

Educational Justice: Which Are You — an Advocate, Ally, or Activist?

Sep 24, 2018 by Sharif El-Mekki

I often describe myself as an activist and a teacher. Why? Because I firmly believe that a quality education is a basic human right that has been historically and currently denied to so many students of color. And things I believe in require my staunch activism and deliberate action. It is why I view a part of my role as an educator is to create a school-to-activism pipeline. Because teaching our students about equity and justice must be an integral part of any student's education.

But I have met so many people in the education sector who say, "I'm not an activist; I'm an advocate." They cling steadfastly to the concepts of advocacy, separating it from activism and separating what they count as their personal success from that of the community. Yet, the truth is, to erase the inequities that form the bedrock of America's founding, we must accept that advocacy and activism are inseparable.

Any activist fighting for the housing, health, and education for the most marginalized in their community is also, naturally, advocating for the same. An activist cannot see how you could have salt water without saline. It's one and the same. An activist fighting for educational justice, for example, can be found in schools or adjacent to schools. They see the urgency at hand and are speaking about and doing the work, in close proximity of the students, to tilt the scales of justice toward children and communities.

And when advocates also see themselves as activists, they are closer to the problem than those who are comfortable just advocating. I can advocate without lifting a finger. I can advocate without truly understanding the depths of despair of those I am claiming solidarity with. I can advocate while I multi-task from the safety of my office sipping on a latte. Often, those with the most privilege take the farthest seat away from the work, eschewing acting big in partnership with those who work closest to the problem and to the people. I have often encountered academics, for instance, who count themselves as advocates, but are so far away from the issues at hand, they can't truly envision the problem, let alone the most effective solutions. Or, they claim advocacy, but you would not be able to tell from their personal choices.

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For example, we have far too many advocates for integrated schools, yet their own children attend the most segregated schools. We have fierce “advocates” for diverse housing who choose to live in the most secluded or gentrified neighborhoods. People advocate against parents choosing schools for their children, but pull out all the privilege they can muster to ensure their own children attend the wealthiest or most exclusive schools available. There are too many complacent advocates who build walls between them and who they claim they advocate for. Without proximity to the issues, their advocacy can be ill-informed, tone deaf, and ineffective. It may even perpetuate the very injustice the advocate is claiming they are railing against.

At the root of advocacy must be **direct service to the people**. While an advocate may view him/herself as someone who speaks on behalf of people, activists must speak for and act with the people they serve. It’s not to say we don’t need people speaking on behalf of others, but it is too often safe, profitable, and uber comfortable to only speak. Too often the advocate, or speaker, is speaking far too softly, as if people’s very lives aren’t in danger. Other times, advocates are advocating for what they feel comfortable speaking about, not what the oppressed deem as the most important to them.

I was once at an organizing meeting and a White woman was lamenting about her inability to rally some Black people she knew to take the front line at a protest she had attended. An elderly Black woman turned to her and gave her a lesson about privilege and risk, advocacy and activism. The Black woman shared that it wasn’t that the Black activists weren’t thinking the task at hand wasn’t of vital importance, but that they are always on the front lines, always at risk, always bearing the brunt of any movement for justice’s failures. They were full-time activists and weren’t prone to jumping at the demand of the suddenly involved advocate. She cautioned the well-meaning White woman that being the advocate for so long means that she may have become accustomed to safety, low-risk involvement, and being protected from any repercussions of the status quo. The activist knows no such place where their very activism does not place them at risk.

Today, more advocates and allies have to find their ways into the communities and serve the people more directly. They need to understand that allyship without community-rooted activism is weak at best and harbors deep inconsistencies and hypocrisy at worst. How many educators from faraway places would call themselves advocates for the communities they’d be scared to step foot in? How many advocates

who type busily on keys would meet the people they are advocating for and ask, “How can I best serve you?” I don’t have any misgivings for those who use policy, research, and writing to push for change. We need it all and must attack inequity and injustice from all sides. However, it should be noted that advocacy alone, doesn’t alter the conditions of the oppressed.

When **Frederick Douglass was asked** what should be done about injustice, he responded, “Agitate. Agitate. Agitate.” He advised, “Those who profess to favor freedom and yet depreciate agitation, are people who want crops without ploughing the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the roar of its many waters. The struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, or it may be both. But it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.”

We need less self-proclaimed advocates and allies and more collaborators on the front lines who view activism as inseparable from advocacy. Bring forth the agitators. The accomplices. The activists. Those are the type of advocates I would want fighting for educational justice next to me.