



Now on Teacher Voice

Affinity Groups

In this episode of *Teacher Voice: The Podcast*, we learn about affinity groups from educators in the Knowles community and how their participation has impacted them.

Brittany: Unlike most of my students, I'm White. My racial identity has shaped the way I understand and relate to pretty much every aspect of society, including the media, pop culture, and education. My whiteness means I experience and move through societal spaces differently than my non-White students and colleagues. Without working to uncover and understand these differences of identity and experience, I'm at risk of replicating and perpetuating harmful disparities in my classroom and school community.

Unlike most of my students and colleagues, I'm queer. Like my whiteness, my queerness is a prism through which I filter the world. I'm always conscious of the vulnerabilities inherent in this identity. Vulnerabilities my straight students and colleagues don't face and may be unaware of.

Sometimes in some spaces, my queerness energizes and empowers me. I feel uniquely positioned to advocate for inclusivity and articulate challenges or harms faced by the LGBTQ+ community. But sometimes being queer just makes me tired or angry, or even fearful. And in those moments conversations with straight people in majority straight spaces are overwhelming.

(1:17) Welcome to Teacher Voice, the podcast that brings you stories by teachers about teaching. My name is Brittany Franckowiak and I teach high school

biology in Maryland. I know that in order to be my best teacher self, I need to feel safe and supported as a whole person at school. And I know that in order for my students to be their best student-selves, they need to feel safe and supported as whole people at school. The work of building truly inclusive communities requires ongoing learning about how our various identities and experiences might inform or bias or facilitate or hinder the work. This learning can feel overwhelming.

Recently, the professional community at the Knowles Teacher Initiative has made use of affinity groups in an effort to make space for safe, productive explorations of diverse identities.

We should probably start with the fundamentals. What exactly is an affinity group? We asked a few members of the Knowles teacher community to weigh in.

(2:16) **Swetha:** I'm Swetha. I'm in the 2017 cohort, I teach ninth grade, advisory interdisciplinary project type things in Philly. I think at its core an affinity group is just people coming together around any shared interest or commonality in their life. So I think specifically when it comes to facets of your identity, an affinity group can be a really validating and empowering space, particularly for marginalized groups.

Jovel: My name is Jovel Queirolo and I teach chemistry and biology in Oakland, California. An affinity group is a group of people who have an identity in common. And I don't know if this is in the textbook definition, but it's—because there's a shared identity, there's some pressure that sort of lifted. And you can sort of be at ease because you're not expecting judgment around that particular identity.

Anna: My name is Anna Montero and I am a phase one TD. I think their purpose or their goal is often to unpack marginalization of either the group they're considered

part of or other groups that they may interact with. And so really unpacking racism, heteronormativity and sexism in a specific way and so targeting conversations around how oppression and marginalization is either impacted by them or how they're impacting it.

(4:00) **Brittany:** How can communities and organizations benefit from investing in and making time and space for this kind of affinity group work? Let's hear more from Swetha.

Swetha: I think it's the acknowledgement that there are like varying points of view, varying identities, varying experiences within the organization, and then an opportunity to sort of like, value what comes out of each of those groups, in a way that's not sort of under the layer of the power dynamics of larger organizational conversation. So for example, when you have an affinity group for people of color, as we did, I think there's like a safety net that we are talking within, that doesn't exist when we're talking about the whole organization.

Ginna: I'm Ginna. I teach math in Chicago. Yeah, I think validation is a really key component of affinity groups, feeling validated in your identity, whether that's a targeted identity that you often don't feel validated in because it's targeted, or whether that's a privileged identity that you feel afraid to be validated in.

Brittany: Jovel also shared their thoughts on this question.

(5:24) **Jovel:** I think for an organization or a community that has people from different identities, like for example, race, I think it's helpful for people, of the same race or who have a shared race, to be together to reflect on that shared identity as a lens through which they might do their work. Or they might have a shared challenge because of the race that they identify with. It doesn't have to be race, though. It could be around gender. I could imagine that in a workplace where there are, you know, cisgender men and cisgender women, the women might feel something or experience work and move through the world in a way that's really different from their male colleagues. So it doesn't just have to be race but gender, sexuality.

Brittany: And so what can individuals stand to gain from engaging in this kind of affinity group work in their communities?

Hai: My name is Hai, and I am working to support the 2016s in Phase 2. As an Asian male, some of the benefits that I've received from being a part of an affinity group is having my personal experience affirmed and corroborated by others who share the same, I guess, markers as I do. And another thing that I've received from being part of this affinity group is to also see the

significant differences within the group. But I think having a space for conversation is the first important step in addressing some of the inequities that are experienced. And also I think ways where Asians might unintentionally or unconsciously reinforce some of the spaces of privilege and power in society.

