On Common Ground®

Strengthening Teaching through School-University Partnership

YALE-NEW HAVEN TEACHERS INSTITUTE® NUMBER 17, SPRING 2026

ALMA WOODSEY THOMAS, *UNTITLED, 1968*

Strengthening Teaching through Conversations

By Richard Ekman

I was at the National Endowment for the Humanities in the 1970s when the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute was initially conceived and established. Both the NEH and the Teachers Institute were in the vanguard of pushing for partnerships between universities and public school districts. And Yale, unlike many other universities, was not only interested in expanding its commitment to the local community but also had the clear emphasis on content and the faculty to make that a credible approach.

The Teachers Institute model has been successful partly because the teachers create curriculum units rather than an entire curriculum. Their units are intended to supplement their existing curriculum rather than replace it. So the Institute engaged teachers in discussion and content, without it threatening what was going on in their own classrooms, or whatever prescribed curriculum there was for the system.

In the decades before the Institute, curricula were often created by curriculum specialists in schools of education. The Teachers Institute model implicitly asserted that teachers had the ability to create their own curriculum, especially with access to the resources of a university and the content expertise of faculty to support them. The Teachers Institute came about at a time when the idea that content emphasis was the best way to strengthen teaching and teachers was becoming increasingly accepted.

Collegiality was also central to the Institute's approach of bringing faculty and teachers together to focus on content. The Yale faculty have understood that dynamic very well. They are seen by the teachers as colleagues and fellow teachers, without detracting from the teachers' respect for the faculty's deep expertise.

In the 1990s, I was also part of the Institute's National Advisory Committee, which helped advise on the prospect of taking the Institute's work beyond New Haven. I think we all thought the model was good, and we were all optimistic that this idea could be adapted in other locations. It began with a National Demonstration Project in 1998 with four pilot Teachers Institutes in Houston, Pittsburgh, Santa Ana, and Albuquerque.

(continued on page 2)

The success of that project led directly to the creation of the Yale National Initiative to strengthen teaching in public schools, which was launched in 2005 to support establishing new Teachers Institutes.

The Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute was one of the earliest validations of the idea of a content-based partnership between a university and a public school district. It reinforced a relatively new but growing belief that institutions of higher education have a responsibility to their local communities. That view was not widely held in the 1970s. In the years since, however, it has become commonplace. The legacy of the Institute is in the relationships forged between the teachers and the faculty and the thousands of curriculum units by local and National Fellows that have been taught to school-children across the country.

Richard Ekman is President Emeritus of the Council of Independent Colleges. He was Director of the NEH Education Division when the Institute received its second major grant in 1982. He also served as a member of the Institute's National Advisory Committee, which helped support the pilot project that led to the Yale National Initiative.

Conversations, Dialogue, and Collegiality

By Michael Hattem

Established by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, the Yale National Initiative to strengthen teaching in public schools offered its first national seminars in 2005. As we commemorate the Initiative's recent twentieth anniversary, it is an apt time to reflect on this issue's theme of "conversations."

The Initiative has always been a teacher-led program that supports the grassroots efforts of teachers to establish their own local Teachers Institutes based on the Yale-New Haven model. In their origins and practice, the Yale National Initiative and the nine Teachers Institutes it has helped establish are products of ongoing conversations between teachers, faculty, district officials, and university administrators.

The Teachers Institute approach to professional development was first conceived by New Haven public school teachers in 1977. After participating in the Yale-New Haven History Education Project, which brought K-12 teachers together with Yale faculty, New Haven teachers took the initiative. They began conversations with Yale faculty and administrators about creating a program that would help teachers improve their content knowledge and create their own curricula. Launched in 1978, the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, a unique partnership between Yale University and New Haven Public Schools, was born directly out of these conversations started by teachers.

Institute seminars were designed by the teachers to be fundamentally collegial. Rather than being a top-down instructional experience, Institute seminars generate extended dialogue between seminar leaders and Fellows who share the common ground of being teachers. At the heart of this dialogue are conversations about content and pedagogy, with both Fellows and faculty contributing and learning from one another. As one Yale faculty member said after having led their first Institute seminar: "It felt like we were a room full of teachers figuring things out together."

As part of the seminars, each Fellow creates a curriculum unit based on their own research using the University's resources. This process includes extended one-on-one conversations between Fellows and seminar leaders, who help guide them through the research and writing process. Once completed, each Fellow teaches their curriculum unit in their own classroom, generating another set of conversations between them and their students. With many Fellows teaching their curriculum units multiple times, these conversations are regenerated regularly with new students taking the content into new directions.

From its conception to its establishment, from Institute seminars to the curriculum units, the entire process of a Teachers Institute is rooted in the theme and importance of conversations and dialogue between public school teachers and faculty, between school district and university officials, and between teachers and their students.

The Yale National Initiative has helped foster a similar dedication to conversations and dialogue between these groups. Each year, the Initiative names dozens of public school teachers from participating school districts "National Fellows."

Over the course of the year, National Fellows experience an intensive Institute seminar and write a curriculum unit. Just as importantly, they are given the opportunity to engage in conversations and dialogue with fellow teachers from their district, teachers of all grade levels from across the country, Yale faculty, and superintendents and school officials.

At every turn, conversations, dialogue, and collegiality between teachers, faculty, school officials, and university administrators have been at the heart of the Teachers Institute approach to professional development and the Yale National Initiative.

Michael Hattem is Associate Director of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute.

Contents

Celebrating 20 Years

1 Strengthening Teaching through Conversations
Richard Ekman

2 *Editorial* Conversations, Dialogue, and Collegiality
Michael Hattem

4 Two Decades of Consistent Results

National Seminars, 2022-2024

6 **Histories of Art, Race and Empire: 1492-1865**
Timothy Barringer

6 Teaching Race through Othello
Tyriese Holloway

7 Student Response
Shaqueah Henry

8 **Environmental Justice**
Jordan Peccia

8 How I Teach Environmental Issues to Fifth Graders
Akela Leach

9 Student Response
Oliver Shamel

10 *Pictorial* Twenty Years of the Yale National Initiative

12 **Alien Earths**
Sarbani Basu

13 An Out of This World Experience
Valerie Schwarz

13 Student Response
Elijah Robins

14 **Poetry as Sound and Object**
Feisal Mohamed

15 Teaching Navajo Poetry
Elizabeth Isaac

15 Student Response
Darius Wheeler

Reflections from Teachers Institutes

16 Teachers Institute of Philadelphia
Deven Patel

17 Delaware Teachers Institute
Dorrell Green

18 Teachers Institute for Tulsa
Tara McKee

19 Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
Kasalina Nabakooza

20 James Vivian Retires

From the Editors

This special issue of *On Common Ground* highlights the themes of conversations, dialogue, and collegiality and commemorates the recent twentieth anniversary of the Yale National Initiative to strengthen teaching in public schools. The issue begins with a brief reflection by Richard Ekman, President Emeritus of the Council of Independent Colleges, on the long-term significance of the Teachers Institute approach to professional development. It is followed by an editorial on the issue's key themes, and an article on key findings from twenty years of evaluations of the Yale National Initiative program.

The issue then highlights four recent national seminars with contributions from seminar leaders, National Fellows, and, for the first time, their students. It also includes a gallery of photographs from the past twenty years of the Initiative, reflections from leaders of four Teachers Institutes, and a commemoration of the retirement of James R. Vivian, the founding Director of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute and the Yale National Initiative.

This issue features the artwork of Alma Woodsey Thomas. Born in 1891, Thomas was a pioneering African American artist who taught art in D.C. Public Schools for over thirty-five years. Upon her retirement in 1960, she began developing a style of exuberant and poetic abstract painting that combined elements of the Washington Color School and pointillism. Landscapes, florals, and space travel were major themes in her work. After her first exhibition in 1966 at Howard University, Thomas became the first African American woman to receive a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1972 and the first to have her work hung in the public spaces of the White House in 2014. Thomas died in 1978 and in the decades since her work has become even more highly sought after. Her career as a public school teacher influenced her work as a groundbreaking artist and her life was a testament to the importance of teaching as a creative endeavor of self-expression.

