

# Education for Democracy

An interview with Allison Horne

by Margie Carter

*“We hold these truths to be self-evident...”*

*These words continue to move the world. The political system of democracy that is built upon them is radical, recent, rare. It is our children’s inheritance. We must not think we can give it to them casually.*

*We must embed it so deeply in their souls that no one can take it away.*

Albert Shanker Institute,  
Education for Democracy

Long ago, in another era, when I was in undergraduate school studying to become a teacher, John Dewey’s *Democracy and Education* was a basic introduc-



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enjoys working with children and their families to show them, and others, how truly competent and capable they can be. Allison is a dedicated life-long learner working on expanding her knowledge and application of Reggio Emilia inspired practices through her current work as a head teacher in a mixed-age preschool classroom.



Margie Carter has worked in the early childhood field for over 40 years as a teacher, administrator, collect instructor, author, and consultant. She delights in visiting early childhood programs with a view that children and their educators are eager to engage and learn, benefit from taking risks, and deserving of having their voices heard.

tory text. It had a powerful influence on me, particularly as a sheltered white suburban woman attending college in the 1960s as the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Anti-war movements burst on the scene. Over time I came to understand that there is no such thing as a ‘neutral’ education. Education is always on behalf of some goals, perspectives, and allegiances. When the first edition of the *Anti-Bias Curriculum* book was published by NAEYC (Derman-Sparks & ABC Task Force, 1989), I put it at the center of my work. Despite, or perhaps because of the controversy this book generated, it went on to become one of the top two bestsellers among NAEYC publications, with over a million copies sold. The new edition, *Anti-Bias Education* (Derman-Sparks & Olsen Edwards, 2010) added a focus on educating ourselves as teachers. This is an extremely pertinent resource for today’s world, along with the companion book, *Leading Anti-Bias Programs Early Childhood Programs: A Guide for Change* (Derman-Sparks, Nimmo & LeeKeenan, 2014). The authors have formulated four clear goals for anti-bias education, which actually go far beyond putting multicultural books and dolls in your classroom (see box). To me, these goals are part of what the opening quote above speaks to: giving children an understanding of the democratic principles of liberty and justice for all.

## Anti-bias Goals

### Goal 1

Each child will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities.

### Goal 2

Each child will express comfort and joy with human diversity; accurate language for human difference; and deep, caring human connections.

### Goal 3

Each child will increasingly recognize unfairness, have a language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.

### Goal 4

Each child will demonstrate empowerment and skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions.

Louise Derman-Sparks & Julie Olsen Edwards (2010). *Anti-Bias Education: Tools for Empowering Young Children and Ourselves*.

How you establish the social environment or culture of your classroom can promote or undermine anti-bias values and civic engagement in a democracy. This is a foundation for ongoing teacher planning, which can then include intentional provocations to expand opportunities for exploring these values. Some

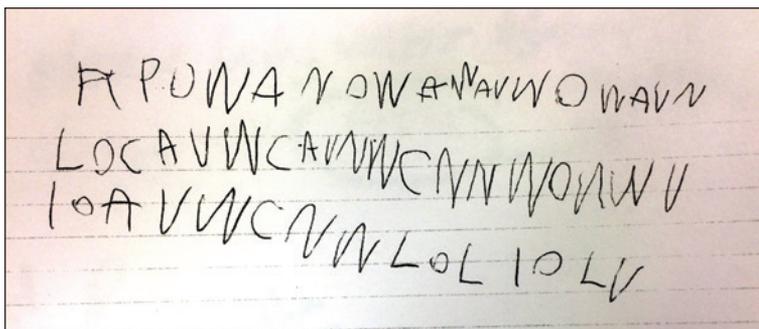
of the most fruitful explorations often come from children’s awareness of current events in their communities, be they holidays, people who are homeless, or hate crimes. When you are truly curious in your listening to children, you see how naturally passionate they are about issues of fairness. Sometimes children’s conversations make educators uncomfortable, especially when they involve controversy or reveal feelings that may seem naive in the face of complicated political issues. But in my mind, the heart of anti-bias education is helping children acquire the dispositions and skills to work with different perspectives as citizens in a democracy while they deepen their understandings and commitment to equity. With a history mired in layers of inequity, the truths we hold may not always be self-evident. We have to always dig deeper to identify the structures that keep injustice in place.

