The SRI Homeroom – Episode 4

[Sounds of a students talking in a high school hallway]

[A school bell rings]

[A digital chime rings three times, with progressively higher pitch]

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Welcome to the SRI Homeroom. Today, can early childhood data be a lever for equity?

[Theme music fades in]

Howard Morrison:

There are so many parents and families out there that are just wanting to do the best for their kids that are just struggling, and so that really drives me because I want to make a stronger early childhood system for them to be able to access and have successful kids that are thriving.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Leveraging data to support young children and families, today, on the SRI Homeroom. Welcome in.

[Theme music fades out]

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Hello and welcome to the SRI Homeroom. I'm Kori Hamilton Biagas, and today, I'm so happy to be joined by Howard Morrison. Howard is a national leader in early childhood education systems and data use. Welcome, Howard.

Howard Morrison:

Hey, Kori. Great to be here.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

So I definitely want to talk to you about your work with the DaSy Center, which is a national technical assistance center that supports states in using data to improve both outcomes and programs for young children with disabilities and their families.

But first, let's start big. So tell me, what is the problem that you're trying to solve in your work?

Howard Morrison:

Yeah, so I think one of the biggest issues is that we really have a fragmented early childhood care and education system within states and territories. And so what that really means is there's early childhood care and education programs in different state agencies. So whether that's Health and Human Services, the Department of Education, Social Services, specific health agencies, all those programs are ran and implemented in different state agencies in many places. Not everywhere. There are some states that are moving towards more coordinated early childhood agencies, but that's a big challenge, really.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

So there's no consistency in how the services are being provided or who is providing the services, and so that really breaks up how kids are receiving, if we know who is receiving services, the data that's being collected on these kiddos, the way the data is being collected on kiddos, it's interrupting those kinds of things?

Howard Morrison:

Yeah, it's disconnected. It makes it really hard for parents because parents are trying to enroll their kids in programs, and they're having to go to four different agencies, potentially, trying to find the right services for their child. And that makes it hard. And so layering on this programs being in different state agencies, you also have data systems that are in different state agencies. And some of them talk to each other, and some of them do not. And so state program administrators that are trying to make decisions for kids and families across their state makes it challenging when you're looking at that from a subset of data that's not connected with kind of a holistic view of all of the kids that are within the state that could be accessing programs and services and making the best decisions for those families.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

So would it be something like if my cardiologist has a medical record, my primary care doctor has a medical record, my orthopedic doctor has a medical record, but those medical records are not connected to one another, and so none of them have a holistic understanding of what I'm going through because they each have just their version or their snapshot of my medical history?

Howard Morrison:

Right, 100%. And maybe that information doesn't correlate to the next program, and the same kind of with the early childhood programs. If they're in a birth to three program and then they're going into pre-K or kindergarten, sometimes those records aren't getting to the pre-K program or the kindergarten program. And so there's a big disconnect in those services.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

And that just impacts the child and the families and what they have access to, and it creates a barrier that shouldn't have to be there in some ways, right?

Howard Morrison:

Oh, absolutely, absolutely.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

So then what are you working on to help address or solve this sort of problem? Where do you fit in in navigating a solution around this because it sounds like a very big challenge?

Howard Morrison:

Yeah, it is a big challenge. So ultimately, there's multiple approaches that I'm taking, that colleagues at SRI are taking in addressing this. And some of this is through developing resources for states to use and leverage, some of it's creating learning communities or working groups for states to join and participate to hear and learn from each other and be able to share and lift up states that are doing things well and say, "Oh, this is working well here. These are some of the best practices and recommendations, but also, this isn't working and this is kind of a struggle for us."

And sometimes that's just as critical for other states to hear because they want to hear what's happening in the trenches, really. What's your biggest challenge, how did you overcome it, how we might be able to learn something from that and gain a little bit of insight? So you might have states or territories that are strong in a certain area but want to learn from another state in a different specific area. So it might be around data systems and data linking and data integration. And they might have a piece of that done really well, but they might have other areas they could improve upon.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

So one of your biggest roles is a connector to connect states. So it's like, we went through this so you don't have to, or here are some of the possibilities that we're exploring. If you all seem a little farther along, here's what we've been thinking about. What have you been thinking about? And creating those opportunities for them to connect with each other, talk to each other, learn from each other and not keep doing things in isolation.

