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Advocating for English Language Learners: The Role of the Literacy Educator

by Briana Asmus and Austyn Sabin



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Many literacy teachers understand the importance of advocating for their students who are English Language Learners (ELs); in fact, many consider it an integral part of their job (de Oliveira & Athanases, 2007; Harrison & McIlwain, 2020). Bilingual and critical literacy theories ask literacy teachers to position themselves “as agents of change” who promote policies that center on equitable distribution of resources and equal partnerships (Morrell, 2017, p. 458). As change agents, literacy teachers can work collaboratively “for the improvement of ELs’ educational outcomes and life chances” (Harrison & McIlwain, 2020, p.14). Literacy educators who work with ELs are uniquely positioned to understand the various dynamics at work in the lives of students, to foster literacy communities around student needs, and to uncover pathways to advocacy.

This advocacy work will look different in every teaching context, as no one school or student population is alike, and no school population or surrounding community is static. As advocates, we have the unique opportunity to help students become successful by creating classroom environments that “require that everyone involved has the skills to ‘read’ the patterns of interaction and relationship” (Comber & Woods, 2018, p.265), a literacy skill that transcends linguistic boundaries. Developing strong relationships is the first step in a

scaffolded approach to literacy (Fenner, 2013). We see our work intersecting with the work of literacy educators in any capacity who share the idea that literacy is about supporting students to “read their world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987). In this article, we explore how our advocacy efforts as ESL teachers of ELs have changed and the ways in which a commitment to advocacy has given us a way to focus our efforts on the immediate experiences and needs of the students in our buildings. As we identify some of our challenges, we hope to offer insights into ways we have confronted them with the hope that it may be useful for literacy teachers. By dissecting these challenges, we offer some strategies that can be integrated into literacy learning with ELs in other places.

Our Positionality and Our Context

The position and geographical location of a teacher, as well as their individual beliefs, shape how a teacher conceptualizes advocacy (Harrison & Josephine, 2019). Our own positionality intersects with the work we do and can affect our ability to navigate the complex racial-linguistic landscapes of our schools where teacher populations are predominantly White and mono-lingual. One of us identifies as White, and the other identifies as Latina but can “pass” as white in terms of looks, often giving us advantages when navigating

our school environments. Both of us speak at least one language other than English; one as a result of being raised among bilingual family members and taking language classes throughout her life and the other as a result of living overseas and taking classes. We have both been raised in middle-class households by most definitions—a way in which we differ from the majority of our students.

Teacher advocacy work can be formed by power, policy, and school norms (Maddamsetti, 2021). Issues of power and policy have shaped our instruction and the advocacy efforts we take up alongside our students. For example, one factor that continually shapes our advocacy efforts and has been compounded in recent years is poverty. In our district, 68% of the student body is considered “economically disadvantaged” (MiSchoolData, 2020-21). Between our two schools (one elementary and one secondary), 85% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch. As inflation rises and basic needs become more expensive for the families in our district, we see the effects in our classroom daily. Increasingly, more families are forced to relocate to find work. Many of our students are refugees, migrants, and unaccompanied minors who experience other compounding factors such as food scarcity, houselessness, and estrangement from family members.

We are also deeply affected by teacher turnover and staff shortages. In the 2020-2021 school year, Michigan schools saw a 40% increase in teacher retirements (French, 2021). This exodus exacerbated an already-existing teacher shortage marked by declines in enrollments in teacher preparation programs. Teacher and other staff shortages in our district have resulted in more than understaffed classrooms. In January, the entire district had to close for one day because the requisite number of staff required to open was not met. Teachers are routinely called on to substitute teach during their planning periods, a time that could otherwise be used for advocacy efforts.

Additionally, one or both of us has experienced all of the following shortages in the past year: 1) a shortage of bus drivers, resulting in bus routes canceled and

students unable to attend school, 2) a shortage of cafeteria staff, resulting in students not having enough time to eat lunch, 3) a shortage of custodial staff, resulting in teachers needing to clean their own rooms, 4) a shortage of counselors, resulting in students not be able to get into the courses they need to succeed, 5) a shortage of campus security, resulting in teachers needing to be alert and responsive to acts of violence or truancy. We mention these not to disparage our district; we believe that many other places have had similar experiences. Instead, these examples illustrate how our recent advocacy efforts have had to respond to the effects of these shortages. For example, allowing students to eat or providing snacks during class; working on academic schedules together; discussing conflict resolution; or helping students learn how to ride the city bus all take class time. But, if getting students to school and keeping them safe and healthy is compromised, it necessitates a targeted approach to advocacy that involves participation from the whole school community.

