

# Eliot-Pearson Children's School: Building an Inclusive Community and Pursuing Social Justice

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The fountain, a hole in an elevated rock through which water flows when a button is pressed, is positioned over a large sand area. Several kindergartners are building dams below the fountain. It is a warm day and the children drift between roles: pressing the button, directing the water from the fountain toward the dams, building the dams, and pushing water from one pool to another. During this play, one boy notices that another, who is not fluent in English, is wearing his boots. "Hey, those are my boots!" he exclaims as he looks intently at the boy wearing them. Then, after a brief pause, he says, "You know where my cubby is." He goes back to working on his dam.

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Interactions like the one in the opening vignette are common at Eliot-Pearson Children's School, where our focus is anti-bias education and, most important, kindness. Current studies of child development from across the spectrum of theory and research (Gopnick 2016; LeVine & LeVine 2016) hold that young children are extremely complex learners who develop their knowledge, skills, and beliefs from their entire physical and social context. More than from any specific parenting strategy or teaching style, children form their minds and morals through acting on the world and absorbing a myriad of beliefs and ideas from the settings in which they play and learn.

At Eliot-Pearson, we (the whole school community) have established an intentional and overt process through which children learn compassion toward others, reverence for and interest in the natural world, and generosity toward those who look or act differently than themselves. This approach is built in to school-wide processes and in to each of the classrooms.

Eliot-Pearson is defined by its diversity. Children, staff, and families are seen as sharing an inclusive community with an emphasis on actively and continually assuring that all members of the community fully participate regardless of developmental ability, cultural background, skin color, gender expression or identification, language, or economic status. Particular attention is given to those who, in the broader society, may experience bias and exclusion. Anti-bias values are not simply assumed; they are pronounced on a daily basis in the interactions between members of the community and in the curriculum.

We keep the four goals of anti-bias education at the forefront of our work:

## Goal 1: Identity

- Teachers will nurture each child's construction of a knowledgeable, confident, individual, personal identity and of related social identities.
- Children will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities.

## Goal 2: Diversity

- Teachers will promote each child's comfortable, empathetic interaction with people from diverse backgrounds.
- Children will express comfort and joy with human diversity, use accurate language for human differences, and form deep, caring connections across all dimensions of human diversity.

## Goal 3: Justice

- Teachers will foster each child's capacity to critically identify bias and nurture each child's empathy for the hurt bias causes.

- Children will increasingly recognize unfairness (injustice), have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.

## Goal 4: Activism

- Teachers will cultivate each child's ability and confidence to stand up for oneself and for others in the face of bias.
- Children will demonstrate a sense of empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions.

(Derman-Sparks & Edwards 2010, 2019)

Anti-bias education supports the development of children's and their families' personal and social identities within a complex and multicultural society. It helps teach children to be proud of themselves and their families, to respect a range of human differences, to recognize unfairness and bias, and to speak their values (Derman-Sparks & Edwards 2010). Through its anti-bias commitment, Eliot-Pearson ensures the right of all children to develop to their fullest potential and to see themselves and their families reflected and respected in their classrooms. (Hence, at Eliot-Pearson we refer to children with special needs as children with special rights.) Inclusive, pro-social, and anti-bullying curriculum and instructional practices are the heart of our work.

Instructional practices focus on the whole child, supporting social, emotional, cognitive, language, and physical development in the context of children's families and cultures. Teachers intentionally integrate their planned projects with projects that emerge from the children's interests, abilities, and needs. The children themselves are the originators of much of the curriculum. Because children reflect the world they live in, their play and interactions with others reflect what is important to them and what is important in society (Gopnick 2016).

In this article, we share examples of our anti-bias work in each of our four classrooms over the course of two years: Preschool East, for children 2.9 to 3.5 years old; Preschool West, for children 3.5 to 4.5 years old; Prekindergarten–Kindergarten, for children 4 to 5 years old; and Kindergarten–1st Grade, for children 5 to 6 years old (this had been a Grades 1–2 classroom and was converted to K–1 for the 2018–2019 school year).

