

## Inclusive Preschool Classrooms

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### Abstract

Piaget identified four stages of growth that all individuals experience, each stage building up on the other. The first stage is the sensory motor stage that spans from birth to two years. The second stage spans from two to seven years, the third stage begins from seven and extends to about twelve years and then the final stage is from twelve to adulthood. The primary focus of this article is on the preoperational stage, which is the second of the four stages. This coincides with when most toddlers begin preschool and start interacting with peers and teachers. An inclusive preschool classroom ensures that all students have an equal chance to reach their full potential. This fosters a sense of belonging where learning is individualized to meet the needs of each learner. Actionable strategies to create an environment that is inclusive, welcoming, and creates multiple opportunities to develop an appreciation of diversity are presented.

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### Introduction

We all know the early years lay the foundation for cognitive, social, and emotional development. Jean Piaget, a famous psychologist described four stages of development from birth through adolescence. Sensorimotor intelligence, preoperational thought, concrete operations, and formal operations (Piaget, 1970). According to him, each stage builds on the preceding one, such that development is a continuing process of qualitative changes in a person's schemata. Each developmental stage is different and requires a deeper understanding from adults to help children reach their growth and development potential. As we discuss a child's growth, we must consider the whole child, which includes not only cognitive growth, but also social and emotional development. Preschool aged children are in the preoperational stage of Piaget's development phase, which begins between 18-24 months and ends around 7 years of age. This article will share some strategies that preschool teachers can utilize to ensure that children reach their full potential.

### Language

One of the hallmarks of the preoperational period is the development of language (Hetherington et al., 2003). Children at this period of their lives develop a fascination with words. Teachers can use this opportunity to introduce non-gender conforming words. The circle time is an ideal opportunity to teach gender neutral language to our young learners. For example, when introducing vocabulary about firefighters, they might ensure that they do not promote gender-biased roles; it is firefighter and not fireman. As you read this article, please reflect on the following professions. Nurse, Receptionist, Firefighter, Astronaut, Bartender, Teacher, and Doctor. Chances are that you *did* visualize a particular gender with an occupation. This is because we have been programmed to link a person's gender to their profession.

Maria Montessori compared children's mind to a sponge that is eager to absorb things from the environment (Orem, 1974). In the early years, children learn new words easily (even if these are from a different language). Teachers can use this as an opportunity to share words in different languages, especially if they have a student who speaks a different language. When I worked in a preschool, during circle time, I would often ask my students to share words (counting and alphabets) in their native language. This allowed them to feel represented and helped all of us learn new words in another language.

### **Role Playing**

Children in the preoperational stage engage in role playing. This is an ideal opportunity for teachers to ensure that they have diverse toys in the classroom. Traditional classrooms might have a pink kitchenette and a blue blocks area. These hidden biases from the toymakers can cement the idea in the young child's mind that blue is for boys and pink area is dedicated for girls. Of course, there is also an assumption here that girls will prefer to play with the kitchenette and the boys will gravitate towards the blocks. Teachers should not interfere or promote any of these and let their students play with whatever they want.

Teachers must teach their young students to respect and appreciate the diversity that surrounds them, especially as our world becomes more and more cosmopolitan. The definition of diversity encompasses people from different ethnicities, abilities, and genders. However, in some preschool classrooms, the available toys do not represent this diversity. If children are not provided opportunities to play with toys that reflect different cultures and traditions, it can shape their opinions about who is important and who is not significant. Some examples of toys that celebrate diversity include Barbie, which now features a doll with a prosthetic leg and Loyal Companion, a doll inspired by a boy with autism who loves space-related things. When children see themselves represented, they feel included. Such toys also provide an opportunity for other children to learn about their peers and develop empathy and greater team spirit.

### **Accommodations**

Student engagement includes their "degree of involvement, connectedness and commitment to school as well as their motivation to learn" (Rangvid, 2018, p. 266). Engagement can be influenced by a variety of factors including teacher's attitudes, peer behaviors, and the school climate. Educators must provide the optimal environment for growth and learning of all children. Some accommodations, which might be useful in a preschool classroom are described below.

