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## Advocacy as a Practice of Critical Teacher Leadership

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Teacher advocacy has been examined as a practice of activism external to the school and as a practice of educational leadership. However, researchers have not merged these ideas by framing advocacy as a practice of leadership that takes place within the classroom and across the school. This article illustrates how, through advocacy on behalf of students who are marginalized, teachers demonstrate a model for critical teacher leadership. Using a critical ethnographic approach, observation and interview data were collected across three schools to answer these research questions: (a) In what ways do teachers advocate on behalf of students who have been marginalized; (b) How do these teachers garner support for the students from administrators and/or colleagues; and (c) How do teachers advocate for these students beyond their school? Findings are used to support teacher advocacy as a practice of critical pedagogy, collaborative leadership, and ethical leadership, and to propose a definition of critical teacher leadership.

Research on teacher leadership has been criticized for being “largely atheoretical” in both of the literature reviews carried out by Wenner and Campbell (2017, p. 147), and York-Barr and Duke (2004, p. 291). Additionally, Wenner and Campbell noted the lack of research addressing “issues of equity and diversity” (p. 164). To address these gaps through this article, I use theories of critical pedagogy, collaborative leadership, and ethical leadership to frame teacher advocacy on behalf of students who are traditionally marginalized including boys of color, English Learners from refugee families, and students with exceptional needs. Further, the study of teacher advocacy as a practice of leadership is in its early stages. While research has focused on teacher activism and teacher leader advocacy, this research has not framed teacher advocacy as a practice of leadership. For example, Nieto (2015) identified teachers who do advocacy as teacher leaders; however, she failed to examine such pedagogical work through the lens of leadership theory. This is common across the literature that examines teacher leader advocacy. Thus, the assumption that advocacy is teacher leadership needs to be clarified.

Within this article, I argue that through their advocacy, teachers combine the practices of critical pedagogy and school leadership to demonstrate how a particular way of teaching, carried out within the classroom, and across the school and community, provides a model for critical teacher leadership. In other words, the article advances a new theoretical understanding of teacher advocacy as both a practice of teacher leadership, as well as teaching and leading for social justice, or critical teacher leadership.

I began this work through an examination of the work of teachers who advocate on behalf of their most vulnerable students in the context of schools with large populations of students who have been traditionally marginalized. I identified the three school sites and key informants for the research in different ways. For example, for the first case study I completed, I had heard about a program that three teachers founded to address violence between Latino and African American gangs in their community. These teachers wanted to address this violence by bringing boys of color together to build peace and develop leadership skills. The teachers’ work in establishing this program intrigued me, and I wanted to explore the processes they used to influence not only administrators in their school and district, but also their colleagues to support

the risks involved in bringing boys of color together in a peace-building effort. In the context of this case, the teachers' work was the focus while the site provided the context for their work.

However, for the second case study I completed, I identified the school as a site for research because I knew through prior work at the school that it offered a full inclusion program for students with exceptional needs. Because the school is a parochial school and because I was aware that such schools are not required by law to provide inclusion programs, I wondered if there might be a group of teachers and/or administrators who had advocated for establishing and carrying out their inclusion program. Unlike the first case study, I did not know who these teachers and/or administrators were before I began the study; thus, I utilized a more exploratory approach where I observed the inclusion work itself before identifying those teachers who were, indeed, advocating for the inclusion of students with exceptional needs. These teachers became the key informants for the second case study.

The approach I used for locating the site for the third case study was still different. For that case, I identified teacher advocates for students from refugee families and invited them to participate in a study. However, these teachers failed to respond to emails I sent inquiring about their interest in being part of my research. Therefore, I started asking other teachers I knew who worked in the same district whether they thought their school would be a good site for a study of the ways that teachers work with students whose families came to the U.S. as political and/or religious refugees. The selection of the site depended on two criteria. First, the site needed to have a large population of such students. Second, the principal of the school needed to be interested in providing me access to the teachers and students at the site. In one instance, these two criteria aligned, and that school became the site for a study of teacher advocacy on behalf of English Learners (EL) whose families immigrated to the U.S. as refugees. I utilized the same exploratory approach for this case study as I did for the second case study, which is that I carried out observations of EL programming before I identified the teacher advocates who became key informants for the study.