# Preschool East: Affirming the home-school connection

*Family involvement is part of the beauty of this place—a lot of thought and care to know about kids in and out. There are opportunities for kids to be who they are and opportunities for them to explore that and display it for others to see and learn from. The emergent curriculum—that allows teachers to be responsive to individual children. There are opportunities for teachers to engage. It's a different level of teaching that*

*I have never experienced before.*

**—Vanessa Cid, head teacher, Preschool East**

The focus for the younger preschoolers is on the developing self as a member of an inclusive community. The child is guided from the security of family through a conscious process in which the child's emotional life is engaged with others and the natural world.

Guided by scholarship on family engagement (Gonzalez-Mena 2014), teachers ask themselves certain questions as they begin to build this community: Does the learning environment communicate who is in the community? Does the environment reflect what the children value as well as the learning process? Are the imprints of the children prominently on display (their photographs, their words, their creations)? Are all of the children's families being honored within the community? What might the children's activities and demeanors communicate about how they feel about themselves?

Three-year-olds enter this community in diverse and individual ways, and they need support in developing healthy and productive ways of negotiating the social and physical environments. We provide opportunities for the children to learn how to share responsibilities, understand and communicate their needs, respond to the needs of others, advocate for themselves, and contribute to their community. Children feel part of a community when their identities and voices are validated within the fabric of classroom discussions and displays.

*Anti-bias education supports children's personal and social identities within a complex and multicultural society.*

One project we engage in early in the school year focuses on the self, family, and home so that the children begin cultivating the positive identities that are essential to the first goal of anti-bias education. In order to include others, one must feel included, so we begin with helping each child develop a secure self-concept.



Once the children have acclimated to participation in the program, the dramatic play area becomes each child's home for several days. The home and classroom are connected by allowing the children to "invite" their friends and teachers into their home (the dramatic play area). Children bring items from their homes that embrace their family's ambiance and culture. Items include blankets, pillows, picture books, empty food containers, tablecloths, paintings, photos, and durable ornaments and figurines. Families may also bring favorite music that is played in the home. Children explore these items in the dramatic play area as they "visit" each child's home. They get the opportunity to ask and answer questions and to honor and investigate each other's personal interests, family lives, and unique qualities such as languages and customs. These pretend homes are pathways for discovering their similarities while bridging differences.

## Preschool West: Introducing a person of power

*Teaching activism empowers young people to make big changes in the world, even though they're small.*

**—Victor Bradley, head teacher, Preschool West**

Older preschoolers continue building strong connections with their peers and establish deeper understandings of themselves as they focus on the world beyond home and school. They are interested in their own power, friendships, and identities in relation to others. Children in the classroom study the lives of powerful people with whom they can identify. They are then introduced to the notion of social justice through people of power who have had a positive impact on society.

The second, third, and fourth goals of anti-bias education are all central to this exploration of power. Teachers facilitate children's wonder and discovery of their individual identities across the curriculum in multiple ways. They ask essential questions like Where does your skin color come from?, What is beautiful?, and What is a family? Group meeting times include discussions, songs, stories, and poems. Teachers use read-alouds on faces, skin color, and families. They also introduce the classroom persona doll and often develop survey questions as part of getting to know one another.

For art, children create photo collages of themselves, draw body-size self-portraits, and construct mini versions and murals of their families and homes using recycled materials (corks, wooden beads, fabrics, shoeboxes, and photos). Children make playdough portraits, clay and plastic body parts, and skin color paint using spices and other natural materials such as cinnamon, coconut shells, sand, sunflower seed butter, chocolate, and clay. They build houses with blocks and talk about people in communities. As they consolidate this learning, children begin to engage in the larger world by examining how powerful people have a positive impact in communities.

*Children are introduced to social justice through people of power who have had a positive impact on society.*

One "Person of Interest" the preschoolers learned about was Cesar Estrada Chavez. The project started by reading the picture book *Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez*, by Kathleen Krull, to help engage children in a dialogue about his lifelong dedication to improving the treatment and pay of farm workers. Children learned about the people and marches he led, the boycotts and hunger strikes he called for, and the national awareness he fostered about the dangers of pesticides for workers' health.

