

Early Childhood Learning podcast - Episode 2: Early Learning Conversations: From Research to Practice Part 1

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JUDI ROSSABI, HOST

Thank you for tuning in and welcome. This podcast is brought to you by SERVE at UNC Greensboro. We have over three decades of experience providing high quality research, evaluation, and customized support that drives positive educational outcomes for all learners.

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ROSSABI

Permeating everything we do is our commitment to engaging collaboratively with our clients to do high quality, important and useful work. I'm Judi Rossabi, a communications specialist for SERVE and I will be your host today. This will be the second episode in a multi-episode series on early learning. I'm here with Carla Garrett, early childhood specialist for the Region 6 Comprehensive Center, which you will hear referred to as RC6 during our podcast.

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ROSSABI

Joining Carla in a rich discussion is Dr. Sharon Ritchie, former director of FirstSchool at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at UNC, and Dr. Eva Phillips, an early learning consultant who is known for her expertise in early childhood development, curriculum, and instruction. I spoke with Carla and the team about the recent cohort that completed the Preschool–Third Grade Distinguished Leadership Institute and asked them to share with us what that program entails.

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ROSSABI

Let's listen in on their discussion.

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CARLA GARRETT

Judi, thanks for that introduction. We're really proud of the work we've been doing together and are excited to share with the listeners. Sharon, Eva, and I have worked together on a variety of local, state, and national projects over the last 20 plus years, all of which have been focused on early learning, effective practices based on the most current research, and the importance of alignment from the preschool years through the early grades.

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GARRETT

We have worked with people representing a variety of roles to strengthen their knowledge of child development and current research, and its implication on learning in the early years. In fact, the preschool to third grade Distinguished Leadership Institute is focused on the uniqueness of the early childhood years and ensuring equitable access to high quality early learning environments. Our collective passion is to provide the most effective and equitable experiences for each and every young child.

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GARRETT

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Between the three of us, believe it or not, we have over 110 years of experience. We are focused on and committed to providing support and resources to ensure school policies, practices, and strategies for our youngest learners encompass what research and data tell us is essential to successful development and learning. Eva, we know that the key to this important work is relationships, relationships, and more relationships.

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GARRETT

Eva, could you talk about how the relationships we have built with educators over time have strengthened our work?

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EVA PHILLIPS

Well, Carla, as we know, everything happens within the context of relationships and these long-term authentic connections we've made over the years provide the foundation for all we do. We have worked with and learned from some amazing educators over these years.

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PHILLIPS

Some of them have been doing this work with us since 2007, and the trust they have in us and in each other has really made the difference in the impact we've been able to see through our projects.

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PHILLIPS

And this project we're talking about today is no exception. One of the main goals of any work that we've done together has been to build, strengthen and maintain positive and supportive relationships with each other.

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PHILLIPS

And because of this, we have a large and dedicated network of colleagues and friends who are ready and willing to do the work alongside us.

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PHILLIPS

So, Carla, you know that it has been through your work and the support of the SERVE Region 6 Comprehensive Center that we've been able to provide some powerful professional development opportunities and resources to our institute participants, as well as others across the region.

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PHILLIPS

It'd be great if you could share a little about your role with RC6, and how this unique opportunity to support state and local education agencies came about.

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GARRETT

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Of course, Eva, I'm happy to share. My role at RC6 as an Early Childhood Program Specialist is to provide support, technical assistance and policy guidance to state and local education agencies, particularly around the preschool to grade three continuum.

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GARRETT

When I began in this role at RC6, leadership provided me with an opportunity to really think about the why around early learning from preschool to grade three, and to think about young children and what type of project we could design to improve experiences for them in a meaningful way.

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GARRETT

First thoughts were to surround myself with good people. So that started with the two of you. Then, of course, we tapped into all those relationships you mentioned earlier, Eva, to pull in a group of early learning leaders representing preschool through the early grades across the state so that we would be sure to listen to the voices of the practitioners.