### An Interview with Allison Horne

Last year while touring the Early Learning Children’s Community Center in Lansing, Michigan, I took time to read an extensive documentation display about children’s growing interest in the water crisis in the nearby city of Flint. It seemed a perfect example of how teachers can genuinely support children’s questions and explorations of their wider socio-economic environment. Allison Horne offers us a window into how a teacher’s recognition of a child’s concerns can provide opportunities to pursue anti-bias goals, especially with an eye on empowerment and action.

**Margie:** What an important piece of documentation, Allison. I was taken with how organically this exploration of the Flint water crisis unfolded with the children. No initial fanfare or big announcement, just you giving respectful acknowledgment to how young children want to advocate for strangers they see facing injustice.

**Allison:** Yes. Our Flint water discussion started during rest time when I noticed Rowan writing a letter in his journal. When I asked him to share his writing, he said the people of Flint couldn’t drink the water because it was dirty and dangerous for them and this made him angry. He symbolized his anger by writing a lot of W’s in a note addressed to the Governor.



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Rowan's knowledge of this issue was both surprising to me and powerful, as he had so much concern and passion for the unfairness regarding this topic. I was interested to hear not only Rowan's ideas but other children's thoughts and feelings. Did they know what caused this unsafe drinking water? Did they have ideas of advocacy for the people in Flint and, if so, what were they? My co-teacher Michelle and I felt it was very important to follow-up on this concern, and we began asking the children questions at the snack table that same day.

**Margie:** Let's offer our readers part of this conversation that took place.

**Ms. Allison:** "What happened to the water?"

**Rowan:** "Well, water got into the tubes and something mixed together and it got out of the tubes and people dranked it."

**Ms. Allison:** "Wow, something mixed together and people drank it?"

**Rowan:** "Yeah!"

**Eleanor:** "How do you know the dirty stuff mixed together?"

**Rowan:** "Well, um...it's kinda clear, like water, but it's dangerous!"

**Brandon:** "Dangerous?"

**Rowan:** "Children are drinking it and moms and dads and them get sick!"

**Eleanor:** "Oh... the water maked them sick?"

**Rowan:** "Yeah, like they could died!!"

**Farrah:** "Like dead? The water makes them dead?"

**Rowan:** "Well, I don't know... they get sick 'cause the water goes through the pipes and stuff gets mixed in and it's bad!"

**Farrah:** "Oh [makes a sad face]."

**Ms. Allison:** "Wow, that sounds serious! How do you feel?"

**Rowan:** "I'm MAD! Cause, well, I'm mad at the Governor, he's not helping them!"

**Ms. Allison:** "He's not helping them? Can we do something to help?"

**Rowan:** "Well, maybe write a letter to the Governor, maybe he doesn't know all those people are drinking the bad water!"

**Ms. Allison:** "Yeah, maybe he doesn't know... you should write a letter to tell him!"

**Rowan:** "Yeah, cause if he knew about the bad water, he would call the police and the police would help those people and they would be safe, 'cause that's what police do: they keep people safe!"

**Margie:** As an adult following this story in the news, were you surprised about the children's awareness?

**Allison:** I was not surprised that they had heard about the Flint water crisis; it was all over the news and radio and everyone was talking about it. However, I was surprised at the depth of knowledge and understanding that the children had. They understood that the water was hurting people, and were deeply concerned about the children and families in Flint, questioning what they could do to help these children. I was deeply touched to hear and see the concern children had for those they had never met. This interaction made me more excited to explore their understanding of the crisis. How much did the children know and what were some of their deeper questions? Did they think a person put it in there, was it an accident, was it on purpose? How did they sort through the fact that people knew about this, but didn't do anything about it? And how does this impact the children and families of our classroom?

**Margie:** Hearing the questions on your mind is instructive. Teachers often face these moments with children where they can just stay in the role of documenter, decide to engage, or just move on to something else. Did you have any conversation with your coworkers before deciding what to do? You must have wondered how the parents might respond. I always appreciate the teacher's voice in a piece of documentation. Including your thinking helps us understand the choices you made.

