

Collective Teacher Agency

Our Executive Director recently wrote about KSTF as a **networked community** working together to bring about educational improvement. I have been thinking quite a bit about evaluation studies that would help us demonstrate the impact of the KSTF networked community. While we have many examples of KSTF Fellows making a difference in their classrooms and beyond, I am puzzling out where, and how, the “networked community” comes into play. In the process, I have been looking at different ways others have written about and/or studied the impact of groups, networks or other collectives. One concept that I am particularly intrigued with is collective agency—the propensity of a group of individuals to intentionally work together towards a shared goal (Bandura, 2000). Collective agency seems like a promising way to describe and explain the networked aspect that KSTF is trying to develop and leverage through our Fellows’ programs. It also underscores the belief that ongoing, sustainable improvement can only be accomplished through the joint efforts of dedicated, accomplished teachers who serve students in classrooms each and every day. In the next few blog posts, I thought I would share some initial ideas about how I see collective agency in the KSTF context—what it means, why it matters, how it develops and how we might measure it.

Before going any further, I need to clarify two important points. The first is that I am not trying to pit individual and collective agency against each other here. It’s not either/or; it’s both/and. We select our Fellows carefully for their propensity to become outstanding teachers and teacher leaders and we support their development as a networked community. The second point is that collective agency is not the additive result of the personal agency of group members. In other words, just gathering a group of highly agentive teachers together does not, in and of itself, predict collective agency. As Bandura explains: *“[It] is not uncommon for groups with members who are talented individually to perform poorly collectively because the members cannot work well together as a unit”* (p. 76). Collective teacher agency requires the intentional and purposeful pursuit of shared educational goals as one interdependent unit.

I thought I would start with some comments from Fellows that infer what collective agency means in KSTF. On a recent survey, we asked Fellows about positive influences they feel they have had beyond their classrooms and what supported their work. I have been analyzing their responses. When describing

support from KSTF, Fellows often point to specific things like learning how to design challenging, productive tasks for students or a leadership grant that funded a professional development session they led in their school. However, Fellows also wrote about KSTF support as an extension of being a member of the KSTF community. Some wrote about KSTF “giving them” confidence, courage or inspiration. Others wrote about the feeling that KSTF “has my back.” This Fellow, in particular, seemed to capture what others also expressed about collective agency in the KSTF community:

I think simply the fact that KSTF is there and that they are such an important community that affirms my importance as an educator has given me leverage and efficacy to really make change at my school.

The sense of efficacy this Fellow refers to is key for translating agency into action. Agency is about potential action, and sense of efficacy is the catalyst that turns potential into reality. The catalytic role of perceived efficacy operates at the individual or collective level. Collective efficacy is a group’s belief in their capability to accomplish something (e.g., improving teaching and learning). When collective efficacy beliefs are strong enough, they can be the spark that that impels the group to action (Bandura, 2000).

Building strong teacher collectives who share the belief that they can bring about positive change seems key for bringing about any kind of lasting educational improvement. As Bandura’s and other’s research shows, the extent to which teachers perceive that they and their colleagues can collectively bring about desired changes (their perceived collective efficacy) will shape their actions in a variety of important ways:

People’s shared beliefs in their collective efficacy influence the types of futures they seek to achieve through collective action, how well they use their resources, how much effort they put into their group endeavor, their staying power when collective efforts fail to produce quick results or meet forcible opposition, and their vulnerability to the discouragement that can beset people taking on tough social problems (p. 76).

I think most people would agree that improving math and science teaching and learning qualifies as a “tough social problem.” The networked community approach that KSTF takes towards teacher and teacher leadership

development means that, even if Fellows do not perceive collective agency in their local contexts or the wider educational system, they can still imagine “different types of futures” they can achieve, and stay the course even when things get tough (as learning to teach and lead from the classroom often are), because they are part of the KSTF community. I can hear that kind of imagination and resilience in this comment from a Fellow who is starting discussions in her department about what good teaching means:

KSTF helped me...feel more confident in my abilities to make these statements. As the newest/youngest member of my department, it has allowed me to propose new ideas with some authority and not feel overwhelmed when met with a tepid response.

This quotation also suggests an equally important effect of the collective agency Fellows share within KSTF (when we get it right). They begin to believe that they can build collective agency outside of KSTF—with a single colleague, a department, a committee, or a teacher study group. And that’s how the networked community begins to change the status quo in schools; not one individual at a time but as a collective force. In my next blog, I’ll share thoughts on how I see collective agency developing within the KSTF networked community and how Fellows use that development as a foundation for building collective agency elsewhere.

Bandura, A. (2000). Exercise of human agency through collective efficacy. Current Directions in Psychological Science, 9(3), 75-78.