NWP Evaluation Continues to Show Positive Results

BY ANDY BRADSHAW

In its spring 2001 report to the National Writing Project, the Academy for Educational Development (AED) confirms something many writing project teachers already know: Writing project teachers spend far more time teaching their students to write than do most of their colleagues.

In a study of 24 third and fourth grade classrooms of writing project teachers in four states, AED reports that NWP teachers spend an average of six and one-half hours per week on writing activities. Nationally, just 3 percent of fourth grade teachers spend three or more hours per week on writing activities.

Created in response to U.S. Department of Education requirements, the NWP/AED evaluation is a three-year study of writing project classrooms, designed to collect data on how student writing is developed, the conditions that support student achievement in writing, and the outcomes for students in NWP classrooms. Teachers from the Mississippi State University Writing/Thinking Project, the Oklahoma State University Writing Project, the Philadelphia Writing Project, and the UCLA Writing Project participated in the first year of the evaluation. Of the 24 participating schools, 13 were in urban areas, 8 were in rural areas, and 3 were in suburban areas. In three-fourths of the schools studied, more than half of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Data was collected from a total of 583 students.

The latest report presents findings from an analysis of teacher assignments and corresponding student work, written surveys, and telephone interviews with NWP teachers. Much of the report focuses on “authentic intellectual work”—the original application of knowledge and skills rather than the routine use of facts and procedures (Newmann, Lopez, and Bryk 1998)—and the emphasis NWP teachers place on such work in their assignments. Research shows that teachers who give students assignments requiring authentic
intellectual work see greater gains on standardized tests (Newmann, Bryk, and Nagaoka 2001). Such work is similar to the type of problem solving that adults face in their everyday lives and helps prepare students to be critical, analytical thinkers.

Of the 45 NWP teacher assignments studied, a majority provided students with an opportunity to perform authentic intellectual work. For example, over half (52 percent) required students to construct knowledge through analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and interpretation; 53 percent explicitly asked students to connect their topic to their own lives, and 67 percent required students to demonstrate an understanding of concepts in a content area, rather than just a superficial awareness.

AED cites several other findings that support the NWP model. For one, writing project teachers tend to view writing as a tool through which learning happens and don’t treat it as a separate subject. One teacher quoted in the report said:

I use writing throughout the day—it is part of almost everything. The children write to explain and write to integrate what they’ve learned in different areas. It has become such a habit that I don’t really even think about it. When I plan what I do [in any subject], I always plan a writing component. (Academy for Educational Development, p. 19)

The report also highlights ways that NWP teachers use various writing-process approaches in their classrooms. In at least half of their writing assignments, 87 percent of NWP teachers required students to work in pairs or groups. Another 79 percent used prewriting exercises, 69 percent used peer editing, and 96 percent employed student conferencing. Of the 45 assignments analyzed by AED, 18 were expository writing assignments, 10 were personal or family narratives, 8 were creative writing, 5 were poetry assignments, and 4 included persuasive writing.

Evaluators found that, in addition to altering their instructional style from a teacher-centered orientation to a student-centered orientation as a result of their writing project experience, many teachers credited their local site with helping them to better understand the processes students go through in becoming writers. As one teacher noted:

The main thing it [NWP] taught me is that I could break free of having a mandatory prompt. I could break free of requiring all kids to write and do the same thing. I could let go of structured lessons with lots of repetition. Instead, the notion of the writing process has created a more flexible classroom environment and kids are thinking about what they are writing and why. It taught me to trust kids. (Academy for Educational Development, p. 27)

Most of the teachers surveyed attributed an increased awareness of current literature and research, as well as an increase in professional support, to their involvement with the writing project. They described writing project continuity programs as extremely valuable in furthering their professional development. As another participant said: “These activities make me keep reflecting on my practice to see what is going on and how what I’m doing fits with professional journals, the district’s agenda, and school reform.”

The report concludes:

Teachers described their experience with the writing project as nothing short of profound. Beginning with the summer institute and continuing throughout their careers with continuity programs, teachers noted how their philosophy of teaching and learning, their daily practices, and their connection to a network of teachers developed through the project. (Academy for Educational Development, p. 3)

For more information on AED’s ongoing evaluation of the National Writing Project or to receive a copy of the executive summary of the fall 2000 and/or spring 2001 reports, please contact NWP at (510) 642-0963. The reports will be available online later this fall at www.writingproject.org.

References


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