

The Power of Relationships in Becoming Teacher Leaders

We at KSTF believe that education reform is most potent when it is led by teachers, grounded in their knowledge of teaching, and fine tuned by their insider understanding of their teaching communities.

Accordingly, we support KSTF Fellows in becoming **primary agents of educational improvement** by designing opportunities for them to study their leadership practices and reflect on their emerging identities as teacher leaders. During Year 5 of the Fellowship, Fellows zero in on becoming teacher leaders by taking actions that support educational improvement beyond their own classrooms—an experience they describe as “risky” since they are learning skills and developing dispositions necessary for leadership in plain view of other teachers. In this blog, we offer examples of ways we structure opportunities for Year 5 Fellows to explore their teacher leader identities and show that their relationships serve as a foothold for taking risks.

We understand the experience of becoming teacher leaders as learning and identity development. This development is facilitated by reflection on leadership experiences that happen in Fellows’ “zone of risk,” an affective domain that is activated because they are trying something new, challenging, and uncomfortable (National School Reform Faculty). With the support of the KSTF staff and each other, Fellows are encouraged to approach leadership opportunities with curiosity and an open mind and to take the risks necessary for learning the skills and dispositions of leadership, even if they don’t feel completely capable. By comparison, attempts to learn leadership within a “zone of comfort” will not challenge their assumptions or help them to learn something new about how to lead. Therefore, we ask Fellows to step outside of the comfort of their own classrooms, to identify opportunities for leadership within their larger teaching communities, and to reflect on “risky” leadership experiences as opportunities for growth.

To prepare Year 5 Fellows for the risks they might encounter when they act as

teacher leaders, they participate in two activities at their Fall Meeting designed to surface a range of feelings those experiences can provoke. First, they engage in an activity we've adapted from a **NSRF protocol** that prompts individuals to reflect on what they find "risky" in their interactions with colleagues. In this kinesthetic activity, Fellows move physically into one of the three "zones" of comfort, risk, or danger when we announce prompts. We begin with a few activities many people would consider risky, such as "singing in public," and then we move on to several potentially risky teacher leadership actions, such as "initiating a new collaboration with someone at my school" and "balancing my priorities with my planning partner's priorities." As Fellows move between zones, they recognize that the same activity can provoke different responses in other teachers—an insight that alerts them to their own and others' tolerance for risk. Likewise, when they find themselves in a particular zone with other Fellows, they have an opportunity to talk about their vulnerabilities and attune to others' feelings and experiences of risk.

We follow up the "zone of risk" activity with a role-play in which Fellows discuss, act out, and debrief actions they are considering taking to influence their teaching communities. Role-play helps Fellows strategize, rehearse and reflect on their plans for acting as teacher leaders within a safe space and prepares them to deal with the potential risks involved in their plan. To begin, Fellows describe a risky situation to others in small groups—explaining the risk involved in the situation, providing background details, and identifying the key players in the situation and their roles in the teaching community. They talk through actions they might take given the situation, and then the group and presenter act out one or more of the scenarios discussed. To conclude the role-play activity, Fellows reflect together on how it feels to take risks as teacher leaders, the dispositions and skills they can draw upon, their next steps, and the support they will need from each other.

We have found the role-play activity to be especially effective for surfacing the assumptions and blind spots that can be challenging for developing teacher leaders to anticipate. For example, last fall, Ashley (a pseudonym) volunteered to role play a conversation about redistributing responsibilities among members of her professional learning community (PLC). She explained to her group that she was especially concerned about how Tom (a pseudonym) might react, because he was paid for his work on the committee. Ashley assumed that Tom would refuse to

take on additional unpaid responsibilities and so she planned to have a difficult conversation with him in advance of the next PLC meeting. Because she was already angry with him, she was worried that she would “blow up on him,” which would make the situation even worse. In her mind, Tom’s potential reaction created the inherent risk in the situation.

During the role-play, a member of the group stood-in for Tom so that Ashley could try out the conversation and get a feel for what might happen during the meeting. Not surprisingly, Ashley’s assumptions about Tom and her anger about his attitude seeped into and bogged down the conversation. When the role-play ended, members of the group asked Ashley probing questions about ways her own attitude about Tom might pose a risk to achieving her goal and prevent her from redistributing responsibilities equitably among all members of the PLC.

We think the “Zone of Risk” and role-play activities help Fellows uncover how it feels to take professional risks, identify what can prevent them from achieving their goals, and consider the dispositions and skills they might draw upon when they work with other teachers. But we also recognize Fellows’ relationships with each other as a source of support and encouragement to act within their local teacher communities even when they are apart. For example, last fall, at 10:00 am on the Monday following Fall Meeting, a Fellow started an online discussion titled “What have YOU done on your Monday Morning?” The Fellow reported, “I HAD THE CONVERSATION I DID MY ROLE PLAY ABOUT!!!! And it wasn’t that scary!!!! And we came up with steps to help our students!!!! ☐ Thanks for the push and the support.” Within minutes of the first post, other Fellows responded, “You are amazing!!! I’m so glad it went well!” and “Whoa! You’ve had a productive week and it isn’t even 10am on Monday! Nice Work!” Other Fellows shared their own experiences of sending a risky email, addressing a delicate issue with a colleague, and sharing leadership of a department meeting with a supervisor, all risky actions they felt emboldened to take because they had worked it out with others. Indeed, what was most striking was how they continued to encourage each other from afar: “Caroline was also having her conversation today. Any updates?” and “I hope that just bringing up your idea and planting the seed kind of helps your situation.”

These Monday morning posts are evidence that Fellows do not feel alone when they take risks as teacher leaders—they are in it together. In considering how Fellows are able to maintain and tap into their relationships across time, place,

and circumstances, we credit their willingness to invest in each other's experiences, their capacity to ask for and provide support, and the development of a shared expectation that taking risks pays off. These aspects of their relationships seem to be essential for Fellows and other teachers to take risks when they act as agents of educational improvement in their schools.

References

National School Reform Faculty. (n.d.). *Zones of comfort, risk and danger: Constructing your zone map*. Retrieved from http://www.nsrfharmony.org/system/files/protocols/zones_of_comfort_0.pdf