

## Practitioner Inquiry and Reclaiming the Teaching Profession (Part One)

Teaching has been called **America's most embattled profession**, and the fact that we still debate whether it counts as a profession (as opposed to a craft, occupation or something else) is one indicator of just how embattled it really is.

At KSTF, arguing whether or not the label of profession is appropriate for the work of teachers is of less interest to us than thinking about how we might support teachers to claim the advantages of a profession for themselves, regardless of how others label or constrain their work. This is not to suggest that forces outside the teaching profession aren't relevant; there are many factors, beyond the immediate control of teachers, that profoundly shape their work. For example, teachers in **the U.S. have worse working conditions, receive less and lower-quality preparation and get paid less than teachers in most other countries**. And each day, teachers juggle the varied and often competing needs and demands of parents, administrators, politicians, and, of course, their students. But even with all of these external factors, teachers have significant agency, and our goal is to support teachers to develop and leverage that agency. The KSTF Teaching Fellows program devotes considerable time, effort, and resources to helping our Fellows develop the **practices and habits of mind of practitioner inquiry**. This focus on practitioner inquiry is grounded in our commitment to and support of teacher professionalism; we see practitioner inquiry as a particularly critical and effective way for teachers to reclaim their profession and their own status as professionals.

Definitions of **what constitutes a profession vary**, but generally-agreed upon characteristics include: specialized knowledge, respectful learning relationships with colleagues, autonomy (that is, freedom to exercise professional judgment), client-centeredness, public responsibility and accountability, institutionalized training and licensing, and a code of ethics.

In our work with KSTF Teaching Fellows and other teacher leaders, we've seen

teachers use practitioner inquiry as a tool to strengthen, and in some cases even create, some of these aspects of their profession. In this post, I'll focus on two aspects—how practitioner inquiry builds specialized knowledge and respectful learning relationships with colleagues. In my next post, I'll take a look at autonomy, client centeredness, and public responsibility and accountability.

**Specialized knowledge:** It is absolutely true that teachers need to know the content they teach, but what's less obvious (until you actually try to teach, and pay attention to the results) is that content knowledge is necessary, but not sufficient for effective teaching. **Deborah Ball and her colleagues** have shown that teachers need specialized mathematics knowledge for the work of teaching—knowledge that is organized for the work of teaching and fundamentally different from mathematics content knowledge used in other professions. But there is a great deal more that teachers need to know. In the field of education, knowledge about teaching and learning is generally assumed to come from education researchers, and only occasionally from teachers themselves. Practitioner inquiry disrupts this model by positioning teachers as capable of and responsible for generating knowledge in, of and for teaching. Practitioner inquiry is explicitly about externalizing teacher knowledge in order to make it available to critique, and therefore improve it. But, equally important, teachers who engage in practitioner inquiry build the expectation within the profession that teachers can and must own the responsibility to generate knowledge—in, of and for teaching (**Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999**)—and share it with each other and the education field more broadly.

At KSTF, Fellows work on developing inquiry practices and habits of mind during all five years of their Fellowship, and an important part of that work is focused on making that knowledge public. Many of them have shared what they've learned at national conferences, on this and other blogs and in a number of journals and other publications. The fact that our Fellows started ***Kaleidoscope: Educator Voices and Perspectives*** is a testament not only to what they've learned, but the extent to which they value sharing their knowledge.

**Respectful learning relationships with colleagues:** Because of how schools are structured in the U.S. (particularly high schools), teachers spend most of their time working with students, and relatively little working with colleagues. Even when teachers do get the opportunity to work together, the content, purpose and

ownership of those opportunities shapes the ways in which they can develop respectful learning relationships with each other. When teachers engage in practitioner inquiry together, they—by definition—own the interaction and decide on the purpose and content. There are many ways teachers build relationships with each other, but engaging in inquiry is one of the most powerful ways teachers can build *learning* relationships.

**Practitioner inquiry is not easy**, and it can often be uncomfortable. It involves close study of elements of one’s own teaching practice with colleagues, and being open to critique and the learning that comes from honest scrutiny. This is why we support Fellows to use specific tools (such as protocols for **developing group norms** and **data analysis**) in their inquiry work, and support them to use those with their school colleagues as well. These tools, and other inquiry practices help teachers to build mutual professional respect and temper the risks of learning together through inquiry.

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<sup>1</sup>Teachers do have institutionalized training and licensing, but in general, practitioner inquiry does not have an impact on this aspect. Similarly, a **code of ethics for teachers** exists that shapes how and why teachers might engage in practitioner inquiry, and I could imagine ways in which inquiry might in turn shape ethics, but (at least so far) we haven’t seen examples of this from our work supporting KSTF Fellows in inquiry.