

Owning the Imposter Phenomenon

At our recent Summer Meeting, as part of their branching out ceremony, the 2012 Cohort of Knowles Teaching Fellows shared with us roses (things that bring them joy) and thorns (their struggles) from their time in the Teaching Fellows program and from their teaching experience.

One of those Fellows, **Camden Hanzlick-Burton**, has been a science and curriculum coordinator for his school while continuing to teach his classes, has received numerous awards and scholarships for his teaching, has written and spoken about the working conditions and the issues that teachers are facing in Kansas, and is continually building his network with other leading science teachers across the nation. But even if he wasn't publicly recognized for his accomplishments and advocacy work, Camden would still be a phenomenal **leading teacher** who cares deeply about his students and their learning, one who strives on a daily basis to improve his practice with other teachers. And so it was quite unexpected when Camden said, "My thorn is still feeling like an imposter sometimes, like I still need to prove that I belong."

The **imposter phenomenon** is a belief among high-achieving individuals that they are not intelligent or capable; they live their lives in fear of being exposed as a fraud (Clance & Imes, 1978). The imposter phenomenon is real and we see it all the time in our work with teachers in their first and second years of teaching in our Fellowship program. In a recent activity in which we asked our newest group of teachers to reflect on the challenges they faced in being **critical friends** to other members in the Fellowship, they shared the following:

Putting pressure on myself to ask "good" questions or make "good" observations.

Other people had so many good observations that I passed over—I was looking for the perfect observation too often.

Feel as though my noticings/interpretations etc. are worth sharing.

These reflections shared above illustrate Fellows' apprehensions about being good enough. Weir (2013) explains that individuals suffering from this phenomenon "have trouble believing that they're worthy" and "rarely ask for help." And so Camden's admission about feeling like an imposter and our Fellows' reflections about finding worth in their contributions weighs on me. It weighs on me because I wonder how this perception obstructs and, at times, cripples our teachers' growth. I wonder how this fear chokes their ability to take risks, be honest about their struggles, and ask for help when they need it.

It may be tempting to think that this phenomenon is expected and even predictable for those who are new to their careers. However, this phenomenon can affect anyone at any stage in their career; it is certainly present in the teaching profession and is not limited to teachers at the beginning of their careers. As if to prove a point, when I recently Googled "imposter syndrome in teachers," the first piece that showed up was titled "Why I Nearly Quit Teaching: Imposter Syndrome," written by someone who has taught for 10 years.

As a community, we are learning to monitor these beliefs in ourselves and have come to realize that the community itself provides a way for us to address these feelings. One of our primary goals in working with first- and second-year Fellows is to support the development of a **strong cohort community**. In such a community, members are able to draw strength from what might otherwise paralyze a more fragile community. When Fellows are afforded opportunities to have conversations with each other about their insecurities, they find comfort in the realization that they are not alone in feeling this way. And knowing that there are others who have or are walking their same steps can be empowering. It means that their pain is genuinely seen and heard. It means that words of encouragement can be trusted. It means that there is real hope that better days are ahead.

In order for a community to develop this level of trust and commitment, its members must learn to be vulnerable. That means that opening up about our successes AND our struggles, about our celebrations AND our fears, and about finding answers AND facing dilemmas is essential. In this way, imposter feelings can actually be reframed and embraced as a strength and an asset that allows us to connect more deeply with each other.

I want to pause a moment and emphasize that sharing these moments and making ourselves vulnerable with each other isn't about throwing ourselves a pity party nor is it about collecting condolences. It's not even about fixing our dilemmas. Rather, when we sit with each other in our insecurities, when we listen deeply with compassion and empathy, we learn to understand each other more deeply. When we give ourselves opportunities to be gracious towards others, we also learn to be more gracious with ourselves. In doing so, we learn to embrace togetherness, we learn to ask each other for help, and we learn to become better teachers, together. In this way, we think that imposter feelings can be understood as a strength rather than a deficit.

We were never meant to do this alone but that's what the imposter syndrome cultivates. Aloneness. There is an African proverb with which we like to remind ourselves: "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." As we push ourselves and our Fellows to redefine what it means to be a community, a teacher and a leader, we invite you to journey with us and listen to **our stories** about who we are. We invite you to hear, with your head and your heart, our stories of doubt, of guilt, of too many mistakes made along the way. We invite you to hear these stories alongside the stories that we proudly tell of all the amazing things that we and our students are doing. In hearing these stories, our hope is that you might find sanctuary from your thoughts and feelings of being an imposter. You are not alone. There is a community that wants to take this journey with you.

References

Clance, P.R., & Imes, S.A. (1978). The imposter phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 15(3), 241-247. doi:[10.1037/h0086006](https://doi.org/10.1037/h0086006)

Weir, K. (2013). Feel like a fraud? *GradPsych*, 11(4), 24. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/gradpsych/2013/11/fraud.aspx>