

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

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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. At the NWP relatively few of those who do actual work are paid employees of the organization. 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. 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*

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<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*

<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. Speigman, “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.