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To cite this article: Elena Aydarova, James Rigney & Nancy Fichtman Dana (2021): “If You’re Not at the Table, You’re on the Menu”: Learning to Participate in Policy Advocacy as a Teacher Educator, *Action in Teacher Education*, DOI: [10.1080/01626620.2021.1982793](https://doi.org/10.1080/01626620.2021.1982793)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01626620.2021.1982793>



Published online: 03 Nov 2021.



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“If You’re Not at the Table, You’re on the Menu”: Learning to Participate in Policy Advocacy as a Teacher Educator

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have long urged teacher educators to engage in policy advocacy and to respond to mounting attacks on the teacher education field. Prior research has shown that teacher educators feel largely unprepared to participate in policy debates. This observation raises the question of how those who do engage in advocacy learn to navigate the contested terrain of teacher education policy. Drawing on a multiple case study research project, we argue that learning policy advocacy is a prolonged process, during which participants acquire the language used by policymakers and learn the procedures utilized by policymaking communities. This learning entails peripheral participation in policy processes, modeling, and mentoring. Our study sheds light on the importance of professional networks and relationships as support systems to expand teacher educators’ ability to participate in policy advocacy and reclaim their professional voice in policy debates.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 11 September 2020
Accepted 31 July 2021

KEYWORDS

Teacher educators; teacher education policy; policy advocacy; sociocultural approaches to policy; case study research

The policy landscape of teacher education has long been described as a contested terrain, with actors vying for control and power over teachers’ entry into the profession and the overall direction of public education (Wilson & Tamir, 2008). In the last twenty years, this struggle has been increasingly described as a war (Goldstein, 2014; Zeichner, 2010), in which university-based teacher education faces the threat of extinction (Weiner, 2007, 2011). Whether it is the burden of accountability-driven bureaucratic reporting, chronic underfunding, new performance assessments, or attacks over the low quality of teachers’ professional preparation, the field of teacher education has faced a growing number of political and economic challenges (Aydarova, 2020a; Kirylo & Aldridge, 2019; Wilson, 2014; Zeichner, 2009, 2017).

To respond to these challenges, teacher educators have been called to move away from the culture of compliance with external mandates (Wilson & Youngs, 2005), in order to reclaim their professional authority, agency, and voice (Bullough, 2016; Crocco, 2018). Acknowledging the challenging socio-political context of public education and teacher education, Coffman (2015) stated that “today’s classroom teachers and teacher educators must have the knowledge, skills, and ability to not only improve student learning but to also critically reflect and advocate for teaching and learning issues and policies” (p. 323). Joining this charge, McLaughlin et al. (2016) urged college of education leaders to become more purposeful in their engagement with policymakers. They suggested that teacher educators become more involved in defining problems, setting agendas, and informing policymakers of pressing educational issues. They also called on teacher educators to pay attention to policies under consideration and find opportunities to present their perspectives on those policies to policymakers. Finally, McLaughlin et al. (2016) argued that teacher educators can use their extensive knowledge base to offer theoretical and empirical insights on policy implementation.

Some teacher educators have taken on this charge and embarked on the journey of policy advocacy (Aydarova & Berliner, 2018; Aydarova, Rigney, & Dana, 2021, *in progress*). Gonzalez and Carney (2014), for instance, described their efforts in counteracting false narratives of teacher education failure in the state of Indiana that legislators used to introduce new rules for teacher preparation accountability. Brenner (2007) documented teacher educators' critical engagement with state proposals for stand-alone phonics courses in teacher preparation in Mississippi. Responding to the introduction of edTPA as a licensing requirement, teacher educators in the state of New York, Vermont, and other contexts mobilized their collective efforts to oppose this standardized test and create alternative locally developed performance assessments (Gorlewski & Tuck, 2018; McGough et al., 2018; Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016). Cochran-Smith et al. (2018) noted how Education Deans for Equity and Justice – a group of over 250 deans from across the United States – have engaged in public and policy advocacy trying to reclaim public education for building a democratic society and righting historical wrongs. Across these cases, teacher educators testified before policymakers, wrote op-eds for state newspapers, engaged with the media, and formed professional collectives to amplify their voices.

Amidst this growing participation in policymaking worlds, some teacher educators have become coopted by neoliberal agendas of various reformer groups (Anderson, 2019; Cochran-Smith et al., 2018), whereas others have largely remained on the sidelines. Research examining professional preparation of teacher educators has revealed that many teacher educators feel underprepared for “navigating the agendas and policies of programs, departments, colleges/universities, and local/state/national government agencies” (Goodwin et al., 2014, p. 293). Along similar lines, Wiseman (2012) averred

In many ways, teacher educators are uninformed about the impact of public perceptions and the resulting policy implications. The topic is often one that deans of colleges of education explore, but usually faculty do not consider. The multiple etiologies of policy and reform and the sustained impact on the profession are important issues that deserve the attention of scholars. (p. 90)

Wiseman's observation points to a tension that motivated this study: in the context of political and economic pressures that seek to undo university-based teacher preparation, it is important to understand what enables some teacher educators to take on the struggle for their professional future.

Grappling with this tension, we have designed a study examining how teacher educators engage in policy advocacy – or “intentional activities initiated by the public to affect the policy making process” (Gen & Wright, 2013, p. 165). As a part of a larger project, this paper explores how teacher educators learn to engage in policy advocacy and pursues answers to the following research questions:

- (1) How do teacher educators learn policy advocacy?
 - (a) What factors facilitate their entry into the policy world?
 - (b) What challenges do they face?
 - (c) What supports their learning?
- (2) How do teacher educators active in policy advocacy participate in preparing the future generations of teacher educators?

