Do NWP Teachers Make a Difference?

Findings from Research on District-Led Staff Development

Through research on district-led staff development, two teachers unveiled some unsettling circumstances about teacher disincentives to initiate change and assume leadership roles. Their work has defined some of the constraints on the impact that teachers can have in this age of standards and accountability. It has also revealed examples of enormous positive effects that National Writing Project teachers exert on their students and colleagues, sometimes against all odds. In this article, the writers discuss their findings, illuminating the issue of teacher empowerment as exemplified in professional development.

Ruie Jane Pritchard and Jon C. Marshall

According to our national research,1 the answer to the question “Do National Writing Project teachers make a difference?” is a qualified “Yes”: Yes, if given enough time to implement National Writing Project (NWP) processes; yes, if the domain for implementing NWP principles is under the control of teachers; yes, if there is district support.

For the last four years, the authors have studied staff development policies and practices in eleven states. The initial pool for the population was comprised of sites where NWP teachers had conducted extensive staff development. Eventually, eighteen districts allowed the researchers to make on-site visits, typically for five days, during which all central office personnel and randomly sampled teachers and administrators in sixty-two buildings were interviewed. This resulted in nearly four hundred hours of interviews.

Documents, such as photographs, school improvement plans, staff development budgets, policies and offerings, curriculum guides, and data from state and national tests, were studied. Further, over two thousand essays about their schools were gathered from students in fourth, eighth, and eleventh grades. These data form the basis for this discussion.

Data were analyzed using analytic induction, a constant-comparison qualitative approach whereby common themes emerge. For reliability, themes had to be addressed in at least three sources. Further, a panel of educators in one site and three NWP teachers in another site reviewed transcripts. NWP teachers created a rubric for and analyzed the student essays for both quality and content.

Two sites in our research will be used to illustrate the positive impact of NWP-trained teachers on their home districts, even when they began as the only advocates for a new idea in professional development.

It Takes Time to Make a Difference

An early study of staff development (Lawrence 1977) indicates that most innovations peak at three years and die by the seventh year. In many studies since then, the question of sustainability of staff development efforts has been raised (for example, see Boston 1995; Elmore 1992; Lazotte and Bancroft 1985; Wilson and Berne 1999.) Bratcher and Stroble’s 1994 study of NWP-trained teachers determined that approximately three years were needed for a teacher to evidence competence and confidence in teaching writing in new ways. In much scientific research, ten to twenty years of research and development are needed for an idea to become practice (Lipkin 2001). The NWP professional development model itself has been developing to meet contemporary needs since it first began twenty-eight years ago.

In our study, those districts with a more elongated view of how innovation and change occur generally evidenced more impact from NWP staff development. They expected change to be slow and the move toward improvement constant.
In Quincy, Illinois, seventh grade language arts and reading teachers in a junior high school wanted to combine their classes and teach two-hour literacy blocks. “We had a kind of ground movement,” commented one teacher. This is a change the teachers wanted to make even though the reading department and language arts department were separate, with separate faculty, meetings, classroom locations, and specializations.

The teachers knew what was in store. The language arts teachers would need to find out about “all these novels that we didn’t know anything about,” as one teacher put it. But even those committed to the change were a bit nervous about it. “Eighth grade teachers were at the benchmark grade for the state, and our eighth grade teachers did a marvelous job. I mean, our scores in writing were always excellent!” one teacher commented. “So, the fear was, as we made this change, would we be compromising that expertise or that student achievement.”

Teachers had to defend their ideas to administrators and others who wanted to know “Why fix it if it ain’t broke?” Of course, the teachers knew the real answer: Because as informed professionals, they believed that reading and writing could be more engaging and pedagogically sound if integrated at the junior high school level. And because, for their own growth, teachers wanted to take on an intellectual challenge.

