NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT

Building and Sustaining Capacity: Teacher Leadership and Instructional Improvement in the NWP

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Summary: The authors propose a research agenda to examine teacher leadership within the NWP that focuses on teacher-consultants and their work, the place of content and instructional practice, leadership development and support in the NWP, and the organization's approach to teacher leadership as investment in educational improvement.

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Background and Rationale

One significant school of thought regarding how best to accomplish needed reform in America’s schools places considerable attention and responsibility upon teachers—their capacities, authorities, status, roles, and activities—to make needed changes in both context and practice. This professionalism movement stands in contrast to other approaches that privilege the mechanics of assessment and accountability systems or rigidly prescribed curricular and instructional programming. In the last two decades, researchers and practitioners alike have suggested that “teachers as leaders” is a viable strategy for school change and improvement (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, Lambert, 1998, Lieberman, 2001, Wasley, 1991).

Although we know from research and experience many of the leadership roles that teachers might be assigned to play, we know far less about what they are capable of doing in a system that supports the development of their expertise and leadership abilities. In such a system it would be good to understand fully what teacher leaders come to know, what they do, and the influences they have in instructional improvement; we also know virtually nothing about the kinds of policy and organizational supports that are necessary to develop and sustain their work with colleagues.

A great deal of experience has been gained through many school improvement designs and approaches. The NWP stands in contrast to many of these efforts because of its fundamental support for teachers as professionals and its engagement of them as leaders in many ways. As such it represents an environment in which relevant and useful knowledge can be generated to guide practice and policy by those who must and do apply that knowledge. This would greatly remediate a situation in which there is little public knowledge about how teacher leaders go about their work and, therefore, little to guide either practice or policy. Instead, we have teacher leaders performing important development work and little systematic documentation of what it looks like, as well as policies that often undermine, or fail to make use of, the leadership of teachers. The great potential of the teacher professionalization movement will remain largely untapped until such questions can be answered through research and addressed in policy and practice.

This leadership is particularly important in large urban districts that are constantly managing change in both student and teacher demographics as political contexts. In Spinning Wheels: The Politics of Urban School Reform, Hess argues that while there is widespread support for reform in urban schools, much of the struggle to improve schools is the result of "policy churn" which distracts teachers and principals from efforts to refine classroom teaching (Hess, 1999).

The National Writing Project has, for thirty years, been implementing a model for working with teacher leaders in the teaching of writing that seems to support building a quality teaching force and sustaining educational improvements. The model has not only shown itself to be engaging and important to teachers, but also shown that teachers take what they learn through participation in their local writing project and use it in their classrooms to effect student accomplishment (St. John et al., 2001; Lieberman & Wood, 2003). Recent data have also shown that teachers in the
NWP use a variety of strategies for involving students in the improvement of writing (Fancsali, 2002). In a sense, the NWP is a large action research project, a powerful instantiation of an approach that puts teacher leadership foremost and does everything it can to support and capitalize on that leadership. Thus, the NWP comes as close to an ideal arena to study the potential of teacher leadership and its implications for local capacity as any available to us.

We also know through anecdotal evidence that writing project teacher leaders are called upon to provide leadership in a variety of other activities, including teaching in pre-service programs, mentoring new teachers, organizing professional development programs at the school and district level, and developing writing programs and curriculum. This complex set of activities demands teachers who are both knowledgeable and respected by their peers, as well as the structures and support systems that prepare, enable, utilize, support, and sustain them.

The Teacher Leadership Research Group determined a conceptual organization for the substantive questions that abound in this area. In the sections that follow, this concept paper first outlines a conceptual approach to teacher leadership within the context of the National Writing Project. It then treats each of the four substantive areas of the research agenda:

1. Teacher-consultants and their work;
2. The place of content and instructional practice;
3. Leadership development and support in the NWP;
4. The NWP approach to teacher leadership as investment in educational improvement.

These four areas of investigation are interdependent, as is reflected in the similarity of questions among them. A primary purpose of this conceptual framework is to ensure that important dimensions of teacher leadership are not overlooked. We offer this taxonomy as useful tool in organizing an intellectual landscape as well as guiding and informing a research undertaking.

