

## Inclusive Learning Environments for Preschoolers

Treshawn Anderson: Hi, everyone. And welcome to “Teacher Time.” I’m Treshawn Anderson.

Gail Joseph: And I’m Gail Joseph. And we are from the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning. We are so excited to have you here with us today to talk about inclusive learning environments for preschoolers.

Treshawn: Yes, we are so excited. And so before we begin, Gail, can you give us a brief overview of our webinar series for this season?

Gail: Sure, Treshawn. And hello, everyone. I am so excited to be back and hosting “Teacher Time” again.

Treshawn: Yay!

Gail: It’s just one of my favorite things to do. So, this season, we’re going to explore the concepts of inclusion and belonging. Now, most of you may be really familiar with the term of “inclusion,” but we’re going to really think about the idea of belonging and making sure that children and families are reflected in and a part of their learning environment, and that’s such a big part of inclusion. So we’re going to talk about both concepts in a little more, as we go along in this episode.

So, each month, we will talk about what inclusion and belonging look like in the learning environment, through the learning materials, and the ways to support families in our inclusive settings. We’ve already done one episode – maybe you saw it – on learning environments for all infants and toddlers. And we’ll do two more episodes dedicated to those of our youngest learners. Today’s episode will focus on learning environments for all preschoolers, and we’ll do two more episodes dedicated to preschoolers, too. So, feel free to join us for all of our remaining episodes. We’d love to have you. Teachers are what makes it “Teacher Time.” Or join us for the episodes that are dedicated to the age of the children you want to learn more about.

I’d like to call your attention to the viewer’s guide. We love the viewer’s guide. You will find it in that green Resource widget. That’s one of my favorite widgets. For each episode, we encourage you to download the viewer’s guide and use it to follow along during the episode. So do it now; download it now. Use the viewer’s guide to reflect on the content we’re covering, to write down new strategies or ideas that come to you as you’re watching. And we also have a take-home activity in there, so you can use that in your learning environments today, which is really great. And we also have a lot of other resources if you want to dive deeper into the topic. We just cover a bit here, but you can go deeper in that green Resource widget. OK, I think that’s all for logistics, so let’s get started, Treshawn.

Treshawn: All right.

Gail: Well, then that’s me, too. We understand that including learning activities and materials and being mindful of creating an inclusive learning environment where children and families have a sense of belonging can sometimes be difficult, especially under these uncertain times, where programs might still be operating remotely or a combination of remote and in person. So

we're curious to know, how is your program operating? Are you working remotely with children, a combination of remote and in-person learning, or are you all the way back at school full time or a few days a week? So, take some time to answer the poll that you see. OK, wow, we're getting a lot of mixed responses here.

Treshawn: Yeah. I know we have a mixture of whether programs are operating remotely. Even my children, sometimes they're at home and sometimes they're at school, so we kind of do a mix, too.

Gail: Yes, and for my kids, they're still just all remote. So, all right, well, we – So, thank you so much, out there, for participating. And we hope that whichever way your program is operating that this information today will be helpful to you in some way.

Treshawn: Yes, thanks for participating in that. We like doing polls. So, thinking about inclusive learning environments, they're really places in which children, with and without disabilities, and their families experience a sense of belonging, positive social relationships, and development to reach their full potential. And education staff work together with families and other service professionals, like occupational therapists and maybe speech-and-language pathologists, to provide children with access to a wide range of learning opportunities and individualized supports that allow children to fully participate in play and learning activities.

Gail: And one of the key phrases in this explanation of inclusion is "experiencing a sense of belonging." Now, inclusion is an act or a teaching practice. It's the things that we do, like individualized learning opportunities for preschoolers, providing books and materials that represent the children and families in our learning spaces, using children's home language and encouraging families to do the same, and making sure materials are accessible to all children. So, on the other hand, belonging, it's a feeling, right? It's a feeling that you are a part of something and that you matter to others. And we create this feeling of belonging through our inclusive practices.

Treshawn: Yeah, that's right. So, many of you are probably doing and have learning environments that demonstrate inclusion and belonging for the preschoolers in your program, and that's so great. Pat yourself on the back for that one. We understand that there are challenges of individualizing, especially when programs may be operating a little differently than before. But with the tremendous help of our program curricula and collaboration with education staff and attending trainings like these – we're so glad that you're here – we have lots of resources and tools that really help us in our work today.

