

**THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT'S  
NEW TEACHER INITIATIVE:  
A STUDY OF OUTCOMES, DESIGN AND  
CORE VALUES**

**INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW**

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# **THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT'S NEW TEACHER INITIATIVE:**

## **A STUDY OF OUTCOMES, DESIGN AND CORE VALUES**

### **Introduction and Overview**

#### **The NWP's New Teacher Initiative**

The New Teacher Initiative (NTI) is a special effort of the National Writing Project aimed at learning how Writing Project sites can best support the large numbers of new teachers now populating U.S. schools. The specific purpose of the initiative is to help the National Writing Project (NWP) learn how to design and carry out programs that support, with content-specific professional development, novice teachers in urban, high-need schools. Toward this end the NTI funded and supported 18 new teacher support projects at existing NWP sites in a multi-year effort.<sup>1</sup>

The most immediate aim of the NTI is to explore multiple professional development approaches and strategies for supporting new teachers. An even broader goal is to capture the lessons learned from the 18 New Teacher Initiative sites and to disseminate information both internally to the NWP network as well as to other external audiences. The work of the NTI holds the potential for 1) a better understanding of the circumstances in which new teachers begin their careers, 2) the design of responsive new teacher support practices, 3) the building of expertise for supporting new teachers across the sites, and 4) the opportunity to examine a host of unexpected, interesting issues and questions concerning new teachers that arise from the effort as it unfolds. The New Teacher Initiative is thus designed as a kind of large-scale "action research" project, intended both to serve new teachers at the designated sites, and to generate knowledge for the National Writing Project and the field at large.

#### **The National Writing Project and New Teachers**

Since its beginnings over 30 years ago, the National Writing Project has grown into a national network of 189 local writing project sites located in universities and colleges in 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. With the goal of improving the quality of the teaching force, local writing project sites conduct a broad array of professional development activities in the teaching of writing in schools and districts across the country.

To help teachers teach writing more effectively, the NWP provides a model for sharing and examining best practices, for developing strategies to meet the literacy needs of individual students, and for learning from research in the field. By preparing expert teachers, K-16, to

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<sup>1</sup> Nine Cohort One sites were funded in the fall of 2002 and completed their NTI participation in August, 2005. They are: Boston Writing Project (WP), Chicago Area WP, Coastal Georgia WP, District of Columbia Area WP, Maryland WP, New York City WP, Philadelphia WP, Oklahoma State University WP, and Third Coast WP. Nine additional Cohort Two sites began participation in January, 2004 and will continue their work through August, 2006. They are: Delaware WP, Central Texas WP, Houston WP, Marshall WP, Meadowbrook WP, Sabal Palms WP, Southern Nevada WP, Western New York WP, and Winthrop WP.

teach other teachers in their own regions, the project currently serves nearly 100,000 teachers annually.

In the fall of 2002 the National Writing Project, with the support of the W. Clement and Jessie V. Stone Foundation, established the New Teacher Initiative. This initiative, exploratory in nature, is one of several that the NWP currently sponsors “to support sites and teachers in studying and improving their work.”

While historically the NWP does not focus its work on novices, the consensus arising among many of its urban sites is that the support of new teachers is a critically important issue. Site leaders note increasing numbers of new teachers entering urban classrooms under-prepared in the teaching of writing, and under-supported more broadly by either their schools or districts. Because one of the foundational beliefs of the National Writing Project is that access to high-quality educational experiences is a basic right of all learners, including both veteran and beginning teachers as well as their students, the lack of support for novices is seen as an equity issue. Reinforcing the experience of the urban sites is what dramatic statistics currently show about the changes in overall teacher demographics, new teacher attrition and retention rates, and worsening working conditions in schools over the past decade.

## The Current Need

According to a recent report, “Tapping the Potential: Retaining and Developing High-Quality New Teachers,”<sup>2</sup> research continues to add to the growing agreement “that the single most important factor in determining student performance is the quality of the teacher.”<sup>3</sup> And yet, current research also shows that “annually approximately six percent of the teaching workforce does not return to teaching. Teachers in all schools are moving out of the profession, but the rate of attrition is roughly 50 percent higher in poor schools than in wealthier ones. And teachers new to the profession are far more likely to leave than are their more seasoned counterparts.”

The “Tapping the Potential: Retaining and Developing High-Quality New Teachers,” report continues:

*Why are so many teachers, most of whom chose to enter the profession because of a real desire to make a positive difference in the lives of children, leaving their jobs? A lack of support and poor working conditions are cited by teachers as among the primary factors.*

*Beginning teachers are particularly vulnerable, because they are more likely to be assigned low-performing students than are their more experienced colleagues. Despite the added challenges that come with teaching children and adolescents with higher needs, most beginners are given no professional support, feedback or demonstration of what it takes to help their students succeed. The result is that new teachers are most at risk of leaving the teaching profession. In fact,*

- 14 percent of new teachers leave by the end of their first year
- 33 percent leave within three years
- almost 50 percent leave in five years

*The net result is that one out of every two new teachers hired will quit in five years.*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Alliance for Excellent Education (2004) *Tapping the potential: Retaining and developing high-quality new teachers*. Washington, DC. Retrieved on August 29, 2005 from <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/TappingThePotential/TappingThePotential.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 1

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 1-2

## **Inverness Research Associates: Our Role and Our Approach**

At the inception of the NTI, we at Inverness Research were asked by the National Writing Project to document and portray the work of the initiative. Our role was to serve as independent observers and as one of several key communication links within the NTI community. The goals of our annual reporting were: to keep the NWP community informed about the progress of new teacher work at each of the sites, to disseminate findings about “best practices” for new teacher support as they developed, and to help build an overall richer knowledge base both within and ultimately beyond the NWP about the content-focused new teacher support the NTI programs provided.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout our three-year study of the NTI our approach has deliberately aimed to reflect the “theory of action” that underlies the design of the initiative itself. Therefore we have examined the key components, assumptions and intended benefits of the initiative, while simultaneously mirroring back to the NTI community our findings as well as our interpretations of their work and its implications.

We have relied heavily on the perspectives and the perceptions of the NTI participants themselves, and have drawn extensively on their own words to illustrate and augment what we ourselves have to say. Over the course of our study we spoke often with a range of people, all of whom served as our teachers: the novices who attended the various NTI programs; the Writing Project Teacher Consultants who planned and delivered those programs; NTI coordinators from each of the 18 programs; site directors from each of the NWP sites; and members of the NTI leadership team. The quotes we select most often reflect the majority voice, or in some instances the “best case” or “leading edge” voice.

Finally, we have paid special attention to learning about the contexts within which the local NTI sites are working. There is an ever-changing political, social and cultural landscape that is unique to the urban schools and districts. The contextual features of this landscape are critical to understanding the issues that have so strongly shaped the new teacher support efforts at each of the NTI sites. Contextual “windfalls” as well as contextual “disasters” have helped forge the emerging NTI models, practices and principles every bit as much as the creativity and hard work of the NTI members themselves.

The reader should consider the products of our study as primarily educative, rather than summative. Our aim is to document and describe the NTI, to suggest the lessons learned, and to stimulate thinking about the initiative and issues of new teacher support.

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix I for a complete list of the research and evaluation activities we conducted from April, 2002 to December, 2005.

## A Series of Linked Reports

As a culmination of three years of studying the NTI, we at Inverness Research Associates have developed a series of four topic-focused module reports.<sup>6</sup> Although these focal topics have been addressed to a lesser degree in our previous evaluations,<sup>7</sup> this final collection of reports offers us the opportunity to discuss aspects of the New Teacher Initiative work in greater depth, and most importantly, from a wider perspective, tying them together in a conceptually cohesive fashion.

Over the three-year duration of the initiative we had time to think about ideas as they emerged and evolved, building our understanding along the way. We were able to test and stretch ideas through successive interviews with NTI participants, to have those ideas used as thinking tools by the NTI learning community, and, finally, on several occasions, to offer them directly to key NTI leaders for response and critique. In this way each report offers an examination of some set of closely observed and interrogated phenomena arising from the work of the NTI.

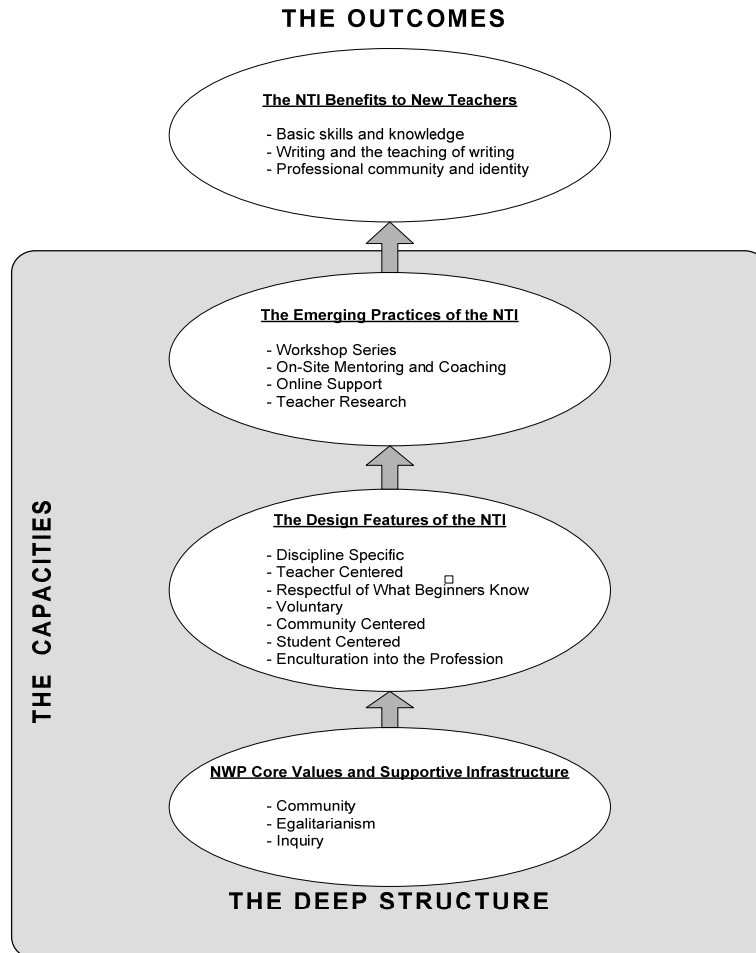
The module reports are distinct but highly linked. Each report or paper can be read in isolation to learn more about a specific dimension of the NTI, but ideally, they should be viewed together and in order, beginning with the focus on the initiative outcomes. This strategy will allow the reader to gain the broadest, most coherent understanding of the New Teacher Initiative, and to understand how the linkages between the ideas the papers describe are causal in nature.

Together our four module reports provide a view of the NWP's New Teacher Initiative that traces a series of causal phenomena that is represented in the graphic below:

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<sup>6</sup> Also included in our final reporting are two supporting documents. They are: "Appendix I: List of Research and Evaluation Activities;" and "Appendix II: Bibliography of Resources Consulted."

<sup>7</sup> See Annual Reports: "The National Writing Project's New Teacher Initiative Annual Report" (December, 2003), and "The National Writing Project's New Teacher Initiative Annual Report" (December, 2004)



In our view the major outcomes of the New Teacher Initiative are the range of benefits accrued by new teachers as the result of their participation in NTI programs. The outcomes or benefits are, in turn, the product of a set of three cascading dimensions of capacity that both pre-existed and shaped the NTI, but also expanded and evolved as a result of the NTI efforts. In other words, these capacities serve as the foundation that underlies the work that produces the outcomes.

- First, we see that the benefits to new teachers are the direct results of common activities, strategies and practices that emerged at the NTI sites as the initiative progressed. This first layer of foundational capacity is that of **effective practices** used in appropriate ways at appropriate times.
- In turn, those practices are derived from and represent **key designs and design principles** we found appearing throughout the professional offerings “invented” by the NTIs. Thus the second layer in the foundation is the defining presence of design principles that help shape the ways in which actual practices are created and implemented.
- Finally, continuing on down the causal chain, the NTI designs and their key features derive from a bed rock of shared values and beliefs that are indigenous to the National Writing

Project. At the same time the NWP has honed over many years a well-developed infrastructure to support sites and individuals in the realization of those values. The third layer in the foundation then is a kind of cultural capacity – the underlying culture, consisting of **core values and supporting infrastructure** for enacting the NWP values.

The four module reports are:

- **The Benefits to New Teachers of the National Writing Project’s New Teacher Initiative**

This module reports our findings regarding the extent to which and the ways in which new teachers benefited from their participation in the NTI programs. We begin with this paper because we believe it is important to document the nature of program outcomes. The NTI ultimately only has value to the extent it is able to serve new teachers in ways that enable them to be better teachers and better teachers of writing. Thus, we provide an array of evidence that helps illuminate the diverse range of benefits that accrued to the NTI new teachers.

We have organized our discussion of the benefits in a hierarchy that is roughly Maslovian in character. We begin with a description of benefits or outcomes that address new teachers’ basic needs. We then discuss the benefits that pertain to the teaching of writing, and end with those benefits that pertain to the overall professionalization of the beginning teachers. In this paper we also begin to explore the idea that the accrued benefits suggest that there are particular practices, design principles, and ultimately core cultural values that produce these particularly rich outcomes and that under-gird the work of the NTI.

- **The Emerging Practices of the National Writing Project’s New Teacher Initiative**

An accomplished teacher develops a proven and diverse repertoire of classroom practices over time. In the same way, a professional development project develops a repertoire of activities, strategies, and ultimately practices and models for educating and supporting teachers. The 18 participating NTI sites developed, tested and refined various activities and strategies as they worked to find ways to serve new teachers.

Just as the NWP supports veteran teachers in sharing their teaching with each other, who thereby refine and improve their classroom instruction, so too has the New Teacher Initiative helped the NTI sites to observe, reflect, and share their new teacher support activities with one another. We see that the NTI practices, similar to classroom teachers’ practices, serve as the currency of exchange within the NTI community as the sites work both individually and in concert to continually refine and improve their program designs.

This report provides a description of four of the most common strategies or practices that have emerged from the NTI work to date. They are: Workshop Series; On-site Mentoring and Coaching; On-line Support; and Teacher Research. For each emergent strategy or practice we include a summary description, specific site-level examples, and an analysis of the benefits and challenges of the practice. We also discuss lessons learned that cut across sites and particular strategies. We conclude with some of our own summary thoughts about the lessons learned from observing new teacher support practices grow and evolve through the course of the initiative.



This module report, although of interest to external audiences, is intended primarily to inform the internal Writing Project audience. It can be thought of as a teaching tool to assist NWP sites in designing programs for new teachers.

- **The Design Features of the National Writing Project's New Teacher Initiative**

Any skilled practice, no matter whether it refers to a classroom or to a NTI program, reflects a set of design features that help define the distinctiveness of the practice and give it coherence. These design features, in turn, both depend on and manifest underlying design principles, which in the NTI we found to be derivatives of underlying foundational NWP beliefs and values. As we observed the New Teacher Initiative unfold we saw a handful of unique design features appear frequently and consistently across the sites.

This module describes those key design features that came to characterize the 18 NTI programs. We identified them as the NTI is: discipline-specific and discipline-centered; new teacher centered; respectful of what new teachers know; voluntary; community-centered; student-centered; and focused on enculturation into the profession. Taken together these design features helped to define the unique profile of the overall initiative, shaped the collection of practices that emerged from the NTI efforts, and made the practices at the individual sites effective.

Throughout this report we refer to current research literature, highlighting how the key features of the NTI are congruent with the design criteria recommended by the most recent research and advocacy reports for high-quality new teacher support programs. We also continue to explore how the most salient design features are closely linked to the larger National Writing Project culture in which the initiative resides.

- **New Teacher Initiative Designs: A Function of National Writing Project Core Values and Supportive Infrastructure**

This final module examines the third, underlying dimension of foundational capacities that produce the outcomes we described in our first report – the benefits to new teachers participating in the NTI. The work of the NTI is embedded in and draws heavily upon the rich cultural capacity of its parent, the National Writing Project. This cultural capacity consists of an ethos, an oral and written history, and a large bank of knowledge developed over the past 30 years of NWP work with teachers of writing.

In our study of the NTI two key aspects of the NWP cultural capacity emerged as critical elements in the efficacy of the initiative. First, we observed a set of NWP core values appear throughout the NTI efforts, serving both as design principles and as ethical standards to the NTI leaders. NTI leaders sought to achieve congruence between their programs and core values. Second, we observed a well-honed NWP infrastructure or modes of accomplishing work, aimed specifically at supporting sites in the realization of those core NWP values.

As the NTI sites faced the common challenge of how best to support new teachers in their local contexts, they drew on and used both NWP core values and NWP infrastructure to drive the process of designing, testing and refining their ideas. In this sense the NTI programs that ultimately took shape were a function of the interaction among three key elements: 1) core NWP values and principles, 2) supportive infrastructure, and 3) various emergent NTI strategies and models for supporting new teachers. The recursive and

iterative interaction among these three elements created a dynamic we found occurring at all 18 NTI sites.

In this report we identify, describe and discuss the two key features of the NWP's cultural capacity that defined the NTI work, namely the core values and the infrastructure designed to enable sites to enact those values. We also discuss the dynamic between these features and the evolving design work at the sites, drawing on specific illustrations from the NTI sites. Finally we posit two related ideas. The first is the notion that as the NTI sites matured and developed a site-level "practice" of new teacher support, they did in fact achieve a high level of congruence between the NWP values and the design of their programs. The second is the idea that the dynamic relationship among the highly articulated core values, the infrastructure supplied by the NWP, and the emerging designs was made possible by a high cultural capacity and drove the overall NTI improvement process.

### **The Intended Audience for The Reports**

Our intended audience covers a broad spectrum of people and interests. First and foremost are those involved directly in the NTI work, particularly the eighteen teams of people at each of the NTI sites and the members of the NTI leadership group. The reports are also intended to inform the broader NWP community. The community includes other sites that might be interested in learning about and starting support programs for new teachers, as well as the national level NWP leadership which is interested in the implications of the work of this initiative for the NWP network at large. Finally this series of reports may be of value to external audiences – to potential funders, policy-makers or educators who are interested in learning more about the design of new teacher support programs.

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# **THE BENEFITS TO NEW TEACHERS OF THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT'S NEW TEACHER INITIATIVE**

## **PART ONE:**

### **THE INTRODUCTION**

This report, “The Benefits to New Teachers of the National Writing Project’s New Teacher Initiative,” describes the extent to which and the ways in which beginning teachers benefited from their participation in the New Teacher Initiative (NTI). We place special emphasis on this first paper in our series because we believe it is important to document the nature of program outcomes. The NTI ultimately only has value to the extent it is able to serve new teachers in ways that enable them to be better teachers and better teachers of writing. Thus we provide evidence that helps illuminate the diverse range of benefits that accrued to the participating NTI new teachers.

These benefits are ones that we identified through our observations of NTI events and our conversations with those involved in the NTI. The accounts of the new teachers who participated in the 18 site-based programs were especially informative, giving us the opportunity to learn from their “eyewitness reports” and “on the ground” experiences.

We have organized our discussion of the benefits in a hierarchy that is roughly Maslovian in character. We begin with a description of benefits or outcomes that addressed new teachers’ basic needs. We then discuss the benefits that pertained to the teaching of writing, and end with those benefits that pertained to the overall professionalization of the beginning teachers.

This report is organized into three parts. They are as follows:

#### **Part One: The Introduction**

We summarize the topic of this report and briefly describe its organization.

#### **Part Two: The Benefits to New Teachers**

We provide the reader with some contextual background about the conditions in large, urban districts in which most of the new teachers work. Against this landscape we go on to describe and discuss in detail the range of specific contributions the various NTI programs made to the new teacher participants.

#### **Part Three: Summary Thoughts**

We offer our own thoughts about the benefits of NTI participation to new teachers, and make links to current research about our focal topic.

## PART TWO: THE BENEFITS TO NEW TEACHERS

### Introduction

From a distance the National Writing Project's New Teacher Initiative would appear to new teachers to be similar to any other staff development programs they encountered in the urban schools and districts where they taught. The goals of the NTI programs were straightforward, the numbers of participants were relatively small, and the amount of time expected of novices was often modest. But almost as soon as the programs began, new teachers realized that the NTI was in fact a very different kind of professional development experience. And in the end, the benefits to new teachers in the NTI programs turned out to be significant.

As part of our documentation of the New Teacher Initiative, we at Inverness Research interviewed over 40 NTI participants about their experiences. We heard what it was like to be a novice teacher in Boston, or Philadelphia or Las Vegas. We heard about the many challenges the new teachers faced, and some of the triumphs they had. We heard from almost every new teacher we interviewed that the NTI was among the more formative experiences of their brief teaching careers.

There were variations among the 18 NTI programs. Some programs instituted regular meetings of new and veteran teachers where teachers could learn about effective writing practices from one another. A few programs centered around teacher research that helped new teachers to focus on one aspect of their teaching by observing and interrogating their own classrooms. Others engaged beginning teachers in an electronic listserv, where they could discuss issues of teaching and learning online. Still others built programs around one-on-one mentoring, and others designed abbreviated summer institutes for new teachers.

Whatever the particular setting or program design, the benefits to NTI participants were universal. In well-articulated and explicit language, all the new teachers we interviewed pointed to specific and frequently similar aspects of their programs that contributed to their development as professionals. As our interviews with NTI participants surfaced these common benefits, we were surprised by two things.

First, that teachers could articulate numerous subtle ways that the NTI affected them was noteworthy. We expected that teachers would derive some benefit from their experiences, but given the relatively modest size of the NTI investment at each site,<sup>1</sup> we did not anticipate the benefits to be as profound, as nuanced, or expressed so consistently with such clarity and conviction.

Second, we learned that the needs of new teachers are not one-dimensional, nor do they emerge in a linear fashion. Rather they appear to surface more organically, in more complex, "messy" aggregates. As it turned out the NTI programs managed to address the range of new teachers' needs in multiple, unexpected, and most importantly, simultaneous ways. It appeared to us that the benefits converged and accrued for individuals as they were ready to absorb them.

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<sup>1</sup> The annual allocation each NTI site received was roughly \$10,000.

For the sake of the discussion that follows we have organized our findings in Part Two into three sections, each focused on a group of needs and benefits that are organized in a loose, Maslovian hierarchy. However, the reader should keep in mind that our organizational structure does not necessarily reflect how these benefits actually emerged for the NTI participants.

The following list is a summary of findings which are discussed in detail in Part Two:

- 1) The NTI Addressed the Basic Needs of New Teachers
  - NTI programs provided basic “survival” information to new teachers
  - NTI programs offered emotional support to new teachers
  - In NTI novices benefited from positive personal and professional interactions with veteran teachers
- 2) The NTI Supported and Developed Teachers’ and Students’ Writing
  - NTI programs provided new teachers with basic skills and strategies to teach writing
  - NTI programs helped new teachers to focus on writing in their classrooms when it otherwise might have been neglected
  - NTI programs helped new teachers re-conceptualize their previous ideas about the nature of writing
  - NTI programs helped new teachers learn to connect writing to a range of other disciplines
  - NTI programs taught new teachers the pedagogical content knowledge of writing
  - NTI programs helped participants and their students meet with authentic successes in writing
  - NTI programs enabled participants to experience writing themselves allowing them to support their students as writers
- 3) The NTI Benefited New Teachers’ Professional and Intellectual Life
  - NTI programs helped new teachers to see and use writing as a reflective tool
  - NTI programs helped some new teachers use writing to infuse inquiry into their own practice
  - NTI programs provided a professional learning community that supported novices in reflecting on and improving their own teaching
  - NTI programs offered novices potential membership in a larger educational network

## **The Landscape of Urban Schools and Districts**

Before describing new teachers’ reactions to the New Teacher Initiative, we want to set our findings against the backdrop of a landscape in which many NTI new teachers – especially those in large, high-need, urban districts – find themselves. It is important to be aware of the social, organizational and cultural environment of their schools and districts to fully understand the ways in which new teachers benefited from their NTI experiences.

Most of the urban districts in which the NTI new teachers have embarked on their professional careers are very large, bureaucratic systems that teeter on the edge of dysfunctionality. They are rarely able to offer attention to individual teachers or students. Almost all face budget deficits, or financial turmoil and uncertainty. As a result, teachers, especially the newest teachers, are frequently faced with job loss or transfers. In addition, most of the NTI districts are also plagued by chronic low student scores on standardized achievement tests. Large percentages of their student population qualify for free or reduced lunch. Again, often the

newest teachers are assigned to the neediest schools and students. Simultaneously, testing, accountability and performance pressures have mounted for teachers and schools, especially with the No Child Left Behind federal legislation demands. Policies intended to address various problems in the districts come and go as frequently as new administrations and restructuring efforts at both the school and district level do, creating a bewildering “policy churn,” which feeds the uncertainty new teachers feel. Finally, because of an overall lack of capacity it is increasingly difficult for these districts to establish viable induction or support programs that effectively meet teachers’ immediate or long-term needs. Thus beginning teachers reside in contexts rife with demands and pressures, but with few resources for support

In our interviews with new teachers we heard story after story about the ways each of these landscape features caused them almost insurmountable challenges. What the following fourth grade teacher from Philadelphia described is representative of many of the stories we heard. We include it here for the reader to serve as one vivid illustration of the contextual background against which our outcome findings can be referenced.

*I am a fourth grade teacher and I have been for these last four years. I am teaching at a school located in the northern part of Philadelphia. It is a rather large school. There are about 700 children K to 4 and we are an overcrowded school, with three annexes. We are about half Latino and half African-American and my particular class is where the English language learners are placed in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. So all of the EL’s are placed into my room... I am Hispanic and so I am able to speak Spanish, although I do have Vietnamese speakers as well, but most of my students are Spanish speakers.*

*It is a poor area and so everybody qualifies for free lunch. It is a very difficult school actually to teach in and to administer as well... We have a lot of behavior problems. There is a brand new principal who is taking over this year and so it has been an adjustment year for everybody and it has been a very tough year in particular, this year. This has been the most difficult year I have had since starting four years ago. It is even harder than my first year, which was very hard. I don’t know what it is – it may just be a mixture of the kids that I have this year. I think part of it also is just the different administration. Morale is very low.*

*The building that I am in is 97 years old and so it is a very hard building to teach in. It is ugly and unsightly, and it is not equipped any more to handle the number of kids that we have. We have been and I understand now, that we are on the top of the list to get a new school building. But this is a process that has gone on for a long time. I haven’t been there as long as other people have been there, but when I talk to some of the veteran teachers, they talk about years where they had even gone so far as to have been part of committees to draw up blueprints for their ideal school and the district slating them for a new school, very soon. And they tell about those plans getting scrapped for whatever reason. During my time here there have been questions about the land that was acquired to build a new school, there has been litigation and that sort of problem. So I think that we have just been caught in these variables that have prevented us from getting a new building, which has been well needed. And you know, it becomes hard ... nobody is really endorsing it, advocating for it...<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> The quotes we use in this report are taken directly from transcripts of interviews we have conducted with NTI participants. They are not composites. We have edited the quotes to make them more readable, but we never change the meaning or intention of what the participant had to say.



## The NTI Addressed the Basic Needs of New Teachers

Entering the world of urban districts proved daunting to almost all new teachers with whom we spoke. A few days of orientation meetings at the start of the school year provided the teachers with a bare-bones introduction to their new positions. Yet they anticipated they would soon collect more information from administrators and other colleagues to help them navigate the unfamiliar territory more adeptly. But especially in the landscape of a large money-strapped district, there is often no one available to help newcomers answer even the most fundamental questions. As a result, the NTI teachers we interviewed reported they often felt alone and overwhelmed by the most basic problems.

- **NTI programs provided basic “survival” information to new teachers**

Before new teachers could delve deeply into the work of teaching they needed to become proficient in the language and customs of the foreign land in which they now lived. Therefore most NTI programs deliberately planned discussions or activities to allow participants to pose concrete, beginning-level questions covering topics such as district requirements, student management, or classroom organization. The issues raised were sometimes ordinary, sometimes delicate: Can my students take their literature books home? What do I do when a student makes a threatening remark? How do I get my students’ parents more involved? What happens if I get a pink slip?