Using the theory of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), we conceptualize teacher educators' learning of policy advocacy as peripheral participation in communities of policy practice. The focus on peripheral participation helps us underscore the complex and protracted nature of learning policy advocacy. In this process, modeling alone provided by professional organizations through workshops or professional development events dedicated to policy advocacy is not enough to equip teacher educators with all that they need for action in policy worlds. We show that mentoring and a stage of observation play a key role in helping teacher educators move toward full participation in policy deliberations. As advocates prepare future generations for policy activities, we find that scaling up preparation activities and involving more preservice teachers, graduate students, and junior faculty would be beneficial for the future of the field.

Conceptual Framework

This project is informed by three theoretical perspectives: a sociocultural approach to policy (Levinson et al., 2009, p. 770), a conceptual framework of policy advocacy (Gen & Wright, 2013), and the theory of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Sociocultural approaches conceptualize policy as “a complex, ongoing social practice of normative cultural production constituted by diverse actors across diverse contexts” (Levinson et al., 2009, p. 770). As a social practice, policy represents a figurative world (Holland et al., 2001), with its own language and implicit rules. According to Shore et al. (2011) policy worlds represent “particular social and cultural worlds or ‘domains of meaning’” (p. 1). When various actors negotiate, contest, and appropriate policies that affect their lives (Castagno & McCarty, 2018), they engage with policy discourses to author voices and reclaim their stakes in the future they seek to create (Shore et al., 2011).

Gen and Wright’s (2013) conceptual framework makes visible the competencies that professionals or members of the public need to navigate policy worlds and engage in policy advocacy as “a deliberate process of influencing decision makers” (p. 165). These competencies include “a sense of agency or empowerment” (p. 171) and “specialized knowledge and skills” (p. 169). Empowerment encompasses a belief that advocates’ “actions may have an impact upon the public policy-making process” (p. 173) as well as an awareness of “helping systems that exist within communities” (p. 173). Entering a policy conversation may feel intimidating if done alone, but this feeling can be mitigated if the conversation is facilitated by the networks of like-minded actors or professional organizations one belongs to. Empowerment, in this framework, is not focused on individuals alone, but rather on the connection between individuals’ agency and collective action. Specialized knowledge and skills necessary for advocacy work include “an understanding of strategy, research, media advocacy, public relations, and lobbying” (p. 173). Effective policy advocacy requires familiarity with and proficiency in the language conventions utilized in policy worlds (McLaughlin et al., 2016). This knowledge and skillset become utilized in advocacy activities, such as “connecting with allies, engaging with the public and people in the positions of power, and conducting information campaigns” (Gen & Wright, 2013, p. 174). Empowerment and competencies alone, however, are insufficient for effective advocacy. Those who engage in policy advocacy also need access to “tangible financial and material resources” (p. 174). In sum, Gen and Wright’s (2013) framework sheds light on the complexity and multi-facetedness of factors that enable actors to become advocates working toward policy change.

This brings us to the central question of our study. If advocacy requires a complex set of competencies, then how do policy actors develop these competencies and learn to engage in policy advocacy? Gen and Wright (2013) noted that formal training programs are less effective in preparing actors for policy advocacy than “daily life” because they “lack real world application” (p. 173). This observation echoes the tenets of the situated learning theory developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) who conceptualized learning as “an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world” (p. 35). Their work focuses on learning that takes place outside of traditional educational institutions where models of knowledge transmission remain prevalent despite theoretical and empirical advances in learning sciences. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) theory approaches learning as a gradual process that allows actors to begin with *peripheral participation* in communities of practice:

Newcomers become old-timers through a social process of increasingly centripetal participation, which depends on legitimate access to ongoing community practice. Newcomers develop a changing understanding of practice over time from improvised opportunities to participate peripherally in ongoing activities of the community. (Lave, 1991, p. 68)

This conceptualization sheds light on the activities that policy advocates engage in to develop competencies and knowledge necessary for participating in policy negotiations and contestations. As peripheral participants, policy advocates first observe more experienced others who model for them how to interact with policymakers and legislators. Then, utilizing tools designed by others, they attempt practice with the support of mentors or expert guides (Cole, 1998; Holland et al., 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991). As advocates receive feedback on their successes and failures, they modify their behavior

and improve their practice until they are ready for *full participation* in the community of practice. Once they become full participants, advocates engage in mentoring others to move from peripheral participation as an observer to full participation as an activist. This conceptualization of learning policy advocacy offers a useful lens for the exploration of how participants gradually learn to engage with ritualistic and scripted patterns of communication of the policy worlds, which we present in this paper.

Methodology

We conceptualized our research project as a multiple case study (Stake, 1995, 2006). Case study methodology allowed us to attend to the contextual factors shaping teacher educators' advocacy (Stake, 1995). Multiple case study design made visible for us many different ways teacher educators engage in policy advocacy: from groups that work together to create policy change through engagement with their local policymakers to individual teacher educators who engage in policy advocacy through public scholarship. A comparison of multiple divergent cases attenuated the commonalities in what learning to engage in policy advocacy entailed despite the differences in the types of advocacy work teacher educators were doing. Of note here is our own positionality as researchers. While we see ourselves as teacher educators, our roles have so far been confined to research and teaching. Thus, we approach our cases as outsiders learning about advocacy from our participants and from other formal opportunities, such as professional development events organized by the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE).

