

# Developing Advocacy in Teacher Leadership

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**Abstract:** *The term teacher leadership is one that can refer to a differing set of skills and understandings, depending on the context in which it is employed. Providing leadership in a classroom, for example, can be quite different from providing leadership to the profession. Many states, including North Carolina, have developed leadership standards for practicing teachers. These standards emphasize classroom leadership, but also address leadership of the profession, with an emphasis on advocacy. This study evolved from the consistent observations of graduate faculty that the latter form of leadership appeared poorly understood and enacted by teachers. Although teachers seemed clear that leading classrooms and leading schools were essential aspects of their practice, they did not often seem to consider leadership of the profession or advocacy as an element within the purview of their responsibilities. These limiting perceptions on the part of contemporary educators are likely to propagate a narrow and incomplete view of teacher leadership. This study addressed the question of whether or not particular course instructional strategies could influence teachers' views of themselves as advocates and leaders of the profession, and found highly significant results.*

*Keywords: teacher leadership, advocacy, teacher evaluation*

Developing a shared definition for teacher leadership is an important task, particularly since the concept has been receiving increasing global attention.

The Glossary of Education Reform (2014) notes that the term is evolving with a broadening set of roles being ascribed to teachers. While the concept of teacher leadership is often cited in educational circles, its meaning can span a wide range of understandings (Warren & Sugar, 2005). The literature relates the term to various activities and dispositions that occur in a number of contexts.

Some of them are extensively implemented while others seem nearly overlooked, by teachers themselves, and other stakeholders in education. This appears to be because teacher leadership, as described in contemporary times, occurs in a wide range of contexts, and as such, represents an equally expansive scope of behaviors, some of which figure prominently in teachers' perceptions of leadership, while others appear rarely acknowledged and practiced.

Smylie, Conley & Marks (2002) note that teacher leadership has become an established feature of educational reform in the United States only in the last several decades. Prior to this period, most

concepts of leadership that related to school improvement depended on what could be provided by principals and superintendents. These were the agents of the traditional Educational Leadership cadre.

More recently, however, states and organizations have clarified structures to describe teacher leadership that express the broadening view of it in standards that identify both the behaviors and contexts in which such leadership is intended to exist. For example, the state of North Carolina includes leadership as a standard in its rubric for the evaluation of teachers, but the contextual aspect of those standards reveals that the skills and dispositions required to exercise it are typically context-specific and significantly different from one another.

## ADDRESSING TEACHER ADVOCACY

Demonstrating leadership in a classroom or school, for example, usually heads the list of standards, but can be very different from the standard that addresses advocating for and participating in the development of educational policy at the state or national level. Yet both of these aspects of leadership are part of the leadership rubric. The

same can be said for other examples, such as the work of the Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium (2011) where demonstrating leadership in the classroom and school figure prominently, along with advocacy for policy.

Since there is considerable variability in the roles and responsibilities of this expanded view of teacher leadership, it is important to be specific regarding which context and behaviors are being addressed.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT IN TEACHER ADVOCACY**

It is our experience as graduate university faculty that practicing teachers are typically well versed in the definition of teacher leadership that relates to their students, classrooms, schools, and districts.

We teach a course in which in-service teachers are asked to rate themselves on all standards of the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation System, one of which is teacher leadership. In consistent majorities, teachers rank themselves as conversant and proficient with the more commonly held views of teacher leadership within the classroom, school and district.

However, just as consistently, a majority will ascribe lower rankings to their achievement in the area of advocacy for the profession and for educational policy. An examination of the data derived from these self-assessments and rankings supports an additional conclusion. Not only are teachers giving themselves lower marks when it comes to the advocacy aspect of teacher leadership, but their expressed examples of what they think advocacy entails indicate a lack of understanding of what it really means, even when the standard against which they are judging themselves spells it out clearly.

In the example of the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process, standards are accompanied by clear descriptors of what behaviors relate to varying levels of accomplishment with respect to those standards. As it happens, teacher leadership is the first of the standards, but it is further broken down into five sub-standards. As is typical, teachers leading in their classrooms represents the first substandard, followed by teachers leading in their schools as the second. On each of the sub-standards, a rubric provides descriptions of

developing, proficient, accomplished, or distinguished achievement levels for the sub-standards.

The third leadership substandard relates to teachers leading their profession. Among other evidences, the rubric clearly cites advocacy for decision-making structures in education and government that take advantage of the expertise of teachers. This indicator is frequently ignored.

While we had observed this phenomenon informally over the course of several semesters, we examined the data more critically in a recent administration of the self-assessment in effort to quantify the condition we were seeing. The results of this analysis appear below, in Table 1. In this table, the self-assessment ratings of eighteen teachers regarding their achievement on standard 1c of the rubric for leading the teaching profession are juxtaposed with the examples they gave to justify the rating.

Although the rubric for this substandard clearly identifies advocacy for decision-making structures in education and government, such advocacy is rarely acknowledged as part of their behavioral repertoires in the teachers' self-assessments. This occurs even when teachers consider themselves distinguished with respect to the sub-standard.