But there was a time when there weren't as many supports for teachers, families, and children with disabilities or suspected delays. So, we think it's important for you to know just how far we've come, so we're going to watch this video on the brief history of the laws that promote inclusive practices in the early learning setting. And there will be some acronyms for you to look at in this video – a little bit of alphabet soup there. So to help you, we've put it in your viewer's guide. So be sure you've downloaded that so that you can follow along. And this video is also going to be posted on MyPeers. If you want to go back and watch it, or share it with friends and families, be sure to do so. So, let's watch.

[Video begins] Narrator: Educators need to address the strengths and needs of every child in their program. For children with disabilities, this often means both expanding and individualizing your teaching strategy. There are laws in place that are meant to help support and protect the rights of people with disabilities. When you know what the laws are and what they entail, you will be better equipped to serve and support young children and their families.

In the early 1970s, millions of children with disabilities were denied access to public schools or placed in segregated classrooms. This violated the rights of people with disabilities and put them under conditions that did not allow them to thrive. While the Education for Handicapped Children Act in 1975 did much to dismantle the segregated school system, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA, was much more comprehensive. IDEA, enacted in 1990, granted children with disabilities a free and appropriate public education. That meant that children with disabilities not only had a right to an education but one that was also individualized to their needs. It allowed them free access to specialized supports, therapies, and equipment.

IDEA has many parts, but the parts most relevant to early childhood are Part B, Section 619, and Part C. Part B, Section 619 addresses special education for preschool children and their families; whereas Part C addresses early intervention services for children 3 years and younger. Part B, Section 619 includes categories in order to help define disability. A child must qualify under these categories, as well as show an educational impact, in order to receive services. The assessment is carried out by a public school district, who will also help to develop a written legal document that describes the services needed to support the child. This document is called an individualized education program, or IEP. Families, early childhood special education teachers, therapists, and the child's educator are invited to attend IEP meetings and collaborate on how to best meet the child's needs in the least restrictive environment.

Similar to Part B, Section 619, IDEA Part C also specifies the creation of a learning plan. Here, it is called an individualized family service plan, or IFSP. According to Part C, if a toddler or infant under 3 years qualifies for an IFSP, then one must be developed for them. An IFSP includes an outline for early intervention services, measurable outcomes for each child and family, and calls for a service coordinator to oversee the plan's implementation. Furthermore, IFSPs require that services are delivered in natural environments, where children with disabilities spend time already, including the child's home and a child care program or other community settings.

In addition to IDEA, there are other laws pertaining to disability that are important for educators to know about. The Americans with Disabilities Act, or ADA, is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities. It includes guidelines for providing things like accessible parking spaces, curb ramps, and crosswalks so that people with disabilities have access to things like restaurants and bus stops. For young children, it means ensuring playground equipment is safe and accessible.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act also protects the rights of people with disabilities by "prohibiting discrimination on the basis of disability in any program receiving federal funds." As a result, in some cases, when a child doesn't qualify for services under IDEA Part B, they may have some protections under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

What does all of this mean for you? What's important for you to know is that early intervention agencies and school districts are legally responsible for providing services to children with disabilities. That makes them your partners when you have a child with disabilities enrolled in your program. Being informed means being familiar with the laws and regulations outlined above. It also means continuing to work with others in order to figure out the best way to support children with disabilities and their families in an educational setting.

Produced by Cultivate Learning at the University of Washington and Rooted in Rights. [Video ends]

Treshawn: This is such a great video, and I feel like I learn something every time I watch it, because sometimes we need a refresher on the different laws and terms and acronyms. So this is a great video to help out with that. And you can even share it with parents. I feel like even parents would be able to get it and be advocates for their children. And so, like I said before, we're going to post this on MyPeers so that you can access it there yourselves, and feel free to share it with those you feel like it would be useful for.

Gail: Yes, I love that video. Great idea to share it with parents. So excited about that. So, now that we have covered a definition of "inclusion" and "belonging" and gave a brief overview of the laws that regulate inclusive practices, we hope you have a better understanding of the topic. And so now let's discuss what inclusion and belonging look like in the preschool environment.

