
Adults as allies to young people striving for social justice

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Abstract

What are some strategies for preparing adults as allies to young people striving for social justice in metropolitan areas that are becoming more segregated and more diverse? This question is especially important at a time when young people are aware of segregation, and want to communicate and collaborate with others who are different from themselves, across the boundaries that segregate them. Some adults successfully support and engage with youth as adult allies. Many adults are, however, conditioned to position youth in secondary roles, and would benefit from more information about how to successfully engage with young people as allies. This article analyses the efforts of adults like these, drawing upon work in metropolitan Detroit, an area that is among the most segregated in the United States, and that also has small pockets of diversity. It views adults as allies in their broader context, identifies exemplars of practice and discusses the lessons learned from empirically based practice.

What can adults do to support young people who are striving for social justice?

Young people care about social justice. They are aware of segregation and its inequalities. They observe prejudice against others because of their race, and discrimination because of their religion. They notice when there is bigotry, when teachers cannot facilitate sensitive discussions and when administrators are unsure how to proceed.

Some young people respond to bigotry by speaking their discomfort in the moment. Only a few of them talk about it, or convene a meeting, or organise a group, or strategise for change. Instead, most youth keep their thoughts to themselves, and can count on one hand the number of adults who reach out to them in such situations.

This article examines adults as allies to young people who are striving for social justice, with an emphasis on adults and youth in metropolitan Detroit. We recognise that one case cannot form the basis for broad generalisations, while also framing the work in terms of its wider significance.

Adults as allies

Adult allies are older people from outside the immediate family who work with and support young people in working for social justice. Adult allies, such as teachers in schools, or neighbourhood residents in community groups, collaborate with them for a common purpose, and play various roles in the process. These collaborations can be formal and informal, and can go beyond a designated professional role.

Because of their older age, adult allies have more life and professional experience than young people, and this is integral to their roles, although youth have expertise of their own. They know who can recruit other youth to meetings, and which adults have the best connections with authorities. Young people see the world through their own eyes, and no one is more expert than they on what they see.

Adults can play various roles in working with young people. They can initiate programs in which youth are consumers of services, or treat them as if they are decorations for the agency. Or they can enlist them to serve on boards or committees on which they rarely speak, or ask them for feedback on decisions that are already made. Or, in unusual instances, they ask them to initiate efforts of their own, or form partnerships for collaboration with them.

‘Youth–adult partnerships’ are relationships in which partners share their common purpose, recognise their respective resources, communicate openly and are relatively equal in their collaboration. Relationships like this can be empowering, partly because collective action enables adults and children to win real improvements in people’s lives, giving them a sense of their own power and altering the inequalities that are normal under adultism.

‘Adultism’ is a condition in which adults assume that they are better than young people and are entitled to act upon them simply because of their age. So-called youth–adult partnerships in which the partners are unequal are not authentic, but a form of adultism. ‘Youth voice’ is characteristic of authentic partnerships in which young people express their ideas, and actively participate in the decisions that affect them, such as some of the youth — and their allies — in metropolitan Detroit.

Metropolitan Detroit

Metropolitan Detroit is highly segregated, with small areas of diversity. The city is largely black, the suburbs are mostly white, and some small areas are increasing in population of African, Asian, Middle Eastern and Latin American descent. Although it is often described as ‘segregated’, it is better viewed as ‘segregated and diverse’.

Segregation results in inequalities. Some schools have rich resources, but others have unsafe facilities and outdated books. Some students score high in national tests, while others score so low that experts say that they might have done better if they had guessed. Diversity strengthens society, and intensifies inequalities. When minority students of color enrol in schools that are majority white, for example, achievement gaps widen and racial incidents increase.

Young people are open to discussion of discrimination, but live in segregation, with too few opportunities to communicate with people who are different from themselves. They understand the limitations of segregation, appreciate the benefits of diversity and want to interact with other young people across boundaries, but opportunities are limited.

Youth Dialogues on Race and Ethnicity in Metropolitan Detroit was established to involve young people of diverse racial and ethnic identities in small- and large-group dialogues. They take tours to see where others reside, sleep under the same roof in residential retreats, and carry out action projects that increase dialogue and challenge discrimination. Evaluation is integral to the program, and shows that the program deeply affects students' understanding of their own racial and ethnic identities, knowledge about others and joint actions against racism.

Adults from community agencies and grassroots groups designate adults to support them before, during and after the program. Then some young people stay and become social justice fellows, a diverse lot who have great passion about the injustices that they experience, observe or hear about in their schools. The program is for young people, not adults; but when they experience troubling situations involving adults, then adults are the program too.

