**Ep 1. Deb Curtis - The Heart of Teaching Toddlers**

**Speaker:** Yeah. I want people to dive in, get messy and be creative and, and struggle and thinking and all of those things that are so important to the day-to-day life of the classroom.

**Nikki:** Hello and welcome to voices from the village, a podcast from the Wyoming early childhood professional learning collaborative, it is often said that it takes a village to raise a child. Wyoming early childhood educators are an important part of that village. We have created this podcast to invigorate and inspire early childhood educators by sharing great ideas from experts and colleagues in the field. I'm Nikki Baldwin. And today I am thrilled to welcome our guests, Deb Curtis. I was introduced to Deb and her colleague, Margie Carter, when they came to Wyoming for professional development Institute, probably about 20 years ago at the time, I did not realize that the experience of leading that Institute was also an important influence on Deb and Margie's work. And Deb thought it might be interesting to have you just share a little bit about what that experience was like for you from your perspective.

**Deb:** Yeah, I remember that Institute really well. It did change everything Margie and I do because it was totally focused on what we believe in, which is people reflecting and thinking about the presentations during professional development. And that's exactly what that was. So we have done that ever since, and it's been really wildly successful and we actually model that whole approach in all of our writing. All of our books have these ways where people have some story to think about and reflect on, and then we have questions for them to consider. And we always suggest they do it with a group. So we've used that pedagogical approach everywhere. So thank you for that.

**Nikki:** Yeah. And I think thanks to my colleague, Michelle Buchanan, who was inspired to lead those in that way. So that's exciting. I love that story. We'll hear a little bit more about you Deb and your background. I think through the course of our conversation. But as we get started, I really wanted to share an experience that I had with some of your work. This is a podcast about professional learning, and I just thought it might be helpful for others to hear that in 2003, I discovered your book designs for living and learning. And it's had multiple additions now since that time, but in 2003, I was a preschool teacher in Kemmerer Wyoming. And I was cruising along teaching the way that I, the only way that I knew how, and I discovered Designs for Living and Learning, and it was one of the most transformative learning experiences in my life. And it was just reading that book. I remember looking at the cover and noticing beautiful things that a little girl was engaging with light and color and thinking, I didn't know, a preschool classroom could look that way. That really led me to embark a journey. I would say of discovery as a teacher about how I could reinvision reimagine my spaces, the space I was offering for children. It made a huge difference for me. You know, I still use that book in the courses that I teach at The University of Wyoming. And in the last year, as we worked with early childhood educators in Wyoming on learning environments, our professional learning facilitators, we still use that book all the time. And I was thinking Deb, that book has had such an impact on the field. Do you have any thoughts about why that's the case? Was it timing? What particular is it about that book that has been so influential?

**Deb:** Well, we have to give appreciation and recognition to the school's Reggio Emilia who initially helped us think about how we offer children beauty and wonder, and order, and organization and all the things that we included in that book. And I have to say, I'm like you, I like come across things. And I dive in and I I've been a learner my whole entire life. And I think that's, what's impacted my work with children that I'm always looking for new possibilities, new things to think about. And the more I learned about children, the more I see other things and read things the more I want to try them out. So that book actually is one of the first ones we wrote after I went back to the classroom. I had been a adult educator for many, many years. And then this was like 19- I don't even know something-- And I had been, I had been in many classrooms. I had been to Reggio Emilia and been reading a lot about it and trying to offer the ideas that I had been developing over many years of being inspired by others. Lillian Katz is another person, Vivian Paley. So basically I went back to work with children and I haven't stopped since then. And I think, I usually say, “Oh, I just went back.” It wasn't that long ago. Now it's almost been 30 years. So I guess that makes me grounded in the profession. So I think what happened is I wanted to write about the things I was trying, and that's a lot of the stories and the images in the book and Margie also has really pays attention to including other voices rather than just mine, which is really useful. So she, as I was collecting and writing the stories of my work, she was putting out to people that we know around the country to say, Hey, tell us about what you're doing. So I think, you know, the whole notion of Reggio was starting to really, to the U.S at the time and since, and because it's such a real document, it's about real programs and real classrooms and things that you can do and not just do to look pretty or be fancy, but it actually has ways to think about it deeply. That's one of the things I really wrestle with with the whole Reggio movement is people think they put a light table in their classroom and now they're Reggio. And, and I always want to think more deeply about why are we doing this? What are we doing? So I think that's why that book is so popular because it is so accessible. And the other thing is the ideas, and it don't cost a ton of money. And our profession is strapped with low wages, low resources. And so I think people are always looking for that inexpensive way to do something. And it's like a teacher's creativity, too. Teachers deserve an opportunity to put their own creative touches into their environments and to feel good about them. That book encourages that. And I think I see that everywhere people get really excited about how they can be the designers of this magic and wonder. So that would be some of my reasons why I think it's so popular and useful for people.

