Claiming and reclaiming the voice of the profession: Teacher educator policy advocacy through the lens of Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism

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A growing body of scholarly literature has focused on policy advocacy and activism among teachers (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Dubetz & de Jong, 2011; Heineke et al., 2015; Riley & Cohen, 2018). A growing body of scholarly literature has focused on policy advocacy and activism among teachers. Although the knowledge base in teacher education remains uneven (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2009), teacher educators possess expertise on the work that teacher education requires that bears important insights for policy development. Yet little is known about teacher educators’ involvement in policy activities. To address this gap, this study presents an analysis of how teacher educators based across the United States navigate the policy landscape and engage in policy advocacy. Through a multi-case study analysis, we examine U.S. teacher educators’ efforts to participate in reform dialogues and amplify their voices in policy contexts. Using Bakhtin’s (1981) theory of dialogism and conceptual framework of policy advocacy (Gen & Wright, 2013), we conceptualize teacher educators’ advocacy as a process of claiming and reclaiming the voice of the profession. This theoretical approach allows us to attend to the analysis of strategies teacher educators deploy in policy-making contexts and examine the challenges teacher educators face in sociopolitical contexts where professional expertise is often sidelined in policy deliberations (Aydarova, 2019; Lubienski, Scott, & DeBray, 2014). This examination contributes to the growing literature on educators’ activism and policy advocacy by shedding light on how teacher educators interact with policymakers and other policy actors who influence teacher education reforms.

1. Literature review

A growing body of scholarly literature has focused on policy advocacy and activism among teachers (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Dubetz & de Jong, 2011; Heineke et al., 2015; Riley & Cohen, 2018). Much of research on teacher advocacy and activism has examined teachers’ opposition to state policies, whether through active resistance to standardized testing or through public advocacy that draws attention to the
challenges faced by the teaching profession in the current historical moment (Bond, 2019; Nunez, Michie, & Konkol, 2014).

Teacher advocacy has also been associated with calls for social and racial justice (Kinloch, Burkhard, & Penn, 2020; Picower, 2012; Weiner, 2013). Whether through unions (Ginsburg & Kamat, 2009; Hartney & Flavin, 2011) or through grassroots organizing (Fabricant, 2010), teachers have found a collective voice to speak back against reforms and disruptions introduced by intermediary organizations (Ravitch, 2020).

At the same time, however, some intermediary organizations have begun to offer policy fellowships that connect teachers with decision-makers. For example, Teach for America, Teach Plus, Educators 4 Excellence, and other groups funded by major philanthropies select teachers ideologically aligned with neoliberal priorities and use those teachers’ voices to advance market-oriented reform agendas (Aydarova in progress; Singer & Brewer, 2021; Kretchmar et al., 2019). Even though these organizations also use the language of justice and equity, they are engaged in advocacy that undermines democratic ideals and fails to address the needs of historically underserved communities (White, 2020).

For this reason, in a policy landscape with many competing agendas, Anderson and Cohen (2015, 2018) called on educators to maintain “critical vigilance” as they follow policy developments and examine the values embedded in reform packages. With the growing neo-liberalization of education and depersonalization of teaching, educators are urged to engage in “counter-discourses” and “counter-conduct” to resist market-driven policies. In pursuit of democratic reforms in education, it is also important for educational professionals to consider how to build alliances with activists and engage with social movements that authentically center equity, diversity, and transformative justice in their work (Anderson et al., 2023).

Juxtaposed with rising tides of teacher activism and advocacy, the field of teacher education has been characterized by policy compliance (Wilson & Youngs, 2005). Research examining professional preparation of teacher educators provides a partial explanation why this might be the case—many teacher educators feel underprepared for “navigating the agendas and policies of programs, departments, colleges/universities, and local/state/national government agencies” (Goodwin et al., 2014, p. 293). Multiple demands on teacher educators’ time, including stringent accountability requirements, keep teacher educators—particularly in smaller institutions—focused on data collection and reporting (Bulough, 2016; Wilson, 2014; Zeichner, 2010). This, in turn, limits their ability to be regular participants in policy conversations and diminishes “the possibilities for teachers and teacher educators to work as knowledge generators and agents of change” (Cochransmith, 2020, p. 56).

Despite these challenges, some teacher educators have been active in public and policy advocacy. They have documented their individual struggles as they act counter to neoliberal policies and assessments at their own institutions (Cross et al., 2018; Henning et al., 2018). Others have focused their advocacy and activism on the critique of educators’ professional organizations—especially those engaged in corporatizing teacher education and advancing the agendas of their sponsors instead of listening to the voices of dissent among their members (Goldin & Bieler, 2018, 2019).

In addition to activism among individual teacher educators, collective and working groups have begun contesting policies that threaten the future of teacher education. In New York, a group of teacher educators critically analyzed the settler colonial logic of a corporate multi-stakeholder teacher licensure test, edTPA, and collectively pushed back against its introduction in their state (Tuck and Gorlewski, 2016). McGough, Bedell, and Tinkler (2018) reported on the work of teacher educators in Vermont who not only opposed edTPA, but also designed an alternative performance assessment. Connected across state lines, teacher educators who joined Teacher Education Collective and Teacher Education Thought Collective have publicly critiqued dominant policy paradigms (Aydarova & Berliner, 2018; Cochransmith, 2020).

