An Evaluation of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute

Robert Kellogg

Yale University and the public schools of New Haven exist at opposite ends of the spectrum of education in America. As institutions, they have in common their physical proximity but only the very broadest of educational goals. Their simultaneous closeness and remoteness makes fruitful cooperation between them plausible and yet supremely challenging. On my visit to the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute on July 7-10, 1980, I was impressed not only by the degree to which difficulty can be overcome but also by the significance of this experiment for American education at large.

Such disparity in educational missions and resources as are represented by Yale and the New Haven schools is not unique; it is a commonplace in this country, one that, on the other hand, goes against our grain as a nation. There are pragmatic grounds as well for believing that the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, and mechanisms like it, must become more widespread. My first impression of the Teachers Institute, therefore, was that it is important not just to Yale and to the city of New Haven, but to all of us.

The Institute is ingeniously conceived and administered, with the knowledgeable support, intellectually and financially, of the administrations of both the schools and the University. The principal impression this care and ingenuity makes on the visitor is that it has left the heart of the Institute free to flourish: the intellectual and pedagogical exchange between the two faculties.

New Haven's schools are no exception to the general rule in public secondary education that a hierarchy of officers—department chairpeople, principals, curriculum supervisors, and the Superintendent's office—formulate the educational goals and methods of the schools more explicitly and in more detail than is customary in higher education, where goals and teaching methods are derived more implicitly, within each discipline, by custom and collegiality, in an atmosphere of perceived intellectual free-

dom. In addition to its strictly academic function, but in many respects indistinguishable from it, the administrative structure of public schools also serves a conspicuous "managerial" function, which, also, has no exact counterpart in higher education, where, in general, university management is carried out and student services are provided by a non-academic staff.

That Yale does not have a school or a department of Education is in this instance a blessing. Without an intermediary buffer, softening, exaggerating, or explaining away the contrast of intellectual milieu between secondary education and higher education, the two groups of teachers (the Institute Fellows and the Yale faculty) are free to explore for themselves the extent to which they share values and assumptions about their subject and its role in the development of children's minds and characters.

In order that the "managerial" aspect of the school administration not be reflected in the operation of the Institute, a small group of teachers, the Institute Coordinators, serves to "represent" both the schools in the Institute and the Institute in the schools. The conception is ingenious, and the individuals who serve as Coordinators are, more than any other single element, crucial to the Institute's successful operation. The Coordinators I met were thoughtful and intelligent men and women who understood the purpose of the Institute and were effective representatives of the two institutions of which they were members. They were especially committed to a central feature of the Institute: an educational experience that does not distinguish between the personal growth of the Fellows and their growth as teachers.

For some members of the Institute, however, this unresolved duality of roles played by the Fellows is a source of frustration. Since it is clearly intentional in the conception of the Institute, and not a fault, I will point out where some lines of stress were apparent to me. The intellectual "occasion" to which the program of the Institute points in the experience of each Fellow is the writing and editing of a curricular unit of instruction. The Yale faculty prepare and conduct seminars in their disciplines, where the Fellows have many of the responsibilities of ordinary students. The curricular unit, however, serves in the seminar in the place conventionally assigned to a research paper. Whom is the curricular unit written for? That is, who, intellectually and rhetorically, is its audience? Is it the seminar leader? the Fellow himself? his students? or other teachers? Asking these questions implies some answer to them other than a general "yes," some attempt to resolve the ambiguity of the Fellows' role as participants in the Institute.

Because the curricular units are reproduced by the Institute and distributed through the New Haven Schools—eventually perhaps even more

widely—they do represent a tangible "end product" of the Institute and of a teacher's participation as a Fellow. Their public, published nature puts a good deal of pressure on everyone concerned to have them meet a broad range of expectations, but especially Yale's (whose name goes on them) and the New Haven Schools (who are "paying for them"). Some of the Fellows find this pressure disagreeable, believing that it distracts them from the experience of personal intellectual growth which they understand to be the main purpose of the Institute. A visitor has few words of wisdom to offer, except to encourage the Institute to continue with the publication of either the curricular units or of some closely analogous written "end product." The pressure of this exercise focuses the energies of all but the most free-spirited of the Fellows, and it holds the teachers and the Yale Faculty in a common community.