When we began our research, we first identified teacher educators who were active in policy contexts. We learned about their policy endeavors through their conference presentations, publications, or professional activities centered on policy advocacy. When we conducted our interviews, we asked for additional recommendations for participants. Most often, participants suggested that we interview those who they worked closely with on specific policy issues in their state or in their institutional context. As we recruited more participants, we also began researching policy contexts where our participants engaged in advocacy. This stage of collecting policy texts and artifacts became a critical moment of bounding our cases around the core groups of advocates that became participants in our study. Our four cases organically emerged out of our initial round of interviews and came to represent a range of teacher educators' policy endeavors.

Cases A and B represent core groups of teacher educators who work together to respond to or shape teacher education policies in their state. In case A, participants occupied positions of deans, associate deans, and directors of teacher education programs. This core group of advocates came together in response to the introduction of edTPA in the state (Aydarova, Rigney, & Dana, 2021) and began to devote attention to other policy issues. In case B, all participants are deans who belong to the state-level organization of education deans. Case C includes affiliates of a research center dedicated to engagement with policy at the national level. In this case, most faculty members were senior scholars with leadership positions either at their institution, state, or national-level professional organizations. Finally, Case D focuses on the activities of an individual scholar whose primary scholarly focus is teacher education and who has used his national standing to influence policy conversations in different state, national, and international contexts. More detail about the cases we examined is provided in [Table 1](#).

To collect data for these cases, we conducted 60 to 90-minute interviews with each participant ($n = 12$). Questions in our interview protocol explored how participants entered the policy world, how they learned to engage in advocacy, what their policy advocacy entailed, and what barriers and obstacles they faced in their work ([Appendix](#)). We conducted our interviews in a conversational manner, using our interview prompts as springboards for the conversation but allowing our participants to take the lead in the co-construction of our dialogs (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004). In addition to interviews, we collected policy briefs, advocates' letters to legislators, op-ed articles, recordings of

Table 1. Cases, Participants, and Policy Contexts.

	Participants	Gender	Policy Context	Interviews	Videos	Artifacts
Case A	Deans, associate deans, directors of teacher preparation programs	4 Females	edTPA, science of reading, education degrees, negotiated rule-making	4	15	51
Case B	Deans	1 Female 2 Males	Teacher preparation accountability, science of reading	3	24	10
Case C	Research center faculty affiliates (Associate and Full professors)	2 Females 2 Males	Technical assistance for reforms along the teacher professional development continuum	4	9	25
Case D	Individual teacher educator engaged in national-level advocacy	1 Male	Federal level legislation and intermediary organizations' involvement in shaping teacher education reforms	1	1	28

media interviews, videos of advocates' testimonies, and other policy artifacts that our participants created in their work. These additional data captured concrete manifestations of the policy work participants discussed with us.

The interviews were transcribed and uploaded together with other data into Dedoose. We chose Dedoose for our data analysis to ensure that our coding was consistent and reliable. Originally, we developed a coding book for our analysis based on conceptual frameworks of policy advocacy (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Gen & Wright, 2013). Throughout the analysis, however, we engaged in iterative revisions of our codebook, using emergent patterns in the data to add new categories, themes, or subthemes as well as to discard some categories that did not capture patterns in our data well. The theory of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) was incorporated into our codebook during these iterative revisions because it best reflected the bottom-up themes in the category "learning policy advocacy," such as "learning the language," "formal training," "mentoring," "participating in meetings," "observing others," and others. When coding was completed, we developed case summaries that captured trends and prominent thematic patterns in each case (Stake, 2006). These case summaries were shared with participants to elicit their perspectives on the patterns we identified in our data. Participant feedback was positive and helped us ensure the study's trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Finally, we compared case summaries to identify the patterns of convergence and divergence on how the learning of policy advocacy was discussed across cases. Below, we present a cross-case analysis that attends to the complexity and prolonged nature of learning to engage in policy advocacy that emerged despite the differences in our cases.

Findings

Drawing on the theory of situated learning (Lave, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991) and the conceptual framework of policy advocacy (Gen & Wright, 2013), we merge findings across cases and present cross-case assertions (Stake, 2006). First, we describe how participants in our study entered policy worlds and the challenges they faced. Then, we analyze how teacher educators' peripheral participation in advocacy began with formal training events organized by professional organizations. Those events served as sites where policy advocacy was modeled and where advocates gained access to more experienced mentors who guided them toward a deeper understanding of policy processes. The move toward full participation required a stage of observation and practice with expert feedback. We conclude our discussion of findings by noting how participants themselves are now engaged in mentoring their students for participation in policy advocacy.

Entry into Policy Advocacy

One of the unanticipated findings of our study was that most participants became active in policy advocacy only after moving into administrative or leadership positions. Two of our participants described initial encounters with policy advocacy as junior faculty members; the rest discussed how they entered the policy world when they assumed roles of deans, associate deans, or directors of teacher preparation programs. For example, one participant commented on how a switch in professional roles led to greater engagement with policies:

I started to pay more attention as an Associate Dean. As a faculty member and even as a department chair, I didn't follow it nearly as much, really only when the big ticket items were coming around. But I didn't attend the meetings, I didn't submit public comment like I do now, or testify like I do now. (Case A, Interview 6, October 2019)

This was an important pattern in our data. Even when participants described personal motivations for engaging with policy – such as a commitment to illuminate the needs of students with disabilities or a desire to improve educational outcomes for all children, most became active only after their professional position called for it. In most cases, this meant that participants moved into the leadership role. Only faculty affiliated with the research center (Case C) engaged in advocacy because it was expected of them as center affiliates.

For some participants in our study, it was important that advocacy would be recognized as one of their official job duties. Faculty members and administrators are already “busy” and “stretched”; they are often in the position where “it’s hard for them to divide themselves up anymore” (Case C, Interview 1, September 2019). Policy advocacy, on the other hand, is time-consuming. Recognizing that advocacy is a part of one’s “job description” in many cases helped our participants know that their work is backed by their institutions and they would not be penalized for dedicating their time to attending meetings, writing policy briefs, or developing public testimonies.

