional coach and curriculum specialist. She achieved National Board Certification in 2004 and was recognized by the Kentucky Department of Education and Ashland Inc. in 2013 with a Teacher Achievement Award.

### I Didn't Know What I Didn't Know A Personal Journey of Professional Growth

What started as a desire to earn the next step on the salary scale in 2004 grew into a journey that redefined my career. I went to a meeting about National Board Certification just to see what it was all about. It sounded like a dream come true - earning a considerable pay raise in one year as opposed to the regular route of taking 30 college hours above my Master's over the next five summers. The district planned to support teachers through the process by providing mentors. That was encouraging and took some of the unknown out of the equation. My thoughts as I left that meeting were, "I am a pretty good teacher, my students and their parents like me. I am going to get help. I can do this." I registered that night.

Somewhat anxious and very excited, I told my family and coworkers. My family and friends were excited for me. Of course, they had no idea what I was doing, but they thought it sounded great. That's why I love them so much. My teacher friends, however, had a different reaction. A teacher in my building that had tried unsuccessfully for two years to earn her certification was starting her

third. They asked me (and asked myself), "If she can't do it, why do you think you can?"

When my box of materials arrived, I could hardly wait to dive into them. I started by reading the National Board standards. Then, I read the standards. Next, I read the standards. After that, I read the standards again. I thought about sleeping with them under my pillow, but chose not to because I might have wrinkled them. Plus, all the highlighter fumes might have interfered with my sleep.

Reading the standards was like going down my educational philosophy checklist. *I agree with this, uh-huh, I know what you mean...* but it was also like the difference in parenting before you have kids and after. What you know and believe can fall by the wayside quickly in the heat of the moment. I also realized that over the years, I had compromised some of my beliefs and practices. I was running on the hamster wheel of life, working hard, running fast, but never making much progress. It didn't occur to me that if I didn't like the scenery, I was the one that had to step off and make changes.

These realizations had an immediate impact on my instruction. (I also wanted to apologize to some of my former students!) I needed more skills and a better understanding of current research. I was determined not to miss any more opportunities to get better at bettering my students. Instead of putting good ideas off for someday when I had more time/a different group/more parent involvement/fill in the blank/... the time was now.

As my work progressed on my National Board entries, the more obvious my path to growth became. The process of explaining my teaching practices gave me clarity and focus. It led me to step away from the, "It's what we always do, and it works" attitude towards one of genuine growth. And, I passed. I was an Early Childhood Generalist. But, as it turns out, instead of being finished, I had just begun.

The next year, my principal moved me to first grade. Quickly, I realized that I didn't actually know how children learned to read. I took the "spray and pray" approach to teaching literacy. My students grew adequately but not to as much as I knew they could. So I started researching and working on my skills and knowledge. I studied current theory of how children learned to read. I reflected on past and present successes and failures. I found an approach to small group instruction that made sense to me and began making changes – this is the process that becoming an NBCT helped me to hone and value. After a three-year process of trying, reflecting, changing and adjusting, I was gradually becoming the first grade teacher I wanted to be; the teacher my students needed the most.

Now, working as an Instructional Coach allows me rich opportunities to learn, as well as to support others. I hope to help my teachers understand the truth of what entrepreneur Derek Sivers suggests: "You should never compare your inside to someone else's outside. We see all the mistakes in ourselves but we only see other's final products." I believe it is important for me to share the humbling process of what is still evolving into my final product, despite the imperfections this process reveals.

More than ever, I appreciate what National Board Certification can do for individual teachers and our profession. It assists us in creating a unique blueprint for their success; for each of us, it is a very personal journey of professional growth.