Two Decades of Consistent Results

The Yale National Initiative to strengthen teaching in public schools promotes the establishment of Teachers Institutes in high-need school districts. Established in 2005, the Initiative adopts the approach developed by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute since 1978. Each year, the Initiative names dozens of K-12 teachers from participating locations and existing Teachers Institutes National Fellows. The Fellows participate in content-based, collegial seminars led by Yale faculty and develop a curriculum unit to teach their students in the coming year.

The annual cycle begins with a two-day Organizational Session at Yale in May, where Fellows are introduced to the program. They return to campus for a two-week Intensive Session in July, where they attend seminar meetings daily and work on their curriculum unit. Completed units are due in August and published on the Initiative website in September. In the fall, Fellows return for a two-day Annual Conference where they present their units and several students speak about learning from a Fellow's curriculum unit. All Fellows receive a stipend upon completion of the program in recognition of their achievement.

From its beginning, the Initiative has required Fellows to complete a questionnaire at the end of each cycle. These questionnaires have provided an opportunity to gauge teachers' experiences in the program, the benefits they receive from participation, and how the Initiative fits in with and differs from professional development opportunities in their districts. Over the last twenty years, despite the significant changes to the teaching profession in public schools, Fellows' evaluations of the program and its benefits have remained remarkably consistent. This article highlights both quantitative and qualitative results as they relate to some of the Initiative's core principles.

This article was produced by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute with contributions from reports prepared by Jaime Thomas, Founder and CEO of Format Consulting, LLC, and Ellen Eliason Kisker, former Managing Partner of Twin Peaks Partners, LLC.

Content Knowledge

The Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute pioneered using university resources to deliver content-based professional development for K-12 teachers. Improving teachers' knowledge of the subjects they teach strengthens teaching in the classroom. Nearly all of the 2005-2024 National Fellows agreed that by participating they gained knowledge of their subject and confidence in their ability to teach their subject (95%; 67% strongly agreed). They also have higher expectations of their students' ability to learn about the seminar subject (95%; 71% strongly agreed). The vast majority of Fellows report that participating made them pay closer attention to their teaching, led them to seek information from others, and led them to think about teaching in new ways. The Fellows have consistently reported increases in their level of preparation, confidence in the classroom, student expectations, and student engagement as a result of their participation.

> I gained a massive amount of knowledge and resources from the brief time I spent there. I feel more confident with my subject matter, and I have gained knowledge of new subject matter.
>
> *2005 National Fellow*

> Because I was able to marry deep content knowledge with an art of teaching, the students will receive more than a superficial covering of the skill or concept.
>
> *2011 National Fellow*

> My students have all responded well to my units and demonstrated a high level of learning. In fact, my YNI units are some of the best curriculum units I teach all year.
>
> *2019 National Fellow*

> YNI has shaped me into the teacher that I am. I have a very strong command of the content that I teach because of my participation over the years. This helps me to achieve strong academic outcomes with students.
>
> *2024 National Fellow*

Collegiality

Since 1978, collegiality has been a core principle of the Teachers Institute approach to professional development. National Fellows experience this principle first-hand in the Initiative's national seminars. Faculty seminar leaders and K-12 teachers serving as Fellows engage as colleagues. Faculty bring their content knowledge and subject expertise while Fellows bring their classroom experience and knowledge of pedagogy. Faculty and Fellows share the common ground of being teachers, and Fellows have consistently found value in their relationships with faculty. Between 2005 and 2024, more than 90% of National Fellows reported that their seminar leader was "useful to a great extent." At the same time, collegiality also defines the relationship between Fellows. Teachers always report that they highly value the unique opportunity of getting to meet and develop relationships with colleagues from across the country. Nearly 90% of National Fellows reported that their interactions with other Fellows were "useful to a great extent."

> One of the best parts of the program was meeting other teachers from all over the country. So much of what we shared both validated what I currently do in my room as well as added some great new ideas. In short – an eye-opening experience.
>
> *2005 National Fellow*

> The most memorable experience was the way professors took us on as equals to help improve the learning of our underrepresented public school students.
>
> *2012 National Fellow*

I truly appreciate the time in which I have to spend with other educators who are very positive about their practice, students, and the education field. Each of them becomes part of my network that will benefit me personally and professionally.

2016 National Fellow

The collaboration among Yale faculty members and public school teachers is a model of respect that public educators desire and deserve!

2024 National Fellow

Professionalism

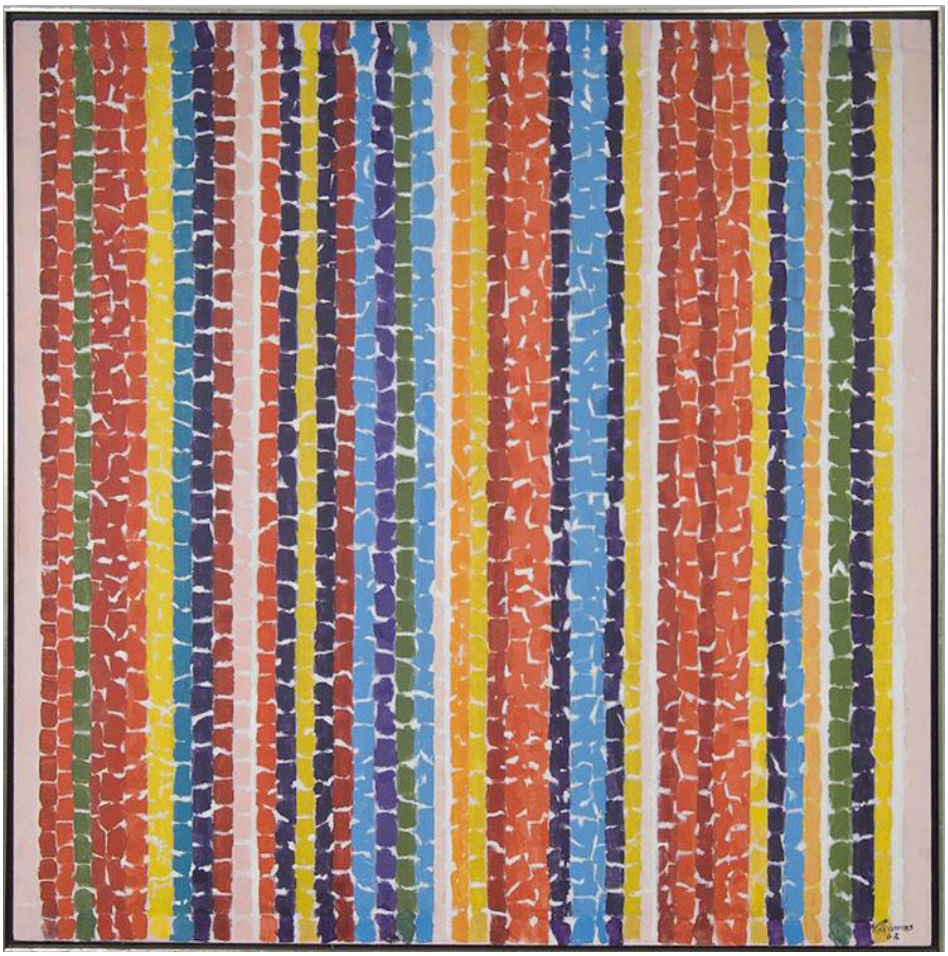
The Initiative treats teachers as professionals, by empowering them to create their own curriculum, to engage as colleagues with faculty, and to assume leadership roles in their schools and districts while remaining in the classroom. In this way, the core principles of content knowledge and collegiality combine to recognize and promote Fellows' sense of professionalism as teachers. Reinvigorating teachers' sense of professionalism increases their confidence and effectiveness in the classroom, their expectations of their students, and retention amongst Fellows who have participated. Between 2005 and 2024, 87% of National Fellows strongly agreed that participating in their seminar helped them grow professionally and intellectually.

My experience was a high point in my teaching career. We were made to feel important and people listened to what we had to say. That was important to all of us.

2005 National Fellow

This was an absolutely wonderful experience for me. I feel so respected and valued and those feelings truly give me an anti-burnout shot as I head into another school year with its inevitable challenges.

2018 National Fellow



ALMA WOODSEY THOMAS, *NATURE'S RED IMPRESSIONS*, 1968

My participation always increases my sense of professionalism and dedication as a classroom educator. It provides a great deal of pride in my scholastic and intellectual abilities and encourages me to continue challenging myself and expanding my knowledge. I receive none of these encouragements during the school year.