So, the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the Division of Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children – or NAEYC and DEC, as we often call them – have written a joint position statement on the early childhood inclusion that stated that "The defining features of inclusion that can be used to identify high-quality early childhood programs and services are access, participation, and supports." The education – or educators – provide children with access through a wide – to a wide range of learning opportunities, activities, settings, and environments. So, that's what access is about.

Now, participation is where teachers and family child care providers have individualized supports in place that allow children to participate fully in play and learning activities with their peers. So it's really not just being there, it's about the full, active participation. And supports include everyone involved in the child's learning. Teachers and family child care providers partner closely with families and work together with a broader system of community supports and specialized services. We're going to address participation and supports in upcoming webisodes, but for this episode, let's focus on access. If you want to see the full joint position statement that I talked about, check your viewer's guide. It's in there.

Treshawn: That's right. So, those are three terms. Of course, we're going to discuss them later, but today we're going to be talking about access. So, what do we mean by "access"? So, access means that teachers and family child care providers provide preschoolers with access to a wide range of learning opportunities, activities, settings, and the environment. For example, there is outdoor areas in the – there's space in the outdoor area where Laricia can enjoy learning activities using her walker. And then Abigail has this headset and her computer so that she can engage in remote learning activities with her teacher. And then there's picture cue cards for

D.K. to help him choose a song at circle time. So, we're going to watch a video looking at a high-quality learning environment for preschoolers. So, go ahead and use your viewer's guide to write down some ideas that you'd like to try. And after this video, we'll take a deeper dive into the key aspects of quality inclusive learning environments to provide some more details for you. So, let's watch.

[Video begins] Teacher: OK, maybe wash right here. Oh, you all are making that truck so nice and shiny. That's a great truck.

Truck washer: Cleaning, cleaning.

Teacher: You got it?

Truck washer: I'm cleaning, cleaning.

Teacher: Oh, good job, Hayden. Are you holding this part up? Oh, you forgot the windows. Hayden, you want me to wash the windows? Psshhh. Psshhh. Psshhh, psshhh. Wash Hayden, wash the truck, wash Hayden. [Video ends]

Treshawn: [Inaudible]. I'm sorry, technology got the best of me. I was on mute. But [Laughs] like I was saying...

Gail: I thought it was just me.

Treshawn: No, it wasn't just you. And it wasn't you guys either, so don't worry about it. It was me.

Gail: That's right.

Treshawn: What I was saying is, I love this video so much, and it was only a 30-second clip, and I'm sure the children were playing much longer with this activity. But they were having so much fun washing that truck together. And these children had access to the learning materials, like the water bottles and the paper towels and the truck, of course. And each child was able to participate in the activity, taking turns washing the truck, and the teacher even got in on the fun. We love to see interactions between teachers and their chil – and their students. Oh, I call them my children, but you know they're students. And one child was supported in his sturdy chair so that he could engage in the play in a way that was comfortable for him. And this video really checks off our list of a high-quality learning environment. So, now we're going to take that deeper dive into the key aspects of quality inclusive learning environments.

Gail: That's great. And I love that video, too. Ensuring that learning environments are inclusive of all children can be a lot to think about and remember. So, luckily, there are five key aspects of quality inclusive learning environments that you can use as a checklist to get you started, to check off what you have currently in your environment – a safe and supportive physical environment; inviting materials; a predictable schedule and consistent routines; connecting and communicating with all children; and engaging interactions and meaningful learning experiences.

Now, for this episode on inclusive learning environments for preschoolers, we'll focus on the safe and supportive physical environment, predictable schedules and consistent routines, and engaging interactions and meaningful learning experiences. And we'll talk about the inviting

materials in our “Learning Materials for Preschoolers” episode, and we’ll be sure to touch on that “connecting and communicating with all children” in our final episode on “Supporting Children and Families Through Inclusion.” So, make sure you register for all of those as they come up.

Now we’ll highlight some strategies for each of these key aspects. We’ve also included these in your viewer’s guide, so be sure to download and follow along.

