

Tipping the Balance: Social Justice Leaders Allying with Marginalized Youth to Increase Student Voice and Activism

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Abstract

Social justice school leaders can amplify the voices and activism of marginalized students by shifting from hierarchical relationships to working as allies. An ally is commonly defined as a person who is associated with another or others for some common cause or purpose. By transferring Kendall's (2013) concept of "allyship" from racial privilege to leadership, this paper applies this theory through three dimensions: developing a radar, breaking ranks and creating space for student voice, and making intentional strategic moves. Ultimately, the school leaders highlighted in this study are tipping the balance to disrupt hierarchical relationships between leaders and students, in service of marginalized students.

Keywords: social justice leadership, student activism, student voice, marginalized students, transformational leadership

In typical schools, students have hierarchical relationships with the formal leaders. This dynamic suppresses student voice in decision-making and other aspects of schooling (Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001; Howard, 2001; Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1992; Weinstein, 2002). Schools are organized in ways that privilege adult and leader voices over student voices in matters that have real consequences for students (Valenzuela, 1999). Students rarely get a say in disciplinary policy decisions, for instance, or in determining how they are allowed to speak up in support of causes that serve their interests. When student voice is allowed, leaders often focus on elected student leaders or an elite group of high-performing students, rather than marginalized youth. In contrast, this paper focuses on leaders who support the voice and activism of those students who are most disempowered, and how they can authentically support students when they have hierarchical authority over them. In other words, we examine how leaders, in the interest of social justice, can become allies to their most marginalized students.

An ally is commonly defined as a person who is associated with another or others for some common cause or purpose. In her book *Understanding White Privilege: Creating Pathways to Authentic Relationships Across Race*, Kendall (2013) differentiates between allies, advocates, coalitions, and connections within cross-privilege relationships. She writes that creating authentic relationships across privilege requires a willingness to keep channels of communication open about power and privilege differences and involves “the risk of losing social and cultural capital” (Kendall, 2013, p. 176). With a focus on racial privilege, Kendall (2013) identifies key behaviors that create the potential to develop authentic relationships across privilege, including:

- “Allies work continuously to develop an understanding of the personal and institutional experiences of the people with whom they are allying themselves” (p. 180).
- “Allies choose to ally themselves publicly and privately with members of target groups and respond to their needs. This may mean breaking assumed allegiances with those who have the same privileges” (p. 180).
- “Allies know that in the most empowered and genuine ally relationships, the persons with privilege initiate the change toward personal, institutional and societal justice... sharing the power, doing the dance...” (p. 183).

In this paper, we argue that Kendall's (2013) concept of allyship across privilege can be transferred beyond racial privilege to other privileges—such as hierarchical authority. This paper applies the above key behaviors of Kendall's (2013) theories of allyship across privilege to the relationship between alumni of the University of California, Berkeley, Principal Leadership Institute (PLI), who are working as equity-centered leaders, and their most marginalized students.

Alumni contributions in this paper were taken from their participation in an Alumni Teach-In held by the PLI at UC Berkeley in January 2018. Teach-ins started in 1965 at the University of Michigan, when faculty chose to join students in their protest against the Vietnam War by holding a 12-hour public debate and dialogue about the issues.¹ In this spirit, the PLI uses Alumni Teach-In events as a form of critical resistance, knowledge sharing, and modeling that gives space for public discussion about social justice school leadership in relation to local or national issues. This Alumni Teach-In was held in solidarity with the second annual Women's March.²

So as to provide context, the following is a short description of each alumnus who participated in the January 2018 Teach-In.³ Jill is a white female principal of a large urban high school. Fernando is a Latino male principal of a medium-sized urban middle school. Helen is a white female elementary teacher leader in an urban district. John is a white male assistant principal at a high school in a suburb where the growing diversity of the student population is alarming to many longstanding community members. Finally, Marcus is a mixed-race African American male assistant principal at a high school located in a suburb approximately 25 miles from UC Berkeley where there is no activist culture. This intentional composition of school leaders, representing a variety of educational contexts and backgrounds, was assembled in order to provide multiple perspectives about how social justice leaders can choose to ally with students to make space for student voice and activism.

¹ For more information about the first teach-in at the University of Michigan, see http://michiganintheworld.history.lsa.umich.edu/antivietnamwar/exhibits/show/exhibit/the_teach_ins/first_teach_in.

² You can read more about the Women's March and its mission at <https://www.womensmarch.com/mission/>.

³ All names and locations have been anonymized in this paper.

