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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT'S COLLEGE, CAREER, AND COMMUNITY WRITERS PROGRAM (C3WP) FOR RURAL TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

In 2013-14, the National Writing Project reached out to high poverty rural school districts in 10 states to launch the College, Career, and Community Writers Program (C3WP).¹ The program was designed to improve secondary teachers' abilities to teach students argument writing, a literacy skill foundational to college- and career-readiness, as well as to informed participation in democratic society. An independent randomized intent-to-treat trial conducted by SRI showed significantly positive results on measures of teacher practice and student writing. This paper takes up the question of why and how the C3WP was so effective in rural areas known for having limited capacity for educational improvement. Drawing from qualitative data gathered during and immediately following the two-year C3WP program in treatment districts, we examine features of the C3WP that made it work for rural teachers and their students. These features include the collegial stance taken toward participating teachers, the content and design of teacher learning opportunities, and the efforts made to support teachers who emerged as leaders and to broaden their professional horizons. The success of the C3WP yields important lessons for all in the education system—from classrooms to state houses—about the potential for strengthening education in rural areas characterized by geographic and professional isolation.

¹ Originally called the College-Ready Writers Program (CRWP).

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THE CHALLENGE

For several decades, researchers and policy makers have been concerned that schools pay too little attention to the kinds of reasoned, discursive writing that has a central place in academic, civic, and professional life (Applebee, 1981; National Commission on Writing, 2003; Applebee, 2011). While writing has received some attention on assessments, studies show that students are rarely asked to write more than a paragraph, and writing assignments rarely link reading with writing and serve the purpose of fostering student reasoning (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008; Graham and Perin, 2007).

Meanwhile, the career landscape has changed, with two-thirds of jobs in fast-growing sectors requiring post-secondary education (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010-1). These changes disproportionately affect rural areas, where college enrollment rates for eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds are lowest (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010-2). A survey of 120 corporate leaders employing a total of 8 million people found that writing is a “threshold skill” for hiring and promoting salaried employees (The National Commission on Writing, 2004). One human resource director said, “All employees must have writing ability...Manufacturing documentation, operating procedures, reporting problems, lab safety, waste-disposal operations...” (p.3). In concert with these developments, the Common Core State Standards were released in 2010, with 42 states adopting them by 2015. Whether states adopted CCSS or developed their own, new standards call for greater attention to writing for college, career, and civic readiness, with an emphasis on evidence-informed analysis and reasoned argument. These standards demand significant shifts in teaching and learning.

Education systems in high poverty rural areas face an especially steep challenge in supporting such changes in schooling. While rural districts are held accountable to changing standards, they often have insufficient internal capacity (Bryant, 2007; Harmon, 2007) and access to local technical assistance (EDC, 2003) to provide the professional development that teachers need to adapt to those standards. Further, realities of geography isolate rural teachers from one another, as well as limit their access to professional support relevant to their unique contexts (Babione, 2010). These conditions can compel rural schools to bring in external agents who have potential to import valuable professional knowledge and expertise. However, evaluation studies and more general research on conditions of rural education suggest that external agents—however necessary they are as contributors to strengthening of rural education—are unlikely to succeed if they lack capacity to gain teachers’ trust (EDC, 2003), to focus on particulars of curriculum and teachers’ work with their students (Harmon, et al., 2007), and to promote the development of local teacher leadership (Harmon, et al., 2007; Inverness Research, 2006-1, 2006-2). Further, external agents often appear and then depart, leaving only a temporary mark on the local landscape.

Finally, in close-knit communities where schools are a core institution that has served multiple generations, concerns about loss of family and community can limit messages students receive

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about preparing for higher education or can put school and home messages into conflict (Duncan, 1999; Shafft and Jackson, 2010).

I am speaking from my own position as someone who has grown up in a rural area, a first generation college student myself, and so I know some of these concerns more firsthand. I definitely think that part of what is at play is that there is, I don't know that I would call it a fear, maybe some mistrust, about the university presence and even just college going. I think a lot of parents are worried that their kids will go to college and won't come back to the community. Parents don't necessarily buy in to the narrative of 'college for everyone' because there is a brain drain problem happening in rural America and here in rural northwest [state], a lot of the kids who do leave to go to college aren't coming back. I think our percentage of college degrees in [town] is 8%, so there is not high demand in the community for college degrees.

—NWP teacher leader working with a C3WP district

C3WP PROGRAM DESIGN AND RESULTS

In 2012, the National Writing Project² (NWP) won a federal Investing in Innovation (i3) validation grant, enabling it to launch the College, Career, and Community Writers Program (C3WP), a rural initiative. Twelve local NWP sites participated, serving 22 high poverty rural districts in 10 states³ over a two-year period, 2013-14 and 2014-15. The program was designed to improve teachers' ability to improve students' skill in writing arguments based on nonfiction sources—a skill central to college and career readiness as well as preparation for informed civic engagement.

Design

Each local C3WP site provided 7-10th grade English language arts teachers in participating districts with 45 hours/year of professional development over two years. A carefully designed national program structured and supported this local work:

² The National Writing Project is a national network of about 180 local school-university partnerships, each organized to develop teacher leadership and offer professional learning opportunities for teachers in their service areas. See <https://www.nwp.org>.

³ Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, New York, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Tennessee. Six of the states were identified by the Rural School and Community Trust (2012) as having the highest priority for education improvement. C3WP districts qualified for RLIS (rural low income schools—more than 20% poverty) or SRSA (small, rural schools achievement program—fewer than 600 students).

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Leadership team. The C3WP was directed by a national leadership team comprising three senior staff members of the National Writing Project. Two had backgrounds as college writing teachers in rural areas (one was actively teaching during the program) and one was the NWP director of research.

Thinking partners for local C3WP sites. Five NWP site leaders from rural areas in other states—Idaho, Kentucky, Montana, Michigan, Ohio—worked with the leadership triumvirate. These five, several of whom were active as high school or college teachers of writing during the program, served in the role of “thinking partners” to local C3WP site directors and teacher leaders, as well as contributed to planning and materials development. One local C3WP coordinator said this about the value of her thinking partner:

I feel very comfortable to call him for questions, small and large, all of the time...and just a great place to go even if I am just feeling overwhelmed by something or need to talk through something or whatever the case may be, and so the thinking partner position has been really important to us. I think also it just helps us feel like our voices are being heard by NWP.

Core C3WP-wide activities. Local C3WP sites had access to these supports:

- *Convenings.* At the launch of the C3WP and once each year, teams from each of the 12 C3WP sites—along with administrators and lead teachers from all 22 participating districts—convened for a two- or three-day meeting to engage in learning opportunities related to the teaching of argument writing, in planning for the delivery of local professional development, and in collective formative analysis of student writing samples.
- *Online learning experiences and check-ins.* National leadership team members offered online courses on the teaching of argument for C3WP site directors and teacher leaders. Also, C3WP site leaders participated in virtual group check-ins.
- *Individual support.* During the year, thinking partners and members of the leadership team stayed in regular phone and email contact with local C3WP site directors. Also, each site received at least one in-person visit from a leadership group member.
- *Materials development.* The leadership group drew upon their personal experiences as writing teachers and professional development leaders in rural areas to circulate key literature on the teaching of argument writing, as well as to create workshops, professional development frameworks, instructional resources, and a formative assessment system. Local C3WP leaders also contributed to these materials. Instructional resources provided strong starting points for teachers. Also, because they were designed to be educative (Ball and Cohen, 1996; Davis and Krajcik, 2005), rather than scripts merely to be followed, teachers learned about argument and the teaching of argument writing through their use.

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Local site design for C3WP. Local NWP sites who participated in the C3WP program received grant funds to engage in the following local activities:

- *Teacher leader development.* From their existing pool of teacher leaders, C3WP sites formed small teams of those with experience in academic writing. Prior to the launch of the program and continuing throughout it, site leaders supported these teams in learning more about argument writing through reading professional literature and piloting classroom resources. Site leaders and teacher leaders provided the professional development in the participating districts.
- *Preliminary meeting in districts.* C3WP site teams met with local district teachers and administrators to learn about district programs and curriculum, visit classrooms and get acquainted with teachers, and set dates for C3WP professional development sessions.
- *Local C3WP program delivery.* Local programming involved a variety of summer and school-year activities, adapted to local district schedules. Particularly in year two, professional development consisted of both group sessions and one-on-one, configured differently at each site according to district contexts.
- *Independent data and formative feedback.* Research teams from SRI and Inverness Research collaborated on collection of qualitative data. Four times over the two years, the research team met with the NWP leadership group to report formative feedback; in response, the NWP group made a number of adjustments to the program.

Results

An independent intent-to-treat randomized control evaluation⁴ of the program found it to be effective in supporting teachers in changing their practices and in significantly improving students' skills in argument writing (Gallagher, et al. 2017). Treatment teachers reported spending significantly more time than control teachers on argument writing (41% versus 13% of instructional days) and placed a significant or heavy emphasis on crucial skills for source-based argument writing during that instruction. These included:

- Developing a claim
- Selecting evidence from source material
- Connecting evidence to a claim
- Introducing or commenting on quoted text from source material

⁴ Control districts received a financial incentive to delay participation and received a one-year version of the program in 2015-16. Treatment and control districts were of comparable sizes and demographics (Treatment: 65% Free and reduced lunch, Control: 66%; Treatment: 36% students of color, Control: 38%). See Gallagher, et al., 2017.

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Students in C3WP districts significantly outperformed students attending control districts on four attributes of student writing:⁵

- Content (reasoning and use of evidence)
- Structure (logical arrangement and coherence)
- Stance (audience-appropriate formality and tone)
- Conventions (correctness of usage, punctuation, etc.)

Following this successful trial, the National Writing Project used subsequent federal SEED and i3 scale-up grants to expand the program. As of 2017-18, the NWP has scaled up C3WP teacher leadership development and in-service programs in high-needs schools to 96 NWP sites in 42 states.

THE CURRENT STUDY

This paper takes up the question of why and how the C3WP was so effective in the especially challenging conditions of under-resourced rural schools. We draw on analysis of qualitative data to explicate key features of program design that made it work for teachers and students.⁶ The Gallagher report points to features of the C3WP that contributed to the results, such as the fact that C3WP sites were faithful in delivering 45 hours of professional development to teachers, and that curricular and formative assessment materials used in the program were well aligned to program goals. For this study, we wanted to dig further into qualitative data, especially interviews, to explore more subtle features that engaged rural teachers, supported effective changes in their practice, and inspired some to begin participating more actively in their profession. These less visible elements, we believe, bolster the promise of lasting change.