00:05:11:05 - 00:05:29:02

GARRETT

Sharon, we had just started talking about how to support early childhood educators through RC6 when the pandemic hit. I remember some really important and tough conversations we had with many of our colleagues, and these conversations shifted our thinking in profound ways. Can you share how the pandemic impacted our work?

00:05:29:04 - 00:05:59:03

SHARON RITCHIE

Sure, Carla, at the beginning of the pandemic, the conversations we had with many of our colleagues were pretty alarming. We saw such a shift in their energy and their emotional stability because the trauma they and their students were experiencing was just too overwhelming. They are and continue to be the best of the best and losing them to education would be a significant detriment to the children and families they serve, as well as the field in general.

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RITCHIE

At that point, it seemed on a positive note that educators were presented with an urgent call and a unique opportunity to ensure that school policies, practices and strategies for our youngest learners encompass what research and data tell us is essential to their successful development and learning. It was a genuine opportunity to utilize and validate their knowledge and experience.

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RITCHIE

We had to be responsive to them and to their colleagues and take advantage of the powerful opportunity offered by the pandemic that included substantial funding and support at state and federal levels to hit the reset button.

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PHILLIPS

Sharon, we have always heard you say, “what if we actually used research to guide our practice?” And I think we can say that it’s even more important than ever in response to the trauma of the pandemic, that we really try to help folks do this. Can you say more about that and how we are using this idea in our work?

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RITCHIE

So not only to guide our practice, but to provide support as people learn to articulate the research so they can effectively advocate for improved practice.

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RITCHIE

Years of research have provided us with many of the policies and practices that best promote the learning and development of young children. We look to the good work that has already been done to ensure that the knowledge, skill, and expertise is recognized, illuminated, and prioritized. Equally, we make the most of new, innovative, and relevant knowledge as it becomes available to us.

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RITCHIE

The Covid 19 pandemic provided the impetus for us to make explicit the responsibility of education professionals to broaden their repertoires and hone their skills to create schools and classrooms in which all children maximize their potential.

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RITCHIE

U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona emphasized the need and opportunity to reimagine education and encouraged all education leaders and stakeholders to leave behind the practices that do not work in education and to use it to heal and learn and grow together.

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RITCHIE

We built upon the research on trauma informed practices, put an intentional focus on equity, emphasized supportive relationships, and used knowledge of child development and brain research as the basis for improving the school experiences of each and every child. And therefore, we knew that equity had to be central to this work. Because of Carla and her work with the RC6, we had the opportunity to create a project to support LEAs and SEAs to ensure equitable and positive school experiences for young children.

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GARRETT

And it was indeed impactful to us all as we heard Secretary Cardona and a variety of national educational leaders encouraging schools to use this opportunity to make real changes in our schools. Leadership at SERVE gave us the opportunity to design an early childhood project based on what we thought was needed by using the research and by listening to the voices of the practitioners.

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GARRETT

Not only did leadership provide this opportunity; they also provided the gifts of support and time to think about and reflect upon what should happen for young children. What a delight it was to be able to brainstorm and work with amazing educators to plan what eventually evolved into this Preschool–3rd Grade Distinguished Leadership Institute. Building on our past relationships, we brought together a group of early learning professionals who offered their expertise.

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GARRETT

They offered their ideas and their support, which helped us to develop and implement useful and relevant professional resources for them and others to use in their settings. These educators held a variety of roles across the preschool to third grade continuum—teachers, directors, school administrators, and district level staff. We asked them tough questions to help us think about what we should do to support the early learning field.

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GARRETT

We spent hours brainstorming and attempting to answer challenging questions. One example was “what keeps you up at night” in relation to young children? Some of the things they shared included the overemphasis on literacy and testing, and the lack of focus on children's social emotional development, which is so important in the midst of the pandemic, the use of developmentally inappropriate and ineffective instructional practices, the overuse of technology, and the lack of playful learning opportunities, as well as the learning loss, and the lack of socialization that occurred for so many as a result of the pandemic.