Treshawn: Yeah, and there’s also some reflective questions in there, too, in your viewer’s guide, so utilize that as you can. So, when we think about the safe and supportive physical environment, it’s important for teachers and family child care providers to arrange their learning environment in a way that offers all children equitable opportunities to learn. And for preschoolers, having defined learning spaces helps to create areas for different kinds of play, like active play and quiet play and, of course, messy and creative play – my favorite. And you can mark these separate learning spaces by using low furniture, such as shelves and tables or even just different colored or different textured flooring. And so if you see, in this picture, this space is defined by words or pictures. It’s the Block Center. And this promotes early literacy and also provides a visual cue for children who respond well to pictures.

If you have a child that uses a wheelchair or a walker, be sure that she can get to all the different learning spaces easily, so this means ensuring that all traffic lines are open and that there’s enough space between furniture in the learning environment for everyone to move about freely. It’s important for education staff to work with individualized education program, or IEP, service providers to gather information that will help in adjusting the physical environment, so you have help. For example, you might talk to a physical therapist, and they might suggest a footstool at the tables to make the space comfortable for children during small group time.

Collaborating and communicating with the service provider ensures that you and family child care providers have the information that you need to create adequate supports that address the specific needs of the child that’s identified on their IEP. And then social-emotional support is also included in the learning environment setup. Someone said that in our infant-toddler episode, which I thought was so neat. So we have to be sure to include quiet spaces and more intimate, soft spaces with comforting materials that children may like to use. It may also be important to include some soft materials for children to play with that represent the things that they’re experiencing, like wearing a mask or taking teddy bear’s temperature. I know we do multiple times a day. And this environmental support really helps children cope with the day-to-day routines that may look just a little differently for them.

Gail: That is right. So, right now, we want to take a moment and think about how teachers and family child care providers can adapt their learning environment to support preschoolers. So, we call this kind of adaptation “making a modification.” And modifications are really just some small changes that can make a big impact for learners.

So, let’s think about an area of the classroom. Let’s just think about the book area, for example. And one of the ways that, a book area, you could make some modifications is, for one thing, just make sure that the book area includes books that are of a child’s particular interest so that

they will access. So, maybe you have a child that really loves to make some – push some noisy things or listen to noisy sounds. There it is. You could put some noisy books over in that book area, and that might attract some children to go over there that either love the pictures of the animals or love to make sounds. And then sometimes it might be that a child has a particular interest in a topic. Like, perhaps they love trains. So we make sure that we put some books over there that feature trains so that they are excited and attracted to go over to the book area.

But what happens if, once they're at the book area – or a child is at the book area – they have difficulty accessing the book? That's where we can make some more modifications. So, we have an example here. Here is Joel. He is our preschooler in the striped shirt there. And one of his favorite activities is reading books. But his motor delays actually make it difficult for him to turn the pages of the book, and this, as you can imagine, can be quite frustrating. And he tends to lose interest in his favorite activity, and we don't want that to happen. So, think about it out there. What could teacher Matthew do to support Joel so that he can have access to his favorite books, read independently, and feel included in his learning environment? So, this is a time to jot some of those ideas down in your viewer's guide. What can teacher Matthew do to help support Joel around that – around book reading?

Well, one thing that teacher Matthew can do – again, this is modification, a small change with a big impact – is that he could find a board-book version of this favorite book. Those are sturdier, easier to turn the pages. And then he could also attach some small pieces of foam or even Popsicle sticks to the top or the bottom corners of the pages. I've done that here. It really does help. Just tape a little Popsicle stick or craft stick, and it makes the pages easier to turn. You can even put those little pieces of Velcro – sticky Velcro – in between pages. That also makes it easier to turn. And then teacher Matthew will be sure to share this tip with Joel's family so that they can support his reading at home. And talk to service providers to share ideas that they can both use together as they work with Joel. So, one little modification, small change, with a big impact.

Treshawn: Yes, that will definitely make a big impact. And even when you are reading at circle time, and sometimes it's hard to get those pages, and you don't want to lick your fingers or wet them to turn it, using those Popsicle sticks or adding something in for yourself, I feel like that would be very useful, too.

So, we're going to talk about predictable schedules and routines. You know, the learning environment not only includes the furniture and artwork and all the materials that fill up the space but it also includes the caregiving routines and daily interactions and daily transitions and fun activities that are planned throughout the day. And so, while it's important to have this consistent routine so that children know what to expect each day, it's also best practice to allow for a little bit of individualization and flexibility in this routine for preschoolers. Remember to talk with families about their routines at home so that you can include or adapt them where possible.