Data sources

Qualitative data collection in 2013-14 and 2014-15, the treatment period, included at least one and sometimes two visits to every C3WP district for the purpose of observing classrooms and professional development activities, interviewing local teachers and administrators, and interviewing C3WP leaders providing the professional development. Additional interviews were conducted by telephone. Throughout that period, we at Inverness Research kept in mind the aim of identifying “best cases” that could illustrate effective features of the program. Cases were identified in year two of the treatment period (2014-15), and data collection continued

⁵ Argument writing was measured on the National Writing Project’s Analytic Writing Continuum, a valid and reliable measure of student writing (Bang, 2013), modified by a panel of experts for Source Based Argument. See Gallagher, et al., 2017.

⁶ In a companion paper, “The Role of Educational Improvement Capital in the Success of the NWP’s College, Career, and Community Writers Program,” we explain the basis of the NWP’s *capacity* to serve isolated rural communities so powerfully within two years and, in addition, to scale the C3WP program from 10 states to 42 states in four years’ time. <http://inverness-research.org/2017/12/27/portfolio-c3wp/>

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through the academic year after the treatment ended (2015-16). Case samples and data collection included the following:

- *C3WP site-district partnerships.* Of a pool of eight potential case sites (out of twelve), we selected three in different states. We visited them a year after treatment for interviews and to observe classrooms and/or professional development.
- *District teachers from four additional sites.* Of a pool of 30 teachers who had been observed and interviewed at least once (often twice) during the treatment period, we interviewed 18.
- *Individual C3WP site teacher leaders* who served as professional development leaders in the program. We interviewed 21 teacher leaders from five local C3WP sites, of whom 11 were active classroom teachers as well.

This paper draws primarily from analysis of these interviews, as well as re-analysis of interviews of the same teachers conducted during the treatment period. Serving as a foundation for interpretation of the case data are interviews and observations conducted (together with SRI) during the treatment period: over 300 interviews with district teachers, 50 interviews with local NWP site directors and teacher-consultants, more than 140 classroom observations and nearly 50 professional development observations, as well as interviews with the C3WP national leadership team and thinking partners.

THE BACKDROP: PARTICIPATING TEACHERS' CONTEXTS

As a preface to examining effective features of the program, we describe the conditions of teachers' work in these high poverty rural schools as the C3WP began.

Professional isolation

Interviews with district teachers and the C3WP site leaders who worked with them over two years show that teachers had been isolated from colleagues. For example, teachers reported being almost completely disconnected from teachers at other schools within their own districts (if there was more than one school in the district) much less neighboring districts. This teacher's account is not unusual:

The only connection that I had with colleagues from other schools was once a year when we went to a consortium group and there are ten schools that go to this meeting and we spend about two hours with each other and that was it.

One local C3WP coordinator observed that even very strong teachers can be limited in their effectiveness by the stress of professional isolation:

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Teachers feel unsupported...no opportunities for professional development and just connection...that is very frustrating, that is huge for those really strong teachers... I think that is something that all teachers want, but especially teachers who are really working to figure out best practices. They have the potential to be isolated in rural communities when schools don't support connecting with professionals in other places.

Professional isolation limited teachers' access to the pedagogical content knowledge required to teach students critical reading of non-fiction texts and argument writing.

Impoverished school systems

Teachers in some districts reported having virtually no access to teaching materials beyond ever-shrinking class sets of novels they found on their bookshelves when they joined the teaching staff. Some teachers reported having \$350 or \$500 per year to purchase books and make photocopies. While some teachers had state-approved language textbooks for their grade levels, in only one state did we find teachers who had access to materials that emphasized the kinds of literacy demanded by new college and career readiness standards.

Typically, incoming novice teachers inherited the materials of prior teachers, a double-edged sword that preserved a community legacy but limited change. A C3WP leader described this phenomenon:

[Teachers feel] that sense of duty...they would kind of inherit a curriculum...teachers really had a sense that they needed to stay pretty close to what had been taught even though there was no authority figure saying that that needed to happen.

Professional development resources were also minimal, often limited to a veteran teacher attending a state or regional conference and handing out information at a school meeting. Together, the lack of updated teaching resources, absence of professional contact, and insufficient professional development opportunity limited teachers' capacity to envision different approaches to teaching and learning writing.

Accountability to competing policies

During the C3WP program, teachers found themselves caught in an eddy of competing currents of education policy. Controversy about Common Core erupted in a number of the states, leading to rushed development of new standards. Meanwhile, as the prospect of new assessments loomed on the horizon, teachers were held to older state accountability systems based upon tests that did not align well with new standards and often did not include writing. Some teachers were in states or districts that mandated scripted curriculum, sometimes aligned with Common Core, often not.

Thus while teachers were isolated from professional contact and resources, they were heavily exposed to state policy mandates. The comments below, from two different states,

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characterize the pressures on teachers *not* to teach argument writing before, or even during, the years of the C3WP:

To do this kind of writing [argument writing using sources], particularly in a climate where you have this real heavy test prep thing hanging over everybody's head and all of that, it was really daunting.

When as a teacher or a school or a district you are evaluated on a multiple-choice test, there is no reason for your students to be writing.