It is common for scholarship on teacher educators’ policy engagement to focus on offering lessons for others to consider in their policy advocacy. For example, McLaughlin, West, and Anderson (2016, p. 145) described differences in policymaking and academic cultures, encouraging teacher educators “to embrace new communication styles and media to make [their] scholarship accessible to policy makers and the public at large.” Using the experiences of teacher educators in Mississippi who joined forces to oppose a stand-alone course on phonics in teacher preparation, Brenner (2007) emphasized the importance of building relationships with policymakers, participating in defining problems and offering solutions, and finding common ground despite potential political differences. In Indiana, the leadership of one school of education engaged in debunking myths circulated by the media that suggested teachers had been poorly prepared by their professional programs (Gonzalez & Carney, 2014, p. 22). The authors recommended that teacher educators should write op-eds and seek out opportunities to address journalists’ misconceptions about the teaching profession.

Amidst this burgeoning literature where teacher educators offer first-hand narratives of their efforts to disrupt neoliberal reforms or propose alternatives, only a few studies have explored how teacher educators participate in policy debates. For example, Cochransmith, Keefe, and Carney (2018) described three ways in which teacher educators participated in reforms in the U.S. Some have taken on the entrepreneurial agenda of moving teacher education out of university contexts and starting independent programs focused on teacher training as a set of technical skills (Kretchmar & Zeichner, 2016; Zeichner, 2017). Others adopted a managerial approach to reform and used accreditation tools to standardize the field to improve educational outcomes (Aydarova, 2021, 2022). Finally, some teacher educators have prioritized democratic values and focused on larger systemic issues that contribute to growing disparities and inequitable opportunities for students from underserved communities. Those teacher educators have worked to transform their own institutions in pursuit of equity and have initiated public debates on justice in educational settings. Noting that the latter approach is “not part of the mainstream education reform movement in the US,” Cochransmith, Keefe, and Carney (2018, p. 12) observed that “teacher educators committed to democratic reform seek to dramatically reinvent and democratize university teacher education with the goal of strong democracy and strong equity.”

Apart from observations described above, much remains unknown about teacher educators’ policy advocacy. This is an unfortunate gap because, as Cochransmith (2006, p. 183) so poignantly argued, “now more than ever, teacher education needs public intellectuals to challenge prevailing views and puncture its governing myths,” especially as those myths are increasingly deployed strategically by policymakers to advance “less-than-noble agendas” (Berliner & Glass, 2015).

1.1. Research context

The U.S. has a decentralized educational system with most decision-making related to educational policies relegated to state authorities (Mitra, 2022). Teacher education programs positioned in higher education institutions are subject to accreditation and approval by national level professional organizations, such as the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) and Association for Advancing Quality in Educator Preparation (AAQEP), as well as state level agencies (Earley et al., 2011). Policies affecting teacher education can be introduced by state legislatures or state boards of education where, in principle, policy deliberations allow for public input. In practice, however, public comment sessions can be scheduled last minute without much advance notice. Some policies and procedures can also be developed by state departments of education (DOE). Although it is common for DOEs to claim that policies were developed through collaboration with educational professionals, those claims do not always fully reflect what is done in practice (Aydarova et al., 2021; 2022b). At the same time, teacher educators’ professional organizations, such as the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) and Association
of Teacher Educators (ATE), operate both at the national and state levels. To varying degrees, these organizations and their affiliates encourage policy advocacy and provide support when critical issues arise (Aydarova et al., 2022a).

In sum, even though the U.S. system is designed in a way that gives teacher educators some opportunities to provide input into policies under consideration, how teacher educators navigate those spaces and whether their voices are heard requires further investigation. To shed light on teacher educators’ efforts to engage in policy deliberations, we draw on Bakhtin’s (1981) theory of dialogism and conceptual frameworks of policy advocacy (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Gen & Wright, 2013) that we describe next.

1.2. Theoretical and conceptual foundations

This project conceptualizes policy advocacy using sociocultural theories (Bakhtin, 1981; Cole, 1998; Holland et al., 2001) and their applications in educational policy (Castagno & McCarty, 2018; Levinson et al., 2009). According to sociocultural theories, cultural change is a dialogic process in which actors engage with diverse voices and perspectives to develop their own authorial stance in the world (Tedlock & Manneheim, 1995). From this theoretical perspective, existence “unfolds in the unique (and constantly changing) place” (Holquist, 2002, p. 46).

Existence also evolves out of subjects’ engagement with various dialogic or monologic utterances that they can ignore, make meaning out of, or respond to as “speaking persons bringing with them their own unique ideological discourse, their own language” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 332). This means that instead of acting as passive conduits of authoritative discourses or objects of surveillance, actors exercise their agency as they negotiate, appropriate, and contest different voices (Holland et al., 2001). Policy landscapes viewed from this perspective represent heteroglossia – or a dialogue between various social languages that struggle over meanings and values as they search for directions for future change (Bakhtin, 1981).

Out of the contestations and struggles over policy as a form of “authoritative allocation of values” (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 7), policy actors develop “a more or less stable authorial stance,” a voice that over time speaks categorically and/or orchestrates the different voices in roughly comparable ways” (Holland, et al., 2001, p. 182). To develop this “authorial stance,” actors “rearrange, reword, rephrase, reorchestrate different voices” (p. 183). In this process, narratives become tools that are used to create new identities and produce visions of both the future and the past (Bakhtin, 1981). Additionally, as policy actors engage in activities that produce narratives and shape reforms, they redraw the distributions of power, authority, and control. In this study, we attend to the dialogues among the voices that speak on matters of teacher professional preparation.

Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism moves from the level of concrete moment-to-moment interactions to abstract points of connection and contestation among different social voices at the state, regional, national, or even global levels (Bakhtin, 1981). Seen through the lens of this theory, policy engagement and advocacy constitute a form of existential dialogue that brings together voices from diverse social planes into events of contestation and struggle. In this dialogue, bills, policy proposals, media briefs, public testimonies, and letters submitted to policymakers, as well as actual interactions among policy actors emerge as conversational turns. When a new policy initiative is announced, it becomes an utterance that has to be noticed and responded to. As policy actors engage in deliberations over the direction of educational reforms, they speak as individuals or collectives from particular social positions with varying degrees of power. Dialogue participants can author oppositional voices or voices of support for the preceding utterances. Or alternatively, they can deploy generative voices offering new proposals or alternative directions of reform. Through the dialogue, different voices of heteroglossia speak new worlds into being (Bakhtin, 1981).

We supplement this theoretical approach with Gen and Wright’s (2013) conceptual framework of policy advocacy, which is also rooted in sociocultural approaches to policy. This framework captures concrete elements of policy advocacy, such as inputs, activities, and outcomes (Fig. 1). In this framework, inputs contain both advocates’ willingness to engage with policy and the resources they bring into policy conversations. Activities include various efforts to influence policy: policy monitoring, engaging decision-makers, coalition building, engaging and mobilizing the public, information campaigning, reform efforts through pilot projects, and defensive activities (litigation). Finally, outcomes comprise the introduction of new policies, bill changes, or the repeal of old policies. Greater public awareness of a social issue or a more democratic process of policy development are also considered possible outcomes of policy advocacy. We map elements from Gen and Wright’s framework onto Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism to show how educators’ policy advocacy becomes a part of wider cultural and political changes (Fig. 2).

Drawing on these frameworks, the research study we conducted pursued answers to the following research question and subquestions:

1. How do teacher educators navigate the policy advocacy landscape?
   a. How are teacher educators positioned in policy discourses of teacher education reforms?
   b. What voices do teacher educators adopt as they engage with policy discourses? To what effect?

2. Methods

In order to understand how teacher educators engage in policy advocacy, we designed a multiple case study (Stake, 1995, 2006) comprised of four cases that capture the variability in teacher educators’ participation in policy processes within the United States context. To select the cases, we used purposive sampling (Marshall & Rossman, 2015), focusing specifically on teacher educators actively involved in policy advocacy. We chose this focus to better understand the experiences and perspectives of those who participate in policy advocacy, rather than attempting to capture variegated attitudes to policy advocacy across the field. While a cross-sectional study examining how teacher educators view policy engagement could potentially provide a comprehensive picture of the barriers and challenges faced by the field, we deemed it necessary to start with those who invest time and resources in trying to get their voices heard in policy contexts.

To recruit participants, we contacted teacher educators who shared their advocacy experiences at professional meetings or demonstrated their impact on teacher education policies through their writing. Once we established initial contacts and conducted our interviews, we asked for recommendations of others we should include in our sample. Gradually, it became clear that in three of the four cases we pursued, a group of teacher educators worked together either in an informal network or with the support of formal structures, such as a research center. While participants sometimes recommended that we speak to advocates in other states, we eventually bounded our cases by focusing on the policy activities of three advocacy groups and one individual educational researcher. This bounding allowed us to gain a deeper insight into the contextual factors shaping teacher educators’ advocacy, develop a better understanding of the policy pressures they were under, and explore in greater detail the policy artifacts these advocates produced.

3. Cases and participants

Cases A and B encapsulate groups operating primarily within a single state context. In state A, the active core of advocates included several deans, associate deans, and directors of teacher education programs. In state B, advocates were mostly the deans of colleges of education who participated in public policy advocacy. In cases A and B, our study
participants began participating in advocacy after they moved into leadership positions because it was expected of them in their new professional roles (Aydarova et al., 2022a). Prior to this change, however, they paid little attention to what was happening in policy contexts. Case C involves a prolific teacher educator who participated in national policy debates through public interviews and writing. Case D represents the work of a research center created with an intentional focus on policy engagement and located at a single university. The center informed educational policy in more than 20 states. There, all faculty affiliates, regardless of their rank and position, participated in conversations with

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Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework of Policy Advocacy (Gen & Wright, 2013).

Fig. 2. Composite Theoretical Framework of Voice in Policy Advocacy.
policymakers and facilitated workshops on the implementation of reform measures. The summary of the four cases and data sources for each case is presented in Table 1.

3.1. Data collection

We spent a year collecting data for this project (September 2019–September 2020). Drawing on the scholarship in policy advocacy (Gen & Wright, 2013), we designed semi-structured interview protocols with open-ended questions focusing on participants’ journey into policy advocacy, their activities in the policy contexts, as well as challenges they faced and supports they received. These protocols, however, were used to inform our interviews but not limit them structurally or conceptually. When interacting with our participants, we used a dialogic approach (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004) that allowed us to be responsive to the experiences our participants shared with us and tailor questions for each participant in order to enhance our learning about each case. As a result, participants’ voices predominated in our conversations and their stories took us in directions that were not always anticipated. We conducted interviews with 12 participants, with each interview lasting between 60 and 90 min. The interviews were transcribed verbatim.