As one example of how the NTI sites responded to the novices’ need for basic information, the DCAWP site designed a strand of work to help new teachers meet their district professional portfolio requirements. The NTI leaders there also compiled what came to be known as a “survival binder” for their newer peers, with information including how to acquire mandated professional development hours, the phone numbers of veteran teachers and lists of nearby teaching resources.

One participant from this site reported her appreciation of this component of the program:

*NTI made sure that you knew these basic things. They told me exactly what I needed in my classroom, from basic survival advice to how to organize my room. I needed index cards, file trays, file folders, paper clips, tissues and things that I don’t even dare to think about...The “survival guide” was another thing – I could not have functioned without that.*

This new teacher and others told us that they grew to view NTI sessions as the first and main forum where they could ask questions freely and “make meaning” of their new environments. In this way the NTI programs helped arm new teachers with a better understanding of what was expected of them, and contributed to stabilizing their first few months and years of teaching.

- **NTI programs offered emotional support to new teachers**

New teachers told us that their membership in NTI helped to combat the isolation they often felt in their first assignments. Even in the best of teaching circumstances there are few structured opportunities for veteran or novice teachers to meet as colleagues. In the New Teacher Initiative programs, however, regular interaction with fellow practitioners was an essential component of all the programs. Simply being able to talk to other teachers did a lot to remedy the feelings of alienation.

One teacher from Third Coast told us that her consistent participation in NTI helped her to “cope” with the feeling that she had to master her new job all by herself:

*Sometimes there is a sense of alienation within your own building; you just feel alone or out there. You are teaching and trying to remain professional on your own, above water. Another new teacher and I would joke, ‘either we are going to sink or swim today.’ And NTI has been a part of that coping, that survival.*

Although most of the NTI programs created regular opportunities for novices to come together, several designed more specific structures to allow teachers to share their experiences with one another. For example, in the NYCWP NTI teachers convened around an electronic listserv. Even though there was little face-to-face meeting time at this site, NTI participants on the listserv grew to rely on the feedback, empathy and sense of belonging they found in this communal conversation. One teacher told us:

*The fact that other people were sharing and were willing to offer up their personal experiences was helpful. I realized here is a place where I can actually unload and everyone on the message board understands exactly what I am talking about. It was not nice hearing that other people had problems, but I felt I wasn’t the only one. The online community became a safe haven.*

We heard repeatedly from participants about this notion of their NTI as a “haven” or “home.” The novice we interviewed from Third Coast summed up her feelings about the emotional support she received in NTI saying:

*I think more than anything what I have liked about meeting with everyone is just feeling like I have kind of a home base – it’s like a homeroom for a new teacher.*

As another example, another New York teacher said she turned directly to the NTI listserv when she faced particular challenges in her classroom. “I went straight online and sent out this email and it was like having ten life preservers thrown back in my direction.”

Embedded in the preceding teachers’ sentiments is the idea that through their NTI new teachers found their first real professional community. The openness and constancy of the NTI group structure, in whatever form it took, allowed the new teachers to form bonds with colleagues which in turn nourished them. They turned to their NTI group, for comfort and sustenance, but also for a sense of stability the regular personal interactions offered.

Most of the NTI participants had not yet found another setting in their schools or districts which offered this kind of support. At first we were somewhat surprised by this. The groups rarely met more than once a month, the summer institutes were abbreviated, and the online communication was sometimes intermittent. But, we realized, in contrast to the world of change and flux they experienced in their schools and districts, new teachers were reassured by the fact that they could count on their NTI.

- **In NTI novices benefited from positive personal and professional interactions with veteran teachers**

An important aspect of the concept of NTI as a “home base” was that it was shared with veteran teachers. For the beginning teachers positive interactions with more experienced counterparts often occurred for the first time in an NTI setting. Surprisingly but not uncommonly, novice teachers had few relationships with seasoned teachers in their own schools. The veterans were either wary of developing bonds with beginners whom they suspected might soon leave the school, or were so busy themselves they had little time to offer advice. New teachers told us they were often ignored by veterans, or more rarely treated unkindly, and this contributed to the isolation and stigma that they typically felt as newcomers.

In contrast, NTI programs deliberately brought new teachers and veterans together, aiming to create a positive context for developing supportive relationships among fellow practitioners. A teacher from Southern Nevada compared her previous experiences with meetings of novices and veterans to those of NTI:

*[Prior to this experience] everyone else was so negative and so miserable in their profession and so I was a little skeptical about going and I wasn't sure what I would have to offer as a new teacher. But I went and these wonderful English teachers were there, just all sharing and collaborating and I just felt so good about myself. We would write and we would share our writing and it was all in an efficient way... it wasn't just a big session where everyone was complaining. It was just really, 'How can we be successful as teachers and how can we have that success for our students and still be energetic and happy about what we are doing?' ... There isn't one meeting that I have been to that I haven't walked away just feeling like a better person, like I am doing the right thing, and if I am not doing the right thing, I know where to go to get help and just someone even to listen.*

This Las Vegas teacher expressed what many other novices articulated to us: admiration for veteran teachers with years of accumulated experience and expertise, willing to share freely. The relationships they had with these veterans were very positive for several reasons. First, the veterans who were NWP Teacher Consultants (TCs) had immediate credibility with the new teachers because they were most often employees in the same district or even school. Novices and veterans alike taught the same students and worked under similar conditions. Secondly, TCs had honed their writing practice over time, developing teaching repertoires which worked with the kinds of students both they and the novices taught. And finally and perhaps most importantly, the TCs had been tapped to lead the NTI programs because they were not only skilled in sharing their expertise, but also wanted to share it with other teachers, especially new teachers.

A good example of how rich personal and professional relationships developed among veterans and novices comes from the NYCWP NTI site. Beginning teachers who joined NTI in New York became part of a heterogeneous community through the NTI listserv. Through electronic postings, NTI participants raised questions, observations and issues to which fellow listserv members, including long-time Teacher Consultants, responded. Veterans posted their ideas and queries on the listserv just as their newer counterparts did. In one strand of dialogue teachers discussed their concerns about their own efficacy. In response to a TC's assurance that she had faced many challenges in her career too, one second-year teacher wrote to the group:

*I think one of the hardest things about being a new teacher is when you see a “master” teacher working with students you think ‘oh will I EVER get there?’ Or worse ‘I could never do that.’ It is heartening to hear that everyone has gone through some pretty tough times, especially in the beginning.*

As this online conversation continued, a first-year teacher shared her particular struggles with management issues. She weighed the prospect of observing a master teacher deal with classroom management and decided against it, suspecting “they do not have discipline problems in their classrooms.” Rather, she surmised, it would be more beneficial to “observe a teacher who struggles with classroom management...” In response, one TC agreed with the challenges posed by looking to a seasoned teacher but gently suggested its potential benefits:

*You can learn how the teacher structures the lesson. Is there room for fooling around? How are the students engaged in the learning? How are reading and/or writing activities implemented? Does this make a difference? What happens when students are placed in groups? Does the teacher instruct orally and then send them off to work or are there protocols that are followed? Does the teacher use particular activities to focus or settle students?*

The veteran went on to compliment the novice who posted the question:

*I think it is so wise that you know to watch others do their ‘craft.’ We can learn so much by just watching and listening. And then there’s the companion of discussions, sharing struggles, getting advice, and just learning that every day may hold yet another surprise. But I swear it gets better over time. It did for me.*

This interchange from the listserv illustrates the promise of the experienced teacher-newcomer relationship. The TC simultaneously validated the beginning teacher’s experience, offered her a new perspective, and suggested alternatives for her to consider. The exchange also shows how a successful mentor-mentee relationship involves modeling and practicing the skills of analysis and reflection focused on classroom practice.

Finally, we see in this sample interchange a good example of how the veteran-novice relationships embodied “teachers teaching teachers,” one of the core principles of the National Writing Project. Through “teachers teaching teachers” the NTI programs helped participants with their most basic needs. By helping participants acquire rudimentary skills and information, and by providing them a “family” and “home, NTI helped new teachers weather the first difficult steps of their careers.

### **The NTI Supported and Developed Teachers’ and Students’ Writing**

The NTI is a new teacher support program that is centered around a particular discipline. The initiative aims to help new teachers by engaging them in the practice and teaching of writing. This is unusual in the national field of new teacher support work. We know of only one other, much smaller new teacher support project that is discipline-specific.<sup>3</sup>

At the beginning of the New Teacher Initiative we were not clear how the focus on teaching writing would relate to the more general support of new teachers, or just how these two apparently separate strands of endeavor would interact. As we observed the NTI programs

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<sup>3</sup> The Teacher Institute at the Exploratorium, through funding from the National Science Foundation, currently sponsors a program where veteran high school science teachers and novices partner, attend professional development sessions together, and then collaborate in their home school settings.

develop we saw that the new teachers did, as intended, learn new strategies and activities to teach writing. But as they became more involved in their NTI programs – in particular, as they tried out and observed writing teaching strategies in their classrooms, as they discussed with their NTI colleagues what they were thinking about as a result, and as they engaged in the writing process themselves – the new teachers became aware of much broader issues of teaching and learning through the teaching and learning of writing.

In other words, we found that when new teachers' understanding of and experience with the discipline deepened, their overall understanding of teaching was affected. At that point, what we had thought of as the writing strand and a more general support strand became intertwined and less distinguishable. Moreover we saw the NTI producing important outcomes in both broad dimensions.

We discuss these multidimensional outcomes in more detail later in this report. First, however, we will focus in the following section on how the NTI supported the development of teachers' and their students' writing.

- **NTI programs provided new teachers with basic skills and strategies to teach writing**

Teacher preparation programs typically focus their brief time with pre-service students on generic issues of practice, and cannot offer more than a limited introduction to subject matter studies. Once hired, teachers may attend some district or school staff development days on certain areas of the curriculum, but again, in financially-burdened and accountability-driven districts, what curricular training there is for new teachers is usually focused on programs that claim to bolster students' reading and mathematics skills. Writing, not often considered to be integral to reading instruction, frequently gets short shrift, and professional development opportunities for new teachers wanting to become better teachers of writing are rare.

NTI provided a way for new teachers to fill this gap in their professional learning. The NTI leaders taught participants a range of concrete strategies for teaching writing to their students. Importantly, participants almost always experienced the strategies firsthand in NTI sessions. Some of these included quick writes and prompts, ways to tie writing to literature, and the use of atypical genres of writing (e.g., letters, journals, lists, etc.). NTI new teachers told us they found virtually all of these strategies to be high quality, as well as "user-friendly" and practical, and therefore readily translatable to the classroom.

New teachers learned that the approaches advocated by NTI made writing more accessible – first for them and then for their students. The story of an OSUWP NTI participant, who turned to teaching after almost 20 years in engineering, illustrates what we heard from others. He saw his urban high school students struggle with traditional writing assignments, focused on topics not related to their own lives. Inspired by his experience in NTI, he decided to try a different approach and offered his students some alternative ways in to writing, designing more student-centered writing topics and prompts for his classroom. In one instance he asked his students to write a letter to their child thirty years in the future "telling them how proud they were of what they had become." He found the experience eye-opening, for himself and for his students. "It was a safe way for them to project themselves, and the letters were long and heartfelt." This beginning teacher changed a few small aspects of his instruction, but in doing so had provided an entry point for many students, something they had rarely experienced to this point.

NTI new teachers told us they also found the activities and strategies they learned to be of high quality. While teachers liked that they could leave an NTI session with something to use immediately with students, they appreciated that the activities “weren’t just gimmicks.” A teacher from Winthrop NTI found this aspect of his learning to be particularly constructive:

*Probably the most beneficial thing about NTI was just learning different strategies, and not just strategies – because sometimes I guess tricks can be just that, cute tricks – but research-based strategies that really worked.*

We learned that NTI new teachers like this one became more critical consumers. They began to discern the difference between quality strategies and activities grounded in research and practiced teaching experience that could lead to long-term benefits for students, and the “quick fixes” often promoted in abbreviated professional development offerings.

- **NTI programs helped new teachers to focus on writing in their classrooms when it otherwise might have been neglected**

Even if new teachers are better equipped to teach a subject, it doesn’t necessarily mean it becomes a priority in their classrooms. Faced with many, often conflicting, demands on their instructional time, new (and veteran) teachers typically teach what is pushed most strongly in their district standards and on high-stakes testing. Literacy and basic math skills are generally emphasized in high-need urban districts, so, not surprisingly, writing is often overlooked.

But teachers we interviewed told us that as they learned sound strategies for teaching writing, NTI helped to remind them of the place and significance of writing in the curriculum. And most importantly writing began to occur more and more frequently in their classrooms. As an example this second-year high school teacher spoke about the shift in her classroom:

*As a result of NTI I'm wanting to increase students' writing opportunities. Many don't like to read or write. I now use quick-writes daily, and I don't grade them, as a way of getting the students to write [without pressure]. I want to get them in the habit of writing... Another way in is to have them write children's books. I want to get them to do it, to start to see utility in writing. So NTI has increased my writing work with students.*

Another beginning social studies teacher from Winthrop WP expanded the role of writing in his teaching when he incorporated multiple media sources into his lessons for the first time:

*The project has shown me thousands of different ways to bring writing into the classroom besides saying, 'Here is an essay, write.' For example, when we studied overpopulation or the Kyoto protocol, we brought in photographs or political cartoons dealing with these things and from there we read articles, we talked about it, and then went back to study the political cartoons to see what people were saying. Then students wrote either response papers or created their own political cartoon and wrote letters or arguments about the topic.*

An important outcome of the NTI was that new teachers not only used the range of strategies they learned but also used them more frequently. They began to ensure that writing was a regular part of the instructional diet they provided to students, recognizing the potency of highlighting writing, and the downsides associated with neglecting it.

- **NTI programs helped new teachers re-conceptualize their previous ideas about the nature of writing**

As writing gained a greater presence in the novices' classrooms, their understanding of the subject matter of writing gained greater depth. New teachers admitted that in the past they thought teaching writing meant simply teaching grammar and sentence structure. As we listened to what new teachers told us about how their ideas about writing evolved, we discovered a highly nuanced set of changes in their conceptualization of the nature of writing. First of all, because new teachers had learned to see writing as a richer, more complex subject, they were able to recast their writing assignments with greater purposefulness. Whereas in the past they had viewed writing as a time-filling exercise without much regard for learning goals, the NTI experience helped them revise their lesson plans.

A first-year science teacher from the OSU site had just this experience. Prior to attending NTI, he posted a "famous quote" in his room each morning and asked students to record their thoughts about it. He told us that he created this exercise to fulfill an expectation in his school that students complete "bell work" – an activity intended to keep students busy before the bell that rang the beginning of actual instructional time. He graded his students simply on the level of their participation in the task, overlooking any of its value as a writing activity. During NTI his perceptions changed; he saw that by focusing on the writing he could make the activity a worthwhile one. He said, "...I will do it [now] for the writing. Writing is a dying art form. It is an important subject. And if students learn to express themselves, [the daily practice] will improve their reading and verbal skills."

Secondly, many teachers had not understood the value of personal writing. Rarely had they given their students an opportunity to write themselves, and if they did it was primarily within a prescribed framework, for example, answering reading comprehension questions. NTI changed that for many of the teachers with whom we spoke. One NYCWP second-year high school teacher modified her thinking about the discipline in her 9<sup>th</sup> grade English class:

*I am now less afraid to have students just write. Before I was very English teacher-like. I learned from NTI about low stakes writing versus high stakes writing, and the value that low stakes writing, like writing letters and keeping journals, can have. It's loosened me up a lot to write in English class.*

Finally, especially at the elementary level, novices did not imagine that the literacy skills they were required to teach might include writing. However, as the novices acquired a deeper understanding of writing through their NTI experience they began to see "literacy" more broadly and holistically. They began to understand that it was important to teach their students a set of language capacities, including the ability to read *and* write. As one teacher from the Greater Houston site who had been teaching reading but not writing noted, "The program helped me survive as a teacher of the English language, of reading and writing combined together."

Thus as the NTI participants learned about and utilized process-oriented writing the experience broadened their thinking about what writing is and what it can do. An important outcome of the NTI was that their conceptualization of writing expanded. New teachers began to see they could teach writing in a different way, and that students could benefit as a result. They told us they saw that writing could support students' learning in all areas. They even began to see writing as an important vehicle for promoting students' thinking.

- **NTI programs helped new teachers learn to connect writing to a range of other disciplines**

The NTI participants were new teachers of math, science and technology as well as English/language arts instructors or elementary generalists. In many cases, their NTI work helped them see how writing could be used in various disciplines as well, and saw how writing could uncover and deepen students' content knowledge. One science teacher from DCAWP told us she focused much more attention on her science labs because of the opportunity it posed for students to write about what they were learning. A math teacher from OSU, accustomed to asking students to complete 70 problems at their desks, began to ask students to do fewer problems but to explain their mathematical thinking in writing. The social studies teacher from Winthrop quoted earlier told us the more he integrated writing into the historical analysis he wanted students to do, the more value he saw in what it could do for students' conceptual understanding.

This teacher and other non-English/language arts teachers were initially surprised by the prominent role writing could play in their instruction. But they became converts, and hence vocal supporters of the frequent use of writing in their lessons. In fact the Winthrop teacher said soon he became "the writing guy for social studies" in his school. In that role he found himself encouraging fellow "content teachers" to utilize more writing as well. His message to colleagues was, "We really shouldn't be afraid of assigning writing."

- **NTI taught new teachers the pedagogical content knowledge of writing**

An outcome of the NTI was that participants began to understand the complexity not only of writing but of teaching writing. The way the new teachers expressed this to us was by describing how their initiative experiences helped them make sense of the terminology, approaches and even educational jargon that are used readily in schools and districts, but that are rarely unpacked and made understandable to novices. Teachers are expected to teach such things as "vocabulary," "fluency," "revision" or "essay" for example, but what are those things really? And how does one go about teaching them to students?

A New York novice described her own experience of trying to teach others to write and how NTI helped her approach that complex task:

*The teaching of writing is such a tough idea. You know how to write yourself, but how do you explain it and how do you break it down for students more completely? The actual classes that I have taken are just so irrelevant to what I am doing in my classroom every day, but then I hear about this Writing Project where you can teach me how to break down a paragraph for my students. Really, how do you do that? But it was great. Everything that was thrown on the table, I considered. I never knew that teaching someone how to write would be so difficult, but that there are so many different ways that you can go about it.*

Just as teachers learn to teach writing, not just assign writing to their students, so did the NTI leaders teach the novices how to teach writing, not just tell them how to do it. In other words, the NTI leaders taught participants the pedagogical content knowledge of writing. They taught the new teachers the special language of writing, the deep and layered meanings of that language, and, most importantly, how to enact that language in practice.

For example, many new teachers told us they had considered the use of journals in their classrooms, and some had even tried using them. But through their NTI experiences they



gained a much deeper understanding of what it takes to get students invested in thoughtful journal writing, and of how a journal might be an integral part of a writing program. They testified that they would approach using journals with their students quite differently in the future.

In another example, the NYCWP NTI new teachers engaged in a lengthy listserv conversation (with each other and Teacher Consultants) about the utility and validity of “teaching” students vocabulary words. One teacher began his query with the entry:

*I feel on the fence about vocabulary instruction. I was reprimanded last year for including traditional vocabulary (10 words on Monday to look up and learn for Friday). Though I understand the district's stance on teaching vocabulary in context, I see many high functioning high schools involved in intensive vocabulary instruction (word origin, prefixes, etc.). Do my students miss out on this?*

*I feel many of them are in early stages of reading and writing. Where vocabulary can aid in this, it can also turn many off. Where I am seeing one student write out his first poem, I have another student in the same class pulling out a photo-copied packet of words to know for the PSAT.*

His listserv colleagues responded to his dilemma with various ideas about how they handled vocabulary learning in their classrooms. In the process, participants began to dissect the pedagogy of acquiring new words, in and out of context, and how that played a role in their high school students' literacy. One of the Teacher Consultants asked, “Do you find that students use the words they have been quizzed on in their writing and speaking? How do you teach the words before you quiz the students? And how do they study for quizzes?” The online conversation offered an opportunity for all participants to reflect on and expand their own knowledge about this aspect of literacy.

As still another example, a participant in the Boston NTI spoke eloquently about how participation in her NTI program helped her give meaning to “editing and revising” with a classroom of new students. Through action research in her classroom she uncovered more nuanced understanding of these terms and other aspects of writing – both for herself and her students:

*When I started teaching 5<sup>th</sup> grade, I realized that these kids really had no idea what I meant when I said 'editing and revising' and they couldn't connect those words with their writing. That is where I focused my research and it allowed me to really question what I was doing with the kids: were the writing activities that I was doing with the kids beneficial? Were they really helping them to become better writers, or was it just sort of covering what I needed to cover?*

*I think that I helped to teach them the language of writing. I think that when you are writing or when you are discussing writing, you use a separate or different language than you would in your every-day speech. We talked a lot about the different traits of writing. We talked about what it means to have voice in your writing, what it means to have sentence fluency, and what it means to have a piece of writing that is organized. Teaching them the language to use to be able to discuss the writing was very beneficial. I would say out of anything, I think that was one of the most important things. I did lots of mini-lessons and one mini-lesson that I can remember was on varying their sentence beginning, because I noticed a lot of them started their sentences with the same words or phrases. So teaching them the language of 'vary your sentence beginnings' instead of just saying, 'you are repeating your same words.' It is like teaching them another language. Not only do I know and understand that language a little better now, I think I can apply it in my teaching a little better.*

At the strongest NTI sites an important outcome was that the new teacher participants began to acquire a body of pedagogical content knowledge, and with it, a much deeper comprehension of

the discipline itself. They were then able to apply their more sophisticated understandings of writing to their classroom teaching.

- **NTI programs helped participants and their students meet with authentic successes in writing**

Having a stronger, deeper grasp of the discipline, giving writing a higher priority in their classrooms, and linking it to other subject areas all converged to one important effect. The NTI teachers told us they were better, more confident teachers of writing and as a result their students' writing improved.

Most teachers reported that their students did not like writing before they started introducing NTI strategies in their classrooms. That tended to change as they experienced writing differently. One NYCWP NTI teacher saw this occur when teaching her students poetry. She was nervous as she strayed slightly from the course curriculum and she wasn't sure students would engage in writing haiku. But she was pleasantly surprised. As is evident from her posting on the NTI listserv, she experienced the boost that comes from having taught a successful lesson:

*The kids loved it... they read, they wrote, they spoke and they listened! All of the skills covered, plus they learned a little something and left my room in great spirits. The next day they asked me if we could do poetry again... Can you believe it? They're asking for the opportunity to write.*

More broadly, NTI teachers began to see how successful writing experiences could affect all aspects of their students' lives. Students who were given the opportunity to write in alternative, less traditional formats often felt their "voices were heard." They found writing as self-expression to be empowering. And as students became engaged in writing and contributed to the classroom, the new teachers found that negative behavior diminished, and classroom management issues improved.

A Third Coast new teacher at a writing magnet school saw this occur in her own classroom after she implemented some approaches she learned at NTI. At her school she told us, "We focus a lot on the grammar aspect or other mechanics of writing. When we do writer's workshop, it is basically more of a structured thing. We have things that we have to teach, as opposed to just letting it be just writing, just expression, just kind of a release." She went on to say how different writing had become in her classroom, and the impact the change had on her students:

*Now students are able to sit down and write a letter to dad in jail, or write how frustrating it is for them to have to take care of a brother and sister, or how tired they are because they have been up all night long. Students are able to generate their ideas in a positive way as opposed to acting out. They are actually able to express themselves in my classroom. I now have kids coming to me and saying 'Instead of going outside, can I come in during my lunch time to journal?'*

This teacher's classroom experience mirrored many other reports we heard. As the novices and their students met with successes in writing, they were motivated to write even more, setting up a positive feedback cycle that promised a central position for writing in the future of their classrooms.

- **NTI programs enabled participants to experience writing themselves allowing them to support their students as writers**

The phenomenon of “more writing begets better writing” occurred for the new teachers as well as for their students. The NTI teachers we interviewed looked back on their writing experiences prior to the NTI with a bit of chagrin, noting that while they “talked the talk” with students they didn’t “walk the walk” regarding their own writing. Few actually had the interest or took the time to write themselves, and if they did it was only in “traditional” formats. In contrast, NTI programs challenged these new teachers to write for themselves. As a result, an important outcome of many of the NTI programs was that new teachers experienced writing by actually becoming writers.

A teacher from Greater Houston described the personal experience of finding her voice as a writer:

*They said you can't teach writing unless you can experience that writer inside of you. Because of the NTI, I have now found my voice and now say, 'I am going to write this the way I want to write it and how I want it to sound.' [Writing this way] has made me more brave... It is a risk, but I am going to take a risk because if I write the five-paragraph formula essay I am not writing fully. When I just write with feeling and gusto, it works.*

We learned from the NTI Site Coordinators that the expectation in every one of the NTI programs was that participants write. Some leaders required that teachers keep their own professional journals and write two entries per week. Some asked teachers to submit a piece of writing to “publish” by the session’s end. As new teachers wrote for the first time, or returned to the act of writing (or publishing) after a long hiatus, they gained empathy for their students. Like them they had to face a blank page, or find just the right word to express a thought, or face the anxiety that arises when sharing one’s work with others. Novices told us that through their firsthand experience of writing they became better teachers of writing, more able to encourage the writer in each of their students.

Many of the new teachers shared their own writing with their students. In revealing to their students that they were writers too, the teachers found that students were more inclined to take on the role of authorship. A teacher from Southern Nevada NTI saw the direct link between her own writing and that of her students:

*Before this experience I would give my students an assignment and say, 'Okay, go to it!' Then there would just be one behavior problem after another. But after going through the Writing Project with them, I just started writing with my students. I started getting an idea of how to take them through their writing and through the writing traits, and it has been a phenomenal experience... It was just great to show them my own writing. I never really had done that before and I think that it helped them get it and it made them invested in what they were doing because I was sharing with them. I got some really emotional pieces, not that I was wanting them to pour out their hearts on paper, but I think that sometimes as writers, that is an effective way to write, something you feel strongly about, especially a personal experience.*

Perhaps most importantly, the novice teachers’ own writing proved to be transformative in many ways. They saw that by providing students with the same opportunities, their students’ writing experiences could be profound as well. One teacher from the OSU NTI reported his delight in witnessing students find the same value in the process of writing as he had:

*Toward the end of the school year I tried out some of the ideas I learned at the NTI sessions... the results were wonderful. Not only did I learn a lot from doing that, I learned a lot about my students too. It was through the NTI I realized the value of making it own-able by the students. They owned their work, and then they related to it on a personal level and what a difference it made.*

By insisting that new teachers engage in the discipline and experience the process for themselves, not just hear about it, the NTI gave new teachers a powerful learning experience that affected their relationship with writing and with their students as writers. It is a central tenet of the National Writing Project that “everyone can and should learn to write.” Writing is important for self-expression, and for finding a voice, but also because it is through writing that we learn because writing demands reflection, problem solving and critical thinking.<sup>4</sup> Thus through experiencing the importance of writing directly, the new teachers were more motivated and better equipped to ensure that their students learned to write.

### **The NTI Benefited New Teachers’ Professional and Intellectual Life**

As we have already mentioned, our interviews revealed new teachers becoming aware of much broader issues of teaching and learning through the teaching and learning of writing they encountered in their NTI programs. An important outcome of the NTI was the influence it had on new teachers’ overall growth and development.

Participants told us that in NTI they gained insight into their teaching and teaching career in a way they had not expected. The NTI programs became learning communities, forums where the novice and veteran teacher participants could share and develop knowledge collaboratively. Being part of this kind of intellectual, social milieu began to shape the way the new teachers thought of themselves. They began to think of themselves as professionals, contributing to and sustained by the network of other teachers of which they had become a part. In the following section we will focus on how the NTI programs supported new teachers more broadly in their professional and intellectual life.