**Allison:** Co-teacher Michelle and I had a discussion almost immediately after observing Rowan's initial interest. We talked about what our next steps would be, because we wanted it to be organic and not forced. I often struggle with moving through things too quickly; knowing this, I wrote down some reflective questions and determined my main focus would be documenting the children's thoughts and actions with as little input from me as possible. That is why a lot of the documentation is written conversations between the children, because my focus was on writing down as much as I could of what they were saying. Michelle and I also talked about our action steps for informing the parents of this interest, as we were concerned how the parents would respond. Would parents think we were pressuring their child to think or act a certain way? Would parents feel that we were forcing a negative opinion of government and scaring children into thinking that their government wouldn't take care of them? Would parents not want us to discuss or research such a negative topic?

We made a plan to communicate with parents daily to inform them of our process and get their feedback. We addressed their concerns and made sure we were on the same page with the language we were using with the children. This made parents feel they were involved; they were able to enhance



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conversations they were having at home, and they were provided suggested action steps to take with their children. We were fortunate that parents got on board and supported this process. Once we were further into the process, both the parents and I were curious to know what the children’s responses were to help solve this problem. I began to pose questions and encouraged them to express their thoughts through writing letters. However, I also maintained my goal to document discussions the children were continuing to have at morning messages, meals, and at our large group time. They brought up the topics freely without influence from teachers or adults, and progressively more children felt comfortable asking questions, providing solutions, and expressing their opinions — even if they differed from the group.

### Considering Goals

**Margie:** I’m wondering if you are familiar with the four goals for anti-bias education, had other goals, or were just following your instincts. I see a clear connection between your decision to continue these discussions with the third and fourth anti-bias goals.

**Allison:** I was just following my instincts and observing the children. However, it would be wrong of me to not acknowledge that I have internal biases that shape my instincts and how I interpret my observations of the children. That being said, reflecting on my notes and the documentation piece, I was focused on showing how competent and capable children can be. I noted that children were able to recognize unfairness, and how unkind it can be. I was fascinated with their feeling of competence in creating solutions to combat these unfair actions. I concentrated on their ability to care for others, be active advocates in society, and find solutions autonomously using their own methods, an example being the creation of a Flint water representation using materials they selected.

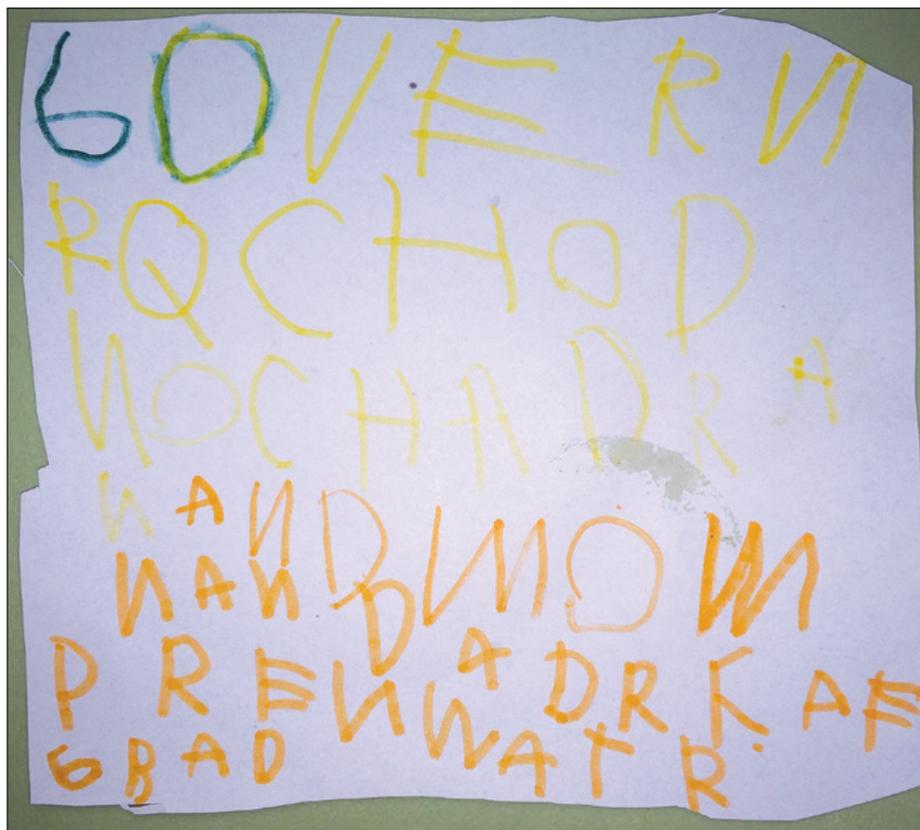
**Margie:** So often people focus their anti-bias curriculum on materials or conversations about diversity. But you had hands-on science-related activities for the children to explore issues of injustice.

**Allison:** Yes, the children were coming up with solutions for how to share the news of the Flint water crisis with other people. They decided they wanted to create a physical representation to show what unclean water would be like to drink. We worked with children to select materials and offer ways to express their understanding of why it was ‘bad water.’ Some created a representation of Flint’s water by drawing the water, followed by the development of a list of materials needed to make the water. After creating their Flint water, Rowan and Farrah shared their representations during a ‘serious meeting.’ They asked the children if they would want to drink the water, and they all shouted “NO!” Rowan then explained that the people of Flint didn’t have an option. Their water is bad and was making them sick. This led to more children becoming

concerned, and they became involved in brainstorming their own ideas and solutions to this problem.

### Offering Solutions

**Allison:** The first solution Rowan came up with was to inform the Governor that he was upset about the people being hurt and that the Governor wasn’t doing anything to help them. Rowan picked out a purple piece of paper and got the markers. He dictated what he wanted the letter to say: “Governor, you should know children and moms and dads are drinking bad water!” I helped Rowan sound out the words and he wrote the letters corresponding to the sounds he was hearing. Later while Rowan was washing his hands in the classroom, he paused and then reflected about preschool classrooms in Flint. He was worried that they wouldn’t be able to learn and feel safe in their classroom if they didn’t have clean water, so Rowan offered to send clean water to the preschools in Flint along with letters





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of sympathy. He set up a letter-making station on the table and soon other children joined in to create letters. The letters included ways to make children feel better like stickers and drawings along with their solutions of how to avoid using the water. Another solution included the proposal of digging up and replacing old pipelines that the children drew, using maps of Michigan for guidance.

### Making Children's Ideas Visible

**Margie:** How thrilling to learn that you actually had your documentation display taken to the state capitol. You really demonstrated that children ARE some of today's citizens, eager to be engaged

in solving community problems and addressing injustice.

**Allison:** Yes, what a great opportunity to bring visibility to what we do as early educators, and how truly competent and capable children are! A few weeks prior to our documentation display being taken to the capitol, we planned a walking trip to visit the capitol, unaware that we would be getting a chance to view our hard work in such a special place. While touring, the children discovered their work on Flint's water crisis featured alongside other 'treasures.' Rowan was excited to show off his hard work, recognizing its important placement.

**Rowan:** "We did that... that's OUR Flint water!" Then he shouted, "MAX!! Come here, LOOK!"

**Maxwell:** "WHAT?! In the capitol's office?! How did that get here? [grins and pauses]... Some people need to see our Flint water because they haven't been in our classroom that much!"

**Farrah:** "Wait, so everybody can see it? And most of all [pauses and grins] ... WOW! I think they should leave it there for people to see!"

