

# WMWP Project Outreach

## Reflective Letter

*to assess the year's work and solicit questions and feedback from the WMWP Board as we work towards a plan of action*

At almost every meeting this year, one of us asked, "What are we doing again?" "Is this going anywhere?" "How will we know what to do from here?" The nature of inquiry and staying in an inquiry stance is to live with more questions than there are answers. We know that as we move into our action year, we expect that there will continue to be many questions that arise to guide our work. The time we have been able to work with you, the Executive Board, has been invaluable. Our Project Outreach Local Leadership Team (LLT) has appreciated the openness and curiosity with which you have approached this work. We know that as we move into action, the Executive Board will continue to be willing participants in reshaping the WMWP so greater (access and relevance) diversity can be achieved and sustained.

To summarize the year we went through a process of charting. We started by revisiting our Inquiry Questions: What are the needs of teachers of students who live in communities impacted by poverty? What kinds of programs and course offerings will best support the needs of teachers who work with the underserved? These questions represent the two levels of work that the PO group has experienced over this past year. We started by collecting demographic and statistical data on race/ethnicity, percentage of highly qualified teachers, number of English Language Learners (ELL) students, number of Special Education (SPED) students, per pupil expenditure, and the size of each district. This then brought us to question of who are the teachers in the WMWP and do they represent the districts we are looking at. We found that we are well represented in these districts.

District	Number of Students	Number of Teachers	Number of Schools	Number of WMWP TCs
Springfield	28,918	2600	48	28
Holyoke	7,532	715	15	7
Athol	2,192	207	9	4

We have collected surveys from teachers in Athol, Holyoke and Springfield and have found some threads:

- Professional Development (PD) is in-district and school directed
- Finances and time are the greatest constraints to seeking out additional, out-of-district PD
- Best practices of reading and writing instruction, working with underperforming students, building comprehension strategies, and developing meaningful assessment are the PD topics teachers were most interested in
- A majority of the teachers surveyed seemed to represent a deficit model in their thinking about the needs of their students.

Next, we looked at all of the documents, data and artifacts that we had created and gathered over this year and began to chart what we saw into categories. The categories were *data collected and generated, themes, questions and surprises, findings or conclusions drawn, process and questions or surprises*. With these categories, we began to recognize themes. The themes are *power, language, leadership, and community*. In this letter, we will capture for you the data, process and remaining questions connected to each theme and ask that you read with an eye towards the following questions: In what ways has the PO work made us see our site differently? In what direction can we see this work taking our site? (Note, to incorporate each of our voices, each member took a theme and wrote in their voice)

***Community:*** When I ask new immigrant language learners what makes them feel comfortable or uncomfortable in school, the most common response is something like this: “When I raise my hand, the teacher ignores me.” This feeling of discomfort is something we have discussed in terms of access to the WMWP, relevance of our program, and diversity within our site. It relates to accessing power and being heard. Do we want to invite diverse members to the table for the sake of having them there but then ignore their voice when it comes to their decisions? Are we willing to invite diversity and the challenges of widening our own cultural perceptions and sharing the very tangible results of power? We have diversity in our classrooms, but whose voices are allowed to be heard? Who is ignored? Our path of creating a diverse community and allowing for greater access through relevant programs has to acknowledge the inherent challenges of shared power and voice.

The element of our process that stands out as relevant to the larger site is how we have struggled and grown because of our commitment to maintain a diverse group. We would like you to think about the implications of this process on the larger site if greater diversity is the goal. We began our first steps to create a Local Leadership Team with a conscious effort to have a team that

reflected various voices. Our team is composed of six people, one male, two people of color, four people who are or have been in interracial relationships, and three people directly connected to the areas we are studying. There is a dominance of white middle class values and language; however, with our commitment to diversity, we often have “ouch” moments where one person’s cultural language conflicts with another. It was not until our May meeting that we began to even name it this way.

We also have noticed that when we write and read together we get to deeper, more complex understandings. We have maintained a commitment to share our writing with each other so that we can hear each other’s voice.

*Power:* As a teacher of I have noticed a trend in the ten years I have worked in this situation. I have noticed that decisions pertaining to any program are usually handed down to me. I have submitted many proposals as well as requests of books and materials at the beginning of the school year. Yet, I rarely receive the materials I request. My decisions, wishes, and requests are marginalized. My curricular wishes are not honored either. In fact, in some years I was just handed the materials that someone else chose for me or was expected to pay for my own.

This is not an unusual process in an institution, even one that claims social justice and equity as guiding forces to neutralize systemic, institutional inequalities. It has been shown that school inputs equally impact school outcomes. In this instance, relevant materials are denied as curricula items perhaps because they are deemed to undermine the systemic institutional codes. Instructional definition is tightly controlled by those who have the means to distribute instructional resources and materials. Scarcity and control of school inputs is a fundamental way that power is brokered.

