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College of Education

Doctorate of Education Program

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Passion and Purpose in Advocacy:

Portraits of Educational Leaders

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Concordia University –Portland

College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in

Education Administration

Committee Chairperson, Julie McCann, Ph.D.

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Abstract

As the public education system becomes more diverse, voices of advocates who positively support students and optimize student outcomes are essential. This qualitative multicase case study focused on the perspectives of five educational leaders who advocated in a public school district in Texas. A brief overview of historic voices in education advocacy gave way to the advocacy-based voices heard from educators, school counselors, and principals. Answering the central research question of how educational leaders maintain their passion for advocacy while overcoming obstacles related to change, each participant shared the personal experiences that paved the way for a passion in advocacy. Interpreted through the lens of social constructivism theory and analyzed from data collected from one-on-one interviews and a focus group session, the study provided the following: characteristics that described how each participant self-identified as advocate, obstacles each encountered when initiating an advocacy effort, and strategies each used to overcome those obstacles. Additionally, study participants furnished reflections on whether their advocacy efforts had helped or hindered their leadership capabilities.

Keywords: advocacy, education, educational leaders, leadership, social constructivism

Dedication

For Julie, my beautifully youthful daughter.

In providing a voice for you, I have found my own.

Acknowledgements

As I mindlessly spin the charms on a silver chain on my wrist, my fingers rest on a heart-shaped piece of metal. Smiling, I think how interesting it is that each charm conjures both recollection and reflection. The same can be said for the dissertation journey: Each facet is like a talisman on a charm bracelet. In the spirt of recollection, reflection, and immense gratitude, I would like to acknowledge each of my "charms":

- A Stephen F. Austin (SFA) charm for my undergraduate alma mater, Stephen F. Austin State University, brings to mind Dr. Donna K. Venedam. As I served as her assistant, Dr. Venedam introduced me to the world of research and impressed upon me the importance of being one's own best resource. Thank you for your guidance at a critical time in my young life.

- A dog charm represents my years in veterinary nursing, where I learned from the very best, Dr. Jan DeWitt. The life lessons learned under her tutelage remain with me always. Thank you.

- An owl charm stands for Dr. Billie Doris McAda. A true champion of higher education, you made me promise to fulfill this enormous dream. Thank you for being an inspiration in many ways.

- The angel wings charm is for my dear friend, Brenda Waugh, who listens to my every tale of woe and still loves me! Thank you for your wonderful, steadfast, and loyal friendship.

- A silver key embedded with a heart is for my person, my chosen sister, my BFF, Kelli Denney Cleaver. Without fail, you have stayed by my side, encouraging me, humoring me, and telling me like it is! Could not do this life without you. Ever. Thank you for your friendship, support, and love.

- A heart-shaped Colorado charm stands for Dr. James and Mrs. Delrena Sides. When I was completely overwhelmed with this process, you invited me to your mountain-topped aerie. That rarified air and your ever-loving arms saved me. Thank you both for your unwavering support, critical insight, life-altering friendship, and love.

- A compass charm represents my friend, cohort member, and lifeline, Dr. Justin Hefley. Without your support, this degree might not have been possible. You kept me on course, and I am forever grateful.

- A four-leaf clover stands for my dissertation chairperson and committee members. First, to my Chair, Dr. Julie McCann, thank you for your insight, support, laughter, eagle eyes, and straight talk. You made me a more conscientious writer, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Second, to Dr. Maggie Broderick and Dr. Catherine Beck, thank you both so much for your guidance and support throughout this process. I appreciate you both more than you will ever know. I guess I am the fourth leaf on this clover, and what an honor it is to be among you all! What wonderful luck you brought me!

- A tree charm goes to my family: Dina, Ron, Jeri, Tori, Tony, and Dani. With the strong roots you all provide, I am able to face everything that life throws at me. Thank you all for your support, encouragement, and love throughout this process.

- A mother's heart charm stands for my wonderful mother. Mom, you are my earliest, strongest, and greatest cheerleader. Your endless, effortless optimism and kindness buoy me through life. I love you with every fiber of my being and aspire to be just like you when I grow up.

- A golf ball charm stands for my incredible father. Dad, out on the course and in life, your nonstop encouragement has allowed me to reach great heights. Thank you for your advice, wisdom, insight, golf lessons, and love. I love you with all the love my heart can hold.

- Finally, a single heart stands for my daughter, Julie. You are my heart. I love you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

For the past 23 years, providing a voice for my daughter with special needs and speaking for my severely and profoundly disabled students have driven my advocacy efforts. As I make the transition to educational leadership within my school district, I draw upon the experiences of other educational leaders who have identified as advocates to study advocacy at the district-leadership level. For this study, *advocacy* was defined as the act or process of supporting a cause or proposal (Advocacy, n.d.), and an *advocate* was defined as a person who argues for or supports a cause or policy (Advocate, n.d.b).

> Advocacy is notoriously difficult to define and is used by different people to mean different things. . . . In some ways this is helpful since it demands that the concept evolves, changing over time and being shaped by different contexts. (Gibbs & Ajulu, 1999, p. 12)

With the changing landscape of education, leaders of public schools need to take credit for what they have done well and accept the challenge of what they can do better (Center for Public Education, 2012). Shifting demographics bring transformations in the nation's social fabric and economy, and public schools are the vanguard of change (Center for Public Education, 2012). Like the rest of society, public school leaders must continually reinvent their institutions in a changing world that presents new and greater risk to the families and children they serve (Center for Public Education, 2012). This exploration of district-level educational leaders who advocate was intended to show why and how advocacy matters in the leaders' personal and professional lives.

Background, Context, History, and Theoretical Framework of the Problem

Essentially the leader's task is consciousness-raising on a wide plane. The leader's

fundamental act is to induce people to be aware or conscious of what they feel—to feel

their true needs so strongly, to define their values so meaningfully, that they can be

moved to purposeful action. (Burns, 1978, p. 43)

Background and context. Being motivated to take action is common among leaders and

advocates alike. In this study, delving into the experiences of educational leaders who identified

as advocates shed light on what it means to affect not only student population groups positively

but also the leader himself. This qualitative multicase case study focused on educational leaders

in one public district in Texas.

History of advocacy in public education. According to the Oxford English dictionary,

the word *advocate* was first recorded in the English language in the 1300s as a noun, stemming

from the Latin word *advocatus*—to be called to or summoned, or more specifically, to come to

someone's aid (Morgan, 2014). Voices of advocacy in education have been heard since the

inception of education as a public entity. As early as 1642, 22 years after the Pilgrims landed in

Plymouth, the colony authorized town selectmen to account for children's ability to read and

understand the principles of religion and capital laws (Gyurko, 2012). In the 18th century, the

country's founding thinkers and leaders were outspoken advocates of education as a way to

promote republican values and preserve liberty (Gyurko, 2012). Notably, Thomas Jefferson

championed education to James Madison:

Educate and inform the whole mass of the people. Enable them to see that it is their

interest to preserve peace and order, and they will preserve them. And it requires no very

high degree of education to convince them of this. They are the only sure reliance for the

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preservation of our liberty. (Jefferson, 1787, No Freedom Without Education section,

para. 4)

Holowchak (2013) noted, "Thomas Jefferson's vision of republicanism was critically dependent on a democratic and meritocratic vision of education—education for the general citizenry and higher education for those who would govern" (p. 1). Many historians have praised Jefferson for his efforts on behalf of public education, portraying him as a forerunner of the common school movement (Smith, 2012). The common school movement was propelled forward by Horace Mann (1796–1859), a member of the Massachusetts state legislature, and then secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education (Winslow, 2009). Mann believed that education was a child's natural right, and moral education should be the heart of the curriculum (Winslow, 2009). Mann was convinced that public education had the power to become a stabilizing as well as an equalizing force in American society (Winslow, 2009).

Stability and equality in American society did not coincide. In 1896, legal segregation was ruled constitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* and with it the tenuous principle of separate but equal (Gyurko, 2012). As a result, efforts to improve public education in the South through the first half of the 20th century benefited Whites and increased disparities in terms of length of attendance in schools (Black students would attend school for six months a year, Whites for eight) and teacher training (Black teachers had less training and were paid less—in some cases by as much as 30% to 50%—than their White counterparts; Gyurko, 2012). In 1897, advocacy groups began to appear, including the National Congress of Mothers, founded by Alice McLellan Birney and Phoebe Apperson Hearst, and the National Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers (NCCPT), founded by Selena Sloan Butler (National PTA, n.d.). Their respective founders were women of imagination and courage who had a simple idea—to improve

the lives and futures of all children (National PTA, n.d). These advocates understood the power

of individual action, worked beyond the accepted barriers of their day, and took action to

improve education for all U.S. children (National PTA, n.d.).

In 1901, a female teacher's voice for change was heard through the Chicago Teachers

Federation (Hoffman, 1981). Margaret Haley became a voice in national education politics

when she promoted adopting a more professional approach to teaching, including improved

teacher education and teacher involvement in school management (Hoffman, 1981). Haley

taught classes of 50 to 60 students in deplorable conditions according to a rigid curriculum

imposed by educational bureaucrats (Hoffman, 1981). She observed the unchanging poverty of

the community in which she taught and came to understand that it was up to teachers to fight for

change, both in the schools and in society (Hoffman, 1981).

Severe issues of disparity continued for students of color until *Brown v. Board of

Education* in 1954 (Wright, 2005). In *Brown*, children from four states argued that segregated

public schools were inherently unequal and deprived them of equal protection of the laws. The

Supreme Court found that African American children had the right to equal educational

opportunities and that segregated schools had no place in the field of public education (Wright,

2005). Although its mandate to dismantle segregated public schools initially faced massive

resistance across the South, the ruling provided moral authority for the drive for legal equality

that culminated in the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts a decade later

(Brownstein, 2014). After the decision in *Brown*, parents of children with disabilities began to

bring lawsuits against their school districts for excluding and segregating children with

disabilities (Brownstein, 2014). The parents argued that schools were discriminating against the

children because of their disabilities (Wright, 2005).

In the early part of the 20th century, parents formed advocacy groups to help bring the educational needs of children with disabilities to the public eye (Wright, 2005). In 1961, President John F. Kennedy created the President's Panel on Mental Retardation (John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, n.d.). President Kennedy outlined recommendations from the panel, including new programs for maternity and prenatal care, initiatives for moving away from "custodial institutions" to community-centered agencies, and plans for the construction of research centers that would include diagnostic, clinical, and treatment services (John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, n.d., para. 6). Kennedy also emphasized the importance of special education, training, and rehabilitation (John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, n.d.). Following Kennedy's assassination in 1963, Lyndon B. Johnson continued advocating for the disabled, signing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965, which provided funding for primary education and expanded access to public education for children with disabilities ("The history of special education in the United States," n.d.).

To date, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the most important piece of civil rights legislation for children with disabilities passed in this country (Disability Rights Education & Defense fund, n.d.). Prior to its passage in 1975, at least one million children with disabilities in the United States were denied access to public education, and at least four million more were segregated from their nondisabled peers (Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund, n.d.). IDEA was reauthorized in 2004 and its implementing regulations were released in August 2006 (Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund, n.d.). IDEA brought and continues to bring parent advocacy to the forefront by ensuring that they have a say in the educational decisions schools make about their children (Lee, 2014). At every point of the

process of evaluation for and provision of special education services, the law provides specific rights and protections known as *procedural safeguards* (Lee, 2014).

Throughout the history of public education in the United States, advocates have supported causes or proposals. Political leaders, teachers, and parents have raised their voices in support of the power of both individual and collective action. These groups have worked beyond the accepted barriers of their day, taking action to improve education for all U.S. children.

Theoretical framework. This study was framed by social constructivism, a theory of knowledge wherein individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work (Creswell, 2012). Within this structure, individuals develop varied, multiple, and subjective meanings of their experiences (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). Understanding these meanings motivates researchers to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). Accordingly, the goal of this study was to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of advocacy and advocacy-related efforts.

Constructivist perspectives focus on how learners construct their own understanding (Creswell, 2012). Early philosophers, including Socrates, focused on helping students construct meanings on their own rather than having authority figures transmit information to them (D'Angelo et al., 2009). Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) built upon this approach by recognizing that the way learners perceive stimuli from their environments shapes their understanding of the world (D'Angelo et al., 2009). In the early 20th century, John Dewey (1859–1952) proposed that education should work with students' current understanding, taking into account their prior ideas and interests (D'Angelo et al., 2009). Later, Jean Piaget (1896–1980) identified accommodation and assimilation as ways for new knowledge to build upon previous knowledge (D'Angelo et al., 2009). In addition, Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) influenced constructivism by stressing the

importance of awareness of interactions between the individual, interpersonal, and cultural

historical factors that affect learning (D'Angelo et al., 2009). Taking cues from historical

education advocates as a means to build upon knowledge, in this study, I sought to uncover the

passion and purposes behind the advocacy-efforts of district-level educational leaders.

Statement of the Problem

The tapestry of public education interweaves diversity, disparity, challenge, and

opportunity. "The school district is a microcosm for the changing landscape of American

demographics, and manifests the same tensions and struggles of people wanting to assimilate and

fit in without suffering the loss of cultural identity, language, and society" (Smutny, Haydon,

Bolanos, & Estrada-Danley, 2012, p. 2). Historically, education advocates have acknowledged

the struggles, have listened to the call for action, and have raised their voices for change

(D'Angelo et al., 2009). Future efforts of advocacy-related change are undoubtedly on the

horizon in public education. When an advocacy effort begins, strong advocates for change from

within and outside of the school should be identified and their support actively sought (MacRae-

Campbell, 2016). District-level leaders' voices should be a critical component of change from

within. If the challenge is the changing landscape of public education, then part of the solution

must include district-level leaders who encourage change and who proactively support advocacy-

related efforts that increase opportunities for all students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to uncover the personal experiences,

passion, and purposes behind their advocacy-based actions, to explore the ways in which

educational leaders self-identified as advocates, and to gain a deeper understanding of the

strategies necessary to overcome advocacy-related obstacles. Through the lens of social

constructivism, this multicase case study was comprised of 5 educational leaders from one public school district in Texas. Together in a focus group and separately in one-on-one interviews, the leaders addressed the research question and subquestions that are addressed below.

Research Question

How do educational leaders maintain their passion for advocacy while overcoming obstacles related to change? This was the central research question that guided the study. Gleaning advocacy-forward perspectives from educational leaders assisted in the answering of the central research question, and the subsequent subquestions.

Subquestions

Four subquestions further refined the inquiry.

1. How does the educational leader define advocacy?

2. How does the educational leader self-identify as an advocate?

3. What advocacy-related obstacles has the educational leader experienced?

4. What strategies does the educational leader use to overcome advocacy-related obstacles?

Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study

The rationale for conducting this research study was based on the idea that it is important to listen to the voices of advocates at the district level of public education, to recognize how passion and purposes fuel advocacy-related efforts, and to reveal strategies designed to overcome obstacles to change.

In this qualitative multicase case study, I sought to recognize the value in advocacy. The findings may bring awareness regarding the experiences and perceptions of district-level educational leaders who advocate, and illuminate the ramifications of advocacy on leadership.

The findings of this study are relevant to the education field because the data gathered could motivate other educational leaders to begin advocacy efforts, thus creating a wider circle in which to network in relation to advocacy efforts. In addition, leaders may benefit from examples of specific strategies that can be used to overcome advocacy-related obstacles. The challenge of determining whether being an advocate positively or negatively affects leadership is relevant to the educational community.

The results of this study can be used to help other educational leaders critically reflect on their own feelings toward advocacy, and advocacy-related efforts. The knowledge gained from this study may serve as a resource for educational leaders who seek to pursue advocacy-related efforts of their own by motivating them to implement advocate networks within their school districts. The knowledge gained from the perspectives of educational leaders who advocate may also contribute to new perspectives on leadership.