During the 12-week project, children learned about current events similar to those Chavez worked on, and they talked about boycotting and protesting. They decided to take action in support of migrant workers by focusing on one US fast food corporation's use of farm workers who have poor working conditions in Mexico. Children organized and marched through the school to educate everyone about boycotting the fast food chain. By connecting Chavez's work to current events, children learned that they can take action and make a difference, which plants the seeds of activism in support of social justice (Boutte 2008).

# Prekindergarten–Kindergarten: Understanding gender identities and roles

*Hi, Hanna! I just wanted to thank you so much for your commitment to inclusion and anti-bias work at EPCS. Nick and I were sitting at [a large chain restaurant] drinking hot chocolate, when we noticed a person walk in and pause briefly before choosing between the men's and women's restrooms. Nick immediately asked, "What if you go by they or them? What bathroom do you use?" He talked about a few of his teachers and he wondered what they would do. We talked about it, and now he would like to write a letter to the CEO of [the chain restaurant] to suggest gender neutral restrooms. I know that none of this would have occurred to him if it hadn't been for the diversity of staff at EPCS and for their candor regarding their preferred gender identities. Thank you for this. We love EPCS so much, and sometimes its unique qualities really stand out—even outside of school!*

**—Rebecca, parent of a kindergartner**

In pre-K and kindergarten, children exhibit expanding social awareness, problem-solving ability, and understanding. They communicate their thoughts and feelings more confidently and skillfully as they engage in conflict resolution and begin to understand other people's perspectives. This classroom nurtures this growing awareness by instilling the notion that everyone has the right to feel "safe, strong, free, and powerful" (Family Access of Newton 2017, n.p.). Biases are openly addressed as children are more able to participate in group dialogues about fairness, exclusion, and identity.

The concept of gender is one of the many interesting topics addressed in this classroom. Because children in the US are bombarded with messages about boys and girls, some questions seem to arise year after year Are pink and purple girl colors?, Why are the children playing in the block area mostly boys?, Why are children at the writing and drawing table mostly girls?, Are boys always loud?, Do girls play fighting games?, Is there a boy sink and a girl sink?, and Do you always have to be a girl or a boy? What does it mean if you don't?

The teaching team starts out by addressing these questions in daily activities. With time, teachers revisit the notion of everyone being "safe, strong, free, and powerful" and help children apply it to gender expression and identity. For teachers, this is also an opportune moment to take a step back and reflect on their own thoughts, behaviors, and language

use (Chen, Nimmo, & Fraser 2009). For example, teachers recently discussed addressing children as “kindergartners” or “children” instead of “boys,” “girls,” or “guys.” They also questioned their assumptions about who is loud and active in the classroom.

Focusing on the second and third goals of anti-bias education, the teachers decided collaboratively when and how to explicitly address gender expression and identity with the class. In the 2017–2018 school year, they initiated this work during circle time.

At the beginning of circle time, the teacher, Lynne May, asks, “What toy do you like?” Various children respond: “LEGO,” “Ninjago,” “American Girl doll,” and “Remote control monster truck.” Lynne May asks, “Are there boy toys and girl toys?” At first, the children start identifying each toy as for boys or for girls. Lynne May charts their responses. But after each response, some children object. In response to Robby saying that dinosaurs are boy toys, Shelly says, “But I play with dinos too.” Soon, all the toys are listed for both boys and girls.



Then Lynne May introduces the term *stereotype*. “Girls have long hair, girls play with dolls, boys play with cars, pink is for girls, blue is for boys.” She then elicits “I” statements (which

are familiar to the children). Marsha says, "I like blue." Mac adds, "I have long hair." Several other children make I statements that contradict the stereotypes.

Lynne May finishes circle time by reading and discussing *William's Doll*, by Charlotte Zolotow. During the story, the children begin to recognize that William's grandmother is his ally. Some smile when the grandmother buys William the doll he wants. Lynne May asks if anyone else would stand up and be William's ally. Almost everyone raises their arms, exclaiming, "I would!" Two children say they would be William's friend and play with him. One says she would get him a doll too.

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Over the next several weeks, through planned and spontaneous questions and activities, the children came to understand gender expression and identity in a much less constrained way. They also became vocal about not being limited by old ideas regarding who they can be and what they can do.