The principal recognized that this would be more than just a cosmetic change and agreed to support the idea, but only if substantial planning and study during the school day could be accommodated. But the teachers and principal could do nothing without district support, as the chair of the language arts department explained:

Fortunately, we had a district language arts coordinator, Dot, who backed us 100 percent… The holdback was the scheduling problems. So, then we went to [another district] where they already had a literacy program… with the reading and language arts skills together. We took our assistant principal who does the scheduling with us. So, we were totally impressed with their program! We had a four-hour train ride back. He had his big legal pad out working on the scheduling on the way home with us right there with him. So, that’s where the birth of it was, really.

But what could be accomplished on paper was not so easily accomplished in practice. Other stakeholders needed to be won over. Creating a block schedule within a traditional junior high schedule, that included tracking, necessitated meetings with those who would be affected—the art, band, foreign language, and advanced placement teachers who offered courses on a restricted schedule, the scheduling officer for the building, parents who were concerned about their children getting prerequisites for high school and members of the administration who were worried about the effect on test scores.

Even some of the original advocates were feeling uneasy:

The reading teachers felt uncomfortable teaching the writing, and the writing teachers felt uncomfortable teaching the reading strategies. We were thinking, “Oh dear.” It was like being a new teacher.

But to get us over that and to give us the training that we needed, Dot came up with this idea of a collaborative period.

The seventh grade teachers agreed to take more students in each of their classes and teach five classes a day instead of six, thus freeing up one planning period a day to meet in a study group. The central office provided the language arts specialist as a consultant/facilitator. She met formally with the teachers an hour a day throughout the school year to address how teaching could be adapted to a block schedule and how planning could be shared with a teaching partner. A participant explained, “It was like a college course, really. She kept us up on professional reading and research that had been done. She brought us up to date on everything.” Central office provided each teacher with books for the sessions, such as Nancie Atwell’s In the Middle: New Understandings About Writing, Reading, and Learning (1998).

The study group conducted the best kind of practitioner research, in that the goal of the learning was to bring about a new action in teaching. The following response to the question “How did the language arts faculty contribute in the study group?” offers an understanding of the importance of having time together to advance positive change:

Well, we would actually bring in essays and sit down and, like one of the reading teachers would say, “What would you do with this essay?” We developed a rubric. We developed a curriculum checklist for seventh grade. We’ve got our writing process, all the things that we do for the writing process and all the
Research on District-Led Staff Development

different types of writing and assessments.

But the district commitment to enough time to bring about real change came with a built-in hazard: Where do busy teachers get the energy to do this hard work day after day for an extended period of time? Our research shows that without support and collaboration, projects come and go, and teachers just get worn out. We asked these teachers how they had the stamina to participate in a yearlong study group, face the inevitable problems, take on such a learning curve. In this case, it was a district administrator who seems to have made the difference. One teacher shared, “Dot is the kind of teacher-leader that the NWP needs to sustain, one with flexibility and a vision for how writing can be taught and knowledge of people and processes, as well.”

Another participant elaborated:

“I’ll tell you what, Dot just has a gift for dealing with people. She got us back on track, we had our valleys and peaks and she just dealt with us, she’d sit down, sometimes she would have an individual conversation with a person, to get that person back on track. She would meet with them, and explain something to them when they were frustrated about something. Or else, we’d just take a day—and she would have an agenda every day for us to work on—and she would say, ‘Okay, let’s forget the agenda today. I can see that you are frustrated about this. Let’s do this . . .’”

In the second year, the seventh grade teachers taught three two-hour literacy blocks successfully and met once a month as a study group. Their enormous pride is justified: “We had a lot of convincing to do. We did it. They gave us the go ahead. They are still watching our [writing] scores and everything, and our scores are fine. So, as far as reading—the concern now—we are gradually moving up . . .”

After witnessing their enthusiasm, the eighth grade teachers became involved in a daily study group to change in the literacy block. But the positive changes that occurred in Quincy evolved because the district took the time to be inclusive. These study groups were built on a common base: All twenty-five teachers in the language arts department had had training in the teaching of writing, either from a university-based NWP summer institute or a district-based institute led by trained teacher-consultants using the NWP model. Training for all language arts teachers in the teaching of writing had been encouraged by the central office administration, and teachers became convinced it was valued. One leader explained, “I think our last [teacher] took it this past summer and then we have even included our new teachers coming in. We have included student teachers . . . we’ve included everyone we can possibly think of!”

