

ADVOCACY: AN EMERGING ROLE FOR SPECIAL EDUCATORS

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Advocacy is a new social role growing out of the civil and human rights movements. It reflects the recognition that many people lack the power to participate effectively in decisions that affect their lives. Devalued by society because of economic, physical, or cultural differences, they cannot effect those social changes that must occur in order to have full access to essential goods and services. The advocate's role is to insure those with devalued status a chance to advance or defend their own interests by providing that measure of power, wealth, and/or expertise needed to bring about institutional change (Guskin & Ross, 1971). Traditionally a lawyer's role, advocacy is emerging as a new role for special educators.

Advocacy and Children with Special Needs

Historically, exclusion has been a societal response towards people who differ from the norm. Those identified as abnormal in some observable way have been regarded as less than human; they have been stigmatized, segregated, and assigned a devalued role (Fargo, 1968). Their worth and thus their needs have been minimized.

According to Edelman (1974), many children with special educational needs have been excluded from school because appropriate education programs are not provided. Within existing programs, many children from cultures other than the dominant one have been victims of inadequate testing procedures, resulting in misclassification and misplacement. Some exceptional children are placed in separate and unequal facilities with few supplies and inadequate support services. Not only are they physically isolated from others but they are also socially ostracized by the rest of the school (Hall, 1970). In short, those children most lacking in adaptive skills are forced to cope with conditions that would not be tolerated for more able children.

Special educators are confronting the reality that they cannot teach and children cannot learn under these conditions. Teachers are beginning to speak out on behalf of their students. In the

process they are finding themselves in the role of advocates, seeking to provide that measure of expertise and political pressure that will bring about institutional change. Along with this realization, two developments in education have contributed to teachers' growing awareness of themselves as advocates for the children they serve: the movements toward teacher accountability and the philosophy of normalization.

Teacher accountability dictates that teacher performance be evaluated in terms of student growth. Rather than assessing the behavior of teachers, the emphasis is on the performance of their students. While some regard this mode of evaluation as a threat to the tenure system, most teachers recognize student progress as their critical objective. The institution's failure to provide them with the means to achieve this objective becomes their focus of concern. Advocacy, then, becomes doubly important. Securing improved education programs for their students enhances not only the students' growth, but strengthens the teacher's own professional position.

The philosophy of normalization focuses on acceptance of and provision for individuals with special needs. In public schools the most obvious manifestation of normalization is mainstreaming, the process of integrating children from self-contained special education classes into regular school programs. Implicit in the concept of mainstreaming is provision for the continuity of special education services to meet individual differences. Delivery services need to be restructured to desegregate children with special needs while allowing special education teachers to serve them within the regular school programs.

With desegregation of special education, these students and their special teachers face the problem of gaining that acceptance so necessary to full integration. It is increasingly apparent that if mainstreaming is to succeed, attitudes and practices of regular educators and their pupils will have to change from rejection and exclusion

to acceptance and inclusion. The role of special educators in effecting these changes will be a critical one. Teacher advocacy, then, is necessary to insure the success of special educators assigned to regular school programs as well as the success of their students.

Critical Issues in the Teacher Advocate Role

Despite the impetus provided by teacher accountability and normalization, special educators face several problems in assuming an advocate role. Among these problems are class and role conflict.

It is difficult to advocate on behalf of students whom one does not understand, accept, or feel at ease with because of differences in value systems and behavior. Unfortunately, many teachers face a conflict between their own social class orientation and that of some of their students, particularly in rural or inner-city situations. This is especially true in special education where many of the children are poor and the teachers are often from middle-class homes. There is little in most teachers' life experiences or formal education that prepares them to bridge the discontinuities between poverty life styles and the demands of the middle-class school. Advocacy is difficult enough when the issues are expressive of one's own value system; it is increasingly difficult when teachers must first insure that they do not require students to embrace the teachers' own criteria for "appropriate" values and behavior.

Teacher advocates also face the problem of role conflict. The advocate's chief responsibility is to his or her client; responsibility to the establishment as well constitutes a conflict of interest (Guskin & Ross, 1971). To further student interests, advocates must make demands on the institutions that have purchased their services and, in a sense, their loyalties. Institutions are conservative by nature with institutional procedures designed to guarantee survival. When confronted with change, the institution may seek to preserve itself and avoid risks. It often does this by ridding itself of abrasive elements. The teacher advocate can be construed as an abrasive element and must be aware of this risk.

The reality of role conflict raises the critical issue of teacher responsibility. When institutional requirements and children's needs conflict, teachers are forced to examine their own definitions of loyalty and responsibility as professionals. Teachers must secure their positions

within the institution without compromising their integrity; they must develop styles and strategies of advocacy that lead to effective change without jeopardizing their situations within the system that insures that they will be heard by the community.

Impact upon Training of Special Educators

The emerging role of teacher advocate has exciting implications for teacher training programs. Specific training for advocacy could result in a rapid increase in advocacy activities. Advocacy training would also redefine the roles and responsibilities of teacher trainers, extending their range of concerns to include social change. More important, it necessitates that they, too, become advocates, using whatever prestige they enjoy to guarantee human and legal rights for children with special needs.

In developing advocacy training programs, teacher trainers must specify those competencies needed by teacher advocates. Sensitivity to value systems, knowledge of recent developments, and relevant strategies and skills are important areas to be considered. First, sensitivity to value systems will enable special educators to advocate more easily and effectively for clients whose value systems differ from their own; emphasis on the value of human differences may increase the esteem in which the students themselves are held.

Secondly, knowledge of recent developments in allied advocacy movements is a requisite for credibility as well as decision making. Acquiring information about and cooperating with other advocacy organizations should be an integral part of any course of study. Sources of advocacy information are legal, parent, and citizen advocates at national, state, and local levels. Legal advocates have been active in fighting the exclusion of children with special needs from school (*MacMillan v. Board of Education*, 1969) and the practice of discriminatory testing procedures (*Diana v. State Board of Education*, 1970). Parent advocates have long been working to obtain educational services that meet the needs of their children. One such group, the California Association for the Neurologically Handicapped Child, was largely responsible for legislation that created the program for children with educational handicaps in California. Activities of citizen advocates have ranged from serving on school advisory committees to functioning as "big brothers" for children whose needs are special.



Finally, developing strategies for change and the skills to implement them are critical to advocacy and cannot be accomplished without community involvement. Internships in advocacy are one way of allowing students to translate theory into practice and to develop as advocates. At the local level, assignments might include advocating on behalf of a specific child, serving on an advisory board, enlisting support of local legislatures, and working with teachers' organizations. While local assignments are most convenient, placements at national and state levels should be explored; it is there that most political decisions and appropriations of funds are made.

The necessity for cooperative efforts is paramount. While isolated instances of advocacy cannot effect those social changes requisite to insuring the human and legal rights of students with special needs, consistent efforts can and will make a difference. The strength inherent in organization must be utilized. Teacher trainers can accelerate this movement toward social

change by developing programs that emphasize advocacy training, and encouraging special educators to become agents of change. Teachers and trainers alike must become participants in the decisions that affect their lives as well as the lives of children with special needs.

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