

Leadership Qualities of School Administrators Who Choose the  
Nebraska Writing Project

Kimberly K. Larson

A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the course  
EDPS 900K

University of Nebraska  
Lincoln, Nebraska

December 2011

John W. Creswell, PhD

Leadership Qualities of School Administrators Who Choose the  
Nebraska Writing Project

Abstract

Although research results indicate utilizing the National Writing Project (NWP) model of professional development results in sustained school improvement, teacher growth and development, and improved student learning (Friedrich, Swain, LeMahieu, Fessehale, & Mieles, 2008; Gallagher et al, 2011; Graham & Perin, 2007; Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006), not every school administrator chooses this model of professional development for his or her school district. The purpose of this study is to examine the leadership qualities of Nebraska school administrators who choose to support the work of the Writing Project, uncovering why they embed this professional development model into the work of their school districts and the impact of this decision over time. Three school administrators who received Nebraska Writing Project (NeWP) Administrator Certificate of Recognition, as well as the senior researcher from the NWP were interviewed for this study. As a result of this study, the following themes emerged: the administrator's excitement and passion for their work ("Lit Up"); the importance of having a first-hand knowledge of the work of the people they led ("Bird's-Eye View"); their commitment to doing the right things in order to improve teaching and learning ("Do What's Right"); their respect for teachers' expertise ("Let a Thousand Flowers Bloom"); their knowledge of the importance of writing and its connection to learning ("Writing is Thinking"); and their willingness to share what they know about teaching and learning with others ("Making Public"). This study adds to the existing research on the effectiveness of the NWP taking a closer look at leadership qualities of school administrators who choose this model of professional development.

## Introduction

*When I began teaching first grade, I thought my responsibilities as a writing teacher included teaching young students how to correctly hold school-issued oversized red pencils. I was supposed to teach them to correctly form letters and ultimately copy sentences I wrote onto lined primary manuscript paper. But after experiencing a NeWP Summer Institute, I grew as a writer and writing teacher, shifting my classroom learning environment to one where my students were immersed in their own writing. I learned to support my students as they wrote to share ideas and clarify what they were learning. Instead of time focused on handwriting, my students wrote throughout the day for a variety of reasons and in a variety of genres, discussed their writing in small writing groups, created writing portfolios, and shared their finished pieces with an audience beyond me, the teacher. Participating in my first Writing Project Institute changed the way I taught writing. It also changed my teaching practice beyond the writing classroom. As I improved my teaching practice, I also grew as a teacher leader and to this day continue to learn about teaching through my connection with the Writing Project.*

Behind every teacher leader there is a supportive school administrator. Who are these administrators, and what are the qualities they bring to their work? I was transformed as a teacher of writing and as a teacher leader in 1995. That was the year I participated in my first NeWP institute. *John Zetterman, my principal at the time, supported me by allowing me to take risks as I implemented what I learned back in my first grade classroom, learn from these experiences, and as a result, improve my teaching practice over time. Participation in the Writing Project was transforming for me.*

The NeWP, a network site affiliated with NWP, is a professional development experience that grows writers and at the same time, teachers of writing. There is extensive research on the positive impact of the NWP on teachers, students, and writers (Friedrich et al, 2007; Gallagher et al, 2011; Lieberman & Friedrich, 2010; NWP, 2010; Wood & Lieberman, 2000). Of particular importance is the research that shows improvement in student writing over time, and the

significant impact on teachers who grow as leaders from the experience and resulting opportunities (Fessehaie et al, 2007; Lieberman & Friedrich, 2010; Wood & Lieberman, 2000).

Although we know the support of a school leader is a necessary for a teacher to transform teaching practice, the voices of school administrators are lacking in the research on the effectiveness of the Writing Project. The significance of this project is to broaden the research focused on the Writing Project to include voices seldom heard—the school leaders who support the work of the NeWP. With all of the choices of professional development models and providers, why do some leaders choose the Writing Project model? Past NeWP Administrator Certificate of Recognition recipients were interviewed regarding why they become involved in NeWP, the impact of their involvement personally, on teachers under their leadership, and their students. The results of this research study will provide other school administrators with information that will help them make a decision whether or not to explore the NWP model of professional development for their districts and schools. It will inform them as they research strategies for obtaining long-term sustained school improvement and improved student learning (Fessejaie et al, 2007; Graham & Perin, 2007; Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006). It will inform research about why some teachers who experience the Writing Project are able to successfully implement what they learn in a Writing Project experience, while others struggle to change their teaching practice (Wilson, 1994). It will also provide information to teachers interested in participating in the Writing Project who want to inform their school administrators and other teachers in their districts about the benefits.

#### Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore leadership qualities of school administrators who received the NeWP Administrator Certificate of Recognition who are committed in their support of the NeWP model of professional development. Although there is no general agreement about a definition of leadership qualities across researchers, for the

purposes of this study *leadership qualities* will be generally defined as the attitudes, beliefs, and actions of school leaders.

