

Tutors can be Allies: Putting Allyship at the Top of Your Agenda for Students and Families

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LEARNS – Linking Education and America Reads through National Service

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One of my school allies was Ms. Jensen. As a 5th grader, I observed her respect, fairness, and kindness to all students firsthand and remember appreciating the parts of the day when I could be in her classroom. She was a lover of history and made Pacific Northwest history come alive for us. I still remember when we made dioramas and were invited to imagine what people were feeling, hoping, fearing, and thinking as they struggled to form communities. She encouraged us to question and examine things from different points of view.

It was she I turned to when I decided to confront a situation at our school where a new physical education teacher was abusive. Many of us had been victims of his cruelty. I wanted to quit school; she wanted me to problem-solve and think through my options. One week later, in full view of everyone during lunch period, a core of us students presented the vice principal with a petition signed by every 5th grader with a threat of a walk-out and a call for a special parents' meeting. The next day the school administration held a meeting with the teacher and our student group to discuss the problem. We talked and the situation got better immediately. The teacher ended up staying and so did I.

Ms. Jensen believed in us and facilitated our problem solving. As a small female, living in a basement in Chinatown, learning English as a second language, and struggling almost daily with the cultural insensitivity that surrounded me at school, I needed an ally like Ms. Jensen.

Many of us are able to think back and identify a number of allies like "Ms. Jensen" who made a real difference in our school lives. They, in their humble, compassionate, and principled ways, acted as allies for us and many other students. Most of our allies would be surprised to know just how we cherish their contributions to our learning and safer passage through our school years.

It remains too often the case that a majority of our most "different" and marginalized students are also our most misunderstood and mistreated. They, like all students, require many adult allies and, without them, struggle to find success during their tenure in schools and school programs. When students are made targets because of their ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, spiritual beliefs, sexual orientation, abilities, disabilities, size, cultural membership, proficiency with English, place of national origin, immigration status, home community, political beliefs, or political status, learning definitely becomes encumbered.

The role of ally and "allyship" is critically important and needs promotion. From numerous accounts we know that the acts of allies are long-lasting and critical to positive youth development.

Although ally stories inform us that allies come in different shapes, sizes, ages, roles, backgrounds, and sexual orientations, ally behaviors seem to share some common ground. This article highlights important actions of allies and may help you consider how taking on the role of an ally can not only enhance literacy development for children, but improve school and life success for all young people.

Allies generally are principled individuals who, through their daily, simple acts of courage and compassion, challenge prejudice, discrimination, ignorance, misinformation, cultural isolation, internalized oppression, alienation, poverty, limited resources, skewed power relationships, and their own privileges. Allies are advocates for equity, access, dignity, and respect. They are committed to promoting cultural pride, empowerment, and a sense of self-worth and belonging in the young people around them. Where some see "individual deficits" and cultural differences as the problem, allies appreciate the many

assets and "gifts" that students, parents, and communities culturally different than themselves bring to the learning

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What Is an Ally

"An ally is someone who speaks up or takes action against oppression that is not targeted at them."

(Yeskl & Wright, 1997).

An Ally:

Builds and brokers relationships;

Relates and shares information;

Advocates for justice;

Validates experiences; and

Explains norms.

(Nakashima & Hickman, 1995).

experience, and they operate with the understanding that the problem is systemic.

Who are allies?

Allies are “barrier-busters.” Allies come from every part of the school and community and may be parents, family members, neighbors, friends, siblings, peers, tutors, local store owners, administrative staff, lunch room staff, custodians, bus drivers, front office managers, school volunteers, classroom teachers, classroom aides, community members, leaders, etc. Often, allies have personal histories or knowledge that motivate them to help others traverse the school system and other societal institutions more effectively.

The larger vision of allies calls for the restructuring of schools so that all students and families have opportunities to thrive in their learning. Allies may or may not share cultural membership (ethnicity, age, gender, class, sexual orientation, physical and mental ability and disability, immigration status, etc.) with the youth they help. They are individuals who make lasting commitments to building their awareness and competencies for working and living in harmony with cultures and communities different than their own (Nelson, 1995). Allies are not born, but develop over time and deed. With every effort made to challenge conditions, systems, practices, programming, and discriminatory attitudes that make targets of young people, allies grow in their capacity to change and transform conditions.

What are ally beliefs?

Most allies appear to operate from a fierce personal commitment to and vision of what is a fair, just, healthy, and compassionate school, community, and society. Ally behavior indicates some common beliefs such as:

- ◆ Each youth is unique and to be valued.
- ◆ An ally’s role is to facilitate, improve, and empower students, families, staff, and schools to make conditions better for all students.
- ◆ The total ecology of the school and community matters—values, content, practices, vision, individuals, staffing, language, climate, structure, organization, cultures, communities, system of privileges, etc.
- ◆ Cultural competency is a commitment, a process, and a life journey.