2018 National Fellow

This was the best professional development opportunity I have experienced. The most valuable aspect was being respected as a teacher and being given the time to deeply learn content from an expert.

2021 National Fellow

YNI has significantly impacted my journey as an educator. The experience of being supported, uplifted, and recognized as both a scholar and an educator has affirmed my passion for teaching.

2024 National Fellow

Conclusion

The Fellows' responses to the questionnaires show a remarkable consistency over two decades. The Initiative has remained committed to its original vision and program. This consistency in the administration of the program and the commitment of Fellows to its principles have produced two decades of consistent results and benefits for teachers and faculty.

Histories of Art, Race and Empire: 1492-1865

By Timothy Barringer

The world is changing around us with alarming speed. My 2023 national seminar, "Histories of Art, Race and Empire: 1492-1865," began with two questions: How can we use works of art to explore difficult histories and better understand present-day issues in historical perspective? How have race and ethnicity been understood throughout the history of North America, and how can works of art help us understand and critique this history?

These urgent issues are changing week by week, day by day, but more than ever we need to place them in longer historical contexts. Around the table in 2023 was a wonderful group of teachers, each Fellow lively, imaginative, committed, and exhausted after the challenges of the pandemic years. Every Fellow brought a different perspective to the topic at hand, rooted in their own experience and that of their students, as well as distinctive training, expertise, and knowledge of their local communities. We began with a roundtable discussion. All the Fellows reflected on the demographic and political contexts of the profound racial reckoning immediately occasioned by the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, and how it reflected decades, indeed centuries, of inequality. We could not predict that, subsequently, the ideological pendulum would swing drastically the following year: the 2023 curriculum units have become more, not less, relevant, in today's world.

We often consider looking at works of art to be a pleasure, one typically enjoyed by elite audiences. But if we look closely and carefully at paintings, drawings, prints and photographs—and even works such as maps and magazines not usually considered to be "art"—we can all find powerful traces of the beliefs and practices of earlier generations, as well as the lineage of our own conundrums and dilemmas. Looked at this way, museums and galleries become as important as libraries and websites for understanding the past.

The seminar made distinctive use of original historical materials available on Yale's campus, in New Haven, to explore key yet troubling questions in the art and history of the Americas and the Atlantic interculture. We spent the second half of every session in either the Yale University Art Gallery or the Yale Center for British Art, confronting and discussing works on the basis of readings and classroom discussion in the first half of the session. The intention was not to limit the relevance of curriculum units to those teaching within reach of Yale; quite the opposite. All the images of works in Yale's collections are available online for use by anyone, anywhere, free of charge.

Rather, the idea of the seminar was to model the importance of working with real historical items. We focused on how to look closely and critically at images, objects, and buildings in order to enhance students' historical and social understanding, their ability to relate past to present and to take the visual and material deposits of history as seriously as the written word. In a world where images on screens are dominant, skills of visual analysis and critique are ever more crucial. Every town or city in the United States has a history; that history is written in its urban fabric, material culture, and visual records. Students at every level, K through 12, can use this visual archive to explore the past of their own community.

Some curriculum units addressed the long history of the British Empire, beginning with early efforts at colonization and encounters with Indigenous Americans in the sixteenth century. Here we turned to works of art created by Indigenous people and representations of Indigenous life made by explorers and settler-colonists. Other units turned to the experiences of enslaved people, looking at both lives of forced labor and at creativity channeled into clothing, storytelling, image-making, and carnival arts. Historical and contemporary art, literature, and music were also invoked in imaginative ways to allow today's students to understand the present by confronting the past.

Timothy Barringer is Paul Mellon Professor in the History of Art at Yale University.

Teaching Race through *Othello*

By Tyriese Holloway

Teaching with integrity can be incredibly unglamorous at times, as many educators understand. When I wrote this curriculum unit, I was only in my third year of teaching high school, and lacked the confidence to effectively teach a Shakespeare play. Because much popular commentary on *Othello* is often misappropriated, ahistoricized and decontextualized, I spent a lot of time thinking about which "social lenses" would help my students both enjoy Shakespeare and have informed conversations about who he really is.

I racked my brain thinking about the conversations that I will have the responsibility to facilitate for my students. Will I teach about love, identity, or race? And then, the barrage of doubtful questions came pouring through. What if my students get bored? What if they disengage and think the play is a waste of time? But truth be told, my students were almost destined to talk about love, identity, and race.

When I started to teach the curriculum unit in November of 2023, I had to recognize that the world changed almost

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overnight since I first wrote it in June. Conversations around Islamophobia became hyper-visible again, and I had the responsibility to my students to hold discussions around religious identity in a cautious but convicted manner. I focused on the religious identity of Othello through my own perspective as an outsider-turned-interloper, being a non-Muslim teacher who has fallen in love with the culture and generosity of many Muslims in Philadelphia (both students and friends alike). I thought that both my Christian and Muslim students would connect with Othello's spiritual identity being a point of distrust for many of his detractors and enemies.

In the beginning of the unit, classroom learning culture was strong as many students were excited to pick apart and dissect the art paintings presented to them. However, I made the mistake of confusing rigor for learning early within the unit. I overprioritized students working hard to read college journal articles, take effective notes, and write literature reviews, and students became disengaged. I made a personal commitment to reprioritize student connection. They reconnected with each other through examining stage design and outfits through different *Othello* play interpretations, making their own scene summaries through drawing and art. And as a teacher, I focused less on assessments and prioritized class discussions instead.

In a world in which many Black students believe that they have to work twice as hard to get what white students are given them, in a world where adults (and teachers) are fearful of what the future of the workforce will look like with the dramatic influx of AI-inspired classwork, and the prevailing feeling that none of us are ever doing anything well enough, it is important to say that there is never a penalty on having a meaningful and purposeful connection with students. In a classroom context that has been deeply impacted by trauma, many students struggle with their right to exist unconditionally. A reflective and patient education casts doubt on why it was ever a question in the first place. I hope my experience will remind educators that there is never a wrong time to "switch gears" to make learning enjoyable and meaningful for students. It is one of the most loving acts that you can do as an educator.

KATHLEEN BALLARD, *ACTORS JAMES EARL JONES AND JILL CLAYBURGH IN LOS ANGELES STAGE PRODUCTION OF "OTHELLO"*, 1971

Student Response

By Shaqueah Henry

Representation was a major takeaway from this curriculum unit. Creating a diptych based on this topic has given me the opportunity to reflect on historical and contemporary depictions of oppressed populations. It was not easy, but because of this diptych I learned how to understand symbolism and use it to express such complexities through art. I learned the importance of metaphors and how each design tells a piece of a story. This helped me to create a visual language that communicates the alienation that Othello felt internally and externally. Another key learning point that I had was through having empathy for others. I reflected on times when I may have felt targeted and it caused me to think about the way new students who do not speak English feel at my school. High school can be an environment where everyone automatically judges you based on your appearance. I am happy to attend a high school where such behavior is not tolerated. Overbrook High School promotes empathy and understanding for other people.

This lesson underlined the necessity of learning about difference and diversity, especially in the society we live in today. *Othello* is topical and resonates in Philadelphia because of the city's large Muslim population, underlining the need for understanding in various school contexts. This subject provided me with the academic skills and information I needed to participate respectfully in a society that values cultural and religious diversity. Reading and watching *Othello* was challenging. I had to pay attention not just to what characters were saying but also what they were not saying and how their environment influenced them into who they are today. This book made me see literature and people differently. Everyone has a goal.

Shaqueah Henry graduated from Overbrook High School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 2025.

Environmental Justice

By Jordan Peccia

In the summer of 2023, I led a seminar on Environmental Justice for the Yale National Initiative. Justice is a consistent theme across nearly every environmental problem our world faces. Robust solutions must therefore consider not only technology, but the economies, cultures, and histories of the humans affected.