- **NTI programs helped new teachers to see and use writing as a reflective tool**

NTI teachers began to understand that what they learned about writing in the New Teacher Initiative was not only useful for themselves and for their students as writers, but also for their teaching practice. Many of the NTI programs asked novices to reflect, through conversations and discussions with their peers, but also through writing, on what they were doing in their classrooms. They wrote to particular prompts and questions either in workshop settings or on a listserv. They were asked to write about books they had read to their students, about successful or unsuccessful lessons, about the way they set up their classrooms. All of these activities aimed to promote processes of observation and reflection, and for many the experience of surfacing ideas, questions and realizations about their work through the act of writing was revealing.

A teacher from Third Coast described it this way:

*After my first meeting, I found out that NTI was more of an opportunity for me to journal, to write and learn basically about how I teach. I have been able to pull ideas from myself and to see what I can change to help the students in my classroom based on what I am already doing, and also how I can*

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<sup>4</sup> National Writing Project, Carl Nagin, *Because Writing Matters: Improving Student Writing in Our Schools* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

*enhance that. It has basically given me an opportunity to sit down and write, just to take observations or to jot down notes or ideas that I get in my head while I am teaching. When I have the teachable moments, I can write that stuff down so I can implement that to improve my teaching. I thought it would be more the program leaders telling me how to teach writing, but really it has taught me how to write myself and how to take the time to sit back, take notes based on the observations that I see from students and kind of learn from them.*

This teacher and others learned the value of writing as a tool for seeing with a critical or observer's eye what one is thinking or doing. The above teacher's explanation of being able to "pull ideas from myself" is a powerful image. Her writing surfaced her own thinking for herself, allowing her to examine it more deeply. Many teachers had similar experiences, telling us that in NTI writing was "like having a conversation," talking through a classroom issue or complex situation, but with oneself. The added benefit was that the conversation and thought process was recorded and could be revisited.

An OSU science teacher who participated in the NTI serves as another example of how the novices learned to use writing for reflection. Soon into his first year he started regularly writing about his lessons and students' reactions to them. He kept all of his writing in a big binder, calling it "a running, living document" which allowed him to continually review his earlier thoughts and actions. He told us that rereading what he had written was as important as writing it. He said of the binder, "I use it to organize my thinking." He realized what so many of his NTI colleagues had as well, namely that reflective writing helped articulate what had happened and what to do next. In this way an important outcome of the NTI was that NTI teachers learned to use writing reflection as a technology for improving their practice.

- **NTI programs helped some new teachers use writing to infuse inquiry into their own practice**

At the NTI sites where participants engaged in reflective writing most frequently, NTI leaders supported novices in adopting a reflective or inquiry stance toward their teaching. Many NTI teachers remarked that by questioning their teaching and then writing about it, they gained not only insight in hindsight, but also greater confidence to make better informed decisions about changing their current practice. Using writing as a tool for reflection led naturally toward developing a more reflective overall approach to the work of teaching.

Many teachers simply developed the habit of more careful observation of their classrooms, a practice suggested by several NTI programs. This Third Coast teacher relished the chance to study her classroom dynamics:

*I think what has been very helpful to me is the opportunity to sit back in my classroom, without guilt, with a notebook and a pen, saying to myself, 'I don't care who walks in, because I am helping my students. I am helping myself because I am [taking notes on my observations] and observation is [the source of] vital information for the growth of my students and for myself.'*

Some new teachers became involved in more formal inquiry in the context of NTI teacher research courses. The Third Coast Writing Project, for example, developed an action research course as a key component of its NTI program. For the one participant the experience led her to distinguish between teaching on "autopilot" and teaching with an inquiry stance. She said,

*I think that as you teach, and not that I have been teaching for a long time, I think you begin to realize that what you are given to teach is just something to cover and it is not always quality and not that it is not good, but it is 'this is what the kids need to know and by the end of the year, you need to make*

*sure you covered this.’ I think with action research, it is not about covering something, it is about actually diving into an area where you think the kids need improvement or you need improvement or whatever it may be. I think that it produces a higher quality of work and I think it produces a higher level of learners and goes beyond ‘this is what the district gave me to teach, I am just going to teach it and open your book to page 465 and find the adverb.’ Just because they can find an adverb doesn’t really tell me that they have learned anything. Action research provides a high level of learners and it creates more critical thinkers in the classroom – not only the students, but myself. I think that anybody who can look at themselves and give themselves constructive criticism, I think that is far more beneficial than just saying ‘yep, I covered everything.’*

Another Third Coast NTI participant found that doing teacher research established a standard for her present and future practice:

*I think it is going to set up habits for me for every year that I teach. I would love to think that I wouldn’t be able to teach without doing research, because they are so complementary and set up a really positive dynamic. Working this way keeps your ear to the ground, to the research, to the journals, to colleagues and to the professional development, and that sometimes gets lost during a teaching career.*

Whether through simple modeling of reflective, inquiring “teacher talk,” or through promoting reflective writing, or by offering more structured inquiry and research activities, the NTI experiences influenced many of the new teachers to adopt an inquiry perspective on their beginning classroom teaching practice. Most importantly many of the beginners saw their “new” way of looking at things as the foundation of good teaching.

- **NTI programs provided a professional learning community that supported novices in reflecting on and improving their own teaching**

In the strongest programs the NTI became a professional home for beginning teachers. Within the landscape of large bureaucratic districts, in addition to offering an emotionally supportive community where the novices found solace and refuge, several of the NTIs also offered an intellectually supportive one, where the beginners received stimulation and developed their identity as thoughtful professionals. The following quote from a NYCWP NTI teacher in her listserv posting to colleagues represents the sentiments of other new teachers about their “professional home:”

*I was really happy when I received the first email after our break. I didn’t really realize how much I missed this experience and how much I value it until it was missing and I found it again. I have been thinking about how I have friends outside of the city that I talk to frequently about teaching, but these days whether it’s good or bad I want to share it on the listserv. I am a bit surprised because I have never been a big fan of email so I didn’t know whether this experience would work for me.*

One feature of this teacher’s NTI communication is especially pertinent to how the NTIs achieved real professional community. In NTI she engaged in group conversation, as a member of a community, rather than as an individual in a one-on-one dialogue. In the NWP culture of “teachers teaching teachers,” teachers gain mutual benefit from their relationships with one another in a way that cannot happen alone. Even in their abbreviated formats, the NTI programs tried to replicate the “teachers teaching teachers” dynamic for novices. They wanted participants to see teaching (and learning) not as an activity occurring in isolation, but rather as a collaborative, iterative process that occurs in interaction with a diverse group of others.

One Third Coast teacher described the two facets of the peer group experience this way:

*The group collaboration and knowing that you have camaraderie and colleagues out there, other than just in your building, that was validating. Also it was important to realize that there are other people out there supporting you professionally; that's validating too. I think as a new teacher, or maybe as a teacher period, it is very easy to get lost in your own little world of planning and grading and all of these things. So to know that you have that professional support and someone who is really developing you professionally – caring about what you are working on, caring about what you are reading and what you are learning as you go – that has definitely been the best thing for me.*

We found this new teacher's experience repeated in many other NTI settings. Thus an important outcome of the NTI programs was that new teachers were given the opportunity to make sense of their own practice and teaching, through participation in a professional community and to define themselves through belonging to it.

- **NTI programs offered novices potential membership in a larger educational network**

While the NTI experience was often intense and productive for the new teachers, it was almost always brief. Only a few new teachers participated in their programs for more than one year's session. From its inception NTI leaders envisioned involvement in the program as a teacher's first step leading toward increasing familiarity with a philosophy of education grounded in standards-based teaching practices and NWP core principles. The NTI was viewed as an introduction and an invitation to join the larger NWP site community.

Inquiry and reflection, and the notion of community are National Writing Project values and practices that were expressed in the NTI work. Indigenous to and deeply embedded in Writing Project culture, it was these values and practices that made the difference to the new teachers we interviewed, in their eyes transforming their chosen career from a mere job to a life-long profession that was worth pursuing. Not surprisingly, most of the new teachers we interviewed were eager to step over the threshold from NTI to involvement in their NWP site, hoping to keep up the connection with the professional community they had just entered.

New teachers started attending their NWP site events after "graduating" from their NTI program, and a few participated almost immediately in the invitational institutes. As an example, this third-year teacher attended the Winthrop Writing Project summer institute one year after having participated in NTI.

*When I first started teaching I really tried to find my place in education, but I didn't really find that place at first. I hadn't really found my place until NTI and now the Writing Project. With the Writing Project, I found my niche.*

His sentiments were echoed by others who had been introduced to their Writing Project site's ongoing work. A new Las Vegas teacher described what it was like participating in site-sponsored events with seasoned TCs:

*It is why you go into teaching. You say to yourself, "this is my career, and hopefully I will continue, and will retire in education." I always thought that I was going to, but my early experiences teaching made me think that wouldn't happen. But that all changed with the NTI. So to walk into a Writing Project with professionals, people that you know really care about what they were doing, I felt like I was among my co-workers. They all really cared, and they weren't burned out, and they weren't bitter about what they were doing. And they wanted you to be successful too.*

Both of these teachers relished the thought of being members of an ongoing professional network that could sustain them for the rest of their professional lives. A very important outcome of the NTI then, was that it offered new teachers the possibility of long-term involvement in a high-quality learning community. The NTI offered new teachers a very important vision and promise of a fulfilling professional life that is often sadly missing from many educational settings.



## PART THREE: SUMMARY THOUGHTS

The conclusion of this report consists of our own thinking about the outcomes of the New Teacher Initiative. We draw on two sources – our own study of the NTI conducted over the first three years of the initiative, and on recent research on what helps new teachers not only remain but also grow in the profession.

As we look back on the growth and evolution of the New Teacher Initiative over the past three years, we are struck by the wide spectrum of benefits accrued to the new teachers, and by how consistently and predictably these benefits appeared across the 18 NTI programs. The breadth and depth of these outcomes allow us to speculate on the long-term benefits of new teachers' participation in the NTI program. We think there are three major areas in which the NTI contributions to beginning teachers hold the potential for career-long influence. First, our study suggests that it is likely that the NTI experience is likely to affect beginning teachers' decision to stay in teaching. Second, it suggests that the NTI has influenced broadly the novices' beginning teaching practice. And finally, we think the NTI experience, so closely linked to the National Writing Project culture, contributed to novice teachers' lasting identity as professional educators.

### Participation in NTI Supports Teachers to Stay in Teaching

Teachers new to the profession leave their positions at a dramatic rate, frequently within the first five years, and at a rate higher than that of the student drop-out rate in some districts.<sup>5</sup> As we noted previously, two reasons teachers cite most often for their early departure are unstable working conditions and inadequate support. The new teachers we interviewed as part of this NTI study corroborated facing both these challenges.

Most schools and districts lack the capacity and resources to offer beginners quality support. While 83% of new teachers participated in some form of induction in 2000 (up from 51% in 1991), the kind and quality of programs they attended varied considerably.<sup>6</sup> Urban districts typically don't have the money, infrastructure or personnel to offer their increasing numbers of new teachers effective induction. Educational researcher Susan Moore Johnson and others have noted that induction efforts are weakest and retention rates are lowest at low-income schools, so much so that researchers have identified what they call a "support gap." In observing teachers' tendency to migrate from low- to high-income schools over a four-year period, Johnson's study showed that new teachers who stayed in their low-income schools did so because their schools were able to create specific ways to support them in their early years of teaching. Without such supportive induction efforts, teachers found their situations too overwhelming to continue, and left their positions.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> K. Fulton, I. Yoon, and C. Lee (2005) *Induction Into Learning Communities*. Washington DC: National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, p.1. Retrieved on August 29, 2005 at

[http://www.nctaf.org/documents/nctaf/NCTAF\\_Induction\\_Paper\\_2005.pdf](http://www.nctaf.org/documents/nctaf/NCTAF_Induction_Paper_2005.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p 7.

<sup>7</sup> S.M. Johnson, S.M. Kardos, D. Kauffman, E. Liu, and M.L. Donaldson (2004) The Support Gap: New Teachers' Early Experiences in High-Income and Low-Income Schools. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 12 (61) retrieved August 15, 2005 from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v12n61.pdf>

NTI was developed as a modest initiative, and did not ever assume that it could provide full-scale induction to its participants. However, the NTI sites tried to design programs that served broad, both personal and professional, needs of new teachers, reaching beyond the parameters of more traditional modes of induction. They surmised that new teachers, just like their veteran counterparts, needed the support of a professional community of practitioners which would provide both an emotional and intellectual home. The merits of the kind of design for new teacher support the NTI programs aimed to achieve is corroborated by recent research.

The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) article "Induction Into Learning Communities" presents evidence from studies of many induction programs, finding that induction has largely failed new teachers because it has been too narrowly defined. They propose an alternative – "comprehensive induction" – whose primary goal can no longer simply be to increase retention. Instead, comprehensive induction should "be a stage in a continuum of teacher development" and should support teachers beyond their initiation into the profession, assuring their "entry into a learning community."<sup>8</sup> As we have described, the NTI programs offered just that. Participation in NTI became for many of the participants much more than a singularly focused induction experience. Rather it became an introduction into a complex profession and into a learning community of practitioners. For some of the NTI novices it became a critical part of their own "continuum of teacher development," one that many told us raised the possibility of actually attaining in teaching what they had hoped to have.

For many new teachers that vision still seemed distant. They faced myriad challenges and obstacles on a daily basis, and some few told us they had decided that teaching was not for them. For a much larger number, the desire to remain in the profession, to continue at least another couple of years, was certainly influenced by their NTI experience. We think that an important outcome of the NTI work is that it did positively affect new teachers' decisions to stay in teaching.

### **Participation in NTI Helps Teachers to Become Thoughtful Practitioners**

Sharon Feiman-Nemser's recent article, "From Preparation to Practice: Designing a Continuum to Strengthen and Sustain Teaching," like the NCTAF report, describes a professional learning continuum for teachers, extending from pre-service to induction to the early years of teaching. In introducing the induction phase she writes, "New teachers have two jobs – they have to teach and they have to learn to teach." She pinpoints "constructing a professional practice" as one of the primary tasks of making a successful transition from a pre-service student to a classroom teacher.<sup>9</sup>

"Constructing a professional practice" is a significant part of what teachers did in NTI. Specifically, the NTI exposed novices to the idea of using writing as a tool for reflection in their teaching. They told us NTI helped them to see how they could continually examine and question their thinking and teaching more carefully. Some even adopted the beginnings of an inquiry stance in their teaching. Having learned the skills of reflective teaching, they were inclined to observe, question, and critique themselves, which in turn led to ongoing improvement in their practice. Many new teachers initially thought they were going to learn a few discrete writing strategies.

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<sup>8</sup> K. Fulton, et al., p. 1

<sup>9</sup> Sharon Feiman-Nemser, "From Preparation to Practice: Designing a Continuum to Strengthen and Sustain Teaching," *Teachers College Record* 103 (6): 1026-27 (2001a)

Milbrey McLaughlin and Joan Talbert in their study for Stanford's Center on Research on the Context of Secondary Teaching noted that this kind of reflective and thoughtful teacher develops best in a community of fellow practitioners. They write, "The path to change in the classroom core lies within and through teachers' professional communities, learning communities which generate knowledge, craft new norms of practice, and sustain participants in their efforts to reflect, examine, experiment and change."<sup>10</sup> As a professional community NTI provided its participants with the strategies and structure in which to grow those skills.

### **Participation in NTI Helps New Teachers Develop Professional Identity**

For novices the other key feature of "learning to teach," according to Feiman-Nemser, involves "forming a professional identity." She proposes that it plays a critical role in strengthening "the beginning teacher's capacity for further growth."<sup>11</sup>

As we heard repeatedly, the NTI experience helped many teachers to create and develop a professional sense of themselves. In our view, this was perhaps the most unexpected outcome given the parameters of the original initiative. But in a brief timeframe, participants were welcomed and nurtured in a professional home, surrounded by like-minded novices and expert veteran teachers, and encouraged to observe, analyze and share issues of practice. Immersed in such an environment even for a brief time, the newcomers began to cast themselves as professionals as well. They began to define themselves in terms of their NTI experiences, and those terms originated and were embedded in the professional values and beliefs of the National Writing Project.

Moreover, the NTI also served as a formal entry point into the larger NWP professional community. Certainly not all, but many of the new teacher participants in the NTI programs went on to participate in a range of other activities at their National Writing Project site. The most enthusiastic and sophisticated proceeded quickly into an invitational summer institute, or returned to their NTI programs as facilitators, mentors or organizers. Thus in many cases the NTI served as an interface deliberately designed to give new teachers invitation, access and support to engage with the larger NWP.

In their study of the National Writing Project Ann Lieberman and Diane Wood describe the NWP's effort to re-conceptualize "professional identity" by "linking it to professional community."<sup>12</sup> They note that the NWP is fundamentally about "learning what it means to be a learner and understanding in important ways what it means to help others learn." They observe that neither of these can be accomplished unless a culture is established that will "transform how people think of themselves and how they interact with colleagues in a learning community." We certainly observed NTI teachers experiencing both of these mental shifts. They credited NTI with at least part of their "transformation" from seeing themselves as isolated individuals working at a job, to professionals of stature closely linked to a community of fellow practitioners. A significant outcome then of the NTI is that it provided new teachers with an important re-conceptualization not only of themselves but also of the teaching profession, a sustaining vision likely to last.

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<sup>10</sup> Milbrey W. McLaughlin and Joan E. Talbert, "Contexts That Matter for Teaching and Learning: Strategic Opportunities for Meeting the Nation's Education Goals." Stanford, CA: Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching, 1993

<sup>11</sup> Feiman-Nemser, p.1027

<sup>12</sup> Ann Lieberman and Diane R. Wood, *Inside the National Writing Project: Connecting Network Learning and Classroom Teaching* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2003), p. 31-32

# THE EMERGING PRACTICES OF THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT'S NEW TEACHER INITIATIVE

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# THE EMERGING PRACTICES OF THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT'S NEW TEACHER INITIATIVE

## PART ONE:

### THE INTRODUCTION

This report, “The Emerging Practices of the National Writing Project’s New Teacher Initiative,” describes the “teaching practices” that emerged from the planning, implementing and refining of the New Teacher Initiative (NTI) programs over the first three years of the initiative. Just as an accomplished teacher develops a repertoire of effective classroom activities and strategies over time, in the same way the 18 New Teacher Initiative (NTI) sites developed a repertoire of practices for educating and supporting beginning teachers. And just as an experienced classroom teacher’s repertoire of strategies greatly influences student outcomes, so did the practices the NTI programs developed shape the outcomes, or benefits accrued to the novice teachers participating in the New Teacher Initiative.

Though many strategies were developed in the NTI through the process of implementation and revision, only a handful emerged as especially viable at a range of sites. In this report we identify four most commonly adopted NTI program practices, drawing on several specific site examples as illustrations. The report then highlights the benefits and challenges of each practice, and we discuss some cross-cutting lessons learned from these four major practices. Finally we offer some broader perspectives on the emerging practices of the New Teacher Initiative.

Our report shares the knowledge that NTI sites accrued about conducting new teacher support within a National Writing Project context. Therefore, although of interest to external audiences, it is intended primarily to inform the internal Writing Project audience. In the spirit of this initiative where “teachers teaching teachers” was central, so is this report intended as a tool to serve “sites teaching sites” about new teacher support.

This report is organized into three parts. They are as follows:

#### **Part One: The Introduction**

We summarize the topic of this report and briefly describe its organization.

#### **Part Two: The Emerging Practices and Their Benefits and Challenges**

Drawing on the sites’ own reporting, as well as the observations and interviews we conducted during the course of our study of the NTI, we report on four common strategies or practices used most frequently in NTI programs. We describe each one in detail, and then from our perspective discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each of the four. We conclude this section with a discussion of lessons learned by looking across all four major strategies.

**Part Three: Summary Thoughts**

In this final section of the report we step back to view the emerging practices from an initiative level. We offer our summary thoughts about the significance of this dimension of the NTI to the overall initiative.

**PART TWO:**  
**THE EMERGING PRACTICES  
AND THEIR  
BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES**

At the start of the New Teacher Initiative the 18 sites involved faced a compelling design challenge – how to best support new teachers within the context of their National Writing Project site and the districts they served. Within those constraints the NTI teams had much freedom to develop programs that would best fit the needs of the new teacher population in their service area. Drawing upon their personal experiences and sites' strengths, the NTI leadership teams planned various activities and strategies that they expected would offer high-quality support to beginning teachers.

What came next was a natural developmental process in which program designs were implemented, evaluated and refined over the following three years. Both at their sites and within the NTI community, the leadership teams reflected on their work and re-designed their programs accordingly. NTI sites learned from one another, as teachers at the Writing Project learn from one another to improve their instructional repertoire. It was not surprising, then, that while there were many different approaches implemented in the early stages of the NTI, eventually the work of supporting new teachers converged around a handful of tested, refined and “proven” practices.

The four major practices that emerged from the “research and development” efforts carried out at the NTI sites included the following:

- **Workshops Series** – A majority of NTI sites held some kind of regular meetings or professional development sessions for their new teacher participants. These were designed to give new teachers a chance to express their concerns and questions, to talk with one another as well as with veteran teachers (Teacher Consultants or TCs), and to learn writing and literacy strategies and techniques they could take back to their classrooms to use with their own students.
- **On-site Mentoring and Coaching** – A small group of sites organized their veteran TCs to mentor or coach new teachers at their own schools. This strategy generally happened where TCs and new teachers worked in the same school.
- **On-line Support** – There were several different strategies for supporting new teachers in this category, all of which took place on-line but varied in purpose and design. Many NTI sites attempted to establish some kind of specially-designated NTI listserv. They were generally, but not always, facilitated by one of the NTI TCs at the site. For the most part they were intended to continue and deepen both relationships and conversations that were started at the events where new teachers and TCs met face-to-face. In addition several of the sites provided on-line, individual mentoring, matching up TCs with new teachers to engage in email dialogue. Both novices and veterans could pose questions, discuss possible solutions, and develop supportive relationships. In addition, almost all the sites used email correspondence to facilitate communication among NTI leaders and new teacher participants.



- **Teacher Research** – Some sites developed teacher research opportunities for new teachers. Some took the form of a graduate credit course while others were more informal.

Our NTI study and previous reporting focused almost exclusively on Cohort One sites. Therefore in our descriptions of the four emerging strategies their experiences appear more frequently. However, it is important for the reader to know that our interviews with Cohort Two site teams corroborated much of what we heard from the first cohort. Their work with new teachers converged around the same designs and practices, and we also heard from both cohorts similar testimonies about the benefits and challenges of each.

## Workshop Series

With a few exceptions NTI sites planned for and attempted to offer new teachers in their service area some kind of professional development experience organized as a workshop series. The specific designs varied considerably from site to site. However all of them involved some kind of regular meetings, typically once a month or quarterly. The meetings were sometimes highly directed and structured and sometimes more responsive and open-ended. The purposes and modes of many evolved over time as the NTI teams responded to issues participants surfaced, and as the teams learned what they were uniquely situated to offer new teachers. We provide several sample descriptions of workshops to give the reader a sense of their variation and of how the workshop designs evolved over the course of the initiative.

In the second year of the NTI the **D.C. Area Writing Project** NTI made quarterly meetings available to all new teachers in the district. The purpose was, according to the Site Coordinator, “To make room for the new teachers, to give them a place at the table.” The NTI meetings served multiple purposes. First, they served as a platform for introducing the DCAWP to new teachers and vice versa. They also helped the NWP site maintain a high profile in the district, and they also established closer relationships with the 15 to 20 novice teachers who participated. At each of these quarterly meetings NTI TCs discussed writing strategies, offered new teachers advice on classroom management and survival skills, gave tips on how to organize the professional portfolio the school district requires of all teachers, and invited new teachers to attend other DCAWP events and activities. They also used the meetings to introduce the beginners to veteran TC mentors who were “on call” for support and advice.

The heart of the NTI program designed by the **Chicago Area Writing Project** was a 10-week workshop series. Structured as a seminar, each session focused on a particular aspect of writing instruction. In the second year, as the Chicago team settled on the workshop series as the major vehicle for their NTI program, the sessions were structured to include: 1) a “town meeting” for new teachers to “vent” and share, 2) a presentation on a focal topic by a veteran TC guest speaker, 3) time for teams of participants to work on a research project, 4) book study which included “literature circles,” and 5) an independent study component in which participants were asked to research a topic, write an essay and present to the rest of the group. In the third and final year the design of the workshop series shifted somewhat to include a “more exploratory reflection into new teachers’ practices.” Participants were asked to read educational journals about teaching writing and/or professional development and to write about the classroom implications of these. The Year Three site report noted, “Participants were encouraged to look at their lesson plans and assignments and to experiment with their newly discovered knowledge, a change from the previous year.”

The **Oklahoma State University Writing Project** NTI offered monthly after-school inservices to approximately 10 to 15 NTI participants. Led by four TCs and a staff member from the district's professional development office, the sessions offered new teachers regular opportunities to share their early teaching experiences with other new teachers in the context of content-specific workshops. The beginners were invited to articulate their most pressing concerns, which the NTI team then consciously tried to address in subsequent sessions through TC or veteran teacher presentations or facilitated discussions. Topics for the sessions included classroom management, student-led conferences, and parent conferences; they often made reference to the Tulsa Model (a district approach which overlays all instruction in the district). Also in each session TCs introduced a different writing strategy or approach, such as "Poems for Two Voices" or "Quick Writes."

In Philadelphia at the **PhilWP** NTI a workshop series was launched in the spring of the second year of their NTI participation. The NTI hoped to "distinguish itself" from the district-provided induction programs by focusing on building community among the new teachers and the TCs. The NTI intended to connect new teachers to "a teacher-led, ongoing network of teachers" where they would not only gain specific information about the teaching of writing, but also become part of a sustaining, professional community. Of particular importance to the PhilWP NTI was the idea of giving new teachers a strong voice. They declined to "deliver" a "one size fits all" program, but rather, like OSUWP, designed each workshop session in response to new teachers' questions and concerns. Readings, discussions, and reflective writing were centered on many of the issues new teachers raised – for example, working with parents in urban schools, negotiating between the highly structured core curriculum used in the district and their own need for creativity, etc. The series culminated in many of the new teacher participants presenting their own practices at a "Celebration of Literacy" event held especially for new teachers across the district.

### ***The Benefits of a Workshop Series***

- Professional development, structured as a workshop series, is a strategy that is commonly used in public school settings, and was therefore easily recognizable to teachers and administrators in contexts external to the Writing Project. No one had to explain what a workshop series is.
- Because workshop series are structured as regular events that occur consistently over time, they offer NTIs the opportunity to design processes and activities for new teachers that cumulatively built knowledge and experiences. In this sense the strategy lent itself well to establishing trust and rapport, to building community, to learning and practicing skills, or to scaffolding and developing a core set of writing strategies and activities – in short, to any kind of steady work that builds on itself.
- The workshop series strategy is flexible and responsive. It was easily adjusted by NTI teams as needs and issues arose in the course of the series.
- In its entirety, a workshop series provides a fairly intensive experience for new teachers. After completing the series it is likely that they understand some key tenets of the Writing Project – reflective practice, looking at student work, etc. They also likely grasp essential writing skills and topics that are taught. Thus a workshop series held high potential for new teachers to serve as a firm stepping stone into the larger NWP site.

- A NTI workshop series also had the potential of serving as a showcase for TCs to share their knowledge, thus serving the site as a venue for teacher leadership capacity building. Of special note was that many of the NTI efforts included TCs on their leadership teams who were relatively new teachers themselves. Thus the workshop structure provided them with a relatively safe place to take their first steps as teacher leaders.