Although I used slightly different site selection, recruitment, and field entry processes for each of the three case studies, the same research questions guided all three studies: (a) in what ways do teachers advocate on behalf of students who have been marginalized; (b) how do these teachers garner support for the students from administrators and/or colleagues; and (c) how do teachers advocate for these students beyond their school? Additionally, I collected and analyzed data using a critical ethnographic approach (Carspecken, 1996) for each study. This involved the collection of observation data first to establish an understanding of teacher practices and behaviors. Carrying out extensive observation also allowed me to identify the key informants for the second and third case studies. Next, I conducted in-depth interviews with each key informant, as well as school and district administrators and other teachers in the schools.

I have chosen to structure the remainder of this article as follows. First, I will provide a brief review of the landscape of teacher advocacy literature. Next, I will describe the theory I used to frame the findings of these studies. However, rather than describing all of the theories within one section focusing on the theoretical frameworks, I have instead shared some of the findings from one of the three case studies as an example of how each theory frames teachers' advocacy work. Using this structure, I address one theory at a time and immediately offer examples from the case studies. This structure allows me to develop the theory of critical teacher leadership I propose by first framing teacher advocacy as a critical practice, then framing teacher advocacy as teacher leadership, and finally framing teacher advocacy as ethical leadership. It is

the uniting of critical teaching practices, and collaborative and ethical leadership practices that I posit as a theory of critical teacher leadership.

### **Advocacy in the Literature**

The small body of research on teacher advocacy explores the concept from two perspectives, the teaching perspective and the teacher leadership perspective. The former associates advocacy with teacher or educator activism while the latter locates advocacy within practices of educational leadership. When described as activism, teacher advocacy is viewed as political and something that sometimes extends beyond the classroom and school. However, within the teacher leadership literature, advocacy is viewed from an organizational perspective where teacher leaders' work across the school is examined.

#### **Teacher Advocacy**

Early literature on teacher advocacy depicts teachers as promoting at best, the teaching profession, and at worst, their own interests (Lortie, 1975). For example, Wagenaar (1974) described teachers as "activist professionals" whose "militancy" was played out through heavy strike activity in the 1960s (p. 372). These teachers engaged in advocacy on their own behalf rather than on behalf of their students. However, this portrayal of teachers as self-serving activists fails to acknowledge the advocacy work that teachers carry out on behalf of students.

Conversely, teacher advocacy literature of the 21<sup>st</sup> century presents teachers as activists whose primary goal is supporting their students. Picower (2012) defines "teacher activists" as "educators who work for social justice both inside and outside of their classrooms" (p. 562). She identified three "commitments" that allow teacher activists to pursue social justice for their students (p. 564). The primary commitment is characterized by teachers' belief that education can simultaneously emancipate and oppress students. To resolve this contradiction, teacher activists pursue two additional commitments. First, they organize their classrooms to be both democratic and caring learning spaces, utilizing place-based and culturally-relevant instructional approaches to empower their students. Pantic (2017) describes this as teachers having an interest in assuring their students' "wellbeing," and that students have "access to equal opportunities for learning" (p. 229).

Second, according to Picower (2012), teacher activists take action outside of the school to achieve systemic change. Through this engagement, teacher activists become transparent; they share what they do and why they do it with external audiences. Further, they seek solidarity with other teachers through collective struggle on behalf of their students rather than themselves (Stern & Brown, 2016). Taken together, the three commitments provide a framework for teacher activism that demonstrates "that teachers are people who love children, not greedy individuals who are milking the system" (Picower, p. 573).

Marshall and Anderson (2009) assert that advocacy requires teachers to take a political stance. Teacher activists are those "who are willing to take a vocal stand in support of projects often seen as controversial" (p. 1). They describe teacher activism at the micropolitical level as teachers becoming "personally involved with an issue or movement; promoting social justice through personal intervention, program creation, or by extending the curriculum; or simply taking up cases to get just and equitable treatment for individual students" (p. 11). This type of activism takes place both within and outside of classroom and school spaces. Marshall and Anderson also identify activism as a moral endeavor with the purpose of expanding "inclusivity,

fairness, empowerment, and equity and fairness, especially for heretofore oppressed and silenced groups” (p. 18). In other words, teacher advocacy is the ethical pursuit of social justice.

These scholars present teacher activism in a way that suggests that advocacy requires a willingness to vocally share one’s political stance outside the classroom and school. However, Jones (2009) found that activism can be “quietly done” within classrooms and schools (p. 85). In her study of teacher advocacy to end sexual harassment within schools, she uncovered more subtle examples of activism. Teachers and school leaders described their advocacy as “pedagogical in nature and conducted in the confines of the school site, collaborating mainly with those individuals with whom they worked” (p. 86).