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GARRETT

And finally, they talked about the diminished valuing of teachers’ expertise and the increasing lack of trust in teachers. We also asked them to consider if we had a magic wand and could really impact change for state and local agencies, what would it look like? What made this so exciting is that these conversations allowed us to utilize a variety of good minds to determine the issues behind the supporting research and articulate the things that needed attention and support, which gave us a direction for change.

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GARRETT

So, what evolved first, from this collaborative work, was the development of our white paper, “Children Come First: Ensuring School Policies, Practices and Strategies Lead to Positive 3rd Grade Outcomes.” Our listeners can find a copy of the complete paper, as well as an executive summary in the show notes. Over time, we've also created several briefs, 11 so far, to accompany the white paper in order to expand on the research.

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GARRETT

So, Sharon, could you talk about some of the research that led to the white paper and the briefs?

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00:11:56:09 - 00:12:29:07

RITCHIE

We looked for the research that would catch the attention and engagement of people who had not had access to information and thinking that could help them understand the vital nature of a good start. This included brain research, child development, play, executive function, self-regulation, and oral language development. Brain research is really our best friend. It is powerful and clearly demonstrates that it is imperative that we take advantage of the very rich preschool to third grade period.

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RITCHIE

In actuality, brain development peaks between the ages of two and three, but does not really drop off until age ten. This makes it essential that schools must optimize the preschool to third grade period. Equally important is becoming knowledgeable and conversant in child development. To teach young children well involves ensuring they experience a child centered, play based, high quality learning environment focused on supporting all their developmental needs—social, emotional, cognitive, and physical.

00:13:05:06 - 00:13:59:08

RITCHIE

This knowledge is instrumental in preparing the learning environment, designing learning experiences, and interacting effectively and productively with children. Research also tells us that play is an essential part of children's healthy growth and development. Play helps children increase their memory, critical thinking skills, self-regulation, social skills, oral language skills, literacy skills, mathematical and problem solving skills, and lays the foundation for all academic learning. In a time when there is so much pressure on teachers past the preschool years to focus on math and literacy, it is critical that knowledge of the value of play and its contributions to children's growth and development become widespread and utilized.

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RITCHIE

Children whose voices are suppressed when the words of the teacher prevail and the thoughts, interests, and feelings of children are not given the attention that helps develop the positive self-efficacy and esteem that comes when people listen to and care about what they have to say. Without a strong voice, used to convey who they are and what they know and care about, it will be difficult for them to become confident, and subsequently powerful, people in this world.

00:14:31:15 - 00:14:56:09

RITCHIE

The development of executive function supports the ability of children to manage themselves and find and use resources in order to achieve goals. An important aspect of executive function is self-regulation, which is developed in the prefrontal cortex of the brain and must be practiced regularly in order to optimize its growth and increased function.

00:14:56:10 - 00:15:33:06

RITCHIE

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Children in preschool spend their days negotiating space, materials, and relationships, usually in the course of play, and all of these help children practice self-regulation. However, as children move into the elementary years, teacher control increases dramatically, and instead of children regulating themselves, they are more often regulated by teachers. This research is just a sample of the base that supports the work with young children, and is available in even greater detail on the Region 6 website.

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ROSSABI

Thank you, Carla, Sharon, and Eva for sharing your insights with us today. We hope our listeners have enjoyed this conversation, which we plan to continue in episode two of “Early Learning Conversations.”

00:15:47:00 - 00:16:00:02

ROSSABI

For more information on our distinguished guests and early childhood, visit the Podcast Show Notes page at www.serve.org/podcast-central.

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ROSSABI

Stay tuned for more information. From all of us at SERVE to all of you. Thank you for spending this time with us. All podcasts are archived and can be found on SERVE’s website at www.serve.org.