Pathways to Effective Advocacy

In this section, we describe three pathways of advocacy through which educators can take actions to overcome barriers and advocate for students. We see teamwork, relationships, and resources as the three areas with the greatest need and the greatest potential for lasting and sustainable change (See Table 1). We describe work that we have done and offer suggestions for possible ways in which literacy teachers and ESL teachers can work together for change.

Teamwork

It is imperative that all school staff are included in conversations around creating supported advocacy efforts. Literacy educators can work together with ESL staff to identify district-wide disparities that may have otherwise been marked as classroom- or building-specific issues. For example, one of our recent discussions centered on the best ways to support ESL students who are new to the district, because newcomer students often struggle to adapt to the pace of a content area classroom. At the elementary level, we decided to gradually release newcomer students from the sheltered classroom into general education classes by integrating

Table 1
Pathways to Advocacy

Teamwork	Relationships	Resources
Coordinate relationships between all school staff and families.	Forge relationships with students and their families .	Ensure ELs have access to the resources they need.
<i>Communication</i> Establish open lines of communication for specific advocacy.	<i>Build Trust</i> Build trust through presence and ongoing communication.	<i>Basic Resources</i> Identify resources for food, water, shelter, and other basic needs.
<i>Language Support</i> Ensure language support is readily available.	<i>Identify Needs</i> Establish a foundational relationship with families to determine needs.	<i>School Resources</i> Ensure student resources are accessible to ELs.
<i>Community-Building</i> Identify opportunities to build relationships with students and families.	<i>Teachers as Learners</i> Learn about the student’s background.	<i>People-as-Resources</i> Identify people inside and outside of school who can serve as resources.

them into one subject at a time. This model is entirely reliant upon transparent and consistent communication between general education teachers and the ESL teacher as students begin attending part-day, content classes with their grade-level peers. The team of teachers independently track student academic progress, along with language development and social growth. This collaboration enabled the teaching staff to provide students in the sheltered classroom opportunities to forge relationships with their grade-level peers prior to being fully mainstreamed into general education classes, while also gaining exposure to grade-level content. A commitment to this kind of communication will enable both teachers to fully support their newcomer ESL students.

Teamwork is crucial for establishing linguistic support for ELs and their families. ESL and literacy educators can advocate for the resources they need to determine the literacy levels of ELs in all the languages they use.

Then, they can advocate for language supports based on individual need. For example, having district employees physically on staff who are available to interpret and provide language support is especially important for students who come from oral linguistic traditions or who may not be able to read school communications in English or the home language. Newcomer students may also have specific needs based on literacy experiences in their home language. For example, the ability to speak in a language may not equate to the ability to read or write in that same language. There can be any multitude of variations when it comes to reading, writing, listening, or speaking in the home and target language(s). Teachers can investigate and explore these abilities together and then determine the appropriate linguistic supports around gaps. Once literacy educators know the foundational skills an EL comes in with, they are better able to build on these skills instead of spending time guessing where students are on their language-learning journey.

Lastly, it is crucial that teaching and support staff work together to create opportunities for collective community building. It can be intimidating for literacy teachers who are not accustomed to working with ELs to initiate initial conversations with families; likewise, families may feel intimidated when approaching school staff. Literacy educators can work with ESL teachers to bridge these gaps, acting as a familiar and supportive network that is invested in student success. Literacy Family Nights may already be taking place in your district, with literacy activities such as book swaps, multilingual read-alouds, and other engaging activities. Showing up to participate in these events is a fantastic way to interact with families in a low-stakes, neutral environment. Going a step further, jointly planning and presenting literacy-based activities or games that multilingual families can replicate at home can strengthen the home/ school divide. Activities ideally should center around readings or concepts in the ELA or ESL curricula, should be demonstrated visually, and should include all the materials necessary to replicate at home. For us, these efforts have helped to create a supportive literacy network of school professionals and families working toward common goals.

