

An Evaluation of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute

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Background

On December 7 and 8, 1981, I visited the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute. This was, for me, a stimulating and rewarding experience and I wish to thank everyone who contributed so generously of their time and welcomed me so enthusiastically to the educational community in New Haven. I wish especially to thank Jim Vivian, Director of the project, for arranging a most productive visit and for maintaining just the right balance of detachment and support.

The Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute was created in 1978 as a joint project of Yale University and the New Haven public schools. The goal of the program is to use university resources to improve teaching and learning in the New Haven public schools. Through the Institute, middle and high school teachers work with Yale faculty to strengthen their academic backgrounds and develop new materials for the classroom. During the past three years, approximately one-third of the eligible middle and high school teachers in New Haven have participated as Fellows in the Institute. About one half of these teachers have participated more than once. In addition, several dozen Yale faculty have been actively involved as consultants or instructors.

After an intensive two-day visit I'm pleased to present tentative impressions and suggestions, acknowledging that my own mental snapshots will necessarily overlook essential subtleties and leave key issues undressed.

Strengths of the Program

I must report—at the very outset—that the impact of the Yale-New Haven Institute far exceeded my expectations. My own past experience (including

three years as director of the Santa Barbara Coordinated Education Project) has left me suspicious of such ventures. School-college collaboration frequently is either ceremonial with “showcase” luncheons or bureaucratic with endless planning sessions. Rarely does the program get to the heart of the matter—helping teachers and advancing the quality of education.

The Yale-New Haven teacher project is a dramatic exception to this rule. After talking with dozens of teachers and visiting classrooms I conclude that this project has fulfilled its stated goals. In this program, teachers are academically strengthened and classroom instruction is improved. Three characteristics have led to this success.

First, classroom teachers are involved. The project has teacher-coordinators in each participating school who clearly are committed and who pass on their enthusiasm to colleagues. I felt this strongly during my visits to Jackie Robinson Middle School and James Hillhouse High School. At each school I was hosted by the Institute Coordinator who struck me as an exceptionally able person who had the respect of colleagues generated, in part I suspect, by the University connection.

In addition, these teacher-coordinators meet regularly, as a group, serving as a kind of “shadow administration” for the project. One of the most impressive features of my visit was the after-school session I had with these Coordinators from the New Haven schools. Arriving after a fatiguing day, the teachers turned, with enthusiasm, to key issues. How can the Institute best help us meet our goals? How can we improve our work? With the battering ram of bad publicity constantly hammering away at schools, the dedication and optimism of these teachers was impressive, almost touching. While speaking of teacher participation I must underscore the point that the content of the summer project is shaped by teachers. It’s the teachers who identify the topics to be studied and then the University builds seminars to provide integrative themes. The significance of teacher leadership cannot be overstated.

Second, Yale University is committed. Typically collaborative programs of this sort—when they exist at all—are managed by Schools of Education. Several bureaucratic layers separate the project and the university’s top administration. At Yale, no such bureaucracy exists. Yale has no School of Education and in this case that’s a plus. Chief University administrators know about the program and give it full support. This University backing pays off in very tangible ways. Teachers in the program have access to full resources of the University. For the first time many of the classroom teachers feel at home on the campus. Time and time again, I heard the teachers speak of the excitement of being part of the Yale community and using Yale facilities—having access to the library, the opportunity to attend lectures—to be, in short, a respected member of an academic community.

Third, distinguished Yale faculty serve as mentors. Frequently school-college projects are supported by “fringe” faculty or by those working on research who use the schools as a laboratory for their own advancement. It is truly remarkable that world-ranking faculty at Yale are committed to this program. One teacher said with genuine enthusiasm, “It’s great to interact with the mental giants at Yale.” Especially significant is the feeling the Yale faculty convey to teachers that they truly care. The faculty are viewed as colleagues and—not surprising—the respect is mutual. A Yale faculty member said that these are “most exciting teachers.” In every interview, Institute participants spoke glowingly of the academic excellence of the program and they were committed to the program because they were studying *substance*, not methods courses. I heard stories of the special help teachers had given them, often beyond the call of duty. One teacher told of receiving a book from his Yale professor long after the Institute was over. Another told of a faculty member visiting her classroom to help teach a Shakespeare unit. I pressed to get some signal that the faculty “pulled rank” and looked down on the teachers. I left convinced that the relationship was authentic.

Equally impressive were Yale faculty comments about the teachers with whom they worked. They gained respect for the quality and dedication of the Fellows. One faculty put it directly. The teachers, he said, are “rather more heroic than one’s colleagues.”

Fourth, the program is well run. Traditionally, collaborative programs fall between the slats. They are at once “everyone’s business” and “no one’s business.” In time they fall apart. The Yale-New Haven Institute is well managed. Jim Vivian has guided the program with great skill, bridging the gap between the University and the community. He has convinced skeptics on both sides that the program has integrity and is worth their time.

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Conclusion

The Institute is an educational venture and when measured on this yardstick it has been a great success. However, I cannot avoid observing that the project is a political success as well. It’s no secret that the University and New Haven are two separate worlds. The challenge is to find a way for these worlds to meet. From my observation the Institute offers dramatic promise. It has put a human face on the University, opened doors, and focused resources where they are needed most. The University has gained enormously from the Institute and I conclude that for both educational and community reasons the program should be nurtured and sustained.