

Embracing Advocacy: How Visible Minority and Dominant Group Beginning Teachers Take Up Issues of Equity

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Abstract

This paper is from a four-year research project that followed graduates of a teacher education program from teacher certification through their first three years of teaching. It focuses on participants' narratives about their advocacy efforts in both their pre-service practicum placements and their first year as probationary teachers. Our findings indicate that while dominant group white participants chose to advocate from a position of personal conviction (often based on new knowledge of equity issues), the visible minority participants were often summoned by others to advocate. The paper concludes with a discussion about how teacher education might better address advocacy issues, alongside the focus on equity issues.

Keywords: beginning teachers, teacher education, advocacy, social identity, diversity, equity, social justice

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Introduction

This paper examines data provided by four graduates of a one-year post-baccalaureate teacher education program about their engagements with equity issues through advocacy in their pre-service program practicum placements and in their first year of teaching. The four participated in a longitudinal study, which followed a cohort of nine of our graduates throughout their first three years of teaching and specifically focused on their experiences with equity issues in their nascent teaching careers. We were interested in determining the following: the success of our teacher education program in instilling knowledge about teaching for equity in our students and the ways in which that knowledge manifested in their beginning teaching careers. This paper focuses on participants' narratives about and responses to what they saw as inequitable practices in their host schools (as teacher candidates) and in their first (probationary) teaching positions. Specifically we examine how they responded through acts of advocacy to these situations. Our engagement with the data has prompted us to ask: How do social identities figure in beginning teachers' advocacy efforts?

Theoretical framework

Our analysis is drawn from the extensive literature on advocacy where it is often referred to as a characteristic of "role modelling" (Allen, 1994; Solomon, 1997; Haig-Brown, 1998; James, 2000; Zirkel, 2002). We use the term advocacy to mean acting or intervening on behalf of those with little or no power to act for themselves (Howard, 1999; Ratts and Hutchins, 2009). Teachers who advocate do so through the decisions they make about who and what populate the walls of their classrooms, through curriculum choices (Perry and Fraser, 1993; Grant and Gomez, 1996), and through the relationships they build with their students and their families (Delpit 1995; Quartz and the TEP Research Group, 2003). They participate in ongoing professional inquiry, educating themselves and their colleagues and peers about equity issues (Howard, 1999; Kelly and Brandes, 2001), and critiquing and challenging inequitable school policies and practices (Quartz et al., 2003).

Teachers who are advocates are also described as change agents (Kelly and Brandes, 2001), gate openers (Koerner and Hulsebosch, 1997), and role models (Solomon, 1997). Solomon's (1997) definition of a "role model" describes the teacher who "intervenes in students' lives, assuming the role of cultural broker, interceding on their behalf in a sometimes inhospitable learning environment, and authenticating their voices by moving (ethnic) cultural knowledge from the margins to the mainstream of the curriculum" (406). Allen (1994) delineates three qualities of advocates: the ethical, the nurturing, and the symbolic. Whereas some teachers may be summoned by their own moral convictions to be the ethical and/or the nurturing advocate, it is usually only visible minority teachers who are summoned by a particular attribute of their social identities to

be symbolic advocates. Symbolic advocates are seen to be in some way “representative” of the students for whom they are advocating (Allen, 1994; James, 2000).

Catapano (2006) suggests that advocacy requires, “the willingness to take risks, professional self-confidence and professional persistence” (87-88). She suggests that teachers who employ advocacy need to be able to look at a situation through multiple lenses, problem solve and take action to resolve conflicts through reflection and discussion. Given an already overcrowded curriculum and a host of other provincial mandates that put large demands on teachers (probationary teachers, in particular), we are aware of the demands that our summons to advocacy puts on novice teachers. We concur with Johnson, Oppenheim and Suh’s (2009) warning that these demands are potentially overwhelming.