### ***The Challenges of a Workshop Series***

- Easy recognition is a benefit to workshop series design strategy, but it also presented the NTI sites with a challenge. Because it is a frequently-used professional development design in school and district settings, a NTI workshop ran the risk of becoming indistinguishable from the multitude of other school and district offerings, especially for hurried and harried new teachers. Many of the NTI teams struggled to communicate what was unique and worthwhile about their work when it was designed as a workshop series.
- As a result of its in-distinguishability many of the NTIs faced enrollment issues. It was difficult to enroll new teachers in the workshop series they planned. Several NTI teams planned workshop series but were forced to cancel or to downsize them because they couldn't enroll enough new teacher participants.
- Moreover, the advantage that a workshop series provides, namely the opportunity to develop an agenda over time, also had a "down side" which contributed to the difficulties NTI teams faced enrolling new teachers. We learned that for new teachers not only is a NTI workshop similar to the many others they are obligated to attend, they are reluctant to sign up for still another professional development activity, especially one that requires the commitment of regularly scheduled sessions and that extends for several months or even a school semester. As one site's reporting noted, "New teachers find it very difficult to commit to regular scheduled meetings."
- Sustaining participation and maintaining a constant audience over the duration of a workshop series proved to be a challenge to NTI sites, especially during the winter months when weather turned bad. Although at times this proved to be a "blessing in disguise," enabling the NTI teams to work with a small and committed group of new teachers, in general attrition was a common issue connected to the workshop strategy.
- A workshop series, although it enables NTI teams to build experiences and knowledge over time, may lack a necessary in-depth, intense and transformative experience. Several NTI teams compensated for this drawback by designing some kind of "kick-off" event or retreat, or by "book-ending" their workshop series with a kick-off event at the beginning and a culminating, celebration experience at the end. Both methods seemed to provide a more intense, immersion experience for new teachers that help distinguish the NTI and the NWP from more standard professional development.

### **On-site Mentoring and Coaching**

On-site mentoring was a very appealing design to the NTI leadership teams. In theory it could provide beginning teachers with the close, intense and individualized professional support the teams felt beginning teachers needed. The sites that developed a practice of on-site mentoring created different ways of structuring their work, based on their TCs' availability and experience, school release time and novices' interest and time.

We offer two illustrations of on-site mentoring, one from the Maryland Writing Project (MWP NTI), and the other from the New York City Writing Project (NYCWP). Together they offer an interesting contrast in approach and design to an appealing strategy where veteran Teacher Consultants work one-on-one with new teachers at their school sites.

### **The Maryland WP NTI's On-site Mentoring**

The major focus of the Maryland NTI for the first two years of their participation in the NTI was on-site mentoring. The leadership team, comprised of the Site Coordinator and a small group of mentoring TCs, often introduced their work to others with a parable – the story of the young man on the seashore littered with tens of thousands of starfish stranded by the tide. He spends his days walking the beach, picking up starfish, and one by one throwing them carefully back into the water. When asked how he can persist in such a daunting task – after all, what is one man in comparison to the infinite number of starfish?, he replies, “It made a difference for that one.”

The Maryland NTI saw their work not only as “teachers teaching teachers,” but also as “teachers nurturing teachers” in the confusing, tumultuous contexts in which they all taught. At the Maryland NTI individual TCs initiated and fostered relationships with new teachers at their school site, supporting them in any way they could. The TC mentors provided such things as emotional support, advice on classroom survival skills, or help with filling out forms and preparing for parent conferences. They also provided new teachers with resources on writing strategies, and occasionally, when time allowed, they modeled lessons or strategies in the new teacher’s classroom. The TCs worked opportunistically, seizing time with the new teachers as they could. The majority of the mentors were full-time classroom teachers themselves, so “meeting with the mentee” often occurred before school, during lunch, or for a few moments between classes. The pressure of finding time to meet with one another was one of the greatest challenges faced by the Maryland NTI, according to the TCs and Site Coordinator.

Through the process of communication and relationship-building between the TC mentors and the new teacher “mentees,” the new teachers were deliberately brought into the larger NWP site community where they were offered additional support. They were specifically invited to participate in the site’s Saturday Write to Learn Workshops, for example. Or they were invited to attend, often in partnership with their own mentor, one of the more intensive professional development series offered by the site, such as the Inquiry Institute.

Distinctions between veteran and new teachers were soon blurred. In the second summer of the NTI several mentees attended the Summer Invitational Institute, becoming TCs in their own right and taking on mentoring even newer teachers at their schools. When a starfish was saved it did make a difference, as this new teacher attested:

*The mentor has been my absolute life line through this whole process because I have had a hideous, hideous first 18 months... She and the folks at the Maryland Writing Project, the Write to Learn Saturdays and the New Teacher Initiative were there every time I had a crisis – and I had them... ..It was not an easy go and every time I think about the New Teacher Initiative, I am thinking, that is the only reason that I am a teacher today... Just her presence and her very quiet confidence in me gave me a lot of reassurance.*

The New York City Writing Project NTI also provided on-site mentoring, but their work in the classroom with new teachers was organized very differently.

### **The New York City WP NTI's On-site Mentoring**

At the NYCWP the NTI effort mirrored the structure of how the site has organized its work with city teachers for many years. Thus the basic mode of working with experienced teachers, through school-based seminars, on-site coaching sessions, and on-line dialogue, has carried over to the NTI program. The NTI leadership reasoned that in the same way that these venues promote reflection and improved teaching among seasoned practitioners, so too would they benefit novices.

Typically TCs spend two days a week in their designated schools, where their dedicated role is to serve as on-site mentors. Sometimes the TC provides demonstration lessons, or conducts observations, or facilitates lesson planning with the new teacher. According to the Site Coordinator, "Our ultimate aim is always to create and demonstrate the value of a reflective professional community in which teachers investigate complex questions about their own practice, look critically at what they do, and receive both support and guidance from colleagues as they attempt to refine and improve instruction."

What the TC mentors offered to do in the new teacher's classroom was the result of a "negotiation" between the TC and the new teacher. The NTI mentors intended that the new teachers realize that the coach was a partner working alongside the teacher, not a judge or critic. In particular, listening was a mentoring technique that the TCs have found to be especially effective in creating an equal partnership, allowing a new teacher to express voice and authority. The Site Coordinator explained:

*Some of the TCs discovered that when they worked with new teachers, they needed to spend more time listening and not just providing advice. One of our Teacher Consultants said, "One thing I have learned is that there is value for new teachers in just being heard and listened to. I think this is because they are always being taught, and given advice." The consultants learned that sometimes they needed to hold back with their advice... you could come across as too much of an expert. New teachers need that chance to discover things for themselves... As a coach, you need to allow new teachers to feel that... and give them some direction without negating whatever it is that they were bringing to the conversation.*

### **The Benefits of On-site Mentoring**

- Working one-on-one was almost always a personal and professional pleasure for the teachers involved. Therefore, this strategy had great appeal and the potential for providing great satisfaction to both the TC mentor and the new teacher.
- In those cases where school environments were rife with confusion, uncertainty, and at times even danger, a relationship with an experienced and supportive veteran teacher at the school site was exactly what a new teacher needed.
- After many years of work observing and evaluating professional development we have come to believe that the unit of change that often proves to be most effective over the long-term is the individual – not the school or the district. The on-site mentoring strategy also assumes that the unit of change is the individual. What a new teachers learned through interactions with NTI mentors could affect them for life.

### ***The Challenges of On-site Mentoring***

- The on-site mentoring strategy was only as good as the mentors that provide support in new teachers' classrooms. In some sites the mentors were new TCs and their orientation to, and understanding of, the Writing Project, as well as to the role of mentor, was still limited.
- Without either strong intentionality or deliberately engineered links to the rest of the NTI program and the NWP site, there was the potential danger that mentors and new teachers remained isolated units in their own schools, making community-building difficult.
- The site capacity to provide on-site TC mentors was a challenge for the NTI programs. Several of them hoped to offer new teachers on-site mentoring as part of their NTI services, but were unable to muster a sufficient number of TCs to serve in that capacity. (The full-time release model used in the NYCWP NTI was the only one of its kind among the 18 NTI sites.)
- When TC mentors were also full-time classroom teachers, finding time to conduct mentoring was extremely challenging. Most of the hours they devoted to mentoring was strictly volunteer work, and had to be wedged into their already full schedule of regular roles and responsibilities.
- When individual TC mentors were charged with steering their own course with each individual new teacher there were some advantages, the chief of which was their ability to adjust what they did with each teacher and in each set of circumstances in wise and responsive ways. On the other hand, when individual TCs were creating and negotiating support "programs" as they went, often on the fly and through great personal sacrifice, the challenge for the overall NTI was to establish coherency and common ground.

### **On-line Support**

Providing new teachers with on-line support was a strategy that appealed strongly to almost all sites. In theory the use of technology would allow new teachers and NTI leaders to communicate easily and readily, to extend and deepen conversations initiated in face-to-face contexts without having to leave school or home. We describe four site's strategies for providing on-line mentoring and support to new teachers, each of which represents a different design.

The **Philadelphia WP NTI** envisioned using on-line strategies to build a strong NTI community among new teachers and facilitating TCs. The first year of the NTI the team planned to provide both: 1) on-line mentoring between experienced TCs and new teachers to take place between monthly meetings, and 2) on-line conversations through the use of a NTI listserv. These on-line support services were the basis of one of the site's major inquiry questions: "How do on-line conversations and mentoring support teachers?"

After the first year the NTI team learned that the listserv was occasionally active, but more often "uneven" throughout the year. Although almost everyone read the listserv communications there were some new teachers who never contributed. The on-line mentoring component of their work met with mixed reviews, "including mixed degrees of receptivity" on the part of the new teachers. Though a few strong relationships emerged through on-line mentoring, for many of the new teacher participants on-line communication seemed to lack a personal touch, and there were those who never responded to their on-line mentors. The team also learned that

setting clear goals and expectations early on for both the on-line mentoring and listserv components would have probably made both more successful. Whether or not participation in the on-line activities was optional or mandatory had not been made clear.

Overall, the NTI team felt the listserv and on-line mentoring strategies did not build the depth of community and relationship the NTI had hoped to achieve. They realized that more face-to-face, personalized contacts in conjunction with the electronic communication would have achieved a stronger network of new teachers and TC mentors.

The **Chicago Area Writing Project** NTI aimed “to use technology to inspire and educate new teachers, and connect them with other urban teachers.” The NTI created a website where they proposed to establish an on-line discussion group focused on current issues in education. To support the discussion they created an internship for a new teacher and “NTI graduate” from Year One, whose role was to post articles and response questions, and to lead the discussion in a “chat room” fashion. According to the Site Coordinator, “We are using the on-line component of our work to build new teachers’ background with instructional material and research articles, and things they felt were missing in their background...” Disappointingly however, the response from the new teachers was lukewarm. The Site Coordinator explained, “We learned that the “chat room” venue was welcomed, but some of the participants rejected the idea of assigned articles and/or topics. In our town hall meeting some of the new teachers asked that they be allowed to suggest topics or articles... so finding the right contents for our on-line activity remains a challenge in our NTI work.” This was so much the case that in Year Three the site decided to discontinue this component of their program.

One of the components of a three-pronged approach at the **New York City Writing Project** NTI was a listserv. The listserv was initiated after at least one face-to-face meeting of all the NTI participants, and was intended to allow new teachers to participate in a written conversation with fellow novices. With the exception of the TCs who facilitate the conversations, no other teachers were participants. In this way the listserv provided a “safe place” for new teachers to converse about their students, their practice and current issues of concern. The design of the listserv evolved. In Year One of the NTI the listserv was facilitated by the two TCs who began the conversation by asking the new teachers to respond to an article. After few responded to the article but many posted other more personal concerns or questions, it became clear that the listserv was most active and effective when the dialogue originated with the new teachers themselves. Thus in Year Two, TCs largely let participants take the lead in directing the discussion. Still TCs had an important role: they continually invited participation in the conversation, provided affirmation, and reiterated and offered questions regarding new teachers’ postings. They worked “behind the scenes” to build community among the group. In Year Three the listserv continued, in conjunction with a few face-to-face meetings. In fact, while he could not attend the meetings, one of the previous year’s participants who relocated was able to post listings from Arizona.

### ***The Benefits of On-line Support***

- On-line listserv communications were an efficient strategy for getting out information. Even at those NTI sites that had ambitious, but thwarted plans for how they might use on-line strategies for supporting new teachers, the listserv still served in an important utilitarian function.
- The NTI sites learned that listserv conversations involve two kinds of users: the active participants – those who join in the talk, and the listeners – those who listen in without advancing their own thoughts, but still find value in listening and reflecting on what was

said. There was value for both, and the distinction helped teams think about the design of their on-line support structures more strategically.

- As one site noted in their Year Three report, the listserv has the potential for providing “a model of professional conversation.” It has significant stand-alone value in that regard.
- Moreover, on-line listserv and mentoring strategies can very effectively continue, expand, or deepen conversations that began in face-to-face venues, such as the workshops or classes the NTIs sponsored.
- Sites learned that their NTI work surfaced specific features that ensure the likelihood of achieving a high-quality professional conversation. They are:

- 1) designating a “driver,” one or two specially appointed TCs to shepherd the listserv conversation, to keep it moving and “work behind the scenes” so that the conversation doesn’t lapse into entropy;
- 2) centering the conversation on a specific purpose, or actual and mutually meaningful experiences or problems;
- 3) making expectations and requirements about participation in the listserv articulated and clear; and
- 4) giving new teachers some power or voice in the process, letting them originate and focus discussions on their own concerns.

### ***The Challenges of On-line Support***

- On-line support to new teachers was no panacea. Sites learned “on-line” could not replace “face-to-face” meetings and interactions. Designing how to conduct on-line mentoring and support proved to be surprisingly challenging to many of the NTI sites.
- For many new teachers participating in a listserv exchange of ideas was burdensome, another assignment, or as one NTI Thinking Partner said, “just something sitting there waiting on their computer.” It was challenging for the NTI teams to design the strategy to make the benefits of participation in a listserv process visible to new teachers.
- Sites came to understand that facilitation of the listserv required a sizeable investment in someone’s time. Facilitation also required significant skill and experience, often of a different sort than more traditional TC duties. The sites learned that the listserv conversation was generally only as good as the facilitator(s).
- Issues of how to structure on-line mentoring and support were also challenging. How “open” and informal, or how “closed” and formal should the structure of on-line listserv and supports be? Neither highly structured nor very loosely structured seemed to hit the right key.

### **Teacher Research**

At the beginning of the New Teacher Initiative relatively few NTI sites focused on or incorporated elements of teacher research into the design of their new teacher support programs. Although conducting research into classroom practice exemplifies the reflection process and the inquiry stance the NWP values so highly, conventional wisdom said that teacher research was an “advanced topic.” Teacher research was for more practiced teachers, not appropriate for beginners. It required, so the thinking went, a high level of intellectual rigor, commitment and time that new teachers simply did not have.



Interestingly however, following the lead of the one or two sites that practiced teacher research with their NTI participants early on, other sites incorporated more and more elements of teacher research into their NTI programs as the initiative progressed. The two NTI vignettes we offer below illustrate how teacher research-focused designs were used effectively to support new teachers.

### **The Third Coast WP NTI's Teacher Research**

As it had in the first year, the Third Coast NTI offered new teachers in their service area a workshop series in Year Two. Beginning with a one-day fall retreat, the TCWP-NTI hosted six after-school meetings. Each meeting began with a dinner and social time where teachers engaged in informal conversation about their practice, then a "How Things Are Going" discussion and problem solving session, then a presentation of current educational issues or content-specific strategies, and finally a focus on the new teacher's own research process. The first year was considered successful, but the NTI team wanted a little more intellectual rigor for their new teachers. Thus in the second year the teacher research component was greatly "beefed up," because, as the Site Coordinator explained, "The first year was too much directed by us and not so much directed by the teachers themselves working on stuff. We wanted to turn it over to the participants, so that the new teachers weren't just ingesting knowledge, but they were creating it too."

The NTI team's "theory of action" was that by engaging new teachers in the process of inquiry, it would deepen the teachers' learning, enhance their professional experience and build a common ground for collegial dialogue. Each participant developed a research project based on classroom practice. They were supported in developing their skills as researchers through varied activities including selected readings from texts provided by NTI, whole- and small-group discussion and presentations from guest speakers. In addition, in a deliberate effort to make the inquiry process manageable for new teachers, TCWP tailored the final product to meet the needs of the individual. Some teachers delved deeply into their topic while others kept a simple journal of their thoughts and observations. "Focusing more on the process, rather than on the final product gave our teacher-researchers more time to examine their data from many angles." All of the NTI participants shared their findings at the culminating two-day retreat.

Assessing the NTI year's work the Site Coordinator noted that the teacher research process helped build a feeling of a community among participants. "That is why the teacher researcher component is so good, because it is a unifying thing that everybody can talk about." A NTI TC who helped facilitate the sessions noted:

*As mentors to new teachers, we need to ask them what they need more often, ask them to reflect and rationalize and categorize, and put into place and make sense of what it is that they are thinking about. That takes a real hands-off approach in a lot of ways, but it also takes some direction. I think what we did this year working with our new teachers, we became much more resource agents than we were people who were going to direct them in a particular way... that seemed to really open them up to feel free to talk with each other.*

### **The Boston WP NTI's Teacher Research**

After coming close to quitting following a frustrating first year of trying to recruit new teachers into a proposed summer institute, the Boston NTI leadership team re-grouped. They moved to an inquiry model, and focused the fall of their second year planning for a graduate level teacher research course conceived of as their core NTI offering. What emerged was the "Teacher Inquiry as Support and Empowerment for Newer Teachers" course: *Through this course we seek to create a community of new teachers inquiring into their practice. Participants will each construct and investigate a question arising from their teaching. The process will empower teachers to be in charge of their career-long learning as reflective practitioners.*

This spoke to the new teachers in the Boston area, described by the Site Director as "graduates of good liberal arts colleges, where you'd been told all your life to ask questions and think for yourself." In spite of a good response from new teachers to the idea of teacher research, the NTI team was careful to offer teacher research that would be palatable and appropriate for new teachers. It was not academic research. The class did not begin, for example, with an introduction to research methodology. Rather the course had to be "centered on talking and writing about your classroom, and then some sort of semi-structured way to start asking questions about your classroom," according to the Site Director. "It would have been easy to go wrong, to make it too formal, too early."

The course proved to be very successful. All but one of the original 12 new teachers completed the course. Almost all reported, in their end-of-the-year assessments, that they wished the course could have gone longer. Over half of the new teachers enrolled in the course again in the third year of the NTI.

Just as importantly the Site Coordinators felt that they had accomplished their goal of creating a community of new teachers through the process of research and inquiry. They cited the power of the writing new teachers were required to do in building a strong sense of community:

*By writing – I should tell you that every session we began with "When I noticed \_\_\_\_ in my class, I wondered \_\_\_\_" – it creates community because you are going to share it. There is a read around. You share it, and then the very specifics of your teaching life are out there. It is a very specific thing, and therefore your vulnerabilities are there. Your hopes are there. We laugh about it because it strikes us as common. And in that sharing, a community is built. The writing is important because when you write, you are going inward and you are saying things that you probably might not say in conversation, because you didn't have quiet time to put them down.*

Similar reflections were echoed in the Year Three report. Teaching the course again confirmed the feelings of the NTI leaders: that they had empowered their participants by equipping them with critical professional skills that would support them in the next stage of development as practitioners:

*We have concluded from our experience that shared systematic inquiry enables newer teachers to recognize: 1) that they have both knowledge and method to investigate their classrooms and productively reflect on their students and pedagogy; and 2) that with one another – and support from NWP/BWP – they can create a practitioner community to support their growth as teachers and leaders.*

### ***The Benefits of Teacher Research***

- Sites learned that new teachers, as do veterans, respond well to an intellectually meaningful, rigorous and captivating activity such as teacher research. Teacher research has the potential to serve as a successful strategy for new teacher support.
- Teacher research, when conducted effectively, surfaced key questions and practices in a novice teacher's classroom, thereby holding the potential to play a significant role in teachers' development as thoughtful practitioners.
- Sites learned that teacher research or inquiry could serve as a successful professional development experience. They also learned that it could serve as a highly effective strategy for introducing new teachers to a "professional stance" toward their teaching, a stance that could remain with them throughout their teaching career.
- The teacher research process – examining questions and issues that arise in one's own classroom – incorporates processes that exemplify many of the core NWP values, especially the principle of inquiry and self-reflection. Teacher research relies on key social practices – such as "honoring teacher knowledge," and "creating forums for teacher sharing, dialogue and critique"<sup>1</sup> that are central to Writing Project work. Thus a great benefit of this strategy was that through the NTI teacher research programs, novices became quickly enculturated into the Writing Project.

### ***The Challenges of Teacher Research***

- Implementing a teacher research strategy required a high level of capacity and skill from the facilitators. They had to know the field of teacher research well enough to carefully scaffold the research processes for new teachers, and to guide novices through an intellectually demanding set of tasks and experiences. Not all the NTI sites had this particular knowledge and leadership capacity.
- Moreover, the NTI teacher research leaders must be able to "walk the walk" as well as "talk the talk." In other words they must reflect the values inherent in the teacher research process in an authentic way, modeling them in their own practice of facilitation and leadership. Again, not all sites had this particular capacity.
- Still another challenge was audience. Teacher research is probably not for every new teacher. So the challenge for the NTIs was to help new teachers understand the nature, demands and rewards of the teacher research process.
- Finally, a great challenge inherent in the teacher research strategy was time. Teacher research demands a considerable investment of time which is necessary for processes of talking, questioning, writing, reflecting, and sharing that drive the individual inquiry.

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Lieberman and Diane R. Wood, *Inside the National Writing Project: Connecting Network Learning and Classroom Teaching* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2003), p. 22

## Cross-Cutting Lessons Learned

As we look across all the practices the NTI sites developed, and especially at the most common four we have just described in detail, we see a list of cross-cutting lessons learned that emerged during the first three years of the New Teacher Initiative. These are likely to be instructive both internally to NWP sites and externally to audiences interested in new teacher support. We now discuss these lessons briefly.

- As the NTI leadership teams launched their first programs they all learned that recruiting teachers to participate was much harder than expected. They learned that new teachers have far too many demands on their time to accept lightly an invitation to enroll in yet another meeting or program.
- For many of the same reasons, they learned that they had to distinguish themselves from other new teacher induction and support programs, to demonstrate how NTI was different.
- Beginning NTI programs also learned that just because teachers came a first time, it did not necessarily mean that they would stay. Extracting a long-term commitment out of a beginning teacher, especially in the first few meetings, was challenging.
- Almost all the NTI sites hoped to recruit significant numbers of new teachers to their programs. Almost all were disappointed in the number they actually had participating. Site teams were disappointed at first when a group of 25-30 decreased to 10, but they soon realized that the new teachers who remained were committed and eager. Sites learned that “fewer participants... often means increased rigor and commitment.”
- Sites learned that finding the balance between supporting and challenging new teachers was critical. Especially at the beginning of the NTI all sites seemed to grapple with the tension between low-pressure expectations and events versus more intensive, reflective, inquiry-based, and long-term time commitments. Focusing on reflective writing instead of easing “every new teacher headache” was a judgment call, as was, for example, requiring teachers to attend retreats or institutes instead of giving them more time to themselves. While continuing to honor the need of beginners to express themselves and their needs, as the NTI program practices matured they were more likely to weigh in on the side of rigor and challenge.
- Most sites found that it was important to establish and foster the link between NTI and NWP in a transparent way for new teachers. This connection to the larger professional NWP community proved to be one of the major distinguishing features of the NTIs, one that set them apart from more run-of-the-mill professional development offered by schools and districts. While they spent a good deal of time supporting novices “where they were,” they recognized the need to look beyond and into the future as well – to extend the professional journey for the novices, to inculcate them into the larger network – as a way for the teachers to grow, but also to benefit the sites. Thus their NTI practices, whether a workshop series or teacher research, almost always included deliberate invitations to the local Writing Project site.

## PART THREE: SUMMARY THOUGHTS

In this final section of the report we offer some summary thoughts from a broader perspective. We look beyond the level of individual emerging practices and cross-cutting lessons learned to the overall initiative. What have we observed about the dimension of practice vis-à-vis the growing capacity of the New Teacher Initiative as a whole that is important to report?

- At almost all of the 18 NTI sites new teacher support programs did indeed take root and grow. Like new teachers developing classroom strategies and practices, NTI sites had to forge their own way in a land that was relatively foreign to them. As the initiative progressed, however, we saw a fairly predictable progression to the development of a “practice” of new teacher support. It involved sites first generating a plethora of ideas and plans, from those then selecting a successful few, and finally settling on and refining some set of activities and strategies which evolved into what one might think of as a site-level “practice.” In fact the process of experimentation and evolution, which was deliberately supported by the organizational structures and the resources available to each of the NTI programs, was critical. It created convergence across the initiative on particular practices that “worked” and worked well for new teachers.
- Indeed the practices for new teacher support that emerged from the NTI in the first three years proved to be very effective. The evidence for their efficacy is the outcome – a long list of benefits that accrued to the beginning teachers who participated in the NTI programs. The many benefits new teachers reported to us ranged from those that addressed very basic needs, to those that supported and developed their writing and teaching of writing, and to those that influenced their thinking about themselves as professional educators. (For a full discussion of this topic see our report, “The Benefits to New Teachers of the National Writing Project’s New Teacher Initiative.”)
- Today, as a result of three years of work, there exists a bank of practitioners’ knowledge among NTI sites and individuals. The body of this report attests to the fact that people know something about new teacher support that they did not three years ago. Moreover a community of practitioners has also developed around the support of new teachers that spans across the NWP sites. As the NTI continues to gain experience in serving new teachers, and as those experiences are shared from site to site within a community context, we would expect, as we would for the classroom practice of a maturing teacher involved in a professional learning community, for initiative-wide practices and knowledge to continue to grow and evolve.

THE DESIGN FEATURES  
OF  
THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT'S  
NEW TEACHER INITIATIVE

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INVERNESS RESEARCH ASSOCIATES

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# THE DESIGN FEATURES OF THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT'S NEW TEACHER INITIATIVE

## PART ONE:

### THE INTRODUCTION

This report, “The Design Features of the National Writing Project’s New Teacher Initiative,” describes the key design features of the new teacher support programs that emerged from the NWP New Teacher Initiative. Any skilled practice, whether it refers to a classroom or to a NTI program, reflects a set of design features that help define its individuality and give it coherence. These design features, in turn, both depend on and manifest underlying design principles. In the NTI we found the design principles to be derivatives of underlying foundational NWP beliefs and values.

As we observed the New Teacher Initiative unfold we saw a handful of unique design features appear frequently and consistently across the sites. They are features that surfaced in our observations of NTI events and our conversations with those involved in the NTI. The accounts of the new teachers who participated in the 18 site-based programs were especially informative, giving us the opportunity to learn from their “eyewitness reports” and “on the ground” experiences.

This report explains how the most salient design features of the NTI are linked to the larger National Writing Project culture in which the New Teacher Initiative resides. Finally, woven throughout the discussion of each unique feature and how it expresses the values and principles of the NWP, we describe how the design features frequently meet the criteria for high-quality new teacher support programs recommended by the most recent research and policy advocacy reports.

The report is organized into three parts. They are as follows:

#### **Part One: The Introduction**

We summarize the topic of this report and briefly describe its organization.

#### **Part Two: The Design Features of the NTI**

Drawing on our observations and interviews, we describe in detail the unique design features of the New Teacher Initiative. We also link these features to the qualities of new teacher support that are currently recommended by educational research and policy advocacy.



The following design features are discussed in detail:

- ❖ The NTI is Discipline-Specific and Discipline-Centered
- ❖ The NTI is New Teacher Centered
- ❖ The NTI Respects What New Teachers Know
- ❖ The NTI is Voluntary
- ❖ The NTI is Community Centered
- ❖ The NTI is Student Centered
- ❖ The NTI Focuses on Enculturation Into the Profession

### **Part Three: Summary Thoughts**

In this final section of the report we offer summary thoughts about our focal topic.

