



Devereux Early Childhood Assessment Profiles of Teaching and Parent Support

Neli Morales Garcia¹, Brittany Bearss¹, Dawn Davis¹, Helen Raikes¹, Karla Bohl², Katlyn Hoggatt², & Deb Buck²
¹University of Nebraska- Lincoln; ² Educare of Lincoln

Abstract

Educare Lincoln emphasizes social-emotional resiliency of children. Teachers complete the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment-P2 (DECA-P2) fall and spring for each child. In 2020, scores on one subscale, Behavior Concerns, were relatively flat from fall to spring (averaging 50 in both, below the critical concern score of 60). Notably, four children decreased/improved 6 points/or more. This study uses a methodological case study approach to extract rich descriptions of the characteristics and experiences of the 4 children who showed significant reductions in behavior concerns. This poster features the DECA context for Educare and provides profiles of teaching/parent support for these cases of positive behavioral improvement.

Methods

Sampling & Demographics

Researchers first identified children enrolled at Educare Lincoln who had shown significant change scores on the behavior concerns subscale of the DECA-P2 from Fall 2020 to Fall 2021. Inclusion criteria included showing a 6 point or greater decrease in behavior concern scores, having remained in the same classroom over the last year, and having been rated by the same staff member at all timepoints. Cases (n=4) were selected from a list of students who met inclusion criteria; parental consent for data usage was obtained through an ongoing study and collaboration agreement between the site and the University of Nebraska.

Once children were identified the research team recruited the child's primary teacher, DECA rater (if different from teacher), and family engagement specialist. All participants were contacted by email or face-to-face discussion and were briefed at initial point of contact about the nature of the study and what children would be discussed, 10 interviews in total were conducted.

Data Collection

Data was collected via semi-structured, in-person interviews with one participant and one research team member. All interviews were audio recorded for transcription and reference during the data analysis. Participants had choice of time and location of their interview, but most occurred over the scheduled daily naptime. Participants answered questions regarding the amount of time the educator had been working with the child, the child's previous DECA scores and behavior, and their experience with the child's behavior change. While the interviews were semi-structured, researchers followed the flow of conversation to gather organic responses, resulting in rich descriptions of the participants' reflections, thoughts, and feelings regarding the behavior concern change.

Data Analysis

A methodological case study approach was used in the present study to extract contextual, in-depth knowledge of the children's experiences as well as to explore the key characteristics, meanings, and implications of the findings. The approach of this study used thematic analysis posited by Braun and Clarke (2006) as a structure, in which to situate the inquiry of this present research. The specific analytic approach employed in this study was thematic analysis, which was performed and guided by ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). The research team met three times specifically for analysis, researchers compared notes and transcripts and began inductively coding each for significant quotes and preliminary themes. If a discrepancy in themes occurred, it was noted as a negative case to increase triangulation measures. The researchers also (want to) discuss themes and findings with the school director and teachers as an informal member checking process.

Introduction

The identification/support of children who are at risk for future social-emotional challenges is critical during early childhood, more so as COVID-19 is suspected to have changed aspects of school/home life. This study explored change and contextual factors that influence positive score changes in the behavioral concerns subscale of the eDECA-P2 in a sample of ethnically diverse preschoolers over a one-year time period from Fall 2020 to Fall 2021. The Behavior Concerns Subscale is unlike other DECA scales, high scores on this scale are undesirable and indicate an area of need. Therefore, T-scores of 60 or above are considered an area of need while T-scores less than 60 are characterized as typical.

Study Questions:

1. How do DECA behavior concerns scores change fall to spring in a pre-k sample?
2. What classroom and other factors associate with improvement (decreasing scores) in four cases?