Methodology

Participants

This article focuses on four teachers from our sample of nine: two teachers from visible (racial) minorities (Miriam and Renee), and two from the dominant white majority (Angela and Susan). (All names are pseudonyms.) These participants were chosen as they closely represented the larger sample, providing a cross-section of racial, cultural, and social class identities of the cohort of nine. The distinguishing feature of this smaller group was their stable employment (with probationary full-time contracts) during their first year of teaching, in comparison to the other participants. Miriam is Muslim, the Canadian-born daughter of middle class immigrants from India. Renee came to Canada from Trinidad as a small child with her family. She identified herself as Indo-Caribbean, working-class and Catholic. Angela self-identified as a working-class Catholic Franco-Ontarian whose family has been in Canada for many generations. Susan is of Irish-Catholic heritage and from a middle class family who has been in Canada for generations.

Data Sources

In this article, we focus on the data provided in program exit interviews and in focus group interviews that occurred at the end of their first year of teaching. Individual interviews at the end of the program provided an opportunity to gather rich detail from each participant about their experiences with the program and aspirations for the future. During their first year of teaching, participants provided copies of written assignments that they had completed during their pre-service teacher education. While we did keep in touch through emails and brief telephone calls, we opted not to visit the participants in their first year of teaching, as we had in some cases supervised their practicum, and did not wish to be seen in a similar evaluative role. Mindful of our position as their ‘teachers’

during their pre-service teacher education we were concerned that individual interviews had the potential to be seen as evaluative, rather than reflective. The focus group questions were designed such that participants could reflect on their first year of teaching with their peers, allowing the researchers to ‘take a back seat’.

Data Analysis

The initial coding of data occurred as it was gathered. This allowed the use of the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Ongoing analysis of the data from exit interviews and copies of submitted assignments and, to a lesser extent information gathered through informal communication, were used to inform the questions that were asked during the focus group interviews at the end of their first year of teaching. Using these three research methods allowed for triangulation of the data. Data were sorted using open, axial and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Advocacy was a theme that emerged from the data itself, rather than a part of our research design. Indeed, in the early stages of our analysis we were initially disappointed when themes such as equity were not evident in the language participants used. With rereading and resorting of data, we realized that it was in the participants’ actions, rather than simply their language, that our former students displayed their commitments to equity.

Discussion

Pre-service experiences (in class)

Students in our program had opportunities in all our courses to explore equity issues. We tried to infuse equity into our teaching, rather than treat it as an add-on to established curriculum. Appendix A lists the explicit components of each of our courses that focused on equity. In addition to course work, the students attended a daylong equity conference that featured hands-on workshops and guest speakers on such issues as poverty and homophobia. They also viewed films that addressed issues of identity and equity, and had access to a huge collection of multicultural children’s literature and teacher resources. In our program, teaching about equity was coupled with a summons to all our students to take on advocacy roles, echoing Guyton, Saxton and Wesche, (1996) in their assertion that all teachers must be “cultural mediators and not just cultural transmitters” (p. 647).

In the exit interviews participants’ responses to questions about the program’s emphasis on equity were favourable, although some held in balance their wish that the program had contained more emphasis on a “how to teach” type of instruction. Analysis of the exit interviews suggests that the program raised their awareness of a range of equity issues and their own social identities and locations.

Susan, one of the white participants in our study, felt that the program made her “a

more aware person” and a “less judgmental person”. She especially appreciated the daylong equity conference where she attended a workshop given by the principal of a racially and culturally diverse school that struggled with its relationship with its community:

[The principal] was making a judgement of some of the parents in the school and [was] feeling that what they were doing was inappropriate and then came to realize, no, that this is part of who they are and part of their culture and part of their relationship with the[ir] child[ren]. ... To me it’s almost one of the hazards of the job because I just hear so many “ah, the parents this and that.” I hope that I won’t get that jaded. I think a lot of our courses and discussions really helped us maybe not go down that path.

Although Angela came into the program highly knowledgeable of equity issues as they related to poverty and disability (she worked for several years as an educational assistant with exceptional students), she, as a white person living in a predominantly white community, had never directly engaged with a diverse population, in terms of ethnicity and race:

I just didn’t have the experience. Anything I did see were like horror show types of things that you see on television.... So I did have a very apprehensive, negative attitude, I think. I tried to make an effort after we did that Diversity Profile. It wasn’t so much that I had the wrong attitude, it was just that I didn’t have the life experiences. So I made the point, often, with different people of different nationalities in our classroom. ... I sort of thought: this is an area where I need to grow, so I’d ask questions and I went out of my way to familiarize myself with how they lived, where they came from.