Many of the districts in our research did not share Quincy’s elongated view of professional development. As these districts did not think long term, neither did the teachers and administrators who worked for them. In these districts, we met up with statements such as these:

From a teacher: “I tried the writing workshop once. It didn’t work.”

From a teacher: “Peer groups worked in our NWP institute because adults are responsible. It doesn’t work with elementary kids. They just goof off.”

From an administrator: “We are going to remediate teachers in writing this year, and next year we’ll do math.”

These less-effective districts relied on short-term, one-session workshops to address the needs for improving writing in the district. Since improving writing was not part of the long-term strategic planning for the district, impact was short lived or visible only at the classroom level.

What Domains Do NWP Teachers Influence?

By far, across all the districts in our research population, the primary domain of influence of NWP training is the individual classroom. As a group, NWP teachers are good teachers who care about children and who develop sound educational activities to engage them. They are teachers who choose to participate in staff development, who take risks, who empower learners, and who adopt many of the teaching of writing practices they either learned or confirmed in their NWP experience: peer writing groups, author’s chair, multiple drafts, reflective journals, writing across the curriculum, guided revision, publishing, evaluating with rubrics, portfolios, and writing in many genres, to name a few.

However, we found many of the NWP-participant teachers we interviewed, like most other teachers, have confined their influence entirely to their own classrooms. Additionally, we found that even within their own classrooms, many of these teachers sacrifice what they believe to be best practices and succumb to outside pressure. For example, with the exception of teachers in five of the eighteen districts, many teachers gave up best practices in teaching writing from
mid-October until after the state writing tests were administered in March. In confidential interviews, they confessed that they relinquished what they believed because of administrative coercion, peer pressure, or simply as a survival tactic.

Some blamed forces they see as beyond their control: “My administrator will not let me have a noisy classroom, so I can’t use peer groups,” or “Parents demand that every error be marked,” or “If our scores don’t go up, we will be labeled a ‘school in decline.’”

More frequently, responses revealed that many teachers preferred to influence only their “own kids,” rather than take on a larger domain of influence. Teachers felt that their first commitment was to the students in their charge. In Covey’s terms, they were limiting their “sphere of influence” (1990). As the ones closest to learners, they did not want to yield that responsibility or power. They proclaimed how hard it was to leave their classrooms in order to meet with administrators or school board members or legislators or union representatives. To attend a conference or participate in staff development meant either getting a substitute or giving up nights, weekends, or summer holidays. They explained that preparing lessons for a substitute in their writing classes was often daunting, both because much work is so individualized and because they didn’t trust the competence of the substitute to maintain the momentum they had created. Often, they had to reteach, or worse, undo damage after a day or two missed.

Some teacher-consultants who did make efforts to influence their peers told stories of disincentives to delivering staff development in their districts: they were rarely paid for their time or even acknowledged for their contribution; they often had to pay for and prepare refreshments, duplicate the handouts themselves, advertise their own workshops, and write up evaluations. As one teacher said, “It all came out of my hide.” As other studies have pointed out, teachers see such professional development as a burden when added to all their other commitments, professionally and personally (Supovitz and Zief 2000).

Another reason for teachers focusing only on their own students derives from what the researchers in this study are calling the “basket of crabs effect.” In a basket of crabs, the others pull down the crab that tries for the top. So, all stay at the bottom. Some teachers confessed that it was hard for them to see themselves as experts because, like the crabs in the basket, some faculties seem to work defensively to assure that no one colleague excels. However, this behavior was usually restricted to districts where administrators did not support teacher development. A good system has an open-door policy that acknowledges teacher expertise and commitment. And it is in these districts that NWP teachers can successfully influence domains beyond the doors of their own classrooms.