Before Lynne May adds some fancy dresses to the dramatic play center, she introduces the items to the children during morning meeting. She begins with a story about the dresses (e.g., where they come from, whom they belonged to, and why she and the children now have them). Everyone seems interested. Lynne May also tells the children that the dresses can be worn by anyone in the classroom who would like to use them. She assures the children, "It is okay to be curious and to test your ideas." Eyes widen and bodies straighten up.

In the days and weeks that follow, both girls and boys wear the dresses in the dramatic play center. They gaze at their reflections with satisfied grins. They talk about which dresses they like best. One child, a boy, encourages a friend, another boy, to try on a dress. "Look, it is fun." He twirls around in

his dress. His friend watches in amazement as the skirt collects air and rises majestically. His friend puts on a dress and twirls too.

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## Kindergarten–1st Grade: Participating in governance

*One of the most important skills we learn is how to be true to ourselves while also being thoughtful, responsible members of a group. This is what used to be called citizenship. Class Council was designed to give everyone—teachers and students alike—a chance to develop as citizens of their community.*

—**Matt Slepín, head teacher, K–1st Grade**

This classroom constructs an inclusive community in which all of the children and adults actively participate in leadership. While the teachers are still working toward all four anti-bias goals, they emphasize the empowerment in the fourth goal. Specifically, they nurture the children's emerging abilities to understand and generate policies that apply to the community.

For the past few years, this class has integrated a block of time called “Class Council.” This is a weekly meeting for the entire group, lasting for 30-45 minutes. The students have opportunities to share and discuss challenges they are encountering at school and come together to make cooperative decisions on matters affecting the functioning of the class. So that all children can anonymously and privately report problems or issues to the council, they have a box—Cutey the Problem Box—in a secluded corner of the room, along with pencils and slips of paper saying, “I am having a problem with. . .”. Problems are openly aired and discussed during Class Council.

The Class Council is introduced early in the year—approximately the third week—preceded by activities focused on community, decision-making, and teacher-facilitated investigations into students' concerns. Early in the year, the Class Council develops rules for the class and later, they create the roster of class jobs.

Some problems, discussions, and decisions require only a single session of the Council. However, weightier issues may occupy several sessions; they might also include special meetings, such as additional sessions outside of the regularly scheduled times or working

sessions with smaller special committees. The issues are usually decided by means of majority voting, although broader items often involve several rounds of runoff voting. The results of Council actions are made public through classroom display (e.g., class job board, class rules display, weekly messages to families). Often, council meetings address conflicts among children, such as rejection, exclusion, and sharing of space or materials.

The children gather at the rug. Matt, the head teacher, calls the Council to order by rapping the gavel: "I hereby declare this October 21 meeting of the Class Council in session!"

The first issue discussed is lining up, a concern of both teachers and students. After about eight weeks of school, the class was experiencing the same issues when lining up: running and pushing to be next in line after the Line Leader, running and pushing to be last in line, and constantly struggling to stand next to preferred classmates.

Casey suggests that each student have an assigned spot in the line. This sparks a lively discussion of why they like or don't like the idea. Tommy and Lucy are concerned that the same people would have to be at the end of the line every day. Carrie suggests that they change the order each week.

When a vote is taken, the class is strongly in favor of the idea. Matt explains why he does not like the idea, but says that since a clear majority of the class wants to try and has given good reasons, it will be done.

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Not long after this Class Council, it was apparent that line spots were exactly what this particular group needed to take the anxiety out of lining up. Examples like this may not seem relevant to anti-bias education on the surface, but by the end of the school year all of the children know how to identify and solve problems. They are well on their way to effectively standing up against prejudice and discrimination.

# Family engagement and anti-bias curriculum

The school engages families through intentional and ongoing communication where the voices and needs of families are heard and addressed. This involves building strong home–school relationships, facilitating opportunities for engagement, community building, and parent leadership, and responding to the educational, social, and financial needs of children and families.

The Parent-Teacher Advisory Board oversees our annual agenda for family activities. In the 2017–2018 school year, the Advisory Board chose to focus on raising compassionate children, which is one of the school's core values. Two evening workshops for families and teachers were held, and kindness and compassion was also included (as one of four topics) in our two community discussion evenings. These evening workshops and discussions offer opportunities for families from differing backgrounds and beliefs to discuss topics ranging from developing healthy friendships to engaging with the natural world to mindfulness.