Miriam’s initial response to the equity education she was receiving was to note: “I guess I didn’t realize that people can be discriminated against in so many ways”. Poverty was one area she felt she had no prior experience with and knew little about:

So when we started talking about poverty and using macaroni in art. I remember [one professor] made a comment that there are some children who come to class without any breakfast and there you are using macaroni.

Renee also gained awareness, but of a different sort: “I know one thing that [the program’s emphasis on equity] did teach me was that it made me more aware of how interested I was in it and how important it was to me”. She went on to note that she also became aware of her “prejudices” about “rich kids” and her assumptions about their self-

sufficiency and wondered if her attitude came from growing up in a family that “didn’t have a lot of money”.

The program also brought their own identities to their attention. Susan noted: I’ve never felt really marginalized. I think everyone has had situations where you’re the new one or maybe you don’t fit in, but I never [did]. In my experiences I always felt I was in. ... I always - even throughout my high school and university days - seemed to be around others like me. So I feel that I didn’t have a whole lot of experience dealing with other cultures and other socio-economic groups either.

Angela struggled with her attitude towards poverty from the standpoint of someone who had grown up poor:

So I struggle with that one because I feel there are ways out [of poverty]. Maybe not totally and some people choose not to. I see it in the schools, which will be a struggle not to judge people who are coming in with poverty issues. I’ve seen it, never have money for outings for the school and never have this and that when you want it. ... So I struggle with that today and I think because we came from a fairly low-income home and we all thrived to do something, it’s like everybody should. So I can see that it’s a problem because not everybody can and maybe not everyone will have the people to support them.

Miriam noted:

It was when I came to Teachers’ College and we did all these assignments and talking about our identity and reflected on where you’re coming from and that was when I started realizing that I was a minority. But I didn’t realize it before then.

Renee’s interest in equity issues faced challenges from some of her peers:

I heard people say, “Oh you think about it too much”, or “it’s too much of an issue with you.” But it is an issue! I’ve always grown up with it. It was in my face. It’s not like I could ignore it.

Just as Angela welcomed the opportunity to learn from her peers whom she deemed “different,” Miriam welcomed the opportunity to both learn about others and to teach them about herself:

I did have these pre-conceived notions of what “up North” [north of the Greater Toronto Area] is like. But it was really nice because then the people that I was

meeting that were coming from way up North ... it was a new experience too. I met some really good friends. They would ask me - it was really funny because they would hesitate to ask some questions. I would just say, 'no! Just ask me anything you want to know about me.' So they asked me about my hijab: "do you wear it all the time?"

What seems most obvious in these responses is how the participants' learning seemed to be focused on what they had not directly experienced prior to beginning the program: Miriam learned about poverty; Renee learned about the learning needs of privileged children; Susan and Angela learned about cultural and racial diversity. They all signalled that this learning was important to becoming a teacher, and in so doing, acknowledged their own prejudices and ignorance. They all claimed to have grown, in terms of self-awareness and self-reassessment. What seems less obvious is the ways in which their engagements with difference varied depending on their current social identities. For Susan and Angela, their experiences in the program seemed to be about opening up and embracing new ideas. Miriam and Renee had the added component of navigating the ignorance and intolerance of other students in the program, as their social identities seemed to form a nexus with their new knowledge about equity issues in ways it didn't for the dominant white group participants (Allen, 1994).

Pre-service Experiences (in practicum placements)

Their growing knowledge and awareness transferred to their practicum placements. Angela's awareness of the Native community in her hometown was heightened by what she learned in the program. This awareness extended to her host school and what she observed:

So when we looked into this, about the diversity in our community, I said [to my group members], "you know, the Native population is there and I really hate the way the teachers treat the kids." They're blamed for everything in the school; for anything that is stolen. The [teachers are] rude in their attitudes towards the [Native students]. They wouldn't talk to other kids the way they talk to these Native kids.