Developing a Radar

Kendall (2013) writes that,

Allies work continuously to develop an understanding of the personal and institutional experiences of the people with whom they are allying themselves. If the ally is a member of a privileged group, it is essential that she or he also strives for clarity about the impact of privileges on her or his life. (p. 180)

At the PLI Alumni Teach-In, participants described the development of a personal radar that connects national and local issues to their students, as well as their knowledge of historical and current systemic oppression. For example, Fernando described the need to prepare support for his students prior to the final verdict for Darren Wilson, the police officer who killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, because he recognized the parallels between that situation and the experiences of many students at his school, stating,

My admin and counseling team started to brainstorm, how do we create a space for kids to process? ... [Our students are] 70% Black and [Latino], which is in [strong] juxtaposition with the city demographics. So, it was really important for us to think about creating a space that's safe for them and talk about ways that they can be safe in the community when trying to just express their feelings of frustration and anger. (personal communication, January 20, 2018)

Fernando's ability to recognize the impact that repeated instances of police violence have on his most marginalized students allowed him to respond proactively to his students' needs.

Helen gave a contrasting example during the pre-presidential election period of 2016, when the Southern Poverty Law Center published a report called *The Trump Effect*⁴ that talked about how the language of the campaign was having an impact on school campuses. Specifically, she recounted how she read the report and "like a good white liberal, I thought, 'I'm so glad that I'm not teaching in a place where this is happening'" (personal communication, January 20, 2018). Her blinders were on until she discussed the article with her colleagues. The principal made her aware of some examples of the Trump Effect at her elementary school, which compelled Helen to reach out to parents of color at her school. Through

⁴ You can read the full report at <https://www.splcenter.org/20161128/trump-effect-impact-2016-presidential-election-our-nations-schools>.

this process, Helen learned that “students were threatening each other with statements such as, ‘you’re going to get deported’ or ‘I’m going to have you deported’ or ‘you were born in a Taco Bell’” (personal communication, January 20, 2018). Connecting with her colleagues and listening opened Helen’s eyes and compelled her to action.

Another critical component to developing a radar is identifying, acknowledging, and building a relationship with student leaders who might be compelled to action in each situation, especially at the high school level. Jill described how she and her team supported student activism in response to Trump’s announcement to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program by being “in very close communication with our student leaders, because that is the way to know what’s really happening in the student body” (personal communication, January 20, 2018). She then acknowledged her own social position and how it affects her work as a leader, stating,

As a white educator and leader, one of the things that I’m always thinking about is how to amplify the voice of our students of color, and I can’t amplify their voice if I don’t know what are the concerns that are close to their hearts. We knew that the Chicano Latino United Voices club was planning an action... and so we started to meet with the leaders of that club and talk about what that could look like. (personal communication, January 20, 2018)

Fernando, Helen, and Jill provide examples of how leaders can approach allyship with students, especially students from marginalized groups. By recognizing their privileges, in Kendall’s (2013) words, they can work “continuously to develop an understanding of the personal and institutional experiences of the people with whom they are allying themselves” (p. 180). Social justice leaders have a unique opportunity to disrupt the systems of hierarchy that were designed to not empower student voice by creating alliances between administrators and students. Developing a radar around social issues that really matter to marginalized students and choosing to take action in support of those students is a critical step in strengthening the ally relationship between students and leaders.

Breaking Ranks and Creating Space for Student Voice

A second key behavior that Kendall (2013) identifies involves breaking from traditional roles that are often defined by the power structure. Specifically,

Allies choose to ally themselves publicly and privately with members of target groups and respond to their needs. This may mean breaking assumed allegiances with those who have the same privileges... It is important not to underestimate the consequences of breaking these agreements and to break them in ways that will be most useful to the person or group with whom you are aligning yourself. (Kendall, 2013 p. 180)

One response typical school leaders have to student activism is the compulsion to “remain neutral” (Hess & McEvoy, 2015). This neutral stance is particularly prevalent in conservative contexts where student activism is less common. John’s school is an example of such a context. John’s principal took this path during the 2016 presidential election, and it impacted him as an assistant principal who is committed to social justice because he recognized that it was suppressing the voices of marginalized students. With growing tensions between Trump supporters and dissenters in the student body and on staff, John spent more and more time “fielding phone calls from conservative parents asking, ‘what are you doing to protect my kid?’” (personal communication, January 20, 2018). The morning after the presidential election, a massive “Make America Great Again” sign was hung in the quad overnight. That’s when John decided that he had to break ranks from his principal and could not be neutral anymore—he took the sign down before many students arrived at school. The next day, when a student walkout led by a small contingent of students of color was imminent (an unprecedented act in this school context), the principal told the administrative team that someone needed to escort the students. John saw this as an opportunity and gladly volunteered. John describes a profound personal lesson he took away from this experience:

Go to the kids. Don’t focus on control and safety. Don’t try to dictate to kids what they can do. Talk to the kids. Pull in the kids. Hear what they want to do, hear their plans, and listen as opposed to just saying, “No, you can’t do that.” (personal communication, January 20, 2018)

As social justice leaders, creating an authentic response to student activism goes beyond standing with our students during a protest to ensure

their safety. Alumni expressed that in order to respond in a truly socially just way, they needed to use their leadership positions to make school-wide structural changes that would create more spaces for student voice to be heard and for future action to be taken. For example, John’s utilization of the detention space as an opportunity for a facilitated student discussion is just one example of how leaders can be transformative in their practice in order to model for students the power and potential of speaking out for what they believe in. As John describes, “we had a mass voluntary detention where we went to the kids and said, look, this is the price of civil disobedience. We opened the gym, and they all came” (personal communication, January 20, 2018). The students who voluntarily showed up for their detention had the opportunity to participate in the walkout and also engage in a powerful dialogue with their teachers, administrators, and peers. Instead of blindly adhering to the district policy, which states, “if you walk out of school, you get a detention,” John chose to use that policy to create a space to amplify student voice and encourage dialogue among student protesters and those who may have shared an alternate viewpoint (personal communication, January 20, 2018).

Responding in this way comes with risks and challenges. Various stakeholders pressure administrators to react in ways that align with district policies and minimize disruption of school activities (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012; Olsen & Sexton, 2009). Despite this pressure, these social justice leaders were willing to take risks, often breaking ranks with their district office or site administrators in order to respond authentically to student activism. One way that leaders provided an authentic response to student activism was by creating safe spaces for students to talk about difficult issues. At Marcus’s school, also located in a conservative community, the administrators organized a peace assembly, where they invited the media, school district officials, and community members to be present and to hear marginalized students express how they felt about a recent incident of discriminatory graffiti in a school bathroom. Instead of inviting a guest speaker or having another adult dominate the space, student voice was at the center. As Marcus describes, the administrators giving

...the microphone to the kids to speak about their racial frustrations, the prejudice they experience, ultimately how they see school and more importantly how the administration fails sometimes to recognize the supports that we need to have in place. (personal communication, January 20, 2018)

This courageous act of listening and truly hearing student voice in a public setting is one example of an authentic response to student activism.

When administrators like Marcus choose to ally with their students in this way, an additional consideration is how to ensure that the teachers, who are on the frontlines in their classrooms with students all day, are fully prepared to continue these difficult conversations with students. Social justice leaders cannot assume that teachers have the experience, training, and skills necessary to participate in conversations about politics, race, and equity. Marcus realized that some of his teachers were uncomfortable leading students in discussions about race-related issues. Rather than letting teachers off the hook, or offering to have the conversations for them, he decided to increase his presence in their classrooms through informal walkthroughs, and to work side by side with his teachers to help them become more comfortable with these critical discussions. In this way, Marcus modeled for teachers and students that these issues are important and that it was okay to let students take the lead. He describes,

It is about what you do on the interior, in your classrooms, and if you show up and are present. And again, you don't have to take the mic and be the leader. You don't have to be on the stage. Be the guy on the side and just be present. (personal communication, January 20, 2018)

These alumni provide clear illustrations of how social justice leaders can use their positions of authority to break ranks and make space for student voice through the implementation of policies and school activities, and by supporting teachers to engage with students on difficult topics. As Fernando said, "...whether it's in the flatlands, in the hills, in the cities, or the burbs, we need to create spaces for kids to maintain hope" (personal communication, January 20, 2018). In each case, it is clear that the leaders intentionally planned for the potential "consequences of breaking agreements," and did so in ways that would be most supportive to the marginalized students.

Making Intentional Strategic Moves

A third key behavior for allies involves the strategy the person with more power and privilege uses to support those with less. Kendall (2013) writes:

Allies know that in the most empowered and genuine ally relationships, the persons with privilege initiate the change toward

personal, institutional and societal justice and equality... Sharing the power of decision making about what will happen is essential. Assess who will be at least risk when stepping into a situation to initiate and move forward... Together with the people who aren't privileged, we choreograph who makes which moves and when they will be made. (p. 183)