Lack of confidence teaching writing

Logically, given the lack of preparation, support or expectation for teaching writing, most teachers had never gained confidence from the experience of it. A teacher said:

I never saw myself as a very capable teacher of writing, and what you don't feel comfortable doing, you don't do.

A site director observed:

They saw themselves as graders of writing, and they were not writers themselves.

Autonomy: A mitigating facet of professional isolation and impoverished systems

Some C3WP site coordinators described the advantage of working in very small schools with few resources: the absence of “central control” over curriculum and materials. While teachers may have been held to standards that did not include writing, they were also afforded sole ownership of their teaching. One teacher-leader described this feature of small districts:

There are definitely some differences that we can see in working with rural districts versus larger districts...there is less central control...In the rural schools, we don't have literacy coaches, curriculum coordinators, assistant superintendents who are in charge of designing curriculum. That makes the CRWP work much easier in some ways because we have autonomy.

WHAT MADE THE C3WP SO EFFECTIVE FOR RURAL TEACHERS?

Teaching the kinds of argument writing called for in the C3WP represented a major departure from existing classroom practice. New practices involved changing the type and quantity of material for students to read (emphasizing non-fiction), changing students' approaches to reading texts (weighing evidence to form claims), increasing the amount and changing the type of writing asked of students (evidence-based writing using sources), and even changing the kind of classroom discussions teachers would facilitate and students would engage in. Given the

demands of the C3WP and the two-year time frame of its implementation: What effectuated measurable change in these high poverty rural contexts? We suggest that two features—the program’s stance toward local teachers and the design of the professional learning opportunities—worked together, particularly in year two, to contribute to classroom implementation and the positive results. A third feature—the support of local teachers to grow as professionals—not only supported implementation but also helped extend the life and the reach of the new practices.

1. C3WP LEADERS’ STANCE TOWARD LOCAL TEACHERS

From many local teachers’ perspectives, C3WP leaders entered their schools as external agents having to earn their trust. C3WP sites were located 1- to 4 hours’ driving time from the participating districts and were housed at regional universities. District leadership teams had formally agreed to participate, and some teachers expected to benefit from the program’s focus on Common Core standards. Nonetheless, the relative proximity of sites and the presence of agreements did not automatically afford C3WP leaders insider status with the classroom teachers. Rural educators can mirror the tendency of their communities toward skepticism of “outsiders” bringing in new ideas (Duncan, 1999; EDC, 2003; Inverness Research, 2006-2). One C3WP teacher leader shared her experience with what she called “all of these politics” of rural districts—the district she teaches in, as well as the one she was working with for the C3WP—explaining the weight of every interaction with local teachers:

The curriculum director is the principal’s wife and the ELA teacher is the superintendent’s wife. I teach in a rural school and this is just a classic rural community. Everybody knows everybody, and everybody talks about what is happening, and there are a lot of conversations that, as a professional development provider, you aren’t a part of. So, again the relationship is key and good communication is key so that when those conversations happen out of your presence, they happen in a meaningful way.

The building of trusting relationships was a core component of the C3WP model. One national thinking partner, whose primary role involved supporting site directors in C3WP implementation, commented that about 80% of his Year One work with local C3WP site directors and teacher leaders focused on helping them build relationships—relationships with administrators and with teachers, and teachers’ relationships with their students. He explains that if trust is not developed, real professional development tends not to happen:

I have learned a lot about the importance of building strong relationships in order for professional development to take hold. I guess the professional development has to be realized, because it is not professional development unless it helps you develop the profession. There needs to be a positive outcome in order to be professional development.

Below the surface of C3WP activities were stances that teacher leaders adopted in order to form trusting, constructive relationships with local teachers.

Thinking partners, not trainers

We posit that a stance enacted in the C3WP—a collaborative “thinking partner” stance toward teachers—contributed to an unusual degree of engagement among many of the classroom teachers. Here a local site coordinator points out that this stance represents a significant shift on the part of the visiting professional development provider:

When you are a thinking partner to a teacher, it is more than giving her some ideas...it is a whole different mindset.

What is this different mindset? First, a “thinking partner” stance contrasts with the “training” stance so familiar to both teachers and professional development providers. A training stance assumes a hierarchical relationship where the external trainer is the expert authority and the local teacher, as trainee, is a novice complier. Such a stance can subtly undermine the professional responsibility of the local teacher to be an informed decision-maker about her practice.

The thinking partner stance⁷ reflects the National Writing Project’s “teachers teaching teachers” culture, consistent with its core value of egalitarianism (Heenan, 2006) and its customary social practices (Lieberman & Woods, 2003). One C3WP teacher leader explains how the program positioned her to work with local teachers:

I was very conscious about saying to any of the teachers that I worked with, ‘I am not here to tell you what to do, and I am here to walk beside you, and you are the expert in your classroom and I am just supporting you.’

A teacher leader for a different C3WP site describes how she worked as a thinking partner at her assigned district:

Each of us [teacher leaders for the C3WP site] needed to take on one of the teachers that we served, and we became that teacher’s mentor in argument. So we would visit the teacher in the classroom and we would do model lessons and we would do co-teaching lessons together, and we tried to observe them and talk with them, so that argument became...rather than something that you need to teach, it became something that we can study and talk about together.