(7:33) **Josh:** I'm Josh Thurbee and I'm a TD on phase one. I think it's been helpful to be in the group, as the White man and learning more about my privilege and for being in a White affinity group and just learning about what does it mean to be White, and unpacking more of my own identity and learning alongside other White people about that. And being held accountable by my co-workers who are White. And I think also as a gay man being in an LGBTQ affinity group, it's also I think, like I said, it's liberating to be with people where I feel, perhaps I get to bring more of my whole self and to have my experience validated and understood on a level that I don't think is understood in other spaces. And I think to be able to work together on a plan to move a conversation in a specific direction.

Josh: But I think, again, I've been [in] LGBTQ affinity groups in work environments. And so being able to talk with other gay people to say, 'where do we want the conversation to go in the organization?' Or 'what do we feel is missing from the organization?' What agenda do we have? Because we're gay, we do have a gay agenda, [laughter] getting time and space to put that together.

(9:07) **Melissa:** So at work I've been in affinity groups based on identity markers, which is what everyone's been talking about.

Brittany: This is Melissa Kagle, Senior Research Associate at the Knowles Teacher Initiative.

Melissa: In my more political activist life, I've been in affinity groups that are organized around actions that people are willing to take. And so that's . . . just a different kind of affinity. So it crosses identity markers, but you have that commonality of saying, you know, I'm willing to do civil disobedience or I'm willing to write letters or whatever it is that the group sort of agreed on. I've learned a lot being in both. And I think both of them give you that same sort of comfort of knowing, that kind of people know where you're coming from, or sort of, you can... I think it can be easier to unpack things when people have a sort of similar context in which to do it. You know, when you have a kind of similar sense of what effective action looks like. It's easier to think about how to go about that as well.

Josh: I think a nice thing about an affinity group, is that there might be times and spaces where something may have happened and I need a group to process

that with. Or it may have happened in a staff meeting or in a cohort meeting. And I don't know how to process it in the moment. And maybe it's something that deals with my whiteness, so I can bring into the White affinity group or maybe something that deals with my queerness I can bring into the queer affinity group. It's nice to have that space—and to know like, okay, I can hold on to this for now. And then I can bring it to this group and they can help me unpack this. And give me perhaps the new perspective, like if I was angry or hurt.

(11:02) **Brittany:** What have you appreciated about your affinity group experiences?

Jovel: I really appreciated the space to process emotions or feelings that were around a specific identity. So for example, when I'm around other LGBTQ educators, it's really helpful to hear how they respond to, maybe student comments that are harmful around that particular identity. Because we might experience that comment in a way that's different from how a straight teacher would experience that. So it's nice to be able to feel like you have a connection to the other people in your group and like they get it. You don't have to explain yourself.

Today, I was in an affinity group with other Asian Americans. And so we were talking specifically about—Oh, what is it like to be an Asian American educator who's teaching White students and also teaching students who are Black or Latino. And it was just really helpful. Because again, I don't have to explain that experience. And I knew that they understood some of the unique challenges that I have and it just felt good to know that I'm not alone.

Brittany: Affinity group work does present some challenges, both for organizations and individuals.

(12:21) **Swetha:** I think there's a couple things I think. First, even within affinity groups, there's a wide range of experiences. There's a lot of diversity within each affinity group. For example, within the people of color affinity group we've separated out into further affinities such as the Black Fellows, the Asian Fellows, East Asian Fellows, South Asian Fellows. We had Latinix Fellows, there's just like, such a huge range of experience that the umbrella of people of color wasn't addressing. So that's one challenge I think when working with affinity groups.

And then I think the other challenge is, sort of not letting that work sit within the affinity group forever, and being intentional about taking those things that you learned, the takeaways, and bringing them to the organization. Because that's when the validation happens, right? That's when it's like, okay, we did this work within our group, and we're bringing this to the whole group, and we'd like it to be seen.

Becky: It seems like that's the mechanism that gives voice to that potentially marginalized group of people to do something with the work that was there.

Swetha: Right.

Becky: And do you see that as one of the more challenging aspects?

Swetha: I mean, I think with any organization, it's the stagnation that happens when change is being pushed for. It's easier to not act than it is to, you know, take feedback and suggestions and move forward.

Ginna: Yeah, I think a challenge that's perhaps specific to White affinity groups or affinity groups for any privileged identity is moving past the hand-wringing stage or the exploratory, internal interrogation phase into action, and, or outward actions. I think in my experiences, White affinity groups have mostly been used as places to just explore identity and have not pushed into the territory of like doing something with that personal interrogation.