Environmental justice is the principle that all people and communities have a right to equal protection and equal enforcement of environmental laws and regulations. Our seminar explored the evidence for and consequences of environmental injustices. We examined how both current and historical policies have allowed, enabled, or even encouraged these inequalities. Initial readings and discussion focused on a review of environmental science. This included the basics of air pollution and water quality, as well as an exploration of how particulate matter in the air is linked to premature deaths. We used online tools to screen for environmental justice by linking race, economics, and social vulnerability to environmental pollution levels and human health risks.

Through a study of the embedded social costs of carbon, our seminar addressed climate change in the U.S. and abroad. Additionally, we examined the global distribution of plastic waste and how plastics used mostly in developed countries are then disposed of in entirely different, often more vulnerable, locations around the world. Finally, we listened to the voices of those impacted by environmental injustice by studying grassroots activism and reading essays from individuals who are adversely and uniquely affected by environmental contamination.

When leading a national seminar, I always learn from the Fellows. My original intent of this seminar was to focus on the environmental justice question as defined by the U.S. EPA, where they ask if a population is forced to bear a disproportionate share of the negative human health or environmental impacts of pollution. The rational approach to answering this question is to use statistical analysis, human health data, and environmental science to inform practices and regulations that address unjust environmental exposures. The Fellows in our seminar pulled me toward a broader treatment of the topic. We discussed how scientific and quantitative approaches to identifying environmental injustices place power in the hands of those who have the ability to conduct these technical analyses and predefine what negative impacts are important. They taught me to humanize the topic, to listen to the voices of the victims, and to explore and recognize the grassroots efforts that have been so effective in the environmental justice movement.

The Fellows' units covered a variety of environmental topics including climate change, solid waste disposal, plastic recycling, and air pollution while identifying societal and governmental practices that embed injustice. Akela Leach wrote a unit for fifth graders on the global problem and distribution of plastic waste. Her unit exemplifies the strength of the Teachers Institute model where talented teachers absorb new information and topics and make them meaningful and impactful for their students. She observed her students' growing awareness of plastic waste, and developed activities which helped students recognize how disposable plastic is embedded in their daily lives. Her lessons showed students the volume of plastic waste they generate and taught them where that waste goes and how their actions impact others around the world.

Jordan Peccia is Thomas E. Golden, Jr. Professor of Chemical & Environmental Engineering at Yale University.

How I Teach Environmental Issues to Fifth Graders

By Akela Leach

I participated in Jordan Peccia's seminar on Environmental Justice. We had several intense conversations about the various ways vulnerable communities disproportionately face the impacts of global warming. I happened to be the only elementary teacher in my seminar that year. While the discussions were highly beneficial to me as a teacher, I knew some of the topics we discussed would not be appropriate for my fifth-grade students. Still, I did not want to water down information, because pre-teens want to feel as though adults are being real with them. After vacillating over different topics, I finally settled on plastic pollution. Every student recognizes plastic bottles and can recognize their presence everywhere.

After the COVID-19 pandemic, water fountains were not turned on in our buildings due to safety precautions. So, students began bringing water bottles to school more frequently. In early 2020, before the pandemic even began, tweens toted reuseable water bottles as a fashion statement. It showed that they cared about the world. I saw the trend of fancy reusable water bottles at school as an opportunity to pique Generation Alpha's interest. Plastic is of course not just in bottles, but everywhere. Students are often surprised to learn that plastic is in clothes, furniture, food containers, and packaging, among other things. I begin the unit by showing students a couple photos of plastic that has remained intact for over 50 years on the ocean floor. When they first view the

Akela Leach is a Fifth-Grade Teacher at Lanier Elementary School in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

photos, students are asked to take note of which objects have not deteriorated. Immediately, they recognize that the plastic bag in one of the photos appears to be usable. I then explain that 800 million tons of plastic end up in the ocean every year.

Next, students learn how plastic is created and how the strong molecular bonds create chains called polymers. The polymer bonds make plastic indestructible. I have students demonstrate the concept by having three to four students link by holding hands. Then they link by interlocking their arms. The interlocking arms represent the polymers. For fifth-grade science, students only need to have a basic concept that plastic is strong down to the molecular level, which is why we cannot get rid of it yet. We learn that wealthier nations contribute more to plastic pollution, yet poorer nations face the impact of the pollution in their communities. Wealthy nations send their plastic trash to poorer countries, and the trash pollutes their waterways and sewage systems.

After learning about plastic's properties, students collaborate on public service announcement projects. In groups of three to four, students create a poster and a one-minute video encouraging their fellow schoolmates to use less plastic. I give students a template for deciding group roles and for taking notes. I pre-select a few articles from National Geographic Kids and allow them to use the online encyclopedia and databases provided by our school district. They "partner read" the articles and take notes using the templates. They must have a slogan and include at least three facts that they researched on their poster and in their video.

By 2050, an estimated 51 trillion pieces of plastic debris will be in the ocean. The plastic will remain there for over 1,000 years. My students will be adults by 2050. They will be settling into their lives, building careers, and starting new families. While we cannot predict the future, we know that the overwhelming plastic pollution will impact the planet.

Student Response

By Oliver Shamel

Speaking at Yale University was a very great experience. When I was in fourth grade, I made a speech for student council. I got elected as Sergeant at Arms. The next year my fifth-grade teacher, Ms. Leach, asked me if I would like to do a speech at Yale. She knew that she could count on me to give a good speech in front of a crowd of people. I said yes and started working on it right away. Ms. Leach helped me a lot going through everything.

Finally, the day came. I went on a plane and took off to Connecticut. A fancy bus picked us up at the airport and took us to the hotel in New Haven. It was a little awkward because everybody said they looked forward to hearing my speech, but I did not know most of the people. The next day we visited the campus. There weren't any phones out, and some people would just have a book in their hand reading on their way to class. After visiting the campus, we went to the Yale bookstore, and I got two sweatshirts.

Next, it was time for me to go and give my speech. As I got on stage, I was very nervous. My speech was about plastic pollution and how it affects the Earth. I talked about how plastic ends up in the ocean and kills many species. Animals eat the plastic and think that they are full, but they are not, and they die of starvation. In class, my group made a video and our slogan was, "Be the solution, not the pollution!" After the speech, the audience asked questions, which also made me nervous. But I answered all the questions. Then I walked around and shook everyone's hands. Everyone told me how well I did. I felt happy and relieved. Speaking at Yale University about what I learned from Ms. Leach's unit on plastic pollution was the best experience. I will never forget it.

Oliver Shamel is a Seventh-Grade Student at Carver Middle School in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

THE OCEAN AGENCY, *TRASH ON BEACH, INDONESIA*, 2018

Twenty Years of the Yale National Initiative

Founding Director James Vivian at the first Intensive Session, July 2005

Rogers Smith leading a 2005 national seminar

Roger Howe leading a 2010 national seminar

U.S. Undersecretary of Education Ted Mitchell speaking at the 2015 Invitational Conference

Jessica Brantley leading a 2015 national seminar

Fellows from the Navajo Nation at the 2017 Intensive Session

Paul Turner leading a 2014 national seminar

Yale National Fellows and visiting faculty on campus, 2013

Yale National Fellows at the Intensive Session, 2023

Alien Earths

By Sarbani Basu

Are we alone in the Universe? That is a question we often ask ourselves. The discovery of planets around other stars has been one of the most exciting astronomical discoveries in the last decade of the 20th century. Since then, Giordano Bruno has been proved to be correct; thousands of extrasolar planets, also called exoplanets, have been discovered. Many multi-planet systems have been observed as well, most of them very different from our own solar system. Consequently, when I was requested by the Yale National Initiative to lead a seminar, I suggested "Alien Earths," where we would discuss whether we can answer the questions: "Are there other planets like the Earth?" and "Are these planets habitable?"

In my 2022 seminar, I had seven enthusiastic Fellows from places as close as Washington, DC, and as far as the Navajo Nation. They included science teachers and language teachers, and even art teachers. They brought with them their teaching skills and a keen interest in learning new material and in discovering the best ways to teach it. I learned as much from them as they learned from me.

We began our seminar by examining the planets in our solar system because, except possibly for Mars, all other planets are pretty alien! We discussed the details of Earth's structure and its various ecosystems. This led us to explore the properties of the Sun and other stars; after all, a planetary system's host determines many of its properties. Then we moved farther away from the Earth to examine exoplanets and habitability. I am not a biologist or a biochemist, which meant that exploring the concept of habitability was enlightening for all of us.