Note that these teacher leaders use the terms “support” and “serve” to describe their role. Even as they brought in new materials and unfamiliar practices, the teacher leaders stood in

⁷ Recall that *thinking partners* formed a part of the organizational design of the C3WP. The thinking partner stance reflects a core mode of work aligned with a cultural norm of the National Writing Project.

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service to the participating teachers, working side-by-side to address the considerable challenge of teaching argument effectively.⁸

Teacher participants appreciated the care involved in building a supportive relationship. A district teacher comments on its value:

They took such an interest in me, and they always were in contact with me...and got to know the people that I worked with. I think that was the best for me.

C3WP teacher leaders also infused an egalitarian stance into workshop settings that gathered teachers within and sometimes across districts. Learning with one another—being thinking partners for one another—contrasted with teachers' typical experiences. Below, a teacher portrays the difference. First, she describes learning in the C3WP:

I am learning so much more by having these [C3WP] educational opportunities...it is sort of a networking collaborative thing, and it is really kind of amazing to find so many like-minded people that I can talk with...I feel like I am always in PD because I am always talking with someone about writing.

Here she gives a contrasting account of “normal” PD opportunities in her district:

When we have PD, normally, you get this little form, and you say ‘this is what I want to do this year,’ and I go to this workshop, and then you just come back and maybe you use it and maybe you don’t. Maybe it wasn’t anything that you even thought it would be when you got there, and you went ‘ahhh, I wasted \$600 on this and now I don’t get to do anything this year!’ It wasn’t a very collaborative environment and it wasn’t sustained...It is just not valuable.

2. THE CONTENT AND DESIGN OF THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

The substance of the professional learning—what teachers were offered, and how they experienced it—served as a major contributor to the results. Key design elements included these: helping the teachers see themselves as writers, providing teachers with well-designed teaching materials and model practices for teaching argument writing, following through to support teachers in trying new practices, and facilitating teachers' formative assessment of their students' work.

Engaging teachers in writing

A hallmark NWP practice is to support teachers as writers, as well as help teachers support students as writers. This was no less true in the C3WP, where sites engaged participating

⁸ The NWP philosophy and practice of leadership is consistent with “servant leadership,” coined by Robert Greenleaf (1977).

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teachers in writing of many kinds, including the source-based argument writing at the core of the program. These experiences re-connected teachers to the challenges and the joys of being a writer and, in particular, gave them firsthand experience with what they would be teaching their students. Understanding argument as a writer helped some teachers overcome the confidence gap:

We didn't identify as writers before this writing project, and now we do, and it is so much easier for us to teach, and we feel so much more confident...we understood how this writing was working.

Providing teacher-developed instructional resources

In year one, C3WP leaders demonstrated approaches to teaching argument, but participating teachers had a difficult time drawing from the ideas to create new kinds of writing assignments. To create a stronger bridge to change, teacher members of the national C3WP leadership team created a set of practical, ready-to-use instructional resources⁹ for the teachers. The resources included carefully selected sets of non-fiction texts that presented a range of positions on a controversial topic that would appeal to students. The resources also included tools teachers could use with their students to teach the relevant critical reading and evidence-based writing skills. Some instructional resources were intended for four or five days of instruction that included preparation, drafting, and revision; others were intended for a two-day on-demand argument task. In year two, C3WP site leaders put these resources at the heart of their professional development sessions. Teachers experienced the resources as writers, and they analyzed the design of instructional units as examples of argument teaching practices. In this way, the resources served an educative purpose for the teachers (Ball and Cohen, 1996; Davis and Krajcik, 2005) as well as for the students¹⁰. C3WP sites strongly encouraged teachers to teach at least two sets of resources within the first five months of the school year.

Many teachers responded positively to these ready-to-use resources. Here a teacher comments on the value of having “tools and resources” that work for all her students:

For me, the most important aspect of the learning was acquiring tools and resources that allow me to teach writing to every member of the class—no matter their ability level.

Some teachers implemented the resources as they were designed for source-based argument writing. The C3WP program preferred this because they wanted teachers to gain insight through teaching them as designed. Other teachers who were more reluctant to disrupt a

⁹ Originally, the core resources were called “mini-units.” The NWP changed the term to reflect the broader nature and purposes of the resources.

<https://sites.google.com/site/nwpcollegereadywritersprogram/instructional-resources/crwp-mini-units>

¹⁰ Our companion paper, “Reflecting on the Critical Role of Generative Structures,” analyzes the underlying architecture of the materials to explain their educative value.

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literature-based course used the resources as examples from which to develop their own source-based argument projects linked to literary themes.

Following through to support teachers' use in context

The teachers were not simply introduced to the resources and left to adapt them. Rather, C3WP leaders followed through with supports for use in classrooms (Davis and Kracjik, 2005). Depending on teachers' preferences and the logistics of different contexts, the types of support varied. C3WP teacher leaders sometimes met with teachers one-on-one or in small groups within or across districts to co-plan adaptation of a unit for particular students. Sometimes teacher leaders visited the teachers' classrooms to demonstrate the lessons, co-teach, or observe, and then debrief and co-plan the next session. Here a C3WP thinking partner explains how in-class support can give teachers' confidence and begin to shift their expectations for students:

Stepping into a classroom, building a partnership with that teacher as equals, allows the teacher to also witness success from someone else. The person providing the professional development is finding success in my classroom, teaching argument writing to my students, and so that I can't crawl back into my head and say, 'Well that doesn't work with my students, that won't work in my community,' and we hear that a lot...and it isn't like the teacher should go over and sit in the corner while the 'expert' comes in and teaches the classroom, it is 'no, let's do this together.'