Building alliances

Adult allies have close relationships with young people, but often operate in isolation from other adult allies, and benefit from forming mutually supportive alliances with others who work closely with young people. Adults schedule meetings that enable them to exchange information, learn from one another and provide mutual support. For most of them, it is their first time to discuss their encounters — such as racist jokes, ethnic stereotypes and racial discrimination — with their colleagues.

These adults have inventoried the social justice activities that already exist, such as written policies, intercultural events and demonstrations recognising civil rights heroes. It was unprecedented when they identified the following questions as their priorities for discussion over the long haul:

- What are some strategies for engaging teachers and educators in diversity and social justice initiatives? Are there problems or issues which arise and, if so, what can be done to address them?
- How can a school build capacity for diversity and social justice over the long-haul, rather than simply deal with incidents? Are there institutional structures that a school should put into place and, if so, which ones?
- What are some strategies for preparing students for leadership roles in a segregated and diverse metropolitan area? Are there specific curricular or co-curricular approaches and, if so, lessons that can be learned from them?
- What are some ways to build support for yourself as a change agent for social justice? What is a specific step you could take — for example, bring your allies together?

When individuals formulate their own agenda for the first time, it is truly significant.

Adults advising adults

What can adults do to support young people striving for social justice? The answers to this question are almost all written by and for adults. The literature on this question is vast, again written by adult authors for adult readers. Adults advise adults in

academic disciplines like psychology and sociology, and in professional fields such as education and social work. In a review of psychology journals throughout their histories, not one adolescent had written an article for adults.

There are literatures in which parents advise parents, teachers advise teachers and counsellors advise counsellors. Psychologists debate whether development is social, clinical or neuroscientific, but without feedback from the youth about whom they write. Indeed, even when adult change agents write about social justice skills, such as community organising, the youth voice is missing.

In contrast, in metropolitan Detroit adults reach out to other adults for advice on how to work more effectively with young people. For example, educators approach educators about how to collaborate with students in school districts that are transitioning from traditionally white to majority black. One white district has declared itself a 'social justice zone', and asked for training for teachers who face increasing incidents, and for cafeteria workers and bus drivers who have 'first contact' with students.

An intermediate school agency in an area undergoing rapid racial transition, sought training for teachers from more than 25 school districts, representing more than 100 schools. Specifically, they sought skills about how to assess their own social identities and the identities of their students, how to bridge differences through dialogue, and how to transform institutions from monocultural to multicultural. Adults advising adults is a limitless enterprise.

Youth advising adults

What can adult allies do to support young people in striving for social justice? There are answers to this question too, but almost all of them occur in informal interactions, which are impossible to capture in writing.

Nonetheless, there are adults who want young people to believe that their voices matter, and who help them to express themselves. Some of this takes place in schools, where teachers believe that reading, writing and speaking are core skills across the curricula. For example, there are courses in critical thinking whose teachers want students to form judgements and say what they think, and in public speaking, where teachers help students to make persuasive presentations about topics that concern them.

Other support takes place outside the curricula, either in co-curricular activities or community learning. For example, there are adult storytellers who promote youth storytelling, adult poets who promote youth poetry, adult actors who promote youth acting, and adult artists who promote youth art.

These forms of youth voice do help young people to learn how to speak for themselves. The issue is not whether the teaching is by adults or young people or both as partners. It is whether young people learn how to speak and, in so doing, motivate adults to support them. The model is that young people can prod adults to action and, when they do, it can contribute to social change. Young people have done this forever.

There are obstacles to this practice. It is difficult for young people to motivate adults to challenge the status quo in societies in which adultism prevails. The essence of adultism is that young people should respect or fear adults, rather than trying to change them. This is the antithesis of youth voice.

It is difficult to imagine a young person saying the following to an adult:

- ‘When are you going to grow up?’
- ‘You should be seen but not heard.’
- ‘You are not old enough to do that.’
- ‘When in my house, you’ll do it my way!’
- ‘It’s just a stage. You’ll outgrow it.’

These statements are essentially disrespectful, but adultism allows adults to say them to young people — but not young people to say them to adults. A world in which adults are dominant and youth subservient, in which adults reserve the right to punish young people for speaking up, perpetuates injustice.

In the absence of difficult discussions with adults about altering the status quo, young people often default to topics that are more normal, such as asking adults to excuse them from school, or driving them to meetings, or making sure that refreshments are on the table.

Who are the adults that young people take as their allies? What are their characteristics? What do they do?

Another approach to the question of adult support is by observing the adults who young people take as their allies. In metropolitan Detroit, they are drawn to a superintendent who advocates social justice as a foundational goal of education; teachers who integrate social justice content into existing courses or create entirely new ones; counsellors who spend needed time with minorities of colour; or parents who volunteer to facilitate a student theatre troupe.

Overall, young people choose adults who give them time, talk with them and ask them about themselves, listen to their stories and take them seriously. They want adults let them make decisions, yet hold high expectations for them without falling into authority roles. They want adults who want to develop genuine relationships — something that otherwise is missing from their lives.

