

Advancing Advocacy: Lessons Learned From Advocates in School Psychology

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Although school psychologists are called on a daily basis to advocate for the needs of our nations' schoolchildren, little is known about the factors that contribute to effective school-based advocacy. This study involved face-to-face interviews with 21 award-winning school psychology advocates. They described what led them into advocacy, obstacles faced, successes experienced, mistakes made, strategies used, resources employed, skills needed, and changes observed. The advocates discussed their definitions of advocacy, how they find balance, their advice for newcomers, and how they empower others. Following a qualitative content analysis, their collective input yielded important findings, including indispensable advice for future advocates. Most suggested that beginners' build relationships with like-minded collaborators and the targets of their advocacy, devote time to building expertise, and be patient and persistent. Common obstacles included intransigence among school psychology colleagues who were reluctant to change their roles to reflect new developments in the field or who feared participating in advocacy would destabilize their positions. To fully embrace an advocacy role, most advised advocacy education and training for both existing school psychologists and newcomers to the field. Limitations and implications that inform a foundation for advancing advocacy within school psychology are discussed.

Keywords: advocacy, school psychology, strategies, skills, qualitative content analysis

As a profession, school psychology has long promoted itself as advocating for the needs, rights, and welfare of children and their families, as well as for high-quality educational services designed to maximize children's potential. Historically, advocacy has been a central and defining feature of the services delivered by school psychologists (Merrell, Ervin, & Gimpel, 2006). In the 2000 iteration of the National Association of School Psychologists'

(NASP) *Principles for Professional Ethics* (NASP, 2000), the school psychologist's role as an advocate was identified as one of two considered foundational to the profession (the second being to "do no harm"). Since then, school psychology's engagement in advocacy has become visible in several ways. For example, the current NASP *Principles for Professional Ethics* defines advocacy as a voice guided by expertise "for the rights and welfare of students and families" and promoting "changes in schools, systems, and laws that benefit schoolchildren, other students, and families" (NASP, 2010a, p. 3). Advocacy was also one of the three main themes addressed in the most recent School Psychology Futures Conference (in 2012) and is highlighted in a number of ways in the 2010 NASP *Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services* (NASP, 2010b), which is used by over 200 school psychology programs in the United States as the framework for the education and training of future school psychologists. Yet despite the resurgence of interest in advocacy, when we reflect on what we really know about the science of advocacy, we find the evidence base in school psychology limited.

Understanding the science behind advocacy, including what it takes to be an effective advocate, the strategies used to advocate successfully, and the resources advocates need, is especially important at the present time. School psychologists and other mental health professionals are expected to advocate about many different

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issues, needs, and concerns for a variety of populations and across multiple settings and ecological levels. However, we know little about what successful advocates do when they engage in advocacy work, the best way to start advocating, and the skills found to be particularly useful. We also know little about the obstacles advocates face as well as the kinds of mistakes that seasoned advocates have made that we can all learn from. In addition, given the demanding nature of advocacy work, an important question to ask is, what do advocates do to find and maintain balance in their lives? This information is important for the field as well as for individual school psychologists to achieve and maintain optimal levels of effectiveness.

Graduate students, early career, and established practicing school psychologists who do not receive formal training or who are not explicitly taught how to advocate may be overwhelmed when deciding where and how to begin their advocacy work. Lating, Barnett, and Horowitz (2009) found that although the majority of faculty representing psychology doctoral programs agree that advocacy awareness and training is important to students' development, 60% of the programs that took part in a National Council of Schools and Programs of Professional Psychology's Self-Study acknowledged not providing advocacy training and activities for students. Graduate preparation programs may not prioritize preparation explicitly about advocacy because they assume that students will acquire advocacy skills informally through their applied training or through incidental observations. Given the central place of advocacy in school psychologists' professional roles, such a casual approach seems inadequate. Without education and training in how to be the best possible advocate, the wisdom and expertise school psychologists have may not get well represented when important decisions are made about children's academic and mental well-being.

Perhaps part of the reason for the lack of widespread integration of advocacy education within graduate programs may be linked to the importance that faculty members place on preparing their students to be advocates. In a recent survey of school psychologists about their perceptions of the most important competencies for practice, Fenning et al. (2015) found that the largely faculty- and school-based practitioner sample (making up 79% and 11% of participants, respectively) considered advocacy, although still important, among the least highly rated activities. Their sample considered the activities associated with traditional school psychology practice (e.g., assessment, intervention) relatively more important than advocacy. For faculty members who placed less importance on advocacy, the challenge may be in finding space for such coverage within an already crowded curriculum. For practitioners who rated advocacy as less important, advocacy work may seem more ill-defined than other role expectations and service delivery demands. Still, the press to prepare school psychologists as effective advocates has been a long standing one, and one that may be argued is now long overdue.

A review of the literature in school psychology suggests a paucity of data-based scholarship examining advocacy. In a departure from the norm, using grounded theory, Graybill, Varjas, Meyers, and Watson (2009) sought to identify the advocacy strategies that 22 advisors to Gay–Straight Alliances used in the schools on behalf of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender (GLBT) youth. They found that the advisors advocated in varied ways depending on the context, with most approaches involving a verbal

in-the-moment response directed at an individual student or school staff member. Other strategies involved attempts to raise awareness by displaying GLBT-friendly signs and by gathering information to share with the school community through outreach to national organizations. At present, no other investigation in school psychology has gone beyond the findings of Graybill et al. to identify additional advocacy strategies that may be used to promote the emotional, social, and academic well-being of youth and their families.

To provide a full array of psychological services, school psychologists need to be equipped to work at multiple levels within their work settings. Implementing developmentally appropriate, culturally informed, empirically based mental health services, whether one-to-one, in groups, or systemically, involves working to change ecosystems within schools. In their study of facilitative factors and barriers to providing integrated and comprehensive school psychological services, Castillo, Arroyo-Plaza, Tan, Sabinis, and Mattison (2017) called for graduate program faculty to devote time in the curriculum to help students learn about systems change. This call is not new within professional circles, having been repeatedly voiced by those who wish to expand the roles of school psychologists as the way to provide comprehensive mental health services in the schools (Meyers, Meyers, Graybill, Proctor, & Huddleston, 2012; Ringeisen, Henderson, & Hoagwood, 2003; Schaughency & Ervin, 2006). Castillo et al. (2017) and others have stressed the importance of school psychologists knowing not only how to engage in systems change but also how to advocate for such changes within their professional work settings. For those who have advocated for such changes but not achieved the desired effects, it would be helpful to know how successful advocates have gone about their advocacy activities to realize change. Tips, insights, and advice from seasoned advocates may help to expand school psychologists' advocacy activities, erase uncertainties, and provide the knowledge needed to gain a foothold as a successful advocate.