Relationships

The next pathway to advocacy focuses on forging relationships with EL students and their families. In our experience, families often only hear from teachers or the school when their child is underperforming or in trouble. A great way to start building trust is by reversing this dynamic and communicating to families more regularly and for a variety of reasons. Part of this step has been logistical for us, since the pandemic has caused many parents/guardians to change jobs or relocate. We spent extra time reviewing records for correct contact information (another way we were affected by staff shortages). Many districts or ESL departments already have district-wide methods of communication in place, like Talking Points (an app that allows for user-end translation) or other technologies. We are lucky enough to have a family liaison in our district, whose job it is to reach out to families. This person, along with the ESL teacher, might also assist in securing interpreters or other ways of communicating. In our experience, these

activities are something many literacy educators are unaware of, but they can play a key role in sharing the achievements of their students by simply passing them along. This year, we hope to include literacy educators and other key points of contact in a newsletter that will go out to families each trimester, allowing for a dedicated space where literacy educators can report on the happenings of their classrooms.

Once lines of communication are open and trust is gained, identifying needs is easier. These extend beyond the needs of a learner. Literacy educators often have unique insights into reading preferences or the connections ELs make with texts. They may even notice areas where ELs excel or areas where they need extra support before the ESL teacher. These connections can be communicated and built upon. “Building background” is part of many instructional models of teaching, allowing any kind of teacher (content or ESL classroom) to build upon skills students already possess. This allows all teachers to plan and decide the best ways to spend instructional time to support ELs.

Finally, we see the ongoing need to be learners ourselves as integral to and a direct benefit of our relationship-building efforts. Taking the time to learn about our cultural backgrounds of our students' families helps us avoid stereotyping based on sources other than the students and families themselves. Moreover, it makes us stronger advocates. Literacy teachers may be uniquely positioned to learn more about their students by inviting family members into their classrooms to share their stories and traditions. We already mentioned literacy night events, but it's important that these spaces are offered in the classroom as well, perhaps through a family story hour or volunteer opportunities. Once a trusting foundation with families is established, possibilities can flourish.

Resources

Access to resources is a common point of advocacy. As Dubetz and de Jong (2011) note in their review of over 30 empirical studies on this topic, ensuring access to resources is part of most definitions of advocacy. As the needs of our students change, the educational

resources we advocate for on behalf of our students may shift. Recently, many of our actions have focused on these basic needs. For example, when we had to turn off the water fountains to avoid the spread of COVID-19, there was no free water available for a time. While there were other ways for students to obtain water in the building, they often required longer walks that they were unable to complete during passing if they wanted to be on time to class. As a result, providing bottled water in the classroom became part of our advocacy plan and was supported by our building administration.

For another example, our advocacy has included ensuring students' cultural foods are available to eat in the cafeteria. Halal or kosher foods are necessary for many of our students, but there were little to no offerings in our school cafeterias. ELs may not know how to ask for these resources or may come from a cultural background where it is considered rude to ask directly. Therefore, the more building staff and EL families we can get involved in advocating for these needs, the more likely they are to become a reality. Literacy educators can help students get basic needs by having discussions about these topics and lending their voice.

In terms of school-related resources, it is necessary to ask which academic resources are important and which resources ELs are (un)able to access. This list is not limited to learning tools like math manipulatives and physical school supplies. Rather, it's important to remember that ELs should have access to the same resources as non-ELs, as dictated by civil rights law (*Lau v. Nichols*, 1974). While resources may be available, they may not be accessible due to an existing barrier. For example, while digital learning programs can enhance EL learning, the language embedded in these programs is often technical and highly academic. For these programs to be considered equitable teaching tools, literacy teachers can plan to pre-teach content vocabulary, give clear instructions, use modeling strategies, and provide opportunities to reinforce concepts.

Finally, it's important that learning communities help students know who they can count on as resources for specific purposes. From the behavior team to content

teachers to librarians to lunch staff, it is imperative that teachers outside of the ESL department are visible and open to serving as resources within the school building. Helping students visually map and locate where these resources are and discussing what roles people in a school play can make navigating a school environment less cumbersome. At the elementary level, we practice the sentence stem: "Who do I talk to if I need _____?" regularly in our rooms. As frontline advocates for our multilingual learners, it is crucial that we take the time to put a face on the support community available to them.