Participants include three past NeWP Administrator Certificate of Recognition recipients who were interviewed regarding why they become involved in the NeWP, the impact of their involvement personally, as well as the impact on their districts, schools, and students. The school administrators who participated in this study were all working in Nebraska districts or schools at the time they received the NeWP Administrator Certificate of Recognition.

The central question for this study is: What are the leadership qualities of school administrators who choose to utilize the NeWP model of professional development? In order to answer this question, these sub questions will guide the research: What leadership qualities do school administrators' possess that make them more likely to become involved with the NeWP? What leadership qualities do school administrators bring to their own work? What leadership qualities do school administrators bring to their work with teachers? What leadership qualities do school administrators bring to their work with students? and What has been the impact of the NeWP on themselves and their school districts?

Creswell (1998) described qualitative research as “an intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colors, different textures, and various blends of material” (p. 13). He explained that qualitative research design is an “interpretive, naturalistic approach to research allowing multiple sources of information and narrative approaches (p. 15). In qualitative research, the researcher approaches his or her research with a basic set of beliefs or assumptions that guide his or her work. This research assumes a constructivist paradigm, believing that participants, including the researcher, have individualistic, unique perspectives about the phenomenon being studied based on their background knowledge and personal experiences. Saldana (2011) explained the “researcher’s worldview—how his or her lens on the world and ways of knowing it focus and filter the perception and interpretation of it” (p. 22). Considering this, I realized the importance of reflexivity throughout this research project. *My involvement with the Writing*

*Project over the past 16 years has been extensive. I previously knew individuals involved in this study through my work at the Nebraska Department of Education, my role as Co-Director of the NeWP, and through educational projects I have been involved in over the years. Knowing my personal involvement could likely impact the decisions I make regarding this study; through ongoing self-awareness and reflection I attempted to minimize this influence. And although my experiences and prior knowledge could negatively impact my research because of my close proximity to the work of the Writing Project, my expertise and past experiences could also positively inform this study because of the background knowledge I am able to consider.*

### Literature Review

#### *National Writing Project*

James Gray founded the NWP in 1974 in Berkeley, California. NWP is described as an organization that “focuses the knowledge, expertise, and leadership of our nation’s educators on sustained efforts to improve writing and learning for all learners” (National Writing Project, 2011). It consists of a network of sites

anchored at colleges and universities and serving teachers across disciplines and at all levels, early childhood through university. They provide professional development, develop resources, generate research, and act on knowledge to improve the teaching of writing and learning in schools and communities.

The NeWP is one of those sites, centered at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln English department and directed by Dr. Robert Brooke. Like the NWP, the NeWP aims to improve the teaching of writing at all grade levels, kindergarten through college. The NeWP, like other sites across the country, follows the NWP model, embracing a set of shared principles and practices for teachers’ professional development. For the NeWP these principles include:

- The best teachers of writing are writers themselves.
- Teachers provide the best instruction for other teachers.
- Anyone, no matter her ability level, can improve her writing in a supportive context with other practicing writers.

- True school reform comes through democratic partnerships across grade levels.
- Teachers, students, and communities benefit when teachers form networks with other teachers and draw on collective expertise.

Belief Statements, Nebraska Writing Project, 2011

The Writing Project experience builds teacher expertise, leadership and confidence, and encourages reflective teaching practice (Lieberman & Friedrich, 2007; Wood & Lieberman, 2000). Research shows teachers are impacted as teachers and leaders through participation in a Writing Project institute (Friedrich et al, 2008; Gallagher et al, 2011; National Writing Project, 2010). At the heart of the Writing Project model is the belief that teachers are the best teachers of other teachers (Friedrich et al, 2007).

Linda Friedrich, Senior Researcher with the NWP, indicated their research shows some teachers are able to recreate a supportive learning environment similar to the one's teachers personally experience in a Writing Project Institute for their student writers, and others "really struggled with that". Friedrich studied the concept of teacher leadership and the effectiveness of the NWP professional development model over an extended period of time. She indicated during a recent interview, although there are many teachers who have experienced the Writing Project who later became administrators and supported the writing project, she is not aware of any research specifically focused on why school administrators choose to become involved in the Writing Project. In order for teachers to improve their teaching practice and grow as leaders, the support of a school administrator might be necessary in order to change teaching practice and take the necessary risks that accompany those changes. Therefore, this study will add to the existing research on the conditions that make it more likely for a teacher to successfully take what he/she has learned through a Writing Project Institute back to his or her own educational situation.

