
The Promise of the Teachers Institute Approach

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The Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, begun in 1978, has developed an approach to teacher professional development that embodies many best practices: extended duration, a focus on content and the pedagogy linked to the specific content, active learning strategies, and alignment with state and local standards and curriculum.¹ Teachers Institutes are implemented through partnerships between local school districts and institutions of higher education.

Each year, Teachers Institutes offer weekly seminars over several months, led by university or college faculty members, on topics developed by Teacher Representatives who canvass teachers to identify topics that will enhance their knowledge of what they teach. In the seminars, the faculty leaders present information and lead discussions on the seminar topic, and they guide teachers in conducting research and developing curriculum units they will use with their students in the coming school year. In each seminar, the seminar Coordinator (an experienced Fellow) assists the seminar leader and supports other Fellows in the seminar. During the seminar, teachers have opportunities to present their curriculum unit in progress and receive feedback from other teachers in their seminar.

Seminar leaders also deliver talks to acquaint all Fellows with their seminar and encourage them to disseminate units from it. The seminar leaders receive compensation and participants receive stipends in recognition of the time and effort they are investing in improving teaching and curriculum. Teachers also receive faculty privileges at the university or college.

How the Teachers Institute Approach is Expected to Support Teaching and Learning²

Teacher and university faculty backgrounds, characteristics, and interests, as

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well as the leadership of the seminar Coordinators, shape the implementation of Teachers Institute seminars. The immediate products of the seminars are the curriculum units created by participants and the professional recognition and faculty privileges at the university that participating teachers receive for a year after beginning the seminar.

The units are expected to lead to three strands of outcomes corresponding to teachers, students, and university faculty. For teachers, seminar participation is expected to result in greater teacher leadership and collegiality and in increased content and pedagogical knowledge, which in turn are expected to improve the quality of their instruction. For students, teachers' increased knowledge and improved instruction is expected to lead to greater engagement in learning.

Ultimately, these intermediate outcomes are expected to increase teacher retention and advancement and improve teachers' performance (as assessed in school district teacher evaluation systems), enhance student learning of curriculum unit topics, and enhance the contributions of university faculty to public education. All of these outcomes converge to support higher student achievement.

What Teachers Say About Their Teachers Institute Experience

The Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute (YNHTI) has a long history of collecting data to inform its work, and these data now constitute a rich, longitudinal record of Institute processes and outcomes. Each year, at the end of their seminar, Fellows must complete a questionnaire that captures key information about their teaching background and their seminar experiences, asks them to rate various aspects of their seminar experience, and includes open-ended questions encouraging Fellows to describe their experiences and the outcomes they expect (and if they have participated before, the outcomes they experienced after past seminars).

The careful process of discerning teach-

ers' professional development needs and interests and encouraging participation in Teachers Institute seminars yields a diverse group of Fellows. During 1992 to 2014, 39% of Fellows taught students in grades 9 to 12, 31% taught students in grades 6 to 8, and 28% taught students in kindergarten to grade 5. Fellows had nearly 6 years of experience, on average, in their present position, an additional 3 years of teaching in New Haven, and another 3 years teaching elsewhere. Fellows included both relatively new teachers (31% had 3 or fewer years of teaching experience) and very experienced teachers (19% had 20 or more years of teaching experience).

Teachers who have participated in a YNHTI seminar are not precluded from participating in subsequent seminars, and every year at least half of Fellows are veteran Fellows who have participated at least once before. During the years from 1992 to 2014, two thirds (64%; 50%-79%)³ of Fellows overall were repeat participants.

The teachers who participate in the YNHTI are strongly motivated by a desire to improve the curriculum they use, to increase their content knowledge, and to work with other teachers. Nearly all Fellows during 1992 to 2014 cited the opportunity to develop curriculum to motivate students (94%; 82-100%) and to meet their needs (90%; 73-100%) as an important incentive for participating in the YNHTI. Nearly as many (70%; 57%-85%) cited the possibility of increasing their control over the curriculum.

YNHTI Fellows also sought to improve their content knowledge. An important incentive for most Fellows to participate was the opportunity to increase their mastery of their subject (89%; 80-95%) and to exercise intellectual independence (89%; 79%-98%).

The opportunity for collegiality also drew many Fellows to the YNHTI. Approximately 85% (77%-97%) of

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Fellows cited the opportunity to work with Yale faculty, and 76% (63%-84%) cited the opportunity to work with teachers from other schools as an important incentive to participate. Nearly two-thirds (64%; 50%-78%) reported that the opportunity for interdisciplinary work was an important incentive to participate.