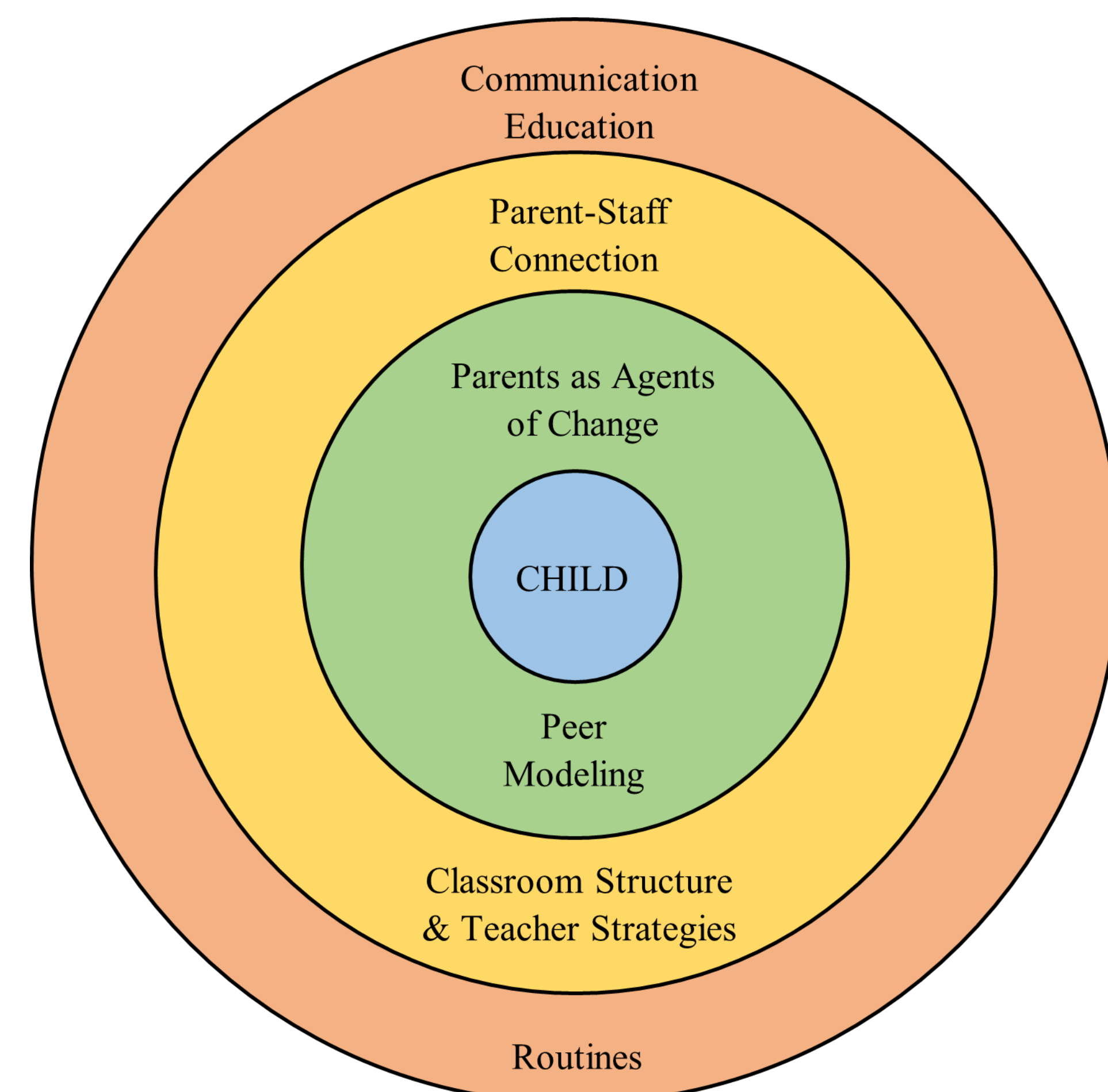
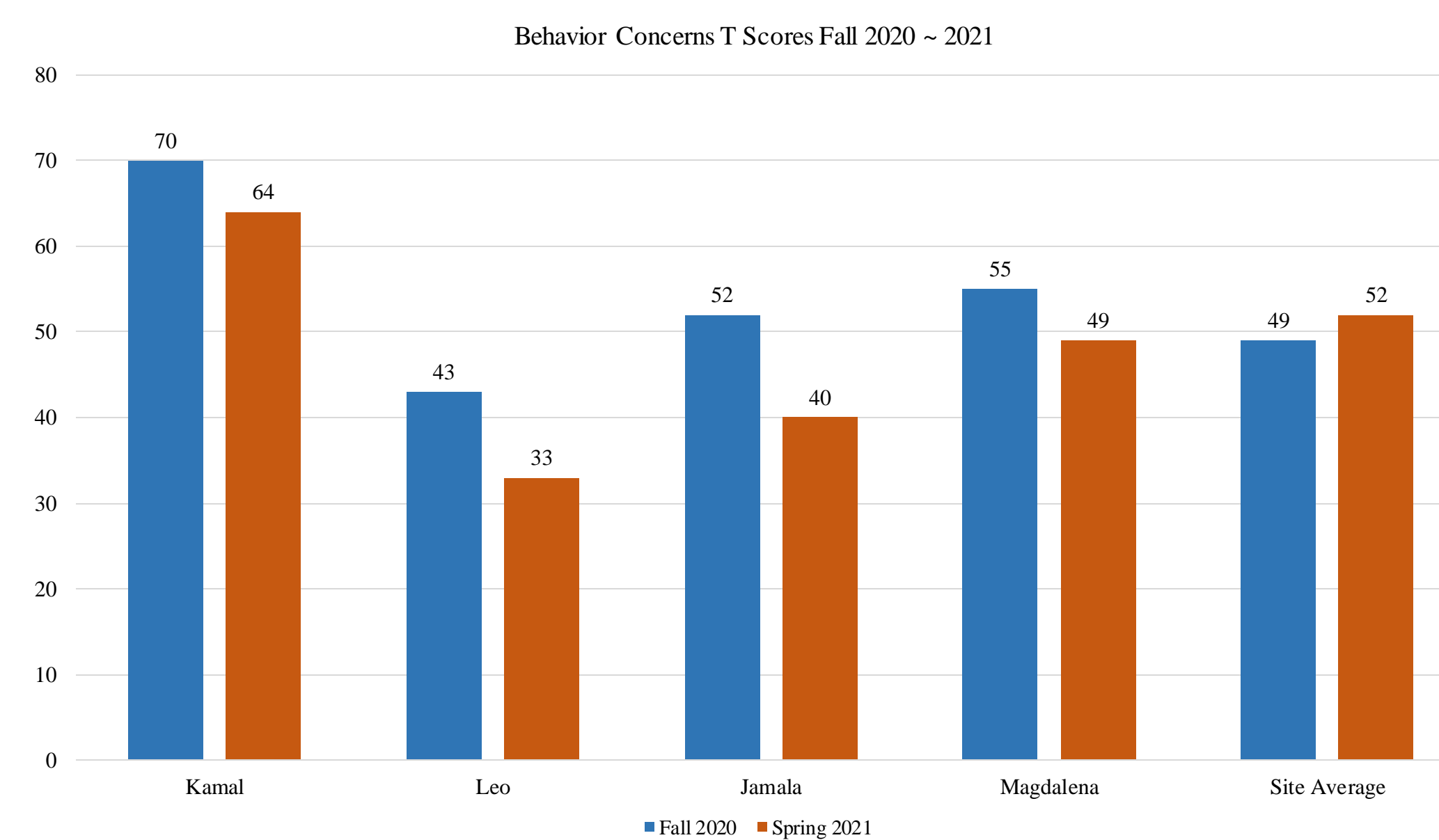