The present study was designed to explore the experiences and tools of award-winning school psychology advocates. The awards, described more fully in the Procedures subsection, recognized each participant's achievements in advocacy. The study aimed to create a detailed understanding of their work as advocates, including what led them into advocacy, the resources they employed, the strategies used, the obstacles faced, the successes experienced, the mistakes made, the skills most important, and the advances witnessed in issues they have advocated about. Also, we sought to learn how they define advocacy, find balance in their lives, and empower others through their work, as well as to identify what advice they have for newcomers to advocacy. Implicitly, we hoped to demystify the work of advocates in school psychology and begin to build a scientific base about best practices in school psychology advocacy.

Method

Participants

Twenty-one school psychologists participated in semistructured video and audio recorded in-person interviews. All participants were award-winning advocates and identified through a multistep process (see Procedures). They included 14 (66.6%) women and

seven (33.3%) men, of whom 18 (85.7%) were European American, one (4.8%) was African American, one (4.8%) was Asian American, and one (4.8%) was Latinx. Thirteen (61.9%) had doctoral degrees and eight (38.1%) had specialist degrees. They included practicing school psychologists ($n = 11$; 52.4%), full- and part-time faculty members ($n = 5$; 23.8%), supervising school psychologists ($n = 2$; 9.5%), independent-practice school psychologists ($n = 2$; 9.5%), and a director of a major division within the NASP organization ($n = 1$; 4.8%). Several advocates held second jobs as adjunct faculty, private practitioners, and editors of professional publications. They worked and resided in 13 states, including Massachusetts ($n = 4$; 19%), New Hampshire ($n = 3$; 14.3%), Florida ($n = 2$; 9.5%), Maryland ($n = 2$; 9.5%), Connecticut ($n = 2$; 9.5%), Alabama ($n = 1$; 4.8%), Georgia ($n = 1$; 4.8%), Nebraska ($n = 1$; 4.8%), New York ($n = 1$; 4.8%), Oregon ($n = 1$; 4.8%), Rhode Island ($n = 1$; 4.8%), Virginia ($n = 1$; 4.8%), and Washington ($n = 1$; 4.8%).

Measures

Participants responded to demographic and personal background questions (e.g., race/ethnicity, professional title) as well as to 19 questions in the interview protocol. The interview questions were developed as part of a larger study addressing advocacy practices and processes and were designed to fill gaps identified in the existing school psychology advocacy literature base. The present study reports on 16 of the questions (see [Appendix](#)), with many questions including follow-up prompts that could be posed, if relevant, to participant responses. The interview guide was semi-structured, with the order of questions varying depending on responses. After the third interview was completed, the question about strategies was added (i.e., “What strategies do you use/have you used to advocate?”) when we realized that participants were not directly addressing the advocacy strategies they had employed, and we did not want to miss learning about them. This revision of the interview guide very early in the data collection process was in keeping with the desire to obtain high-quality information while employing a qualitative approach ([Lietz & Zayas, 2010](#)).

The interview questions asked what led participants into advocacy, their definition of advocacy, and strategies they have used to advocate. They were probed to talk about changes they have witnessed around the issues they advocate for, the skills they consider critical for effective advocacy, resources employed, barriers and obstacles encountered, mistakes made, and their greatest successes when advocating. They were asked about the changes they have seen in advocacy, how they empower others through their work, how they create balance in their lives, and advice they have for newcomers to advocacy. The final set of interview questions asked for recommendations for others who want to develop their advocacy skills, advice for bringing in a new generation of advocates, and any additional important information that they wished to communicate to aspiring advocates.

Procedures

The advocates were recruited by e-mail and/or phone calls through publicly available information (e.g., work phone numbers, professional listservs). They were targeted for recruitment using both purposive ([Palinkas et al., 2015](#)) and snowball sampling

methods. All met the following eligibility criteria: (a) they were trained as a school psychologist, (b) they worked in education (i.e., as a school psychologist, supervising school psychologist, school psychology faculty member), and (c) they were recognized and honored for their advocacy work with a major award (i.e., national honor, state level award). The initial pool of eligible participants was identified from lists and notifications of award-winning school psychologists, including honorees of the NASP Lifetime Achievement Award, the NASP School Psychologist of the Year award, the NASP Government and Professional Relations Certificate of Appreciation, and state School Psychologist of the Year awards. These participants were asked to identify other leading advocates in the school psychology field. The nominated advocates were then vetted to ensure that they, too, met all three eligibility criteria. Of the 27 advocates in total identified, 23 were contacted and 21 agreed to participate. The advocates received \$100 for their participation, with an average interview lasting approximately 60 minutes.

Prior to data collection, the interview protocol was piloted with two advocates to obtain feedback about the interview questions, which led to slight wording changes and altered the order of questions. The university institutional review board approved the study. All advocates completed a written informed consent prior to the face-to-face interview. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by trained research assistants. The transcriptions were triple-checked for accuracy by the interviewer as well as to obtain a general impression of the data.

Qualitative Analytic Method

A team of five researchers conducted the qualitative content analysis of the 16 interview questions following training that contained didactic and applied components. The research team performed the two main phases of the data analysis process, with each phase entailing multiple steps ([Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008](#)). First, the researchers formed dyads to perform a content analysis of the manifest content of the interview transcripts. For each of the 16 questions, the dyads read the transcriptions independently and developed codes regarding the ideas represented in participants' responses to each question. The dyads then met to discuss their initial codes, identify and define common coding categories by interview question, and debate discrepancies in coding categories until they reached consensus. Once the categories that emerged from the data were agreed upon, the dyads independently applied them to each question, keeping a codebook as they went along. They used a constant comparison method of analysis ([Corbin & Strauss, 2008](#)) as they coded so that ideas were compared with categories and similar ideas were grouped together within one category. The dyads met again to discuss their coding decisions, calculate agreement, and discuss their observations. This process was replicated for each question until all responses to each question were fully analyzed. Interrater agreement was defined as agreements divided by the total number of disagreements and agreements, and ranged from 90% to 100% across the 16 questions.