Nature of the Study

This qualitative multicase case study was designed to explore the advocacy-related efforts of educational leaders within a public school district. The multicase case study design provided the opportunity for the study participants to share their experiences and perspectives about advocacy. In an effort to improve the validity of the data gathered from this research study, multiple cases were explored. A multicase case study allows the "researcher to explore differences within and between cases" to draw comparisons between cases (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 548).

The target population for the study was district-level educational leaders in a public school district in Texas. I sought assistance from multiple sources at both the local and district levels to generate a list of names of individuals who were employed as district-level leaders, and

who exhibited a history of raising their voices for change either for employees, students, or student groups. Thirty leaders comprised the target population for the study. I used a combination of purposive and simple random sampling of educational leaders from a public school district as the recruiting method. The nonrandom technique of purposive sampling was intended to select participants who could inform the understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study (Creswell, 2013). I placed the names of potential participants in a hat and randomly chose eight names. An invitation to participate was sent electronically to the eight prospective participants with the expectation that five would consent to become study participants.

One-on-one interviews and one focus group were conducted for the study. Through one-on-one interviews with the participants, I sought to uncover the personal experiences, passion, and purposes behind their advocacy efforts. The focus group provided a forum for the study participants to talk about their shared experiences with respect to advocacy and allowed me to get the essence of why they advocated.

Definitions of Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions were used to describe background information, to convey the significance to the research, and to identify the concepts under investigation.

Advocacy is the act or process of supporting a cause or proposal (Advocacy, n.d.b).

Advocate is a person who argues for or supports a cause or policy (Advocate, n.d.).

Individual advocacy refers to a person or group of people who concentrate their efforts on just one or two individuals. There are two common forms of individual advocacy: informal and formal advocacy (Center for Excellence in Disabilities, 2005).

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Informal advocacy occurs when parents, friends, family members, or agencies speak out and advocate for vulnerable people (Center for Excellence in Disabilities, 2005).

Formal advocacy involves organizations that pay their staff to advocate for someone or for a group of individuals (Center for Excellence in Disabilities, 2005).

General education refers to the program of education that typically developing children should receive, based on state standards and evaluated by the annual state educational standards test (Webster, 2015).

Leadership is a process of social influence that maximizes the efforts of others toward the achievement of a goal (Kruse, 2013).

Self-advocacy refers to an individual's ability to communicate effectively and convey, negotiate, or assert his or her own interests, desires, needs, and rights (Van Reusen et al., 1994).

Special education refers to specially designed instruction offered at no cost to the parents, designed to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities, consisting of instruction (including physical education instruction) conducted in classrooms, homes, hospitals, institutions, and other settings (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Systems advocacy involves changing policies, laws, or rules targeted at local, state, or national agencies that affect how people live (Center for Excellence in Disabilities, 2005).

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations

Assumptions. For this research, I assumed that the educational leaders participating in the study were familiar with the definition of advocacy and had experience in advocacy-related efforts. I assumed that participating educational leaders would provide honest assessments of how they self-identified as advocates and offer credible information regarding the passion and purposes behind their respective advocacy-related efforts.

Delimitations. Certain boundaries or delimitations were associated with this study. The study was delimited to a small number of district-level educational leaders. In addition, the study was delimited by location to one public school district in Texas.

Limitations. I recognized certain limitations inherent in conducting this study. These limitations included sample size, length of study, and researcher bias. The study was conducted with district-level administrators of a public school district. Therefore, the research study outcomes cannot be generalized to the other populations, locations, and settings. Another limitation was the length of the study. Because of the timeline of my Degree Completion Plan (DCP), the fieldwork for this study began at the end of October and ended in December, which allotted only eight weeks for data collection. Researcher bias was the other limitation to consider. Although I sought to separate my own experiences from this study, I was aware that my previous and current experience as an advocate could affect my opinion about others who advocate. I endeavored to remain open-minded throughout the research process. In addition, I recorded participants' responses verbatim to avoid misrepresentation of the data collected during the study.

Summary

In this qualitative multicase case study, I explored the advocacy efforts of educational leaders in a public school district. The study was grounded in the theoretical framework of social constructivism wherein individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work (Creswell, 2012). In this case, the world of district-level educational leadership was reviewed through the lens of advocacy and advocacy-related efforts. Major implications from this study involve the revelation of the passion and purposes behind the advocacy-related efforts

of the sample of educational leaders. In addition, I explored the relevant strategies they used to overcome obstacles related to change.

The remainder of this document consists of several chapters. Chapter 2 features a review of literature focused on advocacy efforts of local-level school employees. The chapter includes the history of advocacy, the conceptual framework used to guide the research study, a review of research and methodological literature, a review of methodological issues, and a synthesis of research findings. Chapter 3 provides the methodology used to conduct research on district-level educational leaders in one public school district in Texas. This study used a multicase case study research design, and the data were collected using semistructured interviews and a focus group. Chapter 4 provides a nonevaluative reporting of the data, and Chapter 5 summarizes the study with a discussion and conclusions regarding how well the findings addressed the research questions guiding this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter provides a review of the existing literature that has focused on advocacy efforts of local-level public school employees, including general educators, special educators, counselors, and principals. In addition to reporting the strategies, keywords, and phrases used to conduct the literature search, in this chapter, I discuss the provisions of the conceptual framework; offer an overview of the faceted roles of teachers, counselors, and principals; and describe the characteristics most commonly seen in effective advocates. Next, I review methodological issues and offer a synthesis and critique of the findings. The chapter closes with a summary and a discussion of the significance of the study.

The search strategies used for collecting sources included keyword and Boolean searches that were refined as the focus of the study narrowed. Key terms and phrases used to conduct the literature search included *advocates AND public education*, *advocacy AND public schools*, *teacher advocates*, *counselors*, and *principals as advocates*. Searches were conducted using databases such as ProQuest Education Journals, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, ERIC ProQuest, SAGE Premiere, JSTOR, National Library of Medicine, and Wiley Online Library. I also entered key terms and phrases into the Google Scholar search option, which located articles and books. I set up automatic alerts using the terms to receive new articles relevant to the study. This broad selection of sources provided an expansive offering of scholarly, educational journals and articles as well as a wealth of credible, peer-reviewed resources.

During this study, I was a special education teacher–advocate with a desire to transition to an educational leadership position; therefore, the motivation behind the study was to understand how educational leaders self-identify as advocates, how their personal experiences, passion, and purposes lead to action, and how they overcome obstacles in their pursuit of

advocacy-related change. In this chapter, I review key literature regarding advocacy research across disciplines within the public school system and present the characteristics of advocates therein. This review focuses on the manner in which general educators, special educators, school counselors, and principals advocate at the local level. The characteristics of effective advocates and the methods currently used to examine advocacy efforts among public school employees are addressed.

Theoretical Framework

The purposes of the research were to uncover the personal experiences, passion, and purposes behind educational leaders' advocacy-based actions, to explore the ways in which educational leaders self-identified as advocates, and to gain a deeper understanding of the strategies necessary to overcome advocacy-related obstacles. This study was framed by social constructivism wherein individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work (Creswell, 2012). Within this structure, individuals develop varied, multiple, and subjective meanings of their experiences. Understanding these meanings motivates researchers to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). The goal of the study was to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of advocacy and advocacy-related efforts.

Constructivist perspectives focus on how learners construct their own understanding (Creswell, 2012). Early philosophers, including Socrates, focused on helping students construct meanings on their own rather than having authority figures transmit information to them (D'Angelo et al., 2009). Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) built upon this approach by recognizing that the way learners perceive stimuli from their environments shapes their understanding of the world (D'Angelo et al., 2009). In the early 20th century, John Dewey (1859–1952) proposed that

education should work with students' current understanding, taking into account their prior ideas and interests (D'Angelo et al., 2009). Later, Jean Piaget (1896–1980) identified accommodation and assimilation as ways for new knowledge to build upon previous knowledge (D'Angelo et al., 2009). In addition, Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) influenced constructivism by stressing the importance of awareness of interactions between the individual, interpersonal, and cultural historical factors that affect learning (D'Angelo et al., 2009).

General and Special Educators

General educators. The role of the general educator is manifold. An effective teacher guides, coaches, counsels, pushes, prods, soothes, and supports. "Every teacher must be an advocate for student and parent engagement in learning and for learning in general. They must promote it actively; they must embed these efforts into their classroom practice on an everyday basis" (Ridnouer, 2011, p. 11). Teachers in the classroom engage in advocacy through their participation in activities, including meeting the diverse needs of students, hunting for resources, and increasing parent communication (Massengale, Childers-McKee, & Benavides, 2014, p. 76). Every teacher has the power to be a tremendously positive force in the lives of their students (Ridnouer, 2011). When they collaborate with parents, students, and other stakeholders affected by public education issues, teachers can solve problems much more publicly Ridnouer, 2011). Even if advocacy does not result in change, "you put your voice out there and stand up for what you believe in" (Massengale et al., 2014, p. 77). The ability to advocate for others represents a useful strategy for fostering personal empowerment and effecting social change (Massengale et al., 2014). In fact, the teacher who speaks out and defends his or her beliefs sends a message to students about the importance of self-advocacy skills (Massengale et al., 2014). When self-

advocates encounter obstacles—for example, in the case of students with special needs—a special educator can step in to help.

       Special educators. Special education, as defined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) refers to specially designed instruction offered at no cost to the parents, designed to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). IDEA has identified 13 different disability categories under which students aged 3 to 21 years old may be eligible for service: autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, or visual impairment (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2012, p. 2). Given the wide range of abilities along the disability spectrum, a special educator's responsibilities may range from formulating a student's Individual Education Plan (IEP) to specializing in the area of differentiated instruction to employing strategies as a Response to Intervention for students who struggle academically. In short, the special educator However, one of the most sacred responsibilities of special education teachers is to advocate for students' needs. Special education teachers are the voices for the voiceless (Lavoie, 2008). The purpose of all these services, accommodations, and modifications is to achieve equity—every child, regardless of disability, has the right to access the same opportunities as do other students (Burness, 2001). "This is true whether one is discussing gender, students of color, students with disabilities, students from economically deprived backgrounds, students who speak another language or any other student who is enrolled in our public education system" (Burness, 2001, p. 33). Thomas, Bland, and Duckworth (2012) suggested the need to strengthen the social capital of students from under-represented groups highlights the necessity for teachers to inform,

encourage, and facilitate learners in order to help them become more aware of and sensitive to cultural and social diversity (p. 9). No matter the grade level, or learning level of students, teachers need to be students' most outspoken advocates (Cox, 2009).

Obstacles to teacher advocacy. When educators see that needs of students are unmet and decide to lobby for change, they can encounter obstacles or objections from colleagues. Whether in the form of insufficient training, funds, or staffing, or resistance to changing longstanding policies and procedures, obstacles and objections can hamper the efforts of teacher advocates (Lavoie, 2008). Members of established organization tend to resist change and defend the status quo even if the status quo is not working (Lavoie, 2008). In working to overcome obstacles and objections for change, teachers must heed their inner voices (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996).

> Teachers have strong values about doing work that makes a difference. . . . The morality and practicality of improvement require that teachers locate this inner voice, that they listen to it seriously, and that they articulate it so as to make its power felt among their colleagues. (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996, p. 66)

Thus, a teacher's voice for advocacy is articulation for the purpose of change.

Professional School Counselors

The role of the school counselor is multifaceted and rooted in maximizing student success (ASCA, n.d). Through leadership, advocacy, and collaboration, school counselors promote equity and access to rigorous educational experiences for all students (Sandhu, 2000). School counselors support a safe learning environment and work to safeguard the human rights of all members of the school community (Sandhu, 2000). In addition, they address the needs of all students through culturally relevant prevention and intervention programs that are a part of a

comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, n.d.). Trusty and Brown (2005) pointed to the school counselor's role in the identification of unmet student needs and the proactive stance needed to "change the circumstances that contribute to the problem of inequity" (p. 259). Professional school counselors not only advocate for particular students and families, they also advocate for elimination of inequities and barriers affecting all people (Trusty & Brown, 2005). Stone and Dahir (2015) highlighted the broad advocacy efforts of the school counselor:

- School counselors survey the internal and external school to identify barriers that are impeding student success;

- School counselors collaborate to establish the conditions necessary for all students to be successful in their academic, social, emotional, career, and personal development;

- School counselors become the voice for students with low achievement, especially low socioeconomic-level and minority students; and

- School counselors empower students. Empowerment is the complex process that encompasses self-reflection and action, awareness of environmental power dynamics, and the development of skills to promote community enhancement (p.259).

The role of the school counselor was described in six key intervention strategies for student success: (a) social support, (b) monitoring and mentoring, (c) personal and social skill development, (d) parent involvement, (e) academic instruction, and (f) academic support (Bain, 2012). The extensive role of the public school counselor carries with it a social advocacy disposition (Stone & Dahir, 2015). Professional school counselors not only advocate for particular students and families, they advocate eliminating inequities and barriers affecting all people on behalf of their student-clients, others' student-clients, and nonclients (Trusty & Brown, 2005).

Given their level of responsibility for student success, including the voice of school counselors in the advocacy discussion is essential. The American School Counselor Association's (ASCA, 2006) national model for school counselors indicates that advocating for the academic success of students is a key role of school counselors, placing them in a leadership position in promoting school reform.

Obstacles to school counselor advocacy. However, the counseling role in a public school system is not without obstacles. Griffen and Steen (2011) identified the following barriers:

- limited or lack of funding in order to acquire the necessary resources,

- minimal knowledge and understanding of cultural differences (i.e., SES, race/ethnicity),

- lack of confidence in leadership abilities,

- difficulties in knowing what the population needs,

- not wanting to work outside the boundaries of the institution, and

- fear of confronting the status quo (p. 75).

School counselors are called to address the challenges and barriers that students face; yet in doing so, counselors encounter challenges and barriers of their own. Collaborative efforts with school leaders can assist the school counselor in accessing the strengths, solutions, and strategies necessary to enhance student success (Griffen & Steen, 2011).

School Leaders

Collaboration and empowerment could be considered critical dimensions in education leadership. In addition, the principal's role involves myriad components designed to promote

and enhance student achievement. For example, Lambert (1998) offered a set of components of

student achievement that complement the overarching goals of effective educational leaders:

- Academic achievement in work that is authentically performed and assessed
  whenever possible;

- Positive involvement (good attendance, few suspensions, low dropout rate, high
  graduation rate, parent and student satisfaction);

- Resiliency behaviors (self-direction, problem solving, social competence, having a
  sense of purpose and future);

- Equitable gains across socioeconomic groups; improvement regardless of gender,
  race, or ethnicity;

- Narrowed gaps between socioeconomic groups; and

- Sustained improvement over time, with improvement increasing and gaps narrowing
  the longer students are exposed to school improvement factors (pp. 23–24).

The parallels between student achievement, effective educational leadership, and advocacy are

evident: The results include involvement, resiliency, equity, and sustained improvement

(Lambert, 1998). In addition, for school principals, having a sense of purpose and future must

encompass a scope wider than local-level pursuits (Lambert, 1998).

Members of the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP; 2002)

have asserted the principal is the school leader who promotes equity and excellence in education

for each student. The role of the principal as one who intercedes on behalf of or defends the

interests of students has now widened to include active participation in the democratic and

administrative channels at the district, state, and federal levels in order to influence the larger

context (Carpenter & Brewer, 2014).

Obstacles to advocacy for school leaders. The National Association of Secondary School Principal's Coalition for Community cited common obstacles encountered by school principals: lack of time, energy, resources, services, supports, and opportunities (NASSP, 2002). The principal casts a wide net with respect to advocacy. From students to teachers, from local- to district-level concerns, and from district-to state-level issues, the principal's skills in advocacy can be an essential part of leadership. However, all those who lead do not necessarily advocate, and all of those who advocate do not necessarily lead. The distinction of characteristics of advocates in the public school system and advocate leaders is noteworthy.