How do allies strengthen efforts to develop literacy?

While the vast majority of tutors and school personnel are caring and well intentioned, not all of them are the allies they could be for the young people and families they serve. Students who need help with reading and language

development are struggling in school for numerous reasons and these reasons are often systemic and connected to issues of diversity within the school culture. Their difficulties are often multi-layered and exacerbated by school priorities, rituals, practices, and protocol which promote a culture alien to the students. Single strategies and “one size fits all” approaches have not and will not work. Their whole person (mind, body, spirit, emotion, social/cultural legacy

and identity, family and community background, and school experiences) is not yet welcomed and honored in most reading programs. Allies see how a lack of access and respect, social isolation, and the incompatibility of values inhibit learning. They recognize that reading programs, like

schools, often reflect the values, processes, and priorities of a narrow cultural spectrum. They also understand that there is a direct connection between students’ sense of acceptance in the culture of a school or program and their ability to gain confidence in their reading ability. Canned reading programs are designed to primarily address the perceived areas of skill deficit in readers and generally are inflexible. Allies, on the other hand, build from the language and culture of individual students. Where tutors, teachers, and volunteers have made addressing issues of diversity an integral part of their program, deeper levels of learning are possible.

Seize the Opportunities!

Within the arena of literacy development, allies seize the opportunity to:

Facilitate Learning Climates that Work to Honor All Learners. The culture and climate of the school can be hostile to students who are perceived to be culturally different from the narrow norm. When allies work hard to facilitate learning environments that are safe, welcoming, respectful, and value learners’ cultures and experiences, learners can relax and better focus on the learning at hand.

◆ Develop, clarify, and reinforce classroom rules that encourage mutual respect, cooperative learning, and cultural appreciation.

◆ Honor cultural and linguistic values and traditions by making a place for them within reading activities and the curriculum.

◆ Commit to meeting each student as a unique individual with talents, hopes, passions, gifts, and challenges, as well as someone who has many cultural memberships.

◆ Work at being sensitive to students’ challenges and home lives and avoid making broad generalizations, unfeel-

ing comments, or creating expectations that cannot be met given current financial, emotional, physical, and cultural realities.

- ◆ Carefully select print material that help dispel stereotypes, correct misinformation, and work to diminish internalized negative self images.

- ◆ Dignify the reading process by making use of print resources that support the student's development of healthy self-esteem, cultural identity, and sense of inclusion.

- ◆ Model an appreciation and respect for all cultures and periodically conduct self-audits of the learning environment for cultural competence.

- ◆ Work with and for students to help them restructure learning environments to be more "user-friendly." This not only facilitates the lowering of anxiety for many neglected learners, but also teaches students that it is within their power to help make the classroom more responsive to their and other students' needs.

- ◆ Take every opportunity to bridge the culture of the students with the culture of the school and school program, using cross-cultural perspectives that allow you to share important information about both the home/community or school/program contexts without placing value judgments on either.

- ◆ Assess the program and school climate for issues of access and privilege and work with others to improve these conditions.

Address Issues of Diversity while Working to Help Students Build Knowledge and Skills that Will Help Them with Reading. The feelings and experiences that students have and the day-to-day challenges that they face are powerful motivation for honing skills and potent material for a language development program. Too few young people are learning that the skill of reading can be useful in their efforts to understand themselves and others and to do real life problem-solving. To do this, allies:

- ◆ Select content that is relevant to the lives of the students and places them in empowering roles.

- ◆ Nurture critical thinking and teach for social justice by exposing students to information, role models, literature, and processes that encourage them to question and solve real-life dilemmas with fairness and compassion.

- ◆ Use multiple strategies for literacy development to meet diverse situations, cultural contexts, and learning styles.

- ◆ Incorporate into your lessons many different "authentic voices" from the literature, oratory, and traditions of many cultures, especially those in which the students have membership.

- ◆ Integrate at least some basic phrases from students' home languages into the learning experience.

- ◆ Learn and make use of culturally responsive teaching strategies to reach students more naturally and enhance their learning.

- ◆ Enrich the reading program with information about the families' and communities' different linguistic traditions—storytelling, chanting, drama, oral and aural tradition, languages of proficiency, knowledge about whose role it is to speak to whom about what, most frequent forms of written communication, etc.

- ◆ Build on the students' communication gifts—storytelling, joking, composing, singing, listening, drama, and passion for news, poetry, rhythm, or metaphor.

Build an Understanding and Appreciation for the Community and Context of the Student. Understanding that there may be many different kinds of barriers that prevent students from learning to read is an important insight. Another is that an important key to opening the world of reading to young people might be readily available in their home or community. The more tutors understand the context in which learners will be refining and using their reading skills and the more they use this information to inform their strategies, the more focused and relevant the coaching of reading can be. Allies:

- ◆ Study the many non-reading challenges that confront English language learners, such as circumstances for immigration or migration, fluency with first language, family/community bilingual resources, family work situation, and struggles to meet basic needs.