(14:28) **Swetha:** I think that something that I've seen, particularly during this meeting, is I think there has been the affinity groups—and I guess maybe it's coming out of that struggle to talk about personal identity. But then I feel like when we're in our cohort time with a vaguely diverse group of people, [laughter] you know, like it can sometimes feel like, we are people of color sitting in a White affinity group when it comes to those conversations, because it's like, you get to unpack your race in this space. I'm thinking about it 24–7.

Becky: So just having affinity groups in an organization does not necessarily mean that the collective spaces become safer spaces necessarily for marginalized people.

Swetha: Absolutely

Ginna: And just having affinity groups is a marker that the organization is catering to the privileged identities because those are the people who need to spend time interrogating their points of privilege. Like people of color, have already done it because they have to.

Swetha: Which I mean, it's not to say—I still do think that affinity groups for people of color are super valuable and particularly in these spaces that are primarily White because those are often like the safest spaces that we have, right? Of being able to bring our full selves and have conversations that I think everyone's thinking about but are harder to bring up in whole group conversations.

(16:02) **Brittany:** Hai suggests that in order for organizations to experience change, conversations have to move out of the space of the affinity group. But care must be given to how that happens.

Hai: For me, just being a part of a few affinity groups, one feeling now is when the session ends there's so much more to be heard, to be said. That it seems like we're just at the iceberg. And it seems like those conversations should really take a lot of time and thought and it should be a series of conversations as opposed to a singular one. Another thought that I've been thinking about is—how do we use an affinity group as a way to bring a particular group together and use the identity markers or whatever markers within that group as a source of pride and shared experience, but also not allowing that common characteristic to position against other groups that don't share that characteristic. So the idea of feeling a sense of belonging around a shared characteristic, but not allowing that characteristic to be exclusive or to feel exclusive.

And to loop back to what Anna said at the beginning, is that at least in the context of Knowles, that we had affinity groups within a context with the goal to understand the marginalization of certain groups and having that as a central goal—keeping that in mind is really important. And seeing that as a system as opposed to positioning different groups against each other.

(17:51) **Brittany:** Working with affinity groups can also bring some surprises.

Josh: I think one thing that was surprising for me when I first joined a White affinity group I, I was resistant. I didn't understand. And I thought it was just going to be a time where I would spend a lot of time feeling guilty. And I didn't see that as a great use of my time. So what was surprising was then—our White affinity group, I feel is really productive and constructive. I don't leave feeling guilty, I leave feeling like we've had productive conversation and I'm learning a lot and feeling empowered.

Melissa: I had a sort of similar concern about the White affinity group. I wasn't actually worried about feeling guilty. I was worried about feeling frustrated that, you know, for me, sort of the way I've thought about anti-racist work has been in conjunction with people of different backgrounds and sort of thinking about that, thinking it through. It was a big change for me to sort of translate that kind of process into a group where there's only one race.

Josh: I also think there's been times where something has been triggering. And I can quickly call together like a quick gay affinity group. Avengers assemble! [laughter] I'm really hurt right now and I need to process and I need support. And I guess a surprise is not realizing how valuable it's become and like that I know I have the support system to fall back on at any time, not just during affinity group time.

Jovel: I think there's a lot of emotion that comes up for me because the identities that I have, for which I have been in affinity groups, have pain and shame associated with them. So like, being an LGBT educator, that identity has come with a lot of shame. And so sometimes when I'm in an affinity group, it resurfaces, because people might talk about shame or they might feel about, and how they've, you know, experienced oppression. So there is a sadness that comes there. But like, along with that comes the pride because like, we're all together and we're proud and that feels good.

GINNA: I don't know if this is so much a comment about affinity groups or conversations about race in general, but I am, I continued to be surprised at how many times I can feel like blinders are being pulled off. I have had that experience so many times and it fools me into thinking I've arrived every time. And I continue to be surprised by how many blinders I have.

Brittany: We'll wrap our exploration of affinity group work with the wise words of Knowles staff member Anna Montero.

Anna: The only thing I'd like to add is that, kind of mentioned earlier, the tip of the iceberg idea. If you're thinking of doing an affinity group or wanting to do one, just recognize that it takes a lot of time to make just a little progress. And so just going into that with an open mind and to know that it's a lot of work and that changes don't happen immediately, but it takes a lot of time. Every meeting you just learn more about that iceberg that you need to work towards. To have . . . patience and to continue working hard on it.

Brittany: To create safe, equitable spaces for ourselves and our students, we need to acknowledge the realities of privilege and oppression. And we need to recognize how our identities position us within our communities. It's a complex, messy, demanding task that requires honesty, vulnerability and commitment. Affinity groups offer one way of approaching this work.

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