A Conceptual Approach to the Study of Teacher Leadership: The Teacher-Consultant

NWP teacher-consultants are the primary focus and subject of the study for three central reasons. First, teacher-consultants are the lynchpin in the NWP’s theory of action; they are both the “product” and the “agents” of sites’ work. It could be said that sites’ primary functions are to “produce” leadership (i.e., effective teacher-consultants) and then to design the relationships and activities whereby these teacher-consultants provide professional development to teachers and carry out any other work of the site.

Second, a direct focus on the work and development of teacher-consultants requires us to inquire into and learn directly from the phenomenon itself, as opposed to other representations of it. In just a short time, the Teacher Leadership Research Group was able to describe sixty-nine functions of teacher leadership, and was able to begin exploring broad propositions from them. Focusing on the teacher-consultants enables the researchers to derive insight empirically as an approach to the analytic and speculative writings about teacher professionalization that abound. Taking a disciplined empirical approach strengthens the study methodologically, giving it greater value and legitimacy in the field. It also strengthens the study substantively because it will produce a more grounded and thus richer definition of teacher leadership, which is a much-used but not clearly defined notion. We offer the analogy of “ground-truthing” to explain this approach to research: whereas a satellite map can define a landscape accurately enough to support good and detailed hypotheses about the terrain, only ground-truthing can confirm what is actually there, and in this way enable one to see how well reality matches theory.

I. Teacher-Consultants: Their Work and their Contributions

The first component of this research is to create a portrait of National Writing Project teacher-consultants and the work that they do. We know from our collective experience and from the ongoing reporting of writing project sites that teacher-consultants work in a wide range of settings and take on a variety of professional responsibilities. In any given year, we estimate from surveys of all site directors that 12,000 teacher-consultants are actively involved in many forms of leadership activity. Details and specifics need to be gathered and organized, as this broad-brush portrait contextualizes the remaining strands of the study. The research starts, then, by examining the work that teacher-consultants do as leaders within the education system, as well as the impacts and contributions of that work.
Guiding Questions

1. Who are writing project teacher-consultants?
2. What work do teacher-consultants do individually and collectively?
3. What contributions are realized through these activities?
4. Where do we see the influence of teacher-consultants and their work through the writing project?
   a. How does taking leadership influence a teacher-consultant’s classroom practice? Student learning?
   b. How do teacher-consultants support the learning and growth of teaching colleagues and thereby their classroom practice and their students’ learning?

II. The Place of Content and Instructional Practice

The National Writing Project, from its inception, has been consistently focused upon its definition of the content that serves as the intellectual core of its work. That content focuses upon four critical elements: (1) writing and the production of writing; (2) the teaching of writing; (3) developing professionals to teach writing; and (4) creating the contexts and conditions to enable the pursuit of effective practice in writing as well as the teaching and professional development pertaining thereto. The first of these elements centers upon writing, its quality, its purposes, and its role in the production of knowledge. The second focuses on the processes through which skill in and knowledge of writing are developed. The third pertains to the establishment of a profession of the teaching of writing, including especially the development of professionals skilled in its practice. The fourth and final element emphasizes systemic conditions (including organizational structure, policy, public action, and the like) that make effective practice possible and even rewarded.

Moreover, NWP has consciously placed student work and judgments about its general quality and specific qualities at the center of all professional development and support activities for its participants. In this way, student learning is ever present in the NWP agenda, and becomes the de facto criterion of purpose and effect for NWP activities, certainly including those that define and support leadership.

Even as the NWP undertakes the development of teacher leadership, it does so always with conscious attention to this broadly defined content base. It does not address “leadership” in any abstract form, but rather it seeks to instill and vivify a disciplinary foundation for teachers in that area where they can legitimately be seen as preeminent: the teaching of writing. Leadership, then, emerges from the exercise and dissemination of this expertise. The source of teacher-consultants’ authority within the profession is located in their knowledge and expertise as opposed to other forms of authority identified by researchers (e.g., positional authority or controlling authority).