The Role of the School System in Determining Impact

Part of being a skilled teacher-leader is negotiating with higher levels of power. In the bureaucracy of school systems that adopt a top-down model, this is not a common experience or expectation for teachers. At most NWP sites, power tends to be dispersed across a broad foundation of teachers and is shared rather than wielded—with expertise rising from that foundation. In those districts where the school district’s top-down model and the writing project model are at odds, what happens to the NWP teacher who becomes a district administrator? While there is no single answer, the following account of a talented NWP-trained teacher is representative of teacher-leaders in many of the districts we visited.

A bright, NWP-trained teacher earned her doctorate and advanced to the higher levels of the system, first as a writing consultant for her building and eventually for the district. The district had sponsored writing institutes and supported teachers to participate in the university-based writing project in the area. The teacher-turned-staff-developer initiated a comprehensive plan for improving writing in her district, one involving extensive mentoring and side-by-side teaching. Her goal was to build a critical mass of skilled writing teachers in each elementary building, a process she designed and implemented in her first year working out of the central office. However, when the district scores in writing declined during that year, the new superintendent adopted new mandates. Her budget for staff development was cut, and she was told to make presentations across the district on how to raise test scores, using one-shot information sessions. In the end, in order to keep her new job and new salary, she yielded to central office demands, largely because she was thrust into new central office responsibilities while at the same time trying to establish her authority.

Ironically, as a classroom teacher, this teacher had more autonomy in decision making than as a staff developer. Without decision-making power or control of the budget, a process-approach teacher became a product-approach staff developer. “Accountability thinking” reigned,
Research on District-Led Staff Development

and teaching to the test became the norm for the staff development culture (Lederhouse 2001).

This district had enjoyed many years of district-sponsored summer writing institutes. When a results-oriented superintendent replaced a learning-oriented superintendent, the system emphasis shifted away from the writing process approach. The full-time writing project director was returned to the classroom, the summer institutes were dropped, and staff development in writing was devoted to teaching to the test.

However, hope lies in those districts with system support for teachers brought about by enlightened administrators, be it school or district administrators. In our study, we identified five such districts. One common denominator in these districts was the belief that the district was a “learning organization” from the classroom to central office (Easterby-Smith 1990; Gill 2000; Senge 1990).

Oak Ridge, Tennessee, has for nineteen years offered an on-site writing project, organized by teacher-consultants who had attended a university-based NWP institute. The language arts coordinator summarized how it came about:

After teachers went to the NWP training, they came and worked very actively as a committee [of eighteen teachers who had had training]. Again, this is representation from all grade levels. They were identified as strong language arts people and very much believers in the writing issues. Through Jenks [director of the District Teacher Center] working with these committee members, they had this proposal. They were very strong about it, very convincing, and they had administration support. So, it was a kind of a grassroots thing.

The thirty-hour, teacher-led writing institutes, plus follow-up, are not considered part of the state-mandated staff development hours; rather, they are part of the teaching contract. Participation in one of two institutes offered each summer is a condition of employment for all new teachers. Administrators are required to participate in a six- to ten-hour institute. One cannot get an exemption from the district writing institute, regardless of one’s experience. One participant commented:

We have everyone from a preschool teacher to a twelfth grade coach, math teacher, social studies teacher, whatever. A lot of them come in dragging their heels. For one thing, they have to do it. . . . They evolve through the week and become a real cohesive group and they learn from each other. The dynamics change. The basis of the workshop, obviously, is to make them feel more comfortable about writing, make them better writers, and therefore feel more comfortable implementing it in the classroom.

One effect of this training is that writing takes place in all subject areas. As one principal put it:

We are looking for what the students are doing in terms of writing, not all five-paragraph essays, but all kinds of things, being able to explain a math problem, being able to develop a word problem. . . . I think our system here is ahead of the [testing] issue because of the emphasis on the writing process.