The second phase of data analysis involved several steps that were taken to ensure trustworthiness of the data in terms of dependability, credibility, and confirmability. To ensure dependability and confirmability ([Lincoln & Guba, 2000](#)), an audit trail was maintained during data collection and data analysis to estab-

lish transparency in the research process. Regarding credibility, researcher reflexivity was maintained through notating and memos (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). As peer researchers, the research team met regularly to make sure that decisions were based on the study objectives and methodology. The team also met to communicate about each phase of the project, establish consensus as needed, and to debrief. During the content analysis of the interview data, the dyads were formed to independently analyze the data, providing investigator triangulation as a way to reduce bias. Credibility was also addressed by using quotations of the transcribed interviews in reporting the findings (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Levitt et al.'s (2018) "Journal Article Reporting Standards for Qualitative Primary, Qualitative Meta-Analytic, and Mixed Methods Research in Psychology" was used to guide our reporting of the study findings.

Results

What Led the Advocates Into Advocacy?

The advocates described a number of experiences that led them into advocacy work, such as professional experiences (including training experiences; $n = 8$; 53.3%), formative life events ($n = 7$; 46.7%), distinctive personal qualities ($n = 6$; 40%), and academic experiences ($n = 3$; 20%). Among those who discussed professional experiences, several spoke about being invited to attend their state association board meetings and how their participation in those meetings served as a catalyst for further involvement. One described it as an awakening of sorts:

One of the turning points for me in making me realize that it was okay to advocate, that it was part of my role, was my participation in the Massachusetts School Psychologists Association . . . I was sent to the . . . Public Policy Institute. You go and learn about different topics in the field. And then you go to the federal offices and advocate for particular programs and services that support kids. And that really got me believing that it was in the role of school psychologists to advocate . . . that it was not self-serving . . . It also made me realize that I did have some expertise . . . I think often school-based practitioners believe that only university people can be perceived as experts . . . the idea that a practitioner really could change how things are done and advocate was powerful to me and kind of eye-opening. I do not think school psychology training programs train people with the idea that you can be an advocate.

Formative life events that led them into advocacy were the second most common category of responses. The events ranged from learning to be an advocate for one's family of origin out of necessity, to growing up in the 1960s and witnessing an era of active social and political engagement, especially as a young adult. One advocate described living during the 1960s as "We learned very quickly how to buck the mainstream and fight for a cause. I see my own children . . . don't have that kind of drive."

When probed to elaborate on specific influences that led them to become advocates, their responses yielded nine categories. Several spoke of personal experiences ($n = 6$; 33.3%), and others discussed transformative professional development opportunities ($n = 5$; 27.8%), books they had read ($n = 5$; 27.8%), being stimulated by the social and political climate ($n = 4$; 22.2%), and their own personal qualities ($n = 4$; 22.2%). The remaining cate-

gories included professional events and experiences ($n = 3$; 16.7%), reactions to systemic injustice ($n = 3$; 16.7%), collegial support and influence ($n = 3$; 16.7%), and family values ($n = 2$; 11.1%). Those who spoke of personal experiences often commented on personal tragedy or early traumatic events associated with pain and rejection. One who underwent reparative therapy as a young gay man living in Salt Lake City talked about how that sharpened his awareness of injustices. He went on to say,

That led me to say well, what are we doing to support LGBT students and youth? I know many young men that I grew up with that went through this particular therapy are no longer with us . . . in fact about 75% . . . are dead. So when you have 75% of your population die, you need to do something about it.

A second advocate spoke of going to a monolingual school when she was an English language learner. She said,

My teacher did not speak Spanish and it was an issue because I wanted to go to the bathroom and I didn't know how to ask and they didn't understand me. So, it was really awful . . . they had to call my Dad in . . . and I said "Dad, I need to use the bathroom and nobody understands" . . . I spent the rest of that year learning how to color . . . while the rest of my classmates were being instructed in groups . . . I was at my own table with pieces of paper . . . my teacher didn't know how to teach me . . . I really felt like I needed to advocate for bilingual services.

For those who spoke of professional development experiences as particularly influential, all talked about attending workshops and trainings either within their state on topic-relevant issues or within NASP at opportunities such as the NASP Public Policy Institute.

Definition of Advocacy

The advocates' definitions of the term *advocacy* fell into five categories. Advocacy was defined as acting for the greater good ($n = 10$; 47.9%), expanding awareness ($n = 9$; 42.9%), speaking up ($n = 6$; 28.6%), and building relationships ($n = 5$; 23.8%). A final category, coded as miscellaneous ($n = 2$; 9.5%), included definitions that did not overlap with the previous codes. Within the category of "acting for the greater good," one advocate stated that advocacy is "making a persuasive argument on behalf of causes or people who lack the voice to make the argument themselves." For those who defined advocacy as "expanding awareness," one advocate focused on advocacy as "educating people," another spoke about it as "changing mindsets," and a third defined it as "bringing people information so they can know." Among those who defined advocacy as "speaking up" was one advocate who spoke of "fighting for what you believe in" and another who stated that it is "people willing to say what they think is right."

Skills Critical for Effective Advocates

The advocates identified seven skill domains as critical for effective advocates. These included an array of personal qualities and skills ($n = 17$; 81%), being well-informed and knowledgeable ($n = 14$; 66.6%), demonstrating excellent communication skills ($n = 11$; 52.4%), being able to make connections and build relationships ($n = 9$; 42.9%), having strong interpersonal skills

($n = 7$; 33.3%), possessing excellent planning and organizational skills ($n = 4$; 19%), and miscellaneous skills ($n = 2$; 9.5%). At their core, some of the seven domains seemed to overlap (e.g., personal qualities, interpersonal skills), but the coding of individual responses was guided by participants' emphasis in their responses. For example, "personal qualities" reflected personality features and associated behaviors, whereas "strong interpersonal skills" focused on relational skills that facilitate positive communications with others. The personal qualities/skills the advocates described were wide-ranging and plentiful. They included being passionate, genuine, open-minded, persuasive, honest, dependable, energetic, empathic, caring, principled without being dogmatic, sincere, self-motivated, action-driven, and persistent. The advocates also referred to the importance of knowing oneself, learning when to stop pushing, learning to step back and reflect, being encouraged by small victories, and being confident in one's knowledge. They also mentioned a willingness to refer to others, having good professional work characteristics, being accepting of limitations, and having a sense of social responsibility.