This is essential to the understanding of NWP’s theory of action about teacher leadership. It starts with a definitional vision of teachers and teaching. That vision views teachers as professionals who are constantly challenged to operate in decision-making environments where they face certain kinds of challenges. The ongoing and valid exercise of professional judgment characterizes this view of teachers as professionals. They must make decisions where both the knowledge base generally and often the available data regarding presenting conditions and contexts are imperfect or incomplete. In other words, they must make decisions (and implement them and evaluate their impact) in contexts where the available information is far from perfect, in what the cognitive psychologists describe as ill-defined problems (and often with less than satisficing information upon which to base the decisions). Yet these circumstances are the very definition of professional decision making. The only way to operate effectively in such a domain is with good judgmental skills and a deep knowledge base about the substance of those decisions. Sound knowledge about content and practice is essential to such professional behavior and that is recognized by the NWP in its approach to education improvement.

What must be pursued, in the context of this research on teacher leadership, is the definition of the mechanisms through which knowledge about content and practice comes to be known and accepted, as well as the manner in which that knowledge serves a central role in the definition, establishment, and practice of teacher leadership. Further, because issues of writing, its quality, its role in learning, and the teaching of its underlying skills sit at the heart of the NWP’s work, issues of classroom practice and student learning and performance in writing necessarily come to the fore.
Guiding Questions

1. What is the disciplinary base (knowledge, skills, dispositions, practices) that serves as the core of NWP content?
2. How is “content” defined and pursued in NWP with regard to:
   a. the teaching of writing?
   b. professional development about the teaching of writing?
   c. the context in which writing is taught and professionals learn to teach it?
3. Where does the disciplinary base and substance of NWP content come from? Through what processes does the disciplinary basis of knowledge in the NWP come to be defined? Who participates and in what ways?
4. How do teacher-consultants (individually and collectively) develop and come to possess that content knowledge over time? What role does the disciplinary base play in guiding teacher-consultants’ leadership activities?
5. How does that disciplinary base function as a source of authority for the exercise of leadership by teacher-consultants? How does possession of this knowledge influence colleagues’ regard for and acceptance of teacher-consultants as leaders in various forms?
6. In what ways do teacher-consultants contribute to the knowledge base about and make a difference in the teaching of writing, reading, and literacy? In related policies?

III. Leadership Development and Support in the NWP

This study of teacher leadership, at the specific level, is about the NWP’s core strategy for doing its work as a professional development network. That strategy, simply put, is to develop the expertise and related capacities of selected practicing teachers, and to support these leading teachers—NWP “teacher-consultants”—in their roles as facilitators of colleagues’ professional development. In addition, teacher-consultants gain experience and confidence that allows them to make other important contributors to local, state, and national efforts to improve education. Leadership in the NWP is not treated in any abstract or generic manner. Rather it builds on teacher-consultants’ knowledge of content and their experience in the classroom. The central question considered in this area of the study is: How are the leadership capacities of teacher-consultants identified, cultivated, and sustained?

The NWP theory of action assumes that teachers enter the writing project with significant expertise in and knowledge of the teaching of writing. It further assumes that teacher-consultants develop new knowledge and deepen their expertise through participation in the writing project, which then shapes their work as leaders. We are interested in examining how teacher-consultants view leadership, how they bring their knowledge and practice to bear as they take on new roles and responsibilities, what supports teacher-consultants in developing their leadership skills, and what motivates them to take on this work.

Guiding Questions

1. What paths do teacher-consultants follow in becoming leaders?
2. How do teacher-consultants see the work of NWP national, NWP sites, and their own professional lives intersecting?
3. How do teacher-consultants capitalize upon the opportunities offered by participation in activities in various segments of the system (classroom, school, district, state, and national) in their exercise of leadership?
4. Why do teacher-consultants engage in the exercise of leadership? What motivates them? How does that motivation get addressed?

Teacher-consultants in the National Writing Project work not as solo virtuosi but as part of a collective structure. Therefore, it is important also to examine how writing project sites identify potential leaders and create opportunities for teacher-consultants to exercise leadership in response to local conditions. In particular, we are interested in the multiple forms of support—individual, collective, organizational, and policy-related—that enable and support their exercise of leadership. Further, we seek to understand the interplay between the roles of individual teacher-consultants and the collective nature of leadership work within writing project sites.
Guiding Questions

5. How does the writing project contribute to the development of teacher-consultants’ leadership capacity? How does it support the exercise of such leadership?

6. How is the work distributed or shared across individuals and within sites? How does this work highlight the strengths of particular individuals?

7. What is the context for their work? How do they shape their work to particular contexts? What policies support or militate against the exercise of leadership by teacher-consultants?

