

## Forming Teacher Leader Identities

While traditional views of schools see leadership as centered primarily on the person occupying the principal's office, recent organization theory posits that leadership is not embodied in a person at all, but rather is expressed through events that result in "adaptive changes" where the organization is better able to meet its goals (Lichtenstein et. al., 2006, p. 3). Because organizations are complex and nonlinear systems, such adaptive change requires dynamics that "generate *system-wide* emergent learnings, capabilities, innovations and adaptability" (Lichtenstein et. al, p. 3). These new views of organizational behavior make it clear that leadership is not limited to those with formal roles, but includes anyone in the system who is able to "mobilize people to seize new opportunities and tackle tough problems" (Lichtenstein et. al., p. 4).

These views of how leadership manifests in complex systems is important to us at KSTF because we want to support Fellows to become **early-career teacher leaders** who are able to mobilize and work with their colleagues to effectuate adaptive changes. I am drawing on stories of teacher leadership that were recorded by Fellows at KSTF's 2016 Summer Meeting. These stories illustrate how teachers operate within emergent leadership events from the teacher's perspective, described by KSTF Executive Director **Nicole Gillespie as a "sidewalk up" perspective on teacher leadership in complex systems.**

In the complexity leadership model, the development of collective social identity, or a shared sense of role and purpose, can be a driver of organizational change if it results in new norms and expressions of identity that better serve the organization's growth (Lichtenstein et. al., p. 5). Recognizing the importance of collective identity, at KSTF, we make an effort to **build strong cohorts**, and support Fellows in applying similar strategies within their school communities. In the data we collect on Fellows' progress, we see Fellows develop a shared understanding of good communication within their cohorts, which they report using with their school colleagues: being mindful of each other's needs, open to different perspectives, and focused on the group's work.

The stories of teacher leadership recounted by Fellows illustrate how they were able to apply building collective identity as done within the Fellowship to their schools in ways that facilitated positive change.

## Stories of Identity Development

### *Kelly: Amplifying Teacher Voice*

*In her story, Kelly concluded that “teachers need to speak up” about issues that impact them. As the only teacher on the schedule planning committee, Kelly found herself in what she described as a “hybrid role” where she was able to improve communication between teachers and administration as a result of her ability to both bring her teacher perspective to the process and also communicate to her colleagues that “teachers don’t realize administrators aren’t aware of all their problems and teachers don’t know the constant fires administrators are dealing with.” The result of Kelly’s efforts to amplify teacher voice in the scheduling process was the creation of a schedule that no longer restricted block periods to AP courses, helping the school to move toward their goal of more equitable access to high-level instruction for all students. At the same time, she empowered her colleagues to more forcefully communicate their needs to the administrators.*

This is a story of collective identity development because Kelly used her assignment to the scheduling committee to help teachers reconceptualize their role as separate from administrative decision-making to one where they more closely communicated with administrators and had influence on their decision-making. In recounting it, Kelly focused on her relationships with teachers and administrators rather than the concrete impacts on the schedule, reflecting the primacy of identity development work in her leadership role. The evolution in policy toward more equitable scheduling was the result of the increased communication and understanding between teachers and administrators.

### *Emma: Leveraging Collaboration for Social Justice*

*Emma recounted how she was able to leverage the highly collaboratively culture at her school to build more shared responsibility for teaching about social justice and mitigating the impacts of systematized racism. She did this by first starting conversations about race with students herself, explaining how she would “just stop the lesson” when a contentious issue involving race would arise, and then use the school’s norms around collaboration, which included co-teaching lessons, to involve other teachers in the conversations about race. Emma also initiated a collaboration with another teacher to provide professional development to all*

*teachers on cultural competencies so that the burden didn't always fall on those with a specific interest or stake in the issue. In this way, Emma was able to foster the conversations she believes "need to happen" across the school.*

Emma was able to build her colleagues' skills and collective identities as teachers for social justice through her strategic leveraging of norms of collaboration already practiced at her school. This teacher story shows the power of teachers as **primary agents of educational improvement** because it was Emma's insider knowledge of the school that led to a change in the system. By contrast, the popular strategy of inviting outside "diversity experts" to lead such efforts in schools could not have effectively harnessed teacher norms as an insider like Emma was able to do. Emma's success in supporting all teachers to be proactive in equity-focused dialogue and pedagogy helped the organization as a whole to better meet its goal of improving outcomes for diverse students.

#### *Alexis: Fostering Informal Collaboration*

*Because her school had a culture where teachers were isolated, Alexis told the story of the approach she took to sharing her practice within this context: she asked a colleague to do her the favor of videotaping a lesson that Alexis planned to analyze on her own. However, being in her classroom got her colleague intrigued by the inquiry lesson she observed Alexis teaching and resulted in the two teachers discussing how to improve students' talk about data, a small step toward teacher collaboration that made Alexis "feel empowered about what teacher-to-teacher conversation can do to move a school forward."*

In this case, Alexis was able to start a collaboration within her school's norm of teacher isolation and autonomy. In successfully initiating collaboration with another teacher in a way that was aligned with existing norms, Alexis gave her colleague an opportunity to experience professional interactions in a new way. As Alexis noted, shifting the school's norms resulted in better outcomes for students.

### **Conclusion: Teachers' Stories Help Us to Understand Leadership Events from the Inside**

What we find across these stories is that the teachers have a deep, insider understanding of the norms that influence collective identities in their schools. This understanding leads them to identify specific ways in which they can

challenge their colleagues to expand their thinking about what is possible within their roles as teachers; these are the “emergent events” that lead to adaptive change as predicted by complexity leadership theory. Seeing the theory in action with our Fellows makes it clear that it is teachers who are in the best position to facilitate this kind of deep and meaningful change.