In the process of reflecting on the entire year, we are left with these questions that challenge our site’s definitions of power and leadership.

- What is the intersection of poverty and education?
- Why does the WMWP want to know this?
- Are we explicit enough in our intentions and language?
- How do we make ourselves (individually and our site) culturally relevant?
- Does our mission statement for WMWP need to reflect our PO work?
- What would it mean to take the risk of becoming a diverse site?
- How do we define leadership at our site?
- How would we need to change to support a diverse participation and leadership?

For next year, our PO team hopes to increase the number of Local Leadership Team. We have had many conversations about how to add in participants and maintain a commitment to diversity. These conversations brought up dilemmas that may be reflective of what our site may need to address. For example:

- If we offer open invitations, in an effort to pay attention to access, for additional participants, how will this emphasize our commitment to diversity?
- If we target participants that represent diverse groups and have a commitment to this work of social justice, are we being too exclusive and limiting access?
- Reflection and Inquiry is the hard work we are doing, but if we don't challenge ourselves to take risk and impact change, then are we really doing the work?

*Language:* Ouch, aint no way you gonna understand how hard it be for me to come in here and have you talk at me and my hommies.

Imagine this was an actual statement made by a student to a teacher. What would our reaction be as the teacher? Would we chastise the student for using non-standard English or trivialize his thoughts because they sound illiterate? Or, would we engage him in a conversation to help him dissipate the "ouch" effect that we sometimes inadvertently inflict on those who are not from the dominant group? Language, we know, is a way to be inclusive. It also can be exclusive. As we work to become more inclusive as a site, the access or relevance of our programs might just be rooted in the language we choose to use. As teachers, we need to always be inclusive. As teachers, this means we need to sometimes, or perhaps often, bypass and overlook non-standard language structures so we can still get the message. As a site, this means that we need to develop a consciousness to our own language use.

The imaginary student example above is a powerful statement. The student has the perception, real or not, of not being heard and certainly not being understood. By using non-standard English, by choice or by voice, the student risks being silenced by the person from the dominant group, namely the teacher. Perhaps we need to look at this "ouch" statement differently. It presents the opportunity to think about access and relevance in ways that might challenge our status quo, but will open the door to new ways of thinking about and seeing the work that we do.

*Leadership:* In this close inquiry we must be willing to be disturbed? Are we ready? It's like entering into the writing process together. We have a draft that

our inquiry focuses around: on one level, the students and their teachers that we serve, and on a second level, the Western Massachusetts Writing Project—the people, its work and the structure of this work.

We must be willing to look at these drafts with critical eyes, or playful eyes, and enter into the conversation that comes with great conferencing & great response—and then envision true revision. In doing so, it is important to keep in mind at all times our audience and our purpose! This inquiry will be a recursive process—weaving in and out of itself.

Writing has been an important part of this inquiry process. Not only have we taken time to write about the readings we have done together, we have taken the time to write into our meetings, write to clarify our thinking and write to wrestle with difficult topics and issues. One of these writings was an “I am from” poem. Not only did we get to know each other better through this writing, but our inquiry group’s identity began to form. We wonder whether inquiry into a journey of social action at our site needs to begin with individual inquiry—and change will grow from that. Who is known by others at our site? And, would the more we get to know others at our site strengthen our site?

We also took the time to write our Personal Journey with WMWP stories and found that each of us came to the WMWP through personal invitation. That connection and sense of feeling welcomed was instrumental for each of us to access WMWP. We wonder how our classrooms welcome in students affected by poverty. Are students and teachers sometimes welcomed in physically, but then never heard? How often do we create an opportunity for teachers and students to tell us what they need?

Also, when we looked together at our own personal stories, both as teachers in our schools and as members of the WMWP, we kept returning to ourselves as learners. WMWP, and the NWP model, has seen us as and empowered us as learners. If given the time, space and resources—we, with our experience and knowledge, know the questions to ask and how to find the answers. When this learning happens within a community, we open ourselves up to even greater learning. Writing, itself, has been an important piece in this process. Writing allows us to ask the tough questions, go deeper into our thinking, make connections to new learning—and make space for our voices to be heard. When someone invites us to write, s/he is inviting our voice to be heard and listened to. This is what we wish to bring to our students.

This is a way WMWP can advocate for teachers and, in turn, these teachers can advocate for their students. Believing in and affirming teacher knowledge allows teachers to do the same for their students. What can we continue to learn from this model, which will help us to create a structure and model at WMWP to make space for more voices?

Thank you for joining us on this journey. We are excited about where it will take us. As we close out this year of inquiry, we are still asking, “Which direction do we go first? Is access the most important factor? How about relevance? If we paid attention to access and relevance would that open up the space for diversity? Or should we look to increase our diversity first which will then push forward the issues of access and relevance?”

Respectfully,

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