- ◆ Know and share information about available community resources that could contribute to the health and well-being of the students and their families—language translators, feeding programs, dental care, legal help, job training programs, mental health counseling, culture classes, tenant rights organizations, drug-free social activities, mentoring and community service opportunities, community service agencies, and the like.

- ◆ Seek to understand the challenges students face as they are forced to cross-cultural code switch (between language and value systems) many times a day in home, school, community, play, work, and so forth.

- ◆ Seek to understand what the home and community conditions are that support and compete with each student's reading development.

Maximize Learning through Building Strong Relationships with Students, Families, and School Personnel. Just as the learning climate is important, so is the quality and composition of the network of people who surround struggling readers. Allies know the importance of reaching out to each student while strengthening relationships with significant individuals in his or her life who can help address

any problems that hinder the development of reading competencies. Allies:

- ◆ Take time to learn each student's story, and family and cultural history. Model for students how to do this respectfully. Invite each young person to share who he or she is, putting on hold what can easily be seen.

- ◆ Take time to share appropriate information about oneself with students, their families, and the school.

- ◆ Refuse to label, "type," categorize, or gossip about students and their families. Be willing to confront conversations that you hear in which others do.

- ◆ Help bridge information gaps between students, the school, and families.

- ◆ Partner with schools and the community to build more culturally sensitive activities and programs.

- ◆ Partner with schools and the community to increase student access to opportunities to build study skills, receive positive recognition, make connections to mentors and caring adults, join in service-learning, and participate in healthy, drug-free activities.

- ◆ Partner with parents, families, and caregivers to

understand and carry out their role to support student learning and success.

- ◆ Partner with parents, families, and caregivers to understand what contributions they make and can make to the school/program and learning of all students.

- ◆ Facilitate ongoing activities that help strengthen communication between programs, home, and school.

- ◆ Work in collaboration with school personnel and parents to effectively challenge and bridge barriers that the schools create for students and their families.

Hopefully, this reflection on allyship will help spark important discussions. Remember, when ally stories are heard and told, they help make us recommit to our own growth and to follow through with seemingly simple acts that make a difference across the school program, curricula, culture, and community. Let each of us take inspiration from the legacy of our own allies and those in our midst and join with others to work more diligently to meet the diverse needs of all young people.

Recommended Readings:

Edited by Mauriann Adams, Lee Anne Bell and Pat Griffin, *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice: A Source Book* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 1997). This curriculum is geared to adult learners and workshop facilitators who help adults address issues of diversity.

Edited by Bill Bigelow, Linda Christensen, Stan Karp, Barbara Miner, and Bob Peterson, Special Edition of "Rethinking Schools," *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice* (Milwaukee, Wisc., 1994). Provides a collection of strategies developed primarily by K-12 practitioners to facilitate discussions with young people about social stigmatization and labeling people who are different, and to evaluate materials for bias.

Louise Derman-Sparks and the A.B.C. Task Force, *Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children* (Washington D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998). Focused primarily on early childhood populations, this collection both provides a clear discussion of basic diversity concepts and details lots of activities.

Edited by Violet J. Harris, *Using Multiethnic Literature in the K-8 Classroom* (Norwood, Mass.: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, Inc., 1997) This multicultural children's literature resource provides critical analysis of ethnic-specific writings and guidance on selecting reading material.

J. Hixson and M.B. Tinzmann, "Who Are the 'At-Risk' Students of the 1990s?" available from the National Mentoring Network (NCREL, Oak Brook, 1990) This paper clarifies different perspectives on the notion of "at risk" and challenges practitioners to think systematically.

Linda Lantieri and Janet Patti, *Waging Peace in Our Schools* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1996). Tried and true strategies and resources for facilitating safe and respectful learning communities are documented and discussed in this volume.

Edited by Enid Lee, Deborah Menkart, and Margo Okazawa-Rey, *Beyond Heroes and Holidays* (Washington D.C.: Network of Educators on the Americas, 1998). This resource is a practical guide to K-12 anti-racist and multicultural education, and staff development. The back section contains a multicultural resource guide that lists resources by content area.

Edited by Lauren Miller and the Poetry for the People Collective, *June Jordan's Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Blueprint* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 1995). This volume documents poetry as a unique teaching tool, offers creative ways to encourage young people to express themselves through poetry, and demonstrates the power of poetry in the lives of young adults.

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Equity Center, *Improving Education for Immigrant Students: A Guide for K-12 Educators in the Northwest and Alaska* (Portland, Ore.: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1998) Provides good background information to help tutors understand the social/cultural/political, emotional, and linguistic needs and traditions of immigrant students.