So why does this matter? Our goal in education is to improve student learning. Research shows the positive impact on student writing and sustained school improvement (Friedrich et al,

2008; Gallagher et al, 2011; Graham & Perin, 2007). Researchers agree students who write more, learn more (Graham & Perin, 2007; Dyson & Freedman, 2003). Students who write learn more content and are better able to articulate what they are learning in school (Graham & Perin, 2007; Dyson & Freedman, 2003; National Writing Project, 2010). The NWP model of professional development increases teacher competence and confidence in the area of writing and writing instruction. As a result, teachers who participate provide more meaningful writing opportunities for students, which allows for increased learning in all areas.

#### *Nebraska Writing Project Administrator Certificate of Recognition*

Also relevant to this study is background related to the NeWP Administrator Certificate of Recognition. According to Dr. Robert Brooke, Director of the NeWP,

We are after an individual who has offered administrative support to NeWP programs, from an institutional position outside NeWP. We created the award for two purposes: first to recognize publically some of the good people who have supported NeWP in school, ESU's, funding agencies, and other institutions, since we value the work these individuals to raise funds and publicity for NeWP programs; second, to connect with and support the growing movement across NWP for partnership—we imagine many if not most of the administrators we'd recognize would be involved in supporting partnerships with NeWP, and the recognition certificates might draw wider attention to the possibility of partnerships.

According to Dr. Brooke, there is open nomination period in the spring, and then the NeWP Leadership Team decides on Administrator Certificates of Recognition recipients from those nominated. At least one award is given each spring to a Nebraska educator as part of the NeWP Spring Gathering celebration. These award winners are not only honored in person at this event, but they are recognized on the NeWP website throughout the year.

#### Methods

A qualitative approach of narrative inquiry was used for the study because it allowed for an in-depth look at the leadership qualities of NeWP Certificate of Recognition recipients. Individuals selected for this study were selected using criterion sampling because they met the identified criterion—were “information rich”, and would best answer the research questions. The group included two males and two females, three of which worked as school administrators in



Nebraska school districts for a significant number of years. I recruited them by phone to determine their interest in participation in this study, and followed up with email correspondence to make further arrangements.

One type of data collected was through semi-structured interviews. The interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes and were recorded on my computer using Garageband. They were held at quiet locations convenient for the interviewee. One interview was held using technology (Skype) because the distance between us did not allow for a face-to-face interview. Interview protocol was provided to the participants for the interview that included a copy of the research questions. The interview included six open-ended questions as well as related follow-up questions, which varied across interviewees (Attachment A). The questions attempted to discover the viewpoints, attitudes, and actions of leaders who support the NeWP professional development model in order to answer the central research question. Interview questions asked of the administrators included: Why did you select this artifact to share today? How did your relationship with the NeWP begin? What impact has the NeWP had on you personally/professionally? How have teachers been impacted because of your work with the NeWP? How have students been impacted because of your work with the NeWP? What else would you like me to know about your involvement with the NeWP? and the final question, which was my central research question, In your opinion, what are the leadership qualities of school administrators who choose to support the NeWP?

In addition to the NeWP award recipients, I was able to interview the Senior Researcher for the NWP, Linda Friedrich, while attending the annual 2011 NWP Conference in Chicago, Illinois. The questions I asked Friedrich varied as they were intended to explore her work as a researcher with the NWP.

Interviews were transcribed and analysis took place in the form of hand-coding, memoeing, and theme formation (Appendix B). Data collected for this study was triangulated as a validation strategy. In addition to interviews, each interviewee was asked to select an artifact (Appendix C)

to bring to the interview that represented an important moment or event related to their work with the Writing Project. Interviewees talked about this artifact as part of their interview. Artifacts were hand-coded as part of the data analysis. As a third data point, I also collected and analyzed the letter of nomination (Appendix D) for each of the school administrators who participated in this study. I retrieved these letters of nomination from the NeWP website, submitted by an individual(s) impacted by the leadership decisions of the nominee. As a final measure of validity, individuals interviewed for this study will be allowed to read and respond to this research report. Table A provides a summary of data collected as part of this study.

Table A: Table of Data Collection

Participant	Interview	Artifact	Letter of Nomination
Jef Johnston	X	X (Stop Day)	X
Mary Knight	X	X (Leading all teachers toward best practices)	X
Ron Pauls	X	X (book: <u>Old Jules</u> by Mari Sandoz)	X
Linda Friedrich	X		

Although IRB approval was not granted for this study, each individual who was interviewed signed a consent form (Appendix E) agreeing to participate in the interview and to allow me to use what I learned in the interview for this qualitative research study. They also granted permission for me to use their real names for the purposes of this study.

Ethical considerations for the study involved informed consent from participants for inclusion in the study including being taped during the interview process. All information obtained during the study was kept strictly confidential. Recordings of the interviews, artifacts, and copies of nomination letters were stored securely on my computer throughout the duration of the study.