Characteristics of Effective Advocates

Those who advocate are as diverse as the motives that drive them. A review of literature on the characteristics of effective advocates revealed some commonalities, including objectivity, independent judgment, sensitivity, understanding, persistence, patience, knowledge, assertiveness, ethics, and respect for others (Disability Rights Washington, 2001; Trusty & Brown, 2005; Wiede, 2011). Luckner and Becker (2013) primarily studied self-advocacy skills; however, certain characteristics have also been seen in those who advocate for others across multiple disciplines—for example, knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, and communication (pp. 35–36). Successful advocates share their knowledge and expertise while acting as positive role models (Luckner & Becker, 2013). They act as positive role models, take personal interest in their students, and they motivate their students by setting good examples and demonstrating positive attitudes (Cox, 2009). Characteristics of education advocates include being proactive, staying current with education policies, focusing on students' learning, speaking up to promote the good of the whole, motivating others, and taking risks (Pratt-Fartro, 2009, p. 3).

The most telling traits of an advocate in a leadership position are seen in the descriptions afforded by Sargent Shriver (Elias, 2011), whose leadership credentials are unrivaled in American public service:

- A sense of purpose: The values of an organization must be clear, members of the organization should know them, and they should exemplify and uphold them in their own actions;

- Justice: Everyone in an organization should be held to common standards, with rules and procedures that are clear, firm, fair, and consistent;

- Temperance: A leader must strive to maintain a proper balance of emotions;

- Respect: The dignity of each individual is the concern of any leader, and this is preserved by treating all members of the organization with respect and ensuring they treat one another similarly, regardless of differences;

- Empowerment: Leaders are just that—leaders. Most of what happens in organizations is carried out by individuals who are not in formal leadership positions. Therefore, the more skilled they are, the more they feel confident in their abilities and competent to make decisions, raise questions, see new possibilities, and disagree respectfully with others at all levels of the organizational hierarchy, the stronger and more successful the organization will be;

- Courage: Leaders are paid to set direction, not wait for direction to emerge. They have to be willing to follow their convictions and bring their organization to new places; and

- Deep commitment: Leaders should have deep commitment to their organizations, the advancement of the organizations' missions, and the wellbeing of everyone in them. It

is this deep commitment that makes leadership in schools so challenging, because it

requires a commitment to every employee, student, and parent (p. 1).

Review of Research and Methodological Literature

Qualitative and mixed-method studies are common among the literature related to

advocacy efforts in the U.S. public school system. For example, Massengale et al. (2014) used a

mixed-methods study to explore preservice teachers' experiences learning advocacy to determine

how individuals might take up a critical advocacy lens in their professional lives. Specifically,

"a transformative mixed methods paradigm was employed to acknowledge the workings of

power in all parts of the research process" (Massengale et al., 2014, p. 76). Through the lens of

critical advocacy research, the authors sought to "conduct research that was change-oriented in

order to advance social justice causes by identifying power imbalances" (p. 76).

Massengale et al. (2014) selected participants from a pool of female undergraduate

students who were actively pursuing degrees in elementary education at a medium-sized

university in a Southern state. A preintervention survey regarding advocacy beliefs was

administered to 22 females. The data obtained therein were used during focus group discussions

to answer the study's research questions. The use of focus groups in qualitative research has

several advantages; for example, using a focus group increases candid responses from

participants throughout facilitated discussions and fosters researchers' ability to look beyond

facts obtained by survey to glean or confirm meaning behind the facts (Leung & Savithiri, 2009).

In the Massengale et al. study, the participants engaged in an advocacy lesson, which centered on

a letter-writing activity. Each participant was instructed (a) to choose an issue of personal

meaning to research and compose an advocacy letter requesting a change in the status quo, (b) to

reflect on what could be done to improve the issues of choice and to determine who had the

power to make the changes happen, and (c) to send the advocacy letter to a local entity with the power to enact changes on their chosen topics (Massengale et al., 2014, p. 79). The use of advocacy letters in qualitative research is not uncommon. Harris (2002) noted, "Letters, unlike journals, are written to another person with the expectation of a response" (p. 4). Letter writers try to give an account of themselves, make meaning of their experiences, and establish and maintain relationships among themselves, their experiences, and the experiences of others (Harris, 2002, p. 4). Next, the participants in the study received a postintervention survey to assess behaviors and attitudes about advocating on social justice issues (Massengale et al., 2014). After analyzing the quantitative data from the pre- and postintervention surveys and the qualitative analysis of the focus group transcripts, Massengale et al. concluded, "Integrating data from all results, we have theorized a model for understanding advocacy development or the way in which individuals come to view themselves as advocate" (p. 88). The authors' Advocacy Development Model was a continuum of embracing advocacy that included negotiating the process of an advocate, awareness of the benefits of advocacy, negotiating who benefits from advocacy, affective dimensions of advocacy, and barriers to becoming an advocate (p. 84). One of the suggestions made by Massengale et al. (2014), "developing an understanding of the process by which participants develop an advocacy identity, and negotiating barriers to advocacy represent real and valid concerns," (p. 86) piqued my interest for my own study.

Marbley, Malott, Flaherty, and Frederick (2011) presented a qualitative, collective case study of school personnel focusing on multicultural social justice in a school setting. Creswell (2013) noted that a case study is a good approach when "the inquirer has clearly identifiable cases with boundaries and seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the cases" (p. 100). This study included a female African American school administrator, a female Hispanic school

counselor, and a female Caucasian leadership development trainer to illustrate the importance of leadership and advocacy (Marbley et al., 2011). Through the lens of social justice advocacy, Marbley et al. provided study participant narratives from the following perspectives: equity for all children, multiheritage youth in schools, and social justice and leadership in a service learning program. Qualitative researchers often rely on narrative knowledge and meanings constructed and created through stories of lived experiences to make sense of the ambiguity and complexity of human lives (Etherington, 2002). In Marbley et al.'s study, each case's narrative and subsequent reflection was richly descriptive, providing insight into the struggles associated with social justice in the school system.

Marbley et al. (2014) found participants reported gains in the following areas: (a) regarding education, participants showed an increased understanding of social justice challenges relevant to the school setting; (b) regarding personal aspects, participants wanted to continue to self-educate and examine their own identity biases and perceptions; and (c) regarding action, participants had many ideas—for example, a participant said, "We had about 15 strategies/actions in our action plan" (p. 69). In addition, Marbley et al. suggested specific action strategies as a means to engage in social advocacy efforts in school settings but conceded that advocacy tactics needed to suit counselors' styles and skill levels.

These studies represented two approaches to advocacy in public schools through the lens of social justice. Initially, the focus of my study was going to be social justice advocacy in the public school system at the district level. In the end, I wanted the impetus for advocacy to shine versus the actual advocacy effort. Two factors altered my thinking on the subject: the specific area of advocacy, and study participant anonymity. Had the study participants revealed their specific areas of advocacy, their respective identities may have been compromised.

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Review of Methodological Issues

The studies described in this review were primarily qualitative in nature. The focus of qualitative research is on learning the meaning that participants hold about the problem or issue, not the meaning that researchers bring to the research (Creswell, 2013). Within that focus, issues may arise—specifically, researcher bias, use of the researcher as the data collection instrument, the nature of qualitative research, and ethical concerns.

Researcher bias. "Personal attachment to an interest provides the passion and dedication necessary for conducting good research" (Machi & MacEvoy, 2012, p. 19). However, qualitative research is subjective and thus susceptible to researcher bias where the researcher influences the results of the study in order to portray a certain outcome (Shuttleworth, 2008). Reflexivity, or the process of examining both oneself as researcher, and the research relationship (Hsiung, 2010), is important because it allows researchers to display their biases publicly; otherwise, researchers can be severely compromised (Machi & McEvoy, 2012).

Researcher as instrument. Stake (2010) contended, "The researcher is often the main research instrument" of a qualitative study (p. 15). Qualitative research requires that researchers personally collect data directly from the source by interviewing participants, observing behaviors, and examining documents (Creswell, 2013). In order to obtain information "directly from the source," qualitative researchers spend "a considerable amount of time in direct interaction with the settings, participants, and documents they are studying" (McMillan, 2012, p. 274). However, because of the intimate nature of conducting research, the researcher runs the risk of "going native," thus becoming reluctant to disclose negative or unflattering results for fear of alienating the study participants (McMillan, 2012). Therefore, it is beneficial to share interview transcripts with participants to let them review and react to their own interpretations.

Emergent nature of qualitative research. Qualitative research is emergent in nature, requiring flexibility on the part of the investigator so the study can evolve based on the data collected. "This means that the initial plan for research cannot be tightly prescribed, and that all phases of the process may change or shift after the researchers enter the field and begin to collect data" (Creswell, 2013, p. 47).

Ethical issues. "The qualitative research in a good study is ethical" (Creswell, 2013, p. 55). However, researching and reporting findings about participants' private lives in the public arena raises multiple ethical issues for researchers (Stevens, 2013). Awareness of issues involving ethics necessitates more than applying for and obtaining permission from an Institutional Review Board (IRB); it requires awareness on the part of the researcher to address ethical issues through all phases of the research study (Creswell, 2013). Accordingly, every effort was made to protect the study participants from harm. The harm associated with qualitative research is generally mental or emotional in nature and can occur in the form of adverse reactions to study findings (McMillan, 2012). Providing full disclosure of the purpose of the study and allowing study participants to review interpretations and conclusions in order to confirm findings may help minimize harm (McMillan, 2012).

Trustworthiness. Trustworthiness, or validity, in qualitative research reflects the accuracy of a study's findings (Creswell, 2013). Strategies designed to validate qualitative research include clarifying researcher bias; implementing member checking; and providing rich, thick description—tactics used for the purpose of triangulation. Triangulation involves collecting "corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective" (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). Clarifying researcher bias at the initial stage of a study assists the reader in understanding the researcher's position and discloses any biases or

assumptions that may affect the inquiry (Creswell, 2013). In addition, implementing member

checking may assist in the validation process, thus establishing credibility (Creswell, 2012).

Member checking involves taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the

participants so they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account (Creswell, 2013). In

addition, credibility of the findings was enhanced by providing rich, thick descriptions that are

sufficient in detail to evaluate and draw conclusions (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Reporting thick

description ensures "the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are

heard" (Denzin, 1989, p. 83). Providing vivid description of participants' views helps establish

the significance of their experiences.

Synthesis of Previous Research

Although the articles reviewed for this research supported using social constructivism

theory, improving advocacy-related proficiencies, and raising educators' voices as advocates in

the public school setting, the parameters differed from discipline to discipline. Using narrow to

wide approaches, teachers advocate for students in their classrooms on a daily basis (Massengale

et al., 2014). Extending the focus, school counselors must have advocacy competencies (ASCA,

n.d.; Trusty & Brown, 2005). Trusty and Brown (2005) noted that school counselors' advocacy

efforts have multiple objectives: (a) eliminating barriers impeding students' development; (b)

creating opportunities to learn for all students; (c) ensuring access to a quality school curriculum;

(d) collaborating with others within and outside the school to help students meet their needs; and

(e) promoting positive, systemic change in schools (p. 259). More broadly, Carpenter and

Brewer (2014) addressed the role of the school principal as advocate at the district, state, and

federal levels. Although the positions of teachers, school counselors, and principals are hardly

exhaustive in the public school setting, the insight gleaned from the literature pertaining to this scope of public school employees sets the stage for future research.

Critique of Previous Research

The mixed-methods study of Massengale et al. (2014) showed the connections between experiences engaging in advocacy and beliefs about advocacy; however, the small, homogenous sample consisted of 22 female participants who identified as 90% Christian and 81% White. The lack of diversity within the sample raised concerns. Diverse perspectives are often associated with diverse research goals and the generation of new findings (Medin & Lee, 2012). For example, including male participants in Massengale et al.'s study may have added a unique perspective to advocacy engagement. Despite presenting a model for understanding advocacy development to show the way individuals come to view themselves as advocates, Massengale et al.'s (2014) homogenous sample did not enhance generalizability or transferability.

The case studies by Marbley et al. (2011) illustrated three issues, approaches, and action strategies taken by counselors in support of multicultural social justice in public school settings. However, participants' overly concise narratives produced a lack of richness in the study. As a result, the reflection portion appeared far more biased than perhaps originally intended by the authors. Marbley et al. did provide suggested action strategies for counselors to increase advocacy efforts. They also described overcoming the perceived barriers to achieving advocacy-related goals designed to increase quality educational experiences for students. This additional discussion allowed readers to move beyond the narratives by focusing on a plan of action.

These studies contributed to my overall knowledge of advocacy-related efforts of public school employees, the characteristics of effective advocates, and qualitative research design. Capecci and Cage (2015) wrote, "Part of the journey from silence to story involves uncovering

and understanding the potential of your story to be a powerful tool of advocacy" (p. 194). These researchers provided stories of those who advocate. My research involved the same: uncovering the passion and purposes behind the advocacy-related efforts of district-level educational leaders.

Summary

The literature review centered on advocacy efforts in the U.S. public school system, from the perspectives of the teacher, the school counselor, and the principal and yielded distinctive descriptors linking advocates to their respective efforts. In addition, the literature review showed a wide variety of characteristics pertaining to successful advocacy (Disability Rights Washington, 2001; Luckner & Becker, 2013; Trusty & Brown, 2005; Wiede, 2011). However, despite thorough review, the motives *behind* the advocates' voices remain elusive, intrinsic, and personal. To date, researchers have not provided an informative and intimate portrait of diverse public school educational leaders who are advocates. Trusty and Brown (2005) noted, "There has been little analysis of the *personal* qualities needed for advocacy" (p. 264); that fact was the driving force behind this qualitative multicase case study. Capecci and Cage (2015) urged, "Be an advocate for the people and causes important to you, using the most powerful tool only you have—your personal stories" (p. 22). In this study, I explored the ways in which educational leaders self-identified as advocates; uncovered the personal experiences, passion, and purposes behind their actions; and provided insight on strategies used to overcome obstacles to change. The next chapter details the methodology chosen for this study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter provides a detailed description of the methodology used to explore the district-level educational leaders who advocate in a U.S. public school district. The desire of educators to advocate for others is personal.

> What drives you to be an advocate may be a significant event, a response to what you see happening around you, a whole lifetime of experiences, or a value or belief that dwells at your very core. Whatever that initial impetus is, whether life-altering or quietly significant, it transforms into advocacy when you answer the call to make a positive difference for yourself and others, for your community or the world. (Capecci & Cage, 2013, p. 12)

This chapter provides a description of how the study was conducted, beginning with the context of the study. The research question guided the choice of research methodology, which informed decisions regarding the overall design, target population, sampling method, data collection method, and data analysis procedures. Finally, the chapter addresses the limitations of the research design. In addition, I present expected findings and outline the ethical issues of the study.

Context of the Study

This qualitative multicase case study involved participants from one public school district in Texas. The target population included district-level administrators who had engaged in advocacy-related efforts. This population of educational leaders was chosen to highlight the importance of leadership at the district level in relation to advocacy. Lambert (1998) noted, "The work of leadership involves attention to shared learning that leads to shared purpose and

action" (p. 91); the voices of advocates can be found within those elements of purpose and action.

Exploring the views of educational leaders was important to the study because research indicates that education advocates have power, and when they talk about education and education issues, people listen (Whitaker, 2007). Therefore, in this study, I not only sought to uncover the passion and purposes behind advocacy-related efforts of educational leaders but also to reveal whether their strengths in advocacy helped or hindered them in their roles as leaders.

