



Diversity and Inclusion in the Arts

The arts are a powerful vehicle to celebrate diversity in the classroom. Children are natural artists, and each one brings their own cultural identity, language, traditions, beliefs, interests, and dreams to school every day. By valuing and integrating their individual backgrounds and interests into your arts curriculum, you'll create a space for everyone to be visible, showcase their talents, and pave the way for their future success in other academic areas and in life!

Why is diversity and inclusion important in arts education?

The arts are, by nature, a great equalizer that can offer positive academic experiences for students. Because the arts tap into a variety of abilities—such as creative, expressive, and imaginative—all children can experience enjoyment and success in the arts. Positive art experiences, in turn, can lead to academic, social, and personal gains for students. Some of the benefits of a diverse and inclusive arts classroom include:

Academic Achievement

The arts give all students a way to achieve, especially children who might struggle with language or whose learning preference is visual-spatial, auditory, tactile, or kinesthetic. Drama, music, dance, and visual art can easily be used as a bridge to other subject areas, increasing students' success and confidence in math, science, or language. For example, students might act out a concept, like the transformation from a caterpillar to butterfly, and then learn the vocabulary to describe the process. They sing a song or draw a picture about metamorphosis—reinforcing science concepts and language skills.



Social Connection

Art is about expressing and communicating ideas to an audience. When children create and share their art, they make connections with other people. They might discover that they have something unexpected in common, see things in a different way, or learn something new. They may learn about traditions, culture, or history that is different from their own. They might admire or respect each other's backgrounds and make new friends as a result!

Personal Growth

Art is a personal way to share your thoughts and ideas—children incorporate their own narrative and life experiences into their artwork. When they talk with classmates about their art and receive positive feedback, their self-esteem and confidence grow. They take pride in their work and appreciate their own unique contribution.

What does a diverse and inclusive classroom look like?

A diverse and inclusive program must have a classroom culture that is safe for all students. Every student must feel valued, cared for, and respected. Children need to feel that their stories and voices are heard and reflected in the classroom—by you and other students, and in the content being taught.

To create this atmosphere, provide content that respectfully represents the cultures of all children in the classroom. This will enable students to share their experiences and perspectives and learn from each other. Students also need exposure to a wide range of art, artists, ideas, and viewpoints. When connections are made between students' lives and the art curriculum, they will feel valued, appreciated, and motivated to contribute.

How can I make my art curriculum more diverse and inclusive?

- 1. Get to know your students.** Find ways to integrate their histories, backgrounds, and cultures into your curriculum. Consider:
 - What are the racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds of your students? What languages do they speak at home? What traditions do they celebrate?
 - How can you learn more about students' families? Can students share something about their family's history or culture? Are there ways to involve families or their stories, songs, and traditions in your art curriculum?
 - Where do the arts appear in your students' everyday lives? What arts exist in the community and how do they reflect the community's values? How can you make connections to community art?
- 2. Create a classroom community that encourages inquiry and dialogue.** Set the expectation that all members of the class are open to and accepting of new ideas. Consider creating a Classroom Contract, or a set of expectations for how the class will communicate with each other about the arts. This could include:
 - Active listening—listening deeply to what others say and how they feel; making eye contact; responding to the speaker by asking questions

- Respect—understanding that there are different ways of communicating through art and that everyone can have their own opinions
- Trust—providing a safe space to talk about ideas; appreciating individual perspectives and differences

3. Offer different ways for students to participate. The arts enable children to express themselves using many different intelligences, such as kinesthetic, musical, visual-spatial, or interpersonal. When developing your art curriculum, provide different modes of expression (e.g., drawing, sculpture, music, movement, dance, theater, speaking).

4. Engage children in projects that celebrate their identities as individuals. Create projects that highlight students' racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds. Choose broad topics that all students have experience with and can relate to (like food, music, or entertainment) or let the class choose their own topic. You can get families involved by having them share their traditions, customs, or expertise. Also consider ways that students can work collaboratively on projects so that they can appreciate their own individuality as well as their classmates'.

5. Introduce artists and art forms that mirror your students' backgrounds. Include artists across genders, cultures, nationalities, races, ethnicities, languages, and abilities. Students should see themselves, their cultures, their communities, and their histories reflected in the materials and class activities you choose. Offer diverse role models in the arts so students can make connections and find parallels with the artists. Read books about the artists, display their photos around the classroom, and share their work. Discuss the different media and art forms that they've created and the messages they communicate through their art.

6. Read books about diversity in the arts. Books are a great way to talk about individual differences, barriers, and the impact that each person can make. Some ideas include:

- *Amazing Grace* by Mary Hoffman. Illustrated by Caroline Binch. Grace wants the role of Peter Pan in the class play, even though she's a girl and she's Black.
- *Between the Lines: How Ernie Barnes Went from the Football Field to the Art Gallery* by Sandra Neil Wallace. Illustrated by Bryan Collier. In the segregated South during the 1940s, young Ernest is recruited to play football, but he can't resist his passion for drawing and painting.
- *I Will Dance* by Nancy Bo Flood. Illustrated by Julianna Swaney. Eva longs to dance but it seems impossible with her cerebral palsy and clunky wheelchair.
- *Keith Haring: The Boy Who Just Kept Drawing* by Kay A. Haring. Illustrated by Robert Neubecker. Keith Haring has a simple vision—to make the world a better place by sharing his art.
- *My Name Is Celia/Me llamo Celia* by Monica Brown. Illustrated by Rafael López. This bilingual book introduces Celia Cruz, the Queen of Salsa, who celebrates her Cuban culture through music.

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