Reciprocity was addressed as participants kindly gave me their time and shared their expertise and stories for this study. As a measure of reciprocity, individuals interviewed will be given the opportunity to read and respond to a final draft of this research paper. All individuals

who participated in the study will receive a note of thanks, a gift card to a local coffee shop, and NWP notepads and pens at the conclusion of the research project.

### Findings

What were the leadership qualities of school administrators who choose the Writing Project as their professional development model? After an analysis of their interviews, artifacts, and letters of nomination for the award, major themes consistently emerged that revealed six leadership qualities: the administrator's excitement and passion for their work ("Lit Up"); the importance of having a first-hand knowledge of the work of the people they led ("Bird's-Eye View"); their commitment to do the right things in order to improve teaching and learning ("Do What's Right"); their respect for teachers' expertise ("Let a Thousand Flowers Bloom"); their knowledge of the importance of writing and its connection to learning ("Writing is Thinking"); and their willingness to share what they know about teaching and learning with others ("Making Public").

The school administrators who provided the information that informed this study include three individuals who had 30 to 35 years of experience in education having served in a variety of roles from classroom teacher to district superintendent. Jef Johnston is currently the Chief Operating Officer of the Avenue Scholars Foundation in Omaha, Nebraska. Mary Knight is a Talent Management Consultant with Gallup Consulting in Omaha, Nebraska, and Ron Pauls is a retired principal from Heartland School District in Henderson, NE. I also interviewed Linda Friedrich, Senior Researcher with the NWP regarding what she knows about teacher leadership and administrator support through the research she has been involved in with the NWP. Currently Linda is leading a multi-year SRI research study which will be a summary of all research gathered regarding the effectiveness of teacher professional development based on the NWP model.

The artifacts selected by each administrator as a symbol of importance related to their work with the Writing Project, revealed an important moment in their personal educational history.

Ron selected a book he read and discussed as a member of a small group when he participated in his first Writing Project institute 14 years ago. It was particularly relevant to him since this group meets to this day, reading the works of Nebraska authors and talking about their own writing. Jef's artifact revealed his commitment to educational excellence and the beginning of his interest in the Writing Project, his Stop Day assessment tool used to uncover the amount of writing students are doing, the types of writing they are doing, and the relevance of that work to learning. Mary's artifact, a framed photo with the text, Are you leading every teacher toward best practices?, revealed her commitment to developing teacher expertise through effective professional development opportunities. Analysis of these artifacts, along with one-on-one interviews and each person's letter of nomination from the NeWP website, led to the determination of six themes.

### *"Lit Up"*

The first leadership quality that emerged from this study was the spirited attitude the individuals who received the NeWP Administrator Certificate of Recognition displayed about their work as educators, as well as the work of teachers and students in their districts. Although every participant studied had a long career in the field of education, they continue to show *passion* towards their own work as administrators and the work of others impacted by their leadership. Perhaps in order to see this excitement in others, it has to be valued, and present within yourself.

Ron participated in his local Writing Project Institute and spoke with *pride* about how the experience impacted him personally as a reader, writer, and educator. He spoke several times throughout his interview about his ongoing membership in a community-based reading/writing club that started meeting as part of the Writing Project Institute they participated in 14 years ago, a group that continues to meet to this day. He made "lifelong" friends through this experience. The artifact he shared was a book by Marie Sandoz, Old Jules, a book he read and discussed in his small group as part of his school's first Writing Project experience.

Jef talked about a principal in his district who was towards the end of his career who was *lit up* by his work with the writing project. He spoke of many others in the district who exhibited this same *passion* for their work. Jef and Mary both spoke highly of principals who were active participants in the districts' Writing Project Institutes, and had a voice in all the planning. Jef spoke of one principal saying "he was just so *proud* of what they did" in his school. He spoke about many teachers in his district in the same way, empowered by their work with the Writing Project.

Mary talked about the teachers who went through the institute and how their *excitement* was even evident to the students they taught. "I think it was so powerful for teachers to be immersed as a student of writing".

Another example of his excitement was revealed when Ron talked about a teacher in his district who "developed something pretty important" when she started having her young students write their own personal history around an artifact from their family past such as "an old steamer chest that came across from the old country". They would write about it, tell about it, and "at some event with family and community people, they would have a chance to share this story".

Linda exhibited a similar excitement for her work with the NWP. After many years of research on teacher leadership and the overall impact of the Writing Project, she saw the excitement of learning in others saying there is "this incredible *passion* about kids and it's often accompanied by a *passion* about the content of teaching", it's a "real belief in kids and kids capacities to learn and a sense of self-efficacy around that".

#### *"Bird's-Eye View"*

A second leadership quality displayed by these individuals was a commitment to know and understand the *real work* of the students and teachers in their schools and districts. They were researchers asking questions and finding the answers to their questions through study within and outside of their school environment. Some personally participated in ongoing teacher

professional development opportunities, others “checked in” on a regular basis. All of them knew *what’s happening*, and used the information to inform their work.