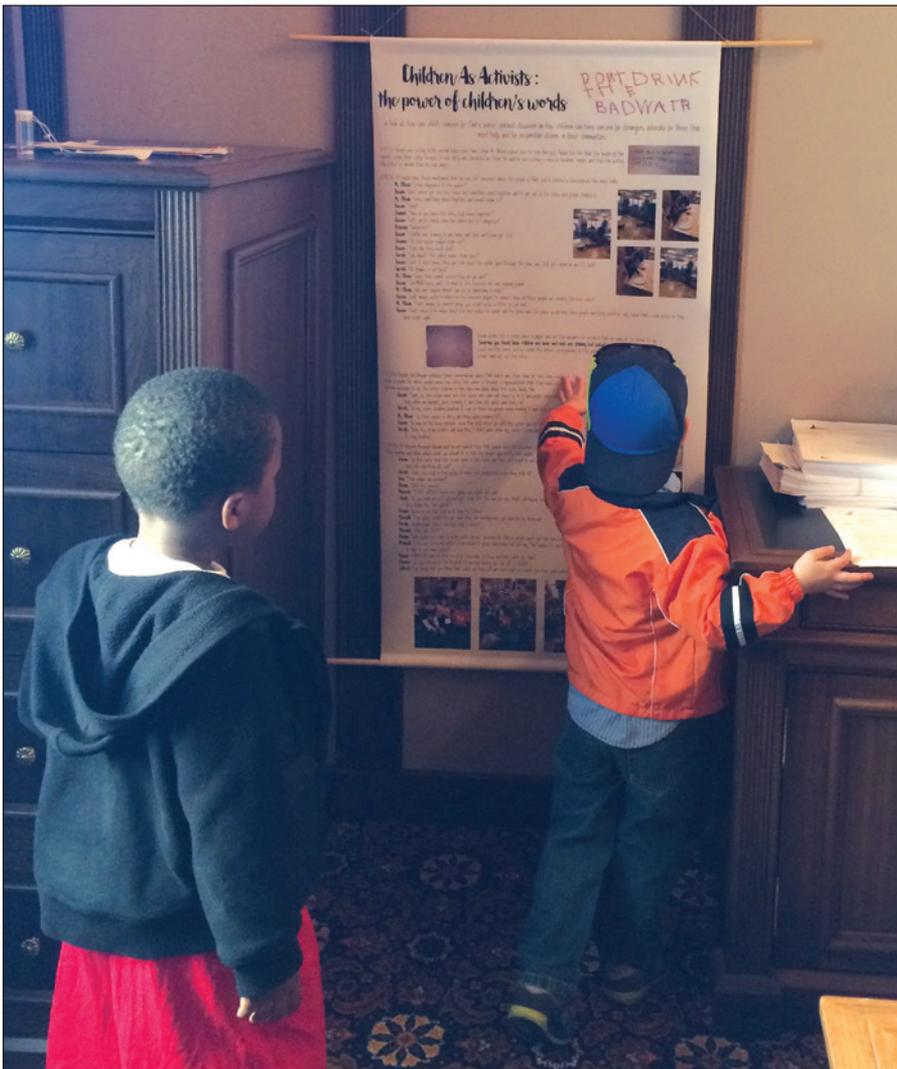
**Rowan:** "Yeah... It's a kind of bad thing, but now people will know... all the people in the capitol, cause they think it's all fine but it's NOT! I feel a little bad now, cause the people may be sick and dying! But kinda great because this is so special! [looks down and takes a deep breath] I don't know [shakes head, continues to look down and takes another deep breath]."

**Margie:** Seeing that their ideas have been brought to the state capitol building for everyone to see obviously filled the children with pride, even as their concern for those affected continues. As Rowan expresses the complexity of his mixed emotions, we can see the depth of what this experience meant to him. You've brought to life how the Albert Shanker Institute talks about devotion to human dignity can be learned and practiced.

Devotion to human dignity and freedom, to equal rights, to social and economic justice, to the rule of law, to civility and truth, to tolerance of diversity, to mutual assistance, to personal and civic responsibility, to self-restraint and self-respect — all these must be taught and learned and practiced. They cannot be taken for granted or regarded as merely one set of options against which any other may be accepted as equally worthy.

Albert Shanker Institute

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**Allison:** Throughout this experience, I felt reminded that children are capable and competent, and their ideas are valuable. They understand 'bad' things occur in the world and they are able to process through these 'bad' things to find solutions to overcome the unfairness. Children are able to care for others and their well-being outside of their own community and intimate space. This experience has given me a new perspective on how children are viewed by myself and others throughout the community. I was surprised to find that others were as passionate as we were about this topic and interested in what children had to say about the issue. I realized how powerful it is to show children proof of their own competency and ability to be impactful when we take time to listen to what they say. I continue to think of how to make the unheard voices heard.

### Anti-bias Goals in Action

**Margie:** Even without prior knowledge of our professional anti-bias goals, Allison,

your thinking goes right to the heart of those goals. When we listen carefully and see children as competent, we recognize that they inherently understand our democratic ideals of equality. I see a close link between our anti-bias goals and the Shankar Institute's notion that we must be proactive because democracy is our children's inheritance. Your desire to bring unheard voices into the spotlight and your directed attention to Rowan's desire to address the Flint water crisis brings us back to the Education for Democracy quote that opens this article. "We must embed [democracy] so deeply in their souls that no one can take it away." A powerful reminder for these times.

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