As Table 2 shows, even those who consider themselves proficient or accomplished with respect to the standard do not describe accompanying evidences that support the rating. When prompted to describe what it is they actually do that earns the ranking they ascribe, descriptions largely include activities unrelated to advocacy in education or government. In only 11% of the self-assessments is actual advocacy included as a salient part of the rationale for the grade assigned.

**TABLE 1**

*Teacher Self-Assessments on Standard 1c of the Rubric for Evaluating North Carolina Teachers*

	<b>Rating</b>	<b>Evidences Offered</b>
1	Distinguished	Work with county officer
2	Developing	Have my classes observed
3	Accomplished	Further my education
4	Accomplished	Serve as mentor
5	Accomplished	Use ideas from other teachers' classrooms and encourage them to share in professional development sessions
6	Developing	Attend all TAT trainings to identify strategies for low performers
7	Proficient	Work on master's degree
8	Developing	Learn more about school's rules and procedures
9	Proficient	An indicator, which applies to my teaching, is that teachers advocate for change within their school community by contacting policy makers at the county, state, and national level.
10	Proficient	Send home a weekly newsletter to parents
11	Accomplished	Arranged an anti-bullying program
12	Accomplished	Continue education to graduate. School
13	Proficient	Implementing what I learn in professional development
14	Accomplished	Make all personnel feel important, including custodians, etc.
15	Accomplished	An indicator that applies to me would be my participation in our local NCAE chapter. I believe my participation and involvement with this group advocates for education and government decision-making. My participation with this organization also allows me to help others stay informed and advocate for education as well.
16	Developing	Accepting of performance feedback.
17	Accomplished	Work with others for class collaboration
18	Proficient	Volunteer to help other teachers with projects

**TABLE 2**

*Self-Assessments by Ranking and Evidence on Standard 1c*

Rating	Number	Responses that referenced school or district-based activities	Responses that referenced decision-making structures in education & government
Developing	4	4	
Proficient	5	4	1
Accomplished	8	7	1
Distinguished	1	1	

Our interest in this subject grew as we distilled the finding that advocacy was, in fact, a nearly ignored aspect of teacher leadership among our teachers, despite being part of their own state evaluation system, and represented in the model standards of national groups. For example, the Teacher Leader Model Standards from the [teacherleaderstandards.org](http://www.teacherleaderstandards.org) cite advocacy as Domain VII in clear terms: the teacher leader understands how educational policy is made at the local, state, and national level as well as the roles of school leaders, boards of education, legislators, and other stakeholders in formulating those policies. The teacher leader uses this knowledge to advocate for student needs and practices that support effective teaching and increase student learning. (<http://www.teacherleaderstandards.org/index.php/>)

More recently, teachers have been invited to move into leadership roles in varying contexts, to the extent that the United States Department of Education and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards have launched an initiative entitled Teach to Lead that is committed to expanding teacher leadership. Associated remarks by the former U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, assert "Teacher leadership means having a voice in the policies and decisions that affect your students, your daily work, and the shape of your profession." (2015).

We wondered if we, as teacher educators, could affect our students' perceptions of their advocacy roles in a way that would cause them to reflect and consider amplifying their views and potential activism in their own profession. As Warren and Sugar (2005) have observed, other professions are largely led by their own practitioners. Why not teachers?

### **DEVELOPING THE RESEARCH QUESTION**

We wanted to examine how our work might impact teacher perceptions of their role in advocacy, so we modified our course design to include a series of targeted assignments. First, we required students to define an educational issue about which they felt strongly, and over which they would like to exert some influence. Second, we required them to educate themselves beyond their current level of

knowledge about that issue through investigating a variety of sources. Students were then asked to create a position paper that described the issue, its importance, and one or more potential solutions, so that the exercise was not one of simply carping about a challenge, but synthesizing possible approaches to working toward improvement.

In order to improve the chances of having their views read and considered, students titrated the position papers to succinct advocacy statements, developed a list of prominent individuals whom they felt could influence policy, and contacted them directly. Our research question became, "Does the described series of course experiences modify teacher perceptions about the importance of this advocacy in their work?"

### **METHODOLOGY**

In our work as faculty teaching a graduate course entitled Teacher Leadership at a large, state university, we work with students who are, in the main, practicing classroom teachers. In a typical class in any semester, more than ninety percent of our participants fall into this category, with the exception being a small number of graduate students who are seeking a master's degree directly following an earned baccalaureate in Education. While they represent differing levels of classroom experience, they share a common perception about the aspect of teacher leadership dealing with advocacy for the profession.

Our students are, almost without exception, working in North Carolina, so we ask them to judge themselves with respect to each area of the teacher evaluation rubric provided by the state. We typically discover that they either ignore advocacy as a part of teacher leadership, or misunderstand the evidences associated with the standard that describes it. We wanted to emphasize advocacy through targeted exploration and assignments in our courses to see if we could bring it out of the marginalized position it appeared to hold.