Similarly, Susan's growing awareness produced a critique of the host teacher in her first practicum placement:

I saw instances where I probably felt that if the teacher of that classroom had been more aware or in tune, then maybe it would be a bit of a different atmosphere. ... I'm just thinking of a student who the teacher had told me that came from a home

where the mother was manic-depressive and the father was often not at home. So here was a student who really struggled socially with other students ... and that was just a non-issue for that teacher. So there didn't seem to be much of taking that into account.

Both these examples demonstrate an important first step in recognizing the practicum as an arena for testing out their new knowledge about equity issues. In small but significant ways, they were challenging school practices (Quartz et al., 2003). However, they also point to the lack of real power that teacher candidates experience in their practicum placements (Solomon, 1997; Kelly and Brandes, 2001). We note the tentative language Susan used: "probably", "maybe", "there didn't seem to be", as if she were giving her host teacher the benefit of the doubt. Angela shared her critique of her host school only with her peers. Neither discussed their observations with their host teachers or other school personnel.

Susan did have one experience in her second practicum placement wherein her critique of the curriculum being used in the classroom led to some changes:

We were doing pioneers and I remember [our professor] having spoken about the whole issue of presenting pioneers' way of living back then through just the one view that is often presented in books. That was, again, another example of my [consciousness] being heightened. Having the discussion and hearing [our professor's] point of view, I did look further and dug a bit deeper and found examples of Black pioneers and their role in the history of pioneers in Ontario. I felt really supported by my host teacher in that.

We suggest that over the course of the year, Susan was gaining an ability to look at things through multiple lenses, to problem solve and take action (Catapano, 2006) in ways that resulted in her educating herself and her host teacher (Howard, 1999; Kelly and Brandes, 2001).

Renee noted that while her first practicum placement had a richly diverse student population, she "was the only brown person (of the teacher candidates) and there weren't a lot of teachers who were [racial minorities]". Renee took time to get to know many of the children at her host school, recognizing that her racial identity signified in important ways: "I connected to the kids right away, I think, because I was a minority. They took to me. ...They weren't used to having teachers in that role". Renee recognized her potential as a symbolic role model (Allen, 1994).

Miriam was summoned beyond critique to a spontaneous act of advocacy. In her practicum placement, there was one Muslim student in a class that was predominantly Christian. An incident involving this student pushed Miriam to advocate:

Halloween time came and ... everyone was going to dress up and have a big party. [The Muslim student] came up to me, he didn't come up to the host teacher, and he said, "My dad said I can't dress up tomorrow" and I looked at him and I said, "That's fine. It's okay, you don't have to."... He felt comfortable with talking to me as opposed to my host teacher. The next day came and it was fine 'cause I wasn't dressed up and he wasn't dressed up. ... [I went to the host teacher and ...] I said he wouldn't be dressing up and she said, "Okay! No problem. I understand". That was it. No big deal and I knew if he had gone to her, it wouldn't have been a big deal, but he chose to come to me.

Miriam's response to the boy's comment was low-key and matter-of-fact. As a Muslim, she understood the boy's father's objection his son's participation in Halloween celebrations and she also understood the need to make this a 'non-issue.' She quietly empowered the boy to be who he was.

Angela and Susan used their newly acquired knowledge about equity as a lens through which to analyse their practicum placements. Their ethical standpoint led them to their critiques. Rene and Miriam found themselves identified by others in ways that summoned them to small acts of advocacy. These small acts suggest Solomon's notion of the "cultural broker" (Solomon, 1997), the visible minority teacher who makes use of her own cultural or racial identity to connect with students: "Using strategically the politics of cultural identity (association with students' cultural norms and traditions, language forms, and knowledge), they [the visible minority teachers] break down barriers that often exist between students of colour and dominant group teachers" (406). This was particularly true of Miriam, who was summoned, not only to an ethical and a nurturing response, but also to a symbolic one, as she advocated for the one Muslim student in her predominantly white host classroom.

