

All Teachers as Leaders

“all that you touch, you change/all that you change, changes you”

– Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

In March of 2019, with an awful case of mastitis and a three-week old baby waiting outside, I finally, successfully, defended my dissertation. My qualitative study had a relatively small sample size: I talked to 10 classroom teachers who thought of themselves as leaders, and whose colleagues agreed. One of my key findings was that these teachers had a shared belief that all teachers could be leaders. These teachers shared that they did not engage in leadership work in order to distinguish themselves from their peers, but instead hoped that their leadership work might inspire others to lead as well, and that they could work collaboratively to enact positive change. They hoped their leadership would spread.

They did not, as it so happens, liken their leadership to [slime mold](#), though I think they would find the analogy as delightful as I do. In her [blog post](#), “Teacher Leadership and Educational Improvement in a Complex System,” Knowles former CEO Nicole Gillespie explains that slime mold colonies survive and thrive not due to a centralized command center, but through emergent patterns—each individual cell relating and reacting to another. No single leader cell is responsible for mold’s movement. Instead, the complex system moves as a result of relatively simple interactions between individual cells. Gillespie argues that understanding education as a complex system, like slime mold, helps us to look beyond centralized, top-down change efforts, and even beyond developing individual, “superhero” teacher leaders, and focus instead on cultivating leadership capacity in *all* teachers.

Can all teachers be leaders? Should they be? Are they already? In my role at Knowles as a Program Officer for Teacher Development, my colleagues and I work to support Fellows in their growth as teacher leaders. Our mission is to support a national network of teacher leaders improving education for all students. So our work involves deep conversations about what exactly our call to teacher leadership means. We wonder, how should teachers chart their own individual teacher leadership journeys, informed by their identities, school contexts, and stages of life? How can we support teachers to develop as leaders in

the ways that make sense to them? How can we celebrate the leadership actions that often go unrecognized? How can we avoid contributing to unsustainable and exploitative leadership expectations for teachers? If leadership is a process of influence, what is the role of inward-facing work, like inquiry into one's own classroom practice, and self-reflection?

These questions get easier when we think of leadership as something we do rather than something we are. Every teacher is capable of leadership action, and in fact, just like an individual cell of slime mold, has an invaluable role to play in helping the system grow and strengthen. Throughout the Teaching Fellowship, we explore leadership practices such as critical friendship, opening your practice so that others might learn, facilitating learning conversations, attending to community dynamics influenced by norms and systems of power and privilege, interrupting instances of bias and oppression, and sharing inquiry-generated knowledge with colleagues. We're working toward that vision of a national network of teacher leaders, focusing on practices and habits of mind that teachers can develop and implement. The goal is that our Fellows will not only grow as teacher leaders, but will inspire leadership action among their colleagues, cultivating communities of teacher leaders. Each small, individual actor influencing another in complex systems, challenging the status quo and working toward greater educational equity.

My three-week old baby is now four-years old, and I've been working at Knowles for most of his young life. During that time, I've had a front-row seat for lots of teacher leadership action. I know from talking with Fellows that often they underestimate the power of the ways in which they manage to challenge the status quo. From their vantage point, the obstacles to their students' success and well-being are relentless, the scale of the system designed toward inequality is enormous, and the task of mastering the art and science of teaching is intimidating.

From my vantage point, all of this is still true. But I also have the privilege of seeing their isolated efforts toward improvement as a piece of a larger whole, and their work as profoundly impactful on their peers, their colleagues, their schools, and the profession. One Fellow organizes a district-wide training for adopting a modeling curriculum. Another initiates a data dive with his department to better understand if they are better serving some students than others. Another adjusts her curriculum to be more culturally responsive, engaging her English language

learner students in content that had previously been inaccessible. Another suggests and implements norms and agendas for professional learning community meetings and the space eventually evolves toward a true learning community. They all dig into their own practice, and then share what they're learning and wondering about with colleagues. Collectively, the impact of their leadership actions is really quite great.

I've just started reading Adrienne Maree Brown's *Emergent Strategy*, and it's already WOW. She explains, "Emergent strategies are ways for humans to practice complexity and grow the future through relatively simple interactions" (p. 20). She hasn't explicitly named slime mold, but she writes that examples of emergence are everywhere: "birds flocking, cells splitting, fungi whispering underground." (p. 3). In each case, it is the relationship between individual members of the system that drives the change. She writes,

Emergence notices the way small actions and connections create complex systems, patterns that become ecosystems and societies. Emergence is our inheritance as a part of this universe; it is how we change. Emergent strategy is how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for. (p. 3)

(See? Wow.) How helpful to think of teacher leadership action as emergent strategy, as "our inheritance as a part of this universe," as how we "grow the future." We need not always see the bigger picture, or build a critical mass, or lead way out in front. As our Fellows, and teachers in general, engage in their own leadership action, they influence the leadership actions of those around them, and change the community as a whole. When the work feels too big, and the distance between where we are and where we want to be feels too great, we might lean into our power to influence the larger system in small ways. We might ask: how can each of us, not individually, but in relationship with one another, grow the future we want?