We learned that having liquid water on the surface, which is how astronomers usually define habitability, is not sufficient; properties of planetary atmospheres and their composition also matter. This realization brought us to more speculative aspects of habitability: when we discuss habitability, we also invariably think of carbon-based, and particularly DNA/RNA-based life, but what if there are life forms that are completely dissimilar, based on some other elements? Would we even recognize them as being alive? Which leads to the partly philosophical and very practical question of how "life" is defined.

NASA, *WEBB'S FIRST DEEP FIELD UNVEILED*, 2022

We were fortunate that the first results from the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST) were released on July 12, 2022, when the Fellows were in New Haven. The results included transmission spectroscopy of the atmosphere of exoplanet WASP-96b, a gas giant about half the mass of Jupiter but with a larger radius, orbiting a star about 1,100 light years away. The results indicated that there is water in the planet's atmosphere, which, of course, was very exciting given what we were covering in the seminar.

Unfortunately, the result did not stand the test of time, and it turned out that the signature of water was from the host star's atmosphere. However, since then, JWST has detected water vapor in other exoplanet atmospheres, and those results have been confirmed. Nevertheless, this and the other beautiful first-light results were further motivation for the Fellows and brought home the realization that we were discussing cutting-edge science in the seminar.

The seminar resulted in some outstanding curriculum units that deal with the solar system, life on earth and elsewhere, the role of gravity, writing science fiction, and connecting modern astronomy to Diné mythology about the solar system and the Universe.

Sarbani Basu is William K. Lanman, Jr. Professor of Astronomy at Yale University.

An Out of This World Experience

By Valerie Schwarz

When I learned that I would participate in the Alien Earths seminar led by Sarbani Basu, I was nervous! Even though I had completed more than a dozen Yale National Initiative seminars, the topic scared me. No, not because I am afraid of aliens or life on another planet, but because my experience with planetary science was woefully inadequate.

At the end of April, the first seminars took place. The Fellows seemed like a great group and the seminar leader, Sarbani Basu, was humble and supportive, which was comforting. In May, I delved into the reading period. I began researching, mostly on the NASA website, since it has current information, and recorded copious notes. The reading provided information and facts, but the images, presentations, and knowledge that Basu shared in seminar brought the topic to life. She shared the first deep field photograph from the Webb telescope, which had just been released that day. She revealed that the patch of sky shown in the image was equivalent to a grain of sand held up with an extended arm from Earth! I was in awe!

My curriculum unit "There's No Space Like Home" examines the characteristics of each planet and the potential for habitability. The unit also explores moons, dwarf planets, and exoplanets, which orbit a star other than our sun. As I developed the unit, I wanted students to better understand how vast the solar system is.

The next step was to teach the curriculum unit. I used information and images that Dr. Basu had shared in the seminar to explain concepts. The image helps young students see how scientists are able to classify dwarf planets differently from planets. After providing some background knowledge, the students embarked on four main activities. First, the students created a slide presentation by working in pairs or triads to research and develop a slide about a planet in the solar system. Then the class used place value to order the planets based on size. Then they calculated the relative size of each planet compared to Earth, which they modeled with playdough. Students used chalk on the sidewalk to model the planets' distance from the sun. Finally, the class designed, built, and launched rockets. We used air pressure and a rocket launcher left behind by a retired teacher.

Had I not been in the Alien Earths seminar, I would not have written a powerful curriculum unit for my students. I am relieved that I no longer teach my students about the solar system with subpar knowledge! The seminar experience also sparked an interest in me. I frequently find myself reading about the newest space discovery and of course I have to share it with my students!

Valerie Schwarz is a Fourth-Grade Teacher at Mary Munford Elementary School in Richmond, Virginia.

Student Response

By Elijah Robins

In my lifetime I never thought I would be able to present at Yale, but I was fortunate to be invited to speak there when I was in fourth grade! I was extremely lucky to have Ms. Schwarz as my teacher. She introduced my class to her Yale curriculum unit about planets, exoplanets, dwarf planets, and moons. The Yale National Initiative impacted me in two ways: learning from the curriculum unit and presenting what I learned at Yale helped me get a better grasp on space.

The curriculum she taught us was more hands-on and it helped me and other students easily learn the lessons she was teaching. We did three memorable projects: a playdough planet model of the solar system, building rockets, and exoplanet and moon slides. The planet model helped us visualize how far the planets were from each other. The rocket project helped us understand how hard it was to be a NASA engineer and think about how aerodynamic the rocket had to be. We rolled paper and used duct tape to make the rockets. When launching them, my group's rocket was launched onto the roof of the school. While making the exoplanet and moon slides, we learned Titan orbits Saturn, is the second largest moon in our solar system, and has rivers, lakes, and seas on its surface. Scientists believe that Titan might have life because of the water on its surface. On Titan, its atmosphere is so alike to Earth's that you do not need a spacesuit, you just need an oxygen mask and something to keep you warm. I believe the unit helped my classmates understand science better.

Before I got up to speak, I was nervous, but I was lucky to have a conversation with Superintendent Dorrell Green of the Red Clay Consolidated School District in Wilmington, Delaware. He told me, "You belong here." While I was presenting to a room full of adults, I was nervous in the beginning, then I fell into my groove. It boosted my confidence when I told my jokes, and the audience found the humor in them. When I was done, he told me that he enjoyed my presentation. I reflected on what Superintendent Green said and what it meant to me, coming from another Black man.

Speaking at Yale helped my confidence with prepping and delivering public speeches. When I came back, I ran for my school's governmental positions of vice president in fourth grade and president in fifth grade. And I won both! The Yale National Initiative helped me improve my understanding of space and become a better public speaker.

Elijah Robins is a Seventh-Grade Student at Franklin Military Academy in Richmond, Virginia.

Poetry as Sound and Object

By Feisal Mohamed

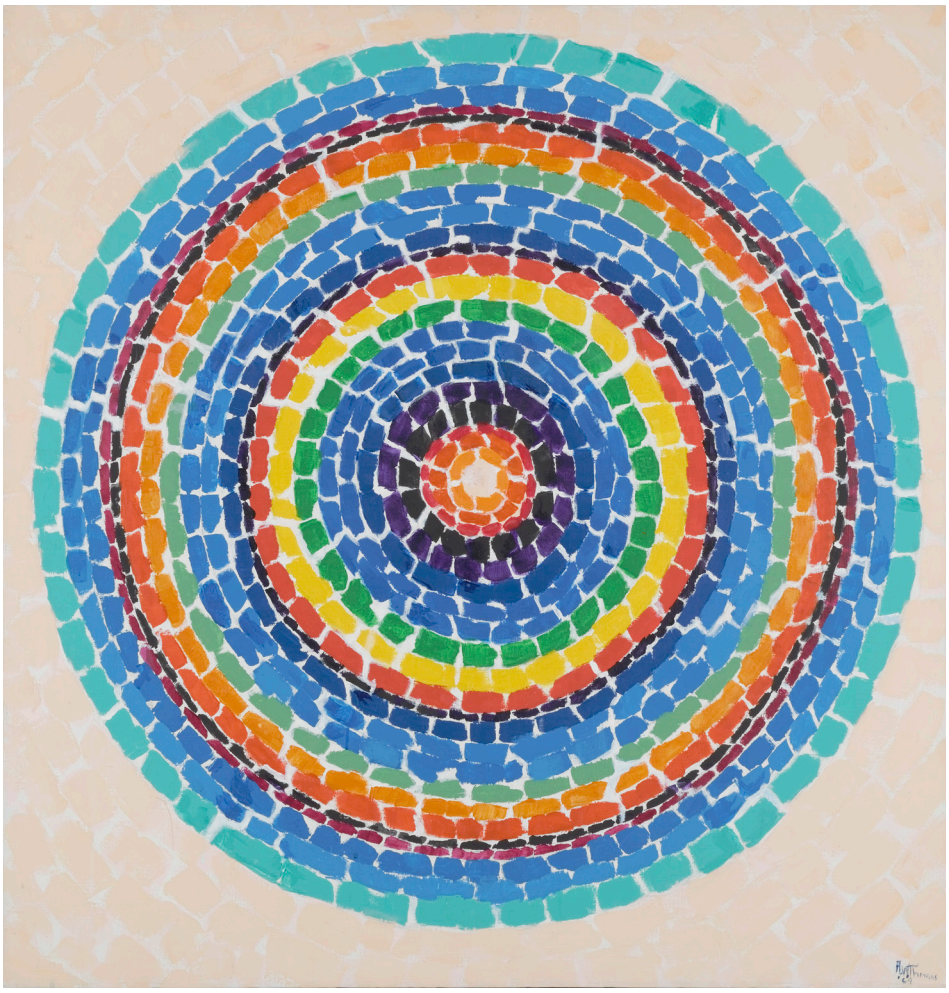
This seminar grew out of my feeling that skills-based approaches to reading pedagogy are squeezing poetry out of K-12 curricula. That trend is, among other things, counter-productive, given that reading poetry best trains higher-level reading skills, such as close attention to diction and syntax. It demands that we make sense of figurative language, and articulate meanings on the edge of the articulable. Most importantly, reading poetry is an invitation to delight in language. Through collaborative discussion amongst teachers of all grades, the seminar explored ways in which we might make students' encounters with poetry a source of pleasure and excitement. Guiding that discussion was our emphasis on "sound and object," which is to say poetry as performance sharing ground with drama, and as art object sharing ground with the visual arts. Such an approach allows even familiar and oft-taught poems to be seen in a new light.