### **Teacher Leader Advocacy**

The teacher leadership literature on advocacy focuses more on the motivations and practices of teachers who advocate on behalf of students within classrooms and schools. Collay (2010) found that teacher leaders who advocate are motivated to struggle with and for students who have been marginalized because, like some of their students, they have experienced ostracism based on race, class, gender, language, and culture during their formative years. As a result, they identify with students who share similar cultural backgrounds or educational experiences with them (Collay, 2010, 2014). Further, Bradley-Levine (2012) found that teacher leaders who work closely with students who are traditionally marginalized develop critical consciousness, or an awareness of social injustices both within and beyond the school. Thus, teacher leaders are driven to advocate because they feel allied with their students or because they deeply understand their students’ circumstances and needs.

In addition, teacher leaders who advocate are not only aware of the promises and restraints of the educational system, but they are active in creating spaces where the diverse needs of students who have been marginalized are met at both the classroom and school levels (Krovetz & Arriaza, 2006). Nowell & Beem (2018) found that teacher leaders “were able to use their expertise and leadership knowledge to advocate for change at the district and state level” (p. 6). Thus, like the teacher activists described above, teacher leaders who advocate take action to address issues of inequity and to pursue social justice.

However, the teacher leader literature acknowledges that advocacy is challenging for teachers and teacher leaders to implement. For instance, Larrabee and Morehead (2010) found that only six of 18 teacher leaders were comfortable advocating for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students. Common explanations for participants’ resistance to advocacy included their fear that parents would react negatively, that administrators would not support them, and/or that advocacy was not their primary responsibility (Larrabee & Morehead). Bradley-Levine (2011) also found that teacher leaders struggled to determine the best ways to influence their colleagues so that students’ needs were met across the school by all teachers. The literature suggests that these difficulties can be addressed through leadership development and collaborative structures. According to Collay (2010), “teachers need strong leadership skills to be successful in transforming schools as organizations that are healthy for adults and children” (p. 230). Teacher leaders who advocate also rely on networks of colleagues and mentors to support this demanding work (Collay, 2010).

The advocacy literature provides a description of teacher and teacher leader advocacy. It also offers reasons that teachers and teacher leaders may be motivated to pursue advocacy. However, for the most part, those who research teacher or teacher leader advocacy have not located this work within theories of teaching and theories of leadership. Through this article, I

attempt to achieve three purposes. First, I argue that advocacy within the classroom is a practice of critical pedagogy, or teaching for social justice. Next, I posit that advocacy across the school is a practice of teacher leadership, where teacher leaders influence the work of their colleagues. Then, I advance that advocacy in the community is a practice of ethical leadership in the pursuit of social justice. In other words, the practice of advocacy is critical in that teacher advocates approach teaching as both a critical and ethical endeavor, and it is leadership because they aim to influence their colleagues' work through collaborative and ethical leadership practices. Taken together, I propose a definition of teacher advocacy on behalf of traditionally marginalized students within the classroom, across the school, and in the community as a practice of critical teacher leadership. Finally, this work addresses a need suggested by Wenner and Campbell (2017) that teacher leadership research "attend to issues of equity and social justice" (p. 164). The examples I share in this article are collected from three case studies of teacher advocacy. I intend for these to move our thinking toward a better understanding of what it means to be a critical teacher leader who through advocacy integrates both teaching and leadership for equity and social justice.

### **Case Studies of Teacher Advocacy**

As described above, I have conducted three case studies examining the ways that teachers advocate on behalf of students who have been marginalized in specific school settings. The first study was set in Spelling Middle School (a pseudonym), a diverse school in an urban neighborhood; the study focused on three teachers who developed a peace-building leadership program to specifically meet the needs of boys of color. The program was a response to increased conflict between African American and Latino Males within the district and across the community. The second study was set in St. Lucy School (a pseudonym), a parochial school with a full inclusion program for students with mild to moderate disabilities. Although students with disabilities are marginalized in many school settings, they are even more so within the context of parochial schools because parochial schools rarely offer inclusion programs. Thus, I considered this a setting worthy of deeper investigation; I identified four teacher advocates for this group of students at St. Lucy. Finally, the third study was set in Franklin Elementary School (a pseudonym), a school serving a large population of students who are both English learners and whose families have been refugees fleeing religious and political persecution in their home countries. I felt that in the context of my state, such a school, where 32% of the population of students are from refugee families, is worthy of closer examination; I located two teacher advocates for this group of students at Franklin Elementary.