Empowerment to engage in advocacy also came from a permission granted by administrators higher in the institutional hierarchies – deans, vice chancellors, or university presidents. In many instances, participants in our study were active in advocacy because they were allowed to do it. Some, however, shared stories of their colleagues who were banned from engaging with policymakers by authorities at their institutions. Those stories served as critical reminders that institutional contexts matter and can prevent some teacher educators from joining advocacy efforts.

Institutional contexts varied in their commitment to teacher education and that had an impact on advocates’ sense of agency in policy worlds. For example, one senior scholar shared that he became involved in advocacy when he moved to an institution where teacher education was valued and faculty members were encouraged to engage in policy advocacy, “When I came to [university in state C] and *there was a real commitment to the teacher preparation effort*, it kind of opened my eyes. You know when you’re in an administrative position you begin to see things differently than as a faculty member” (Case C, Interview 7, October 2019). When institutions prioritized policy advocacy, they allocated material and financial resources toward these activities. These allocations mattered for participants’ willingness to engage in advocacy work. Traveling to state board meetings that took place in the state capital, for example, required financial backing from the institutions where advocates worked. Some advocates noted that they would not have been able to engage with policymakers on a regular basis if they did not get their travel and lodging covered.

Apart from the challenges of obtaining permissions, receiving support, and getting their work recognized by their institutions, most advocates noted that they had not been prepared for navigating policy worlds. Most participants described their first encounters with policymakers as “overwhelming,” “surprising,” and “intriguing.” It was an unfamiliar terrain in which standard academic rules did not apply. Echoing what other studies showed (Goodwin et al., 2014), most participants explained that they did not receive training in policy or policy advocacy during their graduate preparation or early years on the tenure track. As one prominent advocate and dean explained,

None of my studies were targeted on policy, but the practicality of my job a lot of times was. Then moving in to [the dean’s role] where a big part of what I do is teacher education, it was clear to me that this role was really important. I am a firm believer philosophically that we’re given a voice and, if we choose not to use it, then we have abdicated our voice. But if we want to see change, if you want to see things improve, then we need to use our voice to that end. (Case A, Interview 11, January 2020)

This quote captures two themes that we have explored so far: entry into the policy world after moving into a leadership position and a lack of prior professional preparation for advocacy. At the same time, this statement highlights the urgency of engaging with policymakers through advocacy. Teacher educators as professionals have a voice and they have to reclaim it in order to pursue a positive change for the teaching profession. However, reclaiming a voice in policy debates is fraught with challenges, one of which is that the academic world and the policy world do not follow the same discursive conventions (McLaughlin et al., 2016). Advocates have to learn new ways of communicating as they attend to policy issues – the point to which we turn next.

Acquiring a New Language

The observation that engaging in policy advocacy involved “a steep learning curve” was common in our interviews. A major element of this learning curve was the fact that navigating policy worlds required not just understanding the complexity of politics but also acquiring a new language.

Advocates had to move away from using the conventions of the academic discourse and learn a distinct linguistic code utilized in the policymaking communities and accessible to the public. This shift required that they learn to simplify what they say, use numbers and personal stories that touch hearts, and move away from statements that assume shared knowledge.

Simplification entailed several interrelated expectations. When advocates prepared public testimony texts or letters to policymakers, they were told that they should use direct language and avoid ambivalences. Even though in academic contexts attending to the nuances of an issue is important, this did not appear to be the case in policy contexts. Most legislators and policymakers wanted to hear a simple answer on how an issue can be resolved. One of the participants described how this mismatch in expectations played out in a public testimony he was invited to give, “Unfortunately there’s no silver bullet. I think they might have been looking for something like what’s the best structure and what evidence do you have that it is the best. I didn’t have the answer they were looking for” (Case C, Interview 7, October 2019).

In addition, simplification entailed removing academic jargon and changing language structures:

Our government relations rep sometimes will take what I’ve written and really simplify it and take out too much scholarly jargon and break it down into a more compelling and easier to understand text. As academics I think we tend to want to support everything with research and sound very scholarly about that, but that’s not what is going to win any support. We have to be strategic. There’s a different way of talking that I’m still learning how to talk to these boards. (Case A, Interview 6, October 2019)

Even though advice to simplify language may seem straightforward, this quote illustrates that it required ongoing efforts to unlearn discursive conventions of academia in order to learn how to use language strategically in policymaking contexts. Even experienced advocates – some with 20 or 30 year of experience of working in policy contexts – described how challenging this task remained for them to this day.

Another aspect of new language conventions was connected to what would “encourage [policy-makers] to pay attention” (Case C, Interview 1, September 2019). It is customary to assume that policymakers and legislators have to see numbers, charts, or tables to consider advocates’ perspectives. Our participants, however, noted that compelling stories also played an important role in grabbing their audience’s attention. Learning how to work the interplay between numbers and stories was seen as one of the most effective ways of getting a message across:

The power of numbers makes a difference. Give them numbers that they can see and tell them stories that might resonate. We always start by looking at their state data. This isn’t about anybody in this room, this is about these numbers, because we want them to focus on the issues. What are the data showing for students who fit this demographic, and now let’s pick one. What’s her story? What is the trajectory that you’re setting based on the decisions you’re making for and about her? You’ve already got a preconceived notion based on what you’ve seen on paper, but who is she? Who is she? (Case C, Interview 5, September 2019)

Whether it was a personal narrative, a story that illustrated an issue that advocates were working on, or statistics that demonstrated the urgency of the proposal under consideration, learning how to strategically engage numbers and stories in the process of communicating with policy actors was a specialized skill that participants had to develop.