As a text anchoring these ongoing conversations, we turned repeatedly to Tyehimba Jess's Pulitzer-Prize winning book of poems *Olio* (2016), a history in verse of unrecorded Black performance in the period between the Civil War and the First World War. Through this subject, Jess explores questions of enslavement and freedom, of the liberating power of art and its creation of new social bonds, and of the triumph of Black performance in wresting aesthetic achievement from the teeth of anti-blackness. That the book has many visual and tactile components, and that portions have been performed and recorded, make it an excellent example of poetry that demands to be encountered as both sound and object. The seminar also visited the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library on several occasions, availing ourselves of its peerless holdings on writers of the Harlem Renaissance; engaged in some hands-on printing, setting type and working the press in the basement of Jonathan Edwards College; and took a field trip to Governor's Island for New York City's Poetry Festival, which featured an array of readings and poetry-themed activities lending themselves to classroom use.

Teachers in the seminar also consistently pointed to poetry as a valuable tool in social-emotional learning, allowing students to become more attuned to their feelings and gain confidence in expressing them. They become more contemplative observers of themselves and of their world. Rather than alienating students, poetry, rightly used, can be a tool for meeting students where they live, in terms of student reading, writing, and engagement.

In my 2024 seminar, Elizabeth Isaac wrote a unit for students as young as third grade centered on the Navajo concept of *Hózhó*, or "beautyway." As I learned from Elizabeth's unit, *Hózhó* refers to a self-cultivation allowing for attunement to beauty. She has combined traditional Navajo chants with contemporary Native American poetry, namely the work of Orlando White and Joy Harjo, the first Native American U.S. Poet Laureate. It is a wonderful example that reflects the seminar's core aim of making poetry available across grades, and also of using poetry to draw greater cultural diversity into the classroom.

Feisal Mohamed is Professor of English at Yale University.



ALMA WOODSEY THOMAS, *WIND DANCING WITH SPRING FLOWERS*, 1969

Teaching Navajo Poetry

By Elizabeth Isaac

In 2024, I participated in the seminar on "Poetry as Sound and Object," led by Feisal Mohamed. The seminar changed my outlook on poetry. I was constantly thinking of ways to incorporate the environment in my writing lesson and bring it all to life for a purpose. My ears were a magnet to sound, the pattern of sounds around me, the voices, the music, the chants and the expression or message of others opened ideas into my classroom. The seminar helped me think of ways to make writing fun and interesting while also encouraging students to develop a positive mindset about themselves and their surroundings. The effects were astounding.

I teach third grade on the Navajo Reservation. Our school, Tsaile Public School, is located in the northeastern corner of Arizona near the border with New Mexico. The school has an enrollment of 99% Navajo students. Therefore, I developed a curriculum unit that was tailored to the needs of our Navajo students and to the sensitivity of the Navajo culture and tradition. I used the Navajo teaching of *Hózhó*, a concept relating to self-awareness and respect for oneself or the "beauty way of life." When used in any Navajo conversation, *Hózhó* is a powerful word that connects self-identity and well-being to our environment, all life on earth, and to the universe. As part of the unit, students read poems from Joy Harjo and Orlando White, who are Native American poets that have written their own poems drawing on the teaching of *Hózhó*. We also looked at artwork from the Native American artist Shonto Begay.

The seminar helped me create a unit that not only taught students about poetry but also about their Navajo culture. Dr. Mohamed helped me to bring out the emotions of students using *Hózhó* and to write poetry in a fun way. Through the seminar, I learned that writing poetry can increase students' self-esteem, bring out their artistic side, and help them connect with others and the world around them.

SHONTO BEGAY, *EYES OF THE WORLD*, 2019, SHONTOBEGAY.NET

Elizabeth Isaac is a Third-Grade Teacher at Tsaile Elementary School on the Navajo Nation in Arizona.

Student Response

Darius Wheeler

Poetry is one of my favorite ways to write. I learned many things about poetry in Ms. Isaac's class. I first learned about the parts or elements. She taught me about stanzas and lines, which are like paragraphs and sentences. We also learned about free writing, where there are no real rules. Sometimes you don't even need a period! Poetry can be a happy, sad, mad, or depressing story.

Ms. Isaac taught us to use poetry to express ourselves. We used rhyming and patterns to talk about who we are. We wrote a poem about ourselves and even our friends and family. This allowed us to share with others about how we feel. In addition, we learned to write about our environment. I wrote about a tree and how I thought the tree felt.

Ms. Isaac taught us about erasure poetry. I thought that was cool! We read a paragraph out of a text. After reading, we blacked out several words or sentences and gave it a new meaning or a simple meaning. That was interesting because everyone had different outcomes from the same text. It helped us see a different view point of a text by taking out words.

Another thing we learned about was using sounds. We hear sound all around us. We listened to poems written by a local poet who used some of the Navajo words and mixed it with English words to express his feelings about objects. So, we used objects and sounds and a few Navajo words we learned in our own writing. We have also heard other poems written about our Navajo culture by other poets. Ms. Isaac also shared some Navajo songs or chants that she said are like poems. It was a good feeling to share about myself and find a creative way to write. I still have to write a poem about my grandmother who takes care of me and my siblings. I have a lot to share about her.

Darius Wheeler is a Fourth-Grade Student at Tsaile Elementary School on the Navajo Nation in Arizona.

Reflections from Teachers Institutes

Teachers Institute of Philadelphia

By Deven Patel

Over the past several years, I have had the distinct privilege of leading three seminars for the Teachers Institute of Philadelphia (TIP). Each experience has reshaped my understanding of what teaching can be: not a unidirectional transfer of knowledge, but a collaborative, living exchange animated by the needs, insights, and experiences of those gathered around the seminar table. The theme of this issue, "Conversations," beautifully captures what makes TIP so vital: it is not a top-down enterprise but a genuinely collegial undertaking, where learning unfolds through shared inquiry, mutual respect, and deep listening.

The seminars I offered on the storytelling traditions of South Asia and the Middle East, on contemplative practices across the world's religions, and on the meditation traditions of Asia, emerged from ongoing conversations about what Philadelphia's educators most needed and wanted. Whether the challenge involved navigating the complexities of teaching world religions in public school classrooms or finding meaningful ways to introduce students to cultural traditions often perceived as remote or mysterious, each seminar was rooted in a desire to make intellectually rich content accessible and relevant. From the start, the pedagogy was dialogic, structured not around prescriptive outcomes but around shared curiosity and the responsiveness of a community of practice.