The preschooler's day is full of exploration and learning about the world around them. And there are times for free play, maybe some small group time here and there, there's definitely larger group activities like circle time and, of course, caregiving routines like meals and potty

breaks. It is amazing to see all the wonderful things preschoolers accomplish during their day. It may feel like a long day, but lots of things happen in that one day.

One of the things that helps them accomplish these tasks is having predictable schedules and routines. And when children know what's coming next and what to expect to happen in their learning environment, it promotes this sense of safety and security and belonging that we love to talk about. And to help children understand their daily schedule and particular routines, you can post a schedule in several places around the room that are easily accessible for all children, and then you can even use children's home language when creating the schedule to further promote children's development. This picture here on this slide has children's home language and English on there, as well. And then you can refer to this schedule frequently throughout the day to get preschoolers in that routine and then encourage them to promote their own independence by figuring out what comes next.

Gail: Yes, and for all children to have access to the daily schedule, use visual cues of the different activities on the schedule. For example, you might have a picture of children actually doing the activity in the classroom and using those pictures for your schedule, or you might have pictures of the actual activity themselves on the schedule. And if there are children who are having difficulty following the group schedule, there's a few things you can do. And one of them is to create an individual picture schedule that works for the child's needs. You could also create a picture schedule for what your activities are for learning remotely, right? So, creating a routine within a routine is really helpful. So, maybe it's that we're going to do a welcome song, we're going to do a movement activity, we're going to listen to a story, and then we're going to do the surprise bag, and that's going to be it. So, having that predictable schedule that happens in a predictable way is really helpful.

And using visual cues to support – even more visual cues to support learning remotely, when using technology, like, here's my little sign here, having your phone turned on. Treshawn, we could use this – having your microphone on or having you on mute, right? That's a nice little reminder for when it's their turn to share. So, the other thing to do is to check with families and see if there are special schedules or routines that happen at home and try to integrate some of those into your learning environment. You can also show families how you make your picture schedules and encourage them to do the same at home. Make sure to send some of the supplies home so that they can do that. And of course, we want to make sure that they're using their home language on that schedule, as well.

And when there is consistency between home and school, we know that that really promotes children's learning, as well as their sense of security and belonging. And of course, checking in with the families is always an important practice for ensuring that children and families are included in the learning environment. And this practice becomes especially vital when we are going to be transitioning back from virtual to in-person learning so that consistency and communication is going to help build a smooth transition for children and families as they return.

Treshawn: [Chuckles] I giggled because I could have totally used that "mic on" and "mic off" sign, for one. And then you never know what Gail is going to show on her camera sometimes, so make sure you're here at "Teacher Time" to see what new things Gail has to try. [Laughs]



So, remember that routines and schedules are also learning experiences for preschoolers. And so we're going to watch a video of how this teacher uses daily routine to promote learning with these preschoolers. And as you watch, use your viewer's guide to write down something that she says or a thing that she does that you would like to try in your learning environment. Let's watch.

[Video begins] Teacher: OK, we'll work on that more later, OK? Can you put yours in the back there? Thank you, Dalena. What letter is this?

Pupils: S!

Teacher: S! Whose name starts with S? There's a few of them – Saima is one. What letter is this?

Pupils: C.

Teacher: C – Who's –

Pupils: C!

Teacher: Charlie, yeah! There you go, Charlie. OK, what about this one? Are you looking?

Jordana: J.

Teacher: Yes, this is letter J. Any J's?

Jordana: J.

Teacher: Jason and?

Jordana: Jordana.

Teacher: Jordana, yep. What about this one?

Pupils: A!

Teacher: Whose name starts with A?

Jordana: Ahmad.

Teacher: Ahmad.

Jordana: Hey.

Teacher: OK, what about this one?

Dalena: J.

Teacher: J?

Jordana: Jordana!

Teacher: Jordana. Uh-oh, you got it, Jordana? What about this one? Thank you.

Dalena: L for Lemwan.

Teacher: Lemwan – that's right. This one?

Kenzie: Kenzie!

