New NWP Study Explores Teachers’ Learning, Leadership, and Legacy

BY LINDA FRIEDRICH AND PAUL LE MAHIEU

Question: What does it mean exactly to be a teacher-consultant? What do you do?

Continue to support your site and you try to bring other people into your site. You try to use the skills you have learned from the other teachers and you try to help other teachers.

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...It becomes a mission to go out and make other people aware.... We need to be actively out there through our own teaching practices in our classrooms.

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I think of myself first as a teacher and I always have.... I am also a writer, I am very committed to my writing and I write regularly. The writing project just seems to be that part of me. It feeds my teaching and it feeds my writing.

From transcript of a teacher-consultant focus group, 2003 National Writing Project Annual Meeting

To writing project folks, these comments from three teacher-consultants will evoe similar attitudes and experiences. They highlight the importance of teachers learning together and teaching each other; they affirm that, as teacher-

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consultants work with their students, the visibility and credibility of the writing project is increased; and they name ways in which the writing project nurtures teachers as writers. However, these voices also pose a challenge: How does NWP document and communicate the contributions of teacher-consultants such as these—as well as the accomplishments of the sites where they do their work—to policymakers, administrators, and the funding community?

In response to this challenge, the National Writing Project Research Unit recently launched the pilot phase of a national study about the work, development, and contributions of writing project teacher-consultants. This study will explore the central role that teachers can play in accomplishing needed reform in America’s schools. Because of its support for teachers as professionals and its engagement of teachers as leaders, the National Writing Project stands in contrast to many other reform efforts that place heavy emphasis on the mechanics of assessment and on systems of accountability or on tightly prescribed curricular and instructional programming. In exploring the work of teacher-consultants as professional leaders and analyzing how policy systems influence that leadership, this research will contribute to a public knowledge base that can guide policy and practice.

The research will investigate four broad areas.

1) The leadership work and contributions of teacher-consultants. The research will start by examining the work that teacher-consultants do as leaders within the education system as well as the impact and contribution of that work. In any given year, we estimate that 12,000 teacher-consultants are actively involved in many forms of leadership in a wide range of settings. This component of the study will ground such general statements in the day-to-day experiences of teacher-consultants.

2) The content and instructional knowledge bases that inform teacher-consultants’ work. Attention to student writing has always been central to the writing project’s work. Since its inception, the project has focused on the quality of student writing, the role of writing in learning, and the underlying skills required to write well. … a central question posed by the study is, “How are the leadership talents of teacher-consultants identified, cultivated, and sustained?”

3) Writing project sites’ role in supporting teacher-consultants’ leadership capacity. This study focuses on the writing project’s core strategy for professional development, which is to develop the expertise of exemplary practicing teachers and to support these teachers as facilitators of professional development. The NWP theory of action assumes that teachers enter the writing project with significant expertise in and knowledge of the teaching of writing and that, through conscious reflection upon their practice, that expertise can be refined and shared with students, colleagues, and local systems. Thus, a central question posed by the study is, “How are the leadership talents of teacher-consultants identified, cultivated, and sustained?”

4) The legacy established by NWP through its long-term investment in teachers’ leadership. NWP has consistently provided learning and leadership opportunities for outstanding practitioners. This study will examine how the persistent investment in the development of teacher leadership over many years has contributed to education. We’ll look at the professional histories and contributions of those who participated in NWP during the first 22 years of the project’s life, documenting through the professional lives of these early leaders how the legacy of NWP has been established and manifested.

The study will build upon and extend the excellent research already conducted by Ann Lieberman, senior scholar at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and Inverness Research Associates, investigators we will continue to work with. Over the past year, the research team, with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, has been developing a conceptual framework and research design to guide the inquiry. The research will integrate multiple modes of investigation including broad-scale surveys, in-depth interviews, vignettes composed by teacher-consultants, case studies, and review of archival evidence. The research team began engaging teacher-consultants and site directors in the study at the 2003 NWP Annual Meeting and will conduct pilot research activities in 10 to 15 sites between January and June 2004 with the full study commencing in summer 2004. For more information, contact Linda Friedrich at lfriedrich@writingproject.org or 510/642-6338.

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