Paths into Roads

As educators, we have neither the time nor the resources to take up these efforts alone; we must work together and position our students and families as agents of change. We must engage with all aspects of our surroundings, utilize resources, and remove barriers. While our collective efforts may seem small and narrowly focused, by taking small steps, we envision a time when we won't need to advocate for basic needs. For now, we continue to identify the inequalities affecting ELs and seek to disrupt them by "envisioning alternatives and taking concrete actions" (Maddamsetti, 2021, p.3). When we are engaged collectively in this work, we are capable of transformative advocacy. As new challenges arrive, we hope to be more prepared to meet them.

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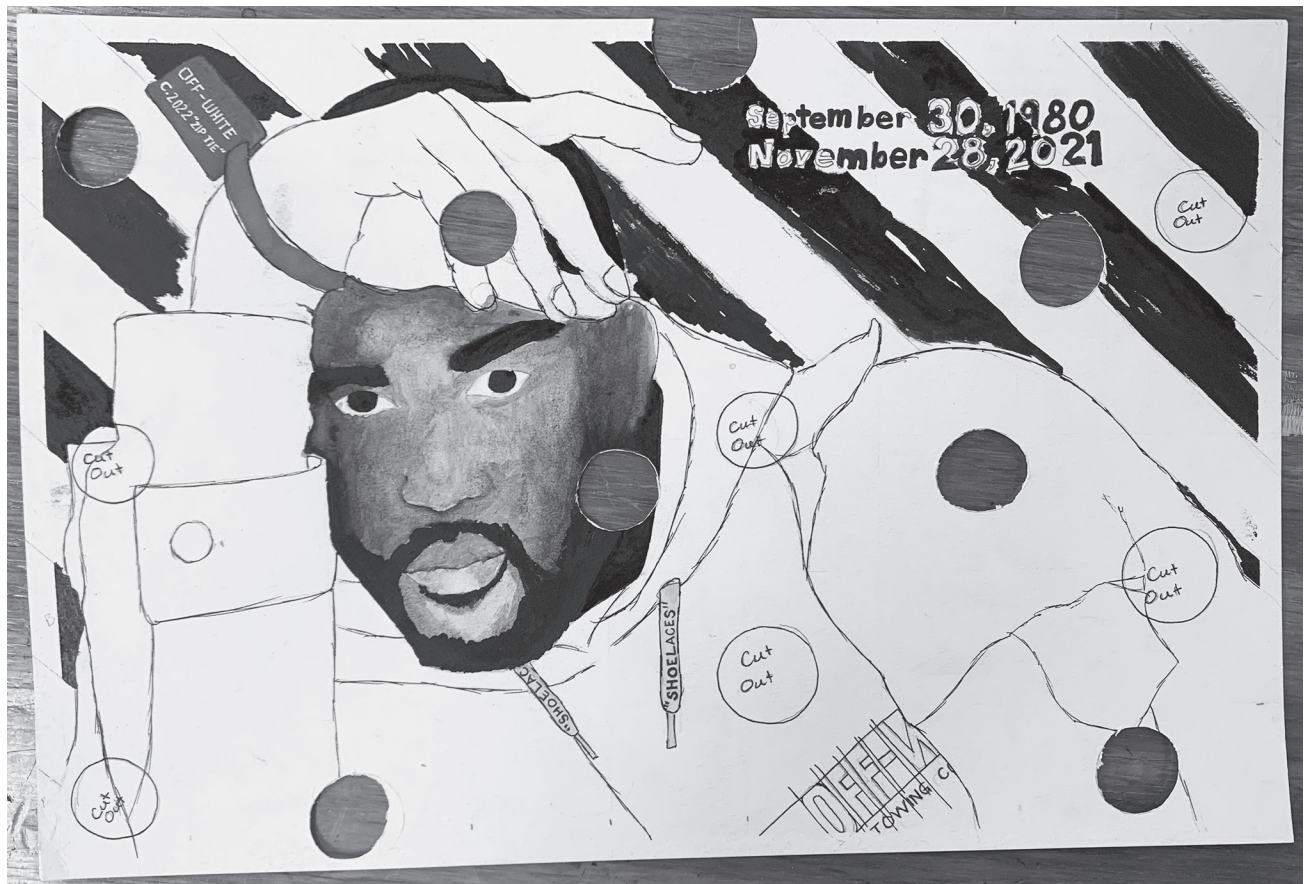
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Author Biographies

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“Off” created by Donte Tinsley, a 12th grade student at Garden City High School in Garden City.