Ron spoke about his commitment to understanding the *real work* of his teachers through participation in professional development activities with his staff, including their local Writing Project Institute. “When you take a class with your teachers, well, they know that you know what’s going on with them in the classroom.” “It’s not just what they’re doing out there, it’s something we’re doing. That’s a pretty important thing”.

Jef began his role as his district’s Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction wanting to get a *bird’s-eye view* of what the students in the district experienced. He created the concept of Stop Day for this reason. The artifact he shared was a description of Stop Day, an event designed to “provide a students-eye view of what the students experience in school (the actual curriculum) in contrast with what is purported to happen in the school district (the written curriculum)”. Once he collected evidence of authentic work happening on a given day across all grades and buildings in the district, and seeing little evidence of authentic writing, “he knew teachers and students could do *so much more*”. This is what originally led him to the Writing Project. Mary also spoke about this idea stating her belief the teachers and students, given the chance, could do *so much more*. Although Mary never went through a formal Writing Project Institute, she attended each session with the principals and teachers in her district. “I would write. The first year I was in every one.” This gave Mary a *bird’s-eye view* of how the experience impacted teachers. She also talked about how she followed teachers back into the classroom to observe writer’s workshop in practice as part of her personal leadership improvement goal. “They were writing more, feeling more confident, and then getting some true best practice types of activities to take back to students.”

### *“Do What’s Right”*

The leaders studied throughout this research project shared a third leadership quality—a *vision* for what needed to be done to improve teacher and student learning based on information

gathered, and the commitment to do whatever it took to achieve identified goals. By making the decision to get involved with the Writing Project they sometimes chose the longer road to improvement rather than the quick fix. Instead of relying on someone else to hand them the answer, they looked within themselves, their teachers, and students to determine their course of action. They realized in order to improve, they would have to *change the culture* of their school and it would take time—it would be a *process*. They believed in *true best practice* and were committed to doing the right things for their teachers and students knowing the positive results that would eventually occur related to student learning.

“We can get better and our kids are learning... I think there was a real *cultural change* and I think the NeWP had a lot to do with that *cultural change*”. Jef decided that students weren’t engaged in enough authentic writing, got involved in the work of the Writing Project, and allowed the time it would take for improvement to occur instead of looking for the immediate results offered by quick fixes.

Mary’s letter of nomination for the NeWP Administrator Achievement Award stated this about her leadership:

Mary has demonstrated positive energy and perseverance to do what is right for teachers and students in our district, despite resistance, at the local, state, or national level, that could easily reduce opportunities for teachers to grow as writers and teachers of writing.

When I spoke with her she confirmed this when she said as a result of the Writing Project, teachers in her district were “more comfortable as writers, writing more, and feeling more confident as writers and teachers”. Her selected artifact revealed her belief in leading every teacher toward best practices in order to improve student learning. Mary and Jef both talked about the long-term positive results of their district’s participation in the Writing Project. Mary said,

And then we would get the scores back from statewide writing. I’ll never forget taking those scores back to school improvement teams, maybe the third year into the project—65 to 70 leaders who were working in all buildings at a leadership level. It had a *grass-roots* type of impact. The scores were through the roof.

Ron stated, “I used to believe our intentions were the important thing in what we taught, but gradually figured out what the students’ learn is the most important thing about what we teach”.  
*“Let a Thousand Flowers Bloom”*

The core belief of the Writing Project is the commitment to developing *teacher expertise* and *teacher leaders* as a way to improve teacher and ultimately student learning. A fourth leadership quality uncovered was an underlying *respect* of the work of teachers. The leaders who were part of this study had a deep respect for teachers, understood the *collaborative* nature of learning, and valued being part of a *learning community*. They *trusted* teachers as learners and by providing them the opportunity to be immersed in their own writing, knew they would improve as teachers of writing. They allowed them to make decisions related to their own learning, rather than imposing it on them as school leaders.

The artifact Mary selected and shared was a visual with the text, Are we leading every teacher toward best practices? When she explained why she selected it she said, “NeWP was the first example of immersing teachers in best practices in writing—teachers teaching other teachers across grade levels—diverse groupings of teachers teaching teachers”. This became the model for all professional development in the district because of its positive impact. Robert Brooke, Director of the NeWP, wrote about Mary in her letter of nomination, “Mary has that rare mix, in an administrator, of absolutely clear practicality with a core commitment to teachers as the real experts in education”.