### **REVISING THE COURSE**

A related series of assignments was added to our course, which required each student to examine personal views on what is important in education

and to select a cause for which each would be willing to advocate as an informed educator. Once the causes were identified, students educated themselves about the topic through various print, online, and in-person sources.

Finally, each student developed a succinct but comprehensive advocacy statement relating to the topic that contained not just complaint, but also one or more potential solutions. These advocacy statements were distributed as personal messages to influential individuals chosen by the students at the local, state, and national levels.

As part of a mixed-methods design at the conclusion of the course, we asked students to compare their perceptions about the role of advocacy by teachers from the beginning of the course to the final stage, using an ipsative scale. In addition, we invited students to share their reasons for having adjusted or not adjusted their perceptions of the role of advocacy in their professional practices. Using a repeated-measures t-test design, student responses were examined to find out whether or not the course redesign strategies had been effective in modifying teacher views on their role in advocacy.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The subjects in this study were twenty-four graduate students enrolled in a Teacher Leadership course, all of whom were enrolled in an M.A.Ed. program. With the exception of two, all subjects were practicing teachers in public schools. Participation in the survey at the end of the courses was voluntary. The survey was brief, and required students to select a statement that most closely represented their view of advocacy as a professional responsibility at the beginning of the course. The statement choices were:

I didn't consider it as part of my role as a teacher at all

I considered it somewhat important to my role as a teacher

I considered it important to my role as a teacher

I considered it a highly important part of my role as a teacher

The next question asked subjects to make the same judgment from the perspective of the end of the course, and the same options were provided as responses. Numerical values were assigned to each of the possible answers in both sets, and those values were compared in a repeated-measures t-test analysis to examine the data for possible significant change. Finally, students were asked to describe whether or not creating and communicating their advocacy statements had been responsible for any shift in perception, and why they believed the experience to be important or insignificant.

## RESULTS

Although there were a couple of outliers in the data, most students reported significant and positive changes in their views about advocacy. The outliers commented that their opinions had not changed for one of two reasons. One of these explained that she did not believe advocacy was part of her role now or in the past, because, in her view, politicians do not understand what teachers go through, nor do they care.

Another commented that she already believed that advocacy was a highly important part of her role before she began the course, so there was not any room for improvement. The others were strongly clustered in a positive direction, indicating that over the course of the semester, their views on their role as educational advocates had become more favorable.

In fact, even with the outliers whose scores did not change over time, the t-statistic for the group was highly significant, indicating that the new course strategies had been effective in modifying teacher perceptions regarding the importance of advocacy in their professional roles. Table 3 reports those findings, with results being significant at the .0001 level.

TABLE 3

*Effectiveness of Course Strategies in Modifying Teacher Perceptions of the Importance of Advocacy*

*t Test Results*

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<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>	<i>Degrees of Freedom</i>	<i>t value</i>	<i>p</i>
24	1.375	0.92372	23	7.2923	< .0001

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Overall, students indicated that the advocacy assignment was important in changing their views. The following statements are representative examples of their feedback. Although in one case, the fact that the student’s message had not been acknowledged and had not received a response was responsible for being judged as insignificant.

“I was fortunate enough to receive a response from the state superintendent, and this portion of the class reiterated the significance of speaking up and advocating for what you believe in. It was a leading example of how standing up for yourself can be beneficial for you, as well as other professionals.”

“Sharing my advocacy statement with a governmental individual and a national corporation really heightened and influenced my views on the importance of teachers as policy advocates. Sending my advocacy statement made me feel empowered; it made me feel that my voice was being heard. Even though I never received anything back from either of the two individuals that I sent it to, it still made me feel that my concerns were being listened to.”

“Again it made me feel that change could really happen and it made me want to pursue becoming a better teacher leader and help create a voice for other teachers who haven’t had the opportunity I had in explicitly learning about the importance of teacher leadership and advocating for change.”

**CONCLUSIONS**

Our examination of teacher perceptions regarding advocacy in teacher leadership has been a process of hope and insight. We were pleased to discover

support for what we hoped: that our course design and instructional strategies could have a positive impact on this subject that we feel is too often neglected, both by powerful administrations and by teachers themselves. We were also gratified to observe that, for most of our students, several collateral benefits accrued. They identified and examined causes they wished to influence, analyzed potential solutions from a teacher’s perspective, and broadened their professional views beyond the scope of a single classroom, school, or district.

Our findings lend credence to a notion that we had titrated from many observations over multiple semesters: teachers do not frequently include or understand the role of advocacy in their professional responsibilities. Our examination of the literature cites many reasons this may be the case, however, if, as a profession, we are serious about all of the elements of teacher leadership that we evaluate, we need to equip our teachers with the knowledge and perceptions that are required to implement them. In our situation, and we believe in most others, advocacy is not a concept that figures prominently in teacher preparation or professional development. We hope that our findings will encourage others to adopt similar strategies in their courses for both teacher candidates and practicing professionals.

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