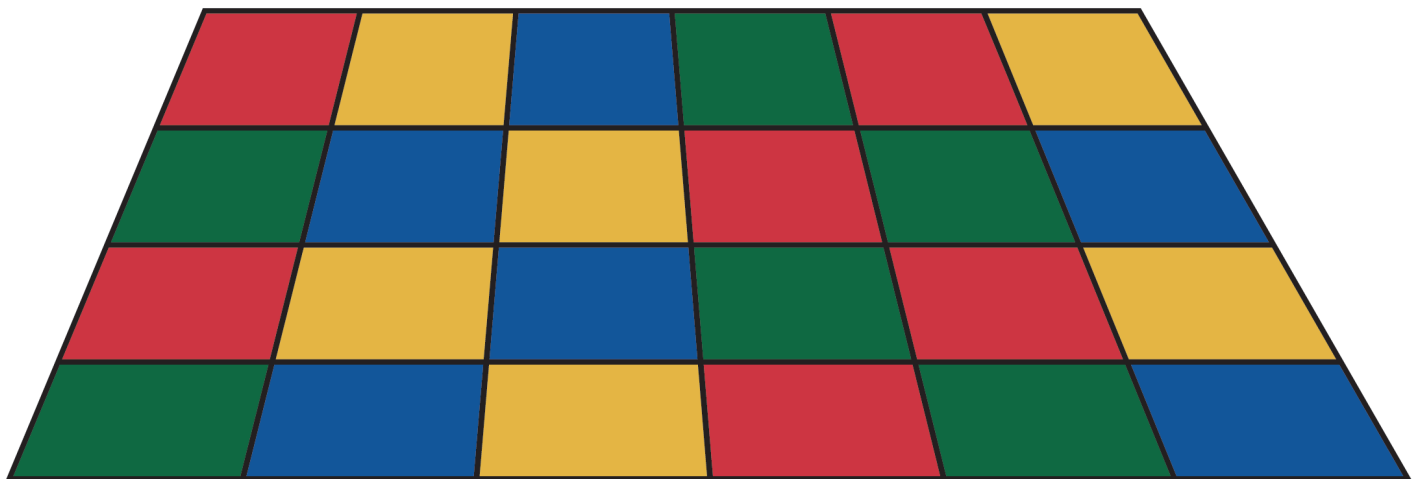




Exploring Best Practices in Early Learning

One Teacher's Journey Through
the Land of the Littles



As I looked around my new classroom, I was overwhelmed by how small everything seemed. I had spent the last twelve years teaching older students with special needs, but I have always believed that significant change can lead to profound learning. My new journey was about to begin as an early childhood special education teacher, and I felt a nervous excitement and a sense of honor to be the teacher to welcome our youngest learners to their first school experience.

Blocks, puzzles and fine motor toys filled the worn wooden shelves. A pretend kitchen, small chairs and short tables were spread across the space and one large alphabet carpet lay in the center of the timeworn tile floor. At this point in my career, I did not know the research behind the significant impact that environments have on learning; however, I knew in my heart that a warm, organized space with enticing learning materials was important to ignite the love of learning in our young scholars. I needed my students to love to come to school.

The amount of fun, learning and relationship building that occurred in that first classroom was immeasurable, but I knew that I wanted more for my students. I started my early learning experience in a self-contained special education classroom. We found a short amount of time each day to meet up with general education peers, but our classrooms were on opposite ends of the school and inclusive activities were minimal. We followed different curriculums, had separate classroom parties and experienced limited collaboration time. Everyone was doing what they believed was best in their own program, but we knew we needed to grow into a more inclusive family.

Under strong leadership from our superintendent, and immense support from our administrators, school board, community and early learning team, we set out on a journey to build an Early Learning Center. Our goal was to embrace and facilitate our core belief of helping all students reach their full potential and become confident, adaptive and productive life-long learners. When planning for the new Early Learning Center, we focused on creating a physical environment to facilitate student independence, embrace an inclusive philosophy and maximize both student engagement and teacher collaboration.