**Nikki:** Sure. I think that really rings true for me. The book was the first time that I had felt invited to bring myself into my classroom to represent the things that I loved and valued and thought were beautiful in that space. And so that was an important piece of that, I think. So it was very empowering that I could get things from garage sales and the dollar store and still do wonderful things with those, you know? So, yeah.

**Deb:** Yeah. Well, and I also think that's another push in our profession. They're always trying to teacher proof it, right? It's like, if you just follow this, or if you just say this, or there are actually some programs that dictate what will be there and what you will say, and that is so far away from what we know children benefit from and educators benefit from. So I think that's another notion we shouldn't be teacher proofing early childhood programs. Like it doesn't matter who the teacher is. We just do this and everything will be fine. So to me, I want people to dive in, get messy and be creative and, and struggle and think, and all of those things that are so important to the day-to-day life of a classroom.

**Nikki:** That's excellent. Deb. I wanted to share a couple of, I have to put in a plug for several of your other books that have been really impactful for me.

**Deb:** Go for it. That's my retirement.

**Nikki:** The book learning together with young children is a book that was also really transformative for me. And I would just encourage anyone. Who's listening to take a look at book, if you want a way to really think deeply about what the decisions you're making daily with children and how you approach curriculum and how you observe. And that leads to another real important favorite of mine, which is the art of awareness. Both of those books I use in the courses that I teach. So I just needed to put a plug in for those. And then another that has been very important is the visionary director. I wondered if you could just take a minute. I'm, we've been waiting at the professional learning collaborative for the latest edition of the visionary director to come out. We're so excited. It's coming soon, right? In the next few months?

**Deb:** It is, it's like in press right now, so it should be out soon.

**Nikki:** Great. Can you tell us a little bit about what you've done with this latest edition of that book?

**Deb:** Well, Margie and I, we don't just write new additions. We write a whole new books, usually. In fact, I think some of our books should have been part one. And part two, both Designs for Learning has all new stories and photographs, Art of Awareness, same. So the visionary director this time we invited another co-author, her name is Lucy KA Cossio, and she's a director here in the Seattle area of a Spanish language immigrant program. So we've been really passionate about social justice and anti-biased education early childhood for a while, but we've been getting more information about it. We've been learning things more deeply. So when we were looking at that book, it's actually, it's 10 years old now, but from the first edition, it's 20 years old. So anyway, so we, we looked at it this time through a social justice anti-biased lens. Like how can we de-center whiteness from it? How can we look at what are all of the ways that the early childhood profession specifically upholds white supremacy? Because everything that's invented in our profession was invented by white people. Now, we don't want to say that's bad that there are bad things. We just want to make sure that we de-center, that, that we are more inclusive of other perspectives, other cultures, other languages. So Luce brings a powerful voice to that because it's something she really cares about. And she works with communities that are underserved and immigrants who are often given really horrible messages. So she brings an incredible voice and it's in part Spanish, it's translated in Spanish a lot throughout the book, particularly her words, and then everything else we've gone through and re imagined adjusted changed based on looking at. So how can we think about this from a different perspective? How can we think about racism and social justice as we lead programs? And we're excited about it, happy about it. I mean, obviously we're going to all keep learning and things will change. We were writing it in the middle of this pandemic. So it felt like, what are we, what does this mean? Like, what does this mean? But then, you know, we all we heard from people that, well, what better time to have a vision then as we come out of this craziness in the world. So I hope people will get it and take this up. It's so necessary in our society to grapple with these issues and we can do it starting with, you know, children and our programs and how we organize them. So go for it. It should be out. I'm not sure exactly when, but soon, yeah. Soon.

**Nikki:** And Wyoming Early Childhood Educators, as soon as we can get our hands on it, we'll be happy to share information about it with everybody. So you can be on the lookout for that. I'd like to come back to something that you talked about before. And it's just a little bit about how you approach learning. You talked about that. You're always a learner. This is a professional learning collaborative that is producing this podcast. And so we really focus on learning. And I was just wondering, is this how you've always been? Or was there something in particular that inspired you or lit the fire under you as a learner in your career?