Figure 1: A conceptual model of emergent themes

Findings & Discussion

Group analysis sessions revealed seven themes which included, *parents as agents of change, peer modeling, parent-staff connection, classroom structure and teacher strategies, communication education and routines*. Figure 1 displays the themes situated in a typical ecological systems theory model, with the child in the center and the concentric circles representing various levels of connection to the child. The green ring shows the child's direct environment, who they interact with most days; the yellow ring entails the social mesosystem, where the included agents come together in benefit of the child, but the child is not directly involved. Lastly, the outermost ring displays broad sweeping concepts that influence the child.

Primary findings:

1. Schools having a social emotional content concentration across services (classroom structure and related services) appear to influence decreasing behavior concerns
2. Active parent engagement and alignment of communication and behavior goals assisted parents and teachers in finding what resources were best for each child
3. Resources such as increased routines and communication education can be implemented at both school and home allowing for the possibility of decreased behavior concerns
4. Some children appear to thrive being in environments where they have unstructured support (peer mentoring) alongside structured social emotional growth opportunities found in classrooms and at home.

Strategies teachers reported using primarily Conscious Discipline strategies and therefore future research could further investigate its impact on behavior concerns in this population. Along with this, with peer modeling/mentoring being a large influence, future research should explore the impact of the split-age classroom structure via direct observation. Finally, limitations of this study were that educator interviews and child DECA scores were the only data included. This line of research could benefit greatly by assessing parent eDECAs and parent interviews.

This results of this study have implications for educators such that the importance of connections with both children and parents is pivotal to a child's growth. Additionally, this study reflects the resilience teachers and parents have when working through challenging behavior and validates all the hard work the educators do every day to help children thrive.

Vignettes

Kamal: English-Speaking, Middle-Eastern Male w/ IEP

- **6-point score change** ~ Age: 4years, 8months
- Previously non-verbal, family speaks Kurdish at home
- **Major influential factors:** increasing regular school attendance, peer modeling, consistent home & school routine, teacher focus on Conscious Discipline strategies, and IEP goal alignment
- *Child's mother set up IEP meeting, discussed feeling exhausted/defeated with the behavior challenges. Mom was open to hearing the staff and was receptive to the materials shared with her. Staff site the book "Schubert's Big Voice" as being a contributor in the child learning to communicate his feelings and frustrations. No current behavior concerns were reported.*

Leo: Russian-Speaking, White Male, No IEP

- **9-point score change** ~ Age: 4years, 8months
- Previously withdrawn from peers & was speaking Russian exclusively
- **Major influential factors:** peer modeling, calm safe place, teacher focus on social-emotional learning, consistent home & school routine
- *Teachers cite split age classroom structure, where half of the class is one year older than the others, as having a significant influence. This child observed peers behaviors and received peer encouragement to use his words to express his feelings. Child's language capacity has grown significantly, is now considered bilingual with English-speaking at school and Russian-speaking at home. No current behavior concerns were reported.*

Magdalena: Bilingual (English/Spanish), White Female w/ IEP

- **6-point score change** ~ Age 4years 11months
- Previously withdrawn from peers & did not speak with others in English or Spanish
- **Major influential factors:** speech language pathologist, positive peer/teacher relationships, consistent home & school routine and home stability
- *Staff site that the speech pathologist played a significant influence on helping this child communicate with staff and peers. Child's mother discussed feelings of concern with staff about behavior challenges. No current behavior concerns were reported.*

Jamala: English-Speaking, Arab Female, No IEP

- **12-point score change** ~ Age 5years 0months
- Previously withdrawn from peers, cried all day at school, trouble managing emotions
- **Major influential factors:** positive peer/teacher relationships, consistent home & school routine, teacher focus on Conscious Discipline strategies
- *Child's mother discussed feelings of concern with staff about behavior challenges. Mother reached out to school staff for support in addressing behavior challenges. Staff site using labels to identify emotions as being a contributor in the child learning to communicate her feelings. No current behavior concerns were reported.*