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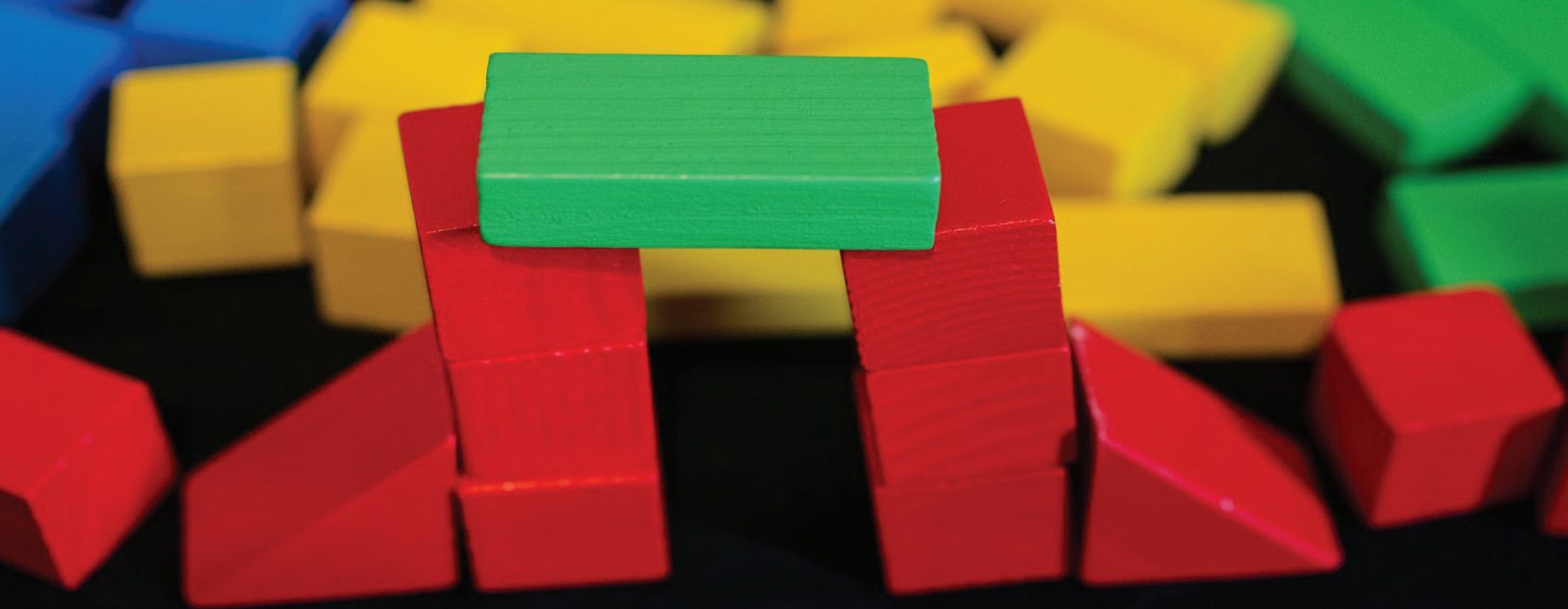
The Benefits of Inclusion

Following completion of the Early Learning Center in 2018, we had four general education classes for students identified with risk factors, and four self-contained classes for students with special needs. We knew that it was time to reflect on our inclusive philosophy and make some changes. We decided that many of the supports that we had in place in the special education program could be delivered in the general education classrooms. My position as a special education teacher changed from teaching in a self-contained classroom to co-teaching with general education teachers in their classrooms.

My co-teachers and I met with students' IEP teams to revisit placement options and to add special education and therapy supports in the general education environment. As a self-contained special education teacher, I prided myself on the structured learning environment, small class

size and high level of supports I was able to provide for my students, but I asked myself "How can I challenge myself to provide these effective supports in a more inclusive environment?" The joint position statement of the Division of Early Childhood and the National Association for the Education of Young Children states that "the desired results of inclusive experiences for children with and without disabilities and their families include a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning to reach their full potential. The defining features of inclusion that can be used to identify high-quality early childhood programs and services are access, participation and supports."

Since we had carefully planned our new spaces, access to the general education classrooms and learning materials



was easy for us. Our play-based curriculum fosters participation and integrated therapies with individualized supports. As I collaborated with my co-teachers, we discussed strategies to model and encourage participation while embracing the ability differences of all of our students. The art of scaffolding support through guided play has helped us provide individualized intervention and monitor student progress. "Inclusion is a natural extension of an early childhood philosophy that embraces diversity and celebrates individual differences... All children can benefit from their ability-diverse peers."

In addition to following best practices for students with special needs, we wanted to increase our family involvement. At least eight times per school year, we plan a family activity. We invite family members on our field trips and plan program-wide parties hosted in our gross motor area so that families can meet each other, visit our learning spaces and participate in learning activities with their children. Welcoming families into our learning spaces helps us make connections with our families that will lead to stronger learning opportunities for our students.

An Environment for Exploration

The physical environment is a critical tool in facilitating student exploration and engagement, especially in young children. Our experience has found that having a classroom with appropriately sized furniture, toilets, sinks and cubbies fosters student independence in daily routines. Ample space for numerous play centers supports development across learning domains. Keeping grade-level classrooms and student support services in close proximity facilitates collaboration between professionals and reduces transition time. The use of natural light and access to outdoor spaces can enhance student engagement.

Our goal in early learning is to set the foundation for student success. Teachers intentionally set up learning environments to facilitate student interactions with

peers, materials and teachers to build physical, social-emotional, language and cognitive skills. Engagement and multisensory materials are purposefully chosen for each center to encourage exploration. Curriculum, materials and schedules are thoughtfully planned to help young learners maintain attention, practice self-regulation strategies and strengthen social-emotional and problem-solving skills.