Purpose of the Study

The purposes of this study were (a) to uncover the personal experiences, passion, and purposes behind educational leaders' advocacy-based actions; (b) to explore the ways in which educational leaders self-identify as advocates; and (c) to gain a deeper understanding of the strategies necessary to overcome advocacy-related obstacles. The educational leaders were asked to reflect and share their perspectives on advocacy in the public school district and discuss whether advocacy had helped or hindered them in their roles as leaders.

Researchers have found that advocacy involves leadership, collaboration, and systemic change (Cuthbertson, 2014; Michalec, 2015; Trusty & Brown, 2005). In this study, I focused on the passion and purposes behind the advocacy-related efforts of educational leaders, which can offer the educational community insight into the motivation and actions of leaders who have successfully used their voices for change. Through interviews and a focus group, the study participants were given an opportunity to reflect on how their passion and purposes for advocacy carried over into their respective leadership roles.

Research Question

One overall research question guided the study: How do educational leaders maintain their passion for advocacy while overcoming obstacles related to change?

Subquestions

1. How does the educational leader define advocacy?

2. How does the educational leader self-identify as an advocate?

3. What advocacy-related obstacles has the educational leader experienced?

4. What strategies does the educational leader use to overcome advocacy-related obstacles?

Research Design

I used a qualitative methodology for this study, consisting of a case-study approach. Qualitative research designs typically involve learning the meaning that participants hold about a phenomenon, not the meaning researchers bring to the research (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research focuses on gaining an in-depth and detailed understanding of a phenomenon based on rich and detailed data, which often comes from the subjective experiences and perceptions of individuals who are willing to share their stories with researchers (McMillan, 2012). Unlike quantitative researchers, who assume that phenomena should be studied objectively with the goal of obtaining a single true reality, qualitative researchers stress a model in which multiple realities are rooted in the subjects' perceptions (McMillan, 2012).

In this study, I focused on the experiences and perceptions of educational leaders who identified as advocates. I provided richly descriptive narratives of their passion and purposes using a qualitative research approach to explore the phenomenon of advocacy. Two data collection methods were employed—one-on-one semistructured interviews and a focus group—

to address the research question and subquestions adequately. My goals were to illuminate how advocacy efforts have helped to shape educational leaders and reveal the impact that those efforts have had on their leadership.

From among the various qualitative methods available, I chose to employ a case-study research approach. Five educational leaders in a public school district in Texas comprised the cases. Case-study research designs involve a comprehensive examination of a phenomenon within a specific context in which that phenomenon is embedded (Yin, 2013). The goal of case study research is to "understand how a phenomenon is influenced by the context in which it is situated" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 556). In this study, the phenomenon was advocacy, and the context in which it was situated was district-level leadership.

Although the multicase case-study approach can require extensive resources and time beyond the means of a single student or independent research investigator (Yin, 2014), it can provide rich and comprehensive details that may not be possible with other qualitative and quantitative research designs (Yin, 2014). This multicase case study produced portraits of educational leaders who were advocates. The portraits revealed what inspired the educational leaders to raise their voices for advocacy, what strategies they employed to overcome obstacles on their respective paths to advocacy, and how their strengths in advocacy positively or negatively affected their ability to lead.

Target Population and Sampling Method

Target population. District-level educational leaders in one school district in Texas comprised the target population of this study. I sought assistance from multiple sources at both the local and district levels to generate a list of names of individuals who were employed as district-level leaders and who exhibited strengths in advocacy-related efforts based on positive

outcomes for specific student populations. Thirty names comprised the target population for the study.

Sampling method. Purposive and simple random sampling methods were used to recruit educational leaders from a public school district. The nonrandom technique of purposive sampling produces a sample of participants who can purposefully inform the understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study (Creswell, 2013). I placed the list of potential participants in a hat and randomly chose eight names. An invitation to participate was sent electronically to the eight potential participants with the expectation that five educational leaders would consent to participate in the study.

Related procedures. After receiving approval from Concordia University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), I sought the approval of the school district in which I planned to recruit participants for the sample of educational leaders. I followed the guidelines provided by the Research, Assessment, and Accountability Department of the district to submit a Research Study Application, a summary of the proposal, and the approval letter from the IRB. In addition, I provided copies of the district leader's response to my request and authorization to proceed with the research study.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

"Effective qualitative field researchers are those that build relationships easily, are sensitive to their surroundings, and who have few reservations about asking questions that enable them to learn new things" (DeClerck, Willems, Timmerman, & Carling, 2011, p. 4). Through one-on-one interviews with the participants, I sought to uncover the personal experiences, passion, and purposes behind their advocacy efforts. In addition, the focus group provided a

forum for the study participants to talk about their shared experiences with respect to advocacy and allowed me to understand the essence of their advocacy work.

One-on-one interview. One-on-one face-to-face interviews were conducted with the study participants. Face-to-face interviews are characterized by synchronous communication in time and place and have the added benefit of social cues, including voice, intonation, and body language (Opendakker, 2006). An interview protocol (Appendix A) was used to guide the research-related interview questions. Although I took notes throughout the interview, as expected, the notes were at times incomplete or partial because of the difficulty of asking questions and writing answers at the same time (Creswell, 2013). To offset this issue, I provided an interview room with adequate acoustics. I used the Rev Recorder and Transcriber app to record the interviews, and the participant-specific transcripts were sent to the participants to be checked for accuracy and review prior to use.

Focus group. "The focus group technique is most useful for encouraging subjects, through their interaction with one another, to offer insights and opinions about a concept, idea, value, or other aspects of their lives about which they are knowledgeable" (McMillan, 2012, p. 294). The focus group met for 45 minutes at the district's administration building, which was the home office for all of the participants. The session was recorded with the Rev Recorder and Transcriber app, and the participant-specific transcripts were sent to the participants to be checked for accuracy and review prior to use.

Data Analysis Procedures

After data (transcribed interviews and electronic journal entries) were collected, I employed strategies for data analysis and interpretation recommended by Roper and Shapira (2000). After the transcripts from the interviews and focus group were received, I began by

coding for descriptive labels consistent with the elements of the research question: characteristics

of advocacy, obstacles to advocacy, passion for advocacy, and purpose of advocacy efforts.

Because the materials collected were text, the words and phrases had to be grouped into

meaningful categories for organization, comparison/contrast, and identification of patterns

(Roper & Shapira, 2000). The second step in the analytic procedure involved sorting for

identified patterns into smaller sets (Roper & Shapira, 2000). Next, I was able to develop themes

to get a sense of possible connections between the information. Working with the smaller sets of

information led me to the third step of the procedure, in which I identified cases, situations,

events, or settings that did not fit with the rest of the findings. I kept these outliers in mind as the

different steps in the research process were developed.

The fourth step in the analytic procedure involved generalizing constructs and theories.

Here, I related the patterns or connected findings to theories in order to make sense of the rich

and complex data collected. Patterns included common obstacles to advocacy, strategies to

overcome obstacles, leadership perspectives, and perspectives on the critical and constructive

changes to leadership because of advocacy efforts.

In addition to initial manual coding, I used the Nvivo 11 software program to increase the

level of scrutiny of extrapolated patterns. A hallmark of good qualitative research is reporting

the diversity of perspectives about the topic (Creswell, 2014). The diversity of perspectives

among the educational leaders within the study regarding advocacy and its effect on their

respective abilities to lead provided the depth needed for this study.

Limitations of Research Design

A qualitative research design is not without limitations. The primary limitation affecting

this study was that the sample consisted of a small number of study participants who were all

employed within one school district. The effect of this limitation on internal validity, credibility, and researcher reflection is discussed next.

Internal validity. Internal validity refers to the extent to which the results can be considered reflective of the true experiences of the participants (McMillan, 2012). In order to enhance the internal validity of the study, I utilized member checking. According to McMillan (2012), member checking is accomplished by "asking participants to review interpretations and conclusions, and the participants confirm the findings" (p. 303). Validation was increased by having each interview fully transcribed by a third party transcriber and checked for accuracy against the original recording of the interview. In addition, I listened to each recording several times to ensure familiarity with the content. Each transcription proceeded through two levels of review: one by the researcher and one by participants, who all received copies of their transcripts for correction, clarifications, and annotations.

Credibility. Credible qualitative studies use detailed, in-depth, thorough, and extensive descriptions that contain an abundance of detail (McMillan, 2012). These descriptions enhance credibility by indicating substantial engagement with the data and a respect for the value of information (McMillan, 2012). By using thick, rich description and verbatim language of the participants, I provided the shared experiences of participants to offer readers multiple perspectives of administrative-level advocacy and advocacy-related efforts.

Researcher reflection. My role as an advocate who proactively participated in advocacy-related efforts was disclosed with readers through reflective writing. Creswell (2014) took a positive slant on researcher bias, concluding that self-reflection creates an open and honest narrative that resonates with readers. As expected, the life experiences that motivated me to become an advocate differed somewhat from those of my study participants. To provide an

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accurate portrait of the participants, I endeavored to present critical as well as constructive information pertaining to the study.

Expected Findings

I anticipated I would uncover how public school leaders self-identified as advocates, what fueled their passion for advocacy, what obstacles to change they encountered, and how they used strategies to overcome advocacy-related obstacles. I expected that the personal experiences, passion, and purposes of the study participants would express the vital nature of the role of advocacy, not only for the students they served, but also for their own leadership.

Ethical Issues

Conflict of interest assessment. To ensure ethical research, the research proposal was submitted for approval to the Concordia University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to beginning data collection. My committee members were consulted throughout the data collection and analysis process. Each participant signed an informed consent document congruent with Concordia University's IRB requirements prior to the individual interviews. The informed consent form notified the participants in writing of the conditions related to the participation in this research study. In addition to the expected duration of the subjects' participation, a description of any foreseeable risks was included. For this particular study, the area of foreseeable risk centered on confidentiality and anonymity. Safeguards were enacted to ensure that all recordings, transcripts, and notes were kept confidential. I hired a third party transcriber for the sole purpose of transcribing the interview recordings. All participant identifiers were removed to ensure anonymity. All research data, including recordings, informed consent, notes, code lists, journals, documents, and transcripts were stored in a secure locked filing cabinet at my home. Participants' information was protected through the assignment of

and referral to pseudonyms in the data analysis and report, as well as in all future presentations and publications of the research. In the event that I utilize direct quotations in the presentation of results, the quotations will not contain information that may be identifiable. Finally, the participants were made aware that participation was voluntary, and refusal to participate involved no penalty or loss of benefits to which the subject was otherwise entitled (Concordia University Institutional Review Board, 2016).

Summary

Chapter 3 provided a discussion of the qualitative methodology and analytic approaches used in the study. The multicase case-study approach was used to explore how educational leaders self-identified as advocates; to identify their personal experiences, passion, and purposes behind their advocacy-efforts; and to discern whether their strengths in advocacy positively or negatively affected their ability to lead.

The target population for the study was educational leaders in one public school district in Texas. To recruit the target sample size of five educational leaders, purposeful sampling techniques were used. Purposeful sampling is a nonprobability technique wherein participants are selected based on satisfying key inclusion criteria (Creswell, 2013). The recruitment of participants and the collection of data commenced after the approval of Concordia University's Institutional Review Board.

Data collection involved conducting individual one-on-one semistructured interviews and a focus group session. The use of different sources of data produced a comprehensive description and understanding of the case study (Yin, 2013). All data were analyzed through the process of coding, with the goal of generating themes. A detailed narrative marked the

conclusion of the study of how their advocacy-efforts moved these educational leaders toward

more purposeful change.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

The purposes of the study were to uncover the personal experiences, passion, and purposes behind the advocacy-based actions of educational leaders; to explore the ways in which educational leaders self-identified as advocates; and to gain a deeper understanding of the strategies necessary to overcome advocacy-related obstacles. As a special educator and advocate with a desire to transition to an educational leadership position, my interest in this area of research was a driving force behind the study. Through the lens of social constructivism, the educational leaders' perspectives on advocacy and advocacy-related efforts were revealed. The following central research question informed this study: How do educational leaders maintain their passion for advocacy while overcoming obstacles related to change? In addition, four subquestions guided the study:

1. How does the educational leader define advocacy?

2. How does the educational leader self-identify as an advocate?

3. What advocacy-related obstacles has the educational leader experienced?

4. What strategies does the educational leader use to overcome advocacy-related obstacles?

In this chapter, I present the description of the study sample and the setting. A review of the research methodology and a comprehensive, inter- and intracase analysis comprises the third section of this chapter. A summary of the findings precedes the presentation of the data and results of the research. The final section is a summary of the chapter.

Description of the Sample

The study was conducted in one public school district in the state of Texas. I chose the study participants through a combination of purposive and random sampling, and these methods

yielded a sample of six educational leaders: four females (one Hispanic, three White), and two

males (one Hispanic, one African American). Because of unforeseen circumstances, the male

study participant of Hispanic descent voluntarily removed himself from the study prior to the

first interview. Therefore, the final sample contained five participants. Each educational leader

represented a case in this study. Raw data were gathered from semistructured one-on-one

interviews and a focus group session. Participants' identities were kept confidential within the

district through the omission of names, titles, and areas of leadership. I assigned each study

participant a numerical identification (e.g., Study Participant 1, Study Participant 2, etc.).

Research Methodology and Analysis

Qualitative research focuses on gaining an in-depth and detailed understanding of a

phenomenon based on rich and detailed data, which often come from the subjective experiences

and perceptions of individuals who are willing to share their stories with the researcher (Yin,

2013). I used a qualitative case-study research approach to explore the phenomenon of

advocacy, focusing on the experiences and perceptions of educational leaders who identified as

advocates by collecting rich, descriptive narratives of their passion and purposes. Using the data

collection tools of one-on one semistructured interviews and a focus group, I sought to answer

the research question and subquestions.

The research design consisted of a multicase case study of five educational leaders in a

public school district in Texas. Case-study research can provide a comprehensive examination

of a phenomenon within a specific context in which that phenomenon is embedded (Yin, 2013).

The goal of case-study research is to "understand how a phenomenon is influenced by the

context in which it is situated" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 556). This multicase case study

provided portraits of educational leaders who were advocates. In addition, I sought to discern

advocacy-related obstacles and strategies used to overcome those obstacles. The case studies revealed what inspired the educational leaders to raise their voices for advocacy, how the leaders self-identified as advocates, what obstacles they faced, and what strategies they employed to overcome obstacles on their respective paths to advocacy. In addition, I collected participants' reflections regarding whether having strengths in advocacy helped or hindered their leadership.

This study was framed by social constructivism wherein individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work (Creswell, 2012). Within this structure, individuals develop varied, multiple, and subjective meanings of their experiences (Creswell, 2012). These meanings led me to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). The goal of the study was to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of advocacy and advocacy-related efforts.

The study participants voluntarily participated in the study. Prior to recruitment, I obtained permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study and promised to maintain ethical integrity and protect the human subjects. I e-mailed participants with a written invitation to participate, an explanation of the nature and purpose of the study, and my contact information. Interested participants contacted me and one-on-one face-to-face interviews were scheduled based on participants' preferences for time and place. Semistructured questions guided each individual interview (see Appendix A). Prior to beginning the interviews, I collected a signed informed consent form from the participants, in which the nature and purpose of the study were restated. The informed consent form also contained the assurance of confidentiality and permission to record the interview session. Each study participant and I engaged in individual 45-minute, one-on-one interviews. In addition, I held a 45-minute focus group session two weeks after the interviews with all the study participants. The group session

was conducted at a location central to all of the participants, and was recorded using the Rev App.