Howard Morrison:

Right. You know how I talked earlier about the system being so fragmented? Well, let's talk about how we can be more connected. And so who are the people that you need to connect to to help improve and streamline some of those processes and improve upon that work? So whether that's within your team, within your agency... It could be different partners or departments within your agency, it could be cross-agency, and are there existing cross-agency work groups or councils that you might be able to leverage to bring this work up or to help facilitate that change?

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

So other than serving as a connector and a collaborator, what other kinds of ways do you and the DaSy Center provide support to states? What are some of the other tools, resources, strategies, other ways that you can do that?

Howard Morrison:

Yeah. So right now, I'm working with a team that have developed an equity product, and it's really looking at embedding equity throughout a data inquiry cycle, so thinking about what are some best strategies and approaches that a state administrator, a state lead, state staff could take at different steps within that process. And that-

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

What's a data inquiry cycle?

Howard Morrison:

So a data inquiry cycle is thinking about the planning and design for the data collection, the actual data collection, so the analysis and interpretation of that data, the reporting of that data, the dissemination of that data. And then the biggest piece is the taking action of that data. States will often really focus on the planning of the collection and some of the analysis interpretation, but we really want to get to that piece where they're actually taking action, talking with their state teams about

what are they seeing when they look at the data. Are they seeing any inequities about children that are accessing services, and how does that look when it's being broken out by race, ethnicity? And what community partners do we need to bring in to have those conversations to get deeper into the story about what's actually happening? And so the product is really a tool for states to take and be able to meet with their teams and say, "Oh, we could take this kind of tip in consideration and integrate that into our daily practice."

We might be able to also work with our research and evaluation team and think about how we might use these considerations and recommendations when we're interpreting it and analyzing our data. Also, we might work with a reporting team in thinking about how might we be able to report on this so it's more clear for the individuals that are going to be using this data. Is it going to be geared towards state administrators or policymakers, or is this going to be for regional or local education agencies or maybe parents? And those are completely different views and different perspectives and need to have those kinds of considerations and thought that's put into it to make that usable and to be able to think about what those actions could be taken are going to differ depending on that audience.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Right. So the idea of embedding equity, accessibility and the nuances around how we collect information, report out information, who are we trying to get it to, we don't want to share things to parents that are really written for researchers... And we need to be thinking about that from the beginning so that we don't get to the end, it's like, oh, well, this is what it is. We can help them figure it out if we're integrating that thinking from the-

Howard Morrison:

From the beginning.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

From the beginning. That sounds really intriguing.

Howard Morrison:

And it's not like it's something that just stops. It's a continuous cycle and continuous process that happens over time. So data collections happen every year, so you're going to be having data that's collected. And it's going to potentially look different, and there's going to be things that come up that might impact your data over that period of time.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

And so part of this inquiry process and this equity focus is to support states in looking back and saying this is continuously improving. We are going to take this information ongoing. We're going to create some actions. We're going to figure out how do we measure if this action is working or not, and go back to where we started and say, "Okay, this one is working. How do we expand that? How do we keep it moving?"

Howard Morrison:

Right, right, right. And we build in some key things that make that successful, so focusing on data leadership and a culture of data use within state organizations. That some states have a really strong culture of data use, and some states have some improvement that they can do, but what does that look like? And so I think just having open conversations about that and building that culture within your teams where this is something that's built into our yearly planning that actually occurs monthly or whenever the timing works out. But that's really something for states to build upon. But also thinking about how do parents, so how do families, how do partner agencies fit into that engagement.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

That sounds so comprehensive, and I feel like that can't all be in one single tool. Is that in one product, or are there other things connecting? That sounds so rich and deep.

Howard Morrison:

Right. So it's a lot to take on. So one of the great things about the product is it does connect to the other DaSy resources that DaSy has to offer. So it has the data linking toolkit, it has the data visualization toolkit, it has a lot of the other DaSy resources that are available. So embedded in each stage has additional resources to go a little bit deeper. So the data use piece. So we have a look, think, act resource that really helps states think about what are the questions we need to ask when we're looking at data, how do we think about that and then act upon that and take action.

So it is kind of a lot in there, but there's a lot of resources to be able to dig deeper. And this is really an introductory entry level resources start off. I think we have plans for next steps, some ideas on how we might be able to take that further, but we really wanted something for states to have, something that's tangible that they can really take and use, something that's concrete and be like, "Oh, this makes sense to me. I could actually take these recommendations, these best practices and

think about how it applies when I'm planning and designing my data collection or when I'm thinking about disseminating my data to my local education agencies or submitting that or sending that to parents and families."