In addition to interviews, we collected videos of participants’ policy engagements whenever they were available (Table 1). As Sandler (2017, p. 99) noted, “attention to meetings plays a particular role in making visible not only the policy practices but the various lines of contention and struggle entailed in educational policy worlds.” To capture those lines of contention, we searched web archives of the relevant state houses, state boards of education, and other websites for videos related to the education policies with which our participants engaged through their policy advocacy. We compiled and analyzed these video recordings to observe interactions between the participants, policymakers, and other actors. For all video data we relied on publicly available recordings and therefore had no control over the angle of recording, which meant that not all the processes that were taking place in those settings were visible to us. Nevertheless, these videos offered us an opportunity to develop deeper insights into advocates’ policy activities and to contextualize the struggles they described during interviews. We took notes as we watched the videos for contextual information about the case but chose specific segments of our participants’ testimonies and interactions with decision-makers for verbatim transcription and more detailed analysis. In order to contextualize interview and testimony data, we also incorporated relevant policy documents (proposed and passed bills, board of education meeting agendas, etc.) into our dataset.

We also assembled policy artifacts that participants developed during their advocacy work. Policy artifacts provided by the participants included letters to policy makers, drafts of testimony to be presented at state policy and legislative meetings, as well as published (academic and news) articles. In case A, participants shared with us an extensive collection of documents, policy briefs, written comments, and informational packets they produced (Table 1). In case B, we were able to receive artifacts not only from the participants but also from the state house itself by contacting archivists who had stored some of the submitted written comments. In case C, we incorporated into our analysis artifacts of public and policy advocacy available on our participant’s professional website. Finally, in case D, the center’s website provided a wealth of information collected and developed over the years of its members’ engagement with policies.

3.2. Data analysis

All textual data sources that we had collected were imported to the digital qualitative software package Dedoose which was used for coding the data and developing analytic memos about the cases. Through iterative readings of the data we developed a detailed codebook that included several large categories (“policy monitoring,” “coalition building,” “information campaigning,” “reform efforts,” and others) based on the conceptual framework (Fig. 1) of policy advocacy (Gen & Wright, 2013). Those large categories were subdivided into codes. For example, “policy monitoring” was a category applied to data excerpts where participants described how they tried to stay informed about the changes. Other responses indicated that our summaries thoroughly captured what was happening. In one case, we received a suggestion for minor changes. Other responses indicated that our summaries thoroughly captured the events and participants’ experiences.

As we conducted the interviews and engaged in early coding of the data, we wrote analytic memos capturing the emergent themes and preliminary observations (Marshall & Rosman, 2015) about the policy advocacy of teacher educators in our sample. When data collection was completed and initial coding was done, one of the investigators read across transcripts, advocacy artifacts, and other data sources within each case to construct case summaries (Stake, 2006). Those detailed case summaries drew on the patterns of codes that were common for each case as well as holistic rereading of transcripts, advocacy artifacts, and video notes. The case summaries were used to reconstruct the timeline of events in each case, capture educators’ actions, and document the insights participants shared about their work. We shared case summaries with our participants to elicit their feedback on our analysis and solicit their perspectives on whether our reconstructions of each case captured what was happening. In one case, we received a suggestion for minor changes. Other responses indicated that our summaries thoroughly captured the events and participants’ experiences.

The case summaries were used to conduct cross-case analysis to examine the similarities and differences in how teacher educators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Cases, participants, and policy contexts.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Policy Context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case A</td>
<td>Deans, associate deans, directors of different teacher preparation programs in state A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case B</td>
<td>Deans of colleges of education in state B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case C</td>
<td>Individual teacher educator from state C engaged in state and national-level advocacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case D</td>
<td>Research center faculty affiliates (Associate and Full professors) at one university in state D engaged in reform efforts across the nation</td>
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</table>
engaged with policy. As we engaged in this comparative analysis, we noticed patterns of how participants described their voice, agency, and efforts to participate in policy dialogues. At this stage, we turned to Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism, which captured participants’ perspectives and experiences better than other theoretical approaches. We used theoretical framework of dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981; Holquist, 2002) to map out, organize, and connect themes that cut across most cases: locating utterances to respond to, cultivating a collective response, authoring an oppositional voice, and authoring a generative voice (Fig. 2).

3.3. Rigor and trustworthiness

We utilized several strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). First, we conducted interviews with several people from the same group in cases where teacher educators engaged in advocacy together with others. This allowed us to gain a more complete and accurate description of events. Second, we used several types of data to triangulate our analysis. Dedoose allowed two coders to engage in coding that was then compared, discussed, and checked for consistency, although we did not apply formal measures of interrater reliability. Finally, we used case summaries to conduct member-checking to ensure the accuracy of how we reconstructed participants’ accounts.

