

**Research Articles and Essays**

**Raising Children's Voices: Lessons Learned from EC PLACE**

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### Abstract

The Early Childhood Program for Language Acquisition and Community Engagement (EC PLACE) is a program designed to support language, communication, and social development of children with significant disabilities within a public preschool setting. This article describes program design and eight effective program practices which contributed to remarkable gains in children's skills and outcomes.

*Keywords:* preschool intervention, autism, early childhood special education

### **Raising Children's Voices: Lessons Learned from EC PLACE**

Most preschool classrooms are cheerful, colorful, busy places with lots of joyful noise and extensive peer socialization. For most typically developing children, these settings are conducive to play, social engagement, and positive learning outcomes. For some children, particularly children with autism, language, communication, or behavior delays or disabilities, these settings can be challenging. The bright and crowded environment, busy or noisy social activities, and pace of activities can cause some children to become stressed, anxious, overwhelmed, and overstimulated. These feelings can lead children to withdraw or engage in challenging behaviors that create a barrier to positive learning and developmental outcomes in preschool (Dye, 2018).

This paper describes a specialized program designed intentionally around strengths and areas for growth of children with significant language, communication, and behavior support needs, with structured inclusion of typically developing peers. The case study public preschool in a rural community was designed in response to the early childhood special education (ECSE) preschool teacher/director noticing significant enrollment increases of children with autism in the preschool, and the challenges the typical preschool program was posing for those children. The director noticed that children were stressed, overwhelmed, and engaging in self-injurious behaviors in the typical classroom, but when they were in a quieter setting with fewer children and more teachers, they were able to relax and engage more productively with language and social learning activities and make deeper relationships with teachers. With teacher designed supports, the children were then able to engage with peers in play and learning activities, with teacher facilitation and support. From these observations, the Early Childhood Program for Language Acquisition and Community Engagement was

designed and launched.

### **Foundational Framework for Discussing dis/Ability: Disability as Social Construct**

Our work as educators and researchers is rooted in the belief that the concepts and definitions of ability and disability are socio-political constructs, grounded in an ableist lens, which have been designed and used to marginalize and segregate people based on socially constructed definitions of fitness and ability, in essence used as tools of exclusion (Hamilton, 2019; Liachowitz, 2010). We approach our work with and for children from a place of respect for human dignity, a curiosity about how we can support each child's optimal growth, development, and learning, and a recognition that we are operating within systems and structures that can be limiting at times. We view our role as educators and advocates for all children as that of guides and facilitators within these limiting structures, striving to help children and families navigate complex and often exclusionary structures in services to support each child's growth, development, and learning.

In this paper, we discuss public school-based interventions for preschool children with documented disabilities, as defined by current legal frameworks. Within this context, we use labels for disabilities as defined by laws which impact school-based interventions, such as the labels and definitions in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). However, the legally defined labels are used here only in the context of public-school structures, which require the use of disability labels to access resources to support individualized interventions tailored to nurture optimal learning and developmental outcomes for each child. Our discourse around disabilities, labels, and interventions warrants a clear grounding in our unwavering advocacy for full and meaningful inclusion of all people across settings, and deeply held belief that diversity of all kinds is the natural state of being human. In this stance,

all humans with all manner of diversities are viewed as inherently valuable, natural, and important to co-creating organically representative settings and authentic experiences among all people. In this philosophical stance grounded in inclusion, we do not generally impose deficit-oriented labels or view human diversity as a “disability.” We use such labels in this paper, with this important caveat, because we are operating within the legal frameworks of school-based intervention and special education programming provided in the case study program.