## PART TWO: THE DESIGN FEATURES OF THE NTI

With the genesis of the New Teacher Initiative the National Writing Project broke with its own tradition of working primarily with seasoned teachers. When we at Inverness Research Associates first began our study of the NTI we were doubtful that the NWP's new direction would meet with success. We wondered how an institution eminently skillful and knowledgeable in its highly specialized domain – namely professional development in writing – would succeed in a line of work distanced from its area of expertise. The uppermost question for us was: Why the National Writing Project and teacher induction? That is, why should the NWP take on the difficult and broad challenge of induction, and what would the NWP have to offer that other exemplary new teacher support programs had not?

After three years of studying the NWP New Teacher Initiative we are able to respond with a strong argument for the Writing Project's place in a national landscape of promising new teacher support programs and practices. Although the 18 NTI sites developed variant responses to the charge of developing new teacher support programs, they all produced very positive outcomes. The large range of benefits to new teachers accrued as a result of their participation in the NTI programs. These benefits were to a great extent the results of common practices of new teacher support that emerged across sites; these, in turn, were derivatives of the underlying design features of the New Teacher Initiative. Though these design features stem from the parent culture, they are NTI hybrids that help translate and transmit NWP cultural values and social practices<sup>1</sup> to a different context, that of new teacher support. As we began to identify the critical design features of the NTI we also began to see that they mirror closely what many experts in the field currently recommend as components of exemplary new teacher support.

### **The NTI is Discipline-Specific and Discipline-Centered**

Unlike many traditional induction programs, the NTI does not offer generic support to new teachers. It is dramatically different from most induction efforts because it is discipline-specific and discipline-centered. In fact we know of only one other discipline- or subject matter-based new teacher support program that currently exists.<sup>2</sup> With assurance we can say that the NTI is one of a very few. All 18 NTI programs focused on the teaching and learning of writing. According to the NTI director, "writing is at the heart" of the initiative. In contrast, typical induction programs cover general topics such as orientation to schools and districts, student assessment, classroom management techniques, or instructional strategies that can be applied across the curriculum.

The NTI programs supported new teachers by deliberately engaging them in both the teaching and the learning of the discipline of writing. Moreover, we found that the interaction between learning how to teach writing, and learning how to write, is a highly generative dynamic. New

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Lieberman and Diane Wood, *Inside the National Writing Project: Connecting Network Learning and Classroom Teaching* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2003). Lieberman and Wood describe a set of ten "social practices leading to professional community that characterize the National Writing Project."

<sup>2</sup> The Teacher Institute (T.I.) at The Exploratorium, through funding from the National Science Foundation, currently sponsors a program where veteran high school science teachers and novices partner, attend professional development sessions together at The Exploratorium, and then collaborate in their home school settings.

teachers said that through the juxtaposition of foci – on the one hand, thinking about how students learn to write and thinking about how to teach them to do so, and, on the other hand, experiencing the writing process firsthand and for themselves – they began to understand not just important aspects of teaching writing, but of teaching in general.

First, almost all the new teachers we interviewed over the past three years described in detail a range of strategies they learned for teaching writing through their NTI programs. The following new teacher from the Chicago Writing Project NTI is representative:

*[The NTI] was a ten-week workshop where we focused on writing. We had different teachers, sometimes retired, sometimes not, with a different title for each workshop... who gave us different ideas of how we can include writing into our curriculum. [Each workshop focused on] different aspects. One was writing in math, one was writing in the humanities. Another one was using writing to help an ESL student. They were things like that, on different topics.*

*My NTI course helped give me more ideas and more ways of sneaking writing into the curriculum somewhere else. I've learned to focus on reading and writing... I learned that you can read something and give an oral or a written response, and it doesn't always have to be in an essay form either. It can be a poem or another format and still have a valid presence.*

*But we also had to do some writing of our own. We had to submit at least six pieces. We did writing and sharing, so the workshops weren't just 'This is how you can take it to the classroom.' We actually had to do some writing, and then share and critique and edit one another's work.<sup>3</sup>*

Through their NTI work novices learned concrete activities and strategies they could and did use almost immediately in their classrooms. However, many NTI participants attribute the real changes in their classrooms not simply to the writing activities and strategies they learned, but to their own experiences of writing in their NTI programs.

For example, the first-year 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher quoted above had a career in journalism before getting a degree in education. She told us that a highlight of her NTI experience was making the connection between her own writing and that of her students. A novice teacher from the Houston WP spoke about how her experience of herself as a writer influenced her work with her Filipino students:

*At the NTI they taught us not just how to set up a writing program in our classrooms. They also brought out the writer in us. We had to reflect every morning on a piece of writing or reading that they gave us to read and they made us keep a journal. We ended up writing ourselves – some of us started our first novel. They said 'you can't teach writing unless you can experience that writer inside of you.' So we even made a little book at the end of all of our writing, and we published it. I think by letting us explore inside of us to get that voice, now we can pass that on to our students. I know for sure that my kids have improved 100% this past year, because I use a lot of [the NTI] techniques and their ideas in my own classroom... that is really what I got out of that class. They just demonstrated and modeled for us, and let us experience writing as well. We experienced what it is like if you get writer's block, or if you get frustrated. It's the same [experience] as a child would have.*

And still another example, a first-year teacher from the Chicago NTI site teaching English in a high school with 99% African-American students, 90% of whose families are below the poverty

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<sup>3</sup> The quotes we use in this report are taken directly from transcripts of interviews we have conducted with NTI participants. They are not composites. We have edited the quotes to make them more readable, but we never change the meaning or intention of what the participants had to say.

line, echoed a similar sense of how writing for herself contributed to an expanded writing program for her students:

*...when I got into NTI the leader kept saying to us, 'Write with your students, they need to see an adult writing, and they need to understand how important that is.' So I would write with my kids and they would want to know what I was writing. I would share and then it just opened up and everyone would share, all of these kids that didn't talk would start sharing. They asked me to read and they would see my emotions when I read, and if I turned red or I thought it was funny, and of course that made them laugh. So that part of the NTI, besides the guided writings and the technical stuff, made me, I think, open up and interact with my kids a little bit more... not be so, 'Okay we have to teach this for the standards.' They are children, and they are going to be adults and writing is a big part of them figuring out who they are.*

This sample of three reflects accurately the NTI participants at large, almost all of whom expressed similar sentiments about the centrality of writing in their new teacher support programs. Even more importantly, the testimonials of these three novice teachers illustrate how their experience of simultaneously learning to teach writing while writing themselves highly influenced how they taught writing in their classrooms.

We see the design feature of being discipline-based and discipline-centered recommended in current research. Sharon Feiman-Nemser, in her often-cited article "From Preparation to Practice: Designing a Continuum to Strengthen and Sustain Teaching"<sup>4</sup> posits "a professional learning continuum from initial preparation through the early years of teaching." She refers to subject matter knowledge as one of the three important threads of learning that runs throughout the continuum. She also describes "central tasks" of each phase of teacher learning. One of the central tasks of the induction phase, according to Feiman-Nemser, is "Enacting a Beginning Repertoire in Purposeful Ways," where she explains:

"If preservice preparation has been successful, beginning teachers will have a compelling vision of good teaching and a beginning repertoire of approaches to curriculum, instruction, and assessment consistent with that vision. A major task of induction is helping new teachers enact these approaches purposefully with their students by developing the necessary understanding and flexibility of response. The multiple challenges of teaching for the first time can discourage new teachers from trying ambitious pedagogies. Good induction support can keep novices from abandoning these approaches in favor of what they may perceive as safer, less complex activities. It can also help novices attend to the purposes, not just the management, of the learning activities and their meaning for students."<sup>5</sup>

In many of the 18 NTI programs beginning teachers, focusing on the discipline of writing, began to do exactly what Feiman-Nemser suggests. Their understanding of teaching writing was broadened as they learned new writing strategies and activities, adding them into the initial repertoire they had acquired during preservice. The teachers' understanding was also deepened through the process of implementing many of those strategies almost immediately in their classrooms, observing how those new strategies played out with their students, and, in many cases, discussing or writing about what happened in their classrooms in their NTI group.

The NTI novices' understanding of subject matter was further enriched by their own experience of writing, thereby understanding the discipline not just intellectually but experientially. The first-year high school teacher from the Chicago site described that as she herself practiced writing

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<sup>4</sup> Sharon Feiman-Nemser, "From Preparation to Practice: Designing a Continuum to Strengthen and Sustain Teaching," *Teachers College Record* 103 (6) (2001a)

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1029

with her students it “opened up” her classroom and allowed her “to interact more” with her students. We can begin to see that as writing unfolded in her classroom, this novice teacher began to, as Feiman-Nemser suggests, “enact approaches” more “purposefully,” with greater understanding and “flexibility of response.” We can also infer that it is likely, given the place writing has found in her classroom, that this new teacher will not abandon the “ambitious pedagogies” her NTI experience showed her.

In summary the NTI exemplifies well the design feature of being discipline-specific. It helps new teachers develop a strong relationship with writing – both as writers themselves and as teachers of writing. The NTI unabashedly asks new teachers to work hard at becoming better writers and more competent teachers of writing, engaging them as individuals and as a larger, collective group.

There may be an important paradox here. The design feature of being “discipline-specific” may, in fact, be a more useful approach to helping new teachers than the “generic” approach used by many induction programs. By being discipline-specific, and by focusing directly on the challenge of teaching a subject (i.e., writing) well, the NTI support programs appear to help new teachers with broader issues and challenges of teaching. Focusing on the tools and strategies, and on the details and nuances of teaching just one discipline, may be a very effective way of helping new teachers across the curriculum.

### **The NTI is New Teacher Centered**

As we studied the 18 NTI programs we began to think of them as new teacher-centric. In the same way a good teacher designs a student-centered classroom – by taking into account students’ personal experiences or by encouraging each child’s learning through critical thinking and discourse – so did the various NTI programs center on the novice teachers they served.

During the start-up phase of each of the 18 programs, the NTI leaders used various means to learn about the needs of the new teachers attending their programs. They developed surveys and needs assessments; they included open-ended discussions to elicit new teachers’ thoughts and opinions about their needs in every session; they developed websites and special listservs for new teachers to express themselves; and they invited new teachers to write about themselves and their classrooms. Nor were the strategies designed to elicit new teacher input mere gestures. New teachers were frequently surprised, sometimes even shocked, but always pleased to realize that they were not only asked, but “heard” in their NTI programs.

The new teachers we interviewed helped us understand the difference between a teacher-centered induction program, and the more typical professional experiences they frequently experienced in their schools and districts as beginning teachers. One NYCWP teacher explains how a major component of her NTI program, a new teacher listserv, is “teacher-driven”:

*Other programs have agendas that are driven by outside forces, and this agenda is driven by us. For example, I am getting my masters... all of those classes have been driven by syllabi, ‘oh here is what we will be studying now.’ It is not to say that we don’t come off track, because certainly as a teacher comes to a room with some huge pressing problem, we will go off track, but it is the professor’s job to keep us on task...*

*[In contrast] when we go to the listserv, we are really driving the agenda. I can remember one time one of the teachers wrote about how there was a huge fight in his room, how it just made him sick,*

*how, in response to what happened in the class, he wrote a poem. He was thinking about reading it to his class, thinking, 'I will see what comes of it, and then maybe we will write some peace poetry, or some hate poetry, or whatever...' He drove an entire conversation that evolved around it, with people sending messages in – saying, 'that is a great idea,' or 'tell me how that goes in your room,' or 'I would like to use your poem as a starting point in my room.' So the point is that it was his experience that drove tons of thinking... that made us all think about stuff that was driven by our experience, not necessarily what an outside force told us had to be a part of our curriculum.*

A first-grade teacher from the Third Coast Writing Project compares her NTI experience with other professional activities offered by her district:

*Basically I am able to be vocal and not feel guilty about what I say or I don't feel. It's not a thing where I have to say something that people agree with. At NTI you are expressing your own ideas about stuff that works for your classroom. People aren't presenting things to you, like 'you should do this in your classroom,' or 'it has to be like this,' or 'your reading block should look like this.' It is more of a laid-back environment. It is casual, but it is very necessary for us as professionals, as teachers to get together and communicate with one another, and to see what is really working. That's opposed to all of us looking like a carbon copy, and everybody doing the same thing at the same time, and everything being so scripted. It is more of a realistic perspective of teaching for me, as opposed to the meetings that I have attended this year for Reading First.*

And still another beginning teacher, from the Delaware Writing Project describes how her NTI experience compared to other inservice events she was required to attend. What this novice suggests is that when she and her own questions were at the center of the professional experience, as in her NTI course, her growth was greater.

*Last year we had classes on science and math we had to attend, but there we were told what you have to teach and how to teach it. You don't get the material and then make it your own. It is almost 'enabling' to someone who is not a planner, who doesn't know how to plan for instruction when they tell you what to do, and how to do it, and exactly when to do it. It can be a little enabling, because when you have to sit and grapple with questions like – 'Oh, how am I going to fit this into my classroom? Which lesson would be best for when children are doing this?' it's a lot more work, but it is a lot more beneficial to you as a teacher. [It's better] than being force-fed a bunch of information.*

The unique NTI design feature here is one that is also a key feature of the larger NWP. To illustrate what we mean, we refer to the National Writing Project's signature program, the Invitational Institute, which serves as the entry point to the network and whose purpose is to engage teachers in an intensive professional development experience focused on writing. It provides structures and protocols within which participating teachers examine and explore their own practices, issues and challenges of teaching writing. In the same way the NTI is "new teacher-centric," in that the "content" is in large part brought to the programs by the new teachers. Within each of the 18 individual programs, beginning teachers engaged with generative structures and activities created by their NTI leaders to elicit their knowledge of and experiences with the teaching of writing. Through those the new teachers shared their questions and budding practices, read and discussed research, and explored the specific and real challenges they faced in their own classrooms when teaching writing, thereby creating the "content" of the NTI programs.

Teacher-centeredness helped the NTI teams insure that what the beginning teachers learned was relevant and important to them. In turn, relevancy was almost assured if the ideas and issues the new teachers studied were ones that arose from their own classrooms. In this way the NTIs were also practice-centered. Focusing on the practices of participants is an approach that is highly consistent with the overall vision of inducting new teachers into the profession of

teaching. Professions, by definition, draw on their own professional members to identify key challenges and problems of practice. They also create arenas and structures that allow the members of the profession to support each other in addressing those problems and challenges.

### **The NTI Respects What New Teachers Know**

Most traditional new teacher support programs are essentially compensatory in nature. New teachers are considered unskilled, unformed and untested. They are seen as needing lots of help. In short, they are not yet “real teachers.” Therefore, traditional induction programs deliver information beginning teachers “need” on a host of topics ranging from school logistics to prescribed curriculum. Their designs are based on a “deficit model.”

In contrast, a unique feature of the NTI programs was that they designed their efforts using an “asset model.” This model is not compensatory in its stance toward new teachers; rather, it is based on respect for what they know and can bring to the NTI. It considers new teachers as assets. Although they were aware of the special needs of new teachers, almost all of the 18 NTI programs designed events and activities around the fundamental belief that even beginning teachers have something to contribute to their colleagues. One NTI Thinking Partner told us that she saw the sites she mentored approaching their new teacher program as if “new teachers had an intellectual life, and were to be respected for what they brought to the programs.” NTI site leaders across the initiative created multiple opportunities, and in some cases demands, for new teachers to uncover and to express their thinking.

Again we see this feature of the NTI, respecting what new teachers bring to the table, reflected in the recommendations offered by the most recent advocacy reports for new teacher support. For example, in the report “Tapping the Potential: Retaining and Developing High-Quality New Teachers,”<sup>6</sup> the authors propose that the solution for “keeping good teachers in the classroom” is comprehensive induction. They define comprehensive induction as a combination of mentoring, professional development and support, and formal assessments for the first two years of a teacher’s career. The report describes what Comprehensive Induction does: it “keeps quality teachers in the profession; it teaches beginning teachers clinical, practical skills; it builds a community of teachers who are learners,” etc. The report also describes what Comprehensive Induction is not. Of special relevance to this discussion, the report states: “Comprehensive Induction is not a top-down, unidirectional approach to teacher learning where new teachers are expected to be only passive recipients. Beginners also have knowledge and skills to offer existing teachers, mentors, administrators, and principals, and the exchange of information benefits everyone.”

The unique feature, considering novice teachers capable and worthy of making a contribution, stems directly from a key principle of the National Writing Project. The principle of “teachers teaching teachers,” for which the Writing Project is best known, was extended to beginners in the NTI where their innate potential to teach other teachers was acknowledged in many of the NTI program designs.

A new teacher from DCAWP described the stance her site took toward new teachers:

*They teach you that you are a teacher, that you matter, and that what you have to share and the way you share the knowledge you have acquired matters. No one can belittle your job, and no one can*

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<sup>6</sup> Alliance for Excellent Education (2004), pp. 3-4

*say, 'oh you are just a teacher...' I am just a teacher, where you are giving me the job to mold your children's thinking, and to allow them to experience new ideas, and to put that foundation of the education inside of their brain... They teach you that the information you have acquired should be shared, don't be selfish and keep it to yourself, because the more we help each other, the more we help the children. We incorporate that into how we see ourselves.*

Another aspect of respecting new teachers for what they know is also addressed in the "Tapping the Potential" report. It states, "Comprehensive Induction is not just of benefit to beginning teachers. High-quality veteran teachers also can improve their skills by participating in induction through common planning time with inductees and by serving as mentors and instructional leaders."

During the three years of the NTI we interviewed the veteran teachers, or Teacher Consultants (TCs), who worked with the local programs. Although only a few NTI TCs served in formal mentor roles, many of them facilitated workshops, taught courses, gave presentations, shared in discussions, etc., for the beginning teachers. We learned from them that their involvement in the NTI, no matter what their role, gave them opportunities to learn from and be inspired by the new teachers.

*I absolutely love working with new teachers and doing professional development for other teachers. So a benefit of the NTI work for me was that I just had a great time. I really enjoyed talking with the new teachers and learning from them about what new teachers go through, what they think about, what is important for them, what issues they are dealing with, how they solved those problems for themselves and what kinds of resources they need. I learned a great deal.*

The NTI TCs told us that they learned many new things from the beginning teachers, ranging from the practical to the thought-provoking. At the practical level they learned about such things as new books to read aloud, recent ideas the novices brought with them fresh from their education courses, or classroom techniques or strategies created by the new teachers. In addition, working with new teachers gave the TCs opportunities to become more reflective about their own teaching practices. Almost every TC we interviewed described "being a new teacher all over again," and how that experience provoked them into a continuous reassessment of their own teaching. As examples, some TCs incorporated organizational strategies that emerged from their thinking with new teachers, while others reexamined theoretical issues in the teaching of writing. And finally, many TCs told us that just being around the new teachers was energizing and inspirational for them.

*It's just wonderful working with new teachers, because almost any time they come up with an idea it sparks three in us – two that are things that we used to do and forgot about and could start doing again, and one that we never thought of before. That was pretty great!*

In summary, we found the non-compensatory stance of the NTI to be a seminal feature, one that yielded authentic teaching and learning for both novice and veteran teachers. Beginning and experienced teachers shared what they knew, and learned from one another. The vision of professional members, both old and new, working together to contribute to each other and to a collective knowledge, is how most of the NTI programs evolved. And again, we see an interesting paradox here. Building on strength may be the best way of addressing "deficits." By acting as if new teachers have something to offer, by placing new teachers and their thinking at the center of the programs, the NTI puts them in the position of making contributions to each other and to the broader community. Asking teachers, even those who are just beginning, to teach each other may be a very nourishing way to foster their growth and professional stature.



## The NTI is Voluntary

Unlike most other induction programs, the New Teacher Initiative is not mandatory or compulsory. The new teachers that participated in the 18 NTI programs did so voluntarily. Many earned college credits they used toward getting a master's degree, while others earned professional units in their districts, but all made their decisions independently of their schools and districts. They exhibited free choice, which was also true for the Teacher Consultants who worked with them.

This design feature – free and voluntary participation – created both great challenges and reaped unexpected benefits for each of the NTI programs. Because new teachers were not required to attend NTI programs, one of the major challenges for most of the sites was recruiting new teachers. In addition, once beginning teachers were recruited and signed up, the NTI programs also suffered from high attrition rates. These difficulties the NTIs encountered are not surprising. Beginning teachers, especially those teaching in high-need, urban districts where conditions are especially chaotic, are almost always in a state of overwhelm during their first few years of teaching. They must attend to the demands of their students and classrooms, to the demands of their own (often young) families, occasionally to the necessity of a second job, and, finally, to the demands of school- and district-required activities and processes that are designed to support them. Thus each of the NTI programs had to “sell” its services to a “market” that was already highly saturated.

Almost all the sites struggled to find successful ways to enroll the beginning teachers they hoped to support. The strategy that proved most successful was through word of mouth and personal invitation. The NTI programs called on the veteran teachers active at their sites, particularly those involved in the planning and design of the NTI. These vets contacted the new teachers in their own schools and districts, to whom they had frequently already given some kind of informal support, to invite them to participate in the NTI. It was in a context of invitation and personal relationship, not coercion or mandate, that novices were motivated to make the choice to attend a NTI program.

Over the course of its lifespan the NTI did not serve large numbers of new teachers,<sup>7</sup> nor was it ever a major purpose of the initiative. In fact the aim of the NTI was simply to serve enough beginning teachers to function as a quality research and development effort into learning how best to serve them. The struggles of the sites around recruitment and retention, the strategies that did emerge to enroll and engage new teachers, and the testimonies of the novices who were able to maintain their participation in a NTI, all fulfilled the research goals. They all shed light on the nature of how free invitation and choice, a complementary set of core National Writing Project principles, were expressed in the NTI work. The great majority of contact hours with participating teachers that occur through the vast array of NWP workshops, institutes, study groups, etc., are planned and delivered by teachers who are invited to do so, and choose to participate. Similarly in the NTI, facilitators most often receive stipends. Participants sometimes receive stipends, but more often they receive college credit or professional development credit.

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<sup>7</sup> The NTI served 1,263 new teachers from January, 2003 through August, 2005 according to the Site Coordinator Logs of Activity we asked the 18 NTI Site Coordinators to keep annually.

As we listened to the new teachers we realized that volunteering or choosing to do something is closely akin to ownership. Ann Lieberman and Diane Wood describe in “Inside the National Writing Project,” the NWP social practice of “turning ownership of learning over to learners.”<sup>8</sup> They say,

“Wherever we went, we heard NWP teachers talking about the importance of turning learning over to students so that they would develop a sense of ownership for it. Without that sense of ownership, they argued, learners are rarely engaged or motivated. In this spirit, the NWP insists on professional development opportunities that are solidly teacher-centered... Just as they turn ownership of learning over to their students, [teachers] take ownership of their own professional development, which results in an enhanced sense of professional responsibility.”<sup>9</sup>

Although we never asked new teachers directly, many alluded to unexpected benefits of “ownership” that seemed to occur because of the voluntary nature of their NTI commitment. Many new teachers talked about the enthusiasm they felt for their NTI work, the sense of motivation that propelled them through, and the amount of sheer hard work they were willing to expend on their NTI assignments.

In summary, we note that the design feature of voluntary involvement is more profound than it first seemed. We note that ownership and professional responsibility are closely aligned. We hypothesize that the voluntary nature of the NTI permitted and helped create a truly professional culture. By inviting veteran teachers to choose whether or not to participate, the NTI offered skilled, experienced teachers the opportunity to assume responsibility for the health of their profession and the professional growth of new teachers. And by being voluntary the NTI offered new teachers an important and significant career choice – whether they wished to see teaching merely as a job, or whether they wished to see it as a profession worthy of ongoing work and commitment. When veteran and new teachers came together in this voluntary context, the underlying agreements of a professional culture fell into place, binding the members together in ways which enabled them to make truly professional, mutually beneficial contributions to one another.

## **The NTI is Community Centered**

In our study we quickly learned that a key design feature of the NTI is that it is community centered. A focus on creating community was expressed in three main ways in the 18 NTI programs that developed over the course of the initiative. Each of these foci are slightly different, but closely linked.

### ***Community as refuge and professional home***

*There is sometimes a sense of alienation within your own building, or just kind of the idea of feeling alone or out there. You are teaching and trying to remain professional on your own, above water.*  
 –A first-year high school teacher in Michigan

*I am in a big school and I am in a huge district, and I am in a school where it is kind of like the old doesn't want to help the new. So it is kind of like you are on your own. I didn't feel like I was on my own when I was with the NTI.*  
 –A first-year high school teacher in Chicago

<sup>8</sup> Lieberman and Woods, pp. 25-26

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

*I came in on the fifth day of school as a substitute, and they just ended up keeping me in that classroom. It was very difficult. I had no supplies, I had no books, I had no experience. I had no materials to teach for the first month, and that is why when the NTI came along, it was very supportive and much needed... Being a first-year teacher is a trial by fire, but I survived. I don't think I could have done it without the NTI.*

*—A first-year elementary school teacher in Philadelphia*

First and foremost, the NTIs sought to offer novice teachers a refuge and a home. They wanted the beginners to feel safe and respected, to welcome them. The Teacher Consultants who served in leadership roles in the local NTI sites almost always taught in the same schools or districts as the new teachers who participated in the NTI activities and events. As a consequence, they understood well the school and district contexts in which new teachers existed. They hoped, through the NTI, to offer new teachers an antidote to the lack of community and relationship they often suffered. To prevent new teachers from leaving teaching and to offer them a chance of longevity in their teaching career, a driving principle for every one of the 18 sites was to create a professional home for the new teachers they served, one where they could find emotional support, as well as professional identity and challenge.

And in fact, the new teachers we interviewed told us that in many cases their NTI programs “helped them survive” in the often extremely challenging school and district contexts in which they taught. Many also described how their NTI program provided them with a sense of community or “family,” in contrast to the isolation they frequently found in their schools and classrooms. One new teacher said, “We learned we were not alone.”

### ***Community of learning and practice***

Based on the recommendations of leading experts convened at a series of invitational summits who focused on the question of what it would take to ensure that all students have the benefit of highly qualified teachers in schools, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future has very recently published a report called, “Induction Into Learning Communities.”<sup>10</sup> The report advocates ambitious goals for induction – improving teaching and developing teacher communities – rather than solely the goal of teacher retention. It also specifically advocates for induction into a learning community instead of induction based on a model of one-to-one mentoring which, according to the report, reinforces teacher isolation and solo teaching. “The summit participants concluded that effective induction must incorporate new teachers into a professional learning community, emphasizing from the start relationships with colleagues and establishing support for continued learning and growth.”<sup>11</sup>

From our study of the NTI we found that almost all of the 18 programs succeeded in creating learning communities closely akin to those envisioned by the NCTAF. Although these communities were not centered in schools, as the “Induction Into Learning Communities” report suggests, they did bear the hallmarks of what NCTAF summit participants described as central to a successful learning community. For example the NTI programs exhibited the following:

...a culture in which experienced and novice teachers work together on shared inquiry into effective practices to improve student achievement

<sup>10</sup> K. Fulton, I. Yoon, and C. Lee (2005) *Induction Into Learning Communities*. Washington DC: National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. Retrieved on August 29, 2005 at [http://www.nctaf.org/documents/nctaf/NCTAF\\_Induction\\_Paper\\_2005.pdf](http://www.nctaf.org/documents/nctaf/NCTAF_Induction_Paper_2005.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2

...the assumption that the development of teacher proficiency is acquired not through solo study but via collegial deliberation  
...seeking to guide and facilitate the learning paths of novice teachers as they become rooted in the professional culture of a school and in their academic discipline<sup>12</sup>

As alternatives to what the NCTAF report described as “the factory-era model of stand-alone teaching in isolated classrooms,” the NTI programs through their workshop series, courses or listservs created what Lieberman and Woods describe as “forums for teacher sharing, dialogue, and critique,”<sup>13</sup> intended to tap and promote the “intelligence and passion” new teachers brought with them. We heard dozens of descriptions of the intellectual work new teachers did through their NTI programs, and of the sense of community and efficacy that emerged for them through those experiences.