All these examples point to the importance of supportive relationships in practicum settings (Solomon, 2000; Levine-Rasky, 1998). Generally speaking, host teachers were supportive of these teacher candidates' efforts. Susan's host teacher welcomed her efforts to broaden the pioneer unit. Miriam's host teacher supported her handling of the "Halloween" incident. Diversity was welcome. Miriam's and Renee's minority status was regarded as a benefit. However, while their efforts were personally rewarding and meaningful, they did not change the status quo. This points to the lack of power teacher candidates have in their practicum placements and to the overall propensity in the teaching profession to maintain the status quo and not 'rock the boat' in their host classrooms (Menter, 1989; Levine-Rasky, 1998).

In-service Experiences

Upon finishing their first year of teaching, we brought the participants together for focus

group interviews to discuss their experiences as probationary teachers. To contextualize their narratives about their advocacy efforts we include here information about their schools. Angela returned to the school in which she had been an Educational Assistant, in her home community, to teach a combined grade five/six. Susan secured a position as a grade five teacher in a school, district school board and community with which she was unfamiliar. Renee was hired to teach grade one at a school adjacent to the one in which she had done a practicum placement, but approximately a one hour's drive from her home. Miriam was hired to teach grade two in a school not far from where she lived. She was the only participant to speak about her hiring experience in terms of equity issues. Miriam learned when she was hired, that her principal was anxious to include in her staff teachers who were, "East Indian because of the population of East Indian students". Hovering in the back of Miriam's mind was the question: "Was I hired because of my teaching abilities ... or was I hired because I was wearing my hijab?"

In this first example, Susan reported that the immigrant Portuguese community in her school was marginalised by the administration. She had met with the principal about a Portuguese student she had "some academic concerns about". The principal told her that the Portuguese community did not see education as important: "His opinion was that, they are hard-working people but education is not the priority. That the parents would mostly want their children just to finish high school and then get into a trade". His sweeping statement stayed in Susan's mind when she was called to a special meeting with the special education teachers and the three grade five teachers (of whom Susan was the least experienced). The purpose of the meeting was to discuss creating a modified gifted program for a select group of students:

So as they were leading this discussion around the table in terms of what they were looking for. ... These bells were going off in my head - [and I'm] thinking, why are they doing this? This doesn't really make sense to me. I spoke up and I said, "Have there been complaints from parents? Why are we doing this?" "No. No complaints, we are just being proactive." And I am thinking to myself, I know I am pretty confident [but] I am not confident with a lot of things being a first year teacher, but the one thing that I was pretty confident about was that I was challenging my students.

When Susan gave her list of students to the special education teacher this teacher suggested that Susan was being astute and explained that the principal had received complaints about the most experienced grade five teacher who was allowing his students to watch television. The principal's solution was to provide a one-hour block of time for some kind of informal enrichment program. Susan saw this as unjust:

The more I thought about it, the more unhappy I was, because I have a class

where I've got a group of really high achieving students, who are all Anglo-Saxon, and I have got a group of students who are very low-achieving, some are ESL and they are mostly Portuguese students. So, here is this one hour of precious special ed. time not being given to the students who are going to need it. ... And instead, this time is being used by these parents who have taken the initiative to complain about a teacher, and that issue is not being addressed. If it were the Portuguese parents who were complaining, I don't know if anything would have been done.

In this example, the most powerful person (the principal) redistributed scarce teaching resources to the most powerful (and vocal) families in the school - the middle-class, Anglo families. Susan recognized the unfairness of the situation, but was not able to openly challenge the principal's decision as it went beyond her own classroom and involved colleagues. Her powerlessness was heightened by the fact that an even more powerful teacher, the head of the special education department, who agreed with Susan's analysis was not prepared to challenge the principal either.