The effort to identify topics that address the needs and preferences of teachers who might participate and select appropriate seminar leaders appears to ensure a good match between seminar offerings and teacher needs. Every year from 1992 to 2014, nearly all Fellows reported that the program was useful to at least a moderate extent, and 74% (61%-94%) said it was useful to a great extent. Most Fellows (73%; 59%-83%) reported that they intended to participate again in the future.

YNHTI leaders (seminar leaders, seminar Coordinators, Teacher Representatives) played key roles. During 1992 to 2014, most Fellows (80%; 68%-94%) described their seminar leader as useful to a great extent. Most Fellows also described their seminar Coordinator as useful to a great extent in providing information about unit deadlines (86%; 66-97%) and unit writing (75%; 63%-91%), acting as a resource (72%; 53%-86%), and facilitating discussions (64%; 49%-83%). Finally, Fellows also reported that their Teacher Representative was very helpful in encouraging teachers to apply (79%; 71%-93%), assisting with applications (75%; 68%-94%), maintaining contact with prospective Fellows (72%; 59%-84%), canvassing teachers for seminar subjects (66%; 58%-78%), and promoting use of curriculum units (57%; 43%-77%).

My professor was amazing. He had a thorough knowledge of all aspects of the topics we were developing and we all had a wide range of topics. He was an excellent resource as well as a thoughtful guide throughout the process.

According to Fellows, it is through the process of developing curriculum units and the use of these units that many of the effects of YNHTI participation are expected to occur. Most Fellows were motivated to participate in the YNHTI by a desire to improve curriculum, and most recent Fellows (91%) reported that their curriculum unit fills a gap in the existing curriculum or extends it in an important way.

Several teachers noted that unlike the existing district curriculum, the curriculum units they created were designed to support differentiated instruction for students of varying levels and learning styles within their classrooms. The survey reveals that this may be widespread; most Fellows (85%; 72%-97%) reported that their unit was designed for average students, but high proportions of Fellows also reported that their unit was designed for advanced students (68%; 56%-78%) and the least advanced students (65%; 56%-76%). In their narrative comments, a few Fellows noted that knowing more about a topic and having access to more resources on the topic enables the teacher to draw on a much larger body of material to both support struggling students and challenge academically strong students.

In describing their curriculum units, more than one-third of recent Fellows mentioned using deeper learning strategies, such as asking students to conduct research, analyze data, write about conclusions, or do performance tasks tied to the Common Core.

It has led me to do a bunch of research on a very important topic which resulted in inquiry-based activities that will encourage students to do thoughtful research, predict outcomes, analyze data, draw conclusions and question validity. They will read scientific journal articles and develop basic skills such as reading for information. They will design and run experiments that they will need to write about in the form of a lab report. They will be required to write an accurate procedure

and draw conclusions backed by their data. Taking all of this and applying it to a topic that I hope will be interesting to them, will be a great motivation.

A number of teachers mentioned that in preparing their unit, they learned research skills that can be applied to other areas of their teaching, and they learned about available university and community resources that may be useful to their teaching.

The most direct effects of teachers' participation in the YNHTI on student learning are likely to result when teachers implement their curriculum unit with their students. Fellows who participated in the YNHTI between 1992 and 2014 reported at the end of their seminar that they planned to teach their new curriculum unit to an average of 73% (62%-86%) of the students they teach.

The potential effects on student learning of using the curriculum units created by Fellows may be magnified through repeated use of the units over time and by dissemination of the units by the YNHTI and especially through Fellows' sharing of their units with their colleagues. Some veteran Fellows noted that they continue to use all or parts of units they created in previous YNHTI seminars.

Through YNHTI activities, Fellows increased their knowledge of their subject and became more confident in their ability to teach it. The YNHTI supports teachers' acquisition of content knowledge by offering talks; through the reading lists, lectures, and guidance of seminar leaders; through the content expertise of other participating teachers; and by providing access to materials to which Fellows would not otherwise have had access. Throughout the years from 1992 to 2014, nearly all Fellows agreed, and more than half (55%; 42%-69%) agreed strongly, that by participating in the seminar, they had gained knowledge of their subject and confidence in their ability to teach it. In the survey, most Fellows (81%; 70%-91%) reported that the knowledge they gained was useful to a great extent.