8. What forms of support are necessary to teacher-consultants as leaders? What reward structures (formal and informal) recognize and enhance teacher-consultants in their exercise of leadership?

IV. The NWP Approach to Teacher Leadership as Investment in Educational Improvement

The NWP approach as investment strategy seeks to enhance the content and pedagogical skills of outstanding practitioners. The network then utilizes and supports them in the dissemination of that knowledge to colleagues as well as instrumentally in the establishment of educational contexts and environments in which these ideas about best practice can be pursued. In doing so, NWP consciously seeks to enhance capacities both for individuals and for the local systems in which they serve. The preceding sections outline research activities that examine the immediate impact of this strategy (in terms of teachers’ knowledge, skill, and practices as well as in terms of their effects on student learning). What remains is to examine the strategic impact of this approach to instructional capacities more broadly defined. To be specific, three areas comprise the potential benefits of this investment in capacities.

The first benefit resides in the establishment of centers of expertise that enhance the institutional capacities of the systems themselves. Local writing project sites serve as repositories of professional talent that may be called upon to assist in improvement efforts in any of a number of ways. Their unique position as fundamentally supportive and yet independent of the school systems that they serve situates them as particularly useful advocates of powerful practices amidst the sometimes competing influences of politics and ideology. These centers of excellence offer a critical mass of exceptional professionals as well as an institutional sanctioning that supports the teacher-consultants in their exercise of leadership. In these ways, the NWP adds value that goes beyond that of teacher-consultants as individuals.

The second area explores the NWP’s role in supporting the creation and maintenance of a genuine profession of teachers of writing. One important element of reform of the field is in the establishment and full empowerment of teaching as a bona fide profession. Many of the basic tenets of the NWP are consistent, not just with this goal, but also with the particulars of establishing and maintaining a profession of writing teachers. Privy access to an established body of knowledge, continual research to expand that knowledge base for the purpose of improving practice, and acceptance of responsibility for the quality of practice are all essential elements of genuine professionalism. These features are evident in NWP’s work as it advocates and fosters the leadership activities of its teacher-consultants.

The third area investigates the legacy established by the NWP as it has pursued its strategy of investing in teachers as leaders for thirty years. To each generation of educators, there is a small set of programs and experiences that binds many contemporaries through common experience, vision, and values. Incredibly, this is done even across the divide of distant places and disparate cultural contexts. Teacher Corps, the Effective Schools Movement, and Madeleine Hunter’s Instructional Supervisory Model are just a few of recent memory. It has been observed that the impacts of these efforts were best noted, not in their immediate expression, but in the influence exerted over large numbers of individuals as they matured into leaders within the profession. As one prominent educator put it, “An incredible number of these folks went on to become superintendents. We looked for the impact of Teacher Corps in the wrong place and at the wrong time. Its real impact was in the shared goals and visions of a significant portion of the next generation of educational leaders.”

The National Writing Project may well have made just such a contribution, most particularly in realms closest to the educational process—those concerned with curriculum and instruction. As it approaches thirty years of service, and with over 2,000,000 teachers who have been participants, NWP is now poised to assume a historical place amongst these legacy initiatives. What is needed is a systematic and concerted effort to assess and document its legacy in these terms. What is proposed here is a study that will examine the professional experiences and contributions of
those who participated in NWP over the first twenty years of the project’s life (that is, those whose participation was at least ten years ago). It is through the professional lives of these early leaders (and those whom they led and followed) that the legacy of the NWP is established and manifested.

Guiding Questions

1. Does participation in NWP in any way sustain and retain exemplary teachers within teaching?
2. For those who stay in teaching, how does participation in the reflective community and leadership opportunities fostered by NWP sustain them as professionals?
3. Does participation in NWP influence teachers to expand their sphere of influence through acceptance of other leadership positions (both formal and informal) in education?
4. How do colleagues regard the contributions of teacher-consultants as leaders? To their own practice? To their own sense of professionalism?
5. How do the vision and core beliefs of the NWP manifest themselves in the subsequent professional activities of participants?
6. What role has NWP played in guiding the pursuits of a generation of educational professionals so as to influence that and subsequent generations of educators?

