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# Ally & Accomplice: Two Sides of the Same Coin



**If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.**

**- Lilla Watson**

# Did You Know

## There are Levels to Advocacy?

A D V O C A C Y

Y D A O C Y C A

In this edition of *Equity Dispatch*, we will explore the concepts of allyship and accomplice, and how they may manifest at the intersection of education and advocacy. The concept of being an ally has become a hot-button topic under the umbrella of social justice work. In the case of K-12 education, allyship should not be decoupled from authentic equity work in K-12 spaces, especially if educators consider their service with students going beyond the standardized, alleged Color- and culture-neutral curriculum.

According to the Rochester Racial Justice Toolkit (n.d.),

Allyship is a proactive, ongoing, and incredibly difficult practice of unlearning and re-evaluating, in which a person [possessing privileged identities] works in solidarity and partnership with a marginalized group of people to help take down the systems<sup>1</sup> that challenge that group's basic rights, equal access, and ability to thrive in our society. (para. 1)

Of note, it is important to recognize that the title of ally should not be bestowed upon oneself (i.e. you must be recognized by member(s) of a marginalized group<sup>2</sup> as an ally) (Smith, Puckett, & Simon, 2015). Regardless, all educators have the opportunity to practice allyship in their spaces. Ideally, practicing legitimate allyship delineates from those who behave inauthentically, seeking to solicit accolades while not actually “engaging in actions that disrupt White supremacy, homophobia, ableism or patriarchy in their own local spaces and interactions” (Moore, Sanborn, Jackson, Martinez Hoy, Skelton, & Thorius, 2019, p. 2).

Allyship is a verb; it is about individuals with privileged identities *using* their privilege to disrupt oppression, while working alongside people who are part of marginalized groups, toward realizing equity and social justice (Ramsey, 2014). In the classroom, this can look like including curricular resources that reflect identities and lived experiences that deviate from dominant identity markers (e.g. White, middle-class, temporarily able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual, Protestant). It can also look like providing space for students to critically examine standard curricular materials for biases, erasure, and marginalizing narratives about people with non-dominant social identities (i.e. people of Color, women, people with dis/abilities, people who identify as LGBTQ+, etc.) (Coomer, Jackson, & Moore, 2019).

Fundamentally, those who desire to practice allyship should: “Lift others up by advocating; not venting as a personal attack; recognize systematic inequalities and realize the impact of micro-aggressions; believe underrepresented peoples’ experiences; and listen, support, self-reflect & change” (Atcheson, 2018, *Becoming Actionable Allies* section). These kinds of actions work together to decenter those with privileged identities in social justice and equity-driven work, demonstrating respect for the significance of the socio-cultural, -political, and -historical realities that marginalized groups bring

<sup>1</sup>Unjust systems of oppression which stratify, creating “haves” and “have nots” (Rochester Racial Justice Toolkit, n.d.)

<sup>2</sup>E.g. individuals who identify as LGBTQ+, non-binary, women, disabled, non-Christian, people of Color, and/or emergent multilingual individuals

with them. In this way, allies serve as assistants to, and not appropriators of social justice advocacy.

### ***What does it Mean to be an Accomplice?***

www.whiteaccomplices.org defines the actions of an accomplice as “directly challeng[ing] institutionalized racism, colonization, and White supremacy by blocking or impeding racist people, policies, and structures” (pg. 2). While this definition centers on race, we extend this definition to include accomplice-ship to other marginalized groups. To be sure, accomplice-ship and allyship differ in that while all accomplices are allies, not all allies can be defined as accomplices. While allyship involves being in solidarity with marginalized groups, being an accomplice refers to individuals asserting their own power by putting themselves on the line, operationalizing their privilege to challenge oppressive power structures—all at the risk of giving up the safety of their own privilege. The key differences between being an ally and being an accomplice are that accomplices accept personal risks by: jeopardizing their comfort; endangering their livelihood; compromising their physical safety; and, in some cases, gambling their freedom—all in support of marginalized groups of people.

Similar to allyship, accomplices serve to disrupt the status quo, especially when it perpetuates oppression. However, being an accomplice can be described as a step further than allyship, such that it involves more direct, overt action. A historical example of this is the Freedom Rides in the summer of 1961 where Black people, and White accomplices, rode buses across the southern states in non-violent protests of segregated transportation. A number of individuals involved were physically assaulted, chased, and arrested—including the White accomplices. In this example, the accomplices took their solidarity a step further and placed their lives on the front lines as physical representations of their protests against the rampant and systemic racism in this country.

While accomplice-ship does not necessarily result in physical harm, it does mean literally putting yourself in a position that indisputably communicates your stance on advocating alongside marginalized groups, or being “complicit in a struggle towards liberation” (Indigenous Action, 2014, para 5).

It is important to note that we do not take the viewpoint that one course of action (ally v. accomplice) is better, or more effective, than the other. Rather, we provide the distinction between ally and accomplice for educational and advocacy purposes. Ally and accomplice are both critical stances for educators to take, who purport to be equity-oriented. Furthermore, ally and accomplice actions are situational and dynamic, rather than static. As social justice-oriented educators, we must use our discernment to establish when it is appropriate to be an ally or accomplice, dependent upon context. In this way, we determine how we wish to express our commitment to equity-driven systemic change.

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# Why It Matters

## Students Need More Overt Support



Fostering equitable school systems is more than educational spaces being *responsive and reflective* of all students; it is also about *dismantling* structural and systemic barriers to equitable access to resources and opportunities for all students. Ultimately, disrupting the oft oppressive power structures that persistently (re)produce inequities in our schools (Sanborn, Jackson, Moore, Skelton, & Thorius, 2019).