Teacher: K for Kenzie, yep. Oh, thank you, Dalena, for helping her out. What's this one?

Dalena: It's a D.

Teacher: D, Dalena. What's this one?

Sumaya: An S.

Teacher: For?

Sumaya: [Chuckles]

Teacher: Sumaya. What about this one right here? What letter?

Oruscula: M.

Teacher: M for?

Millie: Millie!

Teacher: Millie. Millie, can I grab your pencil from you? Thank you. What about this one?

Oruscula: O!

Teacher: For?

Oruscula: O!

Teacher: Oruscula. Say, "Oruscula."

Oruscula: Oruscula.

Teacher: Good job. Thank you. [Chuckles] [Video ends]

Treshawn: What a great way to transition out of circle time. I mean, those children –

Gail: Loved that.

Treshawn: Yeah, it was great. So, and this really – This transition also helps to promote children's learning. The teacher used the letter cards to help children with their letter recognition, by using their first names. And you know what? We all have letters in our first name, so this is a great way to be inclusive of the group of children in your learning environment.

And she also gave everyone a chance to participate and hold on to something by passing out the letter cards. And then this gives children ownership of their own learning because they have to wait and listen for their name sound and then repeat back to her. And you know, all children were included, whether they said the letter or not. So they still had a chance to have fun in this learning activity. This helps promote that feeling of belonging, no matter what.

Now, the last key aspect of quality inclusive learning environments is having engaging interactions and providing meaningful learning experiences. Research shows that when children feel safe in their learning environments, they are more likely to explore. And so being sensitive and responsive in your engagements with young children help to promote this sense of security and belonging. Being sensitive and responsive means that you pay close attention to first, and then respond to children's cues appropriately.

For preschoolers, engaging interactions and meaningful learning experiences help promote children's concept development and problem-solving skills. So design activities that allow children to engage in multiple ways of exploration and problem-solving.

We know that learning occurs in many ways. And some children learn by doing, like the children here using their finger play. Some children learn by seeing, so they want to look up and see what the teacher's presenting for circle time. And then some children learn by hearing. But most children learn best when there's a combination of these approaches used. So, to ensure activities meet the needs of all children, it's important to collaborate and communicate with other program staff and service providers, because providing adequate support is a team effort.

Gail: Absolutely. And engaging children with a multisensory approach can include having materials that children can play with and explore. One of my absolute go-tos is always some good dough. You can not only play with Play-Doh but you can cut it, you can add glitter to it. It can truly be a multisensory experience. But other things that you can do is that children can watch adults and other children play and talk about materials and activities. You can sing songs about the concepts. You can also clearly watch a puppet show. Puppet shows are always pretty engaging. And looking at books. So, all kinds of multisensory experiences.

And remember, some children have a hard time with engagement and might need more support and structure to focus, attend, and learn. Now, STEM-related activities – that is, science-, technology-, engineering-, and math-related activities – are great, and they have great opportunities for multisensory exploration. They're also often open ended, which really makes them great in inclusive classrooms. You can encourage parents to do STEM activities at home with children, or it would be great to include these activities in your learning environment. Your viewer's guide has a great resource regarding STEM learning in remote learning environments, as well as ideas on inclusion with STEM.

Now, for children having difficulty with a concept or a skill, try pairing the child with a peer who can model or help the child practice the skill. So, for example, a child who has a hard time finishing an art activity that has multiple steps might benefit from buddy art – love buddy art – where they are seated next to a child who can demonstrate how to use the different art materials and keep them motivated to engage in each step of the project.

Treshawn: Yes, I know I always work better if I have a buddy with me, so buddy projects are great to use for preschoolers. So, books are also a great way to engage with children and provide these meaningful learning experiences. And you know what? There are books on just about every topic, so coupling a book with specific learning themes or a great activity that you have is a great way to provide these meaningful learning experiences. Also, choosing books based on the things your preschoolers are interested in is another way to help children feel included and that their interests are important.

So, this season on "Teacher Time," we have something new. It's a new segment we're going to be doing, and it's called "Exploring the Book CASE." And we're going to be talking about how books can connect to the ELOF learning goals for children; how books provide advanced vocabulary; how they support engagement; and then how you can extend learning beyond the

book. So, Gail is going to show us a few of her books that she brought with her today for preschoolers on our Book CASE.

