

Early Childhood Learning podcast - Episode 3: Early Learning Conversations: From Research to Practice Part 2

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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 third episode in a multi-episode series on early learning. I'm here with Carla Garrett, early childhood specialist for the Region 6 Comprehensive Center, 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.

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ROSSABI

We will continue the discussion from Early Learning Conversations episode one as we lead off with Dr. Eva Phillips sharing the planning process for the Early Childhood research team.

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EVA PHILLIPS

When we had completed the white paper, then our planning shifted to what are we going to do with it? And how do we want to share this and with whom? And how can we continue to shine an even brighter light on the importance of the preschool through third grade years?

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PHILLIPS

Our previous work together included successful professional development projects, so of course we built on those successes as well as the lessons learned throughout those projects, as we began to plan for the preschool through third grade leadership professional development initiative. And, as Carla has said, leadership at the RC6 was very much in favor of us developing and implementing a professional development model that would support educators and community members throughout our state.

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PHILLIPS

We used the white paper as the basis for the content of this ten-month institute, including both monthly virtual sessions, as well as two to three in-person days together, which were held in the middle of our state. Along with additional homework experiences, such as readings and trying out new strategies within their own settings, participants could earn up to 100 contact hours to use for continuing education credits upon completion.

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PHILLIPS

Of course, in our previous projects, we had always put a focus on the importance of building relationships. Yet in some of those past projects, we had not spent as much time intentionally

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developing ongoing cohorts of participants. We realized how important this piece of the big picture was to the success and the sustainability of any initiatives that may evolve from the work; therefore, we designed this institute using a cohort model.

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PHILLIPS

It was really the best way for us to help participants to keep this work at the forefront of their thinking, and for them to contribute to and benefit from the relationships they were building across and within their community efforts.

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PHILLIPS

Something else we were cognizant of is that much of the work related to alignment and continuity in preschool through third grade programs has been centered around the policies that govern this continuum and responding to and advocating for changes in policies that, in many ways hinder the alignment between and among the early care and education system, and the early elementary system.

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PHILLIPS

Leaders across the nation have for years been wrestling with how to shift policy more toward using the research on child growth and development that Sharon talked about, to improve the school experiences of our young children, especially when planning, choosing, implementing curriculum, instruction and assessment strategies. For our institute we certainly consider the existing policies and how they impact those years. But in addition, we focus on practice. What can educators and community members actually do that will help shift the practices found in our early learning environments, and how can we respond to those policies in effective ways?

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PHILLIPS

The content of the Institute is guided by the white paper. We focus on a variety of topics, all of those that Sharon mentioned earlier, and we work really hard to integrate the topics in relevant ways. Because we know how important it is, we provide and model effective instructional practices for adult learners, that they can then transfer to the young children with whom they work.

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PHILLIPS

And I guess the last piece of the institute model that I want to share is that, as we've mentioned several times and will continue to do so, we spend a lot of time building and strengthening relationships. We provide a variety of opportunities for participants to get to know each other, and at the same time, we are working hard to build the human capacity of individual participants. And we also put much emphasis on peer relationships as well as our mentoring relationships with our folks.

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PHILLIPS

One of our essential strategies is the development of communities of practice over the long term, and we have continued to build up the notion of community of practice over time and have watched these groups grow and change in so many amazing ways over these past three years.

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PHILLIPS

During our times together, participants have dedicated times to talk with each other about what is working in their communities, as well as what areas need improvement. And then these groups work together both in person and virtually, to develop action plans.

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PHILLIPS

Carla, can you talk about how the cohorts and the communities of practice have evolved over time and also share a little bit about how action plans are developed and supported?

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CARLA GARRETT

I can do that. Eva. So, we just completed our third cohort of participants, and we're looking forward to starting cohort number four in August. The way our cohort model works has evolved over time. We decided to focus on the Community of Practice model for a couple of reasons.

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GARRETT

One, they are responsive to individual needs and perspectives, and two, they provide connections that are applicable and useful to our roles. The Distinguished Leadership Institute is focused on building a community of practitioners to improve experiences for preschool to third grade children, and all those supporting their education and development.

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GARRETT

"All those" for us so far includes representation from LEAs, SEAs, state agencies, Head Start, Smart Start, private childcare and more to come. We encourage communities of practice to scale up over time as they think about adding new members, and we encourage them to be intentional to ensure diverse roles are present, spanning the preschool to grade three continuum.

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GARRETT

We ask questions like who's at the table and who's missing? Is there representation from preschool as well as the early grades. Are principals, district level staff, teachers, as well as community members included? Intentional invites are extended to join the work, and we encourage cohort members to stay involved and connected with their communities of practice as we move from one year to the next.

