



**Evaluating Teachers' Institutes:
Using the Perceptions of Social Studies Teachers to
Assess the Efficacy of Their Training**

A Brief Synopsis of Conclusions

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Introduction

Students often graduate from high school with little understanding of what it means to become an active member of a democratic society, and many may lack the citizenship skills required to do so. Local educational systems, as currently constituted, do little to change this trend, and national policy does more to exacerbate the problem for the short and long term than to alleviate it.

Birmingham, Alabama, schools are attempting to counter these stagnant or downward trends in civic education. Since the 2008 school year, some public schools in the Birmingham City School District have experimented with ways to improve the social studies or civics curriculum taught in middle and high school classrooms by using a program developed by the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) called *National Issues Forums in the Classroom: A High School Program on Deliberative Democracy* (NIF in the Classroom). The purpose of this curriculum is to expose students to a robust definition of citizenship, the democratic practice of deliberation, and what it takes for citizens to work through, and act on, the problems they share.

As part of their continued experimentation, the Birmingham schools added a teacher-training component, or Teachers' Institute, in 2009, to provide additional content knowledge and preparation for teachers in their classroom exercises. The Teachers' Institute was designed and organized as a two-day workshop, during which teachers came together to learn about the NIF in the Classroom curriculum and the democratic theory on which it is based. Teachers participated in a practice deliberative forum followed by a session for reflection on the forum experience, which included discussion of the forum set-up, the role of the moderator, and the purpose of the forums. The institute ended with a session on the relationship of the NIF in the Classroom curriculum to state standards, suggestions for developing and sharing lesson plans, and strategies to assist teachers using the curriculum in the classroom.

This brief synopsis conveys the conclusions and recommendations from a study that evaluated the Birmingham Teachers' Institutes by assessing the perceptions of teachers on the efficacy of their training in this curriculum-specific professional development program. The original research took a case-study approach, which focused on understanding the teachers' experiences in the Teachers' Institutes to determine how the institutes addressed the key characteristics of successful professional development programs and affected teacher practice in the classroom. Data for the study came from a survey of the Birmingham teachers who participated in the institutes from 2009 to 2013 and personal reflections, in narrative form, submitted by teachers, the sponsoring institution of the Teacher Institutes (the David Mathews Center for Civic Life), and the program administrator (Sparks Consulting, Inc.).

Findings

The survey used in the original study identified teachers' perceptions of the three most valuable activities: the practice deliberative forum, group discussion and interaction, and collaboration on lesson plan creation. Interestingly, one of those activities, the practice forum, was also identified as among the most ineffective. That is, when the practice forums are conducted properly in the institutes, they can help teachers perfect their technique for use in the classroom as well as help students make connections by providing context for the curriculum content. Done incorrectly, however, the practice forums can lead to confusion and cause teachers to question the purpose of the activity.

The narrative reports submitted by participants in the institute reflected the same enthusiasm for forums found in the survey responses. Participating in a practice forum was among the three most valuable activities teachers identified. It gave teachers an opportunity to experience the central activity of the NIF in the Classroom curriculum, which helped them understand the theory and objectives of the program. The second favored activity dealt with bringing outside practitioners into the classroom to share their expertise. This afforded participants the opportunity to share knowledge and think through how the curriculum could be used in classroom settings. The third activity respondents touted was a thoughtful and concerted effort to focus on the content and theoretical underpinnings of the curriculum. Teachers found this activity to be valuable, in part, because the instructor led them through a number of engaging, interactive exercises rather than delivering a rote lecture.

Teachers reported that the institute taught them practical skills they can use in the classroom, including how to moderate deliberative forums and how to design classroom experiences in which deliberation can occur. In particular, they noted the acquisition of new communication skills they could use to engage students in classroom settings and the confidence that gaining such skills can inspire in teachers. Respondents also reported learning new skills related to the use of curricular materials and working with colleagues. Teachers were taught a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of the NIF in the Classroom curriculum, including how it fit into their discipline (and others) and the effects it can have on student knowledge and understanding.

Teachers reported that the institutes were adept at addressing personal, organizational, and content factors, each of which is a key component of successful professional development programs.

They highlighted, in particular, the materials provided to them in the course of their training. They said they were given a wide range of materials to use (e.g., DVDs, issue guides, moderator's guides) covering a wide range of topics. Teachers' responses were mixed on whether the materials were easy to use, with some concluding that the

binders containing the full curriculum could be overwhelming, whereas others noted that the large amount of detail provided useful instructions and directions for classroom use.