Gail: Absolutely. So, three really great books that are all focused on the topic of inclusion and belonging. So, the first one that you can see there is “Our Class is a Family” by Shannon Olsen. “Our Class is a Family” is a book that will help build and strengthen an inclusive class community, which is what we all desire. Children in this story learn that their classroom is a place where it’s safe to be themselves, it’s OK to make mistakes, and it’s important to be a friend to others. And it supports a message of inclusion and belonging.

Now, another one that I love – I was just actually looking at it today – is “All Are Welcome” by Alexandra Penfold. And in this book, we discover a school where, no matter what, young children have a place, they have a space, they are loved and appreciated. It is a true message of inclusion and belonging. So, the story actually follows a group of children through their day in school, where everyone is welcomed with open arms and a school where children from all backgrounds and abilities learn from and celebrate each other and their traditions – a school that shows, really, the world how we can be. So, it has these great kind of rhyming pages, too. So, here’s one that’s just so beautiful, just holding it up there.

“Gather now, let’s all take part. We’ll play music, we’ll make art. We’ll share stories from the heart. All are welcome here.” And that refrain of “all are welcome here” happens every couple pages, so you could imagine children will be able to start doing a choral response of that as a way to engage.

Now, the last one that I want to focus on is “The Masterpiece” by Mr. Jay. So, without ever mentioning any particular challenge or disability by name, this story really helps children to recognize and understand what autism is and impresses upon them the importance of showing kindness to those who are different. Wraps into a very fun and rhyming story with these lighthearted and engaging characters that I think children will really love. And I can see that after this, a lot of collaborative art might be happening in the classroom. So, we’re going to explore this book with our Book CASE theme here. So, when you think about the “C” in the “case,” that is to connect. And the book itself, reading this book, “The Masterpiece,” can connect to some of our ELOF social and emotional goals. So, when I look through this book, I think about, this is a great book that can support the social-emotional goal that the child recognizes themselves as unique individuals, having their own abilities, characteristics, emotions, and interests. That’s something you can clearly reinforce with this book.

Another social-emotional goal from the ELOF is that the child engages and maintains positive interaction with others, and positive relationships with other children. This is a great book for that, too. And also, because we’re reading a book, it supports some of the literacy goals, such as the child demonstrates an understanding of narrative structure through storytelling or retelling the story, and the child asks and answers questions about a book that was read aloud. So, I want to emphasize just how great this is for social and emotional development. I’m just going to read a couple of pages here.

“In the back of the studio, behind lumps of clay, to the left of the canvas, where the paint cans would spray, on a dusty old table that was littered with chalk, the paintbrushes gathered for an

artistic talk. The first one to squeak was paintbrush named Reese, who said, 'Let's create a grand masterpiece – something with color to fill many pages, to be remembered by all and to last through the ages.' The paintbrushes cheered and raced to begin, except for one brush, who didn't join in. A brush named Estelle sat off to the side and stared at the wall with her eyes open wide. She rocked back and forth as though in a small boat, and sang to herself with a single low note." So, here, there might not be an obvious difference, but there's maybe a behavioral difference that is drawn to the children's attention.

"Her single-note song, her continuous hum, and the others knew well where the hum had come from. They had heard it before and knew this was her way, then two went over to ask her to play. They gave her some paint – red, yellow, and blue. 'If you'd like to come paint, we'd love to have you.'" Now, that is a great way that you could stop and talk about the way in which those children approached another friend and asked them to come play. So I think that's a great way to underscore that social-emotional piece.

Now, this book, throughout this book, there's advanced vocabulary. I always preview the books and think about, "Oh, that would be a great advanced vocabulary word to emphasize with young children." There are these great words like "studio" and "canvas," great adjectives like "vibrant" and "continuous," and great feeling words in here – "ignored" and "admired." And one of the tips that I always have is to go through a book and to pick that advanced vocabulary and then think about it in advance. How might you describe that advanced vocabulary word in some words that children would understand? So, if you were going to describe "studio" – and I put it on a Post-it note and then I just stick it on the page there. So, if you were going to describe "studio," you might stop and say, "You know what a studio is? You know, it's a space or a place, could be a building, a room, or even just a part of a room, where you can do art. Or you can have a recording studio, a yoga studio." You could go on and on, and then ask children, "Do we have a studio here? Yes, the art area."

