FORUM
Volume 51, Number 1, 2009
www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM

Teaching Advocacy in Early Years Initial Teacher Education Programmes

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ABSTRACT Teacher education programmes in the United States and in England with early childhood certification usually include courses with topics such as early childhood theory and curriculum, child development, model programs, and history of early childhood education but less often include courses with content focused specifically on advocacy. This article interrogates the possibility of developing courses on advocacy for pre-service teachers to build a knowledge base on advocacy for parents, families and children and to develop competency in inter-personal, cross-cultural communication. Drawing on data from Liebovich's study on beliefs about advocacy of early childhood education students in the United States, the authors share pre-service teachers' narratives about advocacy, discuss the process of moving from advocacy awareness to empowerment, and propose content for a university level course on advocacy in England and the United States. Using a feminist theoretical perspective, this study critiques teacher education programs and how student identity as advocates is rarely nurtured. The authors demonstrate how pre-service teachers reflect about the role teacher's play working with, informing, and empowering families to truly become collaborative partners in the education of their children.

Introduction

Advocacy in early childhood education in the United States has been taught within the contexts of family studies and special education, usually including courses such as early childhood theory and curriculum, child development, model programs, and history of early childhood education. In England, advocacy is rarely addressed outside the context of special education. Early childhood teacher preparation programmes less often include courses with

content focused specifically on advocacy. There are many legitimate reasons for this oversight such as no time in an intensive program to adequately cover both theory and practice, competition for credits in required practical field work, the view that advocacy is something acquired or developed through experience, and low priority on coursework focusing specifically on diverse families.

Advocacy can challenge the 'babysitter' myth about early childhood education and gives a voice to the women who are typically silenced (Goldstein, 1998) and whose work is often deskilled (Liston & Zeichner, 1991). According to Arnett (1989) 'many states require no more than a perceptible pulse and some basic literacy skills for child care staff other than the director' (p. 241). Early childhood education is often viewed as childcare and advocacy can raise consciousnesses and respect for early childhood education. Early childhood educators deserve a better image both professionally and as advocates for young children. If preservice early childhood teachers are made aware of the concept of advocacy and armed with a sense of understanding about the need for advocacy, they will have the fortification required to fight against government demands placed on them as educators (ie. mandatory testing). With an understanding of advocacy and commitment to action, future teachers may develop the potential to mobilize and change their working conditions, their standard of living, and the public's sense of value (or the lack of) for early childhood education.

A quick internet search of courses addressing advocacy in early childhood education in the United States indicates that very few community colleges offer courses designed for preparation of childcare directors. For example, Kendall College in Chicago offers a course entitled 'Early Childhood Leadership and Advocacy' and Vanier College in Montreal, QC offers a course called 'Early Childhood Advocacy and Teamwork'.

It appears that universities offering a degree in early childhood education embed advocacy in curriculum, family/community, or policy courses. For example, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, advocacy is part of the course 'Families, Communities, Schools' in the department of Curriculum and Instruction, while at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, advocacy is embedded in their early childhood policies course. At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, School of Human Development and Family Studies, advocacy is embedded in a social policies course. Within these diverse academic contexts, we find multiple conceptualizations of advocacy.

Additionally, advocacy can be perceived from different perspectives: It can be about (1) early childhood professionals addressing the needs of children and families; (2) accessing services for children with special needs; and (3) professional advocacy for teachers, administrators, and caregivers. Advocacy for children and their families might include accessing community services such as housing, medical assistance, governmental assistance, extended childcare, tutoring, counseling and other intervention services. For special needs children, advocacy might involve assisting parents in negotiating the multiple agencies servicing their child. In order to become an effective advocate, one needs to

have confidence and see oneself as an advocate, be able to assess needs and issues for advocacy, develop persuasive communication skills, and locate and offer appropriate resources. We believe that a commitment to advocacy is a vital foundation for all who work with young children.

Further, advocacy is not well defined as a necessary competency for preservice teachers. Participants in a study of advocacy in early childhood education (Liebovich, 2004) defined advocacy in a variety of ways: (1) finding resources for special needs children, (2) empowering families and children, (3) changing negative public attitudes about early childhood education, and (4) promoting professionalism in the field of early childhood education. This article interrogates the reasons for the lack of course work on the development of competency of preservice teachers to advocate for their programs, families, and professional field. Suggestions for incorporating content on advocacy into preservice programs are discussed. Special attention is given to ways in which prospective teachers can reflect upon their own perspectives on families that are racially, ethnically, linguistically, and culturally different from themselves, and to develop strategies to enhance cross-cultural communication.