Throughout the system, educators found pride in the writing institute. One administrator called it a “rite of passage.” Knowing the new superintendent faced enormous pressure to cut the budget, we asked principals if the writing institutes were at risk. Here is one principal’s response:

I would not think it would be at risk. Principals would advocate for it to the superintendent. I know I would. If nothing else, if it says to the new person coming in, to the people who have been here, this is important. . . . I would think that it needs to be something that is looked upon as sort of an entry into the Oak Ridge School System.

The researchers observed that teachers and administrators at every level of the school system were concerned for the importance of writing in the curriculum. The district developed a continuum of literacy skills so that students progressed through a district program and, as they moved from one school to another, would work with teachers engaged in similar strategies and approaches to the teaching of writing.

Conclusions

Across all districts in our study, ongoing teacher-led staff development was rare. More common were outside experts who delivered one-shot, after-school sessions or mandated teacher staff development days that were largely information-sharing events. These practices prevail in spite of considerable research that shows them to be ineffective (see, for example, Ball 1996; Kansas Staff Development Council 1994; Marshall, Pritchard, and Gunderson 2001; Pritchard and Marshall 2002; Wilson and Berne 1999.) In many
Research on District-Led Staff Development

show strong impact of NWP training in their classrooms, considerable impact in their buildings, and moderate to high impact in the district curriculum. However, when districts look for quick fixes and do not provide consistent and long-term support, even NWP teachers show only sporadic impact of their training in their own classrooms and little or no impact outside their classrooms.

Because of tenacious NWP-trained teachers, the profession now recognizes a paradigm shift in how writing is taught. For the writing project to realize its powerful potential, school and district leaders must embrace the underlying assumptions. This was illustrated in the healthy districts from which we drew examples for this article.

The examples underscore the reasons for two essential components of the NWP model: 1) The NWP is not a remediation program but rather is focused on creating teacher-leaders and should attract those with the greatest potential; and 2) NWP teachers need ongoing follow-up support after the summer institute, and not just from the NWP site.

Notes

References
Bull, D. 1996. "Teacher Learning and the Mathematics Reforms: What Do We Think We Know and What Do We Need to Learn?" Phi Delta Kappan 7: 500-508.

see Research, next page
Research

continued from page 37


RUIE JANE PRITCHARD is the director of the Capital Area Writing Project and is coordinator of English education, both at North Carolina State University. As a Fulbright Senior Researcher/Lecturer with the New Zealand Ministry of Education, she developed writing institutes for New Zealand teachers.

Jon C. Marshall is professor of education at the State University of West Georgia. He is executive director of the Northern Interior Staff Development Council serving states in the upper-midwest.

The Five-Paragraph Theme

continued from page 25

teaching. I could see happening at the university level what had happened eight years earlier in the public schools. The examination for the Certification of Educators in Texas (ExCET), an accountability test for teachers in Texas, was shaping capstone courses into test-review courses, just as the TAAS had shaped writing within the five-paragraph theme.

Professors and teachers must work toward raising writing standards across the curriculum. As an educator of teachers, I now make reading, writing, and dialogueing central to the learning process in my classes. While I expect my preservice teachers to state the purpose of their synthesis papers, critically analyze, and synthesize educational research, I have to resist my students’ initial tendency to expect me to give them a formula for controlled writing success. My expectation that my preservice teachers will be able to think critically and express their thoughts clearly goes beyond the minimal standards of a five-paragraph theme.

Will this make a difference? I hope so, but I’m not sure it will. Only this week, I sat in on an inservice for the English teachers at one of the local high schools. The principal is genuinely concerned about raising the Indiana State Test of Educational Progress (ISTEP) language scores for the school just like my Texas principal had been concerned about raising student scores on the TAAS. The principal believes that the test will change how teachers teach, and I agree. My concern is that this change will result in formula writing and five-paragraph themes. I am afraid that what Texas began will sweep the nation before the public demands what educators already know—students need writing connections across the curriculum and in multiple genres.

GLENS MOSS is an assistant professor in the School of Education at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne. She instructs secondary preservice teachers and is currently a participant in the Indiana Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute.