

# Creating Inclusive Classrooms through the Arts

Read about creating an inclusive environment that promotes the Arts.

C. Miki Henderson  
& Elizabeth Lasley

Editor's Note: In the context of this article, inclusion is not a term that is restricted to children with special needs who attend mainstream classrooms. In this context, inclusion means an environment that meets the needs of all children.

“The future belongs to young people with an education and the imagination to create.”

—President Barack Obama

Inclusion is a philosophy that seeks the acceptance of all learners. It is developing a sense of belonging, value and being valued as well as accepting differences (Allen and Cowdery, 2011; Salend, 2010). The basic goals for inclusion in early childhood programs are facilitating the development of independence and participation in socially interactive environments (Allen & Cowdery, 2011). The expressive arts such as dance, drama, music, poetry and visual arts can be differentiated so that everyone can be engaged and successful. Teachers can use prior knowledge and understanding of their learners to create challenging curriculum which incorporates the arts to meet learning goals (Alexander, Johnson, Leibham & Kelley, 2008) for children of all abilities.

Art, drama, music, dance and literature activities are part of the basic components of an early childhood curriculum. They do not rely heavily on oral language or English proficiency and this makes them accessible to all children regardless of language differences or language abilities. Teachers can use creative expression and art to practice cognitive, language, social, emotional and motor skills while integrating them into themes and relating

*Language differences* include different languages (Spanish, Vietnamese, etc.). *Language abilities* include any skills that are required for communication regardless of native language.

them to content. This provides natural opportunities for children to learn through play without feeling anxious over failure. The “arts” are child-friendly and engaging because they are as natural as play.

## Creating an Inclusive Environment

Developing an inclusive classroom while incorporating the arts, signifies judicious planning using appropriate content standards, knowledge of child development, individual needs, abilities, interests and cultural understanding of each individual child (Division for Early Childhood/National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). Planning is time-consuming, but the rewards can be abundant as it creates a zone of proximal development and frees children to take risks and explore roles not necessarily part of their current life (Holzman, 2009).

There are ten areas to consider when creating an inclusive environment:

- Togetherness
- Diversity
- Community building
- Differing abilities
- “Can Do” attitude
- Student-centered
- Shared space and time
- Professional collaboration
- Documenting student learning
- Families

The “arts” can fit into each of these areas to enhance inclusion and provide a richness of experience for young learners.



Photo courtesy of Canterbury Community Nursery School, Richmond, VA.

*Creative art activities don't always require an easel and paper.*

## Togetherness

The late President John F. Kennedy gave a speech to the entire nation saying, “Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths, and encourage the arts and commerce” (1961). He saw the importance of drawing people together and with the pooled strength of the many, great things could be accomplished. Teachers can help students understand this by ensuring all students are treated as equals and are not segregated from the group. Everyone learns

together. Students learn better when they are an equal member of the classroom. This togetherness allows the students to feel valued, supported and increases their self-esteem.

**The arts are accessible to all.**

Developmental differences are accepted by all learners unless influenced otherwise (Allen & Cowdery,

2011). Teachers can take advantage of this naiveté to nurture the development of attitudes in children, which will grow with them as they advance through school. Educators should incorporate art experiences that involve pairing or being a part of a small group such as playing rhythm instruments or painting a mural. These activities provide opportunities for children to feel good about learning from one another and to experience the pleasure of togetherness.

## Diversity

Diversity includes issues of family, culture, language, family structure, socioeconomic status, gender, and religion, among others. The inclusive preschool classroom allows all children to value the wonderful differences around them. Children learn greatly about the world and the way it works from their peers who differ from themselves. Behaviors and beliefs are influenced by peers that may be perceived as more knowledgeable, significant and/or important (Gardner, 2008).

Play as a form of art allows children to share their diverse backgrounds. Thoughtfully planned expressive art experiences should be developed in a manner that inspires children to share their differences and discover ways they are similar. One example of this might be placing male and female clothing in the dramatic play center and supporting children as they explore both gender roles. Another example is to encourage children to draw their families and share the pictures with classmates to nurture further understanding of the diversity within their class setting. Play becomes a way for students to construct new meaning and knowledge based on familiar objects within meaningful contexts (Holzman, 2009).



## Community Building

Community building in an inclusive classroom requires the developing of authentic relationships between all people, teachers, students, and families. Effective inclusive classroom communities do not happen by accident: careful and intentional planning on the part of teachers is required. Inclusion and community are both about belonging. However, it is not just about students with special needs (although very important to include); it's about all students who will need to work together to build their community and promote acceptance of all learners' interests, abilities, and differences.

Teachers are responsible for creating a nurturing environment so that all learners feel comfortable to explore, ask questions, test themselves, and solve problems (Alexander, Johnson, Leibham & Kelley, 2008). For example, during a shared writing experience, teachers can transcribe while students compose the text. This type of experience can be useful when creating poems or stories written by the whole class to share with families or other classes. Another example includes creative projects that can be used to build community which allow children to work together and develop camaraderie. When everyone has a chance to give input or provide constructive feedback and see that their ideas are valued, they may be better able to appreciate what it means to be a member of the community.

## Differing Abilities

When children are treated as unique individuals with their own needs, interests, and abilities, they are given the opportunity to practice their strengths and further develop



Photo courtesy of Our Neighborhood Child Development Center, Charlottesville, VA.

*Young children enjoy using a variety of media and resources.*

in their challenging areas. Within an inclusion setting, the student should be encouraged to focus on their talents and abilities while also sharing them with others. Engaging in meaningful conversations, solving problems together, and play provides daily opportunities to build a sense of community and shared purpose to learn with others (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). In return, they also improve themselves by learning from the strengths others will share with them (Coyne, Kame'enui & Carnine, 2010).

Preschool teachers need to provide many ways for children to show what they know. Some children may express themselves better verbally and dramatically, while others are more physical and demonstrate capability by making a product. For instance, children might get to choose from the options of writing a poem about bugs, making a habitat from clay, dictating and illustrating a story about them, or putting on a puppet show that will share information while entertaining their classmates. Unlike pencil and paper assessments that assume only one particular level

of knowledge, the arts can provide ways for children to showcase their own abilities.

### “Can Do” Attitude

All children are strong and capable, but they need teachers to demonstrate their confidence in them. *Early Childhood Inclusion: A Joint Position Statement of the Division for Early Childhood and the National Association for the Education of Young Children* asserts, “Even if environments and programs are designed to facilitate access, some children will need additional individualized accommodations and supports to participate fully in play and learning activities with peers and adults.” (2009, p.2)

Students should be taught at their level and then challenged with more difficult material to increase knowledge and comprehension. With support, children can learn to face intellectual, socio-emotional, and physical challenges right alongside their peers throughout the school day. Sociocultural knowledge is a part of development that enhances the use of verbal and non-verbal communication, preferred approaches to learning and learning styles, and how to interact with others (Holzman, 2009). Use play as a tool to teach coping and learning strategies to deal with these challenges as this will allow them to excel within the classroom and later in life.

Similarly, active learning through the arts creates a feeling of excitement in children. Hands-on science and math art will excite and dare children. For science, rather than talking about evaporation, give children painter’s tools such as rollers and brushes along with buckets of water and let them paint disappearing

murals on an outside wall. In math, for example, instead of discussing the number ten with preschoolers, taking them on a nature walk to collect ten items to use in a collage will make the number meaningful to them.

**Teachers must provide many ways for children to demonstrate what they know.**

Teachers should intentionally choose activities that use the strengths possessed by the children in the class. This means inclusive educators probably will not reuse lesson plans from previous years in their entirety, but instead will tailor the curriculum to match what their current students can do successfully.

### Student-centered

Piagetian theory indicates the need for students to be actively involved in the construction of their knowledge (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987). Vygotsky’s theory emphasizes that internal development of individuals occurs through interacting and cooperating with others within their environment (Holzman, 2009). Dewey, like Piaget and Vygotsky, promotes the premise that student development occurs when students are actively engaged in the learning process (Dewey, 1910). Students interaction with their environment needs to be meaningful and functional (Dewey, 1910). The Arts provide a logical avenue for actively engaging students in the construction of their own knowledge within a student-centered

environment. Focus must be on the needs, abilities, interests, and learning styles of the students (Alexander, Johnson, Leibham & Kelley, 2008). As facilitators within the learning process we provoke students to learn how to learn and then support their efforts to teach themselves. Students bring a set of rules and expectations for behavior when approaching learning experiences based on their cultural group (Holzman, 2009). Acknowledge the student voice as a critical element of the entire learning experience and expect all students to be active, responsible participants in their own learning.