Teachers were clear in their appreciation for program facilitators, specifically with regard to the expertise and understanding they brought to the program, their ability to convey that knowledge to program participants in dynamic ways, and their ability to connect that knowledge to practical classroom applications.

Pedagogical change did occur and was widely recognized. Teachers reflected that the institutes greatly affected the way they taught students in the classroom. They reported that they had become far more adept at providing opportunities for, and bringing about, classroom discussion among students. Teachers learned new techniques and made efforts to modify existing techniques for teaching lesson plans, including varying the use of small- and large-group learning activities. Teachers also found that they had to reevaluate their perceptions about certain students and allow for open dialogue and discussions among them. Given the discursive and participatory nature of the NIF in the Classroom curriculum, Teachers' Institutes taught participants to rethink classroom power dynamics and the authority they typically held over classroom discussions. Moreover, they had to learn how these new teaching strategies would fit into the formal testing structures that exist around standards and course requirements and how these new teaching methods could enhance their ability to meet those needs and goals.

Still, pedagogical change was not reported to the extent one might have expected. The number of teachers who described changes in their classrooms after participating in the institute should have been higher. Indeed, a perfect response was anticipated. The reasons for this are that most teachers who used the NIF in the Classroom curriculum would have had to incorporate a whole new set of activities into their curricular plans for the semester. Pedagogical change was a natural and unavoidable outcome. Yet, over 30 percent of the survey respondents did not seem to recognize this fundamental connection.

One respondent addressed the fact that the curriculum had fallen into disuse, which suggests, for that participant at least, that if any pedagogical changes occurred immediately after participating in the Teachers' Institute, those changes did not last very long. It calls into question whether teachers are gaining skills that should result in lasting pedagogical change because they are useful in a variety of settings for a range of teaching goals or whether such skills are so particular to the NIF in the Classroom curriculum that whatever change might occur is no longer useful once the program has ended.

Nonetheless, change is happening in important skills, such as how teachers addressed current and past issues, reading, comprehension, and discussion, classroom preparation, and an ability to reach students with special needs. All of these skills

transcend the NIF in the Classroom curriculum and will serve teachers well throughout their careers.

All the teachers reported that they had a very basic level of support from school leaders regarding their participation in Teachers' Institutes simply because they were allowed to attend. When the survey dug deeper, however, teachers provided mixed responses about how they perceived their school leaders' attitudes about their working together with their colleagues to further build on the learning they had received in the Teachers' Institutes. The responses to these questions about support from school leaders in furthering their learning on school time were evenly split between those who felt supported by school leaders and those who didn't. The data provided in the reflective reports by Birmingham teachers and program administrators echo the sentiment noted in the survey responses, namely, that school leaders provided support for teachers' incorporation of NIF in the Classroom into the regular curriculum, but beyond that, support was tepid.

Use of this curriculum was extensive both in the number of students exposed in each school and in the variety of classes in which it was used within each school. Indeed, the wide-ranging and extensive use was so significant that it could not have been done without broad support from school and district leaders. Still, while teachers perceived a high level of support from school leaders for the incorporation of NIF in the Classroom into the curriculum, they were less positive about the support they received for the next step. That is, when asked whether they received support for "practicing what I learned" and "practicing what I learned in classrooms," teachers were less inclined to agree that school leaders supported the latter with the same enthusiasm as they supported the former.

Recommendations

The perceptions of social studies teachers who participated in the Teachers' Institutes, regarding the strength and weaknesses of the program, its effectiveness in improving curricular practice, and the support they received for practicing new skills, was mostly positive—in large part because the training program was very thoughtful and included the very elements shown in the literature to be necessary for success. Still, the conclusions point to a number of ways that current and future Teachers' Institute administrators and facilitators could amend their agendas to make them more beneficial to participating teachers. These recommendations should be considered practical and actionable items intended to increase program effectiveness.

First, rooted in the success of the existing program, teachers were most responsive to activities that focused on practicing deliberative forums and opportunities to discuss current learning and future plans with other teachers. Future Teachers' Institute administrators should make sure their agendas contain these types of activities.