The second most frequently identified skill was being knowledgeable about what you are advocating for, which the advocates described in a number of ways. One did so as, "Know your areas of expertise . . . when I go in and say something, I do not just say it, I have something to back it up. I have the data, I have the background, I have the experience." Others mentioned the need to "do a lot of research," "have knowledge about what works," "be very specific in what you are talking about," "be not just focused on one narrow area or topic," and "understanding what are the key most important things."

The third most important skill mentioned was communication skills. The advocates talked about different dimensions of communication skills as valuable. One advocate discussed how a colleague would help her to assemble the information needed to be an effective communicator. She would ask her to consider,

Why is this important? Why does it matter to people? What are you talking about? Can you put it in layman-speak? . . . you know, I mean she would make me really . . . step out of my enthusiasm and put it in language that was something that would resonate with people. And then she would help me relook at all of that into basic talking points . . . and so now, when I go into a meeting, I have my three things that are important that I think will resonate with them. I will consider it from their standpoint. I'll listen to them first, learn what it is they are interested in, you know, around these issues, and then I will work to connect these key talking points to that.

Another thread included ideas associated with clear public speaking, such as "You need to be a good teacher and that means you have to be able to stand up in front of a group and tell them succinctly what it is they need to know" and "Feel comfortable communicating with individuals who you don't know." One advocate who supervises school psychologists in a large urban school district described this skill as

Being able to take your idea, put it on paper, be able to communicate it in a grant, in proposals, in power points, fact sheets, newsletters, articles . . . being able to take that oral communication, and translate it into a visual representation that people can understand across a variety of audiences.

Recommendations for School Psychologists Who Seek to Develop Their Advocacy Skills

Several different categories of suggestions for developing advocacy skills emerged from the advocates' statements. These included collaborate ($n = 14$; 77.7%), start to do it ($n = 12$; 66.7%), use existing resources ($n = 8$; 53.3%), engage in professional development ($n = 7$; 46.6%), and be persistent ($n = 2$; 13.3%). One advocate described his experiences with collaboration this way:

It's very important not to try to accomplish effective advocacy alone. Do that in coalitions, so that with other people, get together with people who have similar interests and . . . figure out who the . . . most effective spokespersons are going to be for your cause.

A second underscored the importance of involvement with professional organizations in this way:

Get involved with your state association is the top most. Because there is so much opportunity there . . . for leadership skills, and advocacy work, and just, you know, learning about public policy. If you get involved there are opportunities to travel . . . you know . . . these regional meetings, and those are so powerful! You meet some great people who are doing advocacy work in their state and you just learn so much . . . it is . . . invigorating . . . refreshing . . . energizing . . . it is so energizing when you meet other people who are doing the same work . . . I think you really need to get involved with other people who are doing advocacy work to see what it is like.

Another discussed the importance of reaching out to colleagues with this example:

One of the principals was describing that in her high school . . . she thought school psychologists did testing, and they had their first faculty meeting/staff meeting of the year and the principal outlined her goals for the school for the year . . . the school psychologist came up . . . and said, "You had these three goals. Here's how I can help you achieve those" and she said that if the school psychologist hadn't made note of those and come up to her . . . she never would have thought a school psychologist would have anything to do with her goals.

For those who recommended that developing skills is done by simply getting involved in advocacy, one commented, "It takes showing up, you know? . . . I would certainly not be too intimidated for doing that." Another weighed in with "Just starting small . . . I feel like they think it's a huge commitment, but there are so many small things you could do to get involved and see what that work is like."

Strategies Used to Advocate

Eighteen of the 21 advocates described the strategies they used when advocating, and their responses fell into six different categories of strategies. These included building relationships ($n = 15$; 83.3%), communicating ($n = 11$; 61.1%), becoming informed about the issue or issues ($n = 8$; 44.4%), capitalizing on their personal qualities (i.e., being trustworthy, being enthusiastic; $n = 7$; 38.9%), promoting public awareness ($n = 7$; 38.9%), and creating buy-in ($n = 3$; 16.7%). Most advocates discussed how they built relationships, networked, and relied on human resources as one of their principal strategies. Building relationships was also

described by several as of paramount importance. For example, advocates stated, "It's pretty much all about relationship building," "Building relationships with people is key to the whole operation," and "Learn about the people with whom you're interacting, because the bottom line is that influence is about relationships." Advocates elaborated on this theme by offering, "Let me find out about you so I can know how I can interact and collaborate with you" and "Being able to see what our commonalities are, to be able to define what our concerns are, and share concerns before we move to particular solutions." Another advocate described the importance of "joining other like-minded individuals . . . organizations that are involved in whatever you are advocating for."

The second most frequently mentioned strategy was using communication (one-to-one or small group), described as telling stories, setting up productive conversations, listening, and writing. Advocates had interesting thoughts about communication processes, including one who commented, "I think that there are particular ways of raising issues that . . . inform the discussion rather than create an adversarial climate." Another disclosed, "I want advocates to be aware that the process of dialogue, the process of identifying concerns, can sometimes be as valuable as the solutions." Still another described how "I don't feel I have to be right . . . I'm there to help the other people get their point out, and to be understood . . . so . . . I do repeat back a lot." This later advocate went on to say,

We get a lot of parents who come in and they're angry but they're not, I mean yes they're angry at the school district, but they're really angry because their kids are in a bad place and they love their kids . . . they're saying "I need help" . . . and they do not know what they want, they just know that they want something. They might come in with an idea, but sometimes you have to help them see maybe that's not the best idea. But the best way to do that is by helping them hear that you understand what they're saying in the first place and then possibly seeing, well there may be another way to do it.

A third strategy mentioned was being well informed, described as knowing the research and "knowing your stuff." One advocate stated, "The most important strategy is to be very well informed and from all perspectives on the issue." Another advocate described this as follows:

Whatever area you are advocating in, you need to learn absolutely everything you can about it. When you sit down at the table, it really helps for you to be the person who knows the most about this, because you are going to be persuasive, and you are going to be more comfortable when people throw questions at you.