Sometimes teacher leaders made themselves available to teachers by email or phone. Regardless of the format, the purpose was to stand alongside the teacher as a support through the first (and sometimes second) teaching of the new material.

Interviews with teachers and C3WP leaders alike suggest that this kind of follow-through—built on the foundation of the trusting relationship—seemed critical to helping a good number of teachers push through the barrier to change. Here teachers in two states comment on the value of being helped in these ways:

The two teacher leaders that came out and worked with me, that was a great thing, and knowing that I wasn't in this all by myself because they were there to help.

The fact that I had people to go to and that people came to me, I think that was the key... They came in and showed me how to do this, and how to deal with my students.

A "try it and you might like it" approach

Teachers who were reluctant to try new argument writing approaches explained that they felt pressure from their districts to comply with state accountability measures that did not include writing. C3WP leaders suspected that many teachers remained lacking in confidence to take such a big step out of their comfort zone. To demand compliance would be inconsistent with

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egalitarian culture; however, the C3WP leaders fervently wanted (and expected) widespread implementation of this specific form of writing, given the investment of the federal i3 program, and given their own professional commitment to promoting writing critical to students' academic success and civic participation. Thus to encourage greater implementation, C3WP leaders adopted what they informally referred to as a "try it and see if you like it" approach. This stance gave C3WP leaders permission to focus on specific practices without being concerned whether teachers had fully "bought into" the rationale for argument writing. Here a C3WP leader describes how trying new practices led to changes in thinking:

If we [PD leader] say 'we want you to try this mini-unit and this writing cycle and see what happens,' they come back saying 'WOW, I think that worked'...I am learning that [teachers] can change their practice and that the change in philosophy comes later.

The "try it and see" stance positioned teachers as co-inquirers, not compliers, invited to judge the efficacy of the new practices.

The instructional resources functioned well to build students' skills in argument writing and they functioned well to give teachers initial experiences with new, highly unfamiliar practices. Seeing what their students were becoming capable of kindled many teachers' motivation to continue trying the new practices¹¹ and began to change their expectations of what students were capable of producing. One teacher explains that her own fear of her students' failure had inhibited her growth as a teacher:

I don't think that I trusted my students enough at the beginning of this process...That maybe was my own internal worry, that they would fail, but I should have started sooner building some of those skills with them. Because they totally can do it.

We know that students of competent teachers who hold students to high standards are more likely to go to college (e.g., Howley & Hambric, 2011). Our interviews with teachers early in the C3WP program showed that while some held high aspirations for their students, a good number initially questioned students' capabilities to gain college-ready skills. Inviting teachers to form their own judgments based on what they saw in student work ultimately appeared to contribute to shifts in teachers' personal, *internal* standards, bringing them more in line with goals of new college and career readiness standards.

Guiding teachers in formative assessment

Reviewing student work for formative purposes, rather than for grading, was an unfamiliar practice for most teachers. To complement the instructional units, the C3WP program created a specialized tool for formative assessment. Called the Using Sources Tool, it zeroes in on a small set of high-leverage skills called for in argument writing: uses of source material in strategic

¹¹ This reaction is consistent with research showing that teachers value professional development when they can see benefits for their students (Guskey, 2002).

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ways to build an evidence-based, reasoned argument around a claim. C3WP leaders introduced the Using Sources Tool as a guide to help teachers analyze student work in order to identify what skills students were demonstrating and to plan next steps in teaching. C3WP teacher leaders used professional development time to facilitate teachers' discussions of what they learned from their students' work. The Using Sources Tool functioned well to enable teachers to focus in on critical features of student writing and make tactical choices about instruction linked to the goal of argument writing. This guidance helped teachers grasp the purpose and value of the tool.

A comment on designing for the usage of tools

Tools for improvement are only valuable to the extent that they are actually used. In our studies of various education improvement programs over the years, we have seen that tools made for the complex work of teaching, and for the challenging process of *changing* teaching, often require support for meaningful implementation. The new instructional units and the Using Sources Tool contributed substantially to participating teachers' capacity to begin teaching argument writing effectively, and thus to the success of the program. Two design elements were important. First, the tools themselves were well designed, having been created by expert writing teachers within the NWP and honed in classrooms. Just as importantly, the C3WP program effectively engineered *teachers' usage of the tools*. By this we mean that the C3WP leaders did not simply deliver the resources in workshops or post them on a web page and expect teachers to adapt them effectively for use in context. Rather, they carefully designed ways to guide teachers in implementing the instructional units and formative assessment tool in their specific contexts. Just as the C3WP helped teachers become teachers rather than merely assigners of writing, the C3WP taught teachers *how* to use the tools to teach argument rather than simply asking the teachers to use them.

The result: Becoming a teacher of writing

These experiences of thinking as a writer about the teaching of writing, of trying new argument writing practices in the classroom, and of analyzing student writing among a group of colleagues began to shift some teachers' stances and roles in the classroom. A number of teachers we interviewed a year after the program looked back and saw themselves at the beginning as *assigners and graders* of writing, while toward the end, they began to see themselves as *teachers* of writing.¹² Comments like these are typical of their reflections:

Before, I assigned topics, and afterwards I actually taught writing.