Angela advocated for a boy who had experienced a very disrupted education, having thus far been in several schools. The boy lived outside of the school catchment area and the principal wanted to get the student out of the school, using the boy's lack of residency as the excuse to remove him. Angela provided this account of the situation:

His father is illiterate, his mother left when he was about two years old. He is a little ragamuffin, nobody has ever really taken time for him or helped him, and I just said, "How can we kick this kid out? He is settling down, he is getting along reasonably well".... But [the principal] hounded him for months and as I was speaking with the secretary, I said, "He is going to make him leave. He [the student] just has so much stuff to deal with, I can't believe the principal is doing this". And she said, "Especially when such and such a family are being driven in by their parents from out of town." That father is a very high status lawyer in the town, and nothing is being said about hounding them. I just looked at [the principal] and I said, "How can you do this to this kid?" And he said, "Don't look at me like that." I don't even know how I looked but I was ready almost to cry over it because I thought, this kid has had so many bangs in his life, but he is coming to school.

In the end, the principal allowed the boy to stay. What comes through in this excerpt is Angela's indignation at the unfairness of the situation. What is unusual about this incident is Angela's forthrightness in taking on her boss: the person who held the key to her permanent contract with the school board. One of the contributing factors to Angela's actions may have been her previous long-term presence in the school as an educational

assistant: she and her principal knew each other very well.

Miriam was approached by a senior colleague about a Muslim girl in her class:

A grade three teacher approached me in the school two weeks ago and she said “I have a student in my class and she comes to school wearing a hijab, she takes it off, hangs it on the coatrack and before going home she puts it back on.” ... She was concerned and she asked me to talk to [the student, thinking that] because I’m wearing hijab she might be able to relate better to me.

When advocacy takes on an identity politic, it does little to shift the status quo in relation to social power. We argue that in this incident, Miriam’s senior colleague evaded her responsibility and passed it onto Miriam, assuming that Miriam would understand the issues better and be a better advocate for the girl.

Given Miriam’s experiences of having to explain her religious practices during her pre-service teacher education and that she was aware that she had been hired, in part, because of her ethnocultural and religious background it is perhaps not surprising that Miriam agreed with her colleague’s request and spoke with the girl:

So she had [the student] come up to me in my classroom ... and we had a talk about it. I asked her what was the problem and she said some boys were making fun of her and that’s why she took it off. ... I said “do your parents know that you took it off?” she said “no”, and I said, “How would they feel if they knew?” and she said, “They would be very upset”. And I thought [about that] and then I said, “Okay Do you want to take it off?” And she said “... well...” and I said, “are you taking it off because you want to or just because the boys were making fun of you?” She said “because the boys are making fun of me” and I ... told her to give me the names of the boys so that I could go talk to them, because you know she is only in grade three and I can’t expect her to do a “stand-up-for-your-rights” type of thing. But I told her “this is who you are and if it is who you want to be then be proud of it and don’t take it off because then they win.”

The advocacy issues here are many: Miriam knows and respects different ways of being Muslim. She was careful to determine if this decision to remove her hijab was the girl’s choice - which would require another kind of intervention. She considered the parents’ wishes but did not present those wishes as an ultimatum. She encouraged the girl to be proud of who she chose to be. Later, she intervened on behalf of the female student by using an educative rather than a punitive approach with the boys. This incident illustrates the challenges present when visible minority teachers are summoned by senior colleagues to identity-based advocacy. Miriam runs the risk of becoming “a tireless nurturer” (Allen, 1994, p.192) of not only the Muslim students in her school, but also her

(senior) colleagues.

In her first year of teaching, at a school that was predominantly South Asian, Renee volunteered to help out with the school's Black History assembly, working alongside another probationary visible minority teacher. Although Renee was teaching grade one, it was the grade seven and eight South Asian students who were involved in this assembly:

The Black History assembly went over very well. We did resource packages for all the teachers. The kids were really interested and we had morning announcements that the kids did. They were participating. They went and they spoke about different things every day. ... We got pretty good feedback from people who wanted to be involved, and most of them were Indian. It was so funny! We probably got over a dozen people [students] who wanted to participate, and they helped us out, and it was fairly well-done. Their participation was really good.

An outcome of this was that the students wanted to have an "Asian Week" to celebrate "Brown History". Renee encouraged them: "They were joking at the time and we were like, 'well, you know, maybe we can do something about it.' But we left it like that." Whereas the Black History assembly drew a dozen students, the Asian Week plans drew over 50 students "who really wanted to participate. ... Kids were bringing their friends. The room was packed! After that they were like piggy-backing us everywhere!" When the principal turned down the students' request, "the kids came back to us [Renee and her colleague] just struck that this could have happened. They had such high hopes and I think that really let them down."