Immediately after data collection, I forwarded the digital audio files to the Rev app for transcription. Validation of the data was increased by having the interviews fully transcribed by a third-party transcriber and checked for accuracy against the original recording of the interview. Transcribed interview sessions were returned as editable Word files within 12 to 24 hours. Next, I employed member checking to enhance the internal validity of the study. Internal validity refers to the extent to which the results can be considered reflective of the true experiences of the participants (McMillan, 2012). Member checking involved sending the transcripts to the participants to check the accuracy of the transcriptions. The participants were permitted to change their responses to the interview questions; however, none of the participants requested any changes. After member checking was complete, the Word files were imported to NVivo 11, a qualitative data analysis software that helps store, organize, and analyze qualitative data. The data were analyzed using thematic coding to derive themes and categories that addressed the research questions (Saldaña, 2013; Yin, 2013).

Analysis. Upon completion of the member checks, I coded the transcripts for descriptive labels that were consistent with the elements of the research questions—for example, definitions of advocacy, characteristics of advocacy, obstacles to advocacy, passion for advocacy, and purpose for advocacy efforts. Because the materials collected were text, I grouped the words and phrases into meaningful categories for organization, comparison/contrast, and identification of patterns. Next, I sorted for identified patterns into smaller sets and developed the following themes: *doing what is right*, *the students come first*, *follow your heart and/or instincts*, *support*, and *communication*.

Working with the smaller sets of information led to the third step of the procedure, which involved identifying cases, situations, events, or settings that did not fit with the rest of the findings. These outliers included events that involved specific students, student populations, and administrators. The fourth step in the analytic procedure involved generalizing constructs and theories. Here, I related the patterns or connected findings to the theory of social constructivism to make sense of the rich and complex data collected. Patterns included common obstacles to advocacy, strategies to overcome obstacles, leadership perspectives, and perspectives on the constructive and purposeful changes to leadership because of advocacy efforts.

Summary of the Findings

In this section, I present the findings from the thematic analysis. The section is divided into subsections. The subsections are as follows: (a) how does the educational leader define advocacy? (b) how does the educational leader self-identify as an advocate? (c) what advocacy-related obstacles has the educational leader experienced? (d) what strategies does the educational leader use to overcome advocacy-related obstacles? (e) how has advocacy affected leadership? and (f) reflections of advocacy and leadership. Each subsection includes themes that emerged from the patterns in the codes. The presentations of the themes are arranged according to the number of mentions, with the highest number appearing first.

How does the educational leader define advocacy? An analysis of the data regarding how the sample of five educational leaders defined advocacy showed four of the five study participants noted *fighting for what was right* and *being a voice* as the top two definitions of advocacy.

How does the educational leader self-identify as an advocate? Data for self-identification as an advocate yielded 12 descriptors among the five study participants. Table 1

shows the descriptors. In addition, the table provides the number of participants who mentioned

each descriptor. A recurring descriptor for four out of five study participants was *one who*

encourages.

Table 1

Self-Identification as an Advocate

Themes	Number of Mentions
Encourages	4
Cares	3
Confident	3
Has heart	1
Helps	1
Guides	1
Is present	1
Communicates	1
Listens	1
Is generous	1
Personable	1
Resilient	1

Note: Themes involving obstacles related to advocacy are represented in the left column. The number of study participants who mentioned the theme are represented in the right column.

What advocacy-related obstacles has the educational leader experienced? Five study participants identified five advocacy-related obstacles, shown in Table 2. In addition, the table provides the number of participants who mentioned each obstacle. The mindset of others was the most challenging obstacle experienced by the participants.

Table 2

Advocacy-Related Obstacles

Themes	Number of Mentions
Mindset of others	4
Lack of budget	3
Lack of buy-in	2
Time	2
Miscommunication	1

Note: Themes involving obstacles related to advocacy are represented in the left column. The number of study participants who mentioned the theme are represented in the right column.

What strategies does the educational leader use to overcome obstacles? The study

participants listed strategies they used to overcome obstacles related to change. Eight strategies

appear in Table 3. In addition, the table provides the number of participants who mentioned each

strategy. Team building emerged as the primary strategy.

Table 3

Strategies to Overcome Obstacles

Themes	Number of Mentions
Team building	3
Data	2
Fundraising	2
Networking	2
Support	2
Help	1
Pilot studies	1
Long-range goals	1

Note: Themes involving obstacles related to advocacy are represented in the left column.
The number of study participants who mentioned the theme are represented in the right
column.

Has advocacy affected leadership? Study participants were asked whether being an advocate has helped or hindered leadership. For four of the study participants, advocacy helped leadership. For one participant, advocacy both helped and hindered leadership.

How has advocacy affected leadership? From the perspectives of the study participants, advocacy has affected leadership in several ways. Table 4 shows participants' perspectives and the number of participants who mentioned each perspective. The most commonly mentioned effect of advocacy on leadership was *optimal outcomes for students*.

Table 4

How Advocacy has Affected Leadership

Themes	Number of Mentions
Optimal outcomes for students	3
Having a clearer vision	2
Improving teamwork	2
Increasing the talents of others	1
Having to promote what is best for students	1

Note: Themes involving obstacles related to advocacy are represented in the left column. The number of study participants who mentioned the theme are represented in the right column.

Reflections on advocacy and leadership. Themes from study participants' reflections

on advocacy and leadership are shown in Table 5. In addition, the table provides the number of

participants who mentioned each theme. *Team building* was primary, *motivation* was secondary,

and *finding purpose* and *listening* were tertiary.

Table 5

Reflections on Advocacy and Leadership

Themes	Number of Mentions
Team building	4
Motivation	3
Finding purpose	2
Listening	2
Recruiting	1
Patience	1
Optimal outcomes for students	1
Empathy	1
Energy	1
Charisma	1

Note: Themes involving obstacles related to advocacy are represented in the left column.
The number of study participants who mentioned the theme are represented in the right
column.

Presentation of Data and Results

This study was framed by the theory of social constructivism wherein individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, in the following discussion, the participants' perspectives guide the presentation of the data and results. Discussion includes their backgrounds in education, passion for advocacy, personal definitions of advocacy, characteristics of advocates and self-identification as advocates, obstacles to change, strategies to overcome obstacles, how advocacy affected leadership, and their personal reflections on advocacy and leadership. By presenting thick, rich description and verbatim language of the participants, I provide the shared experiences of participants to answer the research question that guided the study and to offer readers multiple perspectives of advocacy and advocacy-related efforts at the administrative level. Data from both the interviews and the focus group culminate in the following case studies:

Case Study: Study Participant 1

We only have one job really as administrators, and that is to provide the best possible education for the children. If you make a decision based on what's right for the child, you can always defend that.

Background in education. Having a mother who was a teacher and a father who was an administrator, a career in education was always in the cards—"It never occurred to me to do anything else," stated Study Participant 1 (SP1). Completing a successful round of student teaching was only "half the battle"; getting hired was the other half. "I had to have a job. I had to have income," SP1 noted. In desperation, SP1 took a job as a special education teacher, although she "didn't even know what it was." From teacher to longtime educational leader, SP1

explained that her early experience with special education students "charted a path for advocacy" that would last a lifetime.

Passion for advocacy. With no personal background in special education and no formal curriculum from the school, SP1 started engaging the students in life skills. "I thought we'll all learn to cook. We did that. They had a washing machine, so we did laundry. They just didn't seem mentally retarded to me," SP1 said. A holiday visit home prompted SP1 to engage with her administrator father about the children in the classroom. By the end of the conversation, SP1's father deduced that the students were likely not mentally retarded but could not speak English. SP1 recalled,

> Those precious little children were tested in English. They were children of migrant
>
> workers most of them, and they'd be there a little bit, and they they'd be gone a little bit,
>
> and then they'd be back. They didn't seem slow to me in any way, except for one. I did
>
> know we started reading. We started doing things that weren't exactly on the curriculum
>
> because they could.

Personal definition of advocacy. Doing things because students had the ability became a benchmark for SP1's advocacy-related efforts. When I asked for a personal definition of advocacy, the response was immediate:

> It's fighting for what you know is right. It's kind of awkward to be complimentary about
>
> yourself but when I look back at several decisions that I made, I did so knowing it was
>
> just the right thing to do.

Characteristics of advocates and self-identification as an advocate. When asked about notable characteristics of successful advocates, SP1 noted the following: doing what is right, having a moral compass, and caring. SP1 self-identified an advocate as one who helps, one who

guides, one who, "genuinely cares about students, teachers, and their families," one who

encourages, and one who is present.

Obstacles to change. SP1 noted "lack of buy-in" as a specific obstacle to change. With a

story, SP1 reflected on a specific incident involving a teacher and lack of buy-in to the vision:

It was my vision and I wasn't going to give up, and it wasn't going to be fun [for the

teacher involved]. I just had to do what I needed to do. My job was not to provide

employment for someone who was not doing her job or his job, in one case. It's a sad

thing when people go into education, and they go in unsure of their own hopes and

dreams. They want it to work out. I don't think people ever start off thinking, 'I'm just

going into this job, and I'm going to do a crummy job.' I don't think people ever start

like that. Most of the time when people are not doing a good job, they really can, they

just need some help.

Lack of buy-in created an unhappy atmosphere, and SP1 acknowledged, "There are a lot of

people that were resentful of what was going on but I was determined to move the ship forward.

We were all going to be successful."

Strategies to overcome obstacles. SP1 used support, help, and team building strategies

to overcome obstacles. In terms of support-based strategies, SP1 explained,

I do think you have to advocate for your teachers. The teachers are the ones in the

trenches, they're the ones that are providing good education for the students. If they

don't feel that you have their back, or are going to support them or back them, how can

you expect them to do what you want, which is doing the right thing for the student?

SP1 noted that being of help was a useful strategy to overcome change. She stated,

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I saw my job as helping the teachers do their job. I wasn't teaching anything. I wasn't

teaching Math. I wasn't teaching English. I had a bunch of people that were. If I didn't

help them, then I couldn't help the kids.

Team building was another approach used by SP1 to overcome obstacles to change:

We worked our own plan. We tried the team approach, and the teachers were excited

about it. We went to a lot of conferences together. We had a lot of lunches. We had a

lot of fun. We liked each other.

Advocacy in leadership: Help or hindrance? SP1 indicated that having a strength in

advocacy helped her leadership capacity. She described the following:

I had a professor who once told me that I would never get a job in administration unless

someone at some time in my life tapped me in the shoulder and said, 'You need to go into

administration.' Well, somebody did tap me on the shoulder, and the rest is history. I

liked teaching. I liked being an assistant principal, as crazy as that job is, and I loved

being principal. I wanted students to have building blocks. I wanted my teachers to

know that I believed that they could do more sometimes than what they were doing. You

have to fight to what is right. If you have to make a decision, and the regulation says

'this' but what's right for the child is 'this,' you make a decision based on what's right

for the child and not what's on a piece of paper. You can always defend that. You have

got to have a mission. You have got to have a north star.

Reflections on advocacy and leadership. When asked to reflect on advocacy and

leadership from a personal perspective, SP1 noted,

I had a strong belief in others. I was a cockeyed optimist, and I believed in them. I made

a couple of bonehead moves, I think I was probably too big for my britches some of the

time, I thought I could do more than I could do, and I did not delegate as much as I

should have. I did, though, encourage others along the way. There used to be a level of

autonomy that is now just gone. It's just been chipped away and now it's not even

chipped away anymore, it's just crushed. With all of the expectations required of leaders,

it takes time away from things that we truly could be doing to help move kids forward.

Case Study: Study Participant 2

Jump all in. If you're passionate about something, even if it's just a small flicker and not

a flame yet, go after it because you wouldn't have the flicker if it wasn't going to evolve

into a flame.

Background in education. For the previous 11 years, Study Participant 2 (SP2) had been

an educational leader whose area of concentration was relationship building through the Parent

Teacher Association (PTA). From an early age, SP2 learned the art of child advocacy from her

mother. "To this day, my Mom is a child advocate. Her focus has been teen girls. She was a

teen leader who took girls to camp. This behavior was modeled to me," remembered SP2.

When SP2's child began kindergarten, joining the PTA was

where I needed to be for my child, but what I learned was that it wasn't about my kid. I

was the one in the classroom or the cafeteria. The more I was there, the more I learned

that it was not about my kid.

Although SP2's career involved educational leadership and the local school board, the flame for

advocacy sparked when she first became involved with the PTA.

Passion for advocacy. "It is the children that need me…the ones who do not have a

parent visible all the time or one that gives them that attention all the time," SP2 said. SP2

explained,

I was going to be there for my kid at home and at school. What it was teaching my child

is that you step up and lead. What I was there to do was to model that for my child, and

to be there for the children who didn't have an adult that was giving them affirmation,

asking them about their day, or just visiting.

Personal definition of advocacy. Teaching and modeling an advocate's actions

contributed to SP2's personal definition of advocacy. When asked to provide a personal

definition of advocacy, SP2 quickly responded,

Advocacy is being a voice. It is a voice for what we are focused on—children, a voice

for the children who don't have a voice for themselves or for parents who don't know

how to voice what's in their heart, or what their passion is, or how to help their child.

Characteristics of advocates and self-identification as an advocate. SP2 listed several

characteristics of successful advocates: being bold, stepping up, and not being afraid to ask

questions or voice an opinion. SP2 self-identified as an advocate in the following manner:

I have the ability to carry on a conversation with anyone from all walks of life. I have

confidence in the fact that I feel like I can make a difference in someone's life. I love to

listen to what other people have to say. I am a good listener and also a good conduit of

communication. Whatever I say might go in one ear and out the other but I am not afraid

to voice an opinion because you may never get another opportunity.

Obstacles to change. SP2 noted the mindset of others, lack of budget, and time as

obstacles to change. "The mindset of 'This is how we've always done it' is a challenge," SP2

noted. With a story, SP2 expounded on all three obstacles:

Pointing out safety, like, 'We've got asbestos on our campus so it's probably a good idea

we take care of it,' and security, 'It's a big deal to have cameras that can see a quarter of

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a mile away very clearly,' those things are easier to sell. iPads were a little bit more of a struggle because people are used to textbooks in school but we are making that happen right now. We are going to bridge the gap, and close this gap for our low socioeconomic students. Time is of the essence. You jump on the train because that same train may not be coming back through here. To be an advocate, you've got to recognize that this may be your only chance to make a difference.

Strategies to overcome obstacles. SP2 noted data, creative fundraising, and networking as strategies. "Back up your position with information, data, and facts that are accessible to your stakeholders, in this case, your taxpayers." SP2 explained,

> Parents know that students have textbooks. But do they know that other students have iPads? If you're in Science and working on volcanoes, you can click on a link on an iPad and watch lava flowing live. You need to remind parents of this.

"Closing the gap by opening doors," SP2 explained, adding in reference to creative fundraising and networking:

> Knowing how to round up parents, community leaders, and sponsors was critical to helping overcome obstacles. It's just taking who you know and getting them to help. Maybe they have a heart to help anything in the community but they just don't know how.

Advocacy in leadership: Help or hindrance? When asked whether advocacy-related efforts have helped or hindered leadership capacity, SP2 responded,

> Advocacy-related efforts have helped me as a leader to see past the small hurdles, and have a vision for the bigger picture. It has also broadened my leadership abilities by

being able to hone in on the talents of others. This allows deeper investment from the team of people working together.

Reflections on advocacy and leadership. When asked to reflect on advocacy and leadership from a personal perspective, SP2 noted,

I have a gift of building relationships. From the moment I first meet someone, I listen to their interests, and without realizing it, I'm finding ways to plug them in to something that has purpose. I can motivate and encourage people to work together for something worthwhile. Work is never done if you are passionate about something. The project I am working toward now is making sure students learn to serve, starting with my own three kids. My children are old enough to learn the value of being an advocate for those who are not able, capable, or are experiencing a time where they are in need of a classmate/teammate/champion. They are learning to be proactive, not to wait for an opportunity, but to create the opportunity.

Case Study: Study Participant 3

When you are truly advocating for something, it's from the head and the heart. You believe in it, have a passion for it, and it energizes you.