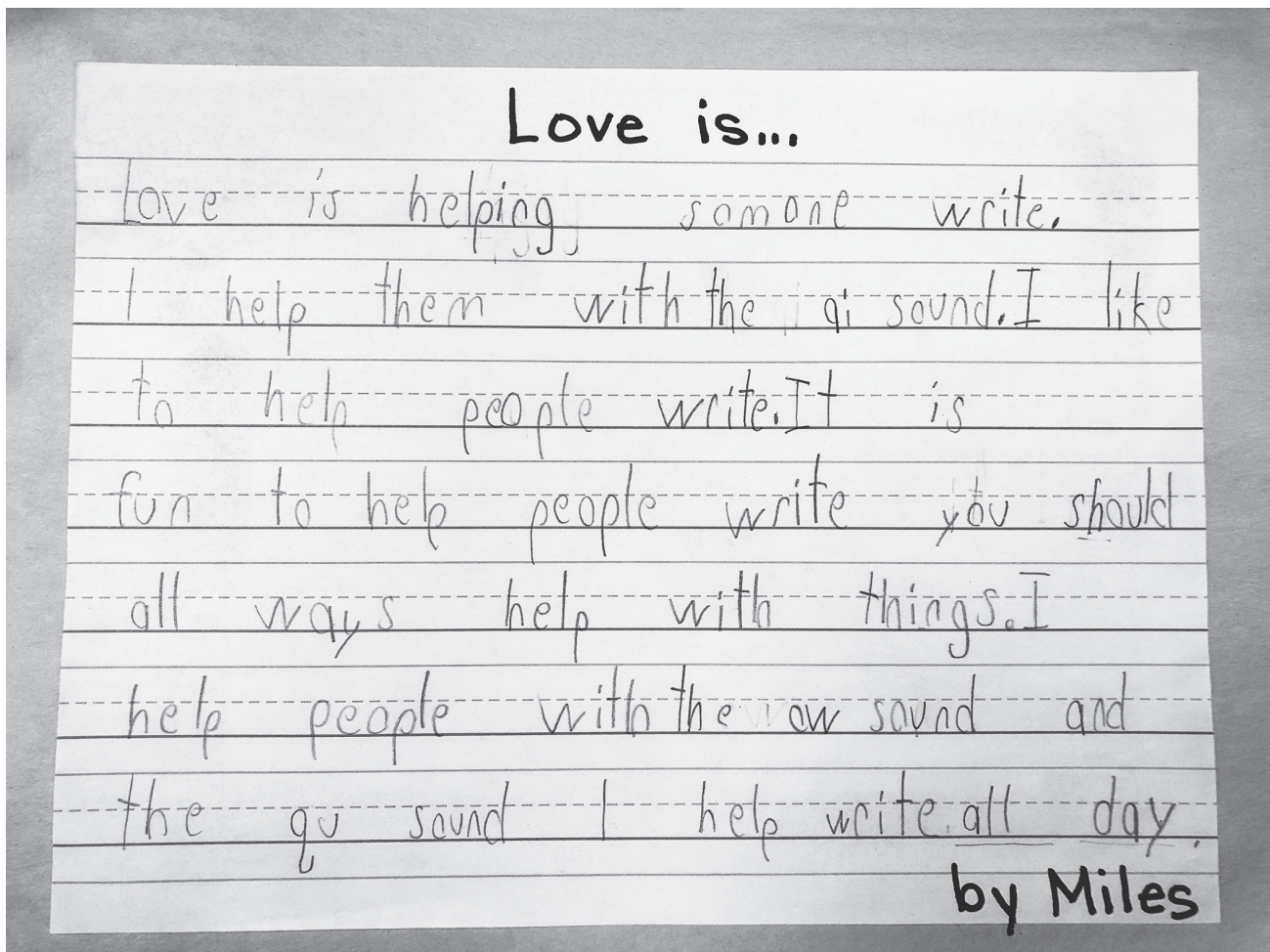
We Do

Don't hate or discriminate,
but yet we do,
whether you're me or you,
we do.

Whether it's to our brothers or sisters,
or to our mother,
we call nature,
whether you're me or you,
we do.

We band together,
for each other,
but then we don't,
but yet we do.

Madeline Langlois is a 7th grade student at Museum
Middle School in Grand Rapids Public Schools.



Miles Black is a 2nd grade student in Mt. Pleasant.