

## 44 - Critical Reflection and Belonging

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**Purpose:** The purpose of the transcripts is to provide readers and listeners with a written version of each episode of the UAGC Center for Early Childhood Education's Early Childhood Chatter Podcast so they can follow along with the audio content. [www.uagc.edu/ece-center/chatter-podcast](http://www.uagc.edu/ece-center/chatter-podcast)

**Audience:** Current Active & Enrolled Students

### Episode Transcript

**Host Dr. Shipley:** Hello everyone and welcome to Early Childhood Chatter with Dr. Shipley and Dr. Heald. We will upload a new episode every other week on Wednesdays.

**Host Dr. Heald:** Twice a month, we will come to you with a 10-minute professional development that you can quickly listen to for new ideas to try.

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Today, we have with us Natalie Royer. Natalie has more than 15 years' experience working in education, and she's been an instructor in early childhood education for the last 10 years, both in college and university settings.

Her research interests include diversity, equity, and inclusion, and belonging in early childhood education. She likes to call herself a belonging enthusiast. She's the co-founder of Saroy Group, Incorporated, which provides consulting, advising, and training for both schools and corporate organizations in the early childhood education sector.

Their work is driven by compassion and love. Welcome, Natalie.

**Natalie Royers Speaker:** Thanks for having me, Stephanie, and Tisha, thank you.

**Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker:** Of course. So, Natalie, today we are going to be talking about critical reflection and belonging.

Tell us a little bit about this topic and why you chose to speak to this today.

**Natalie Royers Speaker:** Thanks for asking. So, I'm really passionate about belonging because I feel, especially in early childhood education, every person should feel that they belong.

And when you think about where does that originate, it's really looking at ourselves as educators, questioning ourselves, analyzing our thoughts, our feelings, and then assessing them and how they can help us move forward in a good way.

**Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker:** I think this is so important in our world today to, you know, obviously as a whole, but also just to start at the foundation, which is our youngest learners. Can you describe to us what the true meaning, the true essence of belonging is in early childhood education?

**Natalie Royers Speaker:** So, I really think the true essence of belonging in early childhood education, that when any child, family, or any community member shows up, they feel valued, acknowledged, and seen.

Right? What do we do on a daily basis to make sure our children, their families, and extended community feel that they're being valued in your early childhood education center and environment? What are we doing on a daily basis? I really want to start with this quote, especially with the sudden death of Bell Hooks.

"If you have love, you have the community of belonging that comes with it". And that's a quote by Bell Hooks.

And that's a quote that really resonates with our work in early childhood education.

**Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker:** So, I love the question that you ask, you know, what are we doing? So, what did your classroom look like? What did you do to make sure that this was happening?

**Natalie Royers Speaker:** So, back when I was in early childhood education in the classroom, I really made sure I connected to the families. So, I would ask them questions about the child's home, about who the child is, who are they, what were their pronouns? There's all these kinds of questions, like who is the family coming in? And who is really the child outside of our care? And what do they want from the environment? I really like to think children and families and community, they're the real data, right? What do they want from us as educators? And what can we do in the classroom on a daily basis? So, really connecting with finding out a format that works.

So, it might not be something paper, it could be something digital, if you're on a digital platform, where in your classroom are families being able to put their expertise, right? We like to think about early childhood education as, you know, we're the experts, but families are really the experts on their own children, and they should be included with their care.

**Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker:** Yeah, I see what you're doing, and you're really building a community and culture of just, you know, bringing people in, and I love it. So, if I close my eyes as a listener, help me visualize how teachers and administrators can actually put this to use in their environments.

**Natalie Royers Speaker:** So, when I think about admin and teachers alike, I think about the importance of reading. Even if, and you know what, we all don't have that time. And I acknowledge that it's so hard, but this is the beauty of what you both are doing.

You can listen to it, right? Like, think about innovative ways, audio books, or listening to podcasts. I usually love a good audio book, you know, when I'm driving somewhere, because I still feel I'm getting some type of information that helps me reflect on my practice, which helps me question myself, and really assess of what I can do better to move forward in a good way. So, reading is really important, having a good reading list.

And I like to say, Tisha and Stephanie, why not bring it as a collaborative?

So, bring it to your admin as educators, or your admin, bring it up with staff. What can we all read together? Whether it be an article, whether it be a series, or listening to a podcast, and then come together at a faculty meeting. Like, in my day, it was like faculty meetings with admin or teachers.

But in ECE, in your staff meetings, coming together, and really thinking about dissecting an article, or one podcast, or one article that everyone listened to, or everyone read. And really having a platform to reflect on that together. So, reading, reflecting together, and remembering to seek support.

So, sometimes you don't know where to start. What is your support look like, right? Where in the community can you get that support? From other organizations, from other perhaps institutions that have experts that can really support you on this journey in the classroom. Really looking at that bridging piece.

That bridging piece is so important, right? And I think that we don't realize that ECE is really creating those roots. And I like to see like the trunk as belonging, and all the branches. Whether it be, you know, transformative, whether it be anti-bias, anti-racist, whatever it may be, really looking at belonging as the trunk, and everything coming out of it, just like a tree.