### **The Origins of the EC PLACE Program**

The Early Childhood Program for Language Acquisition and Community Engagement (EC PLACE) began in a small rural public preschool, located in the public elementary school, in response to increasing enrollment of young children diagnosed with autism, children with limited communication or non-verbal communication, and children with significant behavioral support needs. The preschool Early Childhood Special Education teacher (ECSE), also the preschool director, began noticing increased needs for individualized supports in preschool and observed the challenges the preschool children were facing in their elementary school years. In addition to persisting needs for intervention services in the subsequent years, the ECSE noticed significant barriers to the preschool children being able to engage and participate meaningfully in preschool environments. She began to document observations of children’s skills, strengths, areas of need for intervention, and individualized supports she and her team were providing to increasing numbers of children.

Over the next year, the ECSE/Director continued observing and documenting the interventions the preschool team were developing and implementing to meet children’s needs

and began having more dialogues with administrators and teachers across the elementary grades. The preschool team began making significant changes to the environment and curricular approach to tailor support to the growing number of non-verbal children enrolling in the program. The team adjusted the ways in which materials were displayed and presented to reduce stimulation and distractions, encouraging children to seek and engage with high-interest items and tasks. Visual supports were used by teachers and children throughout the day, including color-coding and using pictures cards (along with verbal cues) to communicate behavior goals, schedule activity sequences (first this, then that), and describe material uses. The team implemented a constant data collection, assessment, and feedback routine which gathered, tracked, and shared information on children's individual interventions and progress, which was used by the preschool team but also shared continually with families and kindergarten teachers.

It became apparent that the preschool children who entered the program with significant communication and behavior needs benefitted from the highly specialized individual supports and the changes the team was making to the program approach. The ECSE/director recognized the need for an intentionally designed specialized preschool intervention program tailored around the needs and goals of children with significant delays in communication, language, and social skills with an emphasis on intensive individual interventions and peer engagement. From this early groundwork, the Early Childhood Program for Language Acquisition and Community Engagement (EC PLACE) was born.

The ECSE director described the experiences that led to the EC PLACE program development, saying:

In my traditional preschool class, the class was designed for typical peers. Most of the

time this was fine but one year I ended up with six students who were nonverbal, had no communication skills, very low language, poor social skills and social communication. All of these students had a lot of sensory defensiveness and the lack of structure in the room compounded by the noise and busy-ness of the other 12 children caused anxiety in my students. Challenging behaviors increased and they were not in the state of mind to focus on learning. They were not making progress in communication, language, or social skills. That was when I realized that I must change the environment to meet the needs of all students. I had to ensure that every child was safe, happy, and successful!

### **Foundations of EC PLACE Program Design**

#### **Research on Effective Early Intervention**

Typical preschool programs are designed for neurotypically developing children, with bright and colorful spaces full of lots of materials always available, energetic whole and small group social interactions, and active routines. But for children with autism spectrum disorder, this kind of environment can prompt an overload of sensory stimulation, leading to highly stressed emotional states, behavior challenges, and sensory defensiveness. In this stressed state, preschool children are not able to meaningfully process and engage in skill practice and guided instruction and miss out on essential early learning experiences (Dye, 2018). Missing these important preschool learning and development foundations can then set children with significant delays in communication, language, and social skills on a trajectory for continued and increasing involvement with special education services throughout their school years (Jónsdóttir et al., 2018).

The purpose of Early Intervention (EI) is to engage young children at risk for or with

delays or disabilities in individualized, evidence-based experiences which are intentionally designed to address areas of identified need and support their growth, development, and learning (Division for Early Childhood, 2014). The goal is to identify areas of need and provide interventions and supports as early as possible, to increase children's functioning and outcomes over the short and long term. Engaging young children with delays or disabilities in early interventions demonstrates the potential to radically improve their developmental outcomes across their school years, reducing needs for on-going special education services and improving learning outcomes (Eldevik et al., 2009).