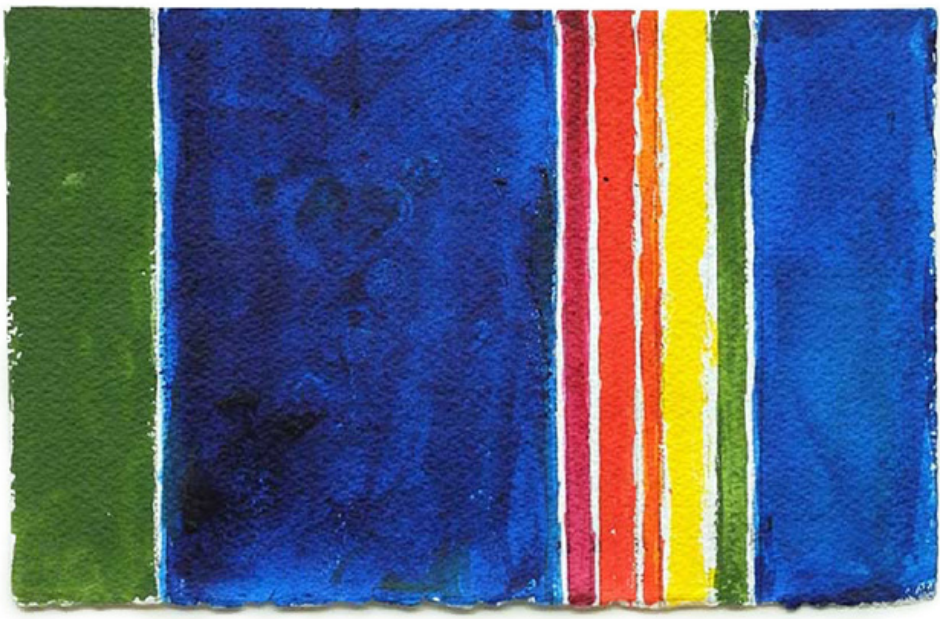
Still, no matter how carefully I designed a syllabus or envisioned the arc of our meetings, the seminars consistently evolved beyond their original scaffolding. Once the cohort of teacher Fellows assembled, our sessions acquired a momentum and nuance that could never have been scripted in advance. These were not passive participants; they were co-inquirers, bringing deep wells of pedagogical insight, cultural knowledge, ethical concern, and classroom-tested wisdom. The resulting conversations were not only intellectually invigorating, but transformative.

I recall a moment in our seminar on storytelling traditions when a Fellow's observation sparked a far-reaching conversation about bridging classical fables and contemporary narrative forms. In another seminar, focused on contemplative practices, we wrestled with how to introduce meditation in public school settings without erasing its religious and philosophical contexts. These were not abstract debates; they arose directly from the lived challenges teachers face in their classrooms and communities.

What I most value about TIP is its profound respect for both scholarly depth and pedagogical practicality. As a university faculty member, I was invited into partnership with public school educators whose expertise lies in shaping young minds under conditions of extraordinary social and institutional complexity. Together, we sought ethically grounded ways to make intricate ideas teachable, meaningful, and alive. And the conversations never end with the seminar itself. They ripple outward into the curriculum units teachers create, into the communities they serve, and into the ways university faculty like me reflect on our own teaching and research. I often return to questions raised by teacher Fellows and moments that have subtly but powerfully reshaped my thinking about literature, religion, pedagogy, and cultural translation.

In an educational landscape increasingly shaped by standardization and top-down mandates, TIP offers a rare and necessary alternative: a space where education is reimagined as conversation; collegial, rigorous, and deeply human. I am honored to be part of that dialogue and look forward to the conversations to come.

Deven Patel is Professor of South Asia Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Pennsylvania.



ALMA WOODSEY THOMAS, *GIVE LOVE HOPE FOR PEACE*, 1971

Delaware Teachers Institute

By Dorrell Green

In education, we often speak of transformation, but too often, the focus is on policy shifts or top-down mandates. True transformation, however, begins at the grassroots level in the authentic conversations among educators who are committed to the craft of teaching and the success of every student. My experience with the Delaware Teachers Institute (DTI), in partnership with the Yale National Initiative, affirms that the most enduring change starts when teachers are given the time, space, and respect to lead their own learning.

DTI exemplifies the best of what professional development should be: intellectually rigorous, deeply relevant, and rooted in collegiality. Its foundation, drawn from the nationally recognized model of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, is built on a simple but powerful premise: that teachers, as scholars and practitioners, are the most important drivers of student learning.

What distinguishes DTI is its unwavering belief in teacher agency. Educators do not merely attend seminars; they become Fellows. They choose the seminar topics that align with their students' needs, engage in intensive study alongside university faculty, and create original curriculum units that reflect both academic scholarship and real-world classroom application. These seminars are more than workshops; they are authentic intellectual communities where public school teachers and university professors collaborate as equals in a spirit of mutual respect.

As a Superintendent, I have seen how this model of partnership transforms teachers. They return to their classrooms energized, equipped not just with new content knowledge, but with a renewed sense of purpose and confidence. They've grappled with big ideas across literature, history, science, and the arts and translated them into learning experiences that are culturally relevant, academically rigorous, and emotionally resonant for their students.

These Fellows become more than curriculum developers; they become instructional leaders in their schools and advocates for equity in their districts. This is transformational pedagogy in action, not a passing trend or a top-down strategy, but a bottom-up movement driven by teachers who are empowered to reimagine what's possible for their students.

> The conversations that begin in DTI seminars ripple outward. They shape lesson plans, school cultures, and student outcomes.

And the impact is visible. I've walked into classrooms where students are engaging in original research, exploring historical narratives that reflect their lived experiences, or conducting science experiments that connect global issues to local realities. These are not abstract improvements. They are the direct result of the professional growth that teachers experience through DTI and the Yale National Initiative.

DTI also offers something that is increasingly rare in public education: "professional joy." Teachers often describe the seminar experience as "invigorating," "restorative," and "the reason I stayed in the profession." In a time when teacher burnout is a national concern, the Institute provides a space for teachers to feel seen, valued, and intellectually challenged. That kind of affirmation is not only good for morale, it's good for schools, for students, and for entire communities.

Just as important, DTI strengthens the bond between K-12 schools and institutions of higher education. The seminars hosted in collaboration with the University of Delaware and Yale University break down the silos that too often separate theory from practice. They affirm that scholarship is not confined to college campuses, but is alive and flourishing in public school classrooms across Delaware.

As a district leader, I am deeply grateful for the capacity DTI builds, not just in individual teachers, but across entire school systems. It enriches the instructional core, advances educational equity, and nurtures the professional capital we so urgently need to retain in our schools.

Ultimately, the conversations that begin in DTI seminars ripple outward. They shape lesson plans, school cultures, and student outcomes. They influence how teachers see themselves and how students see their possibilities. And they remind us that when educators are given the time, space, and respect to learn together, remarkable things happen.

In this season of urgency and opportunity, the Delaware Teachers Institute and the Yale National Initiative offer us a roadmap—not just for professional development, but for professional transformation. I remain committed to supporting this work because I've seen its power: "One conversation at a time."

Dorrell Green, Ed.D., is Superintendent of the Red Clay Consolidated School District in New Castle County, Delaware.

Teachers Institute for Tulsa

By Tara McKee

There are many conversations surrounding education and teacher shortages, especially in the state of Oklahoma, which ranks near the bottom in most education metrics. Amid all the chatter on social media, the news, and in-person, one thing I find intriguing is the lack of solutions that truly lift teachers up, solutions that treat teachers as professionals and say, "We trust your expertise." Right now, most conversations focus on data and student outcomes on high-stakes standardized tests. Their solutions are one-size-fits-all, minimizing teachers' professionalism. We rarely experience the respect we deserve as public school teachers and are often met with distrust from parents, administration, and divisive politicians. The Teachers Institute approach, however, values mutual benefit, appreciation, and respect among all participants.

I helped start and have participated in the Teachers Institute for Tulsa (TIfT), which focuses on teacher autonomy, collegiality, and reigniting teachers' passion for content. Using the Institute model, I have researched and written peer-reviewed curriculum units for my students, becoming more knowledgeable and confident as a teacher in the process. The units I have created are my students' favorites. They ask if we will be doing projects from my units—such as a movie trailer or a fictional anthropological study—because they have heard about them from former students. My TIfT and Yale National Initiative units spark conversation, as students recognize my passion and excitement for the subject matter. They can tell the difference between canned curriculum and units I have crafted, and they overwhelmingly prefer the latter. TIfT has given me the time to research, think about standards, and create something unique and fun for my students, allowing me to focus on my craft. Teachers Institutes celebrate the art of teaching, a rarity in today's business-run professional development landscape.