Resources Called Upon to Support Advocacy Work

Advocates responses about the resources they employ to help their advocacy work fell into four categories. Most called upon informational resources ($n = 19$; 90.5%) and their collaborative relationships with others ($n = 15$; 71.4%). The remaining categories of resources that advocates discussed included their own persuasive abilities ($n = 5$; 23.8%) and financial and human resources ($n = 3$; 14.2%). Those discussing informational resources mentioned many different sources. They included the American Psychological Association, the American Psychiatric Association, professional journals, the Internet, professional web sites (i.e., the NASP website, the PBIS.org website, the "What

Works Clearinghouse" website, the Centers for Disease Control website), professional committees, policy documents produced by national organizations, position papers, documents produced by school districts, books, experts, libraries, conferences, and in-services. For example, one advocate spoke at length about the NASP advocacy site online by stating,

When you are a member you have access to so much more on the website. So they actually have an advocacy roadmap that you can go to online that I do refer to often . . . when you have an issue and you want to start advocating, here is what you do. Kind of step-by-step. That is really like the main resource that I use . . . And so with the MLA [Model Licensure Act], we kind of followed the steps for advocacy.

Others described collaborations with others, including with their peers, colleagues, graduate and undergraduate students, parents, colleagues on their state association executive boards, coauthors, coalition members, and members of other associations. One advocate, a faculty member, described,

I think talking in a collaborative way within other domains, other people working the mental health field, talking with nurses and seeing what their concerns are, talking with psychiatrists and seeing what are the most common issues that they are dealing with, collaborating with teachers, collaborating with families, really getting to know families . . . talking with colleagues, attending professional conferences. I think the networking at professional conferences is just vital.

Greatest Successes When Advocating

The advocates' greatest advocacy successes fell into eight categories: generative activities ($n = 9$; 42.9%), individual success stories ($n = 9$; 42.9%), legislative and policy successes ($n = 8$; 38.1%), improved relationships and collaborations ($n = 7$; 33.3%), advances for school psychologists ($n = 5$; 23.8%), systemic successes ($n = 4$; 19%), publications ($n = 3$; 14.3%), and external recognition ($n = 3$; 14.3%). Among those advocates who engaged in generative activities (or activities aimed at helping others to become advocates) were several who talked of being excited that their students got involved in advocacy following an introduction through them. One advocate described organizing a group each year of school psychology graduate students and state association executive board members to go to the state capital during the legislative session. Another described, with satisfaction, seeing high school students participate in an education subcommittee meeting for the state legislature. A third advocate described,

When people come to me and say that the work we've been doing is inspiring them to want to get involved . . . it's just trying to get one more person interested in speaking up on behalf of kids, so that's what I like the best.

A second category of responses about their greatest successes brought to light individual success stories the advocates experienced. For example, one revealed,

I've worked with some pretty interesting kids over the years and I still get phone calls from them, they are young adults now and they have great lives . . . I think that's always kind of an affirming experience.

Another advocate, a practicing school psychologist, talked about advocating for a student who had taken the Regents exam in New York who had experienced a problem during the test:

I went to bat for her. And they let her graduate . . . you know, you do not always see the change, they go to another school, they go there, they whatever. But it's times like that that I know that I am making a difference. That every little thing that I do, that every time I advocate for somebody, I'm making some change for that person and . . . I did my little piece. I am not the president. I'm not changing the world, but I'm changing a little piece.

Barriers and Obstacles the Advocates Faced When Advocating

The eight categories of barriers and obstacles included facing resistance to change ($n = 10$; 47.6%), a lack of knowledge ($n = 10$; 47.6%), institutional barriers ($n = 9$; 42.9%), limited resources ($n = 9$; 42.9%), limited time ($n = 7$; 33.3%), intrapersonal struggles ($n = 5$; 23.8%), conflicting agendas ($n = 4$; 19%), and depleted emotional and physical reserves ($n = 2$; 9.5%). Within the category of resistance to change, a common thread emerged in advocates observing intransigence among school psychologists in changing their professional role. This observation was best captured by the following statement:

I think a lot of us get very complacent doing what we've always done . . . there are places where people are pretty much testers . . . and I'll tell you it is the easiest part of the job . . . do the test which I've done 800 times before, write a report which happens on a template that I developed over the years, go to a meeting, done. And so folks that are in that kind of a role . . . boy I know it's really hard systemically to fight that sometimes. Everything is already against you . . . but there's got to be some kind of little tiny, tiny, tiny thing that can be done to change a little bit, so that the next person coming along then has it a little bit better than you . . . It used to be you would finish a job, a kid, and you'd be done. Now they do not go away. You are involved as a provider. That is a much more difficult role.

Others described another type of obstacle as resistance borne out of psychological barriers. For example, one advocate stated, "Fear, hesitancy in promoting change. People afraid of losing their job or being seen in a negative light if what they are advocating for is controversial." Another described resistance to change she had experienced in collaborating on a paper about racism. She stated, "People were upset—they didn't want to use the word 'racism' and I said 'Well, if we as school psychologists can't call it for what it is then why are we even doing this paper?'"

Lack of knowledge was also described by almost half the advocates as a barrier. One advocate described this by stating,

I think we've asked elected officials to be experts at everything . . . they find themselves in a position where they feel like they have to know the answer to a problem and there isn't enough reliance on the actual experts in the field in all disciplines to really move policy forward . . . so I think the biggest challenges . . . are bad policy . . . that's not linked to research, that's not linked to best practice, and watching it . . . proceed forward . . . I think this really interferes with . . . our country being able to develop the kind of policies that will actually prevent the problems from happening versus simply react to 'em.