### **EC PLACE Program Features and Impact**

Grounded in the core foundations of special education practice, to monitor, identify, and implement effective collaboration, assessment, and individualized instruction using evidence-based practice (McLeskey et al, 2017; Cook et al., 2008), the preschool team created two dedicated classrooms designed specifically for children with language and communication delays and behavior support needs. Each classroom supported 4–6 children ages 3–5 years, with 2–4 teaching staff per room, guided by the ECSE-licensed director. The classroom environments were designed to be clutter-free, soothing spaces where children could orient themselves in a feeling of safety and predictability and begin to engage in simple to more complex activities and tasks as their skills developed. The teachers used language and visual communication tools to build up and encourage children's own language production and communication as they worked on meaningful tasks. Preferences and interest items and activities were used to reinforce desired outcomes, along with close, warm relationships and encouragement from teachers. The curriculum for the program centered





**Figure 1**  
*EC PLACE integrates peer partners, technology, visual supports, and child choice preferences.*

around building communication and language competencies through use of intentional verbal cues, picture cards, color coding as visual cue, individualized goals, daily progress monitoring, interest- and preference-based task choices, peer-assisted play sessions, technology supports, and daily engagement with typically developing peer partners (selected and paired by program teachers). (See Figure 1). The program activities and experiences were also closely tied to children's Individual Education Plans (IEP).

Instructional interventions were always

embedded in routines and natural contexts to

encourage strong transferability, facilitating the children's application of skills in meaningful ways. The low child-to-teacher ratio allowed for extensive interactions and deep relationships to develop between children, families, and teachers, enduring all throughout the children's elementary school years. The quality of these relationships became a hallmark of the program, along with eight effective practices which resulted in incredible gains in children's language, behavior, and learning outcomes. Almost all of the EC PLACE children moved into general education classrooms full time in kindergarten, requiring very little special education services throughout their elementary grades.

The ECSE team described how their program's philosophy of inclusion was demonstrated in their program design:

We designed a classroom using evidence-based practices for children with autism including visual structure, functional communication instruction, authentic environments for skill development on meaningful tasks, child driven choices, and positive reinforcement. Although designed to meet the needs of students who require an abundance of visual structure and intensive language instruction, the program also meets the needs of neurotypical students. The classroom structure, schedule, visual supports, and intentional instruction on communication and language skills decreased the students' anxiety. They were in a mindset to learn, and they made significant progress in communication, language, social, play and classroom behaviors. After one year, two of them graduated into a general education classroom rather than the center-based classroom. Especially with our youngest learners, it's not best practice to make them adapt to the general education environment which doesn't make sense to them. Rather, we need to adapt the general education environment to meet their needs. True inclusion is about designing an environment and a curriculum that meets the needs of all learners, not making our struggling students just adapt. And this is not only true in the school setting, but in the community and the workplace.

### **Effective Practices for Student Success: Intentionality Across Curriculum and Environments**

Effective early intervention encompasses many aspects of programming, including staff professional preparation and credentialing, environment design, purposeful grouping, intentional data-driven planning and decisions, ongoing assessment and collaborations, and individualizing across the program. Effective programming to support success for each and every child, especially those with disabilities, demands dedicated attention and effort on behalf of all adults supporting children's growth, development, and learning. The EC PLACE

program exemplified this core early childhood special education approach, and additionally teachers attribute the children's highly successful outcomes to eight intentional practices: color coding, visual cues, transition items, adapting materials, communication systems, penny boards, and data binders.

### **Color Coding (Everywhere, Everything)**

Beginning with a clutter-free space, the environment was specifically left a little sparse as far as materials displays, items on walls, and furnishings. There were individual small group spaces created with small cubbies, soft cushions, and small tables/chairs. All materials were in bins to keep items together and in defined spaces, and bins were color coded to connect to different learning areas (yellow for manipulatives, green for cars, etc.). Each child was assigned a color at the enrollment point, which became an important visual cue to denote that child's schedule, preferred materials, learning center tasks, and personal cubby for belongings. Family photos were put into each child's unique colored frames. These color cues allowed children to easily locate their own special places, items, and routines in the environment. This strategy increased children's ownership of the space and increased their independence by being able to locate their own schedule, tasks, and materials.