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GARRETT

We have a number of cohort members from the very beginning in cohort one who remain engaged, excited and involved. That relationship building truly makes all the difference.

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GARRETT

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We all know that the content in this Distinguished Leadership Institute is extremely important. Learning and growing together in a collaborative way is also important. And there's a next step, a really important next step.

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GARRETT

What do we do with all this information, with this new knowledge, and why does it matter? One of our favorite components of the institute is the requirement to develop an action plan. We feel like a unique part of this work, as we are learning and growing together, is the opportunity to reflect and think about next steps. How will we take next steps to make changes impacting and supporting the preschool to third grade continuum?

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GARRETT

We encourage members to think about what interests them and to think about data and needs in the community. Based on this information, what should be included in the action plan? Once action plans are developed and submitted, we schedule one-on-one mentoring time to discuss. We listen and reflect, share ideas and resources to support the plans. I will emphasize that this is one of our favorite parts in leading this work.

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GARRETT

This one-on-one time is powerful, and we love our follow up meetings to continue providing support. Success stories are the best. Sharon, what else makes our work unique?

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SHARON RITCHIE

Well, you know, we've seen so many struggles to make these preschool through third grade efforts really come to fruition, and we had to think really hard about what else we thought we should do to make sure that could happen. So, our guiding principles center on educational equity, which we define as each child receiving what they need in order to develop their full academic and social potential.

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RITCHIE

Using this definition, we work to ensure equally positive outcomes for all children, including children experiencing poverty, by interrupting inequitable practices and cultivating the strengths and assets of children and families. We work to grow and sustain diverse, authentic, respectful, and trusting relationships with stakeholders to guide and support their implementation efforts. Specifically, we address the universal needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy.

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RITCHIE

Relatedness enables individuals to interact effectively with others to give and accept responsibility to cooperate, to have compassion, and to show respect. These abilities enable people to function as productive members of a community. Competent people experience and recognize success and have opportunities to demonstrate their skill and expertise. And autonomous people know they can affect change and impact decisions.

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RITCHIE

This is true for children and adults, and we think of it throughout our work as a parallel process in which children, and adults at all levels can thrive in an environment where individual needs can only be met if the needs of all are also met. This necessitates environments that are culturally responsive and support growth for adults and children alike, where people feel safe and valued.

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RITCHIE

Competence and autonomy develop through relationships based on genuine trust and respect, and excellence is believed possible for each individual and supported to become a reality. Central to parallel process is a mindset of continuous improvement and a use of collaborative inquiry. Both children and adults who operate with the mindset of continuous improvement can identify success and know that it happens due to their hard work.

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RITCHIE

The overall goal of using collaborative inquiry is to increase curiosity, acknowledge competence and promote openness and a willingness to share.

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GARRETT

Sharon, our project is unique for sure. We certainly hit the reset button as we decided to focus on practices that work in education, the outcomes we are seeing for this project are highlighting success. These outcomes are found within the communities of practice. The boots on the ground work— where groups of people have come together to make change, and we are seeing some of those changes come to fruition.

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GARRETT

Here are some examples. Preschool to kindergarten community transition planning, where collaboration includes LEAs, Head Start, private childcare, families, and other early learning partners, and some of these communities have worked together to identify funds to support early childhood. Next, the addition of home visits in kindergarten and professional development provided for principals focused on brain research, play and best practices. As we know, many principals don't have a background in early childhood.

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GARRETT

And a couple more examples like knowledge to change the practice of suspending kindergarten students, and alignment specifically around professional development, and support for teachers on brain development and play in kindergarten extending into first grade that have had members present from cohort one to the current time.

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GARRETT

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In Richmond County, a central office position changed from K-12 English Language Arts Director to PreK-5 Director, and they used ESSER funds to support a summer bridge program for children with no experience transitioning to kindergarten. And finally, they focused on building relationships between and among preschool and kindergarten teachers.

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GARRETT

In Guilford County, they developed a pilot between LEA and private childcare focused on transitions from preschool to kindergarten. They also developed an amazing website and used social media Facebook for families, community members, and educators to access valuable information on transitions.

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GARRETT

I would also like to mention how we build human capacity, along with increasing knowledge and building relationships. Participants in our cohorts have experienced career advancement and changes, as well as opportunities to add to resumes and CV's, such as opportunities to share knowledge and experiences at the state and national levels, like the National ESEA Conference, and the National Homeless Education Conference.

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GARRETT

Of course, along with success stories, we've had challenges as well. A few examples include striking the balance between what we know about how young children learn and grow vs. local, state, and federal mandates.