Lego recently launched braille bricks for students who are blind or visually impaired. These can help those students who are visually impaired to participate in a group project with their peers. Research also demonstrates that children typically have more positive attitudes towards children with disabilities when they work together compared to children who do not have opportunities to interact with peers with disabilities (Yu et al., 2012).

Adaptive Scissors can be used to help children who have not yet developed fine motor skills or have limited hand mobility. The spring in the easy grip scissors open so that children use them with ease, and they do not have small finger holes which is a bonus for those children who struggle with traditional scissors. These scissors can also strengthen hand muscles and develop eye hand coordination. Teachers should also consider purchasing some left-handed scissors for toddlers who prefer to use their left hand. This will ensure that all students have an equal chance

to succeed and will not require left-handed students to learn to adapt the majority (which we know is an anthesis to inclusion).

The Hoberman sphere is an expandable ball that can help children relax and follow their breathing. It expands and contracts like the lungs and the idea is to help children calm and synchronize their breathing with the ball. While the ball is typically used for children on a spectrum, mindful exercises can be used with all children helping them to self-regulate their emotions. Several preschool classroom teachers have created a “peace corner” where students who feel overwhelmed can sit in peace (undisturbed) and workout their emotions. This is not to be confused with time out where students are sent as a punishment. Students should be allowed to go there whenever they want and leave the peace corner as they wish.

### **Aesthetics and Inclusivity**

The preschool should be housed in a well maintained indoor and outdoor facility that promotes healthy development. Reggio Emilia’s philosophy identifies the environment as the “third teacher”. Accordingly, special attention is given to space and the environment where children learn. Consider how can you create an aesthetically pleasing and an inclusive preschool classroom?

Do you have posters that represent different languages so that every child feels welcomed? There are several multilingual posters available to make all students and their families feel represented including ethnic and immigrant children. What do you do to create inclusivity? Is the cultural heritage of your diverse students represented? If so, where, and how? Simply displaying culture in a corner does not create an inclusive classroom. Do students get a chance to interact with these cultural displays?

The classroom library should include books that highlight heroes from different cultures, customs, and traditions. Such books create empathy, tolerance, and respect for diversity. For example, *The Crayon Box that Talked*, (Derolf, 1997) illustrates how different individuals can combine to make a more beautiful society. An activity that can be considered after reading this book is to have children draw themselves. Crayola recently launched new crayon set called “Colors of the World”, which has 24 skin tone shades to represent diverse children

I wrote a children’s book, *Mary and Her New Friends* (Reza, 2019) that represents South Asian culture and children with special needs. When I taught in a preschool, I noticed that there were no stories that represented South Asian children. This book shares their culture and provides an opportunity for children to color henna designs. The main characters is Mary, short for Maryam, who uses a wheelchair. By integrating two important and often underrepresented identities, I created a story that builds empathy and respect for this underrepresented population.

### **Teacher Training**

Educators should be provided regular professional development related to diversity and inclusion. I feel that this is lacking in many school districts. It is important that school administrators encourage participation in such training, and the content should be relevant for the age group the teachers serve. Teachers should also be requested to take the Harvard Implicit Association Test commonly known as the IAT. Understanding the results might them become

aware of their hidden biases and identify opportunities for improvement in creating an equitable learning environment for everyone.

Culturally relevant pedagogy is a framework developed by Ladson-Billings (Ladson-Billings, 2013) which requires that educators actively educate themselves and their students on the personal and sociopolitical issues that impact them, their communities, and the world. This ultimately creates a stronger and richer student body that successfully integrates people from all over the world. An anti-bias curriculum, as championed by Derman-Sparks (1989) might also be incorporated so that every child feels represented, valued, and welcomed in the school. These should not be considered as set of activities for occasional use, rather they should be integrated into all aspects of the early childhood programs such that the classroom becomes truly inclusive.

### Conclusion

Educators who support and accommodate the needs of all students encourage inclusion within their classrooms and an inclusive classroom environment is more conducive to learning and development. Although many teachers support inclusion, they may not know how to create an environment that is inclusive and welcoming to diverse students. This article has shared some simple suggestions on how to ensure that every child feels a part of the school community and has an equal chance to succeed.

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