Additionally, the color-coding enabled all the teachers to quickly identify each child's routines and learning and development goals. At each learning area, color-coded cards were posted with the child's specific task or focus skill, along with specific verbal cues and phrases that were being used with the child. These "goal cards" connected to each child's IEP goals, allowing for more time working on children's intervention services and goals. Using the color-coding system for children and adults alike made sure that all teachers could quickly and easily find and integrate important practices and cues for each child, thereby ensuring

they were maximizing each child's targeted interventions. The team also created extensive data binders, which were color coded for each child so all related service providers, families, and teachers could easily locate children's data on interventions, progress monitoring, assessments, outcomes and goal achievement.

### **Visual Supports and Cues**

Integrating visual cues into classroom practice has long been recognized in research as an effective practice to support communication, autonomy, comprehension, and social engagement for children with disabilities, particularly autism spectrum disorder, as well as being an effective practice to support all learners (Ganz & Flores, 2010). Visual cues can include integrating picture symbols either alongside written words or alone, directional signs, activity sequence charts, sets of picture cards on a ring used to communicate ideas and needs/wants, color coding, direction or instruction cards, and varied signs.

Visual supports in EC PLACE extended to the use of movable schedules and sequence charts, which involved having picture cards stuck on hook and loop tape to be able to move from one side to the other on a task card or schedule. Children, families, and teachers worked together to create communication boards, which included picture cards unique to children's needs and goals or devices with apps to add verbal response to children's picture selections. The teachers used colored masking tape on the floor to create borders and pathways for children to learn to navigate different spaces in the room. The use of a visual timer app was particularly popular with the children. Together with the teacher, the children would set the app for a designated time, and as the time ticked down around a clock face, a favorite image would appear. The use of interest and preference items supported children's ability to transition when the timed activity was over. Children would cheer as the final

moment ticked down and name the pictured item.

### **Transition Item**

While the widespread use of visual supports was an important practice in the EC PLACE classroom, children also needed explicit instruction and practice in using the picture cards and visual tools. For example, the picture card schedule on hook and loop tape helped children track routines and progress, but directions like “put items away and line up for playground time” were still too vague for some children to effectively follow. The use of transition items supported children’s follow through on routines and tasks by giving children an item to carry from one place to another as they transitioned. For example, a child would move the picture card for cleanup, pull off the card for line up for playground time, and take the playground card over to the classroom door. Having the item in their hand as they transitioned from one activity to another, or especially from one space to another, provided children with a concrete, tactile cue in addition to the visual cue, providing more structure to stay on task and follow through. Transition items could be a picture or word cue on a flat wooden stick, a preferred item like a small stuffed toy, car, or plastic food, based on the particular transition in routine or setting the child is making.

The director described a simple transition item strategy:

Once we begin any transition, we provide a transition item. For example, when we transition from carpet to line up for recess, I’ll hand each student a “check schedule” stick. They hold the stick while walking over to their individual schedules. They then place the stick in the pouch and pull the next picture from their schedule.

Understanding the structure and expectations of the classroom (through visual representation) decreased the anxiety of our students and therefore the challenging

behavior that typically happens during transitions.

## Adapting Materials

An overarching goal of the EC PLACE program is to ensure all children have access to and are able to meaningfully participate in all aspects of the preschool curriculum with all supports needed. Access, participation, and support are widely considered the three essential



**Figure 2**

*Adapted children's book about kittens including spiral bound book copy, picture cards, and various stuffed animals corresponding to book theme.*

pillars of high-quality inclusion for children with disabilities (Buisse, 2011). While all the EC PLACE practices are centered around these essential elements, adapting materials is most clearly connected with curricular access and engagement. Adapting materials involves the teaching team assessing the preschool learning goals through the lens of each child's strengths and needs and creating supports and individualized pathways for each child to accomplish either the stated learning goal, or an individually modified version of the stated learning goal. For the EC PLACE team, this meant creating numerous versions of materials, books, lessons, and experience plans to ensure each child's meaningful engagement and learning.