Mistakes Made and Failures Experienced While Advocating

Six categories of responses emerged in response to the question about mistakes/failures that the advocates experienced. These included not meeting objectives ($n = 9$; 42.9%), feeling unprepared ($n = 8$; 38.1%), not communicating effectively ($n = 5$; 23.8%), failing to look at the big picture ($n = 3$; 14.3%), and not speaking up for their beliefs ($n = 2$; 9.5%). The sixth category was that there were no failures, only lessons learned ($n = 2$; 9.5%). The advocates provided many different examples when describing not being able to meet their objectives. One advocate stated, "I've partnered with some people that weren't the right people to partner with," and another commented, "We promoted the bill for three years and it didn't go anywhere." For those advocates who responded that one of their mistakes was being unprepared, their experiences covered a spectrum of unpreparedness. From not involving enough people in their advocacy activities, to not being sufficiently thorough, to underestimating how much time and effort an action required, the advocates helped to shed light on their early mistakes. The category "failing to look at the big picture" was best captured by this mistake:

Coming on strong for kids without fully understanding what is driving those arguing an alternative point of view . . . I work with kids around executive skills weaknesses . . . and ask . . . teachers to do a little more to support those kids . . . I have to remind myself that teachers have executive skill strengths and weaknesses and . . . am I asking them to do something really hard for them?

How the Advocates Empower Others

The advocates described five different ways they empower others through their advocacy work: being a role model and mentor ($n = 9$; 47%), being supportive and encouraging ($n = 8$; 42%), contributing to others' skill development ($n = 7$; 36.8%), engaging in experiential learning activities with others ($n = 6$; 31.6%), and engaging others through their personal qualities ($n = 6$; 31.6%). For those who saw being a role model as empowering, one example aptly illustrates this position:

Oftentimes I have had people who do not want to speak up for whatever reason, you know they may be afraid of authority, and needless to say I'm not . . . but there are rules, we are governed by rules . . . for me the biggest way to do that is to maybe model what I would say or kind of speak my mind in the best way that I could to advocate.

A second advocate succinctly described her view by saying,

The ways I can empower people through my work is by showing them it can be done. Showing them that advocacy work is important and that we all have time for it . . . we all have busy lives, we all have a lot of things going on, but we can afford a little time to put in.

Changes Witnessed Around Issues Advocated For

Eighteen of the 21 advocates discussed the kinds of changes they have observed concerning the issues they advocated about. Their responses fell into five categories. Most spoke of noticing an increased awareness about mental health issues ($n = 8$; 44.4%), followed by a growing interest in best practices in the schools ($n =$

7; 38.9%), an increased respect for the field of school psychology and for advocating ($n = 7$; 38.9%), and improvements in diversity and equity ($n = 6$; 33.3%). A handful ($n = 3$; 16.7%) commented on the obstacles they encountered in trying to create change. Statements about mental health awareness included how radically different the social climate around the topic of mental health used to be. For example, one advocate stated,

There is much more awareness of mental health as an issue these days and I am grateful for that . . . Nobody would have cared a long time ago . . . In the schools, mental health was like a really distant stepchild. And . . . trying to have adequate service for people was certainly an uphill climb on a daily basis to try to get schools to understand that they needed to do something about that.

Among advocates who discussed the expanding interest in best practices in the schools, several spoke about schools being safer and more supportive environments. For example, one advocate talked about this focus within a large urban district:

Locally in Boston we are talking about how do we create “safe and supportive” schools . . . how do we adopt a framework to address the needs of students? Those same conversations are happening at the state level . . . and at the federal level.

How Advocates Create Balance in Their Lives

The advocates provided nine different categories of responses in describing how they create balance in their lives. The most frequent response to this question, provided by 13 (61.9%) advocates, was that they actually had difficulty balancing the various facets of their lives. The remaining responses included that they find fulfillment and enjoyment in their work ($n = 10$; 47.6%), spend time with supportive family and friends ($n = 10$; 47.6%), set boundaries ($n = 8$; 38.1%), maintain a healthy lifestyle ($n = 8$; 38.1%), take vacations and travel ($n = 6$; 28.6%), prioritize time for self ($n = 5$; 23.8%), get supports from fellow professionals ($n = 5$; 23.8%), rely on personal beliefs ($n = 4$; 19%), and enjoy hobbies and other pleasurable activities ($n = 3$; 14.3%).

In commenting about the difficulties they experienced achieving balance, most joked in relaying this observation. Among those who wryly noted that they found balance an elusive quality in their lives, the following statement best summed up this sentiment: “Balance . . . what’s that?” A second advocate laughed and continued with,

Is one supposed to do that? Do you? I’m still working on that one. It is important to do that. It’s hard to achieve balance when what you do you do not just see it as a job—you see it as your life.

Those who described achieving balance in their lives by truly enjoying their work spoke about work as “fun.” Three also mentioned that their work was so enjoyable, it was like a hobby for them. For example, one stated, “I am one of those lucky people who thinks their job is fun . . . part of my job is like a hobby, I don’t even mind . . . I mean I like doing it.”

Advice to Those Just Beginning Advocacy Work

When asked about advice they would give to newcomers to advocacy, the advocates’ responses fell into seven categories. Most advised newcomers to collaborate with others ($n = 16$; 80%),

to focus on learning and building expertise ($n = 12$; 60%), and to be persistent and patient ($n = 10$; 50%). Also included was advice to start advocating ($n = 7$; 35%), to cultivate one’s passion for an area ($n = 6$; 30%), to foster communication and interpersonal skills ($n = 5$; 25%), and to engage in critical thinking ($n = 2$; 10%). Two advocates who spoke about collaborating had complementary advice. One stated, “Work with somebody. You know it’s hard to be the only person on a bandwagon. So, find a kindred spirit and do it together,” and the other explained, “Focus on relationships, individual relationships before trying to fly off a cliff.” A third weighed in with,

Form a good team, surround yourself with people who are going to help you, and build those relationships and know that it is going to take years depending upon what you are advocating for.

Still another advocate added an important dimension to her response:

I would encourage them to emphasize the social aspects of relationships. Meeting people . . . discovering things about the other person across the table from you, trying to reflect on how you are connected to that person no matter who they are, no matter how different their opinions are, to start there and building relationships before you ever ask for anything . . . always think about the relationships as being a critical aspect of the work . . . try and be a positive resource, offer as much support and help as you can and then follow through with that as best you can.

Within the responses that focused on learning and building expertise, one advocate offered,

I would tell them to find partners in their own organization and in the community that have similar views. And really spend some time first, figuring out what you believe in and how you see it fitting, rather than trying to advocate while you are still kind of formulating your opinion of things . . . spending a little time just being a volunteer . . . and then when you advocate you’ll be more knowledgeable.