Offering choices from a variety of projects and activities will ensure a more student-centered environment (Coyne, Kame’enui & Carnine, 2010). For example, a teacher in a school that was primarily Islamic and Jewish did not feel the need to incorporate Easter into the curriculum since these two religions don’t celebrate it. However, when the season arrived, the children were interested in the decorated eggs they saw in the community. She told them about some special eggs made by Russian artists and the children became excited to find out more. Working together they planned a research project on the Fabergé Eggs. In the writing center, children explored the Fabergé Eggs via the Internet and collected data to share with the group. They counted, matched and sorted decorated plastic eggs in the manipulative center, and created their own designs for original Fabergé Eggs in the art center. In a culminating event, they made their own decorated eggs and set them in a museum for families and other classes to view. Children can participate in projects that they are drawn to and will then be more likely to elaborate and expand their research



interests to build onto their knowledge as these children did.

Although this example focuses on a student-centered example as a means of inclusion, teachers can also use this opportunity to talk about diversity within the community.

### Shared Space & Time

An inclusive approach that supports the inclusion philosophy of increased accessibility to the general education classroom is the “pull-in” approach (Smith & Tyler, 2010). Special services are brought to students within the general education setting (Smith & Tyler, 2010). Since specialists may have overwhelming demands on their time and be forced to move from school to school, teachers must also be flexible in their schedules so that children with special needs can get the services they require.

Early childhood teachers should consider scheduling their learning center and small group times during the visits of the specialists. Many times specialists can get a better understanding of the child by observing and interacting with them in a more natural play setting and engaging in the arts rather than a clinical one. They may even be able to utilize the current class themes, art processes and projects, or learning center offerings in their therapies. Through advanced planning between classroom teachers and therapy providers, the Arts may be used to meet the special needs of students.

A teacher in a small preschool in San Diego, California had a child in her class who was born addicted to drugs. She invited specialists who worked with him such as the speech therapist and other service providers into the classroom to observe

and work with the child. Together they reviewed the overall plans for the first semester and determined which activities she would put in the child’s portfolio to demonstrate his growth over time. One of the projects included finger painting, but the child’s sensory issues precluded him from engaging in it. The teacher modified the activity, first with sponges, to Q-tips, to wearing latex gloves and by the end of the year he was using a finger to paint. By sharing her classroom with the specialists the portfolio became an integral part of this child’s therapy.

### Professional Collaboration

A collaborative consultative approach is one way to focus on student needs (Salend, 2010; Friend & Bursuck, 2012). Special education or other professional support personnel collaborate with general education teachers (Salend, 2010; Friend & Bursuck, 2012). Their knowledge and skills are combined to address student needs based on

agreed upon problems and solutions (Salend, 2010; Friend & Bursuck, 2012). Emphasis in this professional collaboration is on identifying problems, constructing solutions, and providing avenues for the implementation of the agreed upon solutions that will support the general education teacher (Salend, 2010; Friend & Bursuck, 2012). Money and resources are often problematic to procure in education (Petriwskyj, 2010). Specialists and classroom teachers need to share materials and equipment whenever possible. This may make the difference in the development of the child while increasing the likelihood of the classroom being an inclusive environment for them.

Specialists may have access to adaptive equipment or technology that teachers could borrow when the child needs them in order to participate fully in classroom activities. Teachers might be able to provide consumable art materials that a specialist would not be able to store or move around from place to place.



*Creative activities can be combined with play in outdoor classrooms.*

Photo courtesy of Micah’s Children’s Academy, Brentwood, TN.

The occupational therapist might have a computer program, such as *Dragon*, that would read computer directions aloud for a child with a visual impairment, thus allowing them to create a design in a paint program along with the other children in the class.

## Documenting Student Learning

There are content standards with regards to the Arts that teachers can draw upon for planning purposes. Authentic assessment reflects and describes each student's development within content standards based on their experiences, abilities and strengths (Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2009). McMillan (2011) as well as Wortham (2011) indicate that authentic assessment examines students' performance, ability, and knowledge within the meaningful context of the students' real world experiences. Furthermore, one type of authentic assessment is the construction of portfolios. Portfolios serve multiple purposes – specific academic content, evaluating performance, reporting student work, alternative to standardized assessment, and reporting student progress. The purpose of portfolios, especially for the Arts, is to systematically document student progress/development based on learning outcomes and experiences..