EC PLACE teachers created tactile and hands-on manipulatives to align with children's books that would allow children the opportunity to hold and manipulate items related to learning topics and themes. (See Figure 2). They created movement experiences

and sensory experiences for children who were ready for those opportunities, and utilized lots of visual cues, simplified language, picture cards, some hand-over-hand modeling, video reviews, and repetition. The more they made such adaptations to typical books and materials, the more deeply the children engaged with the content and the faster they tracked learning goal attainment. As children found more meaning in the brief periods of focused academic learning activities, they were able to extend their time in the activities, promoting even stronger learning gains.

### **Communication Systems**

As an early childhood educator wholly centered around inclusion, the EC PLACE director designed and built the program to fully focus children's time and efforts around building and expanding communication. An essential context for all communication and language development and use is the recognition that communication (verbal and non-verbal) is rooted in social connectedness and important to children's abilities to develop important relationships (Kaiser et al., 2001). Informed by extensive research touting the importance of communication skill development for young children's capacity to have needs met, comprehend, and communicate thoughts and ideas, and deepen their meaningful relationships with the people around them (Gooden & Kearns, 2013), the EC PLACE teachers created continuous opportunities for children to develop and use communication. Teachers collaborated closely with the speech-language pathologist who provided services based on children's individualized education plans and continued those interventions throughout each day. This approach allowed for more continuity for children's interventions and resulted in much stronger gains in language skills.

Throughout the environment, the team looked for every opportunity to create



opportunities for the children to use communication (verbal, visual, and gestures) as a means for increasing children's internal motivation and practice in authentic situations. For example, children would find limited materials accessible on shelves, and additional desired materials were stored in bins that children had to use language to request. When children would gesture or use their picture cards, teachers would acknowledge, model verbal language, encourage children's efforts to repeat verbal requests, and provide the materials the child was seeking. The teachers ensured that children saw the need, purpose, function, and benefit to using communication tools and strategies throughout their daily routines and play activities. Throughout the constant opportunities for language development, the team engaged children with peers and adults in prompting and using verbal communication, which boosted children's friendships as well as their communication and social skills development.

As one teacher described, the language and communication skills supports were integrated into natural routines:

We all knew that Zac's favorite thing was trains. We set up a train table with two pieces of track and one train car. We had more tracks and cars and engines in a bin on the shelf. Of course, as soon as he came in, he lit up when he saw it. "Tays! Tays! [trains]" he cried, and immediately went to play. "Yes, Zac! We have trrrrainnns out today just for you!" We extended the /r/ and /n/ sounds in our response to encourage him to hear the complete word. Soon he was looking around for more tracks and cars. Just as he was starting to get upset, which we were carefully watching for, we asked him, "More trrrrainnns, Zac? More?" He looked at us, picked up, and showed the picture card with a train engine. We nodded said the exact same words again, with him watching our faces. "Mo taynnn," he said slowly and deliberately. We just about threw him a party; we were so excited to hear him adding the new sound to his word!



We immediately got him more tracks and trains and joined in his play. We sang train songs and followed his lead in lining up the cars on the track and driving the train around. He was absolutely beaming with enjoyment! By creating a need and internal motivation to work at expanding his verbal skills, he very carefully made the effort. Not because we forced or asked him to, but because his verbalizations were important to getting his needs and desires met; he could see the functional purpose and reward for his verbal communication. This kind of scene was repeated all day, every day for all our kiddos. They took such ownership over their language, and we saw amazing gains in their development!

