

The Intersectionality of Being an Ally

by Amanda O'Regan-Marchand, Executive Staff Officer, Professional Learning

Happy June!

As you are closing another chapter of successes, challenges, lessons and opportunities, reflect on all this school year has brought to you and consider how your allyship with students intersected. What commonalities and connections did you discover?

I am beginning to explore my intersectionalities and my neurospicy brain greatly enjoys finding commonalities and patterns. Whether your mind works similarly to mine or not, take a glimpse into the possible interconnectedness of allyship that exist as allies for your students.

Intersectionality refers to the different parts of our identity or pieces of our puzzle that allow us to explore and share, as we are comfortable, with the world around us; to practice discernment, to set and maintain boundaries and to honour the experience, knowledge and support that have brought us to this place. As members of a collective experience, what common ground do we share and what sets us apart? How can we celebrate our uniqueness while staying comfortably separate within a larger system?

Our students come to us with backpacks full of experiences. We build rapport though common interests, and this shared experience can help to cultivate a sense of safety for our students through genuine opportunities to see themselves in their learning experience. By being open to learning from one another, we get to discover [Mi'kmaq Ways Being of Knowing](#) and further extend our intersections with others to our natural world. We learn about sacred beliefs, practices and traditions that have helped our Indigenous neighbours respectfully tend this land through reciprocity and respect, for centuries.

Our responsibilities as student allies also call us to know students

as they are known and to recognize they come to us as part of a larger community. This involves broadening our understanding, creating meaningful opportunities for students to explore their identities, and embracing this diversity through our teaching practices, resources, and learning routines. Ensuring all our students feel empowered to ask, share and discover and to invite their families to their team helps us to build our allyship toolbox. This will see us equipped to ensure equity and accessibility in our students' learning opportunities. [The African Nova Scotian Student framework](#) is an excellent tool for this link of our allyship circle of care.

In terms of the intersectionality of being an ally, what connections did you discover this past year?

- What are some of the intersectionalities you discovered this year in your learning spaces?
- In what ways have you continued to implement the different intersectionalities into your practice?
- What 'yay me' moments do you recall?
- Finish the sentence: The students really responded to . . .
- How has your thinking grown or changed this school year?
- What have been some of your challenges this year, and how were you able to overcome them?
- What did you learn from your students this year?
- What did you learn about yourself this year? (Steve Barkley)

To help me feel better prepared for next steps, I make notes for next time. So, before you start, ponder this question and use the prompts below to help frame the future possibilities.

What opportunities can you find to interweave these into how we show up for and stand beside our students to encourage their learning.

- What do our students need us to learn in terms of how we



can be an ally for them in ways that honour their unique needs? How can we incorporate this into our feedback.

- Which coaching practices were most/least useful to you?
- What is something that makes you feel hopeful?
- What are you most curious about in your practice?
- If you could remind yourself of one important thing at the beginning of the next school year, what would it be?

Along with June being Indigenous History Month, it is also PRIDE month and so extends our allyship and widens our circle of care. Supporting 2SLGBTQAI+ youth and their allies and families provides opportunities for us to realize, recognize and respond to their needs by ensuring they also see themselves in their learning. This is crucial to their wellbeing and success. I have shared the following resources previously but revisiting and reflecting is important in sound allyship. The Public Service Alliance of Canada has launched a gender-inclusive language toolkit, <https://psacunion.ca/psac-kicks-pride-season-launch-gender-inclusive>, which explains different terms related to gender orientation and sexual identity in a very accessible way.

[TeachingTransgender.org](https://teachingtransgender.org) has developed an educational toolkit that is downloadable and designed to build skills for supporting our youth who identify as transgender and to cultivate safe spaces for those youth who silently identify to possibly find a place where they can share this piece of their identity.

PHE Canada also has a great number of [resources](#) for incorporating inclusive language and activities into the Physical Education learning space, where activities and the physical space can sometimes be one of the most challenging for our youth.

I mentioned earlier that I have a neurosparkly brain; although this is a newer piece of my own intersections, it was likely there all along, and my ways of seeing and interacting with my world made me “different” from my peers and not always in the best way. Neurodiversity is an ever-growing exploration of how individuals exist within our world and the amount of research and associated strategies can be overwhelming. How can we be allies to our students who make meaning and share their understandings in ways that are different? Different is not worse, less than, or odd—it’s just different. We can learn a great deal from that which sets us apart while ensuring what makes us unique still allows us to belong. Brene Brown does an excellent job explaining the important difference between belonging and fitting in. Belonging is now recognized as a fundamental human need. Approaching learning differences and neurodiversity from a strengths-based perspective can help students see we are part of their team and are cheering for their successes and supporting their challenges. Offering a consistent environment where we expect their best each day and recognize that everyone’s best looks different on any given day, is another way to show allyship.

Remember that even as allies, our best looks different too. We must be gentle and give ourselves permission to be open to learning and not knowing in the moment and to make a commitment to do differently as needed.

The NSTU Professional Learning team wishes you a fulfilling yearly reflection and a much-deserved opportunity for rest and a recharge this summer. Check back in September for new additions and changes to our offerings.