Chapter 5

Advocacy in Early Childhood Teacher Preparation

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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that teachers’ definitions of advocacy are highly influenced by their academic pre-service education, even more than their other experiences (Mevawalla & Hadley, 2012), leading to this being a critical focus for undergraduate pre-service teacher preparation (Snyder, 2012). Advocacy can be viewed by preservice teachers as a worthy, albeit intimidating, goal. This chapter describes a structured advocacy project in an undergraduate teacher preparation program. The project was broken down into component parts across the students’ final semester and served as the capstone seminar for the teacher preparation program.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher education programs should be designed to provide preservice teachers (PST) with coursework on child development, content knowledge, pedagogy, and assessment, while fostering positive relationships with children and their families. Courses are carefully planned and ordered to maximize PST growth in becoming a professional. Toward the end of this experience, PSTs should have an application experience, where they are able to put these skills in action. One such application experience is the experience of advocating. The process of advocacy allows students to use their prior knowledge, while also gaining specific information on the practice of advocating for young children. The purpose of this chapter is to describe a systematic approach, embedded within a capstone experience in an undergraduate Early Childhood Education teacher preparation program, to assist PSTs in gaining expertise in advocacy.

Key-words-in-context (KWIC; Luhn, 1966) were gathered from PST reflections across three separate groups of students over the course of three different semesters (spring 2015, 2016, 2017) as the advocacy project was implemented and refined as part of course reflections. PST’s reflective comments are used...
to exemplify thinking, experiences, and components of the project. Appendices with detailed course assignments are included to provide teacher educators with tools to execute this approach in their own classrooms.

How Do You Eat an Elephant?

The PSTs enrolled in the Capstone Advocacy course within the degree in Early Childhood Education at Louisiana State University (LSU) often snicker when this question is posed during the first-class period of their final student teaching semester. Typically, this is because they think they already know the answer. Invariably, a student will say, “One bite at a time”, to which the response is “yes, but you can eat an elephant quicker if you find others who also like to eat elephants, and also convince others that elephants are good eating!” That stimulates discussion on the task we will tackle this semester: How to advocate. We then experience the methodical steps necessary to tackle this feat, which include engaging others as well as connecting to existing resources and efforts in the community. PSTs in LSU’s Early Childhood Education Program are accustomed to working with others and considering the needs of community partners while also addressing the academic goals of their teacher certification program, as their coursework is designed within the framework of service-learning.

An advocate can be defined as ‘one who supports or promotes the interest of others’ (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) and implies individuals will work to best support these populations (Shields, 2012). In Early Childhood Education (ECE), advocates refer to actions that lead to the protection or enhancement of services for children. In the U.S., the majority of teachers elect not to engage in the opportunity to advocate (Cohen, 2008). Research suggests that teachers’ definitions of advocacy are highly influenced by their academic preservice education, even more than other experiences (Mevawalla & Hadley, 2012), making advocacy a critical focus for undergraduate pre-service teacher preparation (Snyder, 2012). A more functional definition of advocacy for the ECE field is “... a proactive stance by individuals in response to particular issues that negatively affect children and families” (Kieff, 2009, p. 17). In the LSU ECE Program, this belief and this process is a philosophical underpinning of academic pre-service education. Advocacy may be viewed by pre-service teachers as a worthy, albeit intimidating, goal.

Many PSTs assume that in order to advocate effectively, one must be an expert on the topic or in a position of power (Mevawalla & Hadley, 2012). Typically, possessing expertise or being in a power position is viewed by undergraduate students as well beyond their stage of professional development.

As ECE educators, we were interested in exploring how PSTs viewed advocacy. We began our inquiry by asking our students about their perceptions of the advocacy process. One PST’s comment, representative of many perceptions, described feeling intimidated talking about her issue “in the real world” versus the university classroom; she reported being concerned about “getting people to listen... and take [the issue] seriously” (R. Carver, personal communication). This sentiment was pervasive among PSTs in this course and seems to stem from the realization that they are new to the profession and may not know as much as other, more experienced teachers. Emblematic of this stance as novices, one PST phrased it, “Intimidation keeps me from speaking up in my school placement. I feel inadequate; I would not feel comfortable approaching a professional” (F. Thompson, personal communication). Recognizing this commonly-held self-perception, we posit PSTs need strategies to help them direct their learning in such a way that they can feel knowledgeable regarding an issue about which they are passionate.
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