

Backbone Teachers: The Importance of Teacher-Generated Professional Knowledge

I've written two previous posts on this blog describing KSTF's vision of a Backbone Teacher (Backbone Teachers: A Strategy for Developing Leadership in the Teaching Profession and [Backbone Teachers: What Does it Mean to be an Outstanding Teacher](#)). We see four characteristics that define a Backbone Teacher: they are, first and foremost, outstanding teachers; they have the inclination and capacity to generate knowledge of and for the teaching profession; they are part of a networked community; and they are leaders in the profession. In this post, I want to elaborate on the idea that Backbone Teachers generate knowledge of and for teaching.

It might sound like a tautology to say that teachers know a lot about teaching, but the broader educational system in the United States, including policy makers, state and federal departments of education, educational research institutions, local school boards and even the general public, often function as if this were not the case.

In the U.S., most knowledge about teachers, teaching, schools and student learning is generated by researchers who are often professionally distant from the classroom and teaching practice. Teachers are sometimes involved in this research, often as research subjects, sometimes as research assistants or in other supporting roles, but rarely as the agents responsible for posing the questions, collecting and analyzing the data, drawing conclusions and sharing the results. Compare this to professions like medicine, architecture, or law, where practitioners themselves are both expected and trained to produce professional knowledge. And compare this to teachers in Finland, who receive research training as part of their three-year credentialing program, and enter the profession with the expectation that they will both draw from and contribute to the professional knowledge base. Pre-service teachers in university-based credential programs in the United States often read educational research, and some even receive training in research methods, but teachers here are rarely expected, supported, or rewarded to study and learn from their own practice.

The U.S. K-12 education system is generally organized in a way that hinders, rather than supports, teachers systematically studying their practice and sharing what they've learned. Most teachers in the U.S. spend the majority of their day

with students, isolated from their colleagues. It's rare that their day includes time to plan with colleagues, much less engage in close study of their classroom practices and student learning. By comparison, Finnish teachers spend about half of their day in the classroom, and the other half working with their colleagues on curriculum or planning, or working with parents. Even if U.S. teachers manage to carve out time to study and learn from their practice (and some do), the infrastructure for sharing, critiquing and building on what teachers learn is extremely limited. While there are a number of quality practitioner journals where teachers can publish, and professional organizations where they can present, these generally serve as a repository of first-person accounts rather than a cumulative knowledge base of teaching and learning.

It seems like U.S. teachers are increasingly viewed as technicians, expected to carry out solutions to educational challenges that have been developed by others with little to no experience with classrooms, students, or the work of teaching. KSTF is working to change this; we believe that teachers have specialized knowledge and skills that allow them to truly understand most problems in education, and then develop and enact effective solutions. KSTF's commitment to supporting teachers as generators of professional knowledge, from the beginning of their careers, is the key driver behind KSTF's increasing attention to practitioner inquiry over the last two years. [Jodie Galosy](#), KSTF's Director of Research and Evaluation, writes more about how practitioner inquiry has evolved at KSTF.