This example suggests several things: firstly, like the Muslim student in Miriam's practicum class (see above), students will choose their own advocates, those teachers whom they believe will best represent their interests (Allen, 1994; Haig-Brown, 1998). Secondly, like Miriam, Renee saw advocacy as a form of empowerment. She encouraged the students. She did not act on their behalf. Thirdly, Renee took on the Black History assembly because she wanted to learn and gain experience. She saw these opportunities as templates for future advocacy endeavours, such as a school celebration of Eid. Renee understood that advocacy requires education (Howard, 1999).

Both Miriam and Renee felt affirmed by parents who openly expressed their delight that their children had teachers who, in Renee's words "the kids looked like". Although parents, in these instances, did not explicitly summon them to advocate on behalf of their children or themselves, their unabashed approval suggests that they saw such advocacy as a possibility. Perhaps embedded in the parents' responses were their own assumptions of how "alike" these teachers were. Miriam's school community, although largely Muslim, was also an immigrant and working-class community, with

many iterations of Muslim identity present. Miriam is from a middle class family within which Islamic observance and tradition are quite varied. (For example, Miriam's mother does not wear hijab.) Renee, although of South Asian heritage, was culturally and religiously different from the immigrant South Asian community in her school, which was mostly Punjabi and mostly Muslim: she was from the West Indies and grew up Catholic. These differences do not preclude advocacy, but they point to the limitations of seeing advocacy based only on identification and cultural transmission. Renee and Miriam's advocacy was in part, based on points of connection, rather than on 'matching' social identities.

The dominant group teachers had very different experiences. They were not summoned to advocacy by administrators, colleagues, parents or students. Instead, they were summoned solely by their own convictions about what they believed was just and equitable. The impact of their social identities on their students and school community was not obvious to them. They did not operate from a place wherein their social identities consciously mattered.

Conclusion

While the data drawn from this small sample do not point to general trends, they do signal a range of experiences and responses beginning teachers had to issues of equity in classrooms and schools. The data presented here provides evidence that graduates of our program were able to identify equity issues. They chose to advocate on behalf of students to diminish the negative impact of inequitable practices routed in differential treatment of students based on their social identities. For example, Susan's attempt to make her host teacher's pioneer unit more inclusive and Miriam's engagement with a Muslim student's dilemma about Halloween indicate how participants grew in their awareness of equity and developed teaching skills to create a more equitable learning environment for students. Their actions suggest that these neophyte teachers understood that their students differed in terms of social location, and the implications for these differences translated into inequitable school practices to which they chose to respond through advocacy.

The impetus to advocate differed depending on social identities. For Susan and Angela, it was their growing knowledge of equity issues coupled with their personal convictions that seemed to spur their decisions to be advocates. For Renee and Miriam, added to this mix was also the summons from others who marked their social identities as important. Further to this, we believe that there was also a sense of teacher responsibility, wherein beginning teachers often take up their new roles individually and in isolation with a belief that "everything depends on the teacher" (Johnston and Carson, 2000). For the most part, their acts of advocacy were individual and independent of support or collaboration with others, thus highlighting the often "isolated and idiosyncratic process

of ‘becoming a teacher’” (Flores, 2006, p.2034).

The incidents explored here remind us that beginning teachers have very little power: they are probationary members of the teaching profession. They enter into a profession that has a tendency towards what Menter (1989) calls “stasis”: a preference for maintaining the status quo. Stasis is most likely to create a working environment that is bureaucratic rather than advocacy oriented (Cho et al., 2009). Our participants’ narratives illustrate the complexity of the decisions they had to make to advocate for their students in situations that involved colleagues with greater experience or school administrators who had significant institutional power over them. To borrow Kelly and Brandes’ (2001) term, our participants “shift[ed] out of neutral” to take a stand when the pressures on teachers were to entrench their neutrality.