This article interrogates the possibility of developing courses on advocacy for pre-service teachers in England and the United States to build a knowledge base on advocacy for parents, families and children and to develop competency in inter-personal, cross-cultural communication. It is organized into the following sections: (1) Perspectives on advocacy in early childhood, (2) Preservice teachers' beliefs about advocacy, (3) The evolution of advocacy awareness and development, and (4) Advocacy in early childhood teacher preparation programs.

Perspectives on Advocacy in Early Childhood

Definitions of advocacy in ECE include the expectation to stand up for children and their needs (Goffin & Lombardi, 1988) and a commitment to professional activism on behalf of young children (Fennimore, 1989). Parents are also encouraged to advocate for their own children (Beck, 1979) and for staff, advocacy is linked to leadership and professionalism at the state and local levels (Gnezda, 1996; Lindamood, 1995). Social justice and advocacy or welfare reform move early childhood advocacy beyond the classroom and into the public policy making realm.

Teacher preparation on advocacy in the field of early childhood education has been relatively inconspicuous in teacher education programs. One reason for this lack of representation as critiqued from a poststructuralist frame of reference by Sue Grieshaber (2001) is that there are contradictory positions regarding expectations of early childhood teachers and caregivers. Grieshaber (2001) writes:

> The humanist notion of the unified rational subject is problematic when the discourse of advocacy and the discourse of developmentally appropriate practice are considered, as teachers are

> placed in contradictory positions by each discourse. Teachers are supposed to meet children's needs through nurturance and care, and at the same time are urged to advocate for children, knowing that such advocacy may involve contestation and conflict. From a humanist perspective, this is a theoretical challenge. While it is possible to be a warm demander as Mead suggested, accounting for this requires a theoretical shift from the way the subject is understood in humanism (p. 65).

Mead, as discussed in Grieshaber (2001) describes a 'warm demander' as a professional, competent teacher 'who is warm and responsive but also capable of demanding learning and competence' (p. 64). This term encapsulates the dichotomy of developmentally appropriate practice used daily with characteristics of early childhood advocates.

Although not many studies have been done on preservice teachers' beliefs on advocacy, a pilot study by Liebovich revealed that there were multiple definitions of advocacy and the students felt unprepared to become advocates. Grieshaber's (2001) theoretical challenge raises the important question: How do you strike a balance between the role of early childhood teachers as nurturers and a developing disposition of teachers as advocates?

Preservice Teachers' Beliefs about Advocacy

In her qualitative study of six preservice early childhood teachers in the United States, Liebovich utilized a narrative inquiry methodology and a feminist theoretical orientation to gather stories about student experiences with and beliefs about advocacy. The study uncovered several domains of advocacy: (1) advocacy for children with special needs, (2) advocacy for children and families, and (3) advocacy for themselves as professionals and for the field of early childhood education. By consensus, participants defined advocacy as a professional commitment to meet the needs of children and families and to promote respect for the profession of early childhood education.

Consciousness-raising, by feminist definition, can be facilitated by small groups of women talking about and transforming personal and professional interests into a shared awareness of their meaning (Tierney, 1991; Capek, 1987; Kramarae & Treichler, 1985). Sharing personal stories, comparing experiences, and exploring mutual interests in supporting children and families, raised the participants' consciousness of advocacy. Space was provided that was non-threatening, non-judgmental, and relaxed so they could share as much or as little as they chose. Active listening and articulation of their appreciation of each other's stories built trust and relationships. Both narrative inquiry and a feminist conversational methodology (Oakley, 1981) provide relationship building among participants and the researcher.

As the researcher, Liebovich shared her experiences with the participants so there was no sense of power or hierarchy, leading to trust and relationship

building. During the research process, growing camaraderie and a comfort level of the group allowed each woman to process the ideas of others and to think beyond their narrow perceptions. Advocacy was scary for them in the beginning and talking about it made it seem less daunting. As they bounced ideas off of each other, the intensity of the conversations rose. The collective 'aha' when sharing their perceptions generated ideas and discussion to include many more considerations for what advocacy could be. During the study, the participants moved from their limited understanding and definitions of advocacy to a multi-layered and broader conception of advocacy