And then you can support engagement by reading with enthusiasm always, stopping before a rhyming word after you've read it repetitively and see if the children can fill in that rhyming word, which is pretty fun. You can pretend to be paintbrushes; you can pretend to hold paintbrushes; you can ask questions about how the paintbrush characters are feeling, to support their perspective taking. Of course, you can do a lot of role-playing, which is, again, "How can we, E, extend beyond the book?" So you can help children go to their art studio in the classroom or create a little art-studio space in their home. And if they're together, they could paint together on canvas, just like the characters in this book. And you can create a big art collaborative picture by just putting a big piece of butcher paper where children can engage together on that. And then be looking for those buddy behaviors and those friendly behaviors to reinforce throughout that. So, I love that book. It's a great book to use with children.

Treshawn: Yes, that was awesome. And I love a good rhyming book, so I might have to add that to my collection, because I do collect children's books, too.

So, it is all about you. We don't want to forget ourselves, because we do our best caregiving and teaching when we feel calm and when we feel well ourselves. And so engaging in self-care practices – maybe it's reading a book with the children, and that's what makes you feel good – can really help educators build this greater social and emotional capacity to deal with some of

these difficult times. And here's one quick strategy that we love to use, that can help you get back into that calm space, and I call it "taking a five" – "taking a high five." So, open up your hand. Open up your hand like you're giving a high five. And then take your pointer finger with your other hand. You're going to trace your finger like you're going up a mountain and then down. You take a deep breath when you go up. [Inhales deeply] Concentrate on your breathing as you go down the mountain. [Exhales slowly] And then back up the mountain. [Inhales deeply] And then breathe out when you're going down the mountain. [Exhales slowly] And this helps bring your heart rate down and to bring you back in that moment. I know I felt a little clearer just by doing that couple seconds of breathing.

Gail: Thank you for that moment to take a break and take a breath. I love that. So, creating inclusive environments for preschoolers is easiest when teachers and family child care providers collaborate and communicate with other program staff and service providers. For example, seek advice from the team you have available: from nutritionists; from mental health consultants; from the early childhood special education itinerant teacher, if they come by; or other therapists – occupational therapists, physical therapists – to provide adequate support for preschoolers. So, remember that we're all in this together, and we're stronger together, and you don't have to figure it out all by yourself. With all of the supports and resources available, creating inclusive environments for preschoolers can become a team approach.

Treshawn: Yes, and we want to provide you with just a few resources that will support you as you create this quality inclusive learning environment for the preschoolers that you work with. So, first, we have MyPeers. We talked about that a little bit, but MyPeers is a virtual, informal social community to exchange ideas, share resources, lend support to the early childhood community, all of that. And if you have not joined MyPeers already, you can join via the ECLKC. We'll also put a link in the Q&A box so that you can find it there. And you'll find us there in our "Teacher Time" community. Stop by and say hello.

We're going to be posting some more videos – the ones that you've seen today and other episodes. We're going to be sharing some strategies related to inclusion and belonging in your learning environments. And there's also a disabilities and inclusion MyPeers group that you may be interested in, for more strategies, so feel free to explore all the communities available on MyPeers.

On the apps and on our phones and our devices, we have a couple of programs there for you, too. First is the Text4Teachers, and this program sends you two free text messages per month, with information, tips, and research and resources to help strengthen and support your teaching practices. Then we have our ELOF2GO app, and it gives you on-the-go access to ELOF goals, so you don't have to carry around that book anymore. You can just have it right there on your mobile device. And then, lastly, is our Ready DLL app. I actually have this one on my phone because I like to share some words and phrases in different languages with my children. So, if you work with children who are dual language learners, in this app, you can access resources, learn key words and phrases, and discover implementation strategies. And all the apps are free, and they're available in English and Spanish, so you don't want to miss out on those opportunities.

Gail: I love all of those. Our next "Teacher Time" episode will be on April 13th, and that will be focused on "Learning Materials That Support Inclusion for Infants and Toddlers." The preschool episode on that topic will be on April 20th, so be sure to register for that.