Chapter 6

Advocacy for English Learners: 
Teacher Candidates Learn Advocacy for Policy Change

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing need for teachers to be advocates for their English Learners (ELs). Teacher preparation programs often do not develop teacher candidates’ advocacy skills effectively, and this chapter begins with an outline of the need for developing the advocacy skills of teacher candidates. Activities to promote the development of teacher candidates’ skills to advocate for policy change for ELs are described both at scaffolded levels of preparation and within the context of an undergraduate teacher education program. These activities are organized in the program to reflect both the teacher candidates’ developing abilities to analyze and synthesize information related to policy as well as, for some assignments, the political election cycle. As part of these activities, teacher candidates engage in self-reflection as well as in-class, whole group reflection, and these processes are described along with a presentation of themed student reflective responses in regard to the advocacy activities.

INTRODUCTION

The percentage of English learners (ELs) in public schools in the U.S.A. has been growing while the achievement gap between ELs and non-ELs remains consistent. As of 2013-14, ELs compose 9.3% (4.5 million) of students in public schools in the U.S.A., and, in California, the percentage is 22.7%. Six states (i.e., Alaska, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Texas) and Washington, D.C., schools have 10% or more ELs, and 17 states (i.e., Arizona, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, Virginia, and Washington) have 6 to 9.9% of ELs (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2016). However, the achievement gap in 4th and 8th grade reading and mathematics between ELs and non-ELs remained consistent between 1998 and 2013 (United States Department of Education, 2013). Results
of the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress indicate that, while 38% of 4th and 8th grade non-ELs scored at or above proficient in reading, only 8% of ELs scored at or above proficient (United States Department of Education, 2015).

When educational policies do not favor EL success, change could happen when educators communicate with school and district administrators, politicians, and policymakers to advocate effectively on behalf of their EL students. Undergraduate teacher candidates often express that they had not considered that politicians are most often not educators and that they need to hear educators’ voices to be informed of the educational needs of students, families, and teachers. However, educators most often do not learn to advocate effectively on behalf of their ELs in their teacher preparation programs (Athanases & de Oliveira, 2007; Dever, 2006; Lievobich & Matoba Adler, 2009; Mahwinney, Rinke, & Park, 2012). In this chapter, activities intended to develop teacher candidates’ advocacy skills, within the larger context of the growing recognition of the need for teachers to become advocates for their ELs, are presented and described. Because the teacher candidates included in this chapter are undergraduate students, they most often do not choose to advocate at the school or district levels, since they are not employed yet as teachers in a school, and they may be concerned about being considered for local employment. Themes and examples from teacher candidate reflections on the experiences are also provided. While the focus here is on ELs, much of the content is inclusive of the needs of other vulnerable students as well.

BACKGROUND

Teachers as Advocates

There is growing recognition of the need for teachers to be advocates for their students, families, and the profession. For example, the Teacher Leader Model Standards (Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, 2012) include a domain entitled, “Advocating for Student Learning and the Profession,” which states that “the teacher leader understands the landscape of education policy and can identify key players at the local, state, and national levels. The teacher leader advocates for the teaching profession and for policies that benefit student learning” [italics added]. Professional organizations, such as Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) recognize that the role of EL teachers as advocates is expanding, both within the school community and with policymakers, and, often, training in advocacy can help teachers be more effective advocates (TESOL, 2013). In the U.S.A and internationally, professional organizations emphasize the importance of advocacy in education through publications, programs, and events. (See Appendix.)

The importance of advocacy in the field of education for ELs in the U.S.A, in particular, has been apparent in the field for many years. Policymakers are often not well-informed about that which is educationally effective for students, in general, and for ELs, in particular (e.g., Hamayan & Field, 2012). To further the challenge, the public, policymakers, and education reporters often ignore the evidence on effective instruction for ELs (Krashen, 2012). While many native English-speaking children can rely on their parents to be their advocates, parents of ELs often cannot advocate for their children (e.g., Hamayan & Field, 2012), due to a variety of factors, including cultural or linguistic differences or a lack of awareness of their and their children’s rights. Oftentimes, teachers of ELs are the only voices in advocacy that their ELs have (e.g., Cloud, 2012, Hamayan & Field, 2012).
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