Study findings indicated that involvement in advocacy is an individual journey, intrinsically motivated, in which some progress more quickly than others. All six women took the journey via the study, but one participant never really became comfortable with identifying herself as an advocate. They perceived advocacy as: 1) not part of their teaching responsibilities, and conducted outside of the classroom on behalf of their students, 2) an activity in which they would only feel confident engaging in when they become certified teachers, 3) an intrinsically motivated endeavor based on a personal agenda for creating change, and 4) a nominal part of their teacher preparation coursework which did not provide the skills for becoming an effective advocate. They saw their involvement in advocacy as a future endeavor once they were established as classroom teachers. Teacher training does not necessarily assist preservice early childhood teachers in understanding the importance of advocacy. If future teachers had some understanding about advocacy fostered by their teacher education programs, they might be less 'daunted' by the thought of being involved and labeling themselves as advocates.

The Evolution of Advocacy Awareness and Development

Some preservice teachers have the potential and the desire to become advocates, but must develop trust in their own ability to recognize student needs and develop courage to seek solutions to address those needs. Based upon the Liebovich study, we have identified several variables in the evolution of preservice teachers' development of advocacy. They are:

1. *Prior experiences with advocacy*: This variable includes observations of practicing teachers, giving them a framework for what advocacy looks like in the classroom. Preservice teachers can reflect on models of advocacy from their past experiences in and out of the classroom.
2. *A risk-taking personality and leadership qualities:* This variable is important because advocacy is a political act, requiring skillful communication to attain needed resources and affect political change. The attributes of risk-taking and leadership are nurtured and developed and can be manifested in different ways (ie. aggressively, directly, quietly, strategically, etc.). The key to success is a match in leadership style with the population served and the gatekeepers of resources and power.

3. *A context for understanding the dynamics of the school community*: Preservice teachers need to take into consideration the student population, the socio-economic status of the school population, and the funding available to the school. This process would encompass activities such as doing a needs assessment, mobilizing support for pursuing change, prioritizing advocacy issues and concerns, and deciding on a plan of action.
4. *Confidence in their skills and abilities for effective advocacy:* Preservice teachers need to develop confidence in their own abilities, nurture their own risk-taking potential as advocates and find opportunities to engage in advocacy. Since advocacy in early childhood education usually takes place beyond the classroom, preservice teachers require a degree of self-motivation in order to be successful. A degree of success on small attempts can lead to further engagement with advocacy.

Preservice teachers in the study indicated that they would be more confident getting involved in advocacy if they had mentors and support while developing their skills. They were hesitant to firmly state their intentions for professional advocacy because they have had little experience with it and were not certified teachers. Teacher education programs can help future teachers build on their concepts of advocacy and offer suggestions on how advocacy can be implemented. The flexibility to decide on whether or how deeply one gets involved depends upon preservice teachers' self-confidence and conceptions of advocacy. If they become empowered to get involved in advocacy while students, then early childhood preservice teachers will seek out opportunities to use their skills and knowledge in their future careers.

Advocacy in Early Childhood Teacher Preparation Programs

Early childhood education curricula differ in their emphasis and audience served (i.e. in the United States 2-year associates programs at community colleges, 4-year teacher education programs with elementary and/or special education certification, credentials for childcare directors, etc.). We propose that all types of programmes in England and the United States can be strengthened by the infusion of a knowledge base and skills related to advocacy.

Future teachers need to be able to discuss their ideas of advocacy and gain insight into how they may become effective as advocates. Just as opportunities for student teachers to experience and work through inherent problems determines their confidence in the teaching role (Sandholtz and Wasserman, 2001), they need experience with advocacy through role modeling and discourse. Teacher education programs are a key to helping future teachers get involved in advocacy (Vavrus et al, 1999; Witherell & Noddings, 1991; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). University/school partnerships are collaborative entities that can support evolving relationships and enhance communication (Sandholtz and Wasserman, 2001). Participants in Liebovich's study stated that they would

have a better perception of advocacy if the program would directly instruct them on the definition of advocacy and how it plays out in practice.

Recommendations for Programmes to Include Advocacy Content

Our vision of an early childhood education teacher education programme would include opportunities for students to define and identify advocacy in early childhood, investigate and observe multiple forms of advocacy, and become involved in community advocacy projects. It would include direct instruction, group investigatory activities, and practical experiences. Content on advocacy includes basic knowledge about: levels of advocacy- (classroom, community, state, federal, etc.), bureaucracy and the policy-making process, effective communication and cross-cultural relations, student and family needs assessment, and availability and selection of appropriate resources. Finally, an analysis of how content on advocacy can best fit into existing course offerings needs to be determined (e.g. separate course or embedded in existing courses).