3.4. Findings

In what follows, we present a cross-case analysis of teacher educators’ efforts to participate in policy advocacy (Gen & Wright, 2013) as dialogic processes (Bakhtin, 1981). Our findings indicate that in policymaking contexts, teacher educators are rarely positioned as speaking subjects whose expertise is considered in policy deliberations. Thus, for teacher educators, policy advocacy starts with a search for utterances to which to respond, as these utterances allowed teacher educators to enter the dialogue — even when not invited. When joining policy debates, teacher educators had to cultivate a collective voice. Because policies are often developed without teacher educators’ input, joining the dialogue involves authoring an oppositional voice to raise concerns about potentially damaging effects of the proposals. In some contexts, teacher educators found opportunities to author generative voices, offering suggestions for change or generating reform roadmaps. We present each theme from our findings in greater detail below.

3.5. Locating utterances that require a response

Across all cases, participants noted how much of legislation targeting teacher education was produced without soliciting input from teacher educators themselves. When decision-makers did present their proposals to teacher educators, they did not seek their input but informed them of already adopted plans. In those cases, teacher educators were not expected to be speaking subjects — their role was to accept the proposal and implement it. When proposals were unexpectedly unveiled without any prior consultations or deliberations, participants described experiencing “shock and anger” (Case A, Interview 6, October 2019).

In some cases, however, teacher educators were not even presented with the information about upcoming legislative changes. To find opportunities to respond to policy, participants had to engage in policy monitoring by tracking bills and following policy developments on their own. Participants described these activities as key elements of policy advocacy and referred to them as knowing what is “coming down the pike” and “staying in the loop.” As one of the advocates explained to us during the interview:

I learned a lot about how important it is to be in the loop. You don’t hear about this if you’re not in the loop. So, trying to make sure that I know what that loop is and how do I stay in it has been key. (Case B, Interview 5, September 2019).

“Staying in the loop” required checking bill databases, tracking down legislative proposals, following policy conversations, and reading education board meeting agendas. Several participants used AACTE’s policy tracker to receive updates about the changes in legislation; others described how they would search through the plethora of bills on the state house websites at the beginning of each legislative session. Most participants noted how much time and resources monitoring policy took up. Sifting through legislative bulletins or state board of education agenda items was time-consuming because it required working through hundreds of pages of dense text. Only those who were explicitly told that policy advocacy would be a part of their job assignment knew they could dedicate the time that this work required.

Building relationships with decision-makers and using informal connections to learn about upcoming legislative items was another strategy advocates utilized. In some cases, however, despite the extensive time and effort that participants invested in making sure they were aware of upcoming policy changes, they noted being caught off guard when they found out about bills or policy changes that were introduced without their knowledge. One participant told us how he and his colleagues felt “betrayed” when they saw an omnibus bill introduced abruptly in his state: “We built relationships with certain key members of the legislature and certainly key people in the Department of Education at the state level, and yet we were not consulted in any way as this major piece of legislature was being put together” (Case B, Interview 10, November 2019).

Acknowledging the marginalization and silencing they experienced in the policy contexts, participants noted the importance of reclaiming the voice of the profession. Thus, in their responses to proposals for new bills, advocates sought the position of a speaking subject included in the dialogue about potential changes in the profession. One participant repeated the observations she shared with decision-makers in the state:

If you will talk to us, we know we don’t get to make the rules, but we live this and we can help you understand what might be problems with policy from an implementation standpoint, but only if you talk to us. (Case A, Interview 11, January 2020).

The pattern that emerged across most cases in our study was that teacher educators were not positioned as speaking subjects by teacher education policy discourses. The very act of joining the dialogue as a participant that brings “a particular way of viewing the world, one that strives for social significance” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 333) became a matter of struggle and contestation.

Not being positioned as speaking subjects with valid expertise meant that teacher educators experienced both short-term and long-term setbacks even if they were active in policy advocacy. In case A, even though teacher educators managed to convince decision-makers to conduct a pilot study and compare the results of edTPA and the state-designed assessment, the endorsement of edTPA returned to the legislative agenda after two years. The teacher educator in case C shared how after years of engaging in policy advocacy, it was hard to identify the impact of that work:

At this point after all these years, my wife keeps reminding me that when I started out as a teacher in 1969 and a teacher educator soon afterwards, things are basically the same if not worse now. She keeps asking me what have you accomplished in all these years — what has actually happened? I don’t know that going out there and writing all this stuff made a difference. (Case C, Interview 8, November 2019).

Amidst constant changes in policy contexts, teacher educators shared a concern that their voices were often lost in policy debates. They could raise awareness of the issues but did not always get a chance to create lasting impact through their advocacy.
3.6. Cultivating a collective voice

Once utterances that required a response were identified, dialogue participants made the choice of whether they should speak or remain silent (Bakhtin, 1981). In the events when participants chose to speak, participation in policy advocacy represented a collective effort across three of the four cases in our study. Whether as informal groups of teacher educators with shared concerns about specific policy issues, or as state-level groups with similar positions in the institutional structures, it was important for advocates to collaborate with others.