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GARRETT

For example, how do you incorporate time for play when you have a required 90-minute literacy block? In addition, we are all too familiar with principals and other leaders with little or no early childhood education or experience. And of course, there's time and funding. Although, we have a fabulous resource to help educators think about funding for early childhood, which we will mention in a few moments.

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GARRETT

So, as you've heard, we've experienced challenges. However, what we know is there is a statewide and a national interest in and demand for long term professional development that involves local communities, a practice of early learning leaders, diverse in ethnicity, backgrounds, and roles, focused on promoting and strengthening the preschool to third grade continuum. We are here to meet that interest and that demand.

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GARRETT

In fact, this project has been scaling up over the years, and the impact of the work is growing, as you've heard. And that's true across our state, all the way from the mountains in Asheville to the shores in

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Kitty Hawk. As far as the future is concerned, we are preparing for cohort four now. We've had a couple of information sessions and will congratulate our new official cohort for members soon. We currently have close to 50 early learning leaders who have shown interest in joining us. I'll add that we are hopeful to expand this work into other states.

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GARRETT

To recap, the information we've shared today about the RC6 Early Childhood project is focused on the Preschool to 3rd Grade Distinguished Leadership Institute, which is focused on ensuring equitable access to high quality early learning environments for all children.

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GARRETT

Educators at all levels need to have a solid understanding of one - child development from ages 3 to 8, two - the content of the curriculum in all developmental areas, and three - the process of learning.

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GARRETT

This understanding translates into an integrated approach to instruction and classroom practice. Many conventional dichotomies, such as play vs. academic rigor, teacher led instruction vs. learner driven exploration, inferential learning vs. direct instruction, breadth vs. depth, and a focus on head, intellectual concepts and skills, vs. heart.

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GARRETT

Social emotional development, engagement and passion need to become synergies rather than choices or compromises. Now we would like to add final thoughts to consider. Sharon, start us off.

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RITCHIE

As you have heard, we have many ideas that guide our work. One in particular is the recognition that less is more. We have too often seen people overwhelmed by the enormity of the task of full preschool to third grade implementation, and when trying to do too much, usually results in surface responses, too often giving up. We specifically support our teams to choose doable goals and to do them well.

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RITCHIE

It is after success has been met in one area that we can then help them make efforts to enhance that effort or expand their scope. We surely advise you to do the same. How about you Eva?

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PHILLIPS

What I really value in this work are the relationships we've built and are continuing to build over time. We say it often, so I'll say it again by paraphrasing a well-respected pediatrician and director of the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard, Jack Shonkoff, who says that without supportive

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relationships, there is no development, that young children experience their world as an environment of relationships. And these relationships affect all aspects of their development.

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PHILLIPS

Nurturing and stable relationships with caring adults are essential to healthy human development and all of this is true for adults as well.

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PHILLIPS

Of course, working with you two amazing folks, Carla, and Sharon, is one of the highlights of this work for me. Each of us brings different strengths to this team, and I believe that is one of the reasons we've been so successful. We continuously learn from each other and yes, we have fun together as well. We also work hard to provide opportunities for fun for our participants too. This is important work and without the strong relationships, change just won't happen.

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PHILLIPS

Carla, wrap things up for us.

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GARRETT

I could not agree more with Sharon and with Eva. Big things have small beginnings and as you've heard throughout the podcast, relationships are key. I am going to end with the why we do this work. The children who would benefit the most from high quality early learning experiences are those least likely to get it. Young children, particularly those who are overburdened and under-resourced, need to have environments where they are engaged in meaningful learning experiences.

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GARRETT

In addition to what we discussed today, what do we need to consider? Equity begins with resources. All children deserve experiences that meet the full range of their developmental needs. We must use multiple funding sources to work towards the goal of ensuring equitable access to these high-quality early learning environments.

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GARRETT

Where can you learn more about these resources? Take a look at our RC6 white paper, "Capturing the Opportunity: How ESSA Can Elevate our Youngest Learners," and tune in to our next Early Childhood podcast.

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ROSSABI

Thank you, Carla, Sharon, and Eva, for sharing your insights with us. We hope our listeners have enjoyed this conversation, which resulted in two amazing podcasts filled with valuable information on this important topic. For more information on our distinguished guests and early childhood, visit the

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podcast show notes page at www.serve.org/podcast-central. In our next episode in this series, we will feature a conversation with Carla and her colleague, Danielle Ewen.

00:20:08:00 - 00:20:44:02

ROSSABI

We will hear more about the research being done in the preschool to third grade education arena. Danielle is a policy and strategy consultant with Sixth Street Associates, serving clients including philanthropic organizations, state and national advocacy organizations, and policy and research groups. All podcasts are archived and can be found on SERVE's website at www.serve.org. Stay tuned for more information. From all of us at SERVE to all of you, thank you for spending this time with us.