As is often the case, when the Advisory Board decided to focus on raising compassionate children, the children got involved too. They created “The Kindness Project” and engaged the community in defining the concept of kindness. They discussed it among themselves in their classroom and engaged teachers, administrators, and staff in dialogue about kindness, self-respect, and respect for others. They then compared what they learned with their initial notes and presented a summary of their findings to the Eliot-Pearson community—including their families.

Another way in which families are regularly involved—and our anti-bias work is deepened—is through direct family participation in the classroom. For example, although religious holidays are not celebrated at Eliot-Pearson, families in the older preschool classroom are routinely invited to come talk about how their families celebrate various holidays that are special to them. These events are recorded in the classroom newsletter and are shared with all the families (along with invitations to share how they celebrate in other ways).

Children's art, words, and work are curated and displayed throughout the center and via the school's website, encouraging family and community engagement and interaction. A variety of methods and approaches are used to share curriculum and students' work with families, such as weekly newsletters, password-protected classroom web pages,

documentation panels, quarterly family breakfasts, portfolios, and parent conferences. These methods ensure access for all family members, drawing them into our rich learning and research about anti-bias education.

One of the most important events of the year is Significant Day. Children invite someone special in their lives other than a parent to visit their classrooms, such as a grandparent, sibling, cousin, or family friend. We started Significant Day because one of the biases that early childhood programs in the US often exhibit toward diverse families is that of assuming a nuclear family. In fact, throughout the world, most children experience deep relationships with people other than a parent (Hrady 2009). We at Eliot-Pearson see these relationships—which are sometimes referred to as fictive kin—as essential to children's well-being in a diverse community. Through Significant Day, we celebrate family diversity.

## Conclusion

At a troubling time in history when human rights and the natural world are under threat, early childhood educators are obligated to recognize their role in supporting the development of children so that, as adults, they are prepared to address global challenges. As much as it is our job to prepare children for school and to assure their emotional well-being, it is equally important for the profession to acknowledge our collective responsibility to foster kindness, compassion, and fairness (LeeKeenan & Nimmo 2016). Early childhood educators can accept the responsibility and opportunity to build a better society, one in which all its members are included. Teaching young children is a moral calling as much as it is a vocation.

In the 1970s, when the inclusion of children with special rights was not yet fully accepted, the Eliot-Pearson Children's School took on the challenge of full inclusion. It was an experiment—one that succeeded in establishing best practices in early childhood special education (Meisels 1977). Today, as the broader society struggles with the challenges of immigration, continued discrimination against people of color, and the reassessment of societal norms of gender expression and identification, Eliot-Pearson again accepts the challenge of full inclusion.

Diversity is not simply a fact at Eliot-Pearson; consideration of who is included, how they are included, and why everyone is included is an active part of the day-to-day curriculum, staff professional development, and family engagement. It is the fabric of what we do at the school. It gives us hope for the future of our diverse society.

## A History of Inclusion

The Eliot-Pearson Children's School began in 1922 as the Ruggles Street School and Training Center. As one of the first nursery schools in the US, it became a training ground for preschool teachers. It also served as a research site for those interested in learning about child development, which at the time was a new field of study. In 1926, the Ruggles Street School became the Nursery Training School of Boston, reflecting its primary focus on teacher training. In 1951, it affiliated with Tufts University, and teachers were able to pursue their college educations in conjunction with training in a preschool setting. In 1964, the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Study was formally established, with the Children's School as its laboratory and demonstration facility.

Since its founding, Eliot-Pearson has had an inclusive focus. The original Ruggles Street School served children from under-resourced communities; over time, the school emphasized serving children of all abilities and economic backgrounds. By the early 1970s it was leading the way in "mainstreaming" young children with special needs (Meisels 1977). Today, it remains committed to inclusivity and to broadening the field's concept of inclusion, such as by supporting children who are learning more than one language and children whose gender expression and/or identity are expansive.

*We know [our child has] been loved, and he needed that. It's there at all levels, from the administration through the teachers. There's a willingness to figure out how to support the child vs. following the stereotype. Finding different ways to work with the child is what matters.*

—**Felicia Share and Sherry Darling, parents**

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### **JOHN HORNSTEIN**

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