The shape of collaborations differed by case. In the case of the research center, collaborations generally took place among the center’s affiliates who worked in teams of two or three as they provided technical assistance to groups from different states in teacher education reform conceptualization and implementation. In states A and B, a core group of advocates watched policy developments and formulated responses. As one of our participants explained, this work entailed the core group coordinating their efforts to ensure that they offered a “unified” response:

“It’s always been that we’ve all been collaborating together before each [board] meeting. We typically have several Zoom calls and tons of emails. There’s a core group of us that are always talking about what do we need to be thinking about for the next meeting, who’s testifying on this, and sometimes we’ll even make a Google spreadsheet of the topics we want to be covered and who will take this one, who will take that one, so that we’re strategic in that process. (Case A, Interview 6, October 2019)

Subsequently, core groups mobilized others to engage with decision-makers by collecting signatures, offering letter templates, or providing policy briefs for wider circulation. To do so, most teacher educators relied on their network resources. A key mechanism for activating a response were state-level professional groups, such as a state organization of deans of colleges of education or state affiliates of professional organizations, such as ATE or AACTE. A small group of active advocates came together to strategize, draft letters, assemble evidence, and plan action, whereas others only added their signatures or endorsed messages that were supposed to represent professional consensus on the matter. These rounds of producing utterances and circulating them among other teacher educators positioned advocates as speakers who speak “through language, a language that has somehow more or less materialized, become objectivized, that [they] merely ventriloquize” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 299). This ventriloquism became particularly evident in policy briefs and collective letters that advocates submitted to policymakers that synthesized research produced by others, compelling “the words that are already populated with social intentions of others … to serve [their] own new intentions” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 300).

When messages were prepared and testimonies drafted, those were often presented by members of the core group. A collective voice in policy advocacy products was often signaled in advocates’ introductions. After stating their name and position, advocates often added that they are speaking on behalf of their state-level groups or professional organizations. Similarly, in letters and written comments, advocates noted how their response to a bill represented a collective perspective:

“I am here today to speak on behalf of the [state] Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, which represents the voices of deans whose colleges and universities prepare initial teacher candidates across [the state]. (Case A, Public Testimony, September 12, 2019). Although I am not officially speaking for other Education deans in the state, I do bring the perspective of being the Immediate Past President of [state] Education Deans Association to my remarks. (Case B, Letter, March 21, 2019).

Thus, in the struggle to be heard, in most situations, teacher educators had to move past the singular voice of themselves as individuals and position themselves as ventriloquists representing a collective voice.

4. Authoring an oppositional voice

Bakhtin (1981, p. 353) noted how a speaking subject’s voice emerges through a dialogic engagement with discourses as it participates in a “protest against the specific verbal utterances toward which it is dialogically aimed.” Across our cases, participants noted that when teacher educators’ voices were not included in the process of policy development, the resulting proposals contained problems, such as making teacher licensure unaffordable for candidates from historically underrepresented groups or exasperating teacher shortages (Aydarova et al., 2021). In such situations, as teacher educators participated in policy advocacy at the state or at the federal level, they engaged in authoring an oppositional voice through information campaigning. Many of them prepared testimonies for education boards or education committees, composed policy briefs, and wrote letters to policymakers and legislators outlining the shortfalls of the proposed policies based on research or practice.

Authoring an oppositional voice through the process of disrupting policy proposals was wrought with tensions. Participants noted that accepting the proposals was an option, but that option often had negative repercussions for the future. Thus, it was important to claim their voice and speak up. As one participant explained,

“On the one hand it would be easy, very easy to go, ‘You know what? Let’s just do edTPA and not try to fight this; be in the know, try to get ahead of the curve. Let’s just jump in and do it and not try to fight this thing. It’s probably going to happen so why not?’ On the other hand, I think it’s important that we take a breadth and really think about this and realize that this is our time. If we’re going to try and diplomatically oppose this and work with legislators and policymakers and really be able to articulate why we’re concerned about it, this is the time to do it; we’re not going to have another opportunity … It’s a real tightrope we have to walk, in both camps if you will, while this plays out. (Case A, Interview 6, October 2019).

The quote above points to a tension in teacher educators’ dual positioning: even though teacher educators disagreed with the proposals, and in some cases chose to oppose them, they had to communicate to decision-makers that they are members of “the same team.” This dual positioning was often communicated through commitments to “what is best for the children of the state,” what would benefit the future of the state at large, or how these policies position the state on the national stage.

On the other hand, teacher educators found themselves frustrated by the changes, but they felt compelled to hide their emotions, constructing an identity as a rational and well-informed rather than an emotional speaking subject. It was important to maintain an appearance of decorum as they wished to not appear angry or unwilling to change. If opposition was necessary, it had to be “diplomatic,” “tactful,” and “respectful.” One participant explained his approach in ways that captures well how others spoke about opposition as well:

“[Once] I definitely was at a point where I was in a mad-as-hell and can’t-take-it-anymore kind of reaction. Generally, I think the fact that I’ve always supported is go in assuming good intentions, realize that that person you’re talking to has an incredible amount of ability to help you with whatever it is that you’re wanting to get accomplished, and therefore treat them with kindness and dignity and respect, and approach it very professionally and find common ground where one can. (Case B, Interview 10, November 2020)

Additionally, as some participants noted, authoring an oppositional voice required recognizing that some aspects of the policy could be changed while others would remain for political reasons. In other words,
In my perspective, certainly, responding to legislation can be and should be a part of advocacy. But in some respects, that horse has left the barn. And it’s much harder to corral that effort on legislation than it is to be on the front end and help guide and direct legislation. We tend to be not leaders, but certainly responders. And I think that we need to take more of an effective leadership role in terms of our advocacy. I try to really think more about how we work within the realm of getting legislation passed or hopefully beyond the front end and by building these relationships. One of the things I tell everybody all the time is we are here as an institution to provide resources to you. We have the resources, the research, the databases, the information, that if you would like information, please, please, please let us know. Let us know how we can help you in what you’re trying to achieve as well. (Case B, Interview 12, September 2020)