**Deb:** I think I have a natural disposition to be curious and want to learn. I'm a nerd. So I go deep. I dive deep with whatever I do in my professional work. I think it's been because I started watching children really closely. Like now that you asked me, I'm thinking back during my, my work as an adult educator, I was a CDA trainer and I would go into early childhood classrooms. And my job was supposedly to watch teachers and give them feedback on what they could do to develop the competencies. And I started, you know, when you're out of the role of a teacher and you start watching children, it just comes so clear how gracious children are with us, how competent they are and how often teachers, not because they're not trying to be good teachers, but they just miss or dismiss what children are offering. And I saw that so many times in my work with adults that children would offer something brilliant. And the teacher was so involved in his or her own agenda that they didn't see it, or if they did, they didn't value it. So I think that became my passion to really observe children. And I have to also give Vivian Paley the credit for my inspiration, because I think she's one of the few people in our profession who actually writes about children's voices. She died, I think last year. And it's a big loss because we have, if you haven't read any of her books and you don't use them in your college classes, I highly recommend you do, because it is a perspective that is so powerful. And it's her reflecting on her own ideas and the children's ideas and how you can bring them together. So that's what I've been doing ever since I'm a kid watcher and I get really interested in what are they thinking? What are they doing? And since I've been doing a lot of study about, well, not since it's been a lot of years, I've been studying all these new things about brain development and brain research. There's a book I read back in the seventies called the magical child by Joseph Children Pierce. And it was a huge inspiration for me because he talked about all of these ways that children see the world that had yet to be discovered in like research. And it just was like, Oh my gosh, I want to see the world that way too. I want to see, you know, what it must feel like to lay down on a cold marble floor in the airport, right? So I just got really curious and excited about children. And in the, in the middle of that, for me, it's been this incredible hopefulness that I have for us as humans It continues to help me feel hopeful that we are born with incredible capacities for learning, for invention and discovery and for relationships and for compassion and empathy and fairness. We're born with those innate dispositions and skills. And what happens is we train those out of kids. We train out of them, these abilities to learn. We train out of them these natural ways. They want to be helpful and want to be in relationship on behalf of trying to teach them. And I'm so passionate about that, that that's, my work is to try to help people pause and marvel, pause and notice, see children and see their amazing capacities. And let's try to figure out how to help those grow rather than stop them. So that's a long answer to your question.

**Nikki:** That's great. That leads me down to two paths. One, I think we'll, we I'll ask this next, but I just want to throw it out there. This relates to your newest project. And so we'll come back to talking about your newest project, those ideas, but what I was just thinking about is the thinking lens tool that you developed and what you were just describing. You've created a tool to help us pause and reflect. And I wondered if you could just take a minute and talk to early childhood educators about that tool and what it could do for them, how it could be helpful for them.

**Deb:** Well, we developed it with Ann Pellow one day sitting on the couch at Margie's and it came from, it came from, I had just gone back to work with children, and I was like overwhelmed. You know, I had all these big ideas from Reggio, from my work with teachers, what I wanted to do, and I didn't know how to do it. It was just like, overwhelming. I just didn't have a way to go about it. So we started talking about like, what does it take to actually do this big work? So we developed that protocol for thinking out of that. So how do I first know myself in these moments? How do I look at, for children's perspectives and their competence? How do I see how the environment's impacting this? How do I look for other perspectives from other people from research and child development information, and then figure out what I want to do? So that's where it came from. And it's been, I've been grounded in it since then. It's, what's really kept me passionate and fierce about administrators and policy makers need to understand. We need to provide time for teachers to reflect on their work because you can't do it in the moment. If, unless you've studied for a really long time, you have to do it away from the work with children. So that's what I've been doing, like taking, you know, capturing stories of what's happened, where I was uncertain, what should I do here? And I would call Margie every day, this happened. And she, and I would walk through these ideas together. And that's how it became this protocol. And sometimes I would want to say to her, you go try that because she knows these big ideas, because that's the other thing, the real work, it's not easy to pause and marvel, there's so much you have to think about. So I know that because I continue to do the work and I have privileged because I've been doing it a long time. So I don't get so nervous about it anymore, but it's still not an easy task. So to me, the notion of pausing and thinking through, so that when you're in that you have more of a repertoire to call upon, you have more things to consider that you might the role you will play in the moment. And sometimes you realize maybe you don't need to step in. Maybe there's no role for you right now, but to pause and marvel. And I've found that over and over again, that children often don't need me to fix things for them.