We also saw that as teachers observed students exhibiting new writing skills, they gained the confidence to teach more writing and less test-prep. One early-career teacher described how she tried to juggle mandated testing practices with the ideas of the C3WP:

¹² Also see our companion paper, "Deep Changes in Classroom Practice: Teachers' Perspectives on the Effects of Participation in the CRWP." <http://inverness-research.org/2017/12/27/portfolio-c3wp/>

We are expected to do those common assessments at our school every other week...they are just multiple choice tests...Last year, the only thing that anybody said about you is, 'Are you teaching the test?'...Then we kept having the College Ready Writers Program and they are talking about how important writing is...it kind of reminded me, yes, writing is important, and that is what we are supposed to be doing, and so now I am, for lack of a better word, like 'no, I am not teaching the test, I am teaching writing.'

The greatest benefit is for the students. It is students who for the first time saw success in an area that they didn't even know that they could possibly be successful in. For the first time I saw rural students in high school look at me and actually think that they could go to college...The idea of college- and career-ready is an important conversation to have with middle and high schoolers, because those students—and I am from a rural background myself—it is not something that students think about. They are going to go work on the farm or pick up on whatever career or trade that their family is working with, and so when we had these conversations at the very beginning of the grant, these students looked at us like we were crazy. And now, they can write this argument that is well written, and can change someone's mind about a stance, and they feel very successful. I even had many students say to me, 'You know, I am actually considering what I might want to study in college because I think I could do this.' And so I think that is creating responsible citizens for this rural area, and that is needed.

—C3WP participant

3. EXPANDING LOCAL TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL HORIZONS

Developing teacher leadership is a core function of the National Writing Project, occurring formally and informally in all NWP programs. Part of the C3WP's original theory of action included the development of teacher leadership in the participating districts. This element of the C3WP aligns with research on rural education improvement, which indicates that building local teacher leadership capacity is especially important given the unique conditions of rural schools. Teacher leaders help legitimize and sustain improvement efforts by embracing the vision and providing intellectual leadership, serving as role models and supports for classroom practice, and sustaining high expectations for students (Anderson, 2008). Teachers in schools that partner with colleges and universities are especially well positioned to find supports for leadership development (Eargle, 2013).

In a variety of ways, C3WP leaders worked with local teachers to activate their leadership potential and broaden their participation in the profession.¹³

¹³ See our companion paper, "Teacher Leadership as the Scaling of Teacher Learning," for cases of teacher leadership activation and development. <http://inverness-research.org/2017/12/27/portfolio-c3wp/>

Involving participants in leading C3WP professional development activities

When local teachers emerged as enthusiasts for the new teaching practices, C3WP leaders found ways to position them as emerging leaders who could assist in the drive toward broader implementation. C3WP teacher leaders supported local teachers in working with colleagues in several ways:

- Sharing C3WP practices they had tried in their classrooms
- Sharing adaptations of C3WP materials or tools for different students
- Speaking up about how their students were responding to the materials
- Facilitating a small group in analyzing student work
- Contributing to a study group on professional literature
- Creating a short video or other artifact of C3WP practice to share

Following the two-year program for the first group of 22 early start (experimental group) districts, C3WP sites were responsible for providing a full year of professional development for the delayed start (control group) districts. C3WP leaders involved newly emergent teacher leaders from the early start districts in these programs. This gave delayed-start teachers the immediate advantage of the inside-the-classroom view. One such teacher said:

It was just helpful to have a classroom teacher telling me this is going to work, and trust the process, and you will be amazed at the outcome of it, and you will be so glad that you did this—and she was absolutely right...hearing it from someone who is actually in the classroom meant a lot.

Local C3WP sites have embraced these developing local teacher leaders as part of their professional communities beyond the grant, providing them with opportunities to participate in the scaling up of C3WP programs in their regions.

Connecting teachers with colleagues in regional and national professional organizations

Built into the C3WP program were annual three-day partnership meetings where teams from every C3WP site and district convened to share practices and make plans. The district teachers invited to these meetings experienced a new kind of professional learning community. Additionally, local C3WP leaders found opportunities to engage district teachers in other professional meetings regionally and even nationally. In this account, a C3WP director describes how she acted as a guide, introducing teachers into broader professional society:

The teachers out in these small schools, more often than not, are not part of the greater professional community in terms of language arts, and that was something that we really worked with, especially during the first year. We brought our teacher leaders from each of the buildings to an NCTE [National Council of Teachers of English] meeting, and we tried to get the teachers to participate in some of the statewide writing conferences that we have in [state] because they weren't connected.

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Connecting these formerly isolated rural teachers with colleagues across their states—and sometimes in other states—opened the door to their seeing themselves not just as members of their school communities but also as members of a broader profession.

Access to intensive NWP leadership development

From 2013-2016, sixty-nine C3WP district teachers participated in Invitational Summer Institutes held at local C3WP sites. These institutes, the traditional route into NWP leadership,¹⁴ consist of multi-week intensive experiences with writing, sharing effective practices, and reading professional literature. Institute participants become life-long members of the local NWP site, i.e., a regional community of teachers that has access to ongoing sponsored opportunities to collaborate, learn, and lead professional development programs for other teachers.