And really understanding building a relationship with one another. And people don't realize the importance of building a relationship with your colleagues, and your peers in an ECE center, right? Children, you know, don't always listen to what you say, but they see what you do.

And are you treating everyone collaboratively with that piece of belonging? And that really, really have to instill moving away from gossip, moving away from harmful words, moving away from judgment of families, judgment of others.

And creating a sense of belonging among the leadership, among the educators, so you can be a real example for the children and families you serve.

**Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker:** Natalie, I love what you're adding here. Because I will tell you, from going from one elementary school to the next, in one elementary school, I felt like I belonged.

I felt like I belonged with the families, with the administration, with the other teachers. And then I moved to another elementary school to teach a completely different grade. And it was a completely different community.

And I think that starts with administration. And I think that it's important for you to feel comfortable every day when you go to school. But why do you think that critical reflection and belonging is so important? Like, what have you seen?

**Natalie Royers Speaker:** Because for me, I've seen when that isn't happening in ECE centers, you have disgruntled staff. They're not being able to be the best versions of themselves. They're not able to be authentic. And it's simply, you know, as admin, talking to staff, knowing all your staff's name, right? I love this question.

When you're at your staff meeting, or you're like, do you have one-on-ones with each staff member? And you know what to ask them, Stephanie and Tisha? What's on your mind? What's on your mind right now? This really illustrates you're invested in them. You're invested in them being there.

You're invested in them, contributing to the feeling of belonging. And at the essence, you respect them as value in the sense of basic humanity, on a sense of a human level. And in these times of uncertainty, it's so important that we can occupy spaces that see us in our true selves, in our true authentic selves, and understand that in this time, we all need a place of belonging.

Some of us aren't fortunate to have close family. Some of us aren't fortunate to have close friends. So, we really have to see where we can provide a sense of belonging for our educators, our children, and our families.

**Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker:** Again, just the true essence of building a culture, an inclusive culture. I love that. So, as we wrap up, can you please leave our listeners with three solidified takeaways?

**Natalie Royers Speaker:** Yeah, for sure.

I think, like I said, I love the whole idea of read, reflect, relationship. And I really think having one article, one podcast, whatever it is, have your team reflect on it once a month. Have them think about their thoughts on it, whatever the topic may be.

It might be, you know, what we're doing in the environment for the children. What are we doing as far as curriculum planning? What are we seeing? Whose voices aren't being heard in the classroom? What families you think are being overlooked, right?

So really read an article, read your classroom, right? And this is, you know, we take literally reading an article or like read your room. What is your room telling you? What is your environment telling you about the children that occupy your room? And what can you bring to your admin and to your colleagues at that one meeting when you get together? Creating a platform for meaningful, brave conversations, it's so important in early childhood education.

And then reflecting, reflecting on yourself. And I love doing this personally.

I do this at the end of the day, right? And just write down things that came up for me. Things that made me question my assumptions. Things that made me really evaluate what would I do differently, right? And this is a great piece when I do professional development.

I do like a critical reflection template for my participants. Really to have that kind of, you know, like your bedtime story, but in a different way. And third, really thinking about how are you showing love in public? And this can be as simple as, you know, when you come into work every day, think about, because our work is, I love that quote by Dr. Cornel West.

"Justice is what love looks like in public". And isn't our work always love in public? And how can you find ways that you can show love in public? And that might be, you know, inviting a community member in from the neighboring community. Really bridging people that look different from you.

Bridging with people that are in different socioeconomic status levels than you, into the classroom. Those ideas into your literacy, your materials.

And so, all children can realize that everyone is, and everyone needs, a sense of belonging---despite their religion, despite their ethnicity, despite their socioeconomic status. We all should be included in that circle of belonging.

**Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker:** That is awesome.

Thank you so much. So much to think about. This is what our listeners want.

So, thank you. As we leave, what is one challenge that you want to leave our listeners with, to take back and do, or you want to challenge them for the rest of the year?

**Natalie Royers Speaker:** What I want to challenge them with is thinking about, what do I need to do to be the best version of myself every day? What do I need to do to be the best version of myself every day? And to answer that question, it might be different for different people, but then you can really zero in on, you know what? I really get upset really fast when a colleague says A, B, C, or D. Or, you know what? I really need to think about how to bring more manipulative materials into the classroom. Because, you know, some of my children are feeling like they write real tactile things.

Like, you have to think about what is preventing you from being the best version of yourself every day. And once you start cracking away at that question during the year, I guarantee it'll bring some clarity and it will give you some steps to start the movement to a place of belonging for you, the people you work with, the people in your life, and the families and communities at large.

**Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker:** That's awesome.

So, you have given us so much context here and so many things to think about. I appreciate it so much. And I know our listeners will too.

And thank you so much for being here today. And we hope to talk to you soon.

**Natalie Royers Speaker:** Thank you so much. Thanks for having me.