Others weighed in with the following advice: “Take advice from others, we don’t know it all” and “If you already have a specific area you are interested in, I would say to just learn everything you can about it.” Several offered advice specific to how to acquire the needed expertise. Their responses included “Focusing on one issue . . . that comes up in your day-to-day work” and getting involved in formal organizations (i.e., state organization, NASP Public Policy Institute).

The third category of responses about advice for newcomers focused on remaining persistent and patient. One advocate articulated this idea by saying, “So, start small, be patient, and . . . try not to give up.” A second advocate continued, “First, don’t give up just because somebody says, ‘No, you’re not getting what you want from me.’ That will happen a lot.” A third suggested, “Focus on baby steps, don’t expect change too quickly.”

What Can Be Done to Bring in a New Generation of Advocates?

Regarding bringing in a new generation of advocates, the advocates’ responses clustered into four categories. First, they suggested to be encouraging and provide preparation in advocacy ($n = 18$; 85.7%), and second, to get people involved early ($n = 8$;

38.1%). The remaining responses included mentoring them ($n = 7$; 33.3%) and understanding their perspectives to better prepare them ($n = 2$; 9.5%). Among those who described the importance of being encouraging and providing training, several mentioned the need for training programs to explicitly teach advocacy. As an illustration, one faculty member provided a specific example:

I taught the legal and professional issues class, and we had a whole assignment related to advocacy and getting out there and learning about bills. I had my students . . . go into the state legislature, I mean this was back when you couldn't do it all from your computer, you had to actually go over to the Hill . . . and you know . . . check out the bill room and find a bill that you're interested in and research the bill and find out who the sponsors were and they were required to write a letter or make an outreach meeting with the sponsor. So we had a whole element about that built into the course.

The second common response to the issue of getting people involved in advocacy was to do so early. One stated, "Getting your students involved at an appropriate level of their training from day one." A second advocate made this crystal clear by saying,

We've got to get our students . . . and the advocacy issue in their DNA, while they're still young, because if we do that, and I'm talking about graduate students . . . the younger that a person gets involved . . . the more likely it is that they will continue.

Another elaborated by saying,

Start in high school. Start in elementary school. We have kids . . . they went to the principal and they said . . . we want to collect pennies for the people in the hurricane . . . give them the power to be able to say "Yes, you can help people."

Changes Seen in the Field of Advocacy

Ten advocates responded to the question about changes in the advocacy field (in the remaining interviews, the question was mistakenly omitted). Among those who responded, three categories of changes emerged. Their remarks included increased recognition of advocacy ($n = 7$; 70%), enhanced knowledge and access to information ($n = 4$; 40%), and greater organizational support ($n = 3$; 30%). With respect to the changes associated with increased recognition of advocacy, there seemed to be general agreement that school psychologists and other professionals are increasingly seeing themselves as needing to be advocates as part of their professional roles. For example, one advocate alluded to this by also emphasizing the importance of working in concert with other groups:

I have seen the growth of advocacy as a connected way of reaching and getting the message out. I think we are more aware now that each group cannot work alone, we have to connect and we have to work together.

For those who discussed the expansion of information and greater access to it, a common thread was the ease of accessing people and information through the Internet. One advocate voiced this by saying, "Just the technology alone has changed advocacy." Another went on to say,

The growth of the Internet, the growth of information, the growth of consciousness . . . all helped in fostering advocacy and gave us the courage . . . to stand up and say something.

A third mentioned,

You can go online and get cookbook strategies for how to do it . . . they are guides on how to be an advocate . . . it's a step-by-step thing that is really remarkable . . . Anybody who really wants to be good at it would be able to do that just by reading . . . That's a big change.

Additional Information Important for Aspiring Advocates to Know

When asked if there was anything else to add not already addressed in the interview questions but important for aspiring advocates to know, 16 advocates weighed in. Their responses clustered into four categories: advice about how to go about advocating ($n = 11$; 69%), the importance of collaboration ($n = 5$; 31.3%), encouragement to get involved ($n = 4$; 25%), and a reminder that advocacy work involves both dedication and an openness to keep learning ($n = 3$; 18.8%). When discussing advice on how to go about advocating, one advocate spoke about a fusion of passion and focus in their area of advocacy. She said,

I could not advocate for something I didn't care about . . . I've beat myself up about the fact that . . . I didn't know enough about crisis intervention . . . or whatever . . . and I finally realized I just needed to focus on the things I cared about and assume that if I pursued those that good would follow . . . that is probably another piece of advice . . . do not worry about knowing everything about everything . . . feel free to zero in on what you're really interested in and just pursue that.

One who advised more school psychologists to get involved in advocacy reflected the following:

If only 10% of the teachers in America advocate that's like . . . there's four and half million members of AFT [American Federation of Teachers] and NEA [National Education Association]. Every member of Congress is still gonna get . . . 400 contacts by teachers in a year . . . only one in 10 teachers have to learn to advocate. If only one in 10 school psychologists learn to advocate and we only have 25,000 members, that's only five contacts a year per legislator . . . and there's no way the legislator . . . is going to attend to only five contacts a year. So I firmly believe that every single school psychologist should find a way to do something . . . and that becomes as routine an activity as our work becomes. Because that's the only way we're going to advance the issues . . . We cannot have 10%. We have to have 90% for us to be on the same vein.

Discussion

Our implicit aim in carrying out the present study was to move toward demystifying the work of advocates so that the broad community of school psychologists would become better informed and empowered as advocates. We sought to begin to build a scientifically grounded knowledge base about advocacy in school psychology by learning from experienced advocates to identify best practices. To benefit from the insights of those with recognized expertise, we engaged school psychologists who are award-winning advocates to reveal important elements

about how they advocate. Their collective input yielded several important findings.

Advice From Advocates

For those just beginning advocacy work, the advocates shared indispensable advice. Most advised newcomers to focus on three goals. These were to collaborate with other advocates by building relationships with those who are like-minded and with their advocacy targets, to devote time to building knowledge and expertise, and to be patient as well as persistent in their efforts. Notably, a common refrain among the advocates was to recognize that building relationships was at the heart of all advocacy work. This advice transcended the advice offered for beginners to advice for all those involved in advocacy work. The social psychological underpinnings of this advice deserve mention. Advocates are often in a position of needing to draw attention to and give voice about a minority position, that is, a position that is new, or unpopular, or questions established norms in some way. By joining with others, the advocates found that it created a wellspring of advantages in developing their skills, in providing a base and framework for future advocacy work, and in making them more effective. Previous studies have shown that such collaborations also improve innovativeness of solutions and heighten visibility of issues (Gardikiotis, 2011; Kenworthy, Hewstone, Levine, Martin, & Willis, 2008). Collaborating also helps to build a supportive network and lays the foundation for building capacity within and across organizations, essential ingredients in moving issues forward to create improved mental health services (Kazak et al., 2010).