Strands of Investigation

In order to investigate the four core components of the conceptual framework outlined above, the Teacher Leadership Research Group has outlined three interrelated strands of investigation: the teacher-consultant strand, the site strand, and the legacy strand. In order to ensure coherence, we are building in both conceptual and personnel overlap across these strands. Therefore key research questions will be investigated in more than one strand, the same survey and interview items may be asked of different informants, and some issues will be investigated in multiple contexts using complementary methods. Coordination and integration will be realized as some members of the research team will participate in the design and conduct of more than one strand of research activity.

Teacher-consultant strand. The central purposes of the teacher-consultant strand are to examine: 1) the work of individual teacher-consultants, 2) the pathways teacher-consultants follow as they take on leadership roles and responsibilities and the supports they have found particularly valuable, 3) the knowledge and expertise teacher-consultants bring to bear in their leadership work, and 4) the contributions and impact of teacher-consultants on their students, peers, and administrators, and on parents, policymakers, and the profession. This strand places teacher-consultants’ perspectives and ideas at the core of its investigation. While teacher-consultants constitute the primary informants in this strand, we also intend to incorporate the perspectives of site directors, school and district administrators, teacher colleagues, students, and others as appropriate to address the guiding research questions.

The teacher-consultant strand will use a mixed-methods design in order both to paint a broad-brush picture of teacher leadership in the NWP and to illuminate that landscape with more detailed vignettes and portraits of individual teacher-consultants. Currently we are developing the following research instruments:

- Written survey of currently active teacher-consultants;
- Telephone interview/survey that probes areas of the survey more deeply;
- Vignettes, written by teacher-consultants in response to a common prompt, that provide concrete examples of their work; and
- Case studies of a small number of teacher-consultants that incorporate interviews with teacher-consultants, their colleagues, and students; observations; collection of existing written data and other artifacts; as well as the other data listed above.

At the broadest and least intensive level of data collection (i.e., the written survey) the sample of respondents will be selected from the full population of currently active teacher-consultants. For all other forms of data collection outlined above, teacher-consultants will be selected through a nomination process that involves site directors and NWP staff and leadership.

Site strand. The site strand serves three primary purposes. First, it investigates how sites identify, develop, support, and employ the leadership capacities of teacher-consultants. Second, it contributes to the understanding of the
intellectual and content core of the writing project’s work. Third, it gives insight into the collective nature of teacher leadership at writing project sites. This strand of investigation will focus on the perspectives of site directors and other members of site leadership teams. The site strand team will also work closely with the teacher-consultant team to craft data-collection strategies to illuminate the contexts in which case-study teachers work.

The site strand will make use of the NWP’s rich archival record to analyze patterns of support for leadership development across the writing project network. In particular, the strand will code and analyze a sample of annual site applications. After preliminary analysis of these data, the team may also field a brief site survey focused on sites’ leadership development practices. The site strand will also conduct a small number of site director interviews and observations of key activities to create a more detailed portrait of leadership development practices and a deeper understanding of the content of the NWP’s work.

Legacy strand. The purpose of the legacy strand is to examine the influence and reach of writing project teacher-consultants within the field of education more broadly. It also examines NWP as an investment strategy in developing widespread, deep, and enduring capacity at the local level. In particular, this strand examines how stable investment in the development of teachers’ leadership capacity over many years can contribute to the overall field of education. The key informants in this study are teacher-consultants who participated in writing project summer institutes during the first twenty-two years of the writing project.

This strand involves two key data-collection activities. First, the team will field a large-scale professional history survey. This survey will probe the relationship between NWP participation and subsequent career decisions, along with the manner in which NWP and its fundamental beliefs and values have influenced participants’ approaches to their professional responsibilities and activities. Second, the team will either conduct in-depth interviews or collect vignettes from a randomly selected group of participants. The sample will comprise three subgroups of individuals that followed one of three different career paths: those who remained in teaching, those who remained in education but moved from teaching, and those who left education altogether.

The research team will work with a small group of "legacy leaders" to analyze and interpret these data and to discuss the implications for the future of the NWP.

These three interrelated strands of investigation promise to generate findings that illustrate the rich and diverse leadership work carried out by writing project teacher-consultants. More importantly, this research seeks to illustrate how investing in such a strategy builds and sustains capacity for instructional improvement on a broad scale. It also promises to provide guidance to policymakers about the strategies and conditions that support teachers in taking on leadership roles.

References