One of the core beliefs of the Writing Project is that teachers are the best teachers of other teachers. Linda and Mary both spoke of this when they mentioned the collaborative learning environment of the Writing Project. There is a trust among participants as they learn to share writing, reflect on that writing, and immerse themselves in writing. Linda talked about her *let a thousand flowers bloom* philosophy when she talked about teachers’ “deep belief in kids, kids



capacities to learn and a sense of self-efficacy around that.” She believed teaching is “really a deeply intellectual activity” saying there is always something new to learn.

Jef mentioned the building-based professional development offered in his district. The teachers and principals gathered each week to write, share their writing, discuss best practice and reflect on their learning. He saw this model of professional development as a way for teachers to collaborate as they engaged in continuous learning. It “needs to be theirs”, he said.

*I was one of those thousand flowers that bloomed through my NeWP experience. My principal when I participated in my first NeWP Institute, John Zetterman, supported my changing teaching practice, trusted me, and encouraged me as I became involved in professional development in the area of literacy for our school district. My work with NeWP continues to provide challenges, opportunities to connect and learn with other teacher leaders, and experience writing as a vehicle for learning.*

*“Writing is Thinking”*

The Writing Next report (Graham & Perin, 2007) concludes writing well is not just an option for young people- it is a necessity. “At its best, writing has helped transform the world...Writing today is not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many” (National Commission on Writing, 2003, pp. 10-11). School leaders who chose the Writing Project model of professional development displayed a fifth leadership quality—they valued writing as a *way to learn content* and communicate about that learning. They encouraged time spent writing, especially *authentic* writing connected to real work. They talked about writing and its connection to *thinking*. One mentioned his/her belief that *writing is powerful*. One said about students who write, “they can do anything!”. These beliefs were instrumental in guiding school leaders to the work of the Writing Project, or were a result of their participation.

Ron explained that because of the Writing Project he became aware of just how important writing is. He spoke about one fourth-grade teacher in his building who developed “something pretty important” after participating in their Writing Project when she had her students write their

own personal history centered on an artifact from their lives, like “an old steamer chest that came across from the old country”. The students wrote about their artifact, told about it, and during an event with family and community people, they would have a chance to share their story. “That was just part of what happened” he said. He spoke about the “authenticity of a system like the Writing Project that helps you learn the importance of writing and communication”. He said,

I learned writing is something you know about, and care about, and something you want to share, and once you feel that way about writing it becomes something you carry over into your work. It’s a worthwhile thing that I think changes people’s lives.

Jef talked about writing as thinking and its connection to learning content in school. He discovered through his Stop Day activity that students were doing little authentic writing and through participation in the Writing Project that trend changed. He said, “Wow, look how teachers are thinking differently about engaging students in writing—making the content area connections to writing as a way to learn content instead of lecturing, and then synthesizing the results.” “You don’t get better at recall and comprehension by doing more of it, you get better at things like that when you have higher levels of thinking involved through writing”. He said all three of the schools involved in the district’s first Writing Project institute showed five years of improvement in English, math, and reading, not only on CRT’s [national standardized tests] but NRT’s [local curricular assessments]. “That was a real eye opener for me.”

Because of the Writing Project, one district developed writing assessments that allowed students to demonstrate understanding across all content areas. “The Writing Project had more to do with it than anything.” The Writing Project helped teachers see writing as a way to learn content instead of lecturing. Mary explained in her district, because of their involvement with the Writing Project, they ultimately had assessments in every content area where they asked students to write to “communicate their thinking in every area. I think it was the beginning of articulating our philosophy about best practices in professional development and assessment.”

Ron said his NeWP experience helped him understand that “reading and writing are at the heart of the school curriculum at all grade levels, and that’s a result of the Writing Project”.

*“Making Public”*

The sixth and final leadership quality that emerged after studying these school leaders was their willingness to share what they know and believe about student learning, teacher learning, and school-wide or district-wide improvement. They found opportunities to make their work and *beliefs public*. They were *advocates* for the teachers they worked with, as well as the students in their classrooms. Their confidence in their knowledge and beliefs about education caused them to *make public* their beliefs as a way to impact the learning of others, not only inside their own learning community, but outside of the school system.

Linda spoke about teacher leaders and what she uncovered in her extensive research and finding *opportunities* to share. She said, “

I think teacher leaders do have an agenda and it goes back to this idea about a deep belief in kids, knowing your craft, questioning your practice, but how that gets enacted is through *making public* one’s teaching, not only the good parts but also the flaws.

I think this was true for the school administrators I interviewed as well. These school leaders were clear about what they knew about teaching and learning, and found avenues to *share their beliefs* with others. Linda gave an example when she described a principal she interviewed as part of a research study saying he encouraged teachers to pursue curricula they were interested in and *opened up opportunities* for teachers to share with other members of the faculty. “He was a principal at a time really before the idea of instructional leadership took hold”. Linda mentioned one of her professional goals related to her work with NWP as *advocacy*. She talked about how her research “can be shaped and used to advocate and support the Writing Project.”