Although I completed the three studies in this order, I have chosen to share findings from each study in a different sequence within this article. As such, readers will learn about the teachers at Spelling Middle School first, followed by a description of teacher work at Franklin Elementary School and then St. Lucy School. I present the three case studies in this order because they each demonstrate a different aspect of the theory I am attempting to develop. In addition, I should share that the findings presented in this article do not represent the entire set of findings from each study. Instead, I have selected the most cogent examples from the studies to demonstrate teacher advocacy work as a practice of critical teacher leadership.

For all three studies, I utilized a critical ethnographic approach to explore the "nature of social structure, power, culture, and human agency" within the settings for the case studies (Carspecken, 1996, p. 3). In total, I collected almost 56 hours of observation data, and 28 hours

of interview data with 36 teachers, administrators, and support staff for the three studies. For each study, I identified two to four key informants, who were the teachers that worked most closely with the identified group of students who were marginalized in the specific school.

As described above, the process I used to identify these teachers was different across the three studies. However, all of the teachers who emerged as advocates shared similar characteristics and experiences. For example, most of them shared some life experiences with the students for whom they advocated (Collay, 2010). They also all worked collaboratively with school administrators to design and/or carry out programming that addressed the specific needs of these students. Finally, they all engaged in teacher leadership work as defined by Wenner and Campbell (2017): (a) taking place “beyond the classroom walls,” (b) supporting “professional learning in their schools,” (c) engaging in “policy and/or decision making at some level,” (d) focusing on “improving student learning and success,” and (e) “working toward improvement and change for the whole school organization” (p. 146). As teacher leaders, the key informants’ work offers examples of the ways that teachers practice leadership through advocacy on behalf of students who are marginalized in their school settings. Nevertheless, I am not attempting to claim that these teachers’ advocacy work provides the best example of advocacy, only that their work can be used as an example of advocacy as a practice of teacher leadership for social justice or critical teacher leadership.

### **Theoretically Constructed Teacher Advocacy**

The three studies described above have refined my understandings of the work that teacher advocates engage in within classroom, school, and community settings to carry out what I have suggested may be identified as critical teacher leadership. To better understand their work, I will locate it within the constructs of critical pedagogy, collaborative leadership, and ethical leadership. In each of the following sections, I will take time to briefly describe each theory and then provide examples from one of the case studies to illustrate how the theoretical construct frames teacher advocacy work.

#### **Advocacy as Critical Pedagogy: In the Classroom**

In this section, I will demonstrate how teacher advocacy on behalf of students who are marginalized is a practice of critical pedagogy. In other words, when teachers advocate for all students including those who others in education have traditionally ignored or dismissed, they are teaching for social justice. Critical pedagogy represents a particular way that some teachers work with students in classroom settings.

To examine teacher advocacy within the classroom, I used Freire’s (1970/1993) work on critical pedagogy. Freire argued that “to surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity” (p. 47). Critical pedagogy, as described by Freire, requires that teachers behave in authentic ways including acknowledging oppression and supporting those who are oppressed (Fain, 2002). Such authenticity develops through a sense of genuine caring for others (Frost & Durrant, 2003). Additionally, critical educators examine and take responsibility for the ways that they participate in oppressive relationships (Fain, 2002). This means that teachers who engage in critical pedagogy interrogate their underlying attitudes in order to transform themselves.

Teachers who practice critical pedagogy struggle alongside the oppressed through a collaborative approach. Freire (1970, 1993) notes that “true solidarity with the oppressed means fighting at their side to transform the objective reality” (p. 49). In other words, teachers and students co-create learning experiences that allow them to analyze “oppression and its causes” (Freire, 1970, 1993, p. 48). Only through such experiences will students and teachers “perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform” (Freire, 1970, 1993, p. 49). Thus, critical educators advocate for and engage in action to transform the oppressive situations that limit the capacity of each person.