The Fellows are not ordinary graduate students—and here again the original conception of the Institute is to be praised. To some extent, the Fellows and the Yale faculty are peers. The faculty are authorities in the subject matters of their seminars and in the disciplines they represent. The Fellows derive their authority, on the other hand, from their experiences as secondary school teachers. They know how their students behave in the classroom, and they have a keener, more detailed awareness of their personal and social lives than can the Yale faculty. This relationship as peers conditions somewhat the faculty's response to the early drafts and versions of the Fellows' curricular units. And it seems proper to me that it should. Though in some instances the intellectual skills of the Fellows are less well developed than those of a typical Yale freshman, the Yale faculty member does—and should—view his role in the writing and criticizing of curricular units as that of a demanding editor: he plays Maxwell Perkins to the Fellow's undisciplined Thomas Wolfe. This is on occasion, no doubt, a difficult fiction to maintain, but an important one.

The Teachers Institute has developed historically from a project originally devoted to the teaching of history. It works best, still, in the history seminars—the reasons for this would be interesting to speculate on. History is inherently a learned activity, depending on books, records, documents, the stuff of the classroom and study. There are things to be taught and learned. While the relationship between "reality" and its verbal representation in a narrative can, upon deep analysis, become infinitely complex, the ordinary person can go a long way, learning now this and now that about the historian's craft, without committing fatal blunders in the earlier stages along the way. Because the story he constructs concerns "real" people and events it can always be made interesting and instructive. None of the other studies offered in the Institute this year—language and composition, literature, drama, art history, ecology, and mathematics—

comes quite as easily and naturally to the classroom, where they are all slightly "displaced" from their "natural" setting.

Because these are all traditional school subjects, however, widely recognized as valuable approaches to the training of the young, the faculty and Fellows of the Institute are committed to "domesticating" them to the secondary classroom. As an outsider to secondary education I was impressed by how inexplicit this process of "domestication" seems to be in the schools. Again, history, on the day of my visit, was an exception. One of the Fellows gave a report to the seminar on "The Present as History" in which he outlined a curricular unit on the history of New Haven. In addition to detailing relevant documents and events, he went on to enumerate explicitly the intellectual skills he hoped to develop in his students by the end of the year. Not only was it a pleasure to hear a master teacher consider the details of his craft; it awakened me to how little of his kind of thinking seemed to be brought by the Fellows as a group to their work in the Institute.

If it is generally true that school curricula are specific about the subject matters that are to be taught at the various grade-levels, but not about the intellectual skills that such teaching is intended to develop in the students, then a conspicuous area exists in which the activities of the Institute and the curricular units produced by it can be of extraordinary value.

The most promising example of which I was aware on my visit was the seminar on "Problem Solving." The seminar leaders were superb teachers. I saw them in action and I had a long conversation with them the next morning at breakfast. The Fellows in their seminar, however, came to them with such divergent backgrounds in mathematics that it was difficult to discover common ground, either of topics or of rigor. It was difficult, too, to see how some of the Fellows would be able to use their experience in the Institute either for personal development or as teachers. Given an exceptionally talented and wise faculty the situation seemed discouraging. I began to understand, however, as I talked to the seminar leaders and to one or two of the Fellows, that the basic skills weakest in, say, eighth-grade students are scarely mathematical. Rather, what too frequently retards their development is an inabilty to move back and forth between ordinary language and the system of thought and symbols used in even elementary arithmetic and in science. As it was described to me by the Fellows, their students' weakness is a conceptualizing one, an inability, for example, to move from a prose statement to a statement of the same problem as a series of simple computational operations. The obverse is the inability, for example, to interpret a graph in ordinary language.

A basic conceptualizing weakness of this sort would undermine further

progress in a great many subjects, not only mathematics, but the natural and social sciences as well. It might disguise itself, in terms of a subject-matter-oriented school curriculum as a weakness in mathematics or science, whereas in fact it is anterior to them in the acquisition of skills. One is tempted to classify the development of these "pre-science cognitive skills" as, in terms of subject matter, falling more in the domain of "technical reading and writing" than of mathematics proper. Here I suspect, in other words, that an assessment of the intellectual weaknesses of students in school would show them to fall largely outside of the domain of mathematics and that, at the point of my visit at least, this was being demonstrated by the Teachers Institute. I would recommend, therefore, that the Institute offer instead of (or, preferably, in addition to) the *Problem Solving* seminar one in "Technical Reading and Writing" ("word problems") for middle-school teachers. It might be offered by almost any interested faculty member, perhaps ideally by a philosopher or psychologist.