These kinds of opportunities for professional contact, combined with collaborative professional learning in their schools, helped some teachers begin to experience a new professional way of life. A late-career teacher described an emergent cultural shift in his school that resulted from their participation in the C3WP:

To just have an open exchange of ideas has allowed me to grow so much as a teacher, and for somebody who has been teaching as long as I have to be able to do that is a gift...I have shared it with others...every time we meet, hardly a week goes by where we don't have one or two or three ideas about how to improve what we are doing, and so it is the culture that we have created, and you don't ever reach the end, and you are just developing more and better ways to do what we want to do.

Implications of C3WP local leadership development for rural schools

The local NWP sites involved in the C3WP are part of the decades-old National Writing Project network. As such, they stand as reasonably stable professional communities of K-12 and college/university writing teachers in their regions. Against this backdrop, the deliberate development of local C3WP teachers as emerging leaders functioned as an investment in long-term capacity building for improvement in these rural schools. The capacity building occurred at multiple levels:

- *The individual teacher leader.* As new members of the intellectual community driving the C3WP work, the emerging local teacher leaders gained access to ongoing learning and leadership opportunities beyond the sunset of the grant. These opportunities will help them

¹⁴ ISI participants in 2015 and 2016 included teachers from both the treatment (“early start”) and control (“delayed start”) districts. For more information on NWP sites’ Invitational Summer Institutes, see <https://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/doc/sites.csp>. See Gray (2000) and Lieberman and Wood (2002) for insight into the design of this core NWP program.

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sustain their vision, continue growing their professional practice, and expand their spheres of influence.

- *Local schools and districts.* Teacher leaders can provide leadership within their own schools and others by opening their classrooms, forming relationships with colleagues, and making the case for writing. Teacher leaders can also tap the fuller resources of the local NWP site community to sustain new C3WP practices in their schools by bringing in research, inviting in other expert teachers, and connecting their colleagues with others in the region.
- *Local NWP sites.* Local site communities benefit from the contributions of new leaders. Each teacher leader from a C3WP district adds to the local site's capacity to serve more schools in the region through a teachers-teaching-teachers approach.
- *The National Writing Project.* The NWP benefits from the growth of local communities of teacher leadership. More leadership by rural teachers expands the NWP's collective knowledge of rural contexts and effective ways to support rural teachers. Because the NWP is a connected network, this increased national capacity, in return, translates into increased capacity distributed to other locales.

Building capacity at all these levels through the development of teacher leadership ultimately amplifies the voice of rural teachers in their own professionalization and the improvement of their schools.

Why is capital-A Argument important? I think it is really about thinking, frankly. That is in the end what I really came to get. You know, people can write in the narrative and tell a great story about their lives, but really engaging in thinking about something that might be difficult or complex, I think is really what we are supposed to be doing. I knew that, but I wasn't sure how to do it. Now I see kids having these epiphanies about things that they care deeply about—like whether or not there should be water in their town. And the notion that they can have a say in these things. I think it is really about how we teach critical thinking, and I also think it is about being a full participant and citizen. I see it more clearly—the power of that genre, and the power that it gives students in the room.

—Teacher leader working in a C3WP district

LESSONS TO BE LEARNED FROM THE C3WP

The National Writing Project has always embraced teachers as professionals who can learn and lead from both inside and outside the classroom (Gray, 2000; Lieberman and Friedrich, 2010). Effecting isolated rural teachers' engagement in learning and in broader professional participation through the C3WP implies a potential to disrupt status quo and create a new

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legacy in these rural areas—a legacy of *professional connection than assuages isolation*, a legacy of *building indigenous sources of professional knowledge that can interact constructively with imported knowledge*. The NWP’s C3WP program carries important lessons about the improvement of rural education for those who are positioned at a range of levels:

- *For those in the classroom*, the C3WP demonstrates the capacity of students in high poverty rural schools to respond to more rigorous demands for thinking, reading, and writing, and to gain the literacy skills they need to engage in informed civil discourse and expand their life choices.
- *For leaders in rural schools and the broader teaching profession*, the C3WP demonstrates the capacity of even the most isolated teachers to add to their repertoires of classroom practice and to grow professionally as collaborators and leaders for change. Awareness of the effective features of the C3WP can inform rural education leaders as they seek partnerships with organizations offering to assist them in strengthening instruction.
- *For professional development providers and others whose work contributes to the strengthening of teaching*, the design of the C3WP program shows what can happen in rural schools when outsiders stand alongside local teachers as thinking partners, serve rural teachers with well-designed curriculum materials that work, connect them with colleagues and the broader profession, and promote their emergence as active professionals.
- *For funders and policy-makers who aim to fund improvement of rural education*, the C3WP demonstrates the benefits of investing in educational improvement infrastructure dedicated to serving rural areas.¹⁵ Such infrastructures enable the building of capacity for improvement—much-needed educational capital in many forms—that can accumulate over time and be tapped to give high-quality supports to rural schools.

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¹⁵ See our companion paper, “The Role of Educational Improvement Capital in the Success of the NWP’s College, Career, and Community Writers Program.” <http://inverness-research.org/2017/12/27/portfolio-c3wp/>

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