

Where are Teachers in the Conversation About Education?

Recently, I have had discussions with both educators and others about what I see as a trend in our current national discourse about education and in educational policies: the government (i.e., federal, state, and local, as well as government agencies and school boards), along with corporate and foundation benefactors, seem to decide what is best in education. This often means that teachers are left out of the conversation at best or, when they speak up, maligned at worst.

I think teachers need to be more vocal about what they do as educators and what supports they need. My personal experience as a teacher and what I have learned as a member of teacher professional networks has led me to conclude that teachers better serve their students and the schools and communities in which they teach when they develop a strong professional voice.

It is always important for teacher voices to be heard, but now it is especially crucial. I have been a teacher in Indiana for 10 years and have an understanding of this issue based on first-hand experiences. I have seen that many forces are vying for the power to dictate how schools are run, what teachers should teach, what standards should be used, and what money should be used.

In my own state of Indiana, **our duly-elected state superintendent of schools** is having her powers blatantly stripped away by a governor and Congress who do not believe in her goals for our public school system. The **state government backs one of the largest voucher/school choice systems in the country**, with both political parties arguing over the data that may or may not show an effective system.

Citizens, along with local and state governments, are fighting to **regain control of state academic standards** from what they perceive to be a federally-mandated system of the Common Core Standards (which, no matter what your feelings are about them, **were actually introduced by state governors and private organizations**).

In all this drama and argument, the voice of the teacher is all but silent. When teachers step in to this media circus, they are often vilified or their words are spun in a way to show them as angry, incompetent, or as pawns of a labor union attack. It is no wonder teachers may avoid speaking up and bringing their voice to

these discussions.

But that is the exact opposite of what is needed. We need a firm, constant, professional voice of teachers across the country, sharing experiences, expertise, and classroom research that clarifies what their students need and what they need to better serve their students, their schools, and the communities in which they teach.

I believe teachers have the obligation and the desire to create a vehicle to give voice to ourselves. My colleagues in education from a diverse range of schools across the country have raised their voices in the context of faculty lounge conversations, emails, professional development, local and national conferences, but often are heard only by a small number of like-minded educators. They share hits and misses, development of lessons, data analysis, and the creation of relationships with students and staff. But who else listens?

Think what influence these voices could have if they became united. Think what eyes—and doors—could open if everyone heard these stories. Could teachers help convince their administrations to implement a new program if they have supporting data from collaborations with other teachers? Could a teacher in a difficult situation be inspired by hearing about someone else's struggles? Could enough voices come together to influence local government? Or even influence policy?

My fellow editors at ***Kaleidoscope: Educator Voices and Perspectives*** and I have been thinking about how you do this. How do teachers share their experiences in classrooms and schools, working with students, other educators, and community members, so that they can have a voice in the conversation about education? We already have the educators, the experiences, and the interest. But what can we do to provide the conduit for these teachers to communicate their stories?

In ***Teachers as Researchers: Another Mark of Professionalism***, Marc Tucker (Ed Week, August 27, 2014) argues for an educational research model where the teacher is the researcher, “rather than just the object of research.” While this article is two years old, I still refer back to it as an eloquent mission statement. I believe that teachers’ writing about their practices and what they learn from students, from each other, and from careful observation of schools and

education can come in many forms.

Because I agree with many of my colleagues that in order to improve education, teachers should be viewed as primary agents of **educational improvement**, I am encouraging teachers, including KSTF Fellows, to share their knowledge and understanding in order to combat this trend that we see towards silencing, rather than listening to, teachers. **Nicole Gillespie**, Executive Director of KSTF, argues for the **importance of teacher-generated professional knowledge**, since “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.”

Therefore, because we believe that teachers can and should take a stand about educational issues, that teachers can be agents of school change, that teachers develop an understanding of what it takes to improve education through classroom inquiry and sharing knowledge with colleagues, and that teachers’ perspectives should play a larger role in the national conversation about education, KSTF started a journal, ***Kaleidoscope: Educators’ Voices and Perspectives***.

I have the great honor of being Co-Editor-in-Chief of this fantastic medium for communication, along with **Kirstin Milks**, and our staff of associate editors, **Brittany Franckowiak**, **Lindsey Quinlisk**, **Rebecca Van Tassell**, and **Katie Waddle**. We are encouraging teachers, from novice to expert, to write about their experiences. The more teachers share, the more their voices can make an impact in their community, in policy, in society’s attitude towards the profession.

Of course, writing for *Kaleidoscope* is not the only venue that allows teachers’ voices to be widely heard. **Teachers can write opinion pieces for major newspapers. Teachers can write their own blogs** or contribute to **collective teacher blogs**. Teachers can publish in **journals for educators** or for teachers of **specific disciplines**.

Writing is not the only way. Teachers can also break away from traditional written work and make videos and post on **YouTube** or start a **video blog (vlog)**. Teachers can use social media, such as Twitter campaigns that are highlighting

the work of teachers, like **#teach180** or just **tweet regularly about what it's like to be a teacher**. Teachers can join **a podcast that features teachers' stories** or make your own.

As we transition into a new school year, and welcome a new cohort of KSTF Fellows and new editorial staff for *Kaleidoscope*, I am excited to see what voices we will hear, and how far into the world they will resonate.