Second, those activities seen as most helpful to teachers should be given adequate time. When forums were cut short due to time constraints, they went from being seen as one of the most helpful activities to one of the least helpful. Therefore, future Teachers' Institutes should be wary of cutting into the time needed for practice forums, and if changes to the agenda times must be made, they should be made elsewhere.

Third, teachers were clearly negative about sessions that included rote exercises and going through material on a page-by-page basis in lecture style. Quite simply, participants found this approach boring and said it led to a lack of concentration and understanding. More consideration should be given to determining how sessions currently designed in this way could be made more dynamic and more engaging.

Fourth, the task of creating an agenda does not have to be the sole responsibility of program administrators and facilitators. The literature is quite clear on the need to involve teachers in the planning process, yet teachers noted, by at least a two-to-one margin, that they had not been included. Involving teachers is recognized as an important component of the personal-factors characteristic, the composite variable shown to be most important to teacher perceptions regarding the value of the training program. Inviting them to help plan the agenda provides a perfect opportunity to do just that. It also places some of the responsibility for program success on the participants themselves.

Fifth, the outcomes of the regression analysis suggest teacher outcomes are predicted in the following order: personal factors and attributes, communication networks, content- and context-related factors and attributes, and organizational factors and attributes. This outcome suggests that current and future institute administrators and facilitators should be mindful of the measured importance of these attributes in affecting teacher perceptions regarding the efficacy of training programs and adjust how future institutes are comprised.

Sixth, teachers' responses were mixed regarding the support they received from school leaders in terms of their ability to work together with other teachers to build on what they had each learned during the institutes. Future efforts to recruit teachers to participate in a Teachers' Institute should also be directed at school leaders to encourage their facilitating such opportunities. One way to encourage such support is to engage them early and often, both leading up to and after the program. School leaders need to be informed about the program goals and expected outcomes. Moreover, program administrators could convey how the program is tied to state, district, and local curricular and testing requirements, which would help motivate school leaders to provide support. School leaders could be invited to attend the Teachers' Institutes in partnership with teachers who plan to use the NIF in the Classroom curriculum, which would provide them additional insight into ways they can support teachers. Finally, school leaders and

the Teachers' Institute agenda itself could provide more opportunities during and after the program for teachers to talk with each other about what they had learned.

One of the interesting aspects of the Birmingham Teachers' Institute is the recognition it's receiving from the state as a legitimate and credit-worthy professional development program. The more Birmingham continues along its current trajectory, the greater is the likelihood that this becomes a sustainable model that could be replicated in other school districts and states. This would lead to more frequent and widespread use, increased opportunities for sharing best practices, and even greater possibilities for sustainability.

Birmingham is an interesting case in that it has strong financial and administrative support. So, very few additional system-level supports would be needed. Mostly, it's a matter of time and opportunity. School systems could consider being more generous with the amount of time allotted teachers to participate in professional development programs. Consideration could also be given to convening these programs over the summer break to cut down on costs associated with lost teacher hours.

Practitioners might find it useful to consider these recommendations in the context of what National Issues Forums (NIF) is and does. Stated briefly, NIF is a network of civic, educational, and other organizations and individuals whose common interest is to promote democracy and public deliberation in the United States. They recognize that democracy is rooted in citizens' ability to talk with one another about the problems they share so that they can decide on what to do about them. They also recognize that in order to do this, the nature of political talk—that is, how citizens exchange ideas about their shared problems—is crucial.

All of the above-listed recommendations for improving the Teachers' Institutes are rooted in policy-related decisions. For example, policymakers could lengthen the overall duration of the institute program to ensure that every activity is completed fully. Similarly, school leaders might create more formal space and opportunity for teachers to talk with each other about what they learned and how they are using it in classroom settings. Policymakers might also consider making participation in a Teachers' Institute mandatory for all teachers using the NIF in the Classroom curriculum in the future. All these steps would put added pressure on teachers, school leaders, and districts because it means teachers would have to spend more time outside the classroom for professional development.

In addition to changes in the administration of this particular program, there are a number of other policy-related implications of this study. Schools of education, for example, may take a look at this program and find it to be a useful model for training teachers to expand their repertoire of pedagogical skills, to work collaboratively with

other teachers, and to increase their effectiveness in the classroom. Finally, this study could spur policymakers to give more credence to the key characteristics of professional development programs. It could enhance the policy field around teacher training, curriculum, and pedagogy by serving as a useful reference to policymakers as they consider the creation and implementation of other programs.

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