History appears to occupy one extreme and mathematics the other, in the ability of the disciplines as they are understood in the university to contribute directly to the production of curricular units that are addressed to the intellectual development of students in secondary school—perhaps I should say of the students one worries most about in the New Haven schools.

The activity, for both the seminars and the curricular units, that seemed on my brief visit open to possible development was an examination—discipline by discipline—of what intellectual skills secondary students typically lack and what contribution a study of each discipline can make to their development. As frequently as we ask, "What does this teach the student about life?" we might also ask, "What does this teach the student to do with his mind?"

The answers to such questions are implicit in the activities of each seminar. The art history, literature, and drama seminars all deal with materials that have great power to affect students—both the Fellows themselves and the students in their classrooms. Such aesthetic experience is, of course, significant in itself. The analysis of that experience—what was it? what artistic elements produced it?—proceeds differently around a seminar table at Yale than in an eleventh-grade classroom. Ideally, however, the experience at Yale should lead from the question "What am I learning how to do?" to the question "What can I use this experience to teach my students how to do?"

The seminar on "Man and the Environment" seemed to work as easily and naturally as did the history seminar, which is to say that the topic, the discipline, the previous training and experience of the Fellows, and

the applicability of the seminar's content to the school curriculum all seemed compatible. It might be instructive, as with history, to examine why this is so. Both disciplines—history and ecology—focus steadily on the "real" world. Both can be respectably begun at an elementary level, in straightforward language, without great distortion; and yet each proceeds, at its most sophisticated development, to make powerful demands on the scholar, which, when satisfied, can produce statements of great interest and consequence to our understanding of the world.

I suspect that somewhere near the heart of any speculation about the education of urban secondary students the general question should be raised of language and its various uses in school. History and ecology begin in natural, literal language that is used to represent the real world. Soon, of course, the study of man in his environment requires the disciplined use of second "kind" of language: the special symbols and associated modes of thought that I referred to earlier as "technical reading and writing." The third "kind" of language is the metaphorical language of art, which creates its own world rather than attempting to refer directly to the real world. Some such analysis as this is, of course, implicit in Mr. Winn's seminar on "Language and Writing." Applying to this seminar my overall suggestion of greater explicitness in identifying the skills that the various disciplines are intended to foster, I might suggest that in some future year a seminar on language and writing be organized to illustrate only slightly more explicitly than is being done this year the kinds of reading and writing that children should learn how to do. Ideally, the readings and writings could be closely associated with either those of the other seminars or those suggested in the curricular units produced in the other seminars.

The Institute, as I reported at the outset, works very well. In an effort to discover why rather than simply to report the fact, one is impressed at every point with the steady intelligence, industry, and good will of a large number of people, most conspicuously its director and the outstanding Yale faculty he has recruited. The relationship of the Institute to the New Haven schools has been developed with ingenuity and good sense and depends, too, on the enlightened leadership of the schools at every level and on the devotion of the school Coordinators to their important duties.

At some point, it was decided that there would be only one class of membership in the Institute, that is no *ex officio* or "honorary" fellows. Every Fellow is expected to attend the lectures and seminars and to write a curricular unit. This was a sound decision. It may, however, because of their summertime duties, have made it difficult for the administrators of the New Haven schools to participate as fully as they might wish, especially the curriculum supervisors. The difficulty, of course, is that their

intellectual role in the schools cannot be separated from their "managerial" role, which would have a chilling effect on the other Fellows, who, by university standards, are already too reluctant to criticize each other's ideas and curricular units. But some way of recognizing the support of the supervisors, some listing or title, might suitably be arrived at.

Because the Institute depends so heavily on the manifold excellences of Yale, and on the good will of the New Haven schools, I wonder, in conclusion, to what degree it could be replicated at another university or could be extended beyond New Haven by Yale. As I stated at the beginning, it is important that the experiment be tried. My advice to anyone who attempted to establish such an Institute elsewhere would be to follow Mr. Vivian's scheme as closely as humanly possible. It requires access to the university's best, to its best faculty, its ambience of cultivated intellectual vigor, its special facilities and collections, such as those enjoyed by Mr. Miller's seminar in environmental sciences.

It also requires a deep and sympathetic understanding of how education works, from the technicalities of school administration on one hand to a necessary confidence in the power of an informed, imaginative, and energetic teacher to affect the lives of his students and his students' students.