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

That sounds awesome and sounds like such a wonderful, useful resource for states to be able to leverage immediately. Because even if they're not thinking about the whole cycle, just being able to access, how do I create a culture of data use, what does this look, think, act, having those elements in one thing, so when you're ready for the bigger tool, you already have some introduction into the processes. That sounds incredible. So I'm wondering, you all are creating these wonderful products, these tools, you're connecting folks, you're providing some really lovely support, so if this goes well and we work ourselves out of a job, what would that look like? What would the future look like if the data was linked properly in the systems we're taught? What would be the ideal kind of landscape for that early childhood space from your perspective?

Howard Morrison:

Well, if all the data was linked across each early care and education system, states would have that cross agency data. They'd know all the children within their birth to five system or birth to eight system, however they want to define it, but they would be able to look at that data and see, oh, we have a large population of, pick your race, ethnicity, that might not be accessing services. How can we actually create and develop an outreach plan to ensure that we're having equitable programs and services throughout our states and territories and thinking about that critically and a continuous process in ways to be able to improve that. So it's really so all kids can have access to high quality programs and services.

That's kind of the ultimate goal but not having the access to the data and not having the mental model to be able to think about where there might be inequities and where there might be potential biases and how you are looking and reading and analyzing data and having open conversations about that... And I think just engaging folks from different backgrounds that have those different perspectives that might be able to say, "Oh, we might be able to approach this differently in this community because it has a different makeup in that community, and one community looks different from the next." But be able to have those open conversations and think strategically about how to address that would be wonderful.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

And thinking about not only who is there but really who's not there, and how do we ensure that those people who aren't here are here? How do we get them here so that they're part of the conversation, they're part of the community, they know what's available to them?

Howard Morrison:

Right. If we're able to see we have X number of demographics in this area but we're not seeing them accessing any services, that's a big red flag. But some programs aren't able to even identify those red flags because they don't have the data to be able to see that.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

So this sounds like quite a mammoth body of work. What keeps you coming back to this space, to doing this work?

Howard Morrison:

I love it, and I think about it from the lens of previous work. And I heard from a lot of parents and families. And over the years, hearing the challenges, really, horror stories of not accessing services and programs that they could otherwise be eligible and just struggling navigating the system, so that's my driving force is knowing that there's so many parents and families out there that are just wanting to do the best for their kids but are just struggling. And so that really drives me because I want to make a stronger early childhood system for them to be able to access and have successful kids that are thriving.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

That why is you can feel it in the way that you speak about your work. That desire to really create space for everyone in that early childhood system, I can hear it in how you're describing the work you're doing, the urgency that I hear in your voice around the necessity to be able to access all the information possible to ensure that we can support young children and families throughout states and across the United States. And so if there was a big message to share with the listeners around data use or data systems or early childhood broadly, what would be the Howard Morrison last stance message? I just need you to know this. I need you to be thinking about this.

Howard Morrison:

I think there's two things that come to mind. Building strong relationships, so really thinking about developing those relationships with individuals within your agency, within your team, across agency. That really helps build the foundation to be able to move any kind of work forward. And then secondly, don't feel like you need to do everything all at once. Pick a priority. Focus on that. You may be wanting to integrate two different program level data. Start there, build small and then keep adding to that. Then you continue to build and formulate those relationships, and then you can expand over a period of time. Nothing has to be done within that one year period. Think about what you can do in one year, what you can then do in three years, what you can then do in five years and have that plan of how to expand and improve upon that. But start somewhere, and starting small is fine.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Oh, I love it. Thank you. Relationships, relationships, relationships. And just start. It doesn't have to be the all of it. Just start, and we can keep growing.

Howard Morrison:

Yeah.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Oh, wow. Thank you, Howard, for joining us today. It has been an absolute pleasure.

[Theme music fades in]

Howard Morrison:

Thanks for having me, Kori. It's been great being able to chat with you.

Kori Hamilton Biagas:

Thank you all for listening to the SRI Homeroom. We will see you all next time. Take care. Thank you for joining us on the SRI Homeroom, produced by SRI Education, a division of SRI. Our guest today was Howard Morrison, an early childhood technical assistance specialist with SRI Education. Learn more about Howard and his work in today's show notes. You can find a transcript of today's show or browse our entire archive of episodes by visiting srieducationnews.org. You can also connect with us on social media with the links in today's show notes.

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[Theme music fades out]