Echoing teacher educators’ pleas to be included in policy debates we described earlier, this participant described how he urged policymakers to work more closely with teacher educators. In this instance, our participant led efforts in building university-community partnerships that would address the challenges that historically underserved communities were facing. This work required legislative support, and the university provided support to decision-makers in developing legislation that would address community’s needs. This was one of the instances where teacher educators engaged in authoring a “generative voice.” Instead of engaging in mere opposition, they raised their voices to offer change but often had to use “back channels” to access decision-makers.

Other examples of authoring a generative voice included efforts to develop policies and policy tools that could reshape teacher education based on the needs of the profession. For example, in state A, public universities could not award education degrees, but interdisciplinary studies degrees with a cap on credit hours in education since the 1980s. A vice-chancellor of one of the public universities reached out to the dean’s group to see if this could be addressed. Seeing this as an issue that undermines the quality of teacher preparation and decreases authority of colleges of education, deans across the state discussed the possibility of seeking a change in the state educational code that would allow education degrees to be awarded. First, they worked on removing the prohibition of education degrees. Then, they developed policy recommendations for introducing education studies degrees. Four people – the leader of the dean’s group, a university-based government relations professional, an interim president and a chancellor of a university system – took the lead on drafting a bill proposal.

The group had to find dialogic points of intersection for their proposals: “Who would be the right person to help introduce this bill, both at the House and Senate level? What are those agencies that would be opposed to it?” (Case A, Interview 11, January 2020). In other words, they had to anticipate what responses would come from other dialogue participants. The group checked if there would be opposition to this proposal. They found a sponsor to introduce it to the legislature. When the bill was introduced, the sponsor explained that the bill was a result of a year-long effort by 69 members of the state’s organization of colleges of teacher education. The bill received unanimous support.

Efforts to author a generative voice took other forms as well. For example, the purpose of the research center’s activities (case D) was to create institutionalized reform focused on “a cohesive pipeline of teacher development” by addressing various stages of teachers’ work (preparation, licensing and credentialing, support on the job). Through proposals, training, and subsequent evaluation, center affiliates worked to align teacher learning across the professional development continuum, so that teachers trained through new approaches “do not get lost in the sea of other graduates” with “what they learned get [ting] knocked out.” In other words, in the process of authoring a generative voice, advocates affiliated with the center recognized that a stand-alone proposal for reforming teacher education was unlikely to be effective. If the practices taught in the programs were not supported across other contexts of teachers’ work, those reforms would just be the “tail wagging the
dog.” The center created a reform roadmap that identified potential steps states could take, actors who could take those steps, as well as tools that could be used to support those actions (communication protocol worksheet, scaffolds for teamwork, tools for evaluating innovations, etc.). Through workshops, working sessions, and national convenings of state teams, the center affiliates participated in the redesign of teacher education policies across a variety of states. This case illustrates that in some cases policy advocacy can be productive, and not just reactive, creating opportunities for teacher educators to shape the profession.

6. Discussion and implications

To date, teacher educators’ policy engagement has received little empirical attention. The findings of our study suggest that some teacher educators direct increasingly more effort towards influencing policy. This is an important shift from the culture of compliance seen as traditionally predominating in the field (Wilson & Youngs, 2005). In the context of declining enrollments in teacher education programs (Rutten & Cunningham, 2019) and looming dangers of program closures (Hawley, 2021; Morrar, 2020), reclaiming the voice of the profession becomes an existential imperative. As Bakhtin (1981) would argue, losing one’s voice in the existential dialogue presents the threat of extinction – the threat that teacher education has been facing for at least a decade (Weiner, 2007, 2011; Zeichner, 2010).

Our study analyzed how teacher educators across different contexts worked to reclaim their professional voice by locating policy proposals that required a response. Even if teacher educators were not invited to participate in a dialogue about those proposals, they looked for opportunities to enter policy conversations as speaking subjects – experts authoring a voice of the profession. With rising anti-intellectualism and general distrust towards academic expertise in the U.S. (Hofstader, 1966; Motta, 2018), these efforts took much time and effort. Whether those efforts necessarily paid off or not, Bakhtin’s (1981, 1984) theory of dialogism offers a useful insight that utterances in an existential dialogue can create cultural change even if this change is not easily observable in the moment. Across the cases we observed how our participants have energized other educators across the states to follow their lead and join policy conversations. In other words, the very act of teacher educators joining policy dialogues creates more opportunities for the field at large to adopt a more courageous activist stance.

Our study makes three contributions to scholarly literature. First, our findings point to the importance of mobilizing collective efforts to enter policy dialogues. Taking on responsibility for educational futures requires a collective will and a network of like-minded and committed actors. This demand for collective and collaborative work, however, runs counter to the hyper-individual culture of academia where performance evaluations are based on the output and impact produced by individual faculty members and where careers are made on producing distinct and unique academic contributions. Advocacy work, on the other hand, demands relationship-building, ongoing information exchange, and sharing of resources that ultimately erase boundaries of ownership or promises of academic advancement. Recognizing these differences would require not only adjusting expectations for faculty who engage in advocacy but also prioritizing the cultivation of collective responsibility in programs, departments, and colleges of education.

