

Practitioner Inquiry and Reclaiming the Teaching Profession (Part Two)

In my [previous post on this blog](#), I wrote about some of the ways in which practitioner inquiry allows teachers to strengthen, and even create, the specific aspects of teaching that characterize a profession, specifically specialized knowledge and respectful learning relationships with colleagues.

In this post, I'll expand on the ways teachers can and do use practitioner inquiry to build autonomy, client-centeredness, and public responsibility and accountability.

Autonomy: One of the factors that makes teaching difficult to classify is there is no real consensus (or, often, understanding) on where to draw the boundaries around teachers' work. While it's true that teachers have a certain degree of autonomy once they close their classroom doors and start teaching, autonomy at that level tends to get eroded by a variety of factors that constrain the actual work of teaching. Rather than being trusted to exercise their professional judgment, teachers are often expected (and held accountable) to implement "best practices" that are handed down from outside the profession, or implement other kinds of reforms that are mandated by policy-makers and administrators. Although there are increasing calls to include teachers in the decisions that shape their work, they still have too few opportunities to exercise their professional judgment in the wider circles that shape teaching and learning, for example school/district/state and federal policies that shape (or even dictate) what gets taught, how and to whom. Furthermore, teachers voices aren't often the loudest, or sometimes even present, when it comes to clarifying collective beliefs and values with regards to schooling, or the definition of high-quality or effective teaching or successful learning.

Practitioner inquiry builds and strengthens a different, farther reaching and more sustainable kind of autonomy where knowledge that advances and improves the

work of teaching comes from teachers themselves.

Client-centeredness: The shifting boundaries around teachers' work means that establishing who their clients are is also complex. Many, even most, teachers feel strongly that their students are their primary clients, but they also recognize that they serve the parents/guardians of students, communities and even society as a whole. Because K-12 teachers' primary clients are children and adolescents, being effectively client-centered means teachers must balance children's needs and desires against a broader vision for learning and growth that their clients themselves (by virtue of development and experience) don't and can't have. However, the current structures for school funding and development of educational policy in the U.S., in particular the focus on annual, high-stakes testing, can actually work counter to teachers' efforts and ability to be student-centered. In other words, teachers often don't have enough control over their profession to be, much less hold each other accountable to being, client centered.

But when teachers engage in inquiry focused on student learning, they become client-centered in ways that they, and they alone, can control. First and foremost, inquiry allows teachers to develop a more thorough and nuanced understanding of their students. And closely studying what happens in classrooms, schools and beyond allows them to gain a deeper understanding of what is and is not working for their clients, and begin to take steps toward improvement.

Public responsibility and accountability: In recent years, teachers have experienced increasing levels of public accountability. Unfortunately, this often involves insufficiently understood, and even problematic, measures of teacher effectiveness or teacher "value added" that are made public, and sometimes even used to humiliate rather than help teachers. But perhaps the bigger issue with regards to professionalism might be the fact that teachers themselves have too little say in determining how the profession should be held accountable. Effective teaching is highly complex and contextual factors beyond teachers' control have considerable effects on student learning. Fortunately, our education system seems to be (very slowly) coming around to recognizing that student scores on annual achievement tests are at best incomplete, and at worst, highly misleading measures of teacher effectiveness. But the field is still struggling to develop adequate, never mind efficient, measures of teaching effectiveness. It's even difficult for teachers themselves to systematically identify effective teaching, and this is where practitioner inquiry becomes critical.

Practitioner inquiry is a system for generating knowledge grounded in data. As a teacher, it's tempting to leave a class feeling good about what students are learning based on head nods, raised hands and quality conversation. But when you engage with colleagues and look closely at data, it becomes a lot harder to fool yourself. When teachers do this work together, in a culture of professional respect and growth, they hold themselves to extremely high standards— much higher and more exacting than is possible with more traditional means of teacher assessment. However, the kind of knowledge that teachers generate through inquiry is complex and often highly contextual, which means it's not particularly useful for public accountability. But what it could be useful for is positioning teachers to take the lead in creating more effective and productive systems for accountability within their profession, that are also useful to the public.

In this and my [previous post](#), I argued for the ways that practitioner inquiry allows teachers to build and strengthen those aspects of their profession that make it a profession. My work with KSTF Fellows over the past 12 years has given me uncountable examples of this. Teachers engaging in practitioner inquiry are not going to solve all the problems of our very complex and varied education system, and teachers cannot be expected to solve these problems on their own. I do, however, remain convinced that it's time to get behind teachers and trust them to lead the way to improvement. For too long we've been trying to fix teachers as though they are the problem and have no knowledge worth trusting—and we're not seeing things get better. By supporting teachers to engage in practitioner inquiry, KSTF is betting on teachers to be the change agents we need, and so far, it's proving to be a good bet.