Catalyzing a coalition of adults to support student activism, and ensure its success, was a theme echoed by many of the alumni. As discussed by Kendall (2013), it is essential that educational leaders, as persons of privilege, share the power of decision-making. Helen, an elementary teacher leader, tapped into the network of educators with whom she had built relationships during her tenure as an officer with the teachers' union in an effort to coordinate a response to the recent anti-immigrant sentiment that was becoming a prevalent local and national narrative. Her approach assumed that district leadership would be skeptical about their capacity to implement a district-wide action on top of their already overwhelming responsibilities. With this in mind, Helen began to mobilize the various groups she had previously worked with and solicited their assistance and resources. Helen's "choreography" included aligning with the Teachers of Color network, a collective of teachers focused on creating social justice curricula, and creating posters with the theme "We All Belong." The posters, which included a butterfly motif by a local artist of color, Faviana Rodriguez, were printed in Arabic, English, and Spanish. Together, Helen and her team created accompanying lesson plans, based on the Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Tolerance curriculum. When approached, the district was resistant and skeptical about how to distribute the materials. However, because of the preparations made by Helen and her coalition of adults, all concerns were addressed, and the posters and curriculum were distributed to every teacher.

The Southern Poverty Law Center learned of their work and dispatched a reporter and photographer to document the efforts. They also invited Helen to speak at their fall fundraising event to share her experiences with their funders. Rather than attend the event, Helen suggested that her co-facilitator, a teacher of color, present to the group. Ultimately, the teacher, along with one of her students, shared with the gathering the challenges they faced in their community because of their racial identity. While Helen was the initiator of the action, she chose to move out of the center and give the spotlight to a teacher of color and

student of color. This deliberate act of allyship by Helen provides an example of how leaders can use their privilege to ally with marginalized adults and students.

In an effort to “[share] the power of decision making about what will happen... and... choreograph who makes which moves and when they will be made” as described by Kendall (2013, p. 183), social justice leaders can align themselves with their students in ways that minimize risk to the students while still amplifying their voices and supporting their cause. When the students at Jill’s school, which has a strong history of social activism, were planning a school-wide walkout, she and her leadership team met with the student leaders to help them conceptualize their protest plan in a way that would have maximum impact while also keeping students safe. According to Jill,

...we talked over a week about what the action could look like, and their idea morphed away from a walkout to figuring out to get the students and teachers to hold hands around the school. We were really happy about that... not because it made things simpler for us, but because it was a new approach that provided symbolism that was so much more powerful and representative of their message. (personal communication, January 20, 2018)

Being an ally also means supporting teachers who are struggling with students that make triggering remarks toward marginalized groups. A teacher told Jill that she was in the process of changing the curriculum of her course “because this kid just can’t stop saying really offensive things” (personal communication, January 20, 2018). Jill then described how the administrators have to be the ones to model dialogue across difference by confronting white students on behalf of teachers. In her words:

Yesterday, we had another conversation with this student who keeps saying deeply offensive stuff. We’ve had to give him some really clear boundaries about what you can and can’t say—not to abridge his First Amendment rights, but to reset the expectation around what civil discourse in the classroom looks like. Because if you continue to say very offensive things about immigrant students, you’re not making a safe environment for yourself or for them. (personal communication, January 20, 2018)

In this instance, remaining silent or neutral was not an option for Jill. It was important for her teachers and students to witness her use her position

as a school leader to reset expectations around student safety in support of marginalized populations.

These examples demonstrate how leaders can use their professional knowledge, network, and positionality to amplify the voices of marginalized students and adults. The “choreography of moves” and “assessment of risk” described by Kendall (2013, p. 183) required the leaders to establish and maintain trusting relationships during periods of unrest; it also required both strategy and preparation for the emotional labor involved.

Conclusion

In each of these three dimensions of allyship—developing a radar, breaking ranks, and making intentional strategic moves—the school leaders tipped the balance to disrupt the hierarchical relationships between themselves and their students, in service of marginalized students. The work of developing a radar, breaking ranks, creating space for student voice, and making intentional strategic moves is complex. It requires leaders to repeatedly ask questions such as: *How does my race affect the situation? How can I remove barriers? How do I move out of the center? Where are the opportunities for change? What makes the biggest impact? What are the consequences for each group? Who is taking the risk?*

By choosing to be an ally to marginalized students, social justice school leaders can transform their schools to be more democratic institutions of hope. Leaders can leverage their power and authority to create more equitable conditions for their most voiceless students. This, in turn, will serve to empower students of color and will allow them to become active participants in the democratic process. As Kendall (2013) states, “allies promote a sense of inclusiveness and justice... helping to create an environment that is hospitable for all” (p. 183). Similarly, the alumni leaders of UC Berkeley’s Principal Leadership Institute provide models illustrating how social justice-oriented school leaders can create more inclusive schools that empower the voices of marginalized youth.

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