Background in education. At the time of this study, Study Participant 3 (SP3) had served 31 years in education, including 20 years as an administrator. Driven by a closeness to the community and sustained work with and for students, SP3 said the work in education was both demanding and appealing: "I had a very challenging first few years. Very challenging. When I look back I wonder why I stuck with it, but I loved it," SP3 recollected. When asked to expound, SP3 explained,

I didn't know the role, and I knew there was a learning curve. I got through that learning

curve. I love the role of being a part of education. I love the synergy that you see in

education of a whole bunch of people that aren't just teachers working together to help

educate kids. The one thing I have taken away from my job as an administrator is that I

can't work in a solo silo, so to speak.

Passion for advocacy. SP3 was actively engaged with many facets of advocacy from

student-based efforts to efforts at the state level; however, the passion flamed in one specific

area: special needs kids. SP3 explained,

You know what? I don't think I need to advocate so much for children in the schools.

People that work in the schools, most of the time, love those kids. Why I find myself

advocating for special needs kids is that people don't know much about these kids in

school. Their families have a right to expect us to treat their children with respect and

educate them the best way we can.

SP3 had a firm spiritual foundation. "I feel like sometimes in my walk as a Christian, it's

important to me to have a passion in my life, to share, and to give back."

Personal definition of advocacy. "Wow. I'm not good with a few words. I'm good

with many words," SP3 warned and continued,

Okay. The word advocate, you mean you're standing up for something, you know? It's

something you believe in, you have a passion for. There's a lot of things you do in your

life that you might not advocate for, you do it because you're supposed to do or have to

do. It's maybe more of a brain thing than a heart thing. I think when you're truly

advocating for something, it's from the head and the heart. You believe in it and have a

passion for it. It's something you have the energy for. In fact, it maybe energizes you

more than takes away from energy.

Characteristics of advocates and self-identification as an advocate. When asked what

characteristics SP3 applied to those who advocate, the response was direct:

They have certain gifts of caring, and empathy. They can feel what somebody else is

feeling. It's people that can put themselves in other people's shoes. They're people that

are sensitive and generous in lots of different ways. Generous with their hearts and with

their thoughts, and maybe with other assets they have.

SP3 self-identified as an advocate in the following manner:

I know when I'm advocating for something I believe in, I have a kind of drive. I am a

generous person. I'm generous about caring for people. I know I have gifts for being a

Barnabas, an encourager. Not just encourage others to keep going but also encourage

others to see another side of the situation. That's a lot of advocacy, trying to figure out

that win-win.

Obstacles to change. Trying to figure out that "win-win" often involved disrupting the

status quo. SP3 ruminated on change-related obstacles, noting negativity to any new idea, lack

of resources needed to implement a change, and a lack of urgency on the part of those in power

as obstacles to change. Regarding negativity to new ideas, SP3 shared,

There have been some wonderful changes but not without issues about understanding

why the changes needed to be made. We have had some employees choose to retire

rather than make the necessary changes. The worst part is when you have angry parents.

You understand where they're coming from but you also need to impart to them why we

do the things we do.

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Strategies to overcome obstacles. For every changed-based action, SP3 noted, "There is a strategy-based reaction." When asked to provide the strategies used to overcome advocacy-related obstacles, SP3 mentioned conducting pilot studies, having long-range goals, and networking. With respect to pilot studies, SP3 explained,

> Include at least one naysayer in the pilot group. Pilot studies allow you to work out the
> kinks, identify potential roadblocks, and work out solutions before introducing the project
> to the masses.

SP3 also explained the value of having long-range goals: "Take it small steps at a time. Evaluate and redirect as needed to get to the final desired outcome. Patience!" Always trying to find "the win-win," SP3 expressed how "critical networking is with peers who could lend support to the change. You have to know how to lead, how to guide from the front to the back." To illustrate this point, SP3 shared advice given to a subordinate who wanted to support a particular cause to district personnel:

> Let me help you get what you want. You need to go and have that conversation with
> your principal because you need to let him know you're a strong person. You need to
> stand up for this. You know what you're doing but you need to be respectful. You need
> to get him at a time when he's not too busy. You don't need to throw a bunch of issues
> on him at once, just take your message. In 3 to 5 minutes, be able to tell him your
> concern or cause. Get that good starting point in order to bring him into the fold.

Advocacy in leadership: Help or hindrance? When asked whether advocacy-related efforts have helped or hindered leadership capacity, SP3 responded,

In this environment, advocacy is very important. It takes patience and respectful

interaction to get the message across. So, my answer is advocacy has helped. I am

hopeful that these efforts have led to optimal learning for our students.

Reflections on advocacy and leadership. When asked to reflect on advocacy and

leadership from a personal perspective, SP3 noted,

As a leader, I have the gift of encouragement. I am thankful that the vast majority of

people I work with let me take on a leadership role that allows me to coach rather than be

autocratic. This allows for the flow of new ideas, and my employees feel like they are

partners in the delivery of information to students. Their input is important. And, when I

do have to make a decision that has divided camps, the opposition is more willing to

adopt and adapt to the change. There are times I have to step out of this role and be the

'hammer' but when I do, my employees know that I am serious. I try not to overuse that

form of leadership. When I'm advocating for something I believe in, I have a drive but I

am also an encourager. I encourage others to see another side of the situation. A lot of

advocacy is trying to figure out that win-win when you're bumping up against the barrier.

It's not always about getting what you want.

Case Study: Study Participant 4

Advocating for students on a day-to-day basis is our goal. You're trying to handle

situations, issues and problems that are at hand for parents, being able to give them a

sense of respect, to help them answer any questions they may have, and giving them a

good sense that their students are taken care of.

Background in education. Study Participant 4 (SP4) had five years of experience at the

administrative level. Raised by a grandparent who worked in the public school system, SP4

sought a career in education to "make a difference in the next generation." From teaching to administration, SP4's passion for advocacy resulted from "a desire to improve the educational status quo."

Passion for advocacy. While attending school as a student, SP4 "felt like there could be more support. . . . I feel like I was invested into by educators that I had, and so I wanted to be a part of that for someone else's life." Early work with the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program helped to lay the groundwork for advocacy-related change. In helping to close the achievement gap for students from all population groups, SP4 realized a strength: "Being the mediator between student and teacher, and being the voice of reason allowed me to see how I could initiate resolution."

Personal definition of advocacy. The theme of having a voice underpinned SP4's personal definition of advocacy. "Sometimes, students feel voiceless," SP4 explained. "I want to be the voice for them, and take a stand for them as well as campuses throughout the district." In addition, SP4 noted, "I think advocacy is also a support. It is providing a road for students and people in general whey they can't find that path for themselves."

Characteristics of advocates and self-identification as an advocate. Weighing in on characteristics of successful advocates, SP4 shared,

> They have confidence. They're willing to go against the grain. They're approachable, and willing to take their feelings out of the situation because they want what's best. They want to take of the problem or what they see as, maybe, an injustice. They want to see that it is taken care of and resolved.

When asked about self-identification as an advocate, SP4 said,

Confident and personable. . . . I would go to the ends of the earth in order to see that the need was met for a student. In my professional life as well as my life outside of school as a student pastor, I absolutely advocate for students by getting personal with them when it comes to just life in general.

Obstacles to change. SP4 noted adversity and miscommunication as two obstacles to advocacy-related change. With respect to adversity, SP4 stated, "Adversity in implementing a new program on any given campus when that campus was normally compliant with change and innovation is one of the biggest obstacles." When asked about miscommunication, SP4 explained,

There are problems that take place on any given campus any given day. If there's miscommunication, there could be great conflict. Communication issues can cause a change in the culture. For me, personally, I want the culture to be set clear.

Strategies to overcome obstacles. SP4 highlighted building relationships and using encouragement as strategies to overcome change-related obstacles. When discussing the importance of building relationships and encouraging others to engage in the process, SP4 said,

Developing relationships with people that are a part of your community is essential when trying to eliminate adversity to change. Our first year implementing AVID, we encountered adversity. Teachers didn't want to hear about the program, like it was a dirty word. But, the more we got out and talked about the program with everyone, it really helped. It was just letting those teachers know, 'We need your help. If we are really, truly going to support students and provide for them the best education, then we can't do that on a campus that is divided. We have to be unified together in order to see that process.'

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Advocacy in leadership: Help or hindrance? When asked whether advocacy-related efforts helped or hindered leadership capacity, SP4 responded,

Advocacy has helped me as a leader. I face the hard issues head on. When circumstances arise, it's important that one is able to see the end result, and keep the win in mind. I have grown as a leader having been on the frontlines of advocacy.

Reflections on advocacy and leadership. When asked to reflect on advocacy and leadership from a personal perspective, SP4 noted,

I feel that I have been graced with passion, energy, and charisma that allows my character and leadership capabilities to stand out in the crowd. I have had the incredible opportunity to lead organizations, campuses, and more. This has all been possible because someone believed in me, and took the time to invest and advocate for me. There is so much more I want to accomplish. I aspire to achieve higher levels of leadership where my influence can continue to change the lives of others, and allow for greater ways of advocacy to take place within the world we live. By doing so, my life will have a ripple effect into the lives of others by changing one individual at a time.

Case Study: Study Participant 5

Believe in yourself. If you know it is right, if your gut is telling you it is right, then make sure you do it no matter what anybody else says. There's going to be hard some hard times, you just got to make sure you're doing what's right for kids.

Background in education. As a youngster, Study Participant 5 (SP5) played "teacher" in the garage with neighborhood friends but did not think that a career in education was possible. SP5 explained, "No one in my family went to college, so I wasn't going to be a teacher, because you had to go to college to be a teacher." Resigned to work at first in a grocery store and then at

a temporary employment agency, SP5 landed a job that paid for a college degree. The lure of corporate America eventually tarnished and gave way to the stability of a 20-year career in education. With strong administrator-mentors as guides, SP5 learned to fight for every student who walked through the door as a teacher, coach, and administrator. Those early years helped SP5 reach a critical conclusion: "Students believe everything an adult tells them. Good or bad."

Passion for advocacy. The experience of being a parent sparked a deeper passion for advocating for all students. Advocacy for SP5 was very personal: "I always put my daughter in the classroom, in the cafeteria, and in the nurse's office and make decisions based on what I would want for her."

Personal definition of advocacy. After hearing the question about a personal definition of advocacy, SP5 took several minutes before responding with a definition:

Seeking out fairness for every child? No, because fairness is so different. I mean, fairness for you, and for you, and for you, to *me* are different. So many people think we should treat everyone the same but people come from different backgrounds, have different needs, and you may not need what this person needs. You have to advocate for them for what *they* need.

Characteristics of advocates and self-identification as an advocate. When asked to assign characteristics to those who successfully advocate, SP5 responded with the following descriptors: trusting, calming, educated on the diversity of the kids, and good relationship builders. When asked about self-identifying as advocate, SP5 offered the characteristic of being resilient and explained, "Standing up for what is right often led to everyone being angry at me, but as long as I was doing what was best for kids, I didn't care."

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Obstacles to change. SP5 listed lack of funding, lack of support from a direct supervisor, and lack of support from staff members as obstacles to change. With respect to lack of support from direct supervisors and/or staff, SP5 explained, "Some people get upset, and then there are those who are doing what's best for kids. In the end, you hope the others come around."

Strategies to overcome obstacles. SP5 noted fundraising, providing data, and creating buy-in with a core committee as strategies used to overcome obstacles. SP5 wrote grants and asked for donations when battling a lack of funding. With respect to providing data to prove that a plan is needed and creating buy-in, SP5 explained,

> First, I go back to the purpose of why we are doing it. Instead of saying, 'We have this new program, let me show it to you, and we are going to use it,' I observe what the needs are, begin to understand the program so that I can say, 'let's research some programs that might help.' I really listen to what they need, and find a way to meet the teachers' needs so they then have buy-in.

Advocacy in leadership: Help or hindrance? When asked whether advocacy-related efforts have helped or hindered leadership capacity, SP5 responded,

> I believe it has both helped and hindered me. On one hand, I know that students are getting the education and experiences they deserve. On the other hand, the 'selling' of or promoting what is best for kids takes a toll on me which results in my leadership falling short.

Reflections on advocacy and leadership. When asked to reflect on advocacy and leadership from a personal perspective, SP5 noted,

> Over the years, I have fought for a lot of kids, and a lot of teachers. In the early years, I would say that everyone was angry with me but as long as I was doing what was best for

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the kids it was okay. I believe every day you can wake up and start over. I feel there are

administrators who became an administrator to stand there and tell people what to do.

One of my gifts (that I don't ever like to say is a gift) that just comes naturally is putting

out fires. Whatever needs to be done to have the kids be successful, I will do it. It is just

doing what's best for kids. I want all students to feel at home, feel loved, feel wanted,

and to be able to be successful when they walk out of these doors. I want them to be able

to survive. I will fight for kids, and I will have a discussion with people about what I

think is right and wrong. I do try to look and see if someone is advocating for kids in

their own way. Do they have their own way that is just not my way? Do what you know

is right for kids.

Summary

The purpose of Chapter 4 was to provide a summary of the data collected from data

sources in a dependable and accurate manner (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The chapter

highlighted the perspectives of educational leaders who advocate using the lens of social

constructivism. A multicase case-study approach comprised the research design. Data collected

from one-on-one interviews and a focus group session with the study participants were intended

to help answer the research question related to how educational leaders maintained their passion

for advocacy while overcoming obstacles related to change. In addition, the data were used to

help answer four subquestions regarding the educational leaders' definitions of advocacy, self-

identities as advocates, advocacy-related obstacles, and strategies used to overcome those

obstacles. Analysis of the raw data resulted in the chapter's revelations: educational leaders'

personal experiences often led to a passion for advocacy, educational leaders used their voices

not only to fight for what was right but also to encourage others to join their fight, and team

building and relationship building were important means to overcome obstacles related to change.

Chapter 4 provided the groundwork for the presentation and evaluation of the results that conclude in the next chapter. As I sought to make connections between what my research might mean to the community of practice, how it informs the literature, and how it confirms or adds new knowledge to the community of scholars, the voices and perspectives of the study participants were my guide.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

The tapestry of public education interweaves diversity, disparity, challenge, and opportunity. As a special educator who advocates for severe and profoundly disabled students, I am one thread in that tapestry, and my voice contributes to the strength of the fabric. With a transition to leadership in my future, I undertook this qualitative multicase case study to listen to the voices of educational leaders in one school district in Texas and to uncover how leaders' strengths in advocacy fortified the warp and weft of the public education quilt. This chapter provides a summary of the results of the study, a discussion of the results, and a discussion of the results in relation to the literature. The limitations of the study are detailed, followed by the implications of the results for practice, policy, and theory. Recommendations for further research and the conclusion close the chapter.

Summary of the Results

I am both an educator on the cusp of leadership and a doctoral student immersed in research; thus, I found the importance of the role of the leader as it pertains to student learning, equity, and advocacy coming into sharp focus in response to Brown's (2011) words:

> Respect for diversity and culturally inclusive education entails advocacy, solidarity, an awareness of societal structures, and critical social consciousness. Preparing educational leaders to accept this challenge necessitates both a close examination of personal beliefs coupled with a critical analysis of professional behavior. (p. 350)

I ventured into this study to uncover the personal experiences, passion, and purposes behind the advocacy-based actions of educational leaders, to explore the ways in which the educational leaders self-identified as advocates, and to gain a deeper understanding of the strategies necessary to overcome advocacy-related obstacles. Through this qualitative multicase case

study, I sought to understand the education leaders' worlds through a social constructivist's lens (Creswell, 2012). The goal of the research was to rely as much as possible on the study participants' voices and views of advocacy and advocacy-related efforts. Each person answered the central research question regarding how educational leaders maintained their passion for advocacy while overcoming obstacles related to change. Additionally, each participant responded to subquestions related to (a) how the educational leader defined advocacy, (b) how the educational leader self-identified as an advocate, (c) what advocacy-related obstacles the educational leader had experienced, and (d) what strategies the educational leader had used to overcome advocacy-related obstacles.

