

Ben Collinsworth

Inclusion Preschool Teacher
Flowing Wells Unified School District

*Empowering
student voice
through
storytelling*

“In preschool, life is all about discovery. Young children use play and inquiry to discover truths about their environment and, more importantly, themselves.”

#AZTEACHERLEADER

Ben Collinsworth's face livens as he reads books aloud. His hands animate descriptions and metaphors as he talks to his students. He easily glides between spoken direction and song.

"How many milks do we need?" he asks his class at snack time, then singingly presents "three milks, four milks, five milks ..."

His students—all between the ages of 3 and 5 years old—excitedly count along.

Collinsworth has been teaching preschool at Emily Meschter Early Learning Center in the Flowing Wells Unified School District in Tucson since 2014, but embraced the power of storytelling far before then. While working as a bookseller at Bookmans Entertainment Exchange in Tucson, he volunteered to lead a children's story time. A former theater major, Collinsworth took his role beyond what his supervisor had expected. He incorporated props into his story times, developed activities related to each book, and asked the young children attending the story hour questions to connect them more to the day's book.

Parents of those children started calling him 'Mister Ben,' which he now also embraces in his formal classroom. It was his wife, Amy Collinsworth, who also works at Flowing Wells, who pointed out that he was doing the work of a teacher and that education might be a career path for him.

"All the lights went on—the whole chandelier," Collinsworth remembers. He then student-taught in a preschool classroom and fell in love with the energy, creativity, and culture of discovery he found there.

Collinsworth works to create a classroom culture of belonging, where every student's story is welcome. That sets the foundation for students to embrace their identity, he explains, and be able to advocate for themselves.

"In preschool, life is all about discovery," Collinsworth says. "Young children use play and inquiry to discover truths about their environment and, more importantly, themselves. As an educator, embracing student identity

is about honoring those discoveries through developmentally appropriate practice. Cultivating a child-directed curriculum also encourages student voice by allowing young students to lead their own learning."

As an inclusion classroom, half of Collinsworth's class are general education students and half are special education students.

"Even though the kids don't realize it, they're interacting with students who culturally represent a whole community of people with disabilities, and the students who are enrolled in special education are showing the typically developing students just another way of what it means to be human."

Along with dramatic performance, song, and dance, Collinsworth includes mindfulness activities and the tenets of social-emotional learning in his classroom. What he most wants his students to understand is how to be kind to others and to themselves. That helps students be "able to say, 'I can be kind to myself, which means I can love myself, which means I can respect myself, which means I can ask for and demand and take accountability for the way that people respect me.'"

That sets the stage for students to later succeed.

"The opportunities to be successful that kids have in preschool give them the confidence they need to go further," he says. "It gives them the boldness to be able to say, 'I'm a learner and I can figure it out.'"

-
1. How does Collinsworth elevate student voice?
 2. How can students' exposure to diverse perspectives through storytelling support their understanding of others?
 3. In what ways does cultivating inclusion in your learning environment make an impact on your greater community?