Implications

Our research engaged beginning teachers at two significant moments in their teaching careers: upon completion of their teacher education and at the end of their first year teaching. Our findings thereby have implications on two fronts: teacher education and teacher induction. What can we take away from these beginning teachers’ experiences that would enhance teacher education and also improve the odds for beginning teachers to remain advocates for issues of equity? The important work we do to make teacher candidates aware of equity issues needs to be balanced with attention to the messy and myriad details of advocacy work. We can no longer simply admonish them to be advocates (Rice, 2009). Incorporating course material and assignments specifically related to advocacy work gives teacher candidates opportunity and permission to act as advocates. This might be in the form of an inquiry project, such as those advocated by Merino and Holmes (2006) and Kelly and Brandes (2010), wherein teacher candidates examine their advocacy efforts “as a point for inquiry, and not as a personal teaching [success or] failure” (Merino and Holmes, p. 12). Under the guidance of informed teacher educators (Zozakiewicz, 2010), teacher candidates learn that advocacy is an important and necessary basic teaching skill, not simply a matter of personal choice.

In terms of teacher induction, in a climate that largely sees mentoring as a way of ensuring that beginning teachers align themselves with government initiatives and mandates (Cho et al., 2009), positioning advocacy as a basic teaching competency would certainly require strong advocates (yes!) within the field. Research has indicated that advocacy must not and cannot be done alone (Athanasas and De Oliveira, 2008; Kelly and Brandes, 2010). Teachers, especially beginning probationary teachers require knowledgeable allies for this work.

Our study adds to an emerging body of research that challenges the often taken for granted assumption that beginning teachers are so overwhelmed with fitting into current practice that they cannot or will not be change agents (Athanasas and De Oliveira, 2008;

Johnson, Oppenheim & Suh, 2009 and; Kelly and Brandes, 2010). Rather, when novice teachers graduate from preservice teacher education programs that see equity as integral to teaching, rather than as an add-on, they are able to take steps to create more equitable learning for marginalized students (Kelly and Brandes, 2010). We recognized that, like the new teachers in Athanases and De Oliveira's (2008) study, attempts at advocacy will not always be successful, especially for beginning teachers. Although each participant experienced some success, Susan and Renee backed off when they were faced with inadequate administrative or collegial support. It is important that we teach our students that spaces for advocacy frequently present themselves in the ordinary moments of teaching and in conversations with a colleague, secretary or a student. Catapano (2006) suggests that "[t]eachers must be allowed to start small, within their own world, and then they will develop the confidence to move their advocacy outside the classroom" (p. 89).

In this age of 'pre-wrapped' provincially mandated curriculum, report cards, testing and preselected learning materials, our participants advocated with a small 'a.' It was their responses in the everyday work of teaching, informed by their new and evolving pedagogy, rather than ministry mandated policy that shaped their actions. This research reinforces the position that teachers need to, and are able to, see teaching as a pedagogical activity rather than teaching as curriculum delivery. We need to teach teacher candidates to recognize when they are summoned by others to advocate. We need to give them permission to choose to advocate and to be cognizant of the standpoint from which they do so. We recognize the importance of exploring the intricacies of building professional relationships as well as networking and community building skills, so that as beginning teachers they can form alliances that will make their advocacy endeavours less risky and more effective.

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Appendix A

Naomi Norquay's social foundations course included:

- an assignment on family immigration histories
- a school community assignment that required students to interview community members and organizations in the vicinity of their host schools about their community work
- a weekly observation in their host classrooms of the interplay between various social identities and schooling
- two written reviews of books that addressed issues related to social equity, advocacy and schooling.

Marian Robertson-Baghel's language and literacy instruction course included:

- a diversity profile assignment (a self evaluation of awareness)
- a personal narrative response to *Lights for Gita* (Gilmore, 1994) (a story about a young Indian immigrant's struggle with the meaning of Diwali in a Canadian context)
- and an in-depth exploration of children's literature that concerned "migration, location and dislocation."
- an assignment utilizing Enid Lee's 'Identity Petal' (Lee, 1985), in which students explored their own social identity in relation to the social identities represented in their host classrooms and the social identities that are privileged in Canadian society at large
- an emphasis on learn