

What Does it Mean for Teachers to be the Primary Agents of Educational Improvement?

Since 2002, when KSTF offered its first Teaching Fellowships, developing teacher leadership capacity has been one of our primary goals. Over the years, we've seen many examples of Fellows, **even those who were beginning teachers**, working with their colleagues to improve education for their students. They weren't waiting for others to tell them how to do it, or implementing someone else's plans, but rather taking matters into their own hands and improving what they could. And we learned that when teachers **work together**—even when policies, administration and resources are less than optimal—they improve their own teaching, their students' learning, the collegial culture in their schools and more. In other words, they are the primary agents of educational improvement.

When we say teachers are the *primary* agents of educational improvement, it's because we have seen and firmly believe that teachers can and should be the ones leading improvement, from the ground up. This does not mean that others (administrators, researchers, policy makers) don't have a role in educational improvement, but rather teachers are the foremost experts on teaching and learning and should be the drivers when it comes to improving teaching and learning, not the passengers.

Heather spent many years engaged in activities which could be viewed as teacher leadership, including writing curriculum, participating in district committees, holding office in her local union, and providing professional development workshops for colleagues, but felt there was always something missing. By contrast, she found the mentors who inspired her the most not only shared their expertise and practices, but were genuinely interested in hers as well. In every exchange with those leaders, everyone's contributions were considered and valued, not just the teachers with the most experience or expertise. Those leaders helped her see her own strength and potential, which in turn inspired her to take more risks and step out ever further with her own teaching practice. From those leaders, Heather learned to open her classroom door further, inviting in other teachers to help her plan, teach, and reflect on the learning in her classroom. And she learned how important it was to be honest about her struggles as well as share her successes.

Ultimately, Heather realized that she had the greatest impact as a teacher leader

not when she was sharing her expertise, but rather when she was helping to support and cultivate expertise in those around her. For Heather, teacher leadership has come to mean lifting up other teachers and increasing their capacity to improve education for their students.

KSTF's vision of teacher leadership grew out of what we learned from teacher stories like Heather's. Leadership in education means, for many people, a traditional, hierarchical structure consisting of building-level administrators (principals, assistant principals, department chairs) and district-level administrators (superintendents, supervisors). Unlike this traditional leadership in education, we've learned from teachers' stories that effective teacher leadership is not hierarchical. It **does not require others to follow or report to the teacher leader**. Instead, the teacher who encourages, inspires and supports colleagues to gain greater agency is truly leading.

From experiences like Heather's, we've come to see teachers themselves as capable of and responsible for improvement at a variety of levels, even (and maybe especially) when they are acting on their own agency rather than just in appointed leadership roles. Since teachers are the ones teaching, assessing, and reflecting on the learners in their classrooms, we believe they are in the best position to understand what is and is not working in the education system and lead the way to improvement. While there are many realms of education where teachers often have little to no power to bring about change, all teachers have tremendous power in three areas we think are critical for improving the education endeavor overall: in their own teaching practice, in schools and in the teaching profession.

Over the past year, we've been working as a community to build on stories like Heather's in order to describe what it looks like when teachers act as the primary agents of educational improvement. For the next five weeks, members of the KSTF community will be writing on this blog about what it means for teachers to lead educational improvement in their own classrooms and beyond. The posts will be grouped by the following characteristic actions, which we have seen emerge again and again in teachers' stories and seem to delineate the ways in which teachers act as primary agents of educational improvement:

Teachers taking responsibility for their own learning and supporting collective learning within the profession, both in terms of what teachers need

to learn and how they learn it.

Teachers recognizing that they have the collective responsibility, capacity and right to drive educational improvement and acting on that responsibility, leveraging that capacity, and advocating for that right.

Teachers recognizing that local, national and global societal factors have an impact on the education system and considering these factors in their improvement efforts.

Teachers working collaboratively with other teachers to initiate, own, and critically evaluate improvement efforts that benefit their own students and have the potential to ultimately benefit all students.

Teachers generating and sharing knowledge in ways that support educational improvement in classrooms, schools, districts and beyond.

Please join us as we explore what the characteristic actions listed above mean for teachers acting as primary agents of educational improvement. As we articulate our own thoughts and experiences, we hope to further clarify them for ourselves and others. It's past time for teachers to share their stories of leadership. As you share these posts, we invite you to comment and add your own insights.