The literature review in Chapter 2 covered several elements, including the role of advocacy demonstrated by general and special educators, school counselors, and principals; common obstacles experienced by educators, school counselors, and principals; and characteristics of effective advocates. For example, the mixed-methods study of Massengale et al. (2014) showed the connections between experiences of engaging in advocacy and beliefs about advocacy from the perspectives of teachers. "Integrating data from all results, we have theorized a model for understanding advocacy development or the way in which individuals come to view themselves as advocates" (Massengale et al., 2014, p. 88). Marbley et al.'s (2010) case studies of school counselors illustrated three different issues, approaches, and action strategies in a public school setting. These studies contributed to my overall knowledge of advocacy-related efforts of public school employees and the characteristics of effective advocates. Delving into the world of educational leadership, I sought views of advocacy from district-level educational leaders. More important, I wanted to hear their stories, and while doing so, I was reminded of the wise words of Capecci and Cage (2015): "Part of the journey from

silence to story involves uncovering and understanding the potential of your story to be a powerful tool of advocacy" (p. 194).

The year 2017 ushered in changes to the United States political landscape that may have a direct effect on public education. The significance of the role of an education advocate may become more important because of these changes. The President of the American Federation of Teachers, Randi Weingarten, cautioned,

> We have an obligation to all children in America. That's why we've fought to ensure that schools that struggle get fixed, that we fight for kids to have the powerful learning, the social/emotional and wraparound services, and the great teachers they need. (as quoted in Strauss, 2016, p. 2)

Voices of education advocates across the United States remain strong (Whitaker, 2007). Working to create better educational opportunities and outcomes for Black, Hispanic, and low-income students is critical to both education policy and practice (Kamenetz, 2016). However, the context, issues, and policies focused on racial equity are different today than they were 20 years ago (Kamenetz, 2016), and true equity now means the ability for every child to attend a good school in the neighborhood (NEA, 2015). Both historical and current voices of advocacy in education provided an impetus for this research study.

This study provided portraits of advocates who were educational leaders. The portraits revealed definitions of advocacy from each participant, characteristics of how each participant self-identified as an advocate, strategies they employed to overcome obstacles on their respective paths to advocacy, and how strength in advocacy positively or negatively affected their ability to lead. Through one-on-one interviews with the participants, I uncovered the personal experiences, passion, and purposes behind their advocacy efforts. The focus group provided a

forum for the study participants to talk about their shared experiences with respect to advocacy and allowed me to find the essence of their advocacy work. After member checking was completed, I identified themes through manual coding and computer-based coding. The central research question is addressed in the forthcoming discussion of the results. First, I present a summary of the thematic findings of the research subquestions.

Thematic findings. An analysis of the data regarding the five educational leaders' definitions of advocacy showed four study participants defined the top two themes of advocacy as *fighting for what was right* and *being a voice for students*. Data for self-identification as an advocate yielded 12 descriptors among the five participants. Four participants indicated that an advocate is one who encourages. For obstacles related to advocacy-related efforts, participants said the biggest obstacle they experienced was the mindset of others. Each participant mentioned strategies used to overcome obstacles related to change. Team building emerged as the primary strategy used to overcome obstacles. Participants were asked whether being an advocate helped or hindered leadership. For four of the study participants, advocacy helped leadership. For one participant, advocacy both helped and hindered leadership. From the perspectives of the study participants, advocacy affected leadership. An analysis of the data revealed that the most commonly mentioned effect of advocacy on leadership was optimal outcomes for students, followed by having a vision, and improving teamwork. Teamwork was primary, motivation was secondary, and finding purpose and listening were tertiary. A full discussion of the findings follows.

Discussion of the Results

Using the central research question and subquestions as the study parameters, I set out on this journey to delve into the world of educational leaders who advocate. By listening to

personal stories of advocacy and leadership, I discovered these case studies revealed the participants' unique perspectives. Key characteristics—for example, fighting for what was right, being a voice for students, being one who encourages, overcoming the mindset of others, building teams, and creating optimal outcomes for students—were recurring themes that summarized the advocacy-based impetus of the study participants. I answered the subquestions of the study first; the central research question was answered second. The responses to all research questions were guided by the perspectives of the study participants, formulated using only the participants' words.

For the purpose of this study, advocacy was defined as supporting a cause (Advocacy, n.d.). The study participants provided a definition that seemed to have more depth beyond mere support: Advocacy for the participants was "fighting for what you know is right" (SP1). Advocating for optimal student outcomes was worth the fight for these educational leaders. In general, these district-level educational leaders were influencers of internal and external stakeholders. The voices of individuals at the school and community level can make a difference (Bergman, 2013). Involving a variety of stakeholders from the broader community can improve communication and public understanding while also incorporating the perspectives, experiences, and expertise of participating community members to improve reform proposals, strategies, or processes (Hidden Curriculum, 2014). Study Participant 3 explained, "You're standing up for something you believe in, and that you have a passion for." Passion and belief needed to be channeled into action for change to occur. The manner in which the educational leaders self-identified as advocates showed that action.

The educational leaders self-identified as advocates by encouraging others to stand up for a cause, to stand up for students, and to stand up for what was right. A review of literature on the

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characteristics of effective advocates in general showed advocates possess objectivity, independent judgment, sensitivity, understanding, persistence, patience, knowledge, assertiveness, ethics, and respect for others (Disability Rights Washington, 2001; Trusty & Brown, 2005; Wiede, 2011). Most of the participants in the study had a difficult time labeling characteristics for self-identification, and their responses required thought. Study Participant 3 afforded the following perspective:

> I am generous about caring for people. I have gifts for being an encourager. Not just encourage others to keep going but also encourage others to see another side of the situation. My employees feel like they are partners in the delivery of information to students. Their input is important.

Study Participant 2 explained, "I feel like I can make a difference in someone's life. I love to listen to what other people have to say." Both participants stressed the value of what *others* bring to table when all parties are pursuing an advocacy-based effort. However, Study Participant 4 presented a different perspective:

> My influence can continue to change the lives of others, and allow for greater ways of advocacy to take place within the world we live. By doing so, my life will have a ripple effect into the lives of others by changing one individual at a time.

Study Participant 4 revealed an element of self-importance not evident in the other participants. I pondered possible reasons for this difference and noticed that Study Participant 2 and Study Participant 3 had over 40 years of service combined, whereas Study Participant 4 had only five years. Perhaps the longer educators maintain leadership positions, the less emphasis there is on self. In any event, according to the participants, the value of being one who encourages cannot be underestimated and can make an immediate difference in the practice of

leadership. Encouragement provides awareness and a foundation from which to build (Dinkmeyer & Eckstein, 1996; Eikenberry, 2017). When one is encouraged, confidence grows and attitudes improve (Dinkmeyer & Eckstein, 1996; Eikenberry, 2017). Most important, encouragement promotes action (Eikenberry, 2017).

Sometimes taking action and trying new things can be difficult (Eikenberry, 2017). The study participants spoke about taking action and weighed in on the hurdles related to their advocacy-related efforts. The primary obstacle to advocacy-related change, as noted by the participants, was navigating the mindset of others. Previous researchers have found that every established organization has a tendency to resist change and defend the status quo, even if the status quo is not working (Lavoie, 2008). The voices of the participants emphasized the uncertainty that change brought to those in the workplace. For example, Study Participant 1 said, "There were a lot of people that were resentful of what was going on, but I was determined to move the ship forward." Study Participant 2 stated, "There have been some wonderful changes but not without issues about understanding why the changes needed to be made." Similarly, Study Participant 5 noted, "Some people get upset, and then there are those who are doing what's best for kids. In the end, you hope the others come around." Not one of the participants gave up on an effort because of these obstacles. Study Participant 2 affirmed, "We are going to bridge the gap, and close this gap." Working toward goals and bridging the gap required the help of others.

The findings indicate that team building was the primary strategy employed when the educators attempted to overcome obstacles related to change. Study Participant 1 explained, "We worked our own plan. We tried the team approach, and the teachers were excited about it." Study Participant 4 took that plan a step further:

It was just letting those teachers know, 'We need your help. If we are really, truly going to support students and provide for them the best education, then we can't do that on a campus that is divided. We have to be unified together in order to see that process.'

Obstacles were addressed by listening to team members' requests and finding ways to meet their needs (SP5). Study Participant 2 relied on motivating stakeholders: "It's just taking who you know and getting them to help." In educational settings, advocates value teamwork because it enhances students' learning capabilities, assists them in developing integrative perspectives and skills, improves their self-confidence, and gives them a greater appreciation and tolerance of their teammates (Levin, 2005; Xyrichis & Ream, 2007).

The study's central research question was "How do educational leaders maintain their passion for advocacy while overcoming obstacles related to change?" For the majority of educational leaders involved in this study, passion for advocacy was fueled by the family. Study Participant 1 gave credit to her parents for charting the way. Study Participant 2 was influenced by her mother's advocacy efforts: "To this day, my Mom is a child advocate, and this behavior was modeled to me." Study Participant 2 instilled the same passion for advocacy in her own children: "What it was teaching my child is that you step up and lead, and what I was there to do was to model that for my child." Study Participant 5 placed her daughter in situations prior to decision making: "I always put my daughter in the classroom, in the cafeteria, in the nurse's office, and make decisions based on what I would want for her." The very personal nature of family also extended to the students and parents served in the district. Study Participant 3 concluded, "Families have a right to expect us to treat their children with respect and educate them the best way we can."

Although teachers and families want similar goals for their children, they have different

perspectives. These differences can interfere with communication and collaboration (TATS,

2010). Recognizing and diffusing obstacles to advocacy were critical skills to the study

participants. Study Participant 1 recalled, "The worst part was when you have angry parents.

You understand where they're coming from but you also needed to impart to them why we do

the things we do." Study Participant 2 recognized that some parents needed assistance

overcoming obstacles of their own: "Parents don't know how to voice what's in their heart, or

what their passion is, or how to help their child."

According to the participants, supporting a cause and fighting for what was right required

overcoming the mindset of others. Study Participant 5 recalled, "In the early years, I would say

that everyone was angry with me but as long as I was doing what was best for the kids it was

okay." Study Participant 4 recalled encountering adversity with a program implementation

change:

> Teachers didn't want to hear about the program, like it was a dirty word. But, the more
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> we got out and talked about the program with everyone, it really helped. It was just
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> letting those teachers know, 'We need your help. If we are really, truly going to support
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> students and provide for them the best education, then we can't do that on a campus that
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> is divided. We have to be unified together in order to see that process.'

Study Participant 5 said, "I go back to the purpose of why we were doing it, observed

what the needs were." Study Participant 2 concluded, "You step up and lead, and you've got to

recognize that this may be your only chance to make a difference."

Study Participant 2 emphasized, "Advocacy is being a voice. It is a voice for what we

are focused on—children." The participants in this study noted that doing what was best for

students was the impetus for their respective advocacy-based efforts, and they maintained their respective passions by being true to both students and themselves. Study Participant 4 explained, "I feel like I was invested into by educators that I had, and so I wanted to be a part of that for someone else's life." Study Participant 3's faith complemented her advocacy-related efforts: "I feel like sometimes in my walk as a Christian, it's important to me to have a passion in my life, to share, and to give back." Study Participant 1 maintained passion for advocacy by maintaining focus: "You have got to have a mission, and you have got to have a north star." One statement was resoundingly clear and provided a fitting response to the central research question: "Work is never done if you are passionate about something" (SP2).

Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature

The school district is a microcosm for the changing landscape of American demographics. The school district mirrors the tensions and struggles of people who want to assimilate and fit in without suffering the loss of cultural identity, language, and society (Smutny et al., 2012). Historically, some education advocates have acknowledged the struggles, listened to the call for action, and raised their voices for change (Gyurko, 2012; Holowchak, 2013; Smith, 2012). Future efforts of advocacy-related change are undoubtedly on the horizon in public education. When an advocacy effort is initiated, strong advocates for change from within and outside the school should be identified and their support actively sought (MacRae-Campbell, 2016). District-level leaders should be a critical component of change from within. If the challenge is the changing landscape of public education, then part of the solution must include district-level leaders who encourage change and who proactively support advocacy-related efforts that increase opportunities for all students. "It is the duty of our educational system (and our democratic society) to end oppression, to increase equity, and make bold possibilities happen

for all students" (Brown, 2011, p. 349). In the following sections, I connect the results of this study to the community of practice, to the literature, and to the community of scholars.

Community of practice. A community of practice can be viewed as a social learning system that exhibits characteristics of emergent structure, complex relationships, self-organization, dynamic boundaries, ongoing negotiation of identity, and cultural meaning (Wenger, 2012). Education is a social learning system and a community. Although students and their parents have a primary interest in the nature and quality of the education that schools provide, the broader public also has an interest in students acquiring the knowledge, skills, and values needed to contribute to society as workers and citizens (Resnick, 2004). How students are educated today substantially determines the kind of society people live in tomorrow (Resnick, 2004). The responsibilities of the modern educational leader involve being a proactive voice for the community of education at large (Whitaker, 2007). The results of this study of educational leaders who advocated included reflections on advocacy and leadership from each participant pertinent to the community of practice:

> There used to be a level of autonomy that is now just gone. It's just been chipped away and now it's not even chipped away anymore, it's just crushed. With all of the expectations required of leaders, it takes time away from things that we truly could be doing to help move kids forward (SP1).
>
> I have a gift of building relationships. From the moment I first meet someone, I listen to their interests and without realizing it, I'm finding ways to plug them in to something that has purpose. I can motivate and encourage people to work together for something worthwhile. Work is never done if you are passionate about something. The project I am working toward now is making sure students learn to serve, starting with my own three

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kids. My children are old enough to learn the value of being an advocate for those who are not able, capable, or are experiencing a time where they are in need of a classmate/teammate/champion. They are learning to be proactive, not to wait for an opportunity, but to create the opportunity (SP2).

As a leader, I have the gift of encouragement. I am thankful that the vast majority of people I work with let me take on a leadership role that allows me to coach rather than be autocratic. This allows for the flow of new ideas, and my employees feel like they are partners in the delivery of information to students. Their input is important. And, when I do have to make a decision that has divided camps, the opposition is more willing to adopt and adapt to the change. There are times I have to step out of this role and be the 'hammer' but when I do, my employees know that I am serious. I try not to overuse that form of leadership. When I'm advocating for something I believe in, I have a drive but I am also an encourager. I encourage others to see another side of the situation. A lot of advocacy is trying to figure out that win-win when you're bumping up against the barrier. It's not always about getting what you want (SP3).

I feel that I have been graced with passion, energy, and charisma that allows my character and leadership capabilities to stand out in the crowd. I have had the incredible opportunity to lead organizations, campuses, and more. This has all been possible because someone believed in me, and took the time to invest and advocate for me. There is so much more I want to accomplish. I aspire to achieve higher levels of leadership where my influence can continue to change the lives of others, and allow for greater ways of advocacy to take place within the world we live. By doing so, my life will have a ripple effect into the lives of others by changing one individual at a time (SP4).

Over the years, I have fought for a lot of kids, and a lot of teachers. In the early years, I would say that everyone was angry with me but as long as I was doing what was best for the kids it was okay. I believe every day you can wake up and start over. I feel there are administrators who became an administrator to stand there and tell people what to do. One of my gifts (that I don't ever like to say is a gift) that just comes naturally is putting out fires. Whatever needs to be done to have the kids be successful, I will do it. It is just doing what's best for kids. I want all students to feel at home, feel loved, feel wanted, and to be able to be successful when they walk out of these doors. I want them to be able to survive. I will fight for kids, and I will have a discussion with people about what I think is right and wrong. I do try to look and see if someone is advocating for kids in their own way. Do they have their own way that is just not my way? Do what you know is right for kids (SP5).