The first-year high school teacher in Michigan we quoted earlier described what happened during her NTI course, which was designed as a first taste of teacher research:

*Especially as new teachers, I think for most of us in the group, about maybe 15 or 20 of us, we had the sense of ‘How can we do research, we are just new teachers, the new kids on the block?’ Our directors for NTI did a great job of explaining teacher research, and walking us through how to do that. And then as our sessions progressed, it became more of ‘here is my question; here is my inquiry, my thinking about what I am working on in my classroom.’ Then there was the sharing and collaborating and ideas surfacing -- that sort of thing for gathering research.*

*We met one last time in May and then we will be meeting again in June, the day before we present for our poster presentation. In the meantime, most of us at that point of course had our research questions. In fact we have been working on them, taking lots of notes and data from our classroom and from here on out, we have been emailing. They have us in groups with leaders – so we have been emailing to get ideas and to make sure we are on the right track. Then hopefully when we meet again, they will take a look at our research and make sure we are all good to go for the presentation.*

*It has been great. I think more than anything, what I have liked about meeting with everyone is just feeling like you have kind of a home base so to speak, a home room for new teachers. There are only two of us new teachers in my school, but at NTI we collaborate a lot and then we talk about things. It’s a room full of new English teachers too primarily. It’s been therapeutic.*

When we asked a novice teacher from Delaware what was most beneficial to her about her NTI experience she said the following:

*Probably the time spent with other people, other teachers and other experts. Yes, the time together, and just being able to also have instructors that were other teachers. They were able to put it to you in your terms, and you knew that they were actually doing it too, you could see actual teachers using it. Also, just getting to talk with other teachers and seeing what worked for them and what didn’t work for them. And the time talking, it is really nice because you don’t get that a lot.*

Still another new teacher described his NTI community in the following way:

*I was already familiar with some of the writing practices we learned with the NTI. But it was good to have external motivation [to use them.] It was good to have a group of motivated colleagues to keep going back to and say, ‘What do you think about this? What should I do next? Do you know any good books, or do you know anything about this?’ I am really surprised with what these first- and second-year teachers know and share. It is the closest that I can get right now to actually being in*

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 2-3

<sup>13</sup> Lieberman and Woods, p. 22

*grad school. I need to get some experience under my belt teaching first before I go back to school, but this NTI program kind of takes the edge off. I really look forward to the Saturdays. I devote my whole Saturday to the discussion, but I really look forward to it. It is such a great way to swap ideas.*

What each of these new teachers suggests is that their NTI became a community where learning occurred and where they were asked to think and behave as professionals. They were asked to bring their own classroom-based experiences of teaching writing to the table, and, through scaffolded, thoughtfully designed processes they were challenged to examine, question, and experiment with their instruction. NTI participants were coached and mentored by other teaching professionals, not singly and alone, but rather in interactive groups.

Novice teachers appeared to flourish in these settings, which stood in high contrast to the absence of rigorous or meaningful learning in their schools and districts. Though standing outside the systems in which the new teachers taught, the NTI, like a surrogate parent, fulfilled the promise of induction the NCTAF "Induction Into Learning Communities" report advocates. "Induction should introduce novices to learning communities in which teachers take collective responsibility for the growth and learning of all students and all teachers within a school. Open doors, shared norms and regular communication and collaboration are vehicles for jointly creating knowledge and supporting continuous improvement."<sup>14</sup>

Finally, another very important aspect of building community suggested by several of the new teachers we interviewed was that they began to transfer their own experience of a community of learners to their classrooms. They were inspired to create classroom learning communities modeled after their NTI program. Primarily through teaching writing, implementing the constructivist-based activities and strategies they learned and examined through the NTI, the new teachers began to establish some of the principles of community in their class environments.

### ***The NWP community***

Finally, most of the NTI leadership teams envisioned the NTI as a passageway into the larger National Writing Project community. The NTI was conceived not as a short-lived traditional induction process, lasting a year or, at the very best, two years. Rather, the NTI was thought of by leaders both at the national and at the site level, as an invitation to new teachers to participate in a local NWP site community.

The 195 NWP sites are ongoing, long-standing and multi-faceted professional communities of practice. Moreover, each site is closely linked to the NWP national network community, and provides the teachers who participate at the site access to an even larger set of resources, supports and opportunities for leadership that occur at the national level. In this way, then, the NTI also gave new teachers access to the larger NWP community.

At the site level new teachers became involved in a wide range of activities beyond their actual NTI programs. For example, they were also frequently asked to participate on NTI leadership teams or advisory groups. At some sites new teachers contributed their expertise, developing presentations to share at special events organized for new teachers district-wide. At other sites, groups of teachers, including both beginners and veterans, attended state conferences or other special professional events together under the aegis of the NTI program. New teachers recruited and enrolled other new teachers to participate in the NTI programs. In some cases

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<sup>14</sup> K. Fulton et al.

teachers who participated in the first year of a site's NTI program returned as facilitators or coaches in the second and third year of the program, or offered to "mentor" other participating new teachers who happened to be in their school or district. As we concluded our study of the NTI there were a handful of NTI novice teachers who had gone on to become NWP Teacher Consultants by being invited to and attending one of the summer invitational institutes.

At the national level, NTI new teachers also participated in a range of NTI-sponsored events. These included making presentations to leaders at the NTI summer institutes, participating in NTI retreats with other site leaders, or attending the Urban Sites Network or Annual NWP meetings where NTI leaders met to share information or lessons learned from their new teacher work.

As we have mentioned, the NTI is a special effort of the NWP and is not part of any formal educational institution. Ironically few institutions can, in fact, offer professional homes for their members. Hospitals are not the center of the medical profession, nor are the courts the center of the legal profession. It may well be that schools and districts can not be the centers of the teaching profession.

Paradoxically, by residing outside the district's formal educational system, the NTI was successful in providing a professional community for teachers who were interested in contributing to and drawing upon that community. It served as a refuge and oasis for new teachers who hungered for a professional view of teaching, providing them with a community of practice focused on the details of teaching and learning writing. And the NTI provided new teachers access to and an appropriate entrance into the larger, long-standing NWP community. In all these ways the NTI provided well-designed supports to the enculturation of new teachers into a healthy, nourishing professional learning community.

### **The NTI is Student Centered**

Another key design feature of the NTI is that it is also very student centered. Again, this may seem to be a paradoxical statement, given our previous description of how the NTI concentrates heavily on what new teachers need and have to offer, and on creating a supportive community for them. How can a program be both teacher-centered and at the same time student centered? The answer lies in an intense attention to student learning that serves as a cultural foundation stone within the National Writing Project. The NTI programs, as part of the larger NWP, focused always on the ultimate goal of helping students become better writers and thinkers.

In the context of their NTI learning communities we found new teachers focused on "learning in and from practice," a central task of teacher learning during the induction phase according to Sharon Feiman-Nemser.<sup>15</sup> She describes why and how this should occur:

"The ongoing study and improvement of teaching is difficult to accomplish alone. Novices need opportunities to talk with others about their teaching, to analyze their students' work, to examine problems, and to consider alternative explanations and actions. If novices learn to talk about specific practices in specific terms, if they learn to ask for clarification, share uncertainties, and request help, they will be developing skills and dispositions that are critical to the ongoing improvement of teaching."

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<sup>15</sup> Feiman-Nemser, p. 1030

In all the NTI programs we studied we saw how they deliberately directed the attention of new teachers to their students and their work. They focused new teachers on their students in a wide range of ways – by asking the teachers to write about their classrooms, to share questions of practice out loud, or to try out writing strategies with their students and observe their responses.

Many of the beginning teachers we interviewed told us stories about how their NTI participation focused their attention on their students. They described how, as they began to observe and examine their students carefully, their stance toward their teaching shifted. They began to ask themselves questions about the effects of their own behavior on their students, and they took steps toward creating alternative ways to address problems of practice.

Reading between their lines, we also heard that as the beginning teachers inquired into their students' behavior and performance they increased their own sense of efficacy and professionalism. In fact through our study of the NTI we have come to believe that focusing on students is a critical strategy for moving teachers, whether they are novices or veterans, toward a professional attitude about their teaching. Placing the student at the center of teaching enables the professional to think reflectively and diagnostically, and most importantly to provide services for the benefit of "the client."

The following vignette stands as a representative story, illustrating how one first-year teacher, by reflecting on her students through her NTI teacher research project, resolved a difficult issue in her classroom and changed her initial understandings of the students in her classroom and their families. It also shows how through the process she grew more confident, and took greater charge of her own teaching:

*What I focused on for my project was something I noticed about a group of children in my classroom, the ones whose lack of homework return affected their participation over the school year. I only had six students who consistently returned and completed homework. But what I found was the kids who weren't doing the homework were having a hard time, because they were not getting the extra reinforcement. I also found out that parents were not aware of what their child was doing, even though I sent home weekly newsletters. Sometimes those got lost in the shuffle... especially because of the population of kids I teach. For their parents, the priority is not homework... when they go home, it is basically like the fight for survival for the most part. But still, what I wanted to do was to provide the children an opportunity to get the extra reinforcement by doing their homework. I was frustrated... What I did discover is that at the second parent-teacher conference, parents were sharing things with me that were personal. It was like a light bulb came on: 'Okay, this person is trying to basically make ends meet. When will they have time to focus on their child's homework?' It was a new idea for me, instead of me having the attitude that they were neglecting to sit down with their kid. It all helped me see that they had other things that were going on.*

*So what I decided to do was to ask the students who consistently brought in homework... to serve as homework helpers... Every day now after the kids return from recess, they have 30 minutes of working with students at their table to help them complete their homework. All of the scores have gone up, all of the students are feeling super confident about what they are doing in the classroom, and we all have the sense that we succeeded in promoting the core democratic values to the children. We have been talking a lot about the common good and working towards the common good... all of that has been brought out. The kids who are the homework helpers know that they are doing it for the common good, for the good of our classroom. They know they are helping other people just because it is the right thing to do.*

*Now, when I stand back and take observations, I see helpers who are showing kids the strategies and not just telling them the answer; I see kids who are partner reading and kids are excited to do it.*

*That has really encouraged everybody in the classroom. It has been very beneficial to everybody... the parents are excited because their kids are getting things done, and they are bringing those test scores home and it has really been a helpful thing. So that was my research project.*

*It took me until February to realize that I could really do something about the problems, instead of just sitting back and not really helping the parents out. I'd been stumped. When I started the NTI class I wanted to do my project, I wanted to focus on parental involvement. But I didn't know exactly how I would reach the parents or how I would communicate with them without being offensive. It was the combination of the opportunity to have a one-on-one conversation with them at conferences, and just their presence, them being there alone let me know that they are interested and they care about what their child is doing. So that helped to enlighten me and then with doing this class, I guess with me being able to have the opportunity to journal and kind of get my feelings out, I was able to go back and re-sort those ideas and those feelings, and say to myself, 'Okay, maybe I can do something in my class.' My problem is homework and I do have kids who are consistently doing it, and I can utilize those children to help each other, especially because we are trying to drive home the core democratic values and kind of make things real-life for them.*

*Writing about myself and my class at the NTI helped me to articulate my ideas about the parents who I was working with. It helped me knowing that I have a tool or some ideas of helping children who don't have the extra support at home. If I didn't have this experience, I wouldn't know that, I wouldn't be able to know that it is okay for me to observe my classroom, and to kind of work from the inside out, instead of from being on the outside looking in. It has helped me to kind of dig deeper, because I am able to sit down and watch the experiences of my students as they are going through the situation.*

To summarize we note that another critical design feature of the NTI is its insistence on having new teachers consistently focus on their students and their writing. This focus on students is both a means and an end. It is a means in that it helps new teachers better understand who their students are, how they learn, and what their needs are. It helps new teachers continually examine their practice vis-à-vis its impact on their students.

A focus on students is also a means to providing a shared focal point and a "raison d'être" for the broader community. The NTI, and the NWP, exist in order to study the teaching and learning of writing, and thus a consistent focus on students is required to keep the work of the community grounded in the reality of student experience. Focus on the student creates a community of professional practice. And, finally, of course the focus on student learning is an end in itself. It is this focus that ensures that teachers do not forget why they are in their classrooms, and that they are responsible for furthering the learning of their students.

### **The NTI Focuses on Enculturation Into the Profession**

As we have pointed to throughout the discussion of the preceding design features, they all suggest that the NTI is fundamentally about enculturating new teachers into a profession, not inducting them into a job. The NTI conceptualizes teaching as a professional enterprise, rather than mere employment. In fact the term "induction" is never used within the NTI community itself. The preferred NTI nomenclature is "support." It implies a more varied, complex task of teaching and learning during the first years of a novice's career, not just a simple installation of an available person into a classroom position. The NWP, and hence the NTI, is guided by a set of principles, much like the medical or legal profession. These ethical standards are in turn grounded in NWP cornerstone values such as egalitarianism and respect for the individual, and are key to the conceptualization of teaching as a professional enterprise. (We discuss these



NWP core values and their relationship to the design of the NTI programs in greater depth in our report, “The Dynamic Relationship Between NWP Core Values and the NTI Designs.”)

The NTI conceptualizes teaching as a profession, and designs its supports for beginning teachers accordingly. As Lieberman and Woods suggest in “Inside the National Writing Project,” the NTI, like its parent the NWP, “encourages re-conceptualization of professional identity and links it to professional community.”<sup>16</sup> Within the NTI learning communities we described above, new teachers began to “develop professional identities which demand high levels of collaboration,” to recognize that “ownership of exciting ideas and strategies is *collective* ownership,” and to understand that “professional responsibility for students’ learning is no longer the responsibility of a teacher working alone in his or her classroom; it is the responsibility of the professional community.”<sup>17</sup>

As the NTI participants shared their own writing with one another, or as they revised their research questions based on input from their colleagues, or as they tried out and improvised upon some strategy or activity they had learned from an NTI compatriot, they developed a sense of themselves as teachers within a group of other teachers. In other words, new teachers in the NTI programs began to think of themselves as the professionals they had hoped to become as they participated in the NTI learning communities. Their budding individual identities as professionals evolved as their involvement in their respective communities of practice developed. This first-year teacher sums it up:

*I sincerely mean this, it felt as if the group collaboration and knowing that you have camaraderie or colleagues out there other than inside of your building... that was validating. Also to know that there are other people out there supporting you professionally... that was important. Maybe I am just speaking to myself, but I think as a new teacher... or maybe as a teacher period, it is very easy to get lost in your own little world of planning and grading and all of those things. So to know that you have that professional support and someone who is really developing you professionally and caring about what you are working on and what you are reading and what you are learning as you go. That has definitely been the best thing for me.*

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<sup>16</sup> Lieberman and Woods, pp. 30-31

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 31

## **PART THREE:**

### **SUMMARY THOUGHTS**

We conclude this report with some final, summary comments. They reflect the result of observing and interviewing the NTI site and national participants over the course of the initiative, of comparing the NTI to several other new teacher support efforts we have evaluated in the past five years, and of our reading of the most recent research and literature on the topic. We do not consider our thinking as conclusive, but rather we offer our comments here as food for further reflection.

#### **The NTI Exhibits “Best Practices” of New Teacher Support**

Best practices in beginning teacher support have been evolving over the past several decades. As we scan through those practices it seems to us that the NTI closely “matches up” to many of them.

First, teacher induction has been evolving from an emphasis on short-term support, especially technical and emotional support, to viewing induction as one stage in a longer development process beginning with pre-service education and continuing throughout the early years of a teacher’s career. Although some sites, especially in the first year of the initiative, focused on addressing new teachers’ emotional needs, a larger set of goals quickly evolved. Because the 18 NTI programs reside within the larger NWP community, they quickly began to view their support role as one stage in a long-term continuum available to the teachers through participation in the National Writing Project teacher network.

Second, teacher induction has been evolving from an emphasis on one-to-one mentoring to an emphasis on “comprehensive induction” which is a “combination of mentoring, professional development and support, and formal assessments.”<sup>18</sup> A few NTI sites, in the first year of the initiative, experimented with personal and on-line mentoring strategies, often supplementing with whole-group events. However the majority of the programs, even when they had hoped to include one-on-one mentoring as part of their support to new teachers, quickly found it more effective to create professional development experiences for the novices where group interaction and community building served as the central motifs. Those ranged from workshops and courses, to retreats and on-line forums and discussions where novices and veteran teachers worked side by side.

Finally, teacher induction has been evolving from an emphasis on individual induction, to an emphasis on bringing teachers into teacher learning communities. According to Feiman-Nemser and others we have cited, the evolution from traditional forms of new teacher support to comprehensive induction into a learning community is especially important for new teachers. Comprehensive induction enables new teachers to learn to teach in reform-minded ways, thereby supporting the overall re-culturing of the teaching profession. More comprehensive induction, which includes membership in a learning community, is also especially critical to supporting new teachers in schools with the lowest income students. Through their NTI

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<sup>18</sup> Alliance for Excellent Education, p. 2

offerings each of the participating NWP sites hoped to give novices a first, but important taste of participation in communities of learning and practice – where together new and veteran teachers had opportunities to reflect on their students and their classrooms, to examine and question the writing activities and strategies they used, and to use their discussions to build both individual and collective knowledge about the teaching and learning of writing.

### **The NTI Spans Across Phases of Teacher Learning**

The NWP NTI spans the traditionally separated phases of teacher learning – preservice, induction and professional development – by incorporating and blending elements historically reserved for each phase into one new teacher experience. Moreover the NTI engineers its work in ways that deliberately foster symbiotic, mutually beneficial relationships to develop among those elements.

Feiman-Nemser discusses the central tasks of each phase of a professional learning continuum designed to support teachers to teach in “reform-minded ways.” In pre-service preparation, she explains the importance of “analyzing beliefs and forming new visions” about teaching, and the need for “developing subject matter knowledge,” and a “beginning repertoire” of approaches to curriculum, instruction and assessment. She suggests that “developing the tools to study teaching” is also a central task of pre-service. In the induction phase she mentions, among others, the central tasks of “enacting a beginning repertoire in purposeful ways,” “creating a classroom learning community,” “developing a professional identity,” and “learning in and from practice.” And finally, as she describes the professional development phase of teaching learning she cites “deepening and extending subject matter knowledge,” and “extending and refining one’s [teaching] repertoire.”<sup>19</sup>

We found, in the most fully realized of the 18 NTI sites, that almost all of these tasks were accomplished in one program. Novice teachers had opportunities to analyze and reflect on their beliefs, to learn about the subject matter of writing, to learn from their own budding practice of teaching writing to their students, as well as to deliberately use teacher research tools and strategies to study their own teaching. As the NTI new teachers engaged in these activities they began to create classroom learning communities based on their own experience of their NTI learning community, and, perhaps most importantly, to develop “professional identity” closely linked to and defined by engaging in all of these tasks.

### **The NTI Offers a Promising Antidote to New Teacher “Tracking”**

In the article, “Are We Creating Separate and Unequal Tracks of Teachers?”<sup>20</sup> the authors suggest the idea that in the current educational environment where high stakes testing and accountability concerns dominate, two classes of teachers are being created by the induction services available to them. In “high capital” districts, that is in more affluent, better performing settings, new teachers are provided support services in which they are encouraged to develop and apply professional expertise and judgment to their instructional practice. They are encouraged to “foster students’ independence and creativity.” In contrast, in the low capital

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<sup>19</sup> Feiman-Nemser

<sup>20</sup> B. Achinstein, R. Ogawa, and A. Speiglman, “Are We Creating Separate and Unequal Tracks of Teachers? The Effects of State Policy, Local Conditions, and Teacher Characteristics on New Teacher Socialization,” *American Educational Research Journal* (2004): 41 (3), pp. 557-603

districts, like many of the urban, high-needs NTI districts, novices (who are often under-qualified) “were encouraged to rely on scripted programs to instruct underperforming students, ostensibly ‘leveling the playing field’ and increasing accountability.”<sup>21</sup> The authors conclude: “In the name of greater equality, such policies may serve to reproduce the social divides through differential teacher socialization... thus, some teachers receive scripted, basics-focused teacher training, while others experience creative, co-constructed teacher education.”

The NTI participants we interviewed almost all experienced induction services similar to those offered by “low capital” contexts. NTI teachers described their poor quality: “I am disheartened by the participation and overall approach to professional development at my school,” or “Our professional development meetings have been 90% useless,” or regarding a district-sponsored mentoring program, “It is sort of a package program, and we work through this paper work.” The NTI programs stood in high contrast, and for the new teachers served as a life-saving antidote to their district’s support offerings. In most of the NTI programs new teachers were challenged to reflect on their students and their practice, and to behave as teaching professionals by performing “independently and creatively,” as they would want their students to do. Instead of shunning the challenge of a more rigorous program, the NTI new teachers embraced it.

### **The NTI Provides Support Through Immersion in Writing**

Throughout our study of the NTI we were intrigued with the defining design feature and central premise of the initiative – namely, that a good way to support new teachers is through immersion in the subject matter of writing. It seemed counterintuitive, an approach too narrow and too constrained to address the vast array of new teacher needs. But, as it turned out, it worked very well.

As we have stated, the New Teacher Initiative was never intended to serve large numbers, but rather – by designing and providing services to a sufficient few – to investigate the potential for supporting new teachers within a National Writing Project context. We think the NTI experiment served as a successful feasibility proof. It is not only possible, but in many of the 18 cases highly effective to support beginning teachers through immersing them in the teaching and learning of writing. We are not at all sure whether new teacher support would be as successful as the best NTI programs if the subject matter focus was different – for example if the programs were mathematics- or history-based.

There is something special about writing. And as we have mentioned there was something special about doing writing, not just learning about teaching writing. The new teachers told us so. Writing helped them think and reflect and have insight into teaching their students writing.

And others have concurred. Robert H. Frank, a professor of economics at Cornell University wrote recently in *The New York Times*<sup>22</sup> about a pilot program, “Writing in the Disciplines,” in which he has been involved. It is, according to Frank, a “new pedagogical movement that promises to revolutionize the learning process at every level. The aim of the program... is to encourage students to write about concepts they were grappling with in various disciplines.” Frank goes on to say that “the initiative was inspired by the discovery that there is no better way

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 593

<sup>22</sup> Robert H. Frank, “Students discover economics in its natural state,” *The New York Times*, 29 September 2003

to master an idea than to write about it.” He cites Daniel Boorstin, who used to write several hours in the morning before he went to work, and who said, “I write to discover what I think.” So, in the case of the New Teacher Initiative, new teachers were challenged to think. Writing helped them become more thoughtful, introspective and often times creative teachers, especially when they wrote as a community of writers and practitioners.

A NTI Site Coordinator explains better than we the link between writing and community, which we think is the pivotal relationship that makes the NTI a unique new teacher support effort:

*By writing about ‘What I noticed in my class,’ or ‘What I wondered about my class,’ it creates community. It creates community because you are going to share it. There is a read around. So you share it, and then the very specifics of your teaching life are out there. It is a very specific thing, and therefore your vulnerabilities are there. Your hopes are there. And in that sharing, a community is built. The writing is important because when you write, you are going inward and you are saying things that you probably might not say in conversation, because you didn’t have quiet time to put them down... so the community is built upon common work, common effort or shared perceptions that are made explicit.*

### **The Design Features of the NTI Reflect Core Values**

Finally we wish to reiterate that the most prominent design features of the NTI programs and practices we observed during our study of the NTI surfaced into view easily and consistently. As researchers we did not have to struggle to identify them. All the NTIs, to some degree were: discipline-centered, new teacher centered, respected what new teachers knew, voluntary, community-centered, student-centered and focused on enculturation into the profession.

In fact the relative ease with which we were able to see the design features of the NTI serves as evidence of their root source in the cultural values and principles of the National Writing Project. The NWP values served as commonly held, but challenging design principles to the initiative, setting the bar very high for the participating NTI sites. They were forced, by virtue of their membership in the NWP community, to design their programs and practices according to the principles derived from the humanistic values to which the Writing Project adheres. But as a result they created very high-quality experiences for their new teacher participants, which in turn led to a wide range of benefits for the beginners.

NEW TEACHER INITIATIVE DESIGNS:  
A FUNCTION OF  
NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT  
CORE VALUES  
AND  
SUPPORTIVE INFRASTRUCTURE

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# **NEW TEACHER INITIATIVE DESIGNS: A FUNCTION OF NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT CORE VALUES AND SUPPORTIVE INFRASTRUCTURE**

## **PART ONE:**

### **THE INTRODUCTION**

This report, “New Teacher Initiative Designs: A Function of National Writing Project Core Values and Supportive Infrastructure,” describes a powerful dialectical process that emerged at each of the 18 New Teacher Initiative (NTI) sites as they planned and implemented their new teacher support programs. From the inception of the initiative and throughout its duration, the process of developing, improving and refining the NTI programs was fueled by two potent entities – the fundamental values to which the National Writing Project adheres, and an infrastructure deliberately designed by the NWP to support effective professional development for new teachers.

Our report provides an analysis of how the recursive and iterative interaction among values, infrastructure, and design occurred in the New Teacher Initiative. We identify the core values that were most instrumental in the design of the NTI programs, describing them from the perspectives of both the NTI site leaders and the new teacher participants. We also identify and explicate the components and strategies of the NWP infrastructure, or modes of work, designed to support the initiative, drawing on testimonials of both the NTI leaders and the participants. Then the report provides a more detailed illustration of how NTI sites, through interactions with elements of the NTI infrastructure, evolved increasingly effective design features for their programs by continually comparing and contrasting their professional development activities and strategies to core NWP values or principles.

We conclude the report with discussions of two propositions. First we posit the idea that as the NTI sites matured and developed a “site-level practice” of new teacher support, their programs offered increasingly high levels of congruence between the core, focal values and the design of their work. Second, we propose that the dynamic relationship among the core values, the infrastructure provided by the NWP and emergent NTI designs was made possible by a high “cultural capacity,” and was responsible for propelling the overall NTI improvement process.

This report is organized into three parts. They are as follows:

#### **Part One: The Introduction**

We summarize the topic of this report and briefly describe its organization.

#### **Part Two: Understanding the NTI Designs as a Function of NWP Core Values and Supportive Infrastructure**

Drawing on the observations and interviews we conducted during the course of our study of the NTI, we provide a conceptual analysis of how the NWP core values, and how the infrastructure aimed at supporting NTI sites to enact those values played a critical role in the design process



at each of the 18 NTI programs. We illustrate how the dialectic process among values, infrastructure and design played out at several sample sites, driving the learning process and contributing to ongoing improvement of the NTI offerings. We postulate that as the NTI sites achieved greater congruence between the design of their programs and the core values they held, their support for new teachers increased in effectiveness. And we also discuss why we came to believe that the “cultural capacity” of the NWP, of which the core values and the support infrastructure flowed, served as a critical context for the NTI work with new teachers.

**Part Three: Summary Thoughts**

In the final section of this report we offer summary thoughts about our focal topic.

## **PART TWO:**

### **UNDERSTANDING THE NTI DESIGNS AS A FUNCTION OF NWP CORE VALUES AND SUPPORTIVE INFRASTRUCTURE**

As we studied the New Teacher Initiative, focusing on the work at the Cohort One sites and the programs they launched for new teachers, we had the opportunity to witness a “construction process” from its very beginnings. In developing their new teacher support programs NTI teams, of course, drew on their site’s accumulated experiences of working with veteran teachers, their own individual and personal experiences of new teachers, and, in a few cases, some more formal but still preliminary efforts at the NWP site to target a novice teacher audience. For the most part, however, the NTIs started construction with empty building lots and only rough mental blueprints.

We began to understand that supporting new teachers in complex environments is a “messy business.” Not surprisingly, strategies and models did not emerge neatly or quickly. On the contrary, the NTI site-level teams were faced with unexpected constraints and challenges that appeared in a wide range of dimensions – from highly turbulent district policy and financial environments to their own capacity issues. Not unlike new teachers in the urban schools and classrooms they hoped to support, the NTI teams confronted difficult, unfamiliar contexts and cultures. They tried out “lesson plans” that fell short of what they had hoped. They called on their NWP colleagues and mentors for support, and re-grouped to try again.