**Nikki:** Sure. Yes. But there's, there are a couple of things about that story that I want to just point out. And one, I think is that for anybody who's in a classroom right now, and feeling like you see all these possibilities and you don't know where to start, that's what led to the creation of this tool. So I love that. Just guiding some, your thoughts, using some questions can really help you activate all of the knowledge and wisdom that you have and can really help you help reveal things about children and ways to respond to them. So I love that. That's where it originated. I did not know that. And I think that's amazing. The second piece that you shared that I think is really powerful is that you had Margie and doing this process with someone I think is so important. You need to have another, some other eyes or some other ears to share experiences with and, and hear a perspective. So I think that's a really important piece for us to remember is that you need collaborative, reflective partners to be able to do this work well, and we need to provide time so that early childhood educators can do that together.

**Deb:** Right. And to add to that, I think it's a mind shift as well, because everything in our culture, particular our education called culture leads us to believe there's a right answer and a right way.

**Nikki:** Yes.

**Deb:** I don't believe that to me. It's like, what we're doing is searching for possibilities. What are the possibilities here in the-- even in this moment that I want to take up and we're doing that anyway. I mean, the reality is that we're deciding what is important and what we're going to pay attention to and what we're going to further and what we're going to stop. And when the lights are going to be on and when they're going to be off. So to me, it's like, how do we search for possibilities, right. Rather than right. Answers to fix this. Now I do think there are wrong answers. It's wrong to harm children or you know, sort of denigrate them or be, you know, harsh with them. So those things, I think there are wrong ways, but there are no right ways. And I think that's the other thing about opening your lens to like a social justice anti-biased anti-racist view that, that there are so many possibilities and different people will do things differently. And so the notion of doing it on your own, I think, is not as useful, right? Cause you don't have as many possibilities to choose from. And then to me, the notion of making a choice, what am I going to choose to do? What role do I want to play right now? You have to ask yourself, why? Why am I choosing that one? And that is another really big task of an early childhood educator is to look at your own values and your own buttons that get pushed your own bias, because that is huge. That's at the center of the role you're going to play. And I want people to choose on behalf of the value rather than just react on behalf. And I also think we often have conflicting values in those moments.

**Nikki:** Yes.

**Deb:** So, so how do we see what's conflicting here? We often have a value of safety, right? That's really important to us in our profession to keep children safe. That's a really important value. And then we have children whose desire is to seek challenges and risk because they're going to benefit from that in terms of their brain development and their self-confidence and all those other things. So here we are in this moment, safety versus this incredible thing that children seek, challenge. So what do we do? We have to decide. And I think, you know, again, a lot of that depends on you. Are you a person who's fearful, you're maybe going to stop that quicker. And I think that's okay. I think it's okay for teachers to feel comfortable, but I think you need to own them, right? You need to own, I feel really nervous watching you do that. I know that you really know how to do it. And, but I just can't. And I've had so many situations where that would happen, like working with a coworker who would let children do crazy things. From my point of view, then I would say to the children, “When Cindy's here, you can do that because she can help you. But when I'm here, I don't feel it feel like I can help you.” I just think we have to think about those things, you know about what's our bias, then there's all these implicit or unidentified bias, particularly around race. Like there's a lot of research that says teachers discipline little black boys, way more for the same behaviors that white children do. That is scary to me. I don't want to participate in that. And I know most other people don't either. So we have to look at that, like, what is this? You know, it's not like we want to or mean to, I mean, some people do, but, but it's this message we've been getting forever in America about black people that is in us. That gets us to discipline and little black girls too. So I don't want to do that. So to me, this reflective process is really important for us to consider, like, what choices are we making and why what's possible here? What might I choose and why am I going to choose it?

**Nikki:** Yeah. I think one of my favorite words now is intentional and intentionality. And I think that's what you're talking about. Reflection leads us to be more intentional and that pause that and acknowledging that we're making a choice. I love that in early childhood. Now everybody talks about intentionality and I think, I think that's what, what you're getting at there. Right? Doing the things we're doing, knowing that.

