

Studying Teacher Communities: Working Through Some Inherent Challenges Of Inquiry

At Knowles, we believe that teachers at all stages of their careers have important roles to play as agents of educational improvement. We support **teacher leadership development** across the five years of the Teaching Fellowship, and in Year 5, Fellows focus explicitly on developing their skills, dispositions, and identities as teacher leaders. When we think about developing teacher leaders, we don't aim to reinforce a top-down model of leadership. Instead we envision a kind of **reflexive and distributed model of teacher leadership** where leaders act first to change themselves, then mobilize others to do the same in order bring about change more broadly. Thinking about teacher leadership in this way means that there's no one-size-fits-all model for "how to become a teacher leader." Instead, we see teacher leadership as both intensely personal and highly contextual, and very closely tied to the ways that teacher leaders work with their colleagues.

For these reasons, we frame our work in Year 5 not as a "how to" course in teacher leadership, but as *inquiry into teacher leadership and teacher community*—exploring ways that teacher leadership both relies on and supports the kind of teacher community that creates opportunities for collaboration, continuous learning, and improvement of teaching practice. By **closely investigating their teacher community** as the subject of inquiry in Year 5, Fellows can identify *how* that community is functioning, *what* about that community can be strengthened, and *where* they might see a place for themselves to act as teacher leaders.

Inquiry serves as the foundation for Fellows' professional learning and growth across the Teaching Fellows program. Building on their experience with inquiry from the first four years, by Year 5, Fellows have learned to raise question about their teaching practice, developed skills for working with critical friends to systematically explore those questions, and are comfortable collecting data from their classrooms and grounding their inquiry in those data. So as they get started in their Year 5 inquiry, Fellows begin by examining data from their teacher communities so that they can start to notice new things that can easily go overlooked. Looking at this data can help to uncover, for example, tacit norms or unspoken expectations for each member's participation, patterns of interaction that reinforce relationships of power, or unexamined beliefs that influence a

community's priorities.

However, Fellows typically find that applying what they've learned about data collection to a new area of focus—their teacher communities—raises new challenges. Fellows might feel more comfortable observing students and collecting data about their learning, but feel less certain once they turn the focus of inquiry on their work with colleagues. As “insiders” to their teacher community, Fellows face new risks in collecting data: they're concerned about how colleagues interpret their motives for collecting data, and uncomfortable seeing *themselves* in the data they collect. As a result, Fellows often struggle with questions like: What counts as data from a teacher community? How can I generate this data without creating unnecessary risk for myself or my colleagues?

Since these new challenges can influence what Fellows are able to learn from inquiry, we begin Year 5 by intentionally scaffolding experiences around data. Prior to the Knowles Summer Meeting, Fellows select one of the tools that we provide to either survey their colleagues or observe their teacher communities. For example: Fellows might survey other teachers in their department about their use of department meeting time, or they might observe a Professional Learning Community (PLC) meeting to record who does the talking and for how long. When we meet as a cohort on the first day of the meeting, Fellows share their data and discuss what it was like for them to capture this data. Regardless of the tool they used, many Fellows find it awkward or risky to collect data inside their teacher communities. Together they weigh the risks and benefits of various approaches to data collection, and brainstorm how they can best manage those risks to continue to make progress in their inquiry. Some Fellows opt to use a data tool that is least disruptive to the ways their communities normally function (for example, taking notes during a meeting with an observation protocol), but recognize that their own opinions might creep into their data. Others feel more comfortable using a tool that more directly elicits colleagues' ideas (like a survey), but still worry about “imposing” on their colleagues' time. By acknowledging these inherent challenges in practitioner inquiry, Fellows can choose for themselves a data tool that works best for them in their own context.

We also challenge Fellows to expand their ideas about “what counts as data” by considering the range of data readily available to them in their teacher communities. Aside from intentionally generating data using a tool, we encourage Fellows to think about the community's artifacts—agendas, meeting notes,

documentation, products from collaborative work—and how these can serve as valid sources of data. At the Summer Meeting, Fellows reviewed a “data case study” about a Professional Learning Community from the inquiry work of a Fellow in an earlier cohort. Fellows considered how the data she selected from her PLC’s work—a set of meeting agendas, a list of community norms, and a (de-identified) email exchange among a few colleagues—could help her better understand how her PLC was functioning. After looking through these artifacts, Fellows discussed the benefits and limitations among these data sources. Fellows felt that “naturally occurring” artifacts like meeting agendas can represent real and authentic images of the PLC’s work without requiring the Fellow to encounter risks from “taking notes” on one’s colleagues. They also recognized drawbacks to these artifacts: while an agenda presents one perspective on the PLC’s work, much of the context of that work is missing. Looking together across these artifacts, one Fellow commented to other members of his group, “There’s no one perfect piece of data—each presents a particular perspective, but together [they] create a fuller picture [and] help us look closely at what’s going on in this professional community.” Ultimately, Fellows come to recognize that validity is not an inherent quality of one source of data but the result of balancing “found” data sources and systematically generated ones.

By intentionally scaffolding these experiences with data, we encourage Fellows to expand their ideas about what can count as data, and understand that accessing multiple and varied sources of data is important to understanding their teacher communities. Developing a better understanding of the needs of a teacher community is a necessary first step in improving that community, and we feel that inquiry is a powerful tool for understanding what’s going on around us. By turning the focus of inquiry on their teacher community—and working through some sticky points in this inquiry—Fellows find their own paths to a version of leadership that works for them and is effective in the contexts in which they teach.