Second, our findings indicate that although teacher educators engage in coalition building with professional peers, there are fewer efforts to engage in advocacy across social strata and involve activists in the community. Here, Anderson and Cohen’s (2015, 2018) call to join social movements centered on justice and equity in public education sheds light on the aspect of advocacy that appears to be underdeveloped. Given the rise of authoritarian policymaking in the U.S. and across international contexts, there is a critical need to attend to the voices of communities that have been silenced or sidelined in policy deliberations. As local communities, parent organizations, or activist groups seek to address racial injustices and educational inequities across educational contexts, it is important to consider how teacher educators could join their efforts. Teacher educators and educational researchers engaged in advocacy have a lot to offer such alliances in terms of their expert knowledge and access to data. Supporting social movements would require investments in building coalitions with historically underserved communities (Sleeter, 2008) and working alongside community activists. These are time-consuming endeavors that are rarely supported by the culture of academic capitalism prevalent in higher education institutions. To preserve public education and cultivate teaching as a profession, however, institutions need to change their stance on what type of work is valued and supported long-term.

Third, our findings challenge the focus on resistance that predominates writing on educators’ advocacy and activism (e.g., Anderson & Cohen, 2015, 2018). Although neoliberal reforms do indeed undermine education as a public good and dismantle university-based teacher education, our study shows that opposing decision-makers comes at a cost. In political contexts where much decision-making rests on relationships and positive publicity, engaging in open critiques of legislators’ initiatives undermines teacher educators’ ability to influence future policymaking. Many of our study participants indicated the importance of authoring a generative voice geared towards a positive change instead. These observations should be heeded by those who seek to enter advocacy themselves and those who theorize how educators navigate policy landscapes. Counter-discourses and counter-conduct can result in greater resistance and opposition from decision-makers, whereas efforts to imagine and create a better world are more likely to open opportunities for finding common ground with those who hold power in the society. In offering their visions of reform or policy initiatives, teacher educators could provide roadmaps or resources to inform policies, even if opportunities to write bills or offer policy texts may not always be available. Generating new visions of educational futures does not have to be confined to legislative or policymaking contexts. Gen and Wright’s (2013) framework sheds light on areas of public-facing work that deserves more attention from teacher educators – media campaigning and public advocacy should be deployed more to engage the public in imagining alternatives to the neoliberal designs that now pervade the world.

Thus, our study has important implications for other international contexts. Whether teacher educators are working in centralized or decentralized systems, whether those systems do or do not have built-in spaces for public input or deliberation with professionals about the direction of the reform, it is still possible for teacher educators to author a generative voice with alternative visions of more just educational practices and policies. Relationship-building with decision-makers, letter writing to politicians, and media campaigning through local, national, or social media can be deployed regardless of the political system. Importantly, it behooves teacher educators to pursue coalition-building and networking across international borders to collectively shape the future of teacher education as a professional field.

7. Conclusion

Our study indicates that as teacher educators work on reclaiming their voice in policy debates, they could focus on cultivating a collective voice that brings together those in the profession and those who struggle for the future of public education at large. We concur with Golden and Bieler (2019, p. 9) that the current historical moment calls for “movement-building to amplify teachers’ voices and decisively call out legislation that undermines teachers’ agency and ability to support students and their communities.” In light of this, teacher educators and educational researchers could consider how they can expand their networks to include parent organizations and civil rights groups in their policy advocacy activities to build social movements towards justice, equity, and inclusion.

Future research should explore in greater detail how the issues of equity and justice play out in teacher educators’ policy advocacy. A
lingering question that has remained unanswered so far is whether teacher educators’ work in solidarity with underserved communities (Sleeter, 2008; Zeichner et al., 2016) creates opportunities to amplify the voices of those who have been historically marginalized in policy conversations and whether building alliances across social stratata produces positive policy effects.

In the struggle to reclaim the voice of the profession, it behooves educators and researchers to consider Edward Said’s work on the responsibility of intellectuals to speak truth to power. Said (1994, p. 88) poses a series of important questions to consider in this work: “How does one speak the truth? What truth? For whom and where?” As teacher educators and educational researchers look for ways to make their voices heard in the policy contexts and in the public sphere, we urge them to engage in critical reflexivity, to be mindful of the privileges they bring to those spaces, and to remain vigilant about whose interests they pursue. The question of whose truth is being pursued through advocacy and whether that truth serves to advance justice, equity, and inclusion needs to become central in the deliberations over directions of reform and existential dialogues about teacher education.

Aydarova, E. (2022). Shadow elite of teacher education reforms: Intermediary responsibility of intellectuals to speak truth to power. Said (1994, p. 88) poses a series of important questions to consider in this work: “How does one speak the truth? What truth? For whom and where?” As teacher educators and educational researchers look for ways to make their voices heard in the policy contexts and in the public sphere, we urge them to engage in critical reflexivity, to be mindful of the privileges they bring to those spaces, and to remain vigilant about whose interests they pursue. The question of whose truth is being pursued through advocacy and whether that truth serves to advance justice, equity, and inclusion needs to become central in the deliberations over directions of reform and existential dialogues about teacher education.