Relation to the literature. A literature review of advocacy efforts in the public school system yielded distinctive descriptors, as seen from the perspectives of teachers, school counselors, and principals. In addition, previous researchers have found a wide variety of characteristics pertaining to successful advocacy (Disability Rights Washington, 2001; Luckner & Becker, 2013; Trusty & Brown, 2005; Wiede, 2011). However, after reviewing the literature, the impetus *behind* the voice of the advocate remained elusive, intrinsic, and personal. Trusty and Brown (2005) hinted that the *personal* qualities needed for advocacy needed to be analyzed; that suggestion was the motivation for this study. The responses of the educational leader-advocates who participated in my study contributed several aspects to current education advocate literature, including what it means to self-identify as an education advocate, what obstacles

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hinder advocacy efforts, what strategies help overcome those obstacles, and what role attitudes toward leadership and advocacy may play.

Community of scholars. Human beings have a learning orientation and seek to produce as much valid information as possible about an issue or problem (Argyris, 1990). The educational leaders involved in this study had a learning orientation that involved both leadership and advocacy, and their responses provide insight for the community of scholars regarding the value of being one who encourages others in advocacy-based efforts. Advocating a position and combining it with both inquiry and self-reflection can be a sign of strength (Argyris, 1990). To that end, Study Participant 3 provided a sound description of her advocating role:

> I have the gift of encouragement. I am thankful that the vast majority of people I work with let me take on a leadership role that allows me to coach rather than be autocratic. This allows for the flow of new ideas, and my employees feel like they are partners in the delivery of information to students. Their input is important. And, when I do have to make a decision that has divided camps, the opposition is more willing to adopt and adapt to the change. There are times I have to step out of this role and be the 'hammer' but when I do, my employees know that I am serious. I try not to overuse that form of leadership.

The findings showed the value of connecting with others and encouraging them to participate in proactive change. "Advocate your principles, values, and beliefs in a way that invites inquiry into them and encourages other people to do the same" (Argyris, 1990, p. 107). For the community of scholars whose future focus is education and advocacy, the outcomes of this study present an insider's view of five educational leaders' lives in a public school district.

Limitations

This qualitative research design was not without limitation. The primary limitation was the small number of study participants, all employed within one school district. Additionally, there was an imbalance of genders within the study: four females and one male. The limitations of internal validity, credibility, and researcher as an instrument are addressed next.

Internal validity. Internal validity refers to the extent to which the results are considered reflective of the true experiences of the participants (McMillan, 2012). In order to enhance the internal validity of the study, I utilized member checking. Member checking was accomplished by asking participants to review interpretations and conclusions and confirm the findings (McMillan, 2012). Validation was enhanced by having each interview fully transcribed by a third party transcriber and checked for accuracy against the original recording of the interview. Each transcription proceeded through two levels of review: one by me and one by the participants, who received copies of their transcripts for correction, clarifications, and annotations.

Credibility. Credible qualitative studies use detailed, in-depth, thorough, and extensive descriptions that contain an abundance of detail (McMillan, 2012). These descriptions enhance credibility by indicating substantial engagement with the data and a respect for the value of information (McMillan, 2012). By using thick, rich description and verbatim language of the participants, I presented the shared experiences of participants to offer multiple perspectives of advocacy and advocacy-related efforts at the administrative level. The participants themselves legitimized credibility by approving their own words throughout the member-checking process.

Researcher as instrument. As the researcher, I was the main research instrument of this qualitative study. I personally collected data directly from the source by interviewing

participants and observing behaviors. Even though I am an advocate myself, I withheld that information from my participants in order to concentrate solely on their efforts. My role as an instrument in this study was to allow the participants to speak freely about themselves and their advocacy-related efforts. I chose not to expound on participants' specific areas of advocacy to protect their anonymity; instead, I sought to elicit their perspectives on the general topic of advocacy. Their words informed my thinking about being an educational leader who advocates, and their actions informed my analyses of the value of advocacy at the district level.

Implication of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory

The results of this study of educational leaders who advocate have implications for practice, policy, and theory. The study participants' perspectives on leadership and advocacy have implications for practice. Further, the value of the advocate's voice has implications for future education policy. Finally, the results of the study indicate the merit of social constructivism theory within the context of leadership and advocacy in public education.

Practice. The study participants provided meaningful perspectives of leadership and advocacy that could be parlayed into practice. Specifically, the reflections of the participants indicated whether advocacy helped or hindered their leadership. Study Participant 1 reflected on leadership:

> I wanted students to have building blocks. I wanted my teachers to know that I believed that they could do more sometimes than what they were doing. You have to fight to what is right. If you have to make a decision, and the regulation says 'this' but what's right for the child is 'this,' you make a decision based on what's right for the child and not what's on a piece of paper. You can always defend that. You have got to have a mission. You have got to have a north star.

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Study Participant 2 expressed the following about leadership:

Advocacy-related efforts have helped me as a leader to see past the small hurdles, and

have a vision for the bigger picture. It has also broadened my leadership abilities by

being able to hone in on the talents of others. This allows deeper investment from the

team of people working together.

Study Participant 3 conveyed the following:

In this environment, advocacy is very important. It takes patience and respectful

interaction to get the message across. So, my answer is advocacy has helped. I am

hopeful that these efforts have led to optimal learning for our students.

Study participant 4 explained,

Advocacy has helped me as a leader. I face the hard issues head on. When

circumstances arise, it's important that one is able to see the end result, and keep the win

in mind. I have grown as a leader having been on the frontlines of advocacy.

Study participant 5 concluded,

I believe it has both helped and hindered me. On one hand, I know that students are

getting the education and experiences they deserve. On the other hand, the 'selling' of

what is best for kids takes a toll on me, which results in my leadership falling short.

In sum, the study participants offered collegial advice for current and aspiring educational

leaders that could directly affect practice. Collegiality plays a vital role in augmenting

professional growth and development, job satisfaction, organizational and professional

commitment, school quality, and student performance (Shah, 2012).

The results of this study are particularly relevant for the educational leader who has yet to

find his or her voice. Everyone has a story, and there is great value when people are given an

opportunity to tell it. "When the stories you tell are from your life, you give audiences an

opportunity to feel and imagine with you, to understand in a meaningful way just why they

should care" (Capecci & Cage, 2015, p. 15). Educational leaders should want to know what

drives their colleagues' advocacy-related efforts. Through such discovery, bonds of

commonality could be strengthened. For members of a team working toward a shared vision,

these bonds are critical. Leaders at the district level who might be hesitant to voice support for a

cause may be inspired from the results of this study to become a conduit of change. The

participants shared experiences that might prove familiar to educational leaders, and the

knowledge gleaned from the results might motivate one more educational leader to use his voice

to support a worthwhile cause.

The study participants identified obstacles to advocacy: lack of buy-in, the mindset of

others, budget, time, and miscommunication. In addition, the participants offered strategies to

overcome those hurdles: support, help, team building, data, fundraising, networking, pilot

studies, and goals—all strategies that could increase awareness for other educational leaders who

desire to advocate. The experiences shared by the participants were personal yet relatable to

others at a similar level. The results could help district level leaders avoid common pitfalls while

navigating the waters of change.

Policy. At various points throughout the history of public education in the United States,

advocates have supported causes or proposals (Gyurko, 2012; Holowchak, 2013; smith, 2012).

Political leaders, teachers, and parents have raised their voices in support of both individual and

collective action (Scott, Lubienski, & DeBray-Pelot, 2009). They have worked beyond the

accepted barriers of their day and taken action to improve education for all U.S. children. In fact,

advocacy has become a dominant theme in education research and policy making in recent years

(Scott et al., 2009). The importance of the role of advocates in terms of education policy is crucial at the local, state, and federal levels. Leaders leverage small changes daily that begin to transform bigger systems (Brown, 2011), and the educational leaders in this study did just that: They fought for what was right in order to increase optimal outcomes for students. As advocates for public education, educational leaders provide support for or against public policies decided by public bodies, such as local state boards of education, that affect students, parents, staff, and other stakeholders.

As of this writing, the latest effort in the state of Texas has focused on the new accountability ratings for Texas's public schools (TASA, 2017). The new rating system, which requires the Texas Education Agency to assign letter grades on overall performance to districts and their campuses, was passed by the Legislature in 2015 amid much dissent from school districts statewide (Taboada & Chang, 2017). School districts and their advocates cautioned the State about implementing the A–F system, saying it provided little meaningful information to guide student learning (Taboada & Chang, 2017). The school boards of 150 Texas districts called on the Legislature to repeal the A–F letter grading system (TASA, 2017). The Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA) urged districts to place a resolution to the A–F ratings on their agendas and issued the following on its website:

> With support from communities across Texas, this type of grassroots effort can make a difference. In 2012, 881 districts representing more than 4.4 million students adopted resolutions calling on the Texas Legislature to reexamine the state's overreliance on standardized testing. Together, these districts captured the attention of lawmakers, business leaders, parents and the news media, not just in Texas, but around the nation. As a result, we saw positive changes in the assessment and accountability system at the

high school level via House Bill 5 in 2013 and via Senate Bill 149 in 2015. (TASA, 2017,

right-hand sidebar, para. 2)

This type of widespread advocacy effort requires team building at various levels with various

education stakeholders, reminiscent of what Study Participant 3 shared: "I love the role of being

a part of education. I love the synergy that you see in education of a whole bunch of people that

aren't just teachers working together to help educate kids."

Theory. The goal of the study was to rely on the participants' views of advocacy.

Constructivist perspectives focus on how learners construct their own understanding (Creswell,

2012). According to social constructivism theory, social worlds are developed out of

individuals' interactions with their culture and society (Creswell, 2012). Every conversation

with the study participants presented an opportunity to obtain new knowledge or expand present

knowledge (Lynch, 2016). Social constructivism places the focus on the learner as part of a

social group and learning as something that emerges from group interaction processes (Derry,

1999; Draper 2013; McMahon, 1997). In this study, the educational leaders were the learners,

and district-level administration in a public school district was the social group. By using social

constructivism as the conceptual framework, the educational leader-advocates initiated learning

in self-identifying as advocates, in identifying obstacles related to change efforts, in relating

strategies to overcome obstacles, and in reflecting on advocacy and leadership. Researchers

have found that education advocates have power, and when advocates talk about education and

education issues, people listen (Whitaker, 2007). The findings of this study highlight the ever-

important voices of educational leaders who advocate to improve student outcomes in public

school districts.

Recommendations for Further Research

As I analyzed the data from this study, two recommendations for further study related to gender and length of service became apparent. My study sample contained four females and one male, and there was no emphasis placed on the differences in the ways males and females advocated. Future research in this area could provide critical insight. In addition, exploring the effect on advocacy of length of service in education could prove to be an area of interest for further research. Three additional areas of further research regarding local school board members, advocates for English language learners (ELLs), and advocates for students who are gifted and talented are discussed further.

The first recommendation for further research is to conduct a qualitative study of local school board members who advocate. My study took place in Texas, and the Texas Education Agency has provided a framework for school board development that includes an advocacy section. In order to meet the challenges of public education effectively, school boards and superintendents must function together as a leadership team (Texas Education Agency, 2016). According to the advocacy section of the framework, the board builds partnerships with community, business, and governmental leaders to influence and expand educational opportunities and meet the needs of students and supports children by establishing partnerships between districts, parents, business leaders, and other community members as an integral part of the district's educational program (Texas Education Agency, 2016). Marbley et al. (2011) studied school personnel in the context of multicultural social justice in a school setting; the authors' approach would be a perfect fit for future research involving school board members who advocate.

The second recommendation for further research is to conduct a qualitative case study of English language learner (ELL) advocates in the public school system. The National Education Agency (2015) detailed five steps to ELL advocacy on its website: (a) isolate the issue, (b) identify allies, (c) be clear on the rights of ELL students, (d) organize and educate others, and (e) identify outlets for change (para. 1-5). Using these steps as parameters, further research could be completed using the lens of social justice theory. In the United States, English language learners are the fastest-growing segment of the K-12 population, representing 9.3% of the students in public education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Depending on the geographical location, percentages as high as 20% are common (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Unfortunately, the majority of teacher education courses that prepare general education and content area teachers do not include instruction on teaching English language learners (Fenner, 2014). Further, English language learners and their families may not have a powerful enough voice to articulate their needs. All teachers and administrators must advocate for this important, diverse group of students who will become tomorrow's workforce (Fenner, 2014). As the tapestry of public education becomes more intricate and diverse, the voices of those who advocate for English language learners are crucial.

The third recommendation for further research is to conduct a qualitative study of those who advocate for the gifted and talented student population. Most gifted students receive the majority of their K–12 education in a regular classroom, taught by teachers who have not been trained to teach high-ability students (NAGC, 2017). With an estimated 3 to 5 million gifted and talented students in the public school system, advocates are working diligently to impress upon state and local entities the importance of addressing issues specific to this student population

(NAGC, 2017). The constructivist learning theory would provide an appropriate framework for a qualitative study of this nature.

Conclusion and Researcher Reflection

I ventured into this study to uncover the personal experiences, passion, and purposes behind the advocacy-based actions of educational leaders. By capturing subtle nuances of leadership and advocacy, I sought to present rich, thick details of those who use their voices for change. By exploring the ways in which educational leaders self-identified as advocates, I discovered that although our motivations may have been different, our goals were the same. Whether we help, guide, care, encourage, remain present, communicate, are confident, and/or are good listeners, our heart, our generosity, our ability to be personal, and our resilience separate advocates from those who choose to not raise a voice for change. By inquiring about obstacles related to advocacy efforts, I learned that obstacles in education and in life are universal. By listening to the strategies the participants employed to overcome advocacy-related hurdles, I emerged with a deeper appreciation of team building. By applying a qualitative multicase case-study approach, I sought to understand through a social constructivist lens the world in which educational leaders lived and worked (Creswell, 2012). The goal of the research was to rely on the study participants' voices and views of advocacy as they answered the central research question of how educational leaders maintained their passion for advocacy while overcoming obstacles related to change. Each participant shared stories that served as sparks for their advocacy-related passions. Overwhelmingly, it became clear that personal experience begot passion for advocacy, which in turn begot purpose.

The findings showed that these educational leaders possessed strong values about doing work that made a difference for students. By fighting for what was right and by seizing

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opportunities to make a difference, these educational leaders illustrated the advantages and disadvantages of being voices for change. The fundamental moral imperative of schooling is to serve the best interests of all children (Brown, 2011). The educational leaders in this study noted that doing what was best for children was their impetus for pursuing change. They cited optimal outcomes for students as evidence of the way advocacy affected their leadership. Leaders should have deep commitments to their organizations, to the advancement of the organizations' missions, and to the wellbeing of everyone in them (Elias, 2011). This deep commitment makes leadership in schools challenging, because it requires a commitment to every employee, student, and parent (Elias, 2011).   When my transition to leadership occurs, I will remember the words and wisdom of those who participated in this study.

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Appendix A:

Interview Protocol

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee:

Brief description of study: This research study is taking a closer look at the educational leader who advocates: the traits of effective advocates, how the leader self-identifies as an advocate, and the passion, and purpose behind advocacy efforts.

Questions:

1. How would you describe a leader who demonstrates strong advocacy around critical issues?

2. When you think about leaders who model effective advocacy, what traits do they demonstrate?

3. What challenges do advocates face as they take on disrupting a status quo practice to make changes?

4. What strategies do advocates employ to overcome these challenges to change?

5. What do you think drives an advocate to raise his/her voice?

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