



## **Diversity Value Part I: Creating a Diverse Community**

**Jennifer Friedman, October 2009**

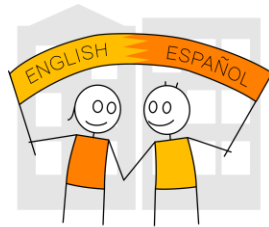
La Escuelita's "diversity value" reads as follows: **La Escuelita families are active members of a diverse community of families who promote equality within the community through respectful, direct communication.**

During these seven years of La Escuelita, we have confronted ethical dilemmas and personal sacrifices in our efforts to ensure that we remain true to the "diversity value". For creating a diverse community is not something that people will argue against as a concept. They will challenge individual decisions and policies that require their own concrete sacrifices for the all too abstract goal of maintaining a sense of equality among all community members. And make no mistake, we are well aware that what we are trying to create does not exist in the "outside world". Things are not fair and just on the Upper West Side, in New York City, in this country, or in this world, and we recognize that we are trying to level a playing ground that brings in plenty of baggage from the world outside of La Escuelita. But alas we persist in our idealism and we continue to make every effort to have all members of our community feel equally welcome, safe, and valued.

So what does it mean to be a diverse community? I would argue that this should be broken up into two parts: creating a diverse community and existing in a diverse community.

It begins with the admissions process when we look to admit families from a variety of backgrounds. Unlike many schools who limit their definition of diversity to skin color (or in the case of some schools to street address!) we look at other aspects that can bring variety to our community. After all, critical to the definition of diversity is variety. We believe that by virtue of having single parents, gay parents, parents of different religions and races, families of varied income brackets, teachers of varied dialects and educational backgrounds, etc., we create a microcosm of the world as we would like it: varied.

At a recent information session for prospective parents, a gay couple approached me after the meeting and asked me if we really did have gay families in the school. I was taken aback a little by the question. On one hand I wanted to respond, "Of course we do! Why would I say we value families with different backgrounds if we don't actually HAVE families of different backgrounds?" But I also realized that I did not want to be misleading either. Some families look for a community that reflects themselves because they can feel more comfortable there. I am not judging that. Gay parents certainly face enough discrimination that finding a preschool community with many other gay parents can provide much needed respite from a harsh and unaccepting outside world. The same is true for biracial couples, Muslim families, and single parents, just to name a few. We are not a "haven" for any of these families, however, in that they will not likely come to La Escuelita and find many families "just like theirs". We usually have one or two families with gay parents per year, for example, and I did not want this couple, who may be eager to find a community of families just like theirs, to be under the impression that La Escuelita is that place. It is not an easy picture to paint for prospective families and the best way for me to explain it is to go back to our goal of creating a community with great variation.



## **La Escuelita**

Varied does not necessarily mean calm, or easy, or adversity-free. But that is exactly the point. In a world with diversity we are all faced with the challenge of experiencing our differences on a daily basis. We learn about each other and about ourselves while learning to appreciate each other both because of and despite our differences. We want our families to feel that what makes them different from other families is precisely what we feel makes them special to our community. We want them to feel that their differences go unnoticed and are celebrated all at the same time. In this way, we expose our children early on to the ways that they are alike and the ways they are different than each other. We believe that this provides them with opportunities to understand each other better while at the same time allowing them to develop a strong sense of self.

This is what it means to us to create a diverse community. In the next Directors' Column, I will discuss our vision of existing in a diverse community.