Time-Tested Strategies

Building relationships was commonly identified as the most important strategy for its social influence properties, but also to help newcomers learn about advocacy processes. Further strategies involved effective communication (i.e., careful listening, reflecting, developing audience-specific talking points) and the importance of paying attention to content and process issues when communicating. Previous research (Folta, Seguin, Ackerman, & Nelson, 2012) identified strong communication skills as being one of the most important skills for leaders who catalyze change within their communities, and it is clear that the present group of advocates had similar but also more nuanced experiences about how to be effective communicators. Advocates also described being well-informed and knowledgeable as an important strategy. When asked about the resources they used to advocate, informational resources were mentioned as critical by almost every advocate. Previous research by Heinowitz et al. (2012) about barriers to public policy advocacy found that the primary barrier was participants' lack of awareness of the issues they needed to advocate for. Having high-quality, data-based information, and being thoroughly informed and well versed in using that information from multiple perspectives is vital for school psychology advocates who seek to provide input about significant mental health and academic issues within their school community.

Challenges and Barriers to Advocacy

Among the major obstacles that advocates encountered were people who were resistant to change, those who were uninformed, as well as institutional barriers and limited access to resources. Of note, many advocates described *other* school psychologists as being the chief obstacle they encountered. In the present context, this finding is a compelling one. By its very nature, advocacy is about trying to change an existing state of affairs—be it a change in policy, or in resource allocation, or in the need to recognize a problem and address it. School psychologists need to acknowledge when their own issues are impeding progress beneficial to their clients and proactively engage in self-reflection and action to address the problem.

It may be that at least some of those school psychologists who feared for their positions had little to no training in advocacy and their intransigence was borne of uncertainty about how to proceed. A recent study by Marrs and Little (2014) found that school psychologists' resistance was a significant barrier in implementing changes associated with Response to Intervention (a multitiered model of service delivery that assists students experiencing academic and social problems), a finding that led the study authors to urge further professional development to help address the resistance. A clear finding from the advocates in the present study was their agreement that school psychologists need to be explicitly trained in advocacy, with almost half suggesting such preparation start early. Indeed, early explicit advocacy training at the preservice level seems beneficial for all mental health service providers in the schools, not only school psychologists but also social workers and school nurses. For faculty and graduate programs committed to incorporating advocacy education and training into their curriculum, the descriptions of advocacy-focused preparation offered by several related specialties may prove valuable and can be drawn from counseling psychology (Mallinckrodt, Miles, & Levy, 2014), professional psychology (Burney et al., 2009), school counseling (Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007; Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahon, 2010), and teacher education (Athanases & DeOliveira, 2008).

Study Limitations

The present findings are tempered by the study limitations. Using another method for identifying award-winning school psychology advocates, potentially resulting in a different sample of advocates, could reveal disparate findings. It is also likely that school psychology advocates who have not won awards for their advocacy but still experienced great success as advocates have valuable and noteworthy ideas to share about how best to advocate, but they were not included in the present investigation. Still, their experiences are worthy of future study and would likely add useful knowledge about effective approaches to advocacy. A related limitation concerns the demographic characteristics of the study sample. Although the ethnic representation of the interviewed advocates closely mirrors that of the field of school psychology—a survey conducted in 2013 estimated that approximately 91% of school psychology practitioners and faculty were White (Castillo, Curtis, & Gelley, 2013)—prioritizing the voice of effective advocates of color is a necessity for continued research in this area. Finally, not all participants were asked all questions, primarily due to interviewer error.

Implications

There are a number of implications of the present study for practice and policy. A unique feature of the study was its reliance on award-winning school psychology advocates to share lessons they learned as advocates. The findings provide us with firsthand accounts of strategies found to be most helpful, common barriers encountered, and other key features of the advocates' activities and experiences. To date, no previously published accounts of these voices exist in school psychology. This information is especially useful for newcomers to advocacy to help guide their next steps, steer them away from blind alleys, and help them to create a plan for their work as advocates. Furthermore, it serves as a touchstone for those experienced advocates who wish to strengthen and sharpen their current practices. Above all, if the profession of school psychology is truly committed to meeting children's educational and mental health needs, it is imperative that we see that such work requires an array of skills and services that no single approach can address. By focusing more clearly on our role as advocates, school psychologists can develop the skills and competencies needed to work to create change at all levels affecting clients individually, institutionally, and societally. Leaving advocacy education and training out of school psychology graduate preparation programs limits our effectiveness, stymies policy discussions, and, we suspect, ultimately compromises our ability to provide the best possible care. To better meet the needs of those most vulnerable among us, school psychologists need to take deliberate steps to embrace the role as advocate and prepare accordingly. We believe that through carefully structured didactic education and applied training, every school psychologist can work to acquire and refine their advocacy skills to meet client needs at all ecological levels.

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Appendix

Advocacy Project Interview Questions

1. What led you into advocacy?*
2. How do you define advocacy?*
3. What skills are critical for effective advocates to possess?
4. What do you recommend to school psychologists who seek to develop their advocacy skills?
5. What strategies do you use/have you used to advocate?
6. Are there specific resources that you routinely call upon to support your advocacy work?
7. Could you describe the greatest successes you have had advocating?*
8. What types of barrier/obstacles have you faced?*
9. What mistakes (have you made) and failures have you had when advocating?*
10. In what ways are you able to empower others through your work?
11. What changes or advances have you seen around the issue you advocated for?*
12. How do you create balance in your life?
13. What advice would you give to someone who is just beginning advocacy work?
14. What can we do to bring in a new generation of advocates into the field?
15. What changes or advances have you seen in the field of advocacy?
16. Is there anything else we haven’t addressed in discussing advocacy today that you feel is really important for aspiring advocates to know?

Note: *Follow-up prompts may be obtained from Margaret R. Rogers.

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