In spite of the apparent “messiness” of the development of new teacher support programs across the field of NTI sites, early on we began to observe underlying processes that gave coherency and logic to the New Teacher Initiative. In particular we saw a strong, common dynamic emerge as the NTI sites planned, implemented, and assessed their new teacher support programs. The root source of the dynamic was simple: nested within their home Writing Project sites, each of the 18 NTI programs ultimately sought to reflect NWP cultural values and practices in their support for new teachers. They strove to achieve congruence between their NTI programs and important Writing Project principles.

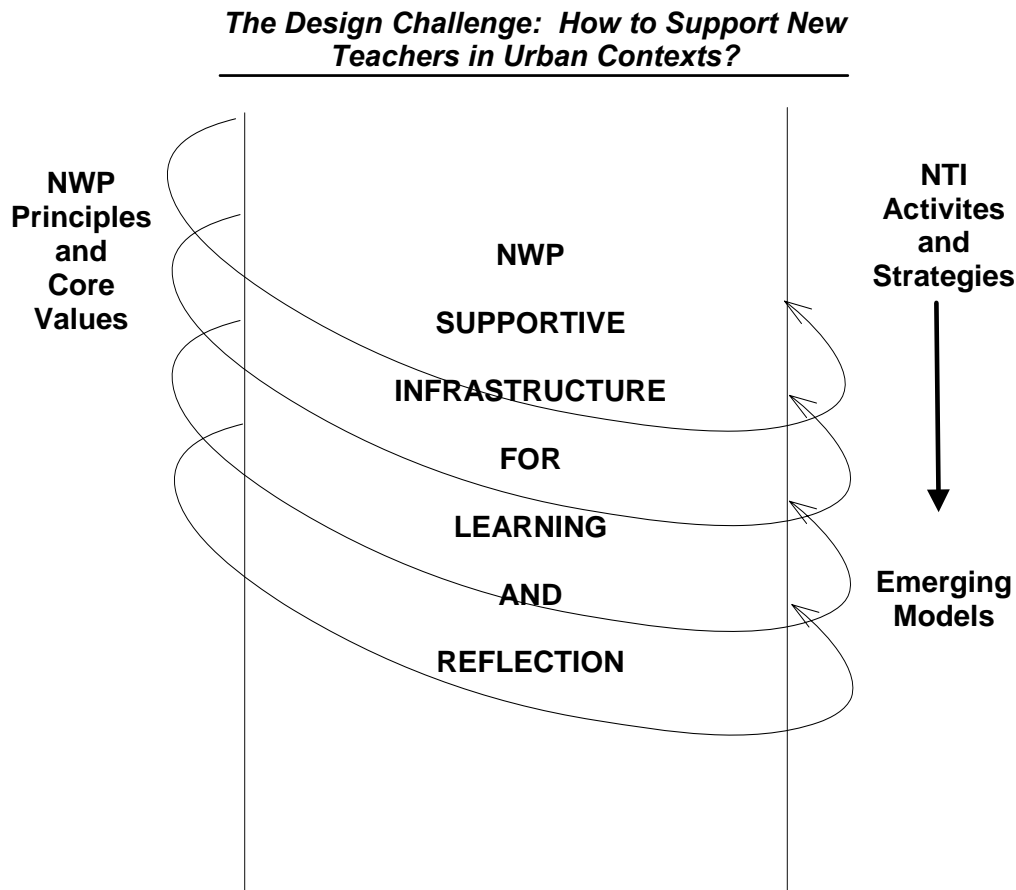
We found a dynamic consisting of an ongoing, iterative oscillation between two strong poles or entities: first, the fundamental values to which the National Writing Project adheres, values such as respect for teachers and teaching, intellectualism, or trust in experiential learning; and, second, the professional development designs the NTI sites created for new teachers, designs such as workshops, study groups, or on-line discussions. Moreover, we also found a third element in the dynamic. We saw that the back and forth interaction between values and design did not just happen. It was promoted, mediated and enhanced by what we came to think of as an infrastructure for learning and reflection. A flexible and responsive infrastructure of supports was carefully designed and provided to the NTI sites by the National Writing Project throughout the duration of the initiative.

Analyzing this dynamic helped provide us with a conceptual frame for understanding how the individual NTI programs grew and improved over time. Even more importantly, it shed light on the deep structure of the initiative, revealing the foundational cultural capacity under-girding the NTI, namely the core values of the NWP. We believe that it was this cultural capacity on which the NTI was able to draw that produced the very strong outcomes of the project – a very broad range of benefits we witnessed accruing to its new teacher participants.

## The Dynamic

Our thinking about the dynamic relationship among NWP core values, the supportive infrastructure for learning and reflection, and emergent NTI designs is represented in the graphic below:

### The Dynamic Relationship Between NWP Core Values and NTI Designs



By participating in the New Teacher Initiative each of the 18 sites was challenged by a common, central question or design challenge: how best to support new teachers in urban districts within the context of the NWP? As NTI leadership teams began to explore how to resolve that key question, a process of learning and reflecting was set in motion. Thus at each of the sites a recursive dialogue occurred both explicitly and implicitly between core values, or what one might call "theory," and the design of activities and strategies, or what one might consider "practice." Again, the oscillation between values and design, or "theory" and "practice" was not a very neat process. Rather, NTI teams selected activities or strategies loosely based on their past experiences – of what they recalled from their own early teaching years, or of what they knew about other induction programs, or of the professional programs offered by their NWP sites, such as a workshop series or a mentoring program.

A key component of the New Teacher Initiative was the supportive infrastructure – consisting of people, activities, events and modes of working – provided by the NWP. This infrastructure supported sites in navigating through the difficult challenges of building their new teacher support programs, enabling them as they tried out various professional development designs, encouraging them to observe and reflect on what happened. By creating opportunities for the NTI sites to hold up their own work, to have other eyes look and respond to it, and to learn about others' work too, the infrastructure supported sites in comparing their results to the core principles and values that define the Writing Project – values such as an emphasis on writing, or insistence that all participants voice their thinking.

Comparing and contrasting their designs to core values generated self-assessment questions. For example: *Were we responsive to new teachers' needs? Did we include enough practical information about writing instruction in our workshop? Did we include enough reflective writing? Did this event help build trust and a feeling of safety? Are we providing sufficient opportunities to develop a community of support and discourse?* The process of moving back and forth between 1) values, ideals or theory, 2) then reflection on feedback and outside input, and 3) onto design, implementation or practice, led NTI teams back to the drawing board to change, to readjust, to move forward, or to simply start all over again. And so on.

The dynamic relationship among the core values, the infrastructure which supported sites in learning and reflecting about their work, and the evolving program designs, propelled sites toward increasingly refined solutions to the question with which they began. Moreover, this dialectic proved to be a central, defining feature of the NTI as a whole, helping to generate learning and knowledge at both the site and initiative level.

## The Core Values

We think of the National Writing Project as a highly “principled” organization. That is, the Writing Project is structured around and reflects a cohesive set of guiding axioms or values. Due in large part to the strong, humanistic vision of the founder, Jim Gray, and his fundamental beliefs about teachers, teaching and learning, but also to over thirty years of adhering to and refining those beliefs, Writing Project values serve as the bedrock of the organization's ethos. As part of the larger NWP community, the New Teacher Initiative programs naturally drew upon and reflected their home culture. Interestingly, however, there were several values that we began to think of as “core values,” those that surfaced quickly, strongly and most frequently, and thus appeared to be most central in the NTI efforts. We identified three we thought of as: community, egalitarianism, and inquiry.

In the book “Inside the National Writing Project” Ann Lieberman and Diane Wood describe a set of ten “social practices leading to professional community” that is the NWP. They write: “The social practices adopted by the NWP convey norms and purposes, they create a sense of belonging, and they shape professional identities.”<sup>1</sup> Although we have come to believe that these “social practices,” like the professional development designs in support of new teachers the NTI sites developed, are derivatives of more foundational core values (such as community, egalitarianism and inquiry), Lieberman and Wood's description of social practices helped us understand better the nature of NWP core values. Coupled with our own observations and

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Lieberman and Diane R. Wood, *Inside the National Writing Project: Connecting Network Learning and Classroom Teaching* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2003), p. 21

interviews we began to understand the particularly key role these core values played in the thinking and design of the NTI efforts.

### **Community**

The core value that emerged first and foremost in the New Teacher Initiative was that of community. Almost every nascent NTI program aimed explicitly to build a community for new teachers through its offerings. The Teacher Consultants (TCs) who served in leadership roles in the local NTI sites generally taught in the same schools and districts as the novices who participated in the NTI activities and events. As a consequence, they understood well the (often) difficult school and district contexts in which new teachers existed. They hoped, through the NTI, to offer new teachers an antidote to the isolation and lack of community and relationship they often suffered in their first years of teaching. As one Site Director from a NTI site explained to us:

*...We found smart, dedicated young people who are working 12 hours a day. And what the school district is doing during the course of their day (and it doesn't take them long to figure this out) is telling them in one way or another to be stupid and don't ask questions. 'Don't use everything you know, don't try to make connections between things, don't rock the boat, just do what you are told and shut up...' after awhile the pressure builds up and there is no pressure release valve in the environment for them to use their intelligence and their passion to look seriously at their own work. And so, they are going to leave the profession. Everyone knows that the statistics, particularly in urban schools, bear that out.<sup>2</sup>*

Thus to prevent new teachers from leaving teaching, a driving principle for the nine Cohort One sites was to create a strong, welcoming professional home or community of learners for the new teachers they served. Similar to and based on the professional communities they knew at their home NWP sites, the NTIs aimed to provide an alternative culture, where novice teachers could find solace and refuge, as well as identity and challenge as professionals. Many novice NTI participants we interviewed, similar to the one from New York City quoted below, responded as their programs had hoped. Their views helped us understand how precious the value of community was for them.

*...the mere fact that you can unload like your worst problem for that day and 10 people respond to you with – 'I am so sorry to hear about that,' or 'I completely understand what you are going through,' or 'This happened to me last year.' The program doesn't have to do much more, they don't even have to offer you advice. Just the encouragement, just the 'hang in there,' – that was really something that new teachers don't get. I certainly didn't feel it in my graduate classes.*

In terms of social practices, the NTIs aimed to “create forums for teacher sharing, dialogue, and critique.”<sup>3</sup> They also hoped to “encourage a re-conceptualization of professional identity and link it to professional community.”<sup>4</sup> Importantly, most of the leadership teams also envisioned the NTI as a passageway into the larger NWP community to which they invited new teachers. Although not all of the NTI programs achieved the ideal of professional community, nor ensured that novice teachers continued teaching or went on to participate in the NWP site, many did. Thus for many of the new teachers, as for the Philadelphia second-year teacher cited below, the NTIs did become communities where professionalism and learning were found, increasing the likelihood of their participants' future as educators.

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<sup>2</sup> Quotes we use in this report are taken from transcripts of interviews we have conducted with NTI participants. We have edited them to make them more readable, but we never change the meaning or intention of what the participant had to say.

<sup>3</sup> Lieberman and Wood, p. 22

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 22

*I think it is always useful to come back to a community of teachers... of course our school will do that occasionally, but it is always structured around the school's particular pressing needs of testing and discipline, and all of those things that come up in the lives of teachers and administrators. But in situations (like the NTI) it is really helpful to talk to teachers from all over the city, different age groups, different experiences – so many different levels to come together and reflect on different things. There are a couple of veteran teachers who are in my school who just love the Writing Project site and the community that it creates for teachers...*

### **Egalitarianism**

Although well-intentioned, most traditional new teacher support programs are structured around a deficit model. New teachers are thought of as unskilled, unformed and untested. They need lots of help. In short, they are often viewed as second class citizens, not yet “real” teachers. In contrast, although they were well aware of the special needs of new teachers, the NTI sites demonstrated quite a different stance toward their participants. By insisting on treating new teachers as equals, with something to offer and contribute, they revealed a core National Writing Project value: egalitarianism. NTI participants were viewed first and foremost as classroom teachers; only secondarily were they new classroom teachers.

One NTI Thinking Partner told us that she saw the sites she mentored approaching their new teacher program as if “new teachers had an intellectual life, and were to be respected for what they brought to the programs.” However, bucking stereotypical notions of what new teachers are was not easy for the sites as they planned and designed their programs. It was easier to think of new teachers as raw beginners who needed lots of information from more experienced teachers; and conversely, it was all too easy for the new teachers to feel themselves inferior. One Site Coordinator described how difficult it was for both the participating veteran and new teachers to insist on the principle of egalitarianism in their workshops: “We really struggled to try to make the point that we were learning from each other... initially, people didn’t seem to feel that way. Over time, however, people began to recognize that new teachers had something to offer the whole group. We really pushed on that.”

In terms of Lieberman and Wood’s “social practices” the principle of egalitarianism mirrors what they describe as the NWP practice of “approaching each colleague as a potentially valuable contributor.”<sup>5</sup> What is key here is, because most of the NTI teams embraced the spirit of egalitarianism, they considered new teachers as their colleagues, and therefore as contributors. Moreover, because new teachers were considered to be of equal standing, the NTI designs also incorporated the social practice of “honoring teacher knowledge.” New teachers were solicited for their thinking, were listened to and responded to in conversation and in writing, and were encouraged to have a voice. The following NTI participant reflects what we heard from many others:

*Being considered equal really goes back to the whole [notion of] professionalism. The NTI people that I dealt with early on and throughout the whole process really treated everybody like a professional... it was this idea that we are all professionals. They stated that specifically at the beginning. I remember, we were all sitting in this nice hall and they said, ‘The reason we are going to be here, the primary goal – is to treat each other like the professionals that we are.’*

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<sup>5</sup> Lieberman and Wood, p. 22

## ***Inquiry***

A third core value or principle that played an important role as the NTI programs designed their efforts was inquiry. Lieberman and Wood identify one of their ten social practices as the practice of “promoting a stance of inquiry.”<sup>6</sup> They write, “Permeating the entire NWP culture is the idea that constant questioning and searching are fundamental to good teaching.” Throughout our interviews and observations we found NTI teams hoping to inculcate new teachers with a reflective stance, an inquirer’s way of thinking about their teaching and their students. Many NTI leaders felt that the practice of inquiry and reflection was pivotal to what differentiated teaching as a mere job from teaching as a life-long intellectual and professional pursuit.

A NTI Site Coordinator explained how reflection and inquiry contribute to new teachers’ longevity in the profession:

*The core of the idea of our teacher inquiry class is that [inquiry] is helping the new teachers reframe how they look at their work. One of the teachers in the class last week said, ‘Every time something comes up in my class, I stand back and think – Hmmm?’ So as novice teachers assimilate inquiry, and approach what they do in their classrooms in that way, then they are more likely to stay in the profession. And that’s because they are likely to be more successful. Because it’s a way of getting better results, and having teaching be a more satisfying process.*

The core value of inquiry was perhaps the most challenging for the NTI leadership teams to fully realize in their programs. Only a couple of the NTIs offered new teachers fully developed, inquiry-based programs such as a teacher research course. It was considerably easier for the budding NTI projects to incorporate elements of inquiry into their programs as they evolved. In particular the NTIs focused on one important aspect of inquiry – reflection – by giving new teachers multiple and varied opportunities for reflective writing.

Because of the close relationship between writing and thinking, activities such as reflective journal writing, responding to writing prompts focused on teachers’ classrooms, writing out and responding to teachers’ questions, etc., readily promoted a reflective stance toward classroom practice and student learning. For example, one first-year teacher describes her NTI site establishing a culture where asking questions of oneself and fellow practitioners – “seeking” – was accepted and expected:

*[An inquiry stance toward teaching] arose in our NTI... but not directly. It somehow came to the surface by the program forcing us to write. I think then we started to reflect, and then we started to ask questions of ourselves. Then we would discuss them as a group and it automatically came up, because I think the new teachers... had different stories to share than, of course, the teachers teaching the program, who had 10-plus years of experience.... We were all asking each other questions, like a young teacher would ask, ‘Well how do you teach somebody to write? How do you do it when [students] say, ‘I don’t have nothing to write.’ Does that child have a writer’s block?’ And then you start sharing. ‘Well I use this and I use that,’ and then you start to think, ‘Well, maybe I should try that, or try this.’ So [inquiring] didn’t come directly; it came indirectly through our own sense of... seeking.*

Most importantly, as the NTI programs sought to have their work mirror the core value of inquiry, and by challenging new teachers to observe, reflect and assess their own practice, important sub-textual messages were communicated about knowledge and authority. NTI participants

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<sup>6</sup> Lieberman and Wood, p. 30

began to understand that through reflection and inquiry they had the power and responsibility to develop their own knowledge, and the voice and authority to share it. We too, as students of the New Teacher Initiative, began to understand the close links between inquiry, the firsthand knowledge it produces, and teacher professionalism. The following NTI participant describes the relationships among them:

*I always have to go back to reflection because that is what you are constantly doing. It's thinking about what you have done, maybe how can you improve it, or change it. And it is all about being the very best at your craft, at your profession... We all hopefully are striving to be better and to continue to improve ourselves. Without reflection how could you ever possibly have that? Reflection forces you to look at yourself and your practices, to look at what you are doing, and to ask if you could be doing it better... I think that there is always room for growth, especially because students are always changing and we have to find new ways to reach them. I can't say enough about my experience with [the NTI]... the Writing Project and with critical friends. It changed everything for me. No staff development or new training initiative ever impacted me the way just sitting in a room with my peers and having intelligent conversations did.*

Of course there are many other core values and principles to which the National Writing Project adheres and which emerged in the work of the New Teacher Initiative. However the values of community, egalitarianism and inquiry, appeared (to us) most strongly, most readily, and most frequently as the NTI programs were created at each of the 18 sites.

## **The Supportive Infrastructure for Learning and Reflection**

Over the course of the three years of the New Teacher Initiative most NTI site teams were remarkably successful at evolving thoughtful designs for their new teacher support programs which, in turn, produced a wide range of benefits for their participants. But these positive results did not occur magically. We believe that in large part the efficacy of the NTIs was the result of scaffolding and support the sites received. The NWP provided the initiative players with a carefully crafted infrastructure for learning and reflection. It was designed to engage and motivate sites, but most importantly, to promote and model NWP values, principles and practices so that sites could create uniquely "Writing Project" new teacher support programs in their local areas.

The supportive infrastructure consisted of an overall organizational structure, specially assigned people and roles, and various tools and practices for promoting learning through inquiry and reflection. We describe the various elements below

### **A Layered Support System**

The overall organization of the New Teacher Initiative was deliberately structured as a layered, pyramid-like support system, intended to support communication and learning among the various constituencies involved in the initiative. Specifically, at each of the participating NTI sites new teachers were supported in a great variety of ways by NTI Teacher Consultants or veteran mentor teachers, who were in turn supported by a NTI Site Coordinator. The Site Coordinator interfaced with new teachers, the TCs, and the NWP Site Director at the participating site, as well as with the NTI leaders at the initiative level. Each NTI Site Coordinator had a "Thinking Partner" who served in a coaching, mentoring and technical assistance role. Thinking Partners, in turn, were "mentored" by the NTI Director, who, in her turn, was supported by her Thinking Partner, a member of the NWP national management team. In addition, as a group the Thinking Partners served as the NTI Leadership Team,

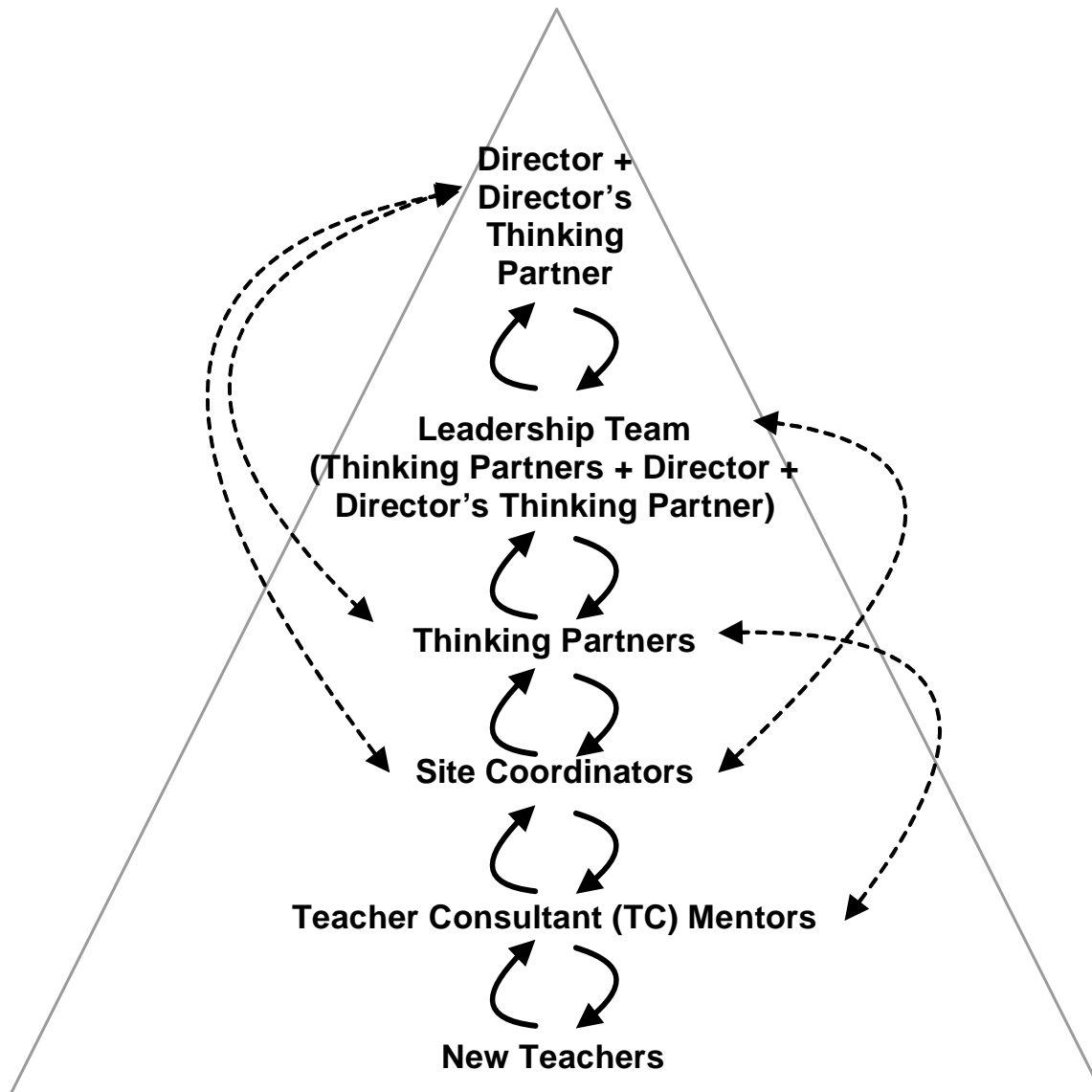


meeting occasionally and communicating frequently through a listserv mechanism to function as a network of “mentors of mentors.” Moreover, all members of the NTI community – including new teachers from the sites, TCs, Site Coordinators and Leadership Team members – met several times a year at various functions, such as the Urban Sites Network conferences or the NWP Annual Meetings. NTI sites also met at national summer institutes designed by the National NTI Leadership Team especially for sites to: present their work; articulate their theories of action; identify what was being learned; discuss new questions about working with new teachers; and provide opportunities for NTI sites to get response and feedback from the national NTI community.

Mirroring fundamental National Writing Project values and principles, the organization of the NTI effort and the support structures were deliberately designed to establish collegial relationships throughout the NTI network, and to focus effort on constructing knowledge about supporting new teachers in an iterative and egalitarian way. Information flowed up and down the layers of the pyramid. All voices were encouraged and welcomed. No one constituency claimed to know the answer to how to support new teachers in challenging urban school environments.

The following diagram portrays graphically the multiple levels of participation in the NTI, and how communication and relationship-building flowed through the pyramid.

### The NTI – A Supportive Layered Pyramid of Relationships



#### ***The NTI Leadership Team***

The NTI Leadership Team consisted of the Project Director and eight to nine Teacher Consultants from various NWP sites. The members covered a range in their experience with the National Writing Project. Some were former NWP Site Directors from mature sites; others were relatively new to teaching and had just recently become TCs. The Leadership Team met three or four times annually to reflect on, to shepherd, and to further the overall initiative effort. Most importantly they collaboratively planned and designed all the NTI-wide events and activities.

Members of the Leadership Team described their work to us in the following ways:

*...We are a support network.*

*We are a small learning community that comes together to understand the [NTI] work from both the national and the local perspectives. I see us as a think tank. We come up with all kinds of ideas. We are planners, very intentional about certain structures we want to put in place and certain concepts we want to get across to local site teams. So, we provide an intellectual leadership function within the design of the structure of NTI itself.*

*We design activities and structures... to help nudge, challenge, and support the teams that we are working with through their work, to (help them achieve) the goal of NTI, which is to help new teachers find a place within the Writing Project and support them as they face teaching.*

### **The NTI Thinking Partners**

The members of the Leadership Team not only worked together as a group to guide the NTI, but they also served individually as Thinking Partners, each paired with one or two of the 18 sites. Their charge was to support the site teams as they set about the work of planning and implementing their new teacher programs. Their mode of working was customized to the site and to the Thinking Partner's skills and capacities, but always bolstered and influenced by the thinking generated by the Leadership Team of which they were a part.

The Thinking Partners performed a variety of activities – sites visits, regular phone calls, emails, making contact at national meetings – which served to further the work of the local NTI leadership teams. But perhaps most importantly, their role was to support the local NTI teams in thinking and learning about what they were doing. One Thinking Partner described it this way:

*I act as a sounding board ...the Site Coordinator run ideas by me, and says, 'Here is what I'm thinking, what do you think about this?' Or, 'Here is what we're planning to do at the retreat, what do you think?' ...It's more of being a listening ear, or a sounding board for them, acting as a resource person to them. And we have been thinking through their course... so the Thinking Partner [provides] the opportunity to have another set of eyes kind of looking in, not to monitor the work, but to see what is being done here, and what is happening, and what is not happening.*

Thus Thinking Partners helped site teams, particularly the Site Coordinator, think through their site issues and plans. A process of reflection and collaboration was set in motion at the sites, whereby local Coordinators worked with Thinking Partners first and foremost as colleagues, but also benefited from Thinking Partners' expertise and broader view of the New Teacher Initiative. The visits and calls provided both direct support to the sites, but also, reciprocally a contextualized and therefore deeper understanding of local issues and challenges for the Thinking Partners.

### ***Supportive Activities and Events***

The supportive infrastructure the NWP provided also consisted of regular activities and events in which site leadership teams participated each of the three years of their NTI commitment. It was these events, where the entire NTI network met, or one of the two Cohorts gathered to examine their work, that proved to be highly motivating to the individual sites. As one Thinking Partner explained, “I think it is putting in place the structure for them to learn and gain knowledge and insights and motivation from other sites – so that is the work we do, which is work behind the scenes.”

The major activities and events were the following:

#### NTI Summer Institutes

Each summer each of the two NTI Cohorts convened at a summer institute in a conference center setting. Three to four members from each of the local NTI teams attended, along with their Thinking Partners. For a week the Leadership Team facilitated the site teams through activities, writing exercises and discussions to enable them to examine and think about their new teacher programs. Site teams shared stories, ideas, successes and challenges; they wrote and reflected on their work; and tapped into the NTI learning community as a whole, asking questions about and examining each others’ work as a way to understand it more deeply and push it further toward core ideals.

