

Introduction to Inquiry Practices and Habits of Mind

At a recent meeting of Knowles Teaching Fellows, three Fellows huddled together to review data they had each brought from their classrooms. Throughout that year, the Fellows had been working together as an **inquiry** group to explore what equitable learning opportunities looked like for students in their classes. One teacher, Ellie (a pseudonym) had recently tried out a new strategy in her biology class called **Socratic Seminar** to facilitate a student-led discussion on a reading about the connection between sports ability and genetics. In a Socratic Seminar, students are responsible for facilitating a discussion around ideas in the text rather than asserting opinions. To support her students in this lesson, Ellie had worked to establish clear norms for this type of class discussion. Now she wanted to look more closely at how these norms played out during the class: Did students adhere to the norms? To what extent did those norms support equitable student participation in the discussion? Could she see ways that the norms provided students' opportunities to learn key ideas from the text?

To explore her questions, Ellie gathered a variety of data sources from her lesson: her own observations of student participation in the discussion, posters that students created after the discussion, and a written reflection after she and a colleague discussed the students' work. She shared this with the other two Fellows in her inquiry group and asked them to unpack that data with her. Although she had already reflected on this lesson alone and with a school colleague, she knew that her inquiry group could provide new perspectives and point out possible blind spots for her. As a group, the three Fellows used a data analysis protocol to guide their discussion of Ellie's data, looking for patterns in what they saw and naming new questions that the data raised for them. After spending sufficient time exploring the data together, they then considered next steps that Ellie might take if she were to facilitate another Socratic Seminar.

Across the five years of the Teaching Fellowship program, Fellows regularly engage in inquiry into questions that arise for them in teaching, related to their students, classrooms, colleagues and schools. Diane Wood describes inquiry as way to examine/investigate a problem of practice teachers encounter in the work they do in their classrooms and schools. It's a systematic process that involves engaging in particular inquiry practices—actions that are central to conducting inquiry and which require specialized knowledge and skills. It also draws on important habits of mind—particular values, attitudes and dispositions toward

inquiry, as well as habitual ways of approaching issues within teaching, learning and schooling. Knowles has identified seven inquiry practices, and five habits of mind that develop as a result of engaging in those practices, that we work to support throughout the fellowship.

The seven practices are: (a) reflecting on and planning for inquiry, (b) asking inquiry questions, (c) collecting and generating data, (d) analyzing data, (e) understanding implications and taking action, (f) engaging with critical friends, and (g) making inquiry public.

Through engaging in these practices, we expect that Fellows will develop the following habits of mind: (a) stance toward knowledge generation that recognizes the value of local, contextual knowledge, (b) open-mindedness and curiosity, (c) valuing multiple perspectives/points of view, (d) development of community that encourages risk-taking and vulnerability, and (e) sensitivity to the ethics involved in researching communities of people.

In the vignette involving Ellie and her inquiry partners, we can see various inquiry practices in action. This group of Fellows worked together over a year by **asking an inquiry question** about equitable learning opportunities for their students. Even as they tried out new strategies, they were careful to pay close attention and reflect on what was going on in their classrooms, remaining open to seeing things they might otherwise overlook. To explore their question, Ellie was intentional about **collecting data** from her classroom—recognizing the value in various forms of data, from observation data, to student work, to written reflections. Guided by a protocol, the group **analyzed the data**, searching together for patterns and new questions that arose from the data.

Similarly, we can see how the three Fellows drew on particular habits of mind for inquiry. Ellie brought her partners into her data because she wanted to **seek new perspectives** on something familiar to her. Valuing multiple perspectives on our questions, data, analysis, and implications means that we recognize that we all bring assumptions into our practice, and we aim to surface and disrupt these assumptions. This inquiry group also demonstrates a **value for inquiry communities**: Ellie knows that asking others to engage with her questions and data strengthens her own teaching, and her inquiry partners demonstrate interest and curiosity in Ellie's work.

We view inquiry as the foundation on which professional learning, growth, and change in education rests. Our commitment to inquiry therefore serves Knowles' larger mission to support **teachers in becoming primary agents of educational improvement**. Inquiry disrupts more traditional forms of professional development that position teachers as recipients of outside knowledge. Instead, inquiry trusts teachers to ask hard questions, explore those questions, and generate knowledge useful to themselves and others. The knowledge teachers generate through inquiry is applicable to teachers' contexts and drive learning in ways that matter most to teachers and their students. As teachers engaging in inquiry, what we learn and come to understand deeply leads to improvement in our practice and our schools.

In our next blog, we look more closely at how inquiry groups work together over time to support each other's learning through inquiry.