For example, initiatives such as multicultural education, culturally responsive and sustaining curriculum, etc. were crafted to pull different students' identities into learning spaces, aiming to disrupt status quo curricular practices. However, oftentimes these curricular approaches are appropriated and watered down; students with marginalized identities find themselves tokenized, exceptionalized, misrepresented or erased as a result of reactionary measures (Moore, Jackson, Kyser, Skelton, & Thorius, 2015). Expanding this notion, an example of allyship might be to challenge the traditional English/liberal arts canon, which require readings for most high schools, consisting of predominantly White male authors (Greenbaum, 1994). A show of allyship might include presenting parents' arguments to faculty voicing concerns about particular texts that may be offensive to Black and Indigenous students (e.g. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*). Conversely, in this situation an accomplice may deviate from the curriculum altogether, forsaking rigid curriculum despite mandates.

Another example of educators taking a step further towards accomplice-ship is by walking alongside students in the midst of student-led activism. Sometimes students may feel compelled to speak out and take a stance against education-based organizations that have oppressed them. Standing in solidarity (allyship) by openly agreeing with and being present during protests (accomplice) are different, but very important positions. A contemporary example of student accomplice-ship lie in the protests of the removal of Mexican American Studies courses in the Tucson Unified School District in Tucson, AZ—which ultimately led to mass student walk-outs (Cabrera, Meza, Romero, & Rodríguez, 2013). Faculty walked alongside these students during their protests, amidst accusations that the curriculum promoted domestic mutiny against the US government. In this example the uprising was led by the students; the adult accomplices were the ones present during the protests, and more specifically adults like Andrea Romero who put her job on the line by presenting the material on the banned books—in light of direct messaging from her institution that faculty should not be involved (Cabrera, Meza, Romero, & Rodríguez, 2013).

There are indeed levels and depths of sacrifice when practicing allyship and accomplice-ship. This ongoing commitment necessitates responsibility and accountability to ensure that allies/accomplices are handling their newfound journey toward authentic social justice advocacy. This journey involves being willing to accept and be mindful of the consistent risks and sacrifices.



# For Equity Now

## Key Considerations of Authentic Advocacy

The labor towards authentic advocacy takes a great deal of critical self-reflection and action. It is important for those individuals to “approach...allyship [and accomplice-ship] with humility, recognizing that [you] are fallible...remaining open to feedback and critique” (Michael & Conger, 2009, p. 59). In order to be an effective partner/co-conspirator in ongoing social justice advocacy, there are several key considerations to ensure allies/accomplices are in line with advancement toward justice, rather than impeding progress:

### ***Considerations for Allyship (adapted from Franchesca Ramsey’s 5 Tips for Being an Ally)***

- **Understand Your Privilege**
  - ◆ Privilege is defined as any advantage that is unearned, exclusive, and socially conferred (Johnson, 2006). Critical self-reflection will lead to recognizing what rights you have, that others do not. It is important to understand the privileges you hold before attempting to fight for those who may not share your ascribed socially constructed affordances.
- **Listen and Do Your Homework**
  - ◆ You must be open and willing to learn—which means you must know to decenter yourself, and actively listen. Additionally, take advantage of social media and other internet outlets (blogs, news articles, Tweets, etc.) for current events. Most importantly allies must not depend upon marginalized groups to teach you directly; rather, be willing to seek the information for yourself.
- **Speak up—But not Over**
  - ◆ Use your privilege to advocate for the community you wish to support. However, do not speak over them, for them, or take credit for work they are already doing.
- **You’ll Make Mistakes! Apologize When You Do!**
  - ◆ This is hard work; you undoubtedly will make mistakes. Embrace your mistakes and learn from them. Remember: intent ≠ impact. If a scenario arises where you make a mistake, listen to the correction, sincerely apologize, commit to changing your behavior, and move forward.
- **Ally is a Verb**
  - ◆ Calling yourself an ally is insufficient; you have to actually do the work!

**Considerations for being an Accomplice (Ferber, 2010; adapted from White Accomplices, n.d.)**

- **Accomplices' freedoms and liberations are bound together with marginalized communities; so retreat or withdrawal in the face of oppressive structures is not an option.**
  - ◆ The work is difficult, but commitment means understanding that advocacy is for the greater good. Being an accomplice means enduring discomfort.
- **Accomplices' actions are informed by, directed, and often coordinated with leaders who are members of marginalized groups.**
  - ◆ Marginalized groups are the experts of their own experiences. It is they that will tell you how you may be most useful, rather than you leading/acting upon your own accord
- **Accomplices actively listen with respect, and understand that oppressed people are not monolithic in their tactics and beliefs.**
  - ◆ Similar to allyship, listening is critical. The key here is a reverence for detail and regard for the myriad ways the marginalized group you have chosen to support has dealt with oppression
- **Accomplices aren't motivated by personal guilt or shame.**
  - ◆ Accomplices who focus on their guilt or shame (un)intentionally decenters the marginalized group's daily, persistent realities. Accomplices should be willing to forsake their own feelings, for the advancement of advocacy.
- **Accomplices build trust through consent and being accountable; this means not acting in isolation where there is no accountability.**
  - ◆ Being an accomplice is a constant unlearning and relearning process, which may result in acute dissonance. It is important for accomplices to remain vigilant and present, to demonstrate commitment to advocacy—no matter how it may feel.

**It is important for those individuals to “approach...allyship [and accomplice-ship] with humility, recognizing that [you] are fallible...remaining open to feedback and critique” (Michael & Conger, 2009, p. 59).**

## Meet the Authors

This January 2020 issue of *Equity Dispatch* was written and edited by:  
**Robin G. Jackson, Kyle Huskins, Seena M. Skelton, & Kathleen King Thorius**

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