Mary told about the impact of the Writing Project on her work as a Talent Management Consultant with Gallup Consulting and how she talks with people around the country about best practices in the area of writing.

We talk about best practices and what it looks like and what it sounds like. I've talked to people on the east coast and people on the west coast. I talk about what it looks like in the classroom and what parents can do at home. It's at the core of my beliefs about professional development.

Jef found ways to advocate for students in his previous work as a school administrator and continues to do this in his current position as CEO with the Avenue Scholars Foundation. "We ought to be talking about improvement, not criticizing and not taking over schools with low income kids, but look at what they are accomplishing."

### Discussion

Leadership is a concept that has been explored by many researchers who have not yet agreed on a common definition of the term, clearly identified characteristics, or how to prepare individuals for leadership roles (Collins, 2001; Lambert, 2003; Lieberman & Friedrich, 2010; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Reeves, 2006). Some definitions refer to leaders as people clearly in charge; individuals who make the rules and make sure they are enforced. Others think of a leader more inclusively such as the view supported by the Writing Project that includes those who "negotiate their identities and roles as leaders through their daily interactions with other teachers, students, supervisors, and those whom they lead" (Lieberman & Friedrich, 2010, p. 31). This definition includes teacher leaders who are a critical component in the implementation of the Writing Project professional development model. Even though there is no commonly accepted definition of leadership or leadership qualities, the school leaders who were part of this research study displayed leadership qualities that were consistently found across participants.

Through analysis of the interviews, artifacts, and letters of nomination throughout the months of this study, six leadership qualities emerged: the administrator's excitement and passion for their work ("Lit Up"); the importance of having a first-hand knowledge of the work of the people they led ("Bird's-Eye View"); their commitment to doing the right things in order to improve teaching and learning ("Do What's Right"); their respect for teachers' expertise ("Let a Thousand

Flowers Bloom”); their knowledge of the importance of writing and its connection to learning (“Writing is Thinking”); and their willingness to share what they know about teaching and learning with others (“Making Public”). Of all questions asked during the interview, I was particularly interested in their responses to the final question, my central research question, because it caused them to do some self-reflection about themselves as leaders and what they felt was important about their own leadership qualities. Looking across the evidence collected including the letters of nomination written about each nominee, the individual interviews, and each person’s selected artifact, I began to see what Creswell described as the threads, colors, and texture that, when woven together, form the fabric of leadership qualities that led these remarkable individuals to the Writing Project.

Limitations of this study included the limited number of participants who were able to participate. Due to time constraints, I was not able to interview every winner of the NeWP Certificate of Recognition. I was also not able to interview any school administrators who were not involved in the NeWP to get some contrasting points of view. The people who participated in my research study displayed very similar characteristics in their approaches to leadership and this left me wondering if this would be true across a broader sample of award winners. Therefore, implications for future research include study of more award winners, and other school administrators involved in school improvement efforts other than the Writing Project, to get a broader look at the commonalities and differences across leadership qualities of school administrators.

As I thought about the leadership qualities of school administrators interviewed for this study, I found myself wondering about other possibilities for future research. How did these school leaders develop the beliefs and attitudes uncovered through this study about teaching and learning? Why do they value teachers voices, and why do they choose to stand up for what’s best for learners of any age? Another area of possible future research related to this study is to interview these individuals a second time taking them back to milestones along their career

paths as a way to discover the answer to this question. I might interview the individual(s) who nominated each award winner to find out more about these people from yet another perspective. I would also probe to determine problems encountered because of their Writing Project experience, and how they addressed these issues.

*I will also consider incorporating an auto-ethnographic study into this project because of my personal experiences with leadership. I received the same award, the NeWP Administrator Certificate of Recognition, in the year 2007. I was a participant in Linda Friedrich's Teacher Leadership Vignette Study (Lieberman & Friedrich, 2010), and have served in a variety of leadership roles related to the work of the Nebraska Writing Project. All of these experiences would allow me to incorporate myself into this study in a meaningful way. I will also consider interviewing my former principal, John Zetterman, to uncover his leadership qualities to further consider his impact on my growth as a teacher leader.*

Positive implications of this study include its potential to add to the existing research on the effectiveness of the NWP taking a closer look at leadership qualities of school administrators who choose this model of professional development. There has been extensive research on the Writing Project's impact on teachers, students, writers, and long-term school improvement. Since there have not been any research studies to date focused on the school administrators who support the teachers who are impacted by a Writing Project experience, this study could provide an introduction to future research in this area. There are positive implications for teachers, as well. Teachers who are interested in approaching their school administrators about beginning a Writing Project professional development initiative in their school or district could use the information in this study to begin a conversation with their school administrators about its potential benefits. They could also use the study to *make public* what they know about writing, learning, and school improvement to begin conversations with other teachers in their schools about the work of the Writing Project, the benefits of writing including its relationship to

learning, and how through increasing writing opportunities for themselves and their students, everyone's learning could be positively impacted.