Portfolios provide authentic performance based assessment that influences instructional practices and progress monitoring (McMillan, 2011; Wortham, 2011; Salend, 2010). The key component is student self-reflection and self-evaluation (McMillan, 2011; Wortham, 2011; Friend & Bursuck, 2012; Salend, 2010). The contents of an Arts portfolio may include student

selected products, self-reflections, self-evaluations, audio or video clips of dance and movement, dramatic performances or musical presentations, scanned or photographed artwork, and copies of creative writing products. The advantage of using portfolios for the Arts in inclusive settings is that students are part of the assessment process (McMillan, 2011; Wortham, 2011; Friend & Bursuck, 2012; Salend, 2010). Portfolios remove assumptions, conjecture, or the need to guess what a particular child needs or thinks. It can facilitate profound discussions about the real progress students are making.

**A creative, inclusive classroom values imagination and innovation.**

Schools need to have collaborative systems for information-gathering and sharing purposes. There is a need for effective communication that identifies similarities and differences among the curriculum, learning goals, teaching materials, strategies and support services (Salend, 2010; Friend & Bursuck, 2012). Stakeholders such as speech and language pathologists, teachers, occupational therapists, hearing specialists, counselors, families, etc., need to share information that will benefit the child and set them up for successful beginnings. Whenever they communicate, whether verbally at informational meetings or in written reports, they should begin with a discussion of the child's strengths and gifts so that everyone who cares about the child can begin in a place of capabil-

ity for the child and do what they can to build on their strengths.

## Families

Families are the most important people in a child's life. Parents have insights into their child's medical needs, previous experiences, family background, and possible future needs (Salend, 2010; Friend & Bursuck, 2012). Trust established between teachers, parents and school personnel is a key component when building positive family relationships (Salend, 2010). Teachers and schools need to provide opportunities for all families to become part of the classroom and school community through elective meetings, trainings and events that are offered at various times and on various days of the week. Families must be an integral part of classroom programming as well as the development of the school's mission, vision and climate. They should feel welcome and appreciated in the classroom and school.

Understanding a family's point-of-view or perspectives is critical. Some families are not comfortable within a school setting due to previous unpleasant personal experiences. Schools may be viewed as intimidating and unfriendly places. Teachers should devise ways to build families into the Arts being offered in their classroom whether it is preparing materials, demonstrating a skill or process, or by providing a context or impetus for a particular creative activity. Ask families if they would like to share their talents, culture, or family traditions through an art experience that can be enjoyed by all of the children. The ability to include families within the decision making process validates and supports family beliefs, culture and traditions.

## Why the Arts?

John Dewey (1910) said, “The aim of education should be to teach us rather how to think, than what to think—rather to improve our minds, so as to enable us to think for ourselves, than to load the memory with the thoughts of other men (p. 38).” Making developmentally appropriate, interesting and engaging projects and themes available to young children can advance the goals of inclusion in the classroom while also helping children develop the habit of thinking for themselves (Alexander, Johnson, Leibham & Kelley, 2008). The use of the arts to relay early childhood content is practical and advantageous because it builds on what is natural for children to do, but without the fear of falling short that might come with a more academic approach. Inclusive teachers thoughtfully incorporate the arts while planning for meeting standards, age and stage expectations, individual needs, abilities and interests, and what is culturally and socially appropriate for each child. The arts are natural, pleasurable and gratifying for children because they can be made accessible to all, they are desirable to teachers because of the beneficial opportunities they

contribute to establishing a creative inclusive classroom where imagination and innovation are valued.

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## About the Authors

**Dr. C. Miki Henderson** has been an early childhood educator for over 23 years. She is an assistant professor of early childhood education at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas. She teaches undergraduate and graduate classes in cognitive development, creative expression, and early literacy. Her research interests include assessment of young children and the early literacy needs of boys and dual language learners.

**Elizabeth Lasley** is an assistant professor of language, literacy and special populations at Sam Houston State University. Her interests are early childhood education, emergent literacy, play, intellectual development, and project-based learning.