#### Annual Meetings

The NTI local teams and the Leadership Team also met annually at two events traditionally convened by the National Writing Project. First was the NWP Annual Meeting, held every fall where all 195 NWP sites are invited and encouraged to attend this three-day conference to share their most current work, meet with colleagues, and generate new ideas. NTI site teams were asked to attend these meetings. NTI sites had a special session at the conference; in the beginning the meetings were internal, used as working time for the NTI teams, but in the later years of the project the sessions also allowed NTI teams to present their “work in progress” with other NWP sites interested in new teacher issues.

The second annual event where the NTI teams met regularly was the Urban Sites Network meetings, generally held in early spring. The USN meetings provided another opportunity for NTI sites to meet all together. Here again they were able to meet as a network within the larger Urban Sites Network, or in smaller teams with their Thinking Partners, and to share their current new teacher support practices with one another as well as with participants from the broader USN. At the USN meetings NTI members also gained a slightly different perspective on the issues of urban sites and issues surrounding beginning teachers in those contexts.

### ***Supportive Processes***

Another aspect of the NTI infrastructure provided by the National Writing Project was a set of processes in which NTI members participated. They ranged from writing with specific goals in mind, to using specially designed tools or instruments aimed at eliciting thinking and reflection, to participating in formal formative feedback mechanisms that we, at Inverness Research Associates, employed to gather information and understanding to feed back to the NTI members.

### Written Documentation

The NTI Leadership required the 18 NTI sites to provide written documentation of their work with new teachers. The documentation included a progress report that concluded each NTI year and described accomplishments, challenges and lessons learned. In addition, both initially and for each year of participation in the NTI, sites were asked to submit proposals for further funding, explaining their local new teacher needs, proposed programs and theory of action. The written reports fulfilled two important functions. They provided the Leadership Team with written statements describing the work and the thinking of each of the sites. Simultaneously the process of writing and submitting the reports, which were often accomplished by teams of individuals, ensured that NTI local program leaders formally reflected on, assessed and interrogated their work in an ongoing way, and wrote about it with regularity.

### Protocols for Evaluating Work

At the Summer Institutes in particular, one of the primary tools used for helping sites examine their NTI work were protocols designed by the Leadership Team. The protocols, used in conjunction with sites' presentation of their work, allowed the sites to see their work from others' vantage point. After their presentations, site leaders were able to listen to observations, questions and suggestions from fellow sites in a fairly formalized setting. The audience and site together reflected on the work, and then – as a community charged with pushing forward the common goal of supporting new teachers – were able to address those issues.

### Interviews and Focus Group Discussions

The “evaluation” of the NTI we conducted for the past three years was designed intentionally to provide formative feedback to the initiative as it evolved. We interviewed members of the Leadership Team, including the Project Director, as well as the local NTI Site Coordinators, TCs, and a sample of their participating teachers annually. The process of preparing for and engaging in the interview was deliberately intended to allow NTI participants to reflect on their work, and in most cases, the chance to talk to an outsider proved to be valuable and insightful to participants and researchers alike. Moreover, our sharing back to the NTI community what we had learned from them also proved to be an instructive process through which individuals and the community at large gained insight into their own efforts.

Over and over again, as we observed NTI events such as Leadership Team meetings and Summer Institutes and interviewed players such as Thinking Partners and Site Coordinators, we saw how the infrastructure elements stemmed from the deep cultural capacity of the Writing Project. The infrastructure used to support the work of the NTI almost always reflected and modeled and allowed participants to emulate the core values of community, reflection, egalitarianism. The infrastructure enabled individuals and teams to actually change their designs and practices, and to make changes that more closely reflected the Writing Project community's ideals.

In particular, a major “source” for the three key values that appeared central to the NTI design process was the NTI Leadership Team. Through their coaching and communication this national-level, highly experienced group served as a direct conduit of NWP values and modes of work. Thus, in the way the overall initiative was structured by the leaders, i.e., as a supportive, layered and fluid pyramid of relationships, and in the way the members of the leadership team worked with one another and their assigned sites, egalitarianism, community and inquiry were reflected back to the local teams in both words and deeds.

## The Dynamic Relationship Among Core Values, Supportive Infrastructure and Designs: Vignettes From the Field

In this section of the report, we have selected a sample of three vignettes drawn from the Cohort One sites which show the dynamic we have described in this report, and which we witnessed frequently as we observed the New Teacher Initiative in action. The vignettes are intended to illustrate and help the reader discover, as we did, the interplay among NWP core values, components of the support infrastructure, and NTI designs for new teacher support. These brief descriptions illuminate how emergent activities and strategies developed to reflect the core values of community, egalitarianism and inquiry. They also illuminate how the designs of those activities and strategies were continuously revised and refined through a process of contrast and comparison to core values and principles, a process which was deliberately encouraged by the support infrastructure we have previously described.

### ***Infusing Reflection Into a Professional Development Workshop Series: The OSUWP NTI***

The Oklahoma State University Writing Project (OSUWP) NTI offered monthly after-school inservice and later summer “mini-institutes” to its participants. The sessions were designed to provide novices regular time with colleagues with whom they could share their early teaching experiences in the context of content-specific workshops. Unexpectedly, the program attracted large numbers of alternatively certified beginning teachers. They expressed a great need, even more so it seemed than their regularly certified counterparts, for help with classroom management and discipline issues. The NTI team had intended to include reflective writing in the workshop series, but in their effort to respond to the cries of these new needs, they quickly modified their original plans. The team’s plan, then, was to offer immediate help first, and follow-up with reflective writing later.

So while TCs modeled professional journaling in the inservice sessions, journal writing which promotes self-reflection and self-assessment was not explicitly required of participants. The team had high hopes but low expectations that NTI participants would in fact engage in writing of this nature; they reasoned that after the new teachers were settled into their classrooms they would be better able to reflect on their practice and discuss it with others.

But as the program progressed at OSU, the lack of reflective writing and professional conversation in the NTI sessions was always a source of discomfort for the team. Particularly the long-time TCs, for whom writing and shared dialogue was an integral part of their practice for which they credited their NWP experience, recognized its absence, a little at first and increasingly as the inservice series progressed. The beginnings of a resolution for the team came through conversations with other NTI teams and the initiative’s leadership, first at the NWP Annual Meeting in the fall of 2003. Hearing other NTI teams present and analyze their work helped the OSU NTI leaders more confidently act on their desire to infuse a more explicit reflective stance in their remaining sessions. Upon their return home, the monthly meetings with new teachers immediately incorporated more journaling and “professional conversation” into their agendas. The Site Coordinator explained how the NTI readjusted its focus mid-way through the series:

*After we went to the Annual Meeting last year... we realized we were doing much more teacher training and not as much reflective practice. In January, at the beginning of the new semester we announced a change in focus. The workshop sessions became... much more about professional conversation, much more focused on journals. We asked the teachers to read some of their journals and then we would have a professional conversation.*

This gentle but firm redesign of the program benefited all involved. As the TCs worked alongside the new teachers, engaging in their own professional journaling and participating in conversations about

their own practice, the process confirmed for them the value of reflection and reflective writing. They remembered that new teachers were not different than other teachers. They saw that novices didn't need to be treated as if their inexperience or focus on survival skills made them incapable of engaging in professional reflection and discourse. In fact, when the NTI leaders "raised the bar" – when they expected more intellectual rigor and more reflective thinking – the new teachers met the standard easily.

Another component of infrastructure, the final NTI report, urged the team to further develop their thinking by asking them to consider what they had learned in their year of work. They wrote: "We have learned that new teachers value professional conversation, teaching journals and reflective practice, just as experienced teachers do." The new teachers at the OSU site corroborated this finding. This new mathematics teacher was interested to learn that required written reflection was beneficial to him:

*Doing professional writing about my practice, in my journal or otherwise, influenced my notions of teaching. I wrote about what went well and what didn't and learned that to know why you're doing what you're doing is key. I became more reflective about my own practice; someone just commented that I've changed a lot since the beginning of NTI.*

In the third and final year of the NTI program the leadership established the expectation of journaling at the outset. NTI participants were asked to write in, and share from, their journals regularly. The Site Coordinator now saw reflective journaling as a key foundation stone in their program's work with novices, noting that, "Our experience during the mini-institute especially showed us that new teachers need very little experience with journaling to realize its power and impact on their practice." As a result of their successes, the site sought to continue this line of work with new teachers, leading the OSU team to apply for and receive a NWP Teacher Inquiry Grant in 2006. This award, another element provided to the site by the NTI infrastructure, has allowed them to plan an additional mini-institute for NTI alumni focused on teacher research and inquiry, and to return to the core line of work – of reflection and inquiry – they intended all along.

### ***Creating a Community of Equals through On-line Mentoring: The NYCWP NTI***

Beginning in Year One of the New York City Writing Project (NYCWP) NTI, the program leadership created the NTI listserv. The listserv was initiated after at least one face-to-face meeting of the NTI participants, and was intended to allow new teachers to participate in a written "conversation" with fellow novices. With the exception of the veteran TCs who facilitated the conversations, no other teachers were participants. In this way the listserv provided a "safe place" for participants to converse about their students, their practice and current issues of concern.

The design of the listserv evolved as the initiative did. In Year One of the NTI this on-line forum was facilitated by the two NTI TCs, both veterans of long standing with the site. They began the conversation by asking the new teachers to respond to a research article. After few responded to the article but many posted other more personal concerns or questions, it became clear that the listserv was most active and effective when the dialogue originated with the new teachers themselves and focused on their issues. Thereafter the facilitating TCs sometimes posted open-ended questions to ponder, but in starting a new thread of conversation the TCs most often took their cues from the novices. In Year Two, the TCs largely let participants take the lead in directing the discussion from the outset. As one new teacher articulated, "When we go to the listserv, we are really driving the agenda." Still, TCs played an important role working "behind the scenes" to build trust and connections within the group. They continually invited participation in the conversation, provided affirmation, or reiterated or offered questions about new teachers' postings, and, most importantly, modeled how to conduct professional dialogue about teaching issues and challenges.

In reflecting on the listserv's evolving design, one of the New York City NTI TCs explained how a broadened view of the listserv, undertaken by the leadership team instinctively at first, helped promote both egalitarianism and community for the new teacher participants. She said:

*The listserv really expands the idea of who gets to be the mentor. It's so important for people who are new at anything, particularly new teachers, to feel that they have expertise and a voice. It helps them to feel secure in their developing profession. When a teacher puts something out on the listserv, they're not only asking the consultant, they're asking everyone on the list. It's tremendously empowering for those teachers who participate to get to offer an experience...*

The notion that a new teacher could "drive the agenda" and take on a mentoring role to a fellow novice is powerful and unusual for new teacher induction programs. Not surprisingly, when people are treated equally and with respect, the facilitating TCs found that a sense of community, even virtual community, developed naturally. But when additional TCs joined the leadership team in Year Two, the NTI leadership team was faced with a design challenge: how to guide them to be good facilitators so that the quality of the listserv could be maintained. Understanding how to coach them required the leadership team to analyze and understand more explicitly how best to initiate, structure and sustain a listserv conversation that reflected core values. According to the NYCWP NTI Site Coordinator, what helped in the analysis, and hence the replication of the veterans' interactions with the new teachers, was the opportunity to "step back and reflect."

*At the NTI Summer Institute we had a chance as a team to have some time together... we had time to step back and look at the listserv conversations we had collected. We could look back on our work and reflect. When you are in the midst of doing the work, you just can't do that ... it was useful to us too to have other TCs at the Institute listen to us, to read and respond to the conversations. That helped us understand what was involved, especially the facilitator's role.*

As the NYCWP group team continued to discuss the parameters of listservs and online mentoring and community building, both at home and at various NTI functions, the veteran TCs continued to model strategies for promoting the core values of egalitarianism and community building, while the newer TCs worked to emulate those strategies. In reflecting back on the process of dissecting the listserv work, the Site Coordinator observed, "I think our conversations also served other sites that were struggling with issues of setting up on-line communication for new teachers."

### ***Incorporating More Inquiry into a Workshop Series: The Third Coast WP NTI***

In its first year the Third Coast NTI offered new teachers in their service area a workshop series. Beginning with a one-day fall retreat, the Third Coast WP NTI hosted six after-school meetings. Each meeting began with a dinner and social time where teachers engaged in informal conversation about their practice, then a "How Things Are Going" discussion and problem solving, a presentation of current educational issues or content-specific strategies, and finally a focus on the new teachers' own research process. The first year was considered successful, but the NTI team felt dissatisfied. They wanted a little more intellectual rigor for their new teachers.

At the second NTI Summer Institute the leadership team attended, they found other teams struggling with similar dilemmas – programs that seemed satisfactory, but that didn't really "flow." A common theme was the challenge to discover what new teachers really needed. Simultaneously, the Leadership Team had designed several processes to examine the idea of inquiry. As a result there was much discussion among the participants about inquiry and how to think about it. "The word 'inquiry' kept coming up," according to the Third Coast Site Coordinator.

In the second year, following the Summer Institute, the teacher research component was greatly "beefed up" because, as the Site Coordinator explained, "The first year was too much directed by us, and not so much directed by the teachers themselves working on stuff. ...we essentially wanted to turn



it over to the participants, so that the new teachers weren't just ingesting knowledge, but were creating it too."

The NTI team's "theory of action" was that by engaging new teachers in the process of inquiry, it would deepen the teachers' learning, enhance their professional experience, and build a common ground for collegial dialogue. Each participant developed a research project based on classroom practice. They were supported in developing their skills as researchers through varied activities including selected readings from texts provided by NTI, whole- and small-group discussion and presentations from guest speakers. In a deliberate effort to make the inquiry process manageable for new teachers, Third Coast WP tailored the final product to meet the needs of the individual. Some teachers delved deeply into their topic while others kept a simple journal of their thoughts and observations. "Focusing more on the process, rather than on the final product gave our teacher-researchers more time to examine their data from many angles." All of the NTI participants shared their findings at the culminating two-day retreat.

Assessing the NTI year's work the Site Coordinator noted that the teacher research process helped build a feeling of a community among equals. "That is why the teacher researcher component is so good, because it is a unifying thing that everybody can talk about." A NTI TC who helped facilitate the sessions echoed how the facilitation of the teacher research and inquiry processes helped foster the social practice of "approaching each colleague as a potentially valuable contributor," and helping to realize the core value of egalitarianism.

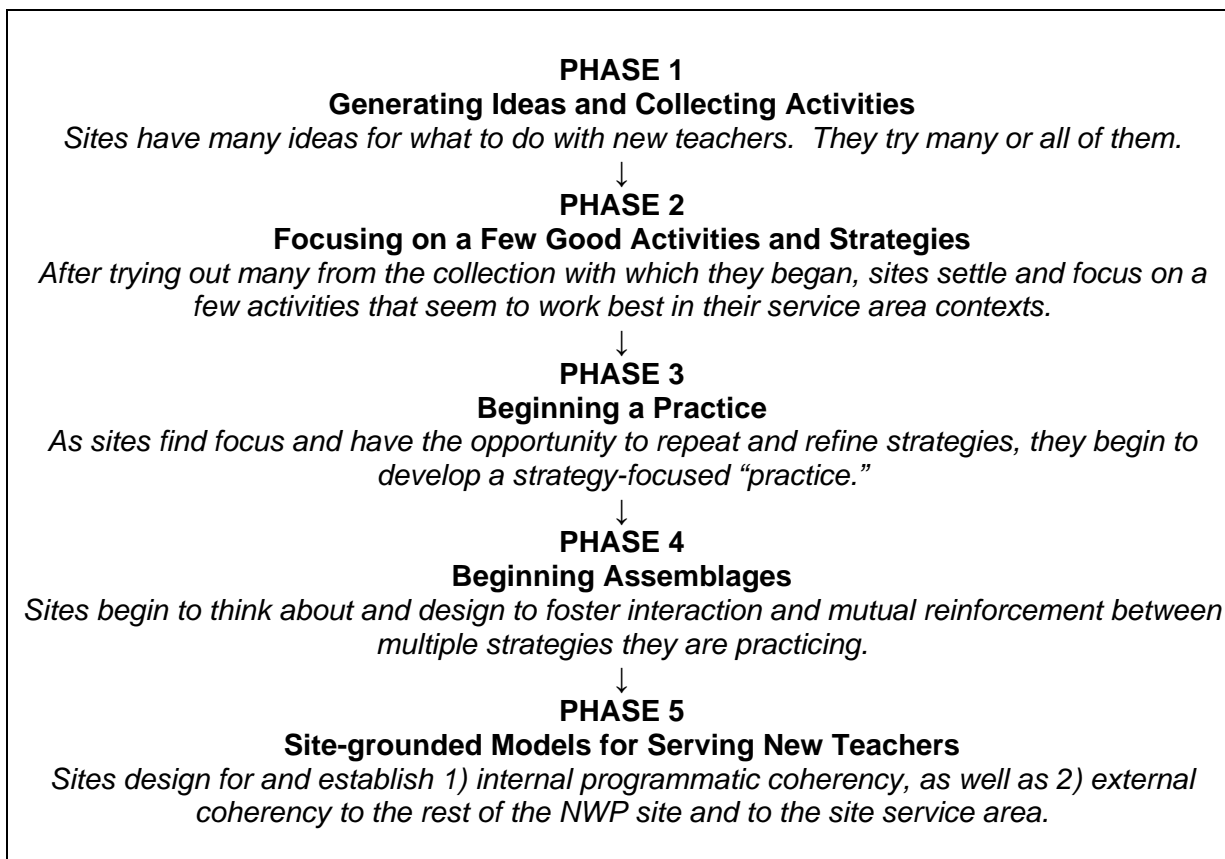
In the third and final year the Third Coast program met less frequently but for longer, more extended periods of time, and focused exclusively on formal teacher research. The concentrated focus on teacher research gave "every member... just what they needed," according to the NTI leaders. In their final report they describe how each novice teacher's research effort promoted inquiry, and how inquiry, in turn led to greater teacher confidence and authority:

*...every member [would be able]... to apply the new learning immediately to their special situations. Because the learning situation is authentically of their own creation, each new teacher would leave the group with answers, new techniques they had discovered and imbedded into their own practice immediately and more deeply than if they had come for a series of workshops that had been prescribed by us.*

The Third Coast NTI leadership team has continued to pursue their understanding of the relationship between new teachers and inquiry. At the Dissemination Retreats, and later, through continued NTI funding for a two-day writing retreat this spring, and support from their NTI Thinking Partner, the team has worked with the OSU NTI team to collaboratively write an article describing how new teacher research promotes and develops their knowledge, "voice," and ultimately leadership propensity.

## A Developmental Progression of New Teacher Support: From Activity to Model

After studying the NTI for three years, and observing the kinds of dynamic interrelationships among NWP core values, infrastructure supports and NTI designs the preceding three vignettes illustrate, we have come to believe that there is a (roughly) predictable progression of development as sites evolve their new teacher support programs. The design and implementation seems to occur in phases. Of course, we saw exceptions to this proposed developmental sequence, but in general NTI programs seemed to evolve along the lines described in the chart below:



We think of the maturation process of the NTI programs as essentially an alignment process – one of creating ever greater congruence between the core values of the NWP and the professional support designs the NTI sites developed for new teachers. One without the other creates imbalance or dissonance. As sites discovered, offering new teachers activities without a firm grounding in a critical core value, such as community or inquiry, risked becoming no different than the standard professional development fare new teachers received from their schools and districts. By the same token, values alone without sufficient real-time, face-to-face and rigorous interactions with new teachers risked becoming a rhetorical exercise. When NTI program efforts began to “find themselves,” and began to develop effective programs for new teachers, there appeared to be a high level of congruity between their values and their design.

## **The Dynamic Between Core Values and Design Drives Improvement**

In our thinking there is a simple but important relationship linking the dialectic process between the core values and the designs, and the developmental sequence in which the NTI evolved that we just described. The dialectic that occurred at each of the NTI sites, whereby the leaders engaged in a process of comparing their designs for new teacher support to NWP core values, generated a continuous inquiry – an ongoing cycle of questioning, observing, analyzing, and redesigning supported through various relationships, mechanisms and processes we have called the supportive infrastructure provided by the NWP. For example, as the OSU leadership team found their inservice sessions becoming prosaic and shared their concerns with other NTI teams at a summer institute, they were moved to consider the core values of inquiry and reflection, and then deliberately incorporated reflective journaling into their program. Or, as the leaders at the Third Coast NTI realized that their workshops were too didactic, they looked to other NTI programs that offered teacher research courses, and gravitated toward the core value of egalitarianism by enhancing the teacher inquiry component of their program to give novice teachers greater voice and autonomy.

This kind of cycle served as an engine, driving sites to revise and ultimately improve their new teacher support programs over time. It is why we think of the relationship and mutual influence among the core values, the infrastructure, and the emerging designs as a dynamic relationship, one in which multiple instantiations of programs coupled with iterative critical reviews, fueled the NTI sites' overall progress and growth. We have also come to believe that the strength, rigor and pervasiveness of this dynamic was one of the most important factors responsible for creating the wide range of benefits to new teachers we found to be the major outcome of the New Teacher Initiative.

## PART THREE: SUMMARY THOUGHTS

We conclude this paper on the relationship between NWP core values and the New Teacher Initiative designs with the following summary thoughts.

- In our view, the NTI fulfilled its mission to serve as a large-scale inquiry into new teacher support issues. The sites were charged with a very worthy design challenge: how to best serve new teachers in high-needs urban districts within a National Writing Project context. Strong core values, such as those of community and egalitarianism and inquiry, served as powerful and highly generative design principles. Moreover, as with any genuine design problem, its resolution was not and could not be easily achieved. It demanded a struggle. Each NTI leadership team had to discover and construct a design solution on its own, one that was based on local needs and contexts, but aligned with the core (design) principles and values.

Thus the New Teacher Initiative as a whole exhibited the same elements as a successful design technology problem posed to an enterprising group of young students – first, a set of good design principles or aesthetic values; second, a good challenge or problem; and third, the freedom, autonomy and support to create a viable design. And, as in a successful classroom or research and design organization, the NTI effort generated a range of thoughtful designs, as well as greater overall knowledge about how to solve the central design problem.

- As we have discussed, the dialectic between values and design mediated and furthered by a strong set of supports by the NWP, proved to be a central, defining feature of the NTI as a whole. When we study educational improvement efforts we are always curious to know: what is it, underlying everything that makes the project “run?” What drives it? Sometimes it is responding to financial incentives, or making good on promises made to funders, or simply fulfilling policy mandates and requirements. It is rarer when a project is fueled by the kind of “internal combustion” process we found in the New Teacher Initiative. By internal combustion we mean the intellectual activity in which the sites engaged, the dialectic between core values and designs that fueled the NTI engine, helping to generate learning and knowledge at both the site and initiative level.
- Perhaps another source of the successes of the NTI experiment and the design challenge the initiative posed is the parallels between the design process and the writing process. In other words, writing and designing are similar enterprises that involve similar intellectual work. Therefore designing a new teacher support program came naturally (though not necessarily easily) to the NTI players. We are certainly not the first to note the similarities between the two. In fact one Thinking Partner told us:

*There are parallels between these understandings that we have about the ‘recursivity’ of writing and the teaching of writing, and how we write and talk these [NTI] experiments into being. Everyone of us is subject to revision. We come together as a group and we ...expect that everyone is subject to revision and all of our work is subject to revision and that process of going through it is transformative.*

We speculate then that the process of design and re-design which constituted the central activity of the NTI, and the writing process were similar and therefore accessible to the NTI teams. Moreover, individual leaders could draw on what they knew about writing and teaching writing to apply to new teacher design work; and the national leadership could also readily apply similar infrastructure supports to program building for novice teachers that were successfully used to support traditional NWP writing workshops or institutes.

- The New Teacher Initiative provided an important avenue for individual leadership team members, as well as teams as a whole, to develop and refine program designs that embodied the not-easy-to-achieve core values. Because the teams started from the very beginning, with no new teacher support programs at all, they were forced to think very consciously and deliberately about how to design a uniquely “NWP-esque” new teacher support effort.

Involvement in this intellectual design process, coupled with often intensive participation in NTI support activities, served as an important professional learning experience for all the leaders of the NTI, but it was especially educative for newer TCs. Less experienced and less enculturated to NWP values and principles than their veteran peers, looking at professional development designs critically in collegial and often rigorous settings, and through the lens of core values was challenging for newer Teacher Consultants. For example, the NYC team realized that if they wanted to sustain and broaden their NTI work, the mentoring TCs might need more explicit and structured guidance about how to work within this initiative, e.g., how to work with novices and facilitate a listserv which gave new teachers an honored and equal voice. The OSU NTI realized that they needed more concentrated focus on writing, reflection and professional conversation in their workshop series, and the participating newer TCs benefited from being involved in those activities alongside the new teachers. And these are just two of the many examples of NTI work enhancing the skills and knowledge of NTI leadership team members.

Overall then, through seeking to align their new teacher support programs with core NWP values, and by virtue of doing so in well-supported venues that in fact reflected those values, the NTI teams expanded their own leadership capacity, and the capacities of their sites as a whole.

- The Writing Project, including the NTI, produce exceptionally positive benefits for teachers, but it is often not clear, especially to outside audiences, just how it happens. Observing the growth and development of the new teacher efforts from the ground up revealed the “inner workings” of the initiative process. Through studying and seeking to analyze how the NTI worked and how it was effective, we were enabled to see what is often invisible. We refer to the “invisible” infrastructure which served as a core component of the initiative, and which enabled the NTI sites to both move forward with their work and to ensure its quality and integrity. We also refer to the values and principles which were not initially visible, but which were revealed as the NTI programs progressed.

We found that both of these invisible assets or capacities to be deeply rooted cultural structures that enabled the NTI to build its programs through the dialectic processes we have described in this report. They stemmed from a well of cultural capacity that very few other teacher improvement or induction efforts can draw upon. The New Teacher Initiative, however, situated as it was within the larger National Writing Project culture was able to contribute significantly to new teachers in a range of important ways.

**THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT'S  
NEW TEACHER INITIATIVE:**

**A STUDY OF OUTCOMES, DESIGN AND  
CORE VALUES**

**APPENDICES**

- I. LIST OF RESEARCH AND EVALUATION ACTIVITIES
- II. BIBLIOGRAPHY OF RESOURCES CONSULTED

## APPENDIX I

### LIST OF RESEARCH AND EVALUATION ACTIVITIES

Listed below are the evaluation activities we conducted over the course of the NWP New Teacher Initiative. Although many of them informed multiple levels of the evaluation, we have organized them loosely by site-level or initiative-level focus.

#### Activities focused on the site-level

- Annually reviewed NTI documents, including NWP Site Profiles, NTI Applications, Progress Reports and Renewal Applications, our own “Site Portraits” developed in the first two years of the evaluation, and other miscellaneous documents
- Conducted interviews with NTI Thinking Partners (Spring and Fall, 2003 and 2004)
- Conducted interviews with Cohort One and Cohort Two Site Directors (Fall, 2004)
- Conducted interviews with Cohort One Site Coordinators (Spring and Fall, 2003 and 2004)
- Conducted interviews with Cohort Two Site Coordinators (Fall, 2004)
- Conducted interviews with participating Cohort One Teacher Consultants (TCs) (Spring, 2003 and 2004)
- Conducted interviews with participating Cohort One New Teachers (Spring, 2003 and 2004)
- Conducted interviews with participating Cohort Two New Teachers (Spring, 2004)

#### Activities focused on the initiative-level

- Annually administered and analyzed NTI Cohort One and Two Site Coordinator Activity Logs
- Annually administered and analyzed NTI Cohort One and Two TC Activity Logs
- Attended NTI Leadership Team meetings
- Conducted NTI Leadership Team focus group (Fall, 2005)
- Interviewed NTI Project Director numerous times
- Attended NTI events (e.g., original Kick-Off Meeting in November, 2002; NWP Annual Meetings, 2003 and 2004; Cohort Two Kick-Off Meeting in January, 2004; Urban Sites Network Conference in April, 2003 and 2004; NTI Cohort One Summer Institute in July, 2003 and June, 2004.)

## APPENDIX II

### BIBLIOGRAPHY OF RESOURCES CONSULTED

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