Findings from the case study of Spelling Middle School provide examples of the ways that teacher advocacy is a practice of critical pedagogy. The leadership program for boys of color was founded and designed by three teachers, Vince, Louis, and Moses. All three men identified personally with the boys in the program. Vince, the son of immigrants to the U.S., grew up in a neighborhood near the school and attended schools in the district for all 13 years of his education. He is also a Spanish teacher and the boys’ soccer coach, helping him connect in particular with Latino boys at the school. Both Louis and Moses are African American men. Although Louis grew up in another city, he attended a school similar to Spelling and had been part of a gang during his youth. He understood why boys would be attracted to gangs, and knew how difficult it is to leave a gang. Moses grew up in the same city as Spelling, but attended a private school with a majority White population. However, he lived in a neighborhood where most families were African American, and so he understood the ways that boys of color must learn to navigate a world that views them as outsiders and criminals. These three teachers had developed the program, calling it “Brothers of Different Colors” (BODC, a pseudonym) to specifically address the needs of boys of color at Spelling.

The two goals of the BODC program were to develop leadership skills and to facilitate intercultural dialogue. Boys in the program, referred to by their teachers as “Brothers,” studied leadership principles and applied these by presenting at education conferences, to the school board, and for community organizations about the BODC program. Developing leadership positively influenced the boys’ aspirations. As an administrator described, “We want these kids to become leaders, and when they become leaders, they are going to dream really, really big dreams, which means they are not going to put limits on themselves.”

To facilitate intercultural dialogue, the teachers designed the program to include what Vince referred to as “critical cultural dialogue,” which the Brothers engaged in to understand “the importance of each culture.” These dialogues, which occurred as a regular part of the program resulted in a sense of unity among the boys. Louis described what such dialogue was like when the boys engaged in it:

We had critical conversations about race, critical conversations about privilege, culture because what we had to establish was an understanding. You know, what are the things that are significant to African American culture, background, upbringing, living, family dynamics? What is [significant] of a Latino population? The conversations went even deeper as we kind of diversified what the Latino population looked like because we have Hondurans; we have Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Peruvians. So [we] had so many different cultures. It was eye opening.

Another example of critical pedagogy occurred when I observed Moses lead a conversation with the Brothers where he asked them what it felt like to be racially profiled. The African American boys talked about their own or family members' experiences with police in particular, whereas the Latino boys spoke about people assuming they were all undocumented Mexicans. Through this discussion, the boys came to realize that they shared the experience of being stereotyped because of the way they look.

Vince, Louis, and Moses identified with their students, each understanding the oppression that boys of color face at Spelling and in their community. They recognized and critically responded to the oppression the boys experience by designing and implementing a program based on critical pedagogy. BODC provided the Brothers opportunities to share their personal experiences of oppression and develop skills that would allow them to transform their situation. Vince, Louis, and Moses acted authentically by sharing their stories with the Brothers. They also chose to be transparent with the boys about why they founded the program, and to allow the boys to actively inform program design. The teachers were not separate from the boys, but struggled with their Brothers toward emancipation. For these reasons, they provide an example of advocacy based on critical pedagogy.

### **Advocacy as Collaborative Leadership: Across the School**

In this section, I use a relatively new theory to frame the ways that teacher advocacy creates a space for the development of collaborative leadership where teacher advocates influence their colleagues' practice. When teachers advocate on behalf of students who are marginalized, they place their students' needs above their own. This approach becomes a way of acting not only with their students, but with their colleagues as well. Teacher advocates challenge other teachers to meet students' needs more fully while supporting teachers as they try new instructional approaches. Collaborative leadership is a way of working with colleagues that allows teacher advocates to influence their colleagues' teaching practice toward co-development (Woods & Roberts, 2018). Such influence over colleagues' work has been identified in the research as teacher leadership (Cherkowski & Schnellert, 2017; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Therefore, teacher advocacy demonstrates a way of carrying out teacher leadership that can be framed through collaborative leadership theory.

Collaborative leadership consists of the view that leadership is intentional and emergent (Woods & Roberts, 2018). School leaders have choices about what intentions they bring to their work. For example, school leaders may choose to carry out their work in order to "make a difference, with and through others" (p. 7). Such leadership develops from intentions motivated by moral and ethical standards. Woods and Roberts (2018) argue that the "core values of democracy and social justice are essential measures of intentionality" (p. 48). As an emergent process, leadership arises "from numerous, ongoing actions and interactions" (p. 50). Further, leadership roles and responsibilities are fluid where all participants of organizations may actively engage to lead intentionally (Woods & Roberts, 2018). When leaders emerge to act ethically, co-development may occur.

The philosophy of co-development unites the application of holistic democracy (Woods & Woods, 2012), and social justice to the intentional and emergent practice of collaborative leadership (Woods & Roberts, 2018). Woods and Roberts (2018) describe holistic democracy as follows:

Central to the practice of holistic democracy is the opportunity for people to grow as whole persons, able to forge a meaningful life, and to participate in the co-creation of their social and organizational environment, in a climate that promotes mutual respect, critical dialogue, independent thinking and belonging. (p. 62)

In other words, each person may develop in “spiritual, ethical, intellectual, and emotional” ways through collaboration with others to create collective goals and agree upon democratic interactive processes (Woods & Roberts, 2018, p. 62). A foundation of holistic democracy is a focus on seeking equity related to “learning, participation, respect and resources” (Woods & Roberts, 2018, p. 72). Thus, the process of collaborative leadership occurs when leadership practice is deliberately directed toward achieving social justice as defined here, and members of the organization allow leadership to emerge through collaborative processes so that individuals are given opportunities to develop in a holistic way.

Teachers and administrators at Franklin Elementary School (FES) demonstrated collaborative leadership as they worked together to meet the needs of students who are English learners (EL), including some students whose families immigrated to the U.S. as political and religious refugees. Awareness of the challenges that these students and their families face drove the teachers’ work at FES. For example, two of the EL teachers, Beth and Jasmine redesigned the EL program to better meet students’ needs; they recognized that classroom teachers needed more support and so Beth and Jasmine began to push into the general education classrooms rather than pulling the EL students out to work in small groups. They noted that this change not only provided better support for teachers, but also allowed for students who were native speakers to learn alongside those who were learning English. In this way, students had more opportunities to interact with and help each other.

Over time, many teachers at FES took formal leadership roles as instructional coaches and mentor teachers. Beth had been an instructional coach before moving into an EL teaching position. Likewise, one of the current instructional coaches had been an EL teacher in the past. According to Beth, teachers at FES are “always changing roles and looking for someone who is going to take a leadership role.” Both the principal and EL teachers used techniques to spread leadership across the school. For instance, Beth used co-teaching to model effective instructional techniques: “[A general education teacher] and I have teamed together [to model] what [learning centers or stations] look like...instead of just putting [students] on the computer.” This sharing of responsibility demonstrates the recognition that leadership emerges from more than just one person, and creates a collaborative pattern of leadership that allows for co-development.

In order to engage teachers in their own learning and development, the instructional coaches at FES used techniques that respect the teacher as an individual who is acting on positive intentions. For example, one coach explained that when she notices a potential problem she would like to address with a teacher, her first step is to ask the teacher, “How’s it going? ...just to see what they say.” Taking this approach allows these formal teacher leaders to understand the teachers’ perspective before addressing problems of practice. Beth explained that the EL teachers try to avoid “drama” by placing “issues on the table” and working to resolve them. I observed multiple instances of teachers supporting each other and collaborating to meet students’ needs during my visits to FES. This culture of co-development provided a safe space for teachers to ask for and receive assistance from each other.

Because teachers at FES are attentive to the type of intentional and emergent leadership they practice so that their leadership reflects co-development principles, administrators and teachers demonstrated strong alignment regarding issues of equity and social justice. Teachers held each other accountable for the growth of all their students, paying special interest to those groups that might be marginalized such as English learners, refugees, students in poverty, students of color, and students with disabilities. One language support para-professional explained:

This school is really good at [evaluating students] and trying to help them the best they can. Just for one student, [teachers and administrators] would all gather together and try to help...that student. When I see that teamwork, even just for one student, how hard they are working, I can see even if [the student is] not from this country, [teachers] still pay attention to that one student.

Another teacher explained, “Everybody is invested in the kids. Everybody is working towards a goal. You don’t feel like there are people who aren’t carrying their weight.” The intentional way that teachers engage in the work of co-development at FES allows for leadership to emerge across the school to support social justice for all students.

### **Advocacy as Ethical Leadership: With the Community**

In this section, I argue that critical pedagogy, or the act of teaching for social justice as a way of working with students, combined with collaborative leadership as a way of working with colleagues result in the practice of ethical leadership. When teachers advocate for students who are marginalized by utilizing particular practices in their classroom, and then collaborate with colleagues to provide supports so that they too may meet these students’ needs more effectively, they are carrying out ethical leadership, or leadership for social justice. In other words, teacher advocacy is not only a practice of critical pedagogy and teacher leadership, but it is also a practice of ethical leadership. It is a way of practicing critical teacher leadership.

Ethical leadership demands that school leaders pursue social justice for all members of the school and community. Foster (1989) insisted that school leaders question the dehumanizing effect of wielding power to reach personal goals rather than working toward a new social vision beneficial to many, but especially to those who are most vulnerable (Bradley-Levine, 2016). Ethical leaders adopt an ethic of care, which prompts them not only to acknowledge the dignity of the individual, but also to reestablish and maintain that dignity when it has been lost (Bradley-Levine, 2016; Furman, 2013). As they carry out an ethic of care, ethical school leaders pursue social justice within their classrooms, schools, and communities (Bradley-Levine, 2016; Brooks, Jean-Marie, Normore, & Hodgins, 2007; Jansen, 2006; Jean-Marie, 2008; Lopez, Gonzalez, & Fierro, 2010; Theoharis, 2007). Moreover, ethical school leaders undertake the complexities characteristic of choosing the right and just action (Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2000; Starratt, 1986). Finally, ethical leaders invite their colleagues to join them in transcending fear and self-doubt to place students’ needs at the center of their work (Bradley-Levine, 2016).

Ethical leaders each adhere to a personal code based on their “principles, beliefs, assumptions, and values” (Starratt, 2004, p. 5). However, despite that leaders may follow different personal codes, Starratt (2004) discussed three virtues necessary for the practice of ethical leadership. The first virtue is responsibility; to be responsible means not just avoiding harm, but also acting to create an educational environment where all students may learn. Ethical leaders also have the virtue of authenticity, which means that they act according to their moral code and allow others to do the same. An authentic leader engages in “reciprocal relationships” that allow members to contribute in ways meaningful to them (Starratt, 2004, p. 81). The last virtue for ethical leaders is presence, or to be cognizant of oneself and of others. To achieve presence, leaders must affirm the individuality of others and empower others to enact their individuality. Further, leaders who are present are also aware of the ways that they or others disrupt “authentic communication” (Starratt, 2004, p. 104). These virtues taken together provide a framework for ethical leadership, where leaders demand that they and others “be true to what they profess,” participate in “authentic relationships,” and attend to both the “cultural differences and the common humanity” of each person (Starratt, 2004, p. 109).

The work carried out by special education teachers at St. Lucy School (SLS) provides an example of how teacher advocacy can support the practice of ethical leadership. I identified the four special education teachers at SLS as key informants for this case study because they are the teachers who work most closely with students who have disabilities. Cindy, Alicia, Steph, and Joyce had all been general education teachers before completing their license to teach special education. Cindy, Steph, and Joyce were drawn to special education because they had grown up with a sibling with a disability. Their colleagues recognized that because these teachers have known someone with an exceptionality their whole lives, they have a richer understanding of how to meet students’ diverse needs. Although Alicia did not share this experience with her colleagues, she noted that an experience supporting a boy with Down Syndrome early in her career had convinced her to pursue her license in special education.

The special education teachers, their colleagues, and administrators at SLS shared a common ideology that inclusion is something that aligns with the Catholic identity of the school. This belief rests on the foundation that school leaders welcome all children including those with exceptionalities. A school leader described that inclusion “meets the mission and philosophy of the Catholic Church... We are not supposed to discriminate. We aren’t supposed to judge... We are supposed to be welcoming and open to all.” Teachers also agreed that inclusion aligns with Church teaching. According to one teacher, “Catholic means universal, for all. So we want to be welcoming for all the kids.” The Catholic ethos of SLS allowed teachers and school leaders to convey a clear mission that supported inclusive practices within the school, as well as supporting an inclusive culture across the school.

Cindy, Alicia, Steph, and Joyce advocated for students with exceptionalities to be fully included in the classroom. Cindy recalled a time when she needed to make sure that a student with a moderate intellectual disability was included in the learning activity: “This particular student was at a first grade reading level and at such a vast difference [from other students] that [the general education] teachers were very frustrated and angry about how to [be inclusive].” In this case, Cindy modeled for the general education teachers how to modify work so that the student could more fully participate in class. In addition, the special education teachers use the case conference as a time to advocate for students with exceptionalities. Alicia explained, “It is really important for the children to know that every single person in the room knows that they are good at something and knows that they have strengths... especially if they really struggle.”

To move the mission of inclusion forward, Cindy, Alicia, Steph, and Joyce utilized a variety of approaches to influence their colleagues' practice. Cindy and Steph described how they try to model how to accommodate students' diverse needs. Steph explained, "I always invite teachers in to see what I do. I don't say or preach that what I do is best because some days I'm really good and some days I'm a hot mess." She said she "hopes to inspire" other teachers to try doing what has worked for her. Cindy also uses modeling: "If you model it and praise [teachers] along the way, they are going to get more comfortable with it. And I think that has worked." Cindy recognized that some general education teachers have limited training and experience, and so they doubt their ability to meet the needs of students with exceptionalities. Alicia and Joyce shared that they typically speak with general education teachers in an effort to collaboratively solve problems. Alicia said she tries to find a solution that everyone can implement comfortably: "Coming together to meet for the common good of the student is the most important thing." As a group, the special education teachers at SLS have been able to influence their colleagues to try new strategies to accommodate students' diverse needs.

Cindy, Alicia, Steph, and Joyce behaved as ethical leaders because they influenced general education teachers to work outside their comfort by trying new strategies to accommodate students with exceptionalities. They struggled alongside general education teachers, providing concrete support through modeling. Additionally, most of the participants aligned their practice with Catholic Social Teaching, which emphasizes the dignity of all children regardless of ability, and their right to full participation in the life of the Catholic Church. These teachers behaved authentically as they behaved according to their beliefs and supported their colleagues in doing the same. They demonstrated responsibility as they worked to meet students' diverse learning needs and supported their colleagues to do the same. Lastly, Cindy, Alicia, Steph, and Joyce showed presence through the efforts they made to bring about a more inclusive school culture at SLS.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The literature on teacher advocacy does not identify activism as an act of leadership or teacher activists as teacher leaders. For instance, Picower (2009) does not explore this activity or the commitments she describes as acts of leadership that have influence on what other teachers do in their classrooms across a school. She and others who write about teacher activism fail to recognize the power of teacher leadership within a school and district to affect positive change. This article attempts to address this issue by explaining how the teachers who participated in the case studies were able to influence the work of teachers across their buildings.

Further, these teachers' work had influence beyond their buildings. For example, versions of the Brothers of Different Colors program that Moses, Vince, and Louis founded have appeared at other schools across their district. Likewise, Franklin Elementary English language teachers have worked in district-wide professional learning communities to grow capacity within their district to support EL students. Finally, the St. Lucy School inclusion program has both inspired and pressured other Catholic schools in the diocese to be more inclusive of students with disabilities. So in all three cases, teachers who advocated have had an influence on the work of colleagues in their buildings, as well as across their districts or institutional spaces (i.e., a Catholic diocese). This influence creates real change for students in the classroom, and demonstrates teacher leadership practice.

The teachers featured in these case studies are teacher leaders whose influence resides in their specific areas of expertise or initiative. They are not positioned in formal teacher leadership roles, but are teachers whose colleagues look to them for advice and guidance pertaining to teaching specific groups of students. For example, the English language teachers at Franklin Elementary and the special education teachers at St. Lucy School are recognized by their colleagues as experts. These teacher leaders challenge their colleagues to meet the needs of diverse students while also providing support. Their advocacy is acceptable to their colleagues because they balance it with guidance embedded in their expertise (Bradley-Levine, 2017).

Moreover, researchers have, for the most part, neglected to frame their studies of teacher leader advocacy within existing leadership theory (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). To address this issue, I have chosen to demonstrate how teacher advocacy is a practice of ethical leadership. For example, the key informants at all three schools took responsibility for creating spaces where vulnerable students' needs were not only met, but where they could flourish. These teachers behaved authentically through the positive supports they provided to both students and their colleagues. And they practiced presence through their awareness of and attention to the needs of others (Starratt, 2004).

It is important to note that the teachers who participated in these case studies did not identify themselves as teacher leaders. Their colleagues and administrators also did not identify them as teacher leaders. Rather, I am making the case that the advocacy they carried out is a practice of leadership and therefore, that they are all teacher leaders. In other words, because of their use of critical pedagogy, they are critical, and due to their collaborative leadership, they have influence on their colleague's work. Their ways of working with students allowed them to pursue social justice while their ways of working with colleagues contributed to their influence. In combination, they carried out ethical leadership, a way of being that allowed them to enact critical teacher leadership.

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