



Parents, childcare providers and staff from Earl Boyles Elementary took part in a series of classes called Mind in the Making.

Photos by Adam Wickham

LEARNING TOGETHER

Earl Boyles parents, staff gain new perspectives through Mind in the Making

By Bill Graves

Five men attending a parenting class one March afternoon in the library of East Portland's Earl Boyles Elementary School stand in a circle puzzling over a square slice of cardboard about the size of a cafeteria tray.

The teacher, MaryEtta Callier-Wells, has charged the men – four parents and a preschool educational assistant – with finding a way to use the cardboard to move across the room from one point to another without touching the carpet with their feet. One of the men pulls out a pocketknife and slices the cardboard in two. He then puts one piece under each foot and shuffles away across the room.

“Why did we do this exercise?” asks another teacher, Andreina Velasco, first in Spanish, then in English.

“To get our minds thinking about new ideas,” says a man named Miguel in Spanish.

This class from 3:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. is focused on helping the adult students – an unusual mix of parents, childcare providers and Earl Boyles staff – foster critical

thinking in young children. It is part of a course that includes eight monthly classes based on the work of Ellen Galinsky, child development expert and author of the best-selling book, *Mind in the Making*.

In her 2010 book, Galinsky identifies seven essential life skills, executive functions of the brain, that research shows equip children for success in school and life. They are: focus and self-control, taking the perspective of others, communicating, making connections, critical thinking, taking on challenges and self-directed, engaged learning.

“It is just a whole new framework for how kids learn,” Galinsky says. “Instead of seeing kids’ behavior as a problem, you see it as an opportunity to teach life skills. It is a mind shift.”

Adults in the course learn why these skills are important for them in life, which helps them promote them in their children, she says. Self-control, for example, predicts a child will have better grades in college, fewer impulse control problems, and better relationships. Children’s

levels of executive functions predict their health, wealth and likelihood of addiction and crime later in life.

The course was offered over the 2013-14 school year at Earl Boyles in Southeast Portland as part of [Early Works](#), an initiative of the Children’s Institute and its partners. The project has pooled resources of the school, its district and public and private organizations serving young children in its quest to build a comprehensive, coherent education program for every child from birth through third grade in the school’s diverse attendance area. The goal is to ensure every child is well-prepared for kindergarten and school success. Early Works seeks to also identify best practices that can be translated into policy at local, regional, state, and federal levels.

Earl Boyles’ diverse enrollment is reflected in the Mind in the Making class, where many of the parents speak Spanish as their first language. Velasco, the Earl Boyles Site Liaison for Early Works, and a third teacher, Anna Ibarra, present lessons in both Spanish and English. When Ibarra or Callier-Wells are talking in English; Velasco translates in Spanish through headsets provided to the class by the school district. Then Velasco presents in Spanish, and Ibarra or volunteer Alex Schay translate into English. Sometimes Velasco switches back and forth every one or two sentences,

“It takes everyone out of their comfort zone” and fosters “cognitive flexibility,” she says.

The students – parents, grandparents, local childcare providers and Earl Boyles staff – hone their perspective taking, or *tener perspectiva*, skills by taking the course together. The unusual mix makes the course as valuable for building closer relationships among staff and parents as it is for teaching Mind in the Making content, says Velasco.

A DIFFERENT MODEL FOR PARENT ENGAGEMENT

Nearly 40 people, including 10 teachers and staff, many of whom were also parents, registered for the course. About 20-to-30 people would show for each class. Even Earl Boyles Principal Ericka Guynes attended some. Early in the year, parents and staff segregated themselves into separate groups around tables scattered across the library. By course end, it would be hard for a visitor to distinguish parents from staff as they sat mixed around tables all pushed together into one big U shape.



Facilitator MaryEtta Callier-Wells co-leads a session of Mind in the Making. Callier-Wells is also a parent educator with Self Enhancement Inc.

“Having mutual goal setting that includes both parents and professionals we think redefines family engagement,” says Galinsky “I think it creates more power for helping children thrive. It is a different model of parent education and parent engagement.”

Vickie Koblasa, an Earl Boyles kindergarten teacher, sits with parents rather than “my comfort zone sitting with the teachers” to build better relationships. Principal Guynes says the course gives her insights into what parents expect from their children and education.

“Learning alongside our parents has been a powerful experience,” she says.

Brett Walker, early learning initiatives coordinator for the Oregon Department of Education, visited the class at Earl Boyles in March, and says it offers a “great model” for helping parents understand young children’s brain development.