Providing a Predictable Schedule

Providing a predictable schedule with a combination of large and small group activities, indoor and outdoor opportunities and rich play experiences can help keep students engaged while limiting challenging behaviors. Transition times and daily routines should be taught and practiced in order to help students gain independence and confidence in meeting their own needs. Time for gross motor activities is essential for physical development. The environment should be thoughtfully constructed to encourage movement while in developmental positions such as sitting, kneeling and lying on their stomachs. Carefully monitoring accessibility will ensure all students have access to all learning materials.

The Power of Play

Play is essential for physical, social-emotional, language and cognitive development, so a considerable amount of time should be spent intentionally planning play activities. Evaluating your observations of children's behavior and teacher interactions can result in meaningful and complex learning for children.

Our preschool program chooses one book each month to introduce meaningful themes. Each classroom creates unique learning opportunities based on student interest and engagement in these themes, then materials are intentionally chosen to ignite student learning and development across learning standards. Materials are changed, removed or added based on close teacher observations. Earlier this school year, we read *The Family*

Book by Todd Parr which was selected to help us better connect with our students by learning to celebrate the unique characteristics of our families. Embracing the family theme, we organized specific materials into our learning areas: art and writing, dramatic play, reading, math, sensory and blocks.

The art and writing centers were moved by our family wall, which displays framed pictures of our students' families. Art materials were intentionally selected to allow for expression of cultural diversity. Students were encouraged to draw family portraits or create journal entries of favorite family activities, holidays or celebrations.

Our dramatic play area began as a pretend kitchen that included a high chair and a baby doll. When our students were especially drawn to the baby doll, we followed their interest to change the dramatic play area to a pretend baby nursery. We asked parents to send in baby pictures of our students and created a class book to add a personal element and literacy material to our pretend play area. Our reading center initiated with both fiction and non-fiction books about families. After observing little interest in our original selections, we asked students to share their favorite bedtime stories. We moved our reading area next to the baby doll cribs so the students could read the familiar books to the baby dolls. Student engagement noticeably increased, and we were able to observe and extend many early literacy skills.

We chose "All About Me" Family Counters for our math and sensory area. We had previously found these colorful counters that represented people and pets to be a powerful learning tool. These manipulatives lend themselves to counting, sorting and patterning activities. We introduced the toys in a sensory table with kinetic sand to encourage exploration. Later in the month, we moved the counters to the math area and added sorting trays, colorful houses and a scale in order to offer different experiences with familiar

materials to extend learning. At this time, the pretend baby nursery was still popular, so we changed the sensory table into a bathtub for the pretend babies.

The block center was filled with an assortment of wooden and soft blocks. We took pictures of each student and then laminated the pictures onto smaller blocks to make the activity more personalized. During small group time, we introduced a counting car activity. This hands-on learning set consists of cars labeled with a numeral and corresponding number word. The learning expectation is to count out the matching number of passengers to place into the seats in the car. We extended this activity during small groups to connect the math experience to the number of members in each student's family, which made the learning activity meaningful and motivating for each child.

Introducing learning materials during large and small group times can help to draw attention to these materials and make them more interesting in play centers. After we used the cars in our small group activities, we added them to the block center for students to use during free choice play. The occupational therapist was able to extend their use during her integrated therapy as a fine motor experience, while our speech and language pathologist brought in a dollhouse to target specific language goals with students in their natural environment.

Embracing integrated therapies helps individualize and enrich the learning environment, materials and activities. Intentionally selecting hands-on and engaging materials facilitates engagement in learning activities across domains. Monitoring student attention and interest gives teachers the opportunity to change and adapt materials to maximize learning opportunities. As evident in our learning activities described in our family theme, thoughtful planning and observation leads to powerful learning activities.



Teacher and Student Interactions

While you can see how the physical environment plays a crucial role in child development and exposure to our learning goals, teacher interactions remain fundamental to ensuring student success. Interacting with students during play helps create a comfortable and safe environment, which is optimal for learning. Thoughtful interactions facilitate growth in targeted learning domains and challenge students to extend their learning.

Guided play allows students to remain actively engaged in free choice activities while interacting with adults. The adults can emphasize learning goals and provide scaffolding support to extend the activity slightly beyond the child's current level of skills. Close observations help teachers target individualized learning goals and strategies to strengthen learning through student-chosen activities. Joining in play, making connections and having positive interactions within play is crucial before attempting to target a learning objective.

Scaffolding should be subtle while providing supports to keep students interested and open to teacher questions or suggestions. Teachers can extend learning by commenting on play, providing feedback or suggestions, creating

challenges and helping to solve problems. Modeling acceptance of all students and embracing differences during play facilitates a culture of inclusion and belonging and helps students form meaningful relationships with their teachers and peers. Intentional teacher interactions are the connection that maximizes learning during student chosen activities.

An Ongoing Process

My implementation of best practices will continue to evolve as I participate in professional development opportunities and collaborate with colleagues, but my core value of helping each student reach their full potential will remain in the forefront. Providing a safe, engaging and inclusive environment was the first step in our journey. Forming relationships with families and planning intentional and purposeful interactions with students maximizes learning opportunities. Having fun and connecting with students initiates their paths as life-long learners and I am so proud to be a part of their journeys!

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