In metropolitan Detroit, young people and adult allies conduct research, gather information from young people and communicate the findings to other young people. This is a direct approach to learning what young people are thinking by asking them themselves. For example, they take a driving tour of the metropolitan area, take photographs of social justice when they see it and display their findings in a public gallery. Or they use focus groups, and learn that young people want schools that are safe, books that are up to date and teachers who can provide an excellent education.

In *Speak for Yourself*, young people document what youth say about stereotypes they observe, then they perform the stereotypes in their own words for audiences in school assemblies and community centres, some of which reach more than 1,000 young people. Again, young people compile information from young people and communicate the findings to other young people.

In *Our Dreams are Not a Secret*, young people share their thoughts about growing up in a segregated area and publish a book on the subject. In contrast to the usual pattern in which youth keep their thoughts silent, the book is a vehicle for youth voice.

In *Youth Voices: Young People in Metropolitan Detroit Speak Out*, a community foundation asked them to identify priority issues of young people in the region. With support from adult allies, they formed a youth-adult research team, and

conducted interviews and focus groups with more than 2,000 youth in sixteen high schools. They produced a written report and colorful video on what they said that they wanted, such as equity in schools, with adequate resources for all, and youth engagement, with a stronger voice. They wanted adults to share power and decision-making, and voting positions on adult boards and committees.

They presented the findings at a summit convened by the foundation, where they invited proposals aligned with priority issues identified by young people. They then participated in the review process, and funded dozens of social justice projects. Today, young people and adult allies are working together on action projects that promise to create changes throughout the metropolitan area.

Finally, young people participate in public policy. At the local level, they have worked with homeless girls to strengthen public awareness of an existing law ensuring their school enrolment. They worked with an Arab-American agency to prepare Arab-American youth leaders to address community concerns, such as immigrant rights and racial discrimination.

At the state level, a school superintendent challenged youth leaders to advocate 'diversity learning for all students'. With an unprecedented coalition of youth leaders, they presented their ideas to state board of education. They then gathered 3,000 signatures on petitions, presented the petitions to the state board of education and worked with adult board members to prepare a formal resolution for unanimous approval by board members.

Concerned about civil rights, adults on state civil rights commission asked youth leaders to testify about their experiences in their schools. Then the adults collaborated with them to prepare and approve a resolution calling for schools, school districts and school boards to strengthen diversity dialogues and civil rights education.

The resolution stated that all students should be provided with educational opportunities that would prepare them to become the next generation of community leaders; that students should be educated on their social identities and about stereotypes that cause discrimination; that they should understand their right to assemble, protest, and organise community action projects, empowering students to exercise their rights; and that they should speak on the policy issues that concern them, through public forums, student representation on school boards and other civic engagement programs.

In these projects, adult allies view young people as their partners in accomplishing their purpose.

Socially just practice

What can adults do to support young people who are striving for social justice in their schools and communities? Young people should not be expected to strive for social justice without adults as allies. The mechanics that perpetuate injustices were already in place when young people inherited them, and they should not be expected to solve problems that are not of their making alone.

Adults are strategically situated to support young people. They have experience that derives from their older age; they are yearning for social justice even if they have forgotten; and they would support young people in the striving for social justice if they were expected to do so. However, there are forces which work against them.

Society is segregated, and it perpetuates inequalities. These conditions cause them to believe that structural changes are beyond reach. Adultism builds inequalities into their role relationships, and legitimates their treatment of young people as subservient. Young people accept adults' conception of them, and do not view themselves as a group that could create change, with or without adult allies, so they withdraw from participation.

If young people were to organise themselves more effectively, and advocate for social justice, this might affect the beliefs and behaviours of adults, which is the pattern in most struggles for human rights. History shows that if there is need for adults to support young people, changes can occur when they organise on their behalf. In this view, young people are instrumental in the creation of adult allies. In the situation described here, there are exceptional adults who are allies to young people and partner with them in their striving for social justice. These partnerships are not typical, but they exist, and this only amplifies their accomplishments.

For the most part, however, young people attend schools that do not teach them about social justice, and teachers also attend schools of this type. Without schools designed to strengthen social justice, nothing much is likely to happen.

Michigan's schools have recently received a failing grade for their civil rights education—which is to say that education for social justice is woefully inadequate. Yet even if schools scored higher, they would still operate in a society that is highly segregated—and, in the absence of fundamental changes, segregation wins.

In metropolitan Detroit, exceptional young people and adult allies are striving for socially just schools—but, again, they are exceptional. The lesson is that when even a small number of young people and adult allies work together, they can create changes in schools and communities, albeit amidst segregation. They might not—but then again, they just might.