Finally, the movement between academic and policy-making communities made visible for the participants how much of their academic writing is based on shared assumptions. Communicating with audiences that do not have a similar academic background required a move away from those shared assumptions. A prolific scholar and long-time policy advocate described these challenges this way:

It was very, very difficult for me to learn how to write for a policy audience. I could whip out a 75-page paper much easier than I could whip out a 1600 word op-ed. In my academic writing, there would be a lot of things that would not be explicitly laid out; it was sort of assumed. If I’m writing about university teacher education, I can sort of assume a certain level of knowledge. And if you’re writing for the general public you can’t do that; you have to be very explicit. (Case D, Interview 8, November 2019)

If assumptions were not shared, then argument structures advocates deployed had to not only present a compelling case but also educate audience without sounding condescending or patronizing. Learning the complexity of these conventions required extended time as well as modeling, mentoring, and opportunities to rehearse. These elements of learning policy advocacy will be considered next.

Modeling: The Role of Professional Organizations

One of the consistent responses across our interviews was an observation that AACTE's "Washington Week" or "Day on the Hill" activities served as a formal training opportunity to gain understandings necessary for policy advocacy. For many participants in our study, AACTE's training events were the first encounter with the policy world. These events worked as sites where strategies for communicating with policymakers were modeled for teacher educators both during workshop sessions and during visits to Congressional offices.

[It is] a crash course on, "We're going up on Capitol Hill; here are some things you can talk to your representatives about and your senators about." The first time I did that we went in January, stopping by people's offices and talking to their aides and trying to talk to them and it's just really interesting that they are responsible for making decisions and pushing policy related to something they know nothing about. You can tell they know nothing based on the questions they ask and how their eyes glaze over when you start talking about specific points. Then we're like . . . Here are some notes, here are some highlights of what we really think is important and why. (Case C, Interview 2, September 2019)

For some participants, the state chapter of AACTE or the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE) served as a bridge toward an ongoing involvement with the policy world. In other words, a "Day on the Hill" organized by the national level organization sowed the seeds of interest and understanding of how to participate in policy advocacy; state level organizations then supported the growth of these seeds if they themselves were focused on advocacy. In the states where state-level organizations remained less involved in policymaking deliberations, participants received less modeling and guidance on how to continue engaging with policymakers in their local contexts.

AACTE provided not only an opportunity to learn about the ways one engages in policy advocacy, but also allowed "members of networks to benefit from their bonds with each other" (Gen & Wright, 2013, p. 174). These bonds included relationships with advocates active in other states. Several participants noted that when the time came for them to formulate a response to a policy that would negatively affect their work, they reached to teacher educators who contested similar policies in other states. Even though there were no formal structures for them to trade information, they were able to exchange resources informally. Those resources included both some of the policy artifacts that other groups developed and strategies for informing policymakers of the problems that new policies could create. For example, in state A (Case A), the group was contesting the introduction of edTPA. They used their informal networks to contact teacher educators in states where edTPA was overturned as a result of teacher educators' policy advocacy. Groups in other states shared research studies they assembled and policy briefs they drafted with the core group in state A. Across these instances, modeling how to engage with policymaking communities was less formal than the training provided by AACTE, but nevertheless offered resources that advocates could use in their work.

Mentoring: The Role of Experts in Advocates' Learning

One of the central themes that ran across all of our cases and appeared in almost all of the interviews we conducted was the importance of mentors for learning policy advocacy. Whether mentors came from professional organizations, institutional contexts, or professional networks, they played a crucial role in supporting teacher educators' learning of policy advocacy. Mentors often helped participants move from the level of abstract understanding of what advocacy entails to concrete action in specific

communities of policy practice. Across the cases, participants described more experienced advocates who shaped their vision for advocacy, helped them make decisions on when to take action and when to stand back, guided teacher educators through the process of preparing public statements or writing policy briefs; informed them about necessary adjustments in language, use of evidence, or links with broader agendas; and offered critical feedback on the policy artifacts they prepared.

Multiple participants mentioned Dr. Jane West – a charismatic leader long involved in advocacy in Washington, DC – for both teaching policy advocacy strategies and influencing participants’ overall frame of reference. One participant explained,

Jane West is a very well-known policy consultant. She worked for AACTE for a while and some other [organizations]. There was a group of national department chairs that I’d been a member of for a number of years. Jane was consulting with them as well as our Teacher of Ed. group within [a national organization] and I was a person who worked with her on how to qualify issues and sort of fleshing some of that out. We worked a lot with staffers in the House. She had worked on the Hill previously. I learned a lot during that time, but mostly the learning was from Jane. She was a person who was mentoring me as far as all that stuff was concerned for several years. (Case C, Interview 4, September 2019)

Another participant reflecting on the importance of policy advocacy reminisced, “Jane always has this slide she ends on, ‘If you’re not at the table, you’re on the menu’” (Case C, Interview 1, September 2019). This quote underscored how a mentor’s call for action shaped participants’ sense of urgency for an active engagement with policymakers rather than reactive responses to the measures designed by others.

