

Grade 7: Cyberbullying

The Role of Ally

Language is very powerful in shaping thought. Naming roles that we might take on can give us power to act differently. The role of the ally' was eloquently articulated by educator Beverly Tatum (1994) to describe the positions and circumstances under which white people might respectfully support Black people in the struggle against racial oppression. Subsequently, other marginalized groups have recognized the power of that role.

Being an ally does not necessarily mean befriending or engaging in a long term relationship with someone. This may neither be realistic nor desirable. Being an ally entails:

- Recognizing that silence is a form of tacit approval of what one sees and hears. Silence can be very powerful in perpetuating hurtful words and conduct.
- Choosing not to remain a silent bystander when hearing hurtful words about someone or witnessing someone being oppressed, marginalized, bullied or treated unfairly.
- Exercising courage and taking the risk of being laughed at or rejected by peers when speaking up against hurtful words and conduct. Students would clearly need support in determining under what circumstances it is safe to do this, recognizing that one can speak out immediately or shortly thereafter, verbally or by electronic means
- Rehearsing words that they might speak, such as: *Stop what you're saying/doing to X. It's hurtful. This sort of treatment could happen to you too. Is anyone else with me in wanting to stop this action? I want friends who believe in fairness and justice. I know you can show those qualities rather than cruelty.*
- Initiating and/or engaging in additional collective action to challenge bullying and oppression. The more people you can invite to be allies, the more 'normative' it becomes to be one. A powerful example of this was provided by two Nova Scotia students who purchased and invited male students at their school to wear pink shirts as a way of standing together with a student who had experienced homophobic bullying. Pink Shirt Day is now celebrated nation-wide and the website below provides an excellent resource on anti-bullying.

<http://www.pinkshirtday.ca/>

Taking on the role of an ally is easier if one:

- understands the arbitrary nature of how power operates

Anyone can be marginalized, oppressed or bullied at pretty well any moment based on accent, sex, sexual orientation, size, ability, clothing, academic expertise, newness to the neighborhood, their lunch, etc. Brainstorming what people are and have been bullied and oppressed for is a valuable exercise in understanding this.

- understands what marginalization is often about: maintaining self-esteem and social status. Bullying and subordinating others is a major way in which people try to obtain social, economic, and symbolic power. It is always about trying to identify who is superior and who is inferior.

Bronwyn Davies (1989) maintains that children are constantly engaged in negotiating their identity and roles in the social order. Every child wants social power and self-esteem. Part of how they get these is to actively engage in 'category maintenance' meaning they work to regulate each others' behaviour to ensure that it's 'normal'. The problem is that 'normal' is never stable, although it can be defined by its relation to the dominant social order in which one gains social power and capital by being white, male, able, thin, heterosexual and middle income—signifiers favourably over-represented in the media. Students might explore why some groups are more favourably represented than others. Who says what's normal? Who benefits from this? Why should they? Clearly not all forms of marginalization are the same but children need to identify how dominant cultural representations of those in powerful roles shape understanding of who is valued and why.

To conclude, becoming familiar with and exploring the role of the ally can help children see themselves in narratives in which they exercise positive personal and social power in the cause of something they all want for themselves: fairness and acceptance.

- Ally work
<http://allywork.solidaritydesign.net/2007/qualities-of-an-ally/>
- Davies, B. (1989). *Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tales. Preschool Children and Gender.*
- Tatum, B. D. (1994). Teaching white students about racism: The search for white allies and the restoration of hope. *Teachers College Record*, 95(4), 462-476.