

Shouldn't You Be A Superintendent By Now?

I still remember the feelings that I had during the Saturday dinner of my first Summer Meeting with the Knowles community.

As a veteran teacher, I was participating in the meeting as a resource teacher, which meant that I was supporting Knowles Teaching Fellows as they designed lessons and discussed their ideas about teaching chemistry. Engaging with young science teachers and talking about chemistry teaching for three days was an energizing experience, and by the final evening dinner, I remember feeling so excited for my own upcoming school year and so grateful to have been a part of the annual Summer Meeting. However, what I remember even more is crying when Nicole, the Executive Director of Knowles, thanked the resource teachers for our help throughout the weekend. My tears were also accompanied by a surge of guilt because I felt like I had learned so much throughout the weekend and I hoped that I had contributed at least as much as I had benefited.

On the plane ride home, I was trying to figure out why I had cried at being thanked the night before. I realized that it was because it was honestly the first time in my professional life that I felt truly valued as a classroom teacher; it was the first time I ever remember being appreciated for the knowledge that I had developed through my classroom teaching experience.

I can contrast this with so many other experiences in which my own knowledge and expertise as a teacher were dismissed. One of these experiences occurred when I sat in my professor's office, sharing my master's thesis idea about embedding career education within my chemistry curriculum. He questioned my degree choice, saying, "I don't understand why you are just getting the M.S. in education. Why not in educational administration? You're young enough, you should really get that now, so that you can be an administrator soon." I remember feeling uncomfortable with his question and even more uncomfortable with my response. I can still hear myself replying, "because I don't want to be a principal. I love being a teacher." Fearing that I would disappoint him or sound silly, I gave him my honest answer with a question mark at the end, not with the exclamation point that I wanted. He kind of shook his head at me, signed off on my request,

then said, “Well, when you change your mind, you can always come back and take those classes for your administrative certificate.” I left his office feeling less excited about my thesis idea and less confident in my decision-making. Replaying this discussion, I wondered: Was it stupid to get a master’s degree if I really wasn’t planning to change career paths?

When I think of myself during this time, the experience of continuing to learn more about teaching *was* changing me as a teacher. I became more reflective of my teaching, more critical of my understanding of my students and their thinking, and more interactive with my colleagues. Working on my master’s degree gave me just the excuse that I needed to have conversations with other teachers and my students about teaching and learning. I could use my coursework as an excuse to share what I was learning and ask others for their perspectives. It gave me a reason to try new things in my classroom, and my students always seemed willing and eager to participate in my learning. Now I realize that more than the coursework itself, it was through those interactions with my colleagues and my students about my learning that I grew as a teacher and was empowered to be a teacher leader.

Since that master’s program, I have also completed doctoral coursework in science education as well as master’s coursework in chemistry. Each time I pursued further study to learn more about my teaching, I felt as though I was fighting to be understood, and that I never really won that battle. As I had conversations with professors, my colleagues, my students, and even friends and family about my continued study, there always seemed to be an underlying question: “Why are you doing all of this?” To me, the answer was always so simple: I wanted to be a better teacher and I wanted to help others to be better teachers. But others continued to question the value of my efforts, primarily because there was no visible change in my “status” as a teacher. In fact, others often asked me: “Shouldn’t you be a superintendent or something by now?” This question always made me feel small—that because I was still “only” a classroom teacher, all of my work to learn about teaching and learning was meaningless. To me, the implication was that teaching itself does not require this much thought and study, and if I really wanted to “improve” teaching or education, I should move out of the classroom and into administration.

Within the Knowles Teacher Initiative, I have found a community that finally “gets” my continued drive to be a better teacher and to support other teachers.

I've found a place that aligns with my core values—an organization that believes that teachers can transform science and math education from the classroom. We work to empower teachers to recognize their ability to contribute their knowledge to the field of education through their engagement in and sharing about **inquiry** within their classrooms and their professional communities. Not only do we support teachers in their own inquiry processes, but also, we as staff engage in inquiry into our own practice as a professional community. As we engage Fellows in the professional development that we have designed, we collect data. We examine this data recursively, looking for evidence of how our Fellows' are thinking about teaching and leadership. Our analysis of this data not only informs our planning of future professional development experiences, but it also provides us with insight about how teacher leadership is enacted by teachers from their classrooms. Through this inquiry, Knowles is helping to define teacher leadership in a more expansive way, a way that includes teachers like me, and I am excited for the opportunity to help other young teachers recognize their own leadership characteristics.

Since my first experience as a resource teacher at the Knowles Summer Meeting, I have continued to work with the Knowles community by sharing my classroom teaching with Fellows and continuing to engage with them in discussions about teaching. Demonstrating my commitment to continual growth as a teacher, I've shared data from my classroom with cohorts of Fellows, and we considered what could be learned by examining data together. Learning alongside Fellows, I've also continued to improve my own teaching—for example, by embedding more mathematical concepts within my science classroom. By openly sharing data from these experiences, Fellows had opportunities to consider how implementation of these pedagogical ideas could look in their classrooms, and they were empowered to take risks themselves.

Now, after 24 years as a classroom teacher, I have made the decision to take on a new role outside of the classroom. In June, I became a full-time Program Officer for Teacher Development, working with Knowles Teaching Fellows as they continue to study their teaching, support their colleagues, and work toward improvement in education. I finally made this decision to step outside the classroom not because it's what I am supposed to do if I want to "move up" in my profession, but because I have found a way to continue to effect the change that I have always believed really matters—a change that fosters teachers' leadership

through shared learning experiences and empowers Fellows to advocate for educational improvement from their own classrooms.