Government relations staff at various professional organizations also took on mentoring roles and supported advocacy learning outside the formal events. As AACTE changed its strategy and began to acknowledge the importance of state level influences on teacher education policy, the organization began to offer support to state level advocates. In one of our cases (Case B), participants prepared a letter to address legislators in response to a proposed bill. The bill targeted several dimensions of teacher preparation and teacher educators saw those changes as potentially detrimental to their work. To ensure the effectiveness of their communication with legislators, they contacted AACTE for support:

We were at “Washington Week.” We were mentioning this and they were just starting to ramp up, trying to reach out more to the states and do more with states. So they said can we use you as a case study for how we might collaborate with states on pieces of legislation at the state level. We said, “Of course!” because we don’t know what we’re doing. [AACTE’s government relations people] kind of vetted the letter. I had put it together based on conversations with other deans about some of the concerns we had, sent it to [folks at AACTE] and said, from their kind of lens is it an appropriate way to address legislators? (Case B, Interview 5, September 2019)

This instance underscored the importance of ongoing connections with professional organizations that could support advocates’ learning of policy language and communication with legislators beyond the formal training provided by the “Day on the Hill.” Even though our study participants had attended AACTE’s events for many years, what they learned there needed to be supplemented to support their action in this specific instance. Hearing an abstract explanation about the need to modify language and use data when preparing a letter addressed to legislators was quite different from a concrete situation where that letter could affect one’s professional future.

Savvy government relations personnel at advocates’ own institutions often took on mentoring roles offering guidance on how to modify language for different audiences, track policy developments, and make decisions when to act. Sometimes, those people were able to provide feedback on a draft of a public testimony or a letter to a legislator, pointing out how to align the argument presented in the letter with state economic and political priorities. At other times, our participants received advice not to take action because the proposed bill was not likely to move forward:

We had a very dynamic government relations person when I was at [university X] who really knew the education issues. She would go in and research them along with us. I and several of the faculty who were in the know could sit down with her and we’d develop a strategy – this bill is really troublesome. Sometimes she’d say, “I don’t think that bill is going anywhere; it’s probably better if you just say nothing about it; don’t address it at all because

I think it's one that's just going to get shelved away and we won't even have to worry about it." So, when do you speak out and having someone that can help you read the political tea leaves well. (Case B, Interview 10, November 2019)

Colleagues who were active in the policy world due to their prior appointments or positions were often helpful mentors for learning the "hidden curriculum" of advocacy. In one of our cases (Case A), a core group of teacher educator advocates worked together with a former superintendent and a former employee of the state education agency. He joined forces with the advocates' group to counteract the policy that the agency initiated without teacher educators' input. His knowledge of ins-and-outs of the policy world became indispensable for the group's success: "He's giving us lots of advice about how the process works and helping us with our testimony and those kinds of things. So, again, it's just about relationships, it's understanding the rules of the road" (Case A, Interview 3, September 2019). This expert's ability to identify strategies for informal influences on policymakers in the specific state context became a source of learning for the group that could not have been created by national-level professional organizations or outside experts.

Sometimes mentoring and support emerged without a preestablished relationship with an advocate but through an assignment by an organization engaged in advocacy. These mentors reviewed texts advocates prepared and offered feedback on how those texts should be modified to better meet the needs of their audience – policymakers and legislators. One of the advocates – a seasoned teacher educator with close to 40 years of research, scholarship, and teaching – shared how the critical role of a mentor in helping him learn how to codeswitch from academic conventions to linguistic codes of the policy worlds:

I was asked to be part of [a national policy center] and they asked me to write something on teacher education programs. So, I wrote something – and this was 2016 – they sent it out for review to policymakers, people out in the world and I got these reviews back that literally made me cry. It was just devastating. The guy who asked me to do it gave me a mentor to help me do the next draft of it and it actually came out pretty well. I was open because I realized it was a whole different way of writing that I had to learn and so that was the hard part. (Case D, Interview 8, November 2019)

Mentors and role models also provided assistance as advocates sought to establish their own voice in policy debates. Learning to take control of the narrative about the profession and to identify a consistent story to share with policymakers was some of the helpful guidance advocates received from their mentors. In addition, mentors provided support as "sponsors" who helped advocates identify committees they could serve on or working groups they could join to be at the center of policy conversations and debates.

If you talk to anybody in [state A] about advocacy, [this person] is a champion. She's been a great model for me and she has encouraged me to be vocal. She really likes to tell our story in the right way; don't let other people put a story on you. In [state A] as in many states right now, the policy bent is "education is not working" and it used to be the teachers' fault; well now it's the preparation programs' fault because if it's the teachers' fault then you didn't do a good enough job preparing them. Every time there's another call for another state level committee she's putting me on it. She encourages me to provide testimony at our board meetings. (Case A, Interview 9, November 2019)

Overall, the support of a mentor or a network of experts that advocates could turn to was invaluable for their learning of policy advocacy. Through guidance, advice, and critical feedback mentors became an indispensable part of advocates' learning of the implicit norms and rules of policy advocacy.

Peripheral Participation in Communities of Practice

Across the cases in our study, once teacher educators made the decision to enter policy advocacy, they started out with peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in policy communities. They were willing to participate and they saw the importance of sharing their perspectives with policymakers. But they needed time to figure out the rules of the game and to author their own voice in policy debates. Modeling and mentoring described above were inseparable elements of advocates' peripheral participation in policy communities.