“What is wonderful is having parents and teachers working together,” he says. “It is so critical to give parents and teachers the same message on how children develop



James Sanford, a preschool instructional assistant at Earl Boyles, and Miguel Salazar, a parent of a preschooler at Earl Boyles, learn together at the Mind in the Making class.

do the same to their kids. In another class, Josette Herrera, who has six children ranging in ages from 5 to 24, describes her decision to “give my kids a better life” by going back to school at night.

“No matter what you go through in life,” she says during the class focused on encouraging children to take challenges, “you can still go forward.”

The students also watch short videos of researchers doing experiments that show how essential skills affect children. One, for example, shows how children with self-control are able to wait on eating one marshmallow for the gratification of getting a second one later. Galinsky says she has produced close to 100 such videos since 2001. That’s when she embarked on a quest to answer one question: How do you keep the fire for learning burning in children’s eyes? Her journey led her to the essential life skills and Mind in the Making.

those skills...That is really the type of model we need to be looking at and replicating in other places and really supporting on the state level.”

Galinsky also is president and cofounder of the [Families and Work Institute](#), a nonprofit in New York City that puts research into action and that developed the course based on her book.

The institute last year trained teachers, which it calls facilitators, to offer five Mind in the Making courses to childcare providers and preschool teachers in the Portland area. Earl Boyles was the only place where parents also took the course along with early childhood practitioners. Since January 2013, the national project has launched Mind in the Making programs in 19 other states, including Hartford, Conn., Evansville, Ind.; Fairfax County, Va., and Austin, Texas.

Adults taking the course not only learn techniques to foster life skills in their students and children, but they also try them out. They play games of moving and stopping on command such as Simon Says the Opposite and Red Light, Green Light – games that help children learn to focus. They share feelings, a practice that helps children see others’ perspectives. They learn the importance of talking, reading and asking questions of their children and of giving them room to explore and experiment.

“Sometimes we get in the way of a child’s creativity and stop the process,” says Callier-Wells during a class on critical thinking.

The adults discuss concepts as a class and in small groups. Sometimes the conversation gets personal. In a discussion on perspective taking, two fathers disclose they were physically abused as children and determined not to

UNDERSTANDING “WHO MY KIDS ARE”

Earl Boyles parents and educators give the course high marks and say they are putting the lessons into practice. Carrie Tercek, 34, a special education teacher, says both she and her husband, Chris Tercek, 37, who also took the class, play focus games such as Simon Says with their 3-year-old more. They also ask questions about story characters when they read to her, which improves her perspective taking skills.

“We ask about how [characters] feel, such as ‘How do you think the baby duck feels?’” she says. “We’ve already seen improvements in her answers.”

Anna Martinez, with two daughters on the autism spectrum, says the course has helped her “understand who my kids are.”

Linda Long, a third-grade teacher and summer childcare provider, says some of the life skills are similar to what her two children learn in Tae Kwon Do.

“My children’s behavior and attitude toward taking on new challenges have changed dramatically as a result of this explicit teaching,” she says. “They are more confident, willing to take risks and have gained an understanding about the process of learning.”

Meri Cullins, 29, a restaurant server, says she and her husband are playing more board games with their three boys. The parents also ask their kids more questions,

encourage role playing, point to objects that begin with certain letters and do other exercises to foster essential life skills.

Her preschooler “is going to be SO ready for kindergarten next year,” she says.

Callier-Wells, Ibarra and Velasco all were given time in their jobs to lead the Mind in the Making course, sparing the expense of having to hire teachers. Callier-Wells and Ibarra each coordinate Parents as Teachers – a home visiting and parenting program for families with young children – for Self Enhancement Inc. and Mt. Hood Community College respectively. Excluding staffing costs, Early Works funded Mind in the Making with about \$5,000 for food, parent incentives, materials and nearby childcare while parents attended the class.

With the opening of the Neighborhood Center at Earl Boyles this fall, the school and community partners will have a chance to expand and grow strategies such as Mind in the Making to support child development, parent engagement and shared professional development.

Erin Ramsey, director of Mind in the Making for the Families and Work Institute, says the Earl Boyles course took “families and professionals on a learning journey” as the institute had envisioned.

The course leaders were “unique in how rapidly and how intuitively they were able to implement and go after what we were dreaming of,” she says. “Earl Boyles really is leading the way for us in a lot of ways.”

Bill Graves in a Portland-based education writer.

[Video](#): Mind in the Making class at Earl Boyles



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- Multnomah County Child Care Resource & Referral
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