### **Peer Supports**

In alignment with the EC Place program's heavy emphasis on language modeling by adults, the team also designed intentional opportunities to generalize and practice language with peers during the typical routines and practices of the day. Research has shown that through these interactions, each partner can increase their use of language and build social skills such as turn-taking, self-confidence, and initiative (Harris et al., 2009). Peers from kindergarten classrooms (neurotypically developing) were selected to regularly join the EC PLACE classrooms. In addition to being informal peer play partners, the teachers also created meaningful opportunities for peers to model skills and behaviors and engage with preschoolers in tasks related to the children's specific IEP goals.

Peer support and modeling has long been an effective practice for enhancing learning and development outcomes for children with disabilities, just as much as it has shown important benefits for children without disabilities (Carter et al., 2015). An essential element of maximizing peer engagement is for teachers to facilitate meaningful interactional activities

and provide support for peers (Brock et al., 2016). The EC PLACE teachers prepared peer mentors ahead of time by discussing the target child's strengths and areas for growth, their interests and preferences, and specific language cues the teachers and peer would use in the play and learning tasks on which the children would collaborate. With this preparation, the peers took on a mentor or learning support role but they also engaged as authentic and natural play partners. Within this environment and with the teachers facilitating relationships, all children demonstrated genuine enjoyment and warm friendships which persisted through the elementary grades.

### **Penny Board**

The EC PLACE classroom was designed to provide the necessary visual support for students with autism to understand the world around them and therefore decrease anxiety and the problem behaviors associated with that anxiety. Children with autism often prefer a predictable routine and struggle with flexible thinking and changes in routine (Iseminger, 2009). That is often why children with autism prefer the social company of adults to peers because adults are more predictable and more accommodating. The natural unpredictability of preschoolers can cause high levels of anxiety in our students with autism (Dye, 2018). They are more likely to be successful in an environment that is structured and with a few number of peers. Although EC PLACE students need to be taught to be flexible, tolerate changes in routine, and tolerate loud and busy environments, these skills are taught gradually.

All of the teaching in the EC PLACE classroom is very intentional and direct. EC PLACE staff are intentionally teaching requesting, labeling, commenting, and listener responding—all of which cannot be taught without reinforcement. Reinforcement is the most important tool in a teacher's toolbox for increasing skills and decreasing undesired behavior.

Reinforcement is always working, works on all people, is always determined by the student, and always increases future occurrence of behavior. Reinforcement is not a bribe, it is not optional, and it is not determined by the teacher. Characteristics of reinforcement used in the EC PLACE classroom include the following: (a) reinforcement given immediately after the behavior or skill, (b) preferred reinforcers increase future occurrence of the targeted behavior or skill, (c) can be naturally occurring in the environment, can be “contrived,” and (d) can be used to turn a naturally occurring neutral consequence into a reinforcing consequence (praise, for example). The types of reinforcement in EC PLACE are found in two categories: (1) natural (praise, attention, and breaks), and (2) contrived (token, sticker, edibles, and tangibles). The two main uses for reinforcement in EC PLACE are using reinforcement to teach new skills and using reinforcement to change unsafe behaviors.

The contrived reinforcer, a token, was used in EC PLACE in what they called a penny board. (See Figure 3). The penny board increased students’ delayed gratification/stamina and improved consistency in teacher expectations and is faded slowly over time, providing a visual cue for progress on desired behaviors and tasks.

The teacher described an essential aspect of using reinforcers, saying:

The child always chooses their reinforcer. See here on the back of the board—he has 4 things that we know are highly reinforcing to him based of the reinforcer survey. He works for dinosaurs, fruit snacks, stuffed dinosaurs, and popcorn. You’ve got to be sure the reinforcers on the back of the board are things the child really likes and



**Figure 3**  
*Image of child’s penny board, with movable pennies on hook and loop tape to track child’s progress on tasks and towards earning preferred rewards.*

wants. If the penny board is not working, the reinforcer isn't high enough. When you first start to teach the penny board, you'll go through the 10 pennies quickly: "Great sitting!" Then move a penny down. "Good job using safe hands!" moving down another penny. Over time, you'll increase the length of time in which you move pennies down. Once you move all 10 pennies down, the child gets their reinforcer: the picture/item in the middle of the front of the penny board.

