

Into the Community – An Extension of the Classroom: Reflections From The Co-Producer

Much of my youth-centered work culminated in week-long intensive leadership institutes with middle and high-school aged youth each summer. I recall checking in with alum from my programs in the midst of a school year or running into them around the city. I'd ask for their perspective on the latest school controversy centered on (or in denial of) race.

One of my first questions in response to the predictable plea of, "This is racist" was, "Tell me how race or racism fits into this equation?" and then "Who is involved and how are you organizing around the issue?" and finally, "Who are your adult allies?" I'm pleased to say that their responses were usually very well stated and thought out, even if they didn't yet possess all the answers. Whether it was a teacher, coach or even occasionally a principal, at the beginning of a school racial "crisis," most young people could identify at least one adult within the school who they felt they could trust. I would press on and ask, "Okay, but what about allies outside of the school?"

The reason I asked this question was that I continually found that young people viewed their everyday experience between school and their neighborhood and home with great distinction. My hope was that questions such as this might facilitate a joining of the two. Even when young people have an adult ally in their life –whether a parent, teacher, an extended family member or even a community elder, it was rare that relationships rooted in mutual commitment to social change existed between the school and the community and through the young person.

Having the honor of working alongside literally thousands of youth in my organizing work for social change over the years, I've found that youth who were inspired to work to end racism often experienced a lack of nourishing and sustained partnerships with adults who can help navigate the complex systems and hierarchies that serve to hold power. Though not always the case, when crises arise, youth can feel let down by people they had long viewed as supportive in schools, in the community and in the family.

For many adult leaders, being perceived as "siding" with youth who challenge institutional racism is a dangerous venture and can threaten long held political alliances and investments in institutional power. I have witnessed that white adults, in particular, can become paralyzed when faced with the choice of stepping up to be allies or quietly opting out.

School culture tends to deny that racism is a problem. By ignoring the danger signs and merely preventing crisis, we hope that the problem will just dissolve. For this reason, as adults working to be better allies for antiracist youth, we need to proactively strive to build alliances with our peers within institutions and neighborhoods to help secure a structure that models strategic antiracist organizing and makes it more likely that youth will succeed in their antiracist organizing. This means engaging the issue with fellow educators, youth in our area, parents, families, and community members. It also means continually doing our homework to gain knowledge about relevant social movements and history and demonstrating our commitment outside of the school for organizing efforts rooted in our neighborhoods.

I'm reminded here of the pre-desegregation, all-black schools, staffed with all black educators and administrators. These schools helped instill a sense of history, interdependence, and self-respect for black students. This promoted the value of service to the black community –which helped sustain people in the worst of times during U.S. racial apartheid. Imagine if we created, out of that same love and sense of duty to our most vulnerable youth, a grounding that helped sustain them and motivated them to pursue learning out of respect for who they are, what they know, and where they come from?

For many of our marginalized youth, long-term relationships, trust, and investment can usually be found outside of the school. Some examples where the adult-youth alliances have been formed include the community center, the religious or spiritual community, athletic leagues, within the extended family, or even on the block. Unfortunately, most families of students of color, poor white, and LGBT/queer students struggle to see the school as a place for social agency or as an extension of their community life. In a time where students of color face continual intimidation and violence at the hands of the state (i.e. police, welfare/service agencies, ICE/ Homeland Security), the school has become more symbolic of this violence as opposed to a sanctuary for nourishment and safety.

In my experience, when parents, extended family or even community members of marginalized students are made to feel welcomed and valued in the school, young people do also. A sense of accountability is instilled, and a mutual benefit is realized between the student, family, school, and community.

Growing up, I remember gaining an understanding of the positions of power from which teachers based their relationships to families and students. Most times these teachers were willing to meet me halfway. If I expressed an interest and commitment to learning, they would take the extra step to assure my interests were heeded. On the other hand, power was frequently exerted by educators to shame me and remind me of “my place” and that my experiences of racial and class oppression carried little clout and mattered little –particularly as a less-powered young person of color.

When I was about ten years old, I remember some of the adult leaders in my community embarked on something historical for us. They began raising funds and purchased a lease for a community center where cultural and social events could be held and arts and history classes were offered. The center also provided second language learning and meals and health services to elders and the working poor. This was an exciting time. I'll never forget how I felt the day that I saw my second grade teacher at the planning meeting for this community center. I was so proud that she cared enough to be a part of what our community identified as our number one need and priority.

Though this teacher was a woman of color, it still had a lasting effect and presented to me an opportunity to feel that the classroom was an extension of the community. Of course, this idea was challenged as I became older and began to feel the weight of institutional racism within the school structure, but this was an experience that led me to work closely and support teachers and school staff in their commitment to social justice by assisting their pursuit of relationships in the greater community.

What role can families play in supporting youth who will have experiences that challenge previously held worldviews of race and difference? In my work with adults around the U.S., I have found that white people newly introduced to an antiracist community seek acceptance and encouragement from their peers of color. This causes us to ask what additional resources white youth might need in their efforts to become more effective allies for people of color in our struggle for liberation from white supremacy.

This observation helps us understand that white youth many times will need more support from adults than youth of color after an experience that challenges ideas of white privilege. For many youth, the opportunity to openly and collaboratively challenge and unpack long-held beliefs and behaviors in a multiracial setting presents an exciting and radical, yet unfamiliar shift in their sense of empowerment.

I am working to become a stronger ally for youth of all backgrounds who are committed to naming white privilege and fighting racism. I have not perfected this, and I make plenty of mistakes. For this to become a reality for me, I've learned that I need to commit to:

- Asking, what I can do to support youth
- Listening, even when I think I have some tested advice to offer
- Promoting the engagement of families and community in problem solving
- Backing youth when they feel action is warranted (even when I think there will be resistance or backlash from the power structure)
- Teaching in a way that promotes critical analysis
- Communicating about the youth organizing in ways that are not

condescending and don't minimize youth efforts

- Being aware that youth of color have few antiracist allies beyond their extended family and friends and that multiracial youth and adopted youth of color in white families often have fewer antiracist allies even within their family units
- Understanding that white youth benefit greatly from white adult allies who are willing to be transparent about their own journey
- Continually working to extend the classroom into the community and bridge the community into the classroom

Of course, this list is not exhaustive and doesn't always apply to every issue, question, or conflict. There also exists a wealth of culturally-rooted and developmentally-based skills and knowledge that will need to be applied toward gaining the trust with youth. You already know this and likely already have some expertise around these competencies.

It hasn't been easy for me, but I have learned that I can be a much more effective ally for antiracist youth by supporting them in using their own voices to lead as opposed to giving lectures, teaching them to avoid conflict, or solving their problems for them. Teaching for me is organizing, and organizing has become more about helping to make connections, widening the lens from which we envision social justice, and pushing for critical analysis and strategic action. I hope *Shades of Youth* serves to support you whether in the classroom, at home, or in your community.

In the spirit of the ancestors, the elders and the next generation,
Jesse Villalobos