## References:

- Blake Yancey, K. (2009). *Writing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English. Retrieved 12-11-11 from [http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Press/Yancey\\_final.pdf](http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Press/Yancey_final.pdf)
- Brooke, R. (personal communication, December 8, 2011).
- Collins, J. (2001). *Good to great*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Creswell, J. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Dyson, A. H., & Freedman, S. W. (2003). Writing. In J. Lapp, D. Food, J. R. Squire, & J. Jensen (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 967-992). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Fessehaie, S., Yang, K. M., Friedrich, L., LeMahieu, P. (2007, July). *The national writing project legacy study*. Berkeley, CA: The National Writing Project. Retrieved December 8, 2011 from [www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2411](http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2411).
- Friedrich, L., Swain, S., LeMahieu, P., Fessehaie, S., Miele, T. (2008, May 2). *Making a difference: The national writing project's inculcation of leadership over 30 years*. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Chicago, IL. Retrieved from web December 11, 2011 from [http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/download/nwp\\_file/11041/NWP\\_legacy\\_final.pdf?x-r=pcfile\\_d](http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/download/nwp_file/11041/NWP_legacy_final.pdf?x-r=pcfile_d).
- Gallagher, H. A., Woodworth, K. R., Bosetti, K. R., Cassidy, L., McCaffrey, T., Yee, K., et al. (2011, June). *National evaluation of writing project professional development: SRI year 4 study*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International. Retrieved 12-8-11 from [http://policyweb.sri.com/cep/publications/WPDYear4\\_Final\\_3June2011.pdf](http://policyweb.sri.com/cep/publications/WPDYear4_Final_3June2011.pdf).
- Graham, S., & Perin, D. (2007). *Writing next: Effective strategies to improve writing of adolescents in middle and high schools* (A report to Carnegie Corporation of New York).



- Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education. Retrieved March 3, 2009 from <http://all4ed.org/files/WritingNext.pdf>.
- Hargreaves, A. & Goodson, I. (2006). Instructional change over time? The sustainability and nonsustainability of three decades of secondary school change and continuity. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 42(1), 3-41. Retrieved November 12, 2011 from [http://policyweb.sri.com/cep/publications/WPDYear4\\_Final\\_3June2011.pdf](http://policyweb.sri.com/cep/publications/WPDYear4_Final_3June2011.pdf).
- Lambert, L. (2003). Leadership redefined: An evocative context for teacher leadership. *School Leadership and Management*, 23(4), 421-430.
- Lieberman, A. & Friedrich, L. (2010). *How teachers become leaders*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Marzano, R. J., Waters, T., & McNulty B. A. (2005). *School leadership that works: From research to results*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- National Commission on Writing. (2003, April). *The neglected R: The need for a writing revolution*. The College Board Report of the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools. New York: The College Board. Retrieved July 31, 2006 from <http://www.writingcommission.org/report.html>.
- National Council of Teachers of English. (2008). *An administrator's guide to writing instruction: A policy research brief*. Retrieved from web 12-11-11 [http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Magazine/Chron0192\\_PolicyBrief.pdf](http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Magazine/Chron0192_PolicyBrief.pdf).
- National Council of Teachers of English. (2008). *Writing now: A policy research brief*. Retrieved from web 12-11-11 <http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/PolicyResearch/WrtgResearchBrief.pdf>.
- National Writing Project (2010). *Research brief #2: Writing project professional development continues to yield gains in student writing achievement*. Berkeley, CA: National Writing Project. Retrieved 12-11-11 from [http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/download/nwp\\_file/14004/FINAL\\_2010\\_Research\\_Brief.pdf?x-r=pcfile\\_d](http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/download/nwp_file/14004/FINAL_2010_Research_Brief.pdf?x-r=pcfile_d).

- National Writing Project Annual Report. (2010). Berkeley, CA: National Writing Project.
- National Writing Project and Nagin, C. (2006). *Because Writing Matters: Improving student writing in our schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Nebraska Writing Project Administrator Achievement Award Recipients: Nebraska Writing Project. Retrieved 12-11-11 from [http://www.unl.edu/newp/news/Admin\\_Award\\_Past.shtml](http://www.unl.edu/newp/news/Admin_Award_Past.shtml).
- Reeves, D. B. (2006). *The learning leader: How to focus school improvement for better results*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Saldana, J. (2011). *Fundamentals of Qualitative Research: Understanding qualitative research*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wilson, D. (1994). *Attempting Change: Teachers moving from writing project to classroom practice*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Wood, D. R. & Lieberman, A. (2000). Teachers as authors: the National Writing Project's approach to professional development. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 3 (3), 255-273.