What also helped advocates at this stage was attending policy-oriented meetings – deliberations at the state houses, the board of education meetings, or presentations of state education agencies. One participant reflected, “I began going to many, many state meetings and as you go to more meetings, meetings beget meetings” (Case B, Interview 10, November 2019). At the beginning, teacher educators saw their role in those meetings as observers: their task was not only to learn the explicit rules of public engagement but also gain the implicit knowledge of tactical strategies for engaging with legislators and policymakers:

Some of it was simply going and starting to understand the process; what does it mean to make public comments, when do the agendas come out. What I realized is we were approaching it as researchers and we need to really understand what the individual [board of education] members are attuned to. Typically, I will write out much more than I can actually say in three minutes and have a handout. What we learned there is they’re much more collegial and will ask questions. There are members that will actually take information via text. We had people texting them questions to ask the people who were testifying in favor of [the policy we opposed]. It’s just learning kind of all these unspoken rules; the hidden curriculum so to speak. (Case A, Interview 3, September 2019)

Several participants noted how being present at these meetings gave them the opportunity to learn the rituals: those who offer public testimony can speak only for three minutes but if legislators ask questions, that time can be extended; a testimony shared orally should be accompanied by a text, a letter, or a handout to ensure that the message reaches decision-makers; a combative tone is not as productive as a tactful and respectful message based on shared priorities.

More experienced others – mentors, role models, and guides – continued playing a crucial role in advocates’ learning during these meetings by helping them make sense of what they were observing. Seeing a heavily regimented and procedure-oriented legislative session was not enough for understanding the implicit rules for accomplishing one’s advocacy goal. This is where the explanation from a more experienced mentor was helpful for interpreting policy events or crafting own message in response to them. One of our participants shared how formative an experience of working alongside someone more knowledgeable about policy processes was for her career:

I was working with [a more experienced colleague]. He was going to provide testimony with me. I always remember wanting to talk about the nuances of an issue, and we were on the phone together, and he said, “This is politics. They don’t need to know about the nuances.” He said, “Even though all the evidence doesn’t weigh in the favor of this particular point, we need to make this point because politically it’s the smart point to make.” That was so interesting to me because I wanted to be brutally honest about the details. He said, “No, we’re in there fighting for teachers, and fighting for the right thing here. We’re going to fight on the point that serves us best.” (Case C, Interview 1, September 2019)

This story illustrates the value of peripheral participation where advocates worked to prepare testimonies or rehearse their public comment alongside more experienced others. In such instances, it was not the critical feedback that played a key role in learning but making visible the process of reasoning behind some of the decisions that were being made.

The stage of peripheral participation ended when a person made the decision to testify or initiate another advocacy action on their own. Overcoming the fear – of speaking to those who held power, of consequences if one was misunderstood, and of repercussions for home institutions – took conscious effort on the part of the advocates. One of our participants described her vivid memories of moving to full participation:

One day I decided just to jump in. The first time I testified I was so nervous; you’re there with this microphone and you’re timed and you have to speak in front of these board members that make very high stakes decisions and you have this one time to sound really convincing. (Case A, Interview 6, October 2019)

What became clear across the different cases we analyzed was that the stage of peripheral participation involved both observations of action in the policy arena and a critical moment of making the decision to “jump in.” Participants described that critical moment as a moment that required courage, composure, and confidence as necessary dispositions for moving to full participation and entering policy conversations on their own.

Mentoring Others and Preparing Future Generations of Advocates

As our participants described their engagement in the policy world, they also noted ways in which they contributed to preparing future generations of policy advocates. Some mentored new administrators or faculty on how to enter policy advocacy; others engaged with students as the future generations of advocates. One participant described how he modified his graduate courses to include an assignment that would allow his students to develop an op-ed on a teacher education policy issue (Case D). Another participant shared with us his commitment to getting undergraduate students to participate in AACTE's "Day on the Hill."

I've always been an advocate for helping our students learn as many professional things as possible. I started involving students in that process. I've brought students to a "Day on the Hill" for at least fifteen years now . . . So, I've been involving students, encouraging other places, other schools who go to these events to bring students as well. So that's probably, I would say if I've accomplished anything good in this area it's helping our undergraduate and graduate students – helping them understand why advocacy is an important part of their role as an educator. (Case B, Interview 10, November 2019)

Several students were selected each year based on their interest, their academic standing, and on their ability to tell a powerful story to policymakers. Those students learned about policy advocacy through AACTE events and testified before legislators in Washington, DC.

Overall, however, even though most participants recognized the importance of getting undergraduate and graduate students involved in policy conversations, implementation of this practice was not systematic or consistent. It often entailed opportunities for a select few rather than a large-scale effort to demystify policy-making processes or to offer tools for intervening in policy conversations.

Implications

Drawing on the sociocultural approach to policy (Levinson et al., 2009), the theory of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and a conceptual framework of policy advocacy (Gen & Wright, 2013), we laid out findings from our multiple case study project that explored how teacher educators learn to engage in policy advocacy. Our findings echo prior research that indicated that teacher educators feel largely unprepared to enter policy conversations (Goodwin et al., 2014), but with guidance and support some do contribute to policy deliberations (Brenner, 2007; Gonzalez & Carney, 2014). Our study extends these observations by shedding light on the complex, intensive, and protracted nature of learning to participate in policy advocacy.

Our study suggests that if the field of teacher education is serious about ensuring its survival, then more concerted and unified efforts are necessary to equip teacher educators with knowledge, competencies, and support systems to engage in policy deliberations. As professional organizations, such as the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE), look for ways to increase policy participation among their members, it is important to keep in mind that policy advocacy mobilization will take time and sustained effort. Relying on the model of quick responses to crises at hand is unlikely to guarantee long-term successes for the field. While AACTE's "Day on the Hill" has supported a growing number of teacher educators, it remains an exclusive event that only those who have institutional support and financial resources are able to join. Furthermore, the focus on federal level legislation that AACTE provides does not address policies and bills at the state level – the site of most policymaking that affects teacher education. Finding new ways to make policy advocacy tools accessible to larger swathes of educators in their local contexts – either through self-paced online modules or state-level training sessions – would make it possible for more teacher educators to build relationships with policymakers (Brenner, 2007) and regularly engage with legislative proposals in their contexts (Gonzalez & Carney, 2014; McLaughlin et al., 2016). Complementing the work of AACTE, ATE with its strong state-unit presence can take a leading role in creating ways to make policy advocacy "how-to" knowledge accessible to greater numbers of educators.