**Deb:** And you know, I'm good at talking about it. So I make it sound easy. It's not an easy way to work. It's way easier to do what other people tell us to do and follow the script and check the box. And so I just want to acknowledge that this isn't easy work I'm talking about, but you know, if you think about easy, easy, often isn't very gratifying or nourishing or deepening, right? So doing the challenging difficult thing is more engaging for me anyway. I really want to think it through. It's why I'm still doing it after 50 years. It's why I'm still here. Cause it's still interesting and exciting for me. And I learn something every day. I seriously do. That's not just a platitude. I think a lot of people say, “Oh, I love children. They think teach me something new every day.” It's actually really true for me.

**Nikki:** Yeah. I can see that. And that's why I think you're so powerful as a writer is that, and I've expressed this to you before is that you're speaking as a practitioner, you're speaking from that classroom lens. And I think that's what makes your work so influential for so many practicing educators.

**Deb:** Yeah. It's very intentional to keep practicing. I'm not going to go back. I, you know, my work has all been canceled because of this pandemic and I'm not going back in the classroom because I'm an old lady and I don't want to, I don't want to die by coronavirus. I'd rather some other way. But I will go back to, I won't go back to that big work cause it's not what feeds me. It's the kid work. So I go back to the classroom and if I can, I'll keep writing about it because that's-- it's my spiritual work because it helps me have hope for us as humans. It's my intellectual work because I'm always thinking and it's my emotional work. I just feel so happy. I always ask myself, why am I so happy to watch this very mundane thing children are to do? Just makes me so happy.

**Nikki:** That's beautiful. I think that's beautiful. Well, that, that leads me to want to ask about your new project, because I can't wait for you to share with our listeners what's going on this latest thing that you've started. You're going to produce a book at the end of this, right? But there's just like, tell us about this new road that maybe it's not new, but where you're headed next in this latest project and what you think come from it.

**Deb:** Okay. I'm so glad to have a place to talk about this.

**Nikki:** Please, I can't wait to hear.

**Deb:** Cause talking helps me deepen my thinking. So I've been thinking about this for a long time. And like I said, in my observations of teachers and children, I've seen so many ways. They already know how to get along with each other. I mean, it's phenomenal when you stop and pause and just let see what unfolds they are brilliant at social relationships. And I've been gathering information about that forever. And I went back to a toddler classroom. It's been about 20 years ago now. And I really saw it there. I worked with a group of 12 to 24 month olds and it was astonishing how, you know, and they have such a bad reputation. Children have such a bad reputation for, you know, being self-centered and not getting along. And you got to do conflict resolution and all of these things in early childhood that we've been telling ourselves about children's capabilities when it comes to this and then practicing all these strategies. So these toddlers were like phenomenal. Like they would, like, I had this one little girl who was a biter. Right. And you know, her mother would come in and kind of look sort of sheepish. Yeah. She does that. And I had a mother who was a pediatrician and she said, do you know how many germs there are when someone bites? I mean, I just had all this pressure about this biter. So I started to try to think about what is biting doing for her? Like why is she biting? And she wasn't trying to be like, mean, that was, that's not what one year olds do. They're not trying to be mean. And you know, oftentimes maybe try to get a reaction. And so for me, I started thinking about this is about her trying to have a relationship. She's trying to connect with people and get a big reaction because she was this delightful, big, energetic, amazing little thing. And when she would bite people, she would get this big reaction. So I came to believe that that's what that was, that this is when some wanting to be big in other people's lives and to have this relationship. In fact, I even started saying she wanted to be in relationship so much. She wanted some of their DNA.

**Nikki:** Just take a little taste.

**Deb:** Yeah, exactly. And again, I think that is such a powerful notion is how do you shift your view of children from a deficit to a competence and I have come to believe that children seek what they benefit from. I want to say that again, everything they seek, they benefit from it may not be what we think it may not even really work to their, to the benefit of others or themselves, but that's their-- they have this natural drive to seek. What's going to help them learn, their brain makes them do that. Right?

**Nikki:** Yes.

**Deb:** So I decided, how can I help when some feel powerful at other times? So what I noticed, I had been watching the kids play with babies and these are one-year-olds and most of them just did this stuff of imitating what they have been done to them, which is also really powerful. Like I have been cared for, I'm going to care for this baby. But I was watching, and she was doing something really different. I had these little crochet squares that I found at the Goodwill. Probably some grandma made them or someone like me made it, never finished the quilt, but there were these really cool squares for these kids. So I watched her very carefully line up these squares, a crochet squares, put a baby on top and cover it up. Right. So I was like, wow, that's a really amazing thing. So one of the other kