Call to Advocacy: Expanding Graduate Students' Leader-Advocate Identities

P O S T E R   P R E S E N T A T I O N

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Abstract

Poster session attendees are informed about findings, perspectives, and recommendations from a qualitative study exploring students' leader-advocate identity formation during an online doctoral course. Stages of leadership-identity development and characteristics of professional learning framed this study. One question guided the study to discover how early childhood educators develop or evidence leader-advocate identities. Data sources included 34 final reflection papers and six semistructured interviews with students who took a leadership, advocacy, and policy course between 2018 and 2019. Participants indicated the course and related doctoral program made them consider the importance of collaboration to leadership and commitment to advocacy through leadership.

In-Progress Research

Problem

Early childhood professionals appear to have weak leader-advocate identities and are reluctant to assume leadership and advocacy roles in their professions (Clapp-Smith et al.; 2019; Hollingsworth et al., 2016).

Participation of early childhood educators in reform initiatives in the field as leaders and advocates is encouraged (Douglass, 2018), yet many EC professionals reported that they are not prepared to assume leadership and advocacy roles (Clapp-Smith et al., 2019).

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the leader-advocate identity development of early childhood education professionals, who were also graduate students, during a doctoral-level course offered in an early childhood education, leadership, advocacy, and policy course at an online comprehensive college of education and leadership.

Significance

While exploring doctoral-level students' leader-advocate identity development in a course designed to foster such development overtly, researchers revealed aspects of the course that influenced transformation of students as their ways of thinking and acting as leader-advocates transformed during practice (see Kegan & Lahey, 2009).

Theory or Framework

We combined two theories for this study:

- The **Leader Identity Development Model** (LID) takes place along a continuum, from awareness to integration or synthesis and takes place in stages (Komives et al., 2005; Komives et al., 2009).

- **Professional learning** is effective to the extent it begins with instruction involving practice, reflection, assessment and feedback, support for learning, and is based on authenticity and applicability (Day et al., 2012).

Relevant Scholarship

Leadership practices were considered only in the domain of administrators; however, various researchers have emphasized that a collaborative effort of leadership, including advocacy, by all educators is needed for successful student outcomes in schools (Frick & Browne-Ferrigno, 2016; Nieto, 2014).

Leadership and advocacy efforts by ECE educators are needed in the field due to the range of contemporary challenges and complexities (Seltz, 2015).

ECE leadership included advocacy leaders who influenced policies, legislation, and strategic thinking of others in the field to impact social good (Kagan & Bowman; 1997; Nicholson & Manites, 2016)

Advocacy has been formally recognized as a component of leadership in ECE since the mid-1990s (Kagan & Bowman, 1997).

Advocacy is vital for the well-being of all citizens (Judd Pucella, 2014; Nieto ,2014) and is critical to the advancement of social justice (Bradley-Levine, 2018).

Leader identity development follows different pathways related to contexts in individuals' personal and professional lives in a climate of trust and respect (Sinha & Hanuscin, 2017).

As educators take on new roles in their communities of practice, their identities are reconstructed (Pennington & Richards, 2016).

Research Question

How do early childhood educators develop or evidence leader-advocate identities?

Procedures

Students' de-identified final reflection papers provided 146 responses.

Six students volunteered for interviews and member checking about their own leader-advocate identity development during the 11-week course. Interview questions were developed by researchers.

Participants

A purposeful sampling technique was used to identify EC professionals who were domestic or international students enrolled in a course of study leading to an EdD degree.

Each had completed an 11-week course in ECE and leadership during the 2016 - 2018 academic years.

Of the 34 participants, 3 were men and 31 were women.

Analysis

Papers and interviews were analyzed by categories derived from the conceptual framework; and cycles of coding that resulted in themes.

Participants' leader-advocate identities were explored along the LID model continuum and Day et al.'s (2012)'s conceptions of professional development/learning.

Findings

Course activities caused participants to consider the importance of relationships, collaborations, ethical commitments, and continued learning to their own roles as leader-advocates.

Participants internalized leadership commitments including commitments most closely associated with advocacy.

Course assignments that promoted students' leader-advocacy identity development were authentic and based in building relationships with others. These assignments provided opportunities for:
- mutually respectful professional exchanges
- development of trust
- honest communication
- shared decision making
- collaboration

Participants did not separate advocacy from leadership. Participants indicated surprise at the levels and degrees of leadership/advocacy which had occurred in their work in schools and communities. They recognized their own leadership/advocacy skills and roles as collaborators involving action-responsibility rather than position power.

Interpretation

Participants' responses indicated that the course activities made them consider the importance of relationships, ethical commitments, collaborations and life-long learning to their own roles as leader-advocates.

The researchers were able to connect stages of leadership identity development (Komives et al., 2009; Komives et al., 2005) and features of instruction that enhance successes of leader advocates as identified by Day et al. (2012).

Limitations

Participants of the study were former students of one researcher who analyzed documents and did not conduct interviews or analyze participants' interview responses. Only the course designer conducted interviews. The kind of assignment to which the students were responding and unanticipated timing challenges that limited our sample size for interviews should be taken into consideration in determining the usefulness of the findings for specific purposes.

Recommendations

For Practice

It appears important for early childhood educators to have support for their leadership and advocacy work as they expand their presence in the field.

Specific assignments can be created and expanded to address advocacy and leadership. It would be good to include an advocacy field study component in the program or course.

For Future Research

Future research with more in-depth interviews or with a larger sample for the interviews would be helpful.

Also pertinent would be interviews with the same participants in the future to see how they continued their leader-advocate development and work.

Social Change Implications

The interviewees indicated that their dissertations did incorporate advocacy. The reflection paper comments indicated that the students recognized the importance of advocacy within leadership and with the EC field. If EC educators can be more confident in advocating for the children and families with whom they interact, positive social change is more likely to occur for those children, families, and communities.

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