We propose the following student activities related to advocacy:

1. *The inclusion of activities designed for self-reflection of attitudes about becoming an advocate*: Self-reflection and study about advocacy assists students construct their own definition of advocacy. This could be facilitated through journaling, group discussions, and recalling experiences and models of
advocacy.
2. *The inclusion of activities designed to develop personal readiness for advocacy*: Students can develop personal readiness through activities such as:
learning skills that empower them, discovering their leadership abilities, dealing effectively with people and bureaucracies, taking part in the public policy process, exerting a powerful influence in the community, and changing the issues affecting children and families (Robinson & Stark, 2002, p.26).
3. *The inclusion of practical experiences in family/community advocacy*: Students can be placed in local community agencies, and/or participate in activities such as letter writing campaigns, public political marches or rallies, attending public policy meetings, and supporting parents at student conferences (e.g. IEP, M-teams, health screenings).

A Vignette of Student Consciousness-Raising

Erika is an American White middle-class preservice early childhood teacher who grew up in a rural Midwestern United States community. When glancing over her programme of study, she wondered what this course on advocacy in early childhood would include and why it was important. Furthermore, she was puzzled by the concept of 'advocacy' and why she would need this course to teach young children? Erika felt that she needed to learn how to make a lesson plan, how to discipline children, and what to say to parents at conferences.

Advocacy, in her opinion, did not apply to any of the skills she thought she would be learning in an early childhood teacher education program.

As was typical, Erika met with four women who were also enrolled in the program and with whom she shared social time as well as academic courses. They all were wary of the advocacy class and voiced their respective reservations and concerns. What was advocacy, anyway? All of them found the word/concept rather daunting as it seemed to imply an investment in political involvement, letter-writing campaigns, marching in demonstrations, and a number of other commitments that these women were frankly not interested in or did not have time to invest. The conversation about the content of this course became heated as the women argued about whether they should be expected to understand and engage in advocacy when they were only students, not certified teachers. Erika walked away from this interchange with mixed feelings.

Thumbing through the assigned readings, Erika began to form her own idea of what advocacy might be. She was convinced that involvement could take many forms and that, perhaps, there was more to it than a huge political commitment. Change was definitely at the core of advocacy. She thought this was not only possible, but needed, from what she had observed while in community classrooms. Perhaps this whole 'advocacy' thing was not quite the irrelevant waste of time she initially thought.

Erika found the course enlightening, especially when she discovered stories of future teachers, like herself, getting involved in advocacy at classroom, school, and community levels. These stories inspired Erika to envision herself in the role of advocate, beginning with small projects, perhaps with families, and building her confidence with successes. Most of her friends in the course concurred, each of them verbalizing their intentions, tailoring their future endeavors to reflect their interests and desires for future careers. One woman in Erika's peer group continued to hesitate about becoming an advocate, stating that she felt uncomfortable coping with the responsibilities of being a teacher, let alone taking on the added burden of creating change (which would not be part of her teaching contract). Everyone in the group empathized with this view, but each was adamant that advocacy was a necessary part of being a responsible teacher.

Erika finished the course feeling as though a door had been opened which she had never before seen. Having seen incidences during her field placements where she felt helpless to assist, make change, or address issues, Erika now had some tools for such occurrences. The idea of stepping beyond the walls of her classroom or school still felt a bit intimidating, but Erika now better understood why she needed to advocate and how she might go about it. She realized that becoming an effective advocate would take time, but she also knew she had resources and role models that would assist and inspire her as she forged her way forward.

Summary

Pre-service teachers, in England and the United States, if offered the opportunity to explore opportunities to become advocates, could become stronger and more competent teachers. A knowledge base for assisting children, families, themselves, and the profession could empower future teachers and strengthen the field of early childhood education. Although a few teacher education programmes do address advocacy specifically, the incorporation of courses about advocacy in early childhood education is not wide spread enough to make a significant impact on the field and the practitioners. By empowering future teachers to become advocates, they will have the tools needed to become collaborative partners with children, parents, the school community and the outside community. From the research conducted with preservice early childhood teachers, it seems that advocacy is narrowly defined by students and they find the concept daunting. However, with courses specifically designed to assist future teachers build their knowledge base and skills in advocacy, the fear can be converted into active involvement and the potential for creating change.

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