Professional organizations could also consider supporting teacher educators' policy advocacy and learning about policymaking through mentoring and networking programs. In the states where there is no established core of teacher educators active in the policy world, participants look for opportunities to connect with others willing to share their knowledge and expertise. Our finding that across different contexts participants can only point to one or two people who have been influential in their understanding of policy advocacy is troublesome for the future of the field. Efforts that rest on the expertise of a small group of actors can turn out to be unstable in the long run. Creating a base of well-equipped actors who bring a wide range of expertise would be more beneficial for the field's efforts to cultivate durable policy advocacy systems. While many groups have found informal connections with advocates in other states, to expand advocacy activities and get more participants involved in policy deliberations, professional organizations could create channels to connect beginners with those who have already established themselves in the policy world. Networking events around similar policy issues that bring together advocates from different parts of the country or the world could serve as gateways for mentoring connections. Those events could also be useful for identifying policy concerns shared by different state groups, discussing effective strategies for addressing these concerns, and sharing resources in support of each other's work.

Additionally, it would be helpful for policy advocates to have access to a database of letters to legislators, public testimonies, and other policy artifacts that teacher educators involved in advocacy created. Engagement with model texts produced by others would create opportunities for beginners to learn how to construct their own texts and ease their entry into the policy arena. The sharing of policy tools and scripts may go counter to academic norms of intellectual ownership, but is an approach widely practiced by intermediary organizations that work together to advance policy agendas at the state and national level (Aydarova, 2020a). Scholars have noted how Philanthropy Roundtable and ALEC worked together to supply legislators with scripts for introducing charter school, voucher, and alternative route into teaching reforms in their states (deMarrais et al., 2019). Sharing common scripts through such avenues as the PIE Network or Excel in Ed Foundation eases the burden for those who advocate for the privatization and deregulation of public education. Learning from these groups the strategies that made their policy advocacy effective would be helpful for professional organizations that seek to mobilize their members to engage with policymakers (Aydarova, 2020b).

Another area worth considering is how teachers and teacher educators are prepared to participate in policy worlds. Our findings suggest that more can be done to create systematic and widespread efforts to raise awareness of how to do policy advocacy among the future generations of educators. As various intermediary organizations, such as Teach for America, the New Teacher Project (TNTP), and TeachPlus mobilize their graduates for influencing policymaking in their contexts (Kretchmar et al., 2019), teacher educators should take heed of the strategies they deploy and learning opportunities they provide.

While some notable initiatives of informing teachers of policy changes and their role of advocating for their students have been proposed (Hara, 2017; Heineke et al., 2015; Ravitch, 2020), the question remains how well graduate programs across the U.S. prepare future teacher educators to understand teacher education policy and advocate for the future of university-based teacher education and public education at large (Goodwin et al., 2014). Tenure requirements in most institutions also leave little room for faculty to engage with policy. Future studies should explore in a greater detail how future teachers and teacher educators are prepared for policy advocacy, what support structures enhance their capacity for participating in policy debates, and how existing initiatives can be scaled up for the good of the profession.

Given how treacherous the political climate has been for teacher education and public education itself, these preparation and evaluation structures are worth reconsidering. We should avoid relying on educational policy and economics programs to continue being the dominant participants in policy conversations. Instead, we should work on preparing our students and faculty to be ready to use the knowledge accumulated by the profession in deliberations about best ways to move forward.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank our participants for sharing their wisdom with us. This study would not have been possible without their generosity and kindness.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Southeast Conference Faculty Travel Grant.

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Appendix. A Sample of Interview Questions

Questions and Sub-questions

1. We would love to hear about your professional journey. How long have you been working in [teacher education]? When and how did you start out?
 2. How did you get involved in the policy world? What were some of the initial steps that you've taken to participate in policy advocacy?
 3. What did you need to know to engage in advocacy? How did you learn it?
 4. What policy advocacy activities have you been involved in? [by policy advocacy activities, we mean participation in public debates about policies, sharing analyses of ongoing efforts to reform teacher education, engaging with policymakers or members of the public regarding policy changes that affect teacher education, or participating in constructing new policies through involvement in working groups or consultations with policymakers, raising public awareness of ongoing educational reforms, etc.]
 5. Can you describe what policy you were responding to and what actions did you take?
 - What kind of policy advocacy did you engage in? (writing op-eds, testifying in front of policymakers, serving as an expert, mobilizing opposition to new policies, etc.).
 - What was that experience like?
 - How did that opportunity come up? [Were you invited or did you volunteer?]
 6. What resources did you draw on to construct your response or develop an action plan?
 - How did those resources become available to you?
 7. What helped you take action in response to policy changes? [support from colleagues, resources available from a professional organization you belong to, your own professional preparation or background, etc.]
 - Were there any elements of your own PhD program that prepared you for policy advocacy?
 8. Have you worked on responding to policy changes alone or with others?
 - If you worked alone, what was that experience like?
 - If you worked with others, who did you end up working with? [colleagues at your or other institutions, groups inside or outside the academy, activist organizations, etc.]
 - If you have worked with others, how was this collective/collaboration formed? What do you do to sustain it or to maintain it? What do you feel has been the impact of this collaboration?
 9. What has been the response to your policy advocacy from your program, department, institution, professional organizations, or the field at large? Have you felt supported in this work or have you experienced opposition to your activities?
-