ALMA WOODSEY THOMAS, *SPRING DELIGHT*, 1969

Through TIfT, I also met a network of K-12 teachers across Tulsa. Teachers are often isolated within their grade or subject area, and this program fosters a sense of community beyond individual school sites. The Institute model encourages relationships with the university, where professors become colleagues in true partnership and collaboration, and learn from teachers' pedagogical expertise. This community, collegiality, creativity, and collaboration inspires teachers like me to stay in Tulsa and teach, despite many challenges. TIfT has motivated teachers to remain in the profession because of what it offers. With all the discussion about improving education, the solution is clear: Teachers Institutes, created and run by teachers, partnered with a university, and centered on students. TIfT is exactly what Tulsa needs: a professional learning opportunity that is not one-size-fits-all and treats teachers as professionals. We do not need multimillion-dollar companies creating generic curriculum; we need Tulsa teachers designing curriculum for their students, shared across the district and beyond. The solution is simple: trust teachers, let them research and write curriculum, foster strong professional networks, and teachers will stay. TIfT has kept me in the classroom and made me a leader determined to refocus the conversation on what matters most: teachers, students, and the ongoing need for Teachers Institutes, especially the Teachers Institute for Tulsa.

Tara McKee is an English Teacher at Booker T. Washington High School in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute

By Kasalina Nabakooza

Walking the Connecticut shoreline this August I picked up a worn sticker of an orange butterfly from the sandy ground. Later that day I pasted it in my artist commonplace book and wrote a sticker digital art lesson for grades 6 and 7.

This fall, my students will work collaboratively to brainstorm ideas, then use a bank of curated images to design their own stickers in small groups. Using the classroom computer, they will create their designs and reflect on their development process through a rubric based on the elements of art.

As a Fellow, you develop camaraderie with colleagues and continue meaningful conversations well beyond the duration of your seminar. I shared my sticker lesson idea with the Fellows in Professor Timothy Barringer's 2025 Yale National Initiative seminar, entitled "Art, Design, and Biology." I also sought feedback from Christopher Snyder, a fellow art teacher from Pittsburgh Public Schools. Christopher and I previously participated in Professor Barringer's 2024 seminar "Landscape, Art, and Ecology." My curriculum unit from that seminar, "Why Mosses Matter," was designed for eighth grade and included a classroom terrarium. At our final reception, Professor Barringer gifted each of us an artwork; mine was a terrarium sticker.

INSTITUTE SEMINAR ON 20TH CENTURY AFRO-AMERICAN CULTURE LED BY CHARLES DAVIS, 1978

Some of my most memorable experiences during the Intensive Session have been the conversations with colleagues and the professors leading our seminars. Professors meet with Fellows individually at least twice during the seminar period, and also serve as mentors in the development of our curriculum units. I have learned from ideas shared in seminars, conversations over meals in the dining halls, early morning runs with fellow teachers, and the incredible books and artworks available through Yale's libraries and galleries.

Teacher Fellows exchange teaching strategies, lesson ideas, and personal reflections throughout the program. Participating in the Institute is a remarkable opportunity for professional growth and for joining a broad community of educators who are passionate about learning new material aligned with their district standards.

As a Teacher Representative of the Institute, I also help recruit passionate educators in my home district of New Haven. I look forward to reading the published units by myself and my peers this fall, and to sharing my students' artwork at the fall conference. Each year, we contribute to the development of new seminar topics, and I continue to feel energized by leadership opportunities, partnerships with other Institutes, and ongoing learning at the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute.

Kasalina Nabakooza is a Visual Arts Teacher at Truman School in New Haven, Connecticut.

On Common Ground®

Strengthening Teaching through School-University Partnership

Number 17, Spring 2026

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Founded in 1978, the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute is a partnership between Yale University and the New Haven Public Schools designed to strengthen teaching and learning in local schools and in high-need schools around the country. Through the Institute, teachers from the university and the schools work together as professional colleagues. In 2004, the Institute announced the Yale National Initiative to strengthen teaching in public schools.

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James Vivian Retires

In February 2024, James Vivian retired after serving as the Director of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute since 1978. He worked with New Haven teachers to develop the Institute as a partnership between Yale University and New Haven Public Schools that centered teacher-created curriculum and treating teachers as professionals.

Under his leadership, the Institute quickly became recognized nationally as a pioneer in both school-college collaboration and content-based professional development. In 1995, he successfully concluded a fundraising drive to endow the Institute as a unit of the University. The Institute's success led to the creation of the Yale National Initiative to strengthen teaching in public schools in 2005, with the goal of supporting the establishment of Teachers Institutes in high-need school districts across the country.

Jim Vivian created and led one of the nation's most innovative and pioneering professional development programs for public school teachers. His conviction that colleges and universities had a responsibility to use their resources to improve teaching and learning in public schools has now become commonplace in higher education. We honor his enormous impact on teaching in high-need public schools in New Haven and across the country.

ALMA WOODSEY THOMAS, *TIPTOE THROUGH THE TULIPS*, 1969

Credits: **Front Cover:** Alma Woodsey Thomas, *Untitled, 1968*, 1968. Acrylic and pressure-sensitive tape on cut-and-stapled paper, 19 1/8" x 51 1/2" (48.58 x 130.81 cm). Private Collection. Photo credit: Phillips Auctioneers. © 2026 Estate of Alma Thomas (Courtesy of the Hart Family) / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. **Page 5:** Alma Woodsey Thomas, *Nature's Red Impressions*, 1968. Acrylic on linen, 51 x 49 1/2" (129.54 x 125.73 cm). Brady Art Gallery, George Washington University, Washington, D.C., Gift of the Artist, 1968. © 2026 Estate of Alma Thomas (Courtesy of the Hart Family) / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. **Page 7:** Kathleen Ballard, *Actors James Earl Jones and Jill Clayburgh in Los Angeles stage production of "Othello", 1971*, 1971. Photograph, 35 mm., b&W negative. © University of California, Los Angeles Library, Special Collections. Creative Commons BY Attribution 4.0 International. https://digital.library.ucla.edu/catalog/ark:/21198/zz0002w64s. **Page 9:** The Ocean Agency, *Trash on beach, Indonesia*, 2018, Ocean Image Bank. **Pages 10 and 11:** All photos © 2005-2023 Yale National Initiative. All rights reserved. **Page 12:** *Webb's First Deep Field Unveiled*, NIRCam Image, 2022, NASA, ESA, CSA, STScI. **Page 14:** Alma Woodsey Thomas, *Wind Dancing with Spring Flowers*, 1969. Acrylic on canvas, 50 5/16" x 48 1/16" (127.79 x 122.08 cm). Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth: Purchased through a gift from Evelyn A. and William B. Jaffe, Class of 1964H, by exchange; 2016.5. © 2026 Estate of Alma Thomas (Courtesy of the Hart Family) / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. **Page 15:** Shonto Begay, *Eyes of the World*, 2019. Courtesy of Shonto Begay, shontobegay.net. **Page 16:** Alma Woodsey Thomas, *Give Love Hope for Peace*, 1971. Acrylic on Arches paper, in two parts, 6 1/2" x 9 3/4" (16.51 x 24.77 cm). Photo credit: Emily Friedman Fine Art. © 2026 Estate of Alma Thomas (Courtesy of the Hart Family) / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. **Page 18:** Alma Woodsey Thomas, *Spring Delight*, 1969. Watercolor on paper, 12" x 15" (30.48 x 38.1 cm). Photo credit: Emily Friedman Fine Art. © 2026 Estate of Alma Thomas (Courtesy of the Hart Family) / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. **Page 19:** J. D. Levine, *Institute Seminar on 20th Century Afro American led by Charles Davis*, 1978. © 1978 Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute. All rights reserved. **Page 20 (left):** © 2026 Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute. All rights reserved. **Page 20 (right):** Alma Woodsey Thomas, *Tiptoe through the Tulips*, 1969. Acrylic on canvas, 50" x 48" (127 x 121.92 cm). National Gallery of Art, Corcoran Collection (Gift of Vincent Melzac). © 2026 Estate of Alma Thomas (Courtesy of the Hart Family) / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.