The most important result of teaching YNHTI units is that, through participation in the seminars, I have greatly increased my confidence in teaching the various academic subjects. Therefore, my teaching flows in a way that increases student participation. I am able to answer their questions more fully, give assignments pertinent to the subject matter, and share my knowledge with colleagues.

Fellows expected collegiality and peer support during YNHTI seminars to continue through new professional relationships with other teachers in the district after the seminars ended. The majority of Fellows cited the opportunity to work with Yale faculty and teachers from other schools as an important incentive for participating, and most Fellows found this aspect of the YNHTI very useful. During 1992 to 2014, nearly all Fellows reported that contact with Yale faculty was useful to at least a moderate extent, and half (54%; 38%-74%) reported that it was useful to a great extent. Similarly, two thirds (68%; 50%-81%) reported that interaction with other Fellows was useful to a great extent. In their narrative comments, some recent Fellows highlighted the importance of connections or relationships they formed during the YNHTI seminar.

The teachers I have worked with in my cohort contributed their strategies and classroom experiences, which were not only helpful for my curriculum unit project, but in addition taught me ways to become a better teacher in my classroom.

Participation in the YNHTI appears to have encouraged some teachers to provide leadership. Some Fellows indicated in their narrative comments that work on their curriculum unit sparked their interest in contributing to curriculum development and support in their school. For others, Institute participation inspired them to create a community of practice or provide professional development to other teachers in their school. For some Fellows, their

curriculum unit was a platform for collaborating with other teachers in their building and establishing curriculum connections. Some Fellows indicated that the opportunities for leadership within the YNHTI have enhanced their ability to participate in interdisciplinary school committees.

Participation in YNHTI seminars may have fostered more general improvements in Fellows' teaching. The interactions Fellows had with their seminar leader and colleagues included discussions of teaching strategies and feedback on their teaching. The YNHTI also may have improved teaching indirectly by increasing Fellows' motivation and enthusiasm for teaching. More than one quarter of recent Fellows (28%; 20%-32%) mentioned coming away from their YNHTI seminar with renewed energy and excitement for teaching.

Fellows expected their curriculum units to enhance their students' engagement in learning. In their narrative responses, Fellows expressed strong expectations that their curriculum unit would engage their students in learning.

Each year that I have participated in the Institute, I have been able to create a unit that allows me to reach my students and teach them through exciting and engaging ways. I have had the opportunity to reuse my units and enjoy seeing the excitement as my class gets involved in the learning. Because of this genuine interest, the students remain motivated and, I feel, learn the content in a meaningful way.

The greater ability to differentiate instruction that some Fellows highlighted may have contributed to Fellows' higher expectations of their students' ability to learn the material in their curriculum unit. During 1992 to 2014, nearly half of Fellows (48%; 26%-67%) strongly agreed that as a result of their seminar, they had a higher expectation of their students' ability to learn about the seminar subject.

The Promise of the Teachers Institute Approach Warrants Further Research

YNHTI Fellows' feedback at the end of their seminars provides key support for the Teachers Institute theory of change and sets the stage for further research and evaluation. A study of curriculum units and their use is under way to examine features of the curriculum units created by participating teachers and to document use of the curriculum units by Fellows and other teachers. Other studies under consideration include an observational study of teaching practices and student engagement during curriculum implementation and a study to document teacher retention. Ultimately, these descriptive analyses may lead to more rigorous analyses of the impact of the Teachers Institute approach on teaching and student learning.

Notes

1. Yale National Initiative (2007). *The Teachers Institute Approach*. New Haven, CT: Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University; Smith, Rogers (2009). *To Strengthen Teaching: An Evaluation of Teachers Institute Experiences*. Philadelphia: Rogers Smith; Archibald, Sarah, Coggshall, Jane G., Croft, Andrew, and Goe, Laura (2011). *High-Quality Professional Development for All Teachers: Effectively Allocating Resources*. National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality Research & Policy Brief.
2. Kisker, Ellen E. (2011). The Teachers Institute Theory of Change. *On Common Ground*, Number 14, pp. 4-7.
3. Here and throughout the article, the first percentage is the percentage of all Fellows who participated during 1992 to 2014. This is followed by the range of annual percentages during the same period. For example, 64% of all Fellows who participated from 1992 to 2014 were repeat participants. The annual percentage of Fellows who were repeat participants ranged from 50% to 79%.