### **Data Binders/ Student Portfolios**

High quality early childhood special education requires two essential elements: intentional assessment and effective collaboration. Implementing evidence-based practice is built on a foundation of systematic assessment, progress monitoring, analysis of child data, and sharing progress reports. To effectively support and nurture optimal outcomes in children's growth, development, and learning, early intervention teachers, service providers, and families need to collaborate seamlessly and integrally on children's behalf. The EC PLACE program cleverly integrates these two pillars of effective practice with the use of extensive data binders.

The EC PLACE data binders were created for each child and housed every possible item of documentation on the child. Families provided important background surveys, children's interests and preferences, favorite items and activities, areas of strengths and areas for growth, ways to motivate children, and important family goals. Teachers build on these foundational elements and added all intake and on-going assessments, highlights and success stories, notes, photos, and work samples, goals and progress reports. The data binders were always available for all teachers and families and were updated daily. Each week, the teaching team would review and analyze notes and children's progress and make instructional and intervention changes as needed based on weekly data. The data binders became like

individual child encyclopedias, giving the team all the information they needed to effectively support and nurture each child's optimal growth, development, and learning.

As the EC PLACE director literally hugged a child's binder to her chest, she said: These binders represent all the love and support we pour into our kiddos. They are like a treasure trove of our journey together, sometimes for three years of our lives together! In here we have a beautiful picture of who the child is, what incredible progress they have made, the bright future they are heading into. On a practical side, these binders are the most effective way we could share so much data and information—such a rich picture of the child—with so many people. The occupational and speech therapists, they grab the binder every time they come in and can easily see and track the work and progress on IEP goals. And I've had so many parents sit at the table with the binder, just smiling through tears with pride in what their children are accomplishing! I always make and keep a copy when my kiddos move up to kindergarten, and I pass up their binder to their teachers. I want them to see this child's amazing journey and know them as deeply as we have. These binders are a beautiful time capsule of their incredible PLACE experience.

### **Conclusion**

The EC PLACE program was the result of a deeply dedicated ECSE team's efforts responding to increasing enrollment of young children with autism demonstrating language, communication, and behavior support needs, and recognizing that the current preschool program was not designed to maximize children's success. With the ultimate goal of full inclusion in general education for all children, the ECSE director created the Early Childhood Program for Language Acquisition and Community Engagement within the public

elementary school to serve and support preschool children with significant disabilities.

By designing the program for children with disabilities first, and integrating typically developing children through structured peer partnerships, the EC PLACE program became an environment where preschoolers with disabilities were valued for who they are while having the resources and support to grow essential skills across all domains. The teachers welcomed each and every child exactly as they were, and intentionally created personalized spaces, meaningful activities, intensive interventions, strong peer partnerships, warm adult relationships, individualized interest-based materials, and richly descriptive assessment reports to nurture growth, development, and learning in each child and effective collaborations across families and teams. The powerful results of this incredible effort were a unique and effective program that changed the school culture to one that highly values inclusion and changed the school and life outcomes trajectory for every child involved in the program.

As children completed one to three years in the EC PLACE program as preschoolers, their social, communication, verbal language, and behavior skills grew quickly and in the first five years of the program, every single EC PLACE participant demonstrated on target age and grade level competencies in communication. Of all EC PLACE participants, 80% of the children went on to be fully included in kindergarten, spending 80% or more of their school day in the general education classroom with minimal need for support. Just over 50% of the children who completed two preschool years in the EC PLACE program moved on to kindergarten without needing any additional special education services and achieved out of needing any additional IEP.

As the director said with a big, tearful smile:

My primary objective in creating and implementing the EC PLACE program was to put the elementary special education department out of business! I knew that intensive interventions implemented early in our children's lives could change the whole trajectory of their educational future. And that's just what we were able to accomplish here for every one of our children.

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