

## Building Empathy for All Learners with Eye to Eye

On today's episode, we're joined by Robby Brice and David Badillo from one of EALA's partner organizations, Eye to Eye. Eye to Eye's mission is to improve the life of every young person with learning differences like learning disabilities (LD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Through their programs, they train high school and college students with learning differences, including dyslexia and ADHD, to mentor similarly-identified middle school students.

### Mentioned People/Resources:

- Eye to Eye's website: <https://eyetoeyenational.org>
- Learning Differently 101: <https://eyetoeyenational.org/assets/downloads/One-Sheet-Educators.pdf>
- CNN video on Eye to Eye's Founder, David Flink: <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/18/us/learning-disabilities-education-dyslexia-adhd-mentorship-cnnheroes/index.html>

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### Transcript of the podcast episode:

**Gabrielle Oates:** Hello everybody, welcome back to the Educating All Learners Alliance podcast. Today we're really excited to be featuring one of our partner organizations, Eye to Eye. And so, we'll be sharing bit about what they do, who they serve, and some of the programs and ways that you can be involved. And so I'm here with Robbie and David. Welcome. If you both could say hello, that way listeners know whose voice is whose.

**Robby Brice:** Hello, this is Robbie.

**David Badillo:** Hi this is David, not Flink, but David Badillo.

**Gabrielle Oates:** Yes, we have two Davids at Eye to Eye, so you'll want to note that. But I mean I'm excited just to get right into the convo. We want to highlight your work as our partner and some of the, you know, you've been in the news lately, so we would just love to talk about it. I guess, just

first you know what is the mission of your organization, and as an EALA partner, how do you serve all learners?

**Robby Brice:** Here at Eye to Eye, we are committed, of course, to enhancing the learning experience for students with learning differences and attention issues such as ADHD. Right? So in taking that into consideration, we want to ensure that educators feel empowered to reach and teach all students. So we also have a student program where we are really, we're really working to allow them to build a better self advocate for themselves and their needs and their conditions in the classroom. We want to also empower our educators, to reach and teach all students, and that includes our students with learning differences. So having increased awareness and empathy for students with learning differences will allow educators to feel one - more confident, but also allowing them to have the strategies and tools that they need in place to create that supportive classroom environment in which all students feel seen, heard, and valued, which i'm sure you hear me say a couple of times throughout our conversation today.

**David Badillo:** I'll add to that. In that, you know we've been around for over 22 years. Our flagship program is the peer to peer mentoring program where we do take high school and college students, who identify with learning differences, train and equip them to be project based mentors and we pair them with similarly identified middle school students. So that flagship program is now being served and schools over 24 States, across the country and it's really provided the foundation, by which we've really built out our professional development services and other engagement services that we are releasing over the next couple of months that we're excited to discuss. But it's really provided the framework, from which Robbie and his team have been able to build an amazing engaging teacher training program that really hits a really important significant need, such as the need for empathy, which is what we're discussing here on the podcast.

**Gabrielle Oates:** Yeah, I know it's definitely been such a big buzzword in this space and deservedly, because it is so crucial to have empathy in relation to what's happening in the world, but what particularly relates to these students, you know, with various disabilities or learning differences. And so just dive in a bit more of how Eye to Eye works with educators and in building that empathy, what are some of the practices that your team works on?

**Robby Brice:** Yeah, so you know we currently have Learning Differently 101 for Educators, which is building the focus is building empathy for all learners right. And that has two main objectives - we want to build understanding of learning differences and its impact on the learners experience, as well as building empathy for the LD student experience by giving an educator strategies to become

humble learners of their own students. So in this session we introduced two simple, yet effective, strategies to again allow teachers to become humble learners of their students. And they are the empathy interview, as well as shadow a student. And these are two easy lift strategies that really is centered around building empathy because that is when you build that empathy and again, and that awareness, you're able to better create that environment in which the students feel empowered to learn and they're put in the position where they feel like they can be successful.

**Gabrielle Oates:** Yeah.

**David Badillo:** And I'll add in terms of like our focus as we, as we take this opportunity to kind of embed empathy into the school culture, into the way school operates as a whole, kind of like it all birthed from a place where historically Eye to Eye has always been invited to do professional development for special education departments. And as we engage with more SPED teachers and these powerful conversations of like, how do we create the systemic transformation that we are looking for, they began to share with us that gap that seems to exist between what general educators are experiencing or how they're prepared, versus the special education teams. And it felt like a lot of school communities had those two departments siloed and there was this great expression of like there's this gap somewhere between what the special education team is trying to do to support these kids and what the expectations should be for general educators.

And that's when they really stepped out and asked if Eye to Eye could resolve or like bring a solution to the table that can create that bridge. And so what's exciting about this training and what Robbie and his team has been working on over the past few months is that we are now, majority of the educators we're training are general educators, those are the real primary audiences. So when we're talking and like we're inserting the conversation about empathy for these particular students it's now happening in an audience of not just SPED teachers, but all teachers. So we're making sure now better positioning school communities in such a way that, if we're going to elevate student voice we're going to ask them to self advocate, they can develop a greater sense of confidence, knowing that it doesn't matter what teacher they speak to. They don't always have to lean on that SPED educator, their counselor, or their learning specialist. They can feel comfort in speaking to anyone and saying 'Hey this is me. I learned differently. These are the accommodations that I need.' 'Hey I need help, because I learn differently.' And now there's this greater sense of comfort that can be established because of that. And so I think that's really, really exciting place where we're at now is shifting that training audience and really plugging into a gap that really fits in well with the greatest scope of the work that schools are doing.

**Gabrielle Oates:** I loved that touched on that. There's a common phrase in the Special Education community that you might have heard, which is 'shovel the ramp'. So, giving the example you know if there's snow on a staircase and a ramp, you shovel the ramp because all people can access the ramp. You don't start with the stairs. So going with that lens of building up the ability for all educators to have those extra fine tuned knowledge or awareness that maybe would have been only previously shared with the special education teachers is so crucial.

I love that you touched on that because, like you said, Eye to Eye has been called on to help schools with that and similar EALA partner organizations have done research recently to find that schools are noticing those silos that you alluded to, so thank you for touching on that. And I wanted to briefly jump back into something that Robbie mentioned about those empathy interviews. I know you discussed how they're helping people, but are there a few sample questions that you could share with us?

**Robby Brice:** You know what the purpose of the empathy interview is simply, you know, it's a little bit different, it's similar to a one on one but different, in the sense that you are really asking very general, yet they're targeted, but they're very general to the student. You're really wanting to get a better understanding of their learning experience. So, for example, I might ask you know, do you feel supported in my classroom? That's very simple and the student will say 'yes or no', right? Then they may give me a yes or no. Okay well that's why i'm challenging them, from that response, to elaborate if you say yes, tell me what's happening in this environment right now to where you feel you're put in a successful position or if you say no okay with that let's unpack that. What is not happening in the classroom to put you in a position to be successful? And honestly, from that question right there that leads into okay well, what can I do more of? Do you feel like your accommodations are being met? First of all, do you know what your accommodations are?

And more times than not, especially in talking with general education teachers, I was a general education teacher myself for seven years, and more times than not, you find that students don't know what their accommodations are. So that's a question that you definitely want to ask! Because they don't know what their accommodations are, then they don't even know that they're not being put in a position to be successful. So just even from those two simple questions, that will lead into questions you'll automatically want to ask, in order to gain more insight. And then you're going to use that data from the empathy interview to again take insight based action and create better support for students and a supportive environment for them to feel successful in.

**Gabrielle Oates:** That's a really good question! And that kind of shows that any teacher could ask their students that. And also, I would say, parents could even ask their students, if parents are maybe the teachers, right now, whether in a homeschool setting or just the hybrid setting, that helps the parent be involved in that level of the classroom.

**Robby Brice:** And it's also important to note, I always tell the educators in the sessions when we're discussing empathy interviews - it doesn't solely help to be just for your class. When you're conducting the interview, you have to understand it, the interviews also help you have that rapport with students. So you may be, you may be that teacher that they are most comfortable with and they may be struggling in math class and not in your English class, right? You're still able to gain that insight because you're able to now, you know, create a community of collaboration, because now, because that student feels comfortable with you, you're able to go to that math teacher say 'hey you know I talked to this student and they said these are the reasons why they don't feel successful in your classroom' and then they can use the insight that's been provided to them from you, in order to create that supportive environment in their class for that student.

And then the student would notice that, and they will say 'Oh! This teacher has made these accommodations for me and I didn't tell them.' And then that'll allow you as the teacher that maybe doesn't have a strong rapport, you know, with that particular student that will help actually bring that student closer to you because they're able to see that you are making the necessary changes so that they feel successful and are able to be successful in the classroom and your class.

**Gabrielle Oates:** Exactly, and that just aligned with Eye to Eye's mission of just emphasizing that power of connection, whether it be a teacher-student or you know anybody who's working with those students and helping them get that closer relationship which we know really does help the students learn better overall.

**Robby Brice:** Yeah and we're really trying to build, not only - when you think about a supportive environment, which is what we really drill down on in LD 101 and it'll also be something that we're really going more in depth with in our future trainings - but you know when you think about a supportive environment, that is not siloed, that's not just an individual classrooms. So we're really trying to make it school wide. We really want there to be a school community where you feel that the entire environment is a supportive space that is dedicated to really ensure that all learners are put in a position of power and empowerment right.

**Gabrielle Oates:** Exactly, and so I know that you said learning differently 101, or LD 101 as is called, is focusing on elevating that student voice, and so what kind of student stories can educators expect to be presented when participating and what can they learn by listening to those stories?

**Robby Brice:** No, of course, so educators can really expect to hear from students and hear them share out really what they want educators to know about being a student with a learning difference and that's an important role that you, as an educator, play in how a student views their learning experience and their environment. And we'll also hear students share their connections that they've had with educators throughout the years, both positive and negative. You will hear students go into great detail and share how they've been in classrooms where the educators have really made sure that they received their accommodation, but you'll also hear on the flip side of that where maybe educators have not been so great at really providing those accommodations that students may need.

I think that it's definitely something that's going to resonate with educators and it's definitely something that really is empowering for the educator, because after hearing these stories, because even myself, you know, having led Learning Differently 101 since we've started, since we started this professional development, you know every time I hear it I'll take something from and it still just like i'm like 'wow.' Like, they just really want us to know that it's not that they can't learn, they just may not learn, like everyone else. But that's also the mindset that we should be in, no two students learn the same right. And we better understand that, again we're better we're better able to create a space that is not only teaching the whole class but teaching to each individual student in the way that they're able to access that lesson or that learning.

**David Badillo:** I will add that one of the things that's great about the student voices that will be showcased on this training is that teachers will get to see what an elevated empowered student voice looks like, sounds like, feels like. And these are students that have gone through the Eye to Eye mentoring program who have been really supported on our end and within their school ends on developing that voice. And they'll begin to see the power in that. They'll be able to see the potential and the possibilities that can be unlocked if they can just replicate that within their own school communities. So they'll walk out with a greater sense of renewed vision and purpose of like 'Wow, we want our kids to be able to feel that level of comfort to speak and advocate and and help us learn about the lived experience within our context and how we could support within our context, within our school community'. And I think that's a real powerful opportunity that they'll quickly realize that's in front of them.

**Gabrielle Oates:** We definitely hope so, and so, of course, we mentioned all these resources and Eye to Eye specifically, so where can people go to know more about LD 101 and to follow up on news with Eye to Eye?

**David Badillo:** Yeah so our website is the go to spot - [eyetoeyenational.org](http://eyetoeyenational.org) - and then, when you visit our website you'll see the page Learning Differently 101. You can access that page and then sign up for a free online course through Thinkific. If schools want to kind of just make it as individual assignments, self guided, if schools want to expand on that and maybe have a live session with Eye to Eye and engage live with Robbie for professional development, they can do so also by clicking on 'bring Eye to Eye to your school' and we could have a conversation about more comprehensive professional development.

**Gabrielle Oates:** Well thank you so much again both of you for joining. We'll definitely link to those mentioned resources in the show notes of this episode. So if you're listening on any platform just scroll down to the description and you'll see those links. But thank you again, David and Robbie! Of course, check out the information we mentioned on Eye to Eye. And you can always learn more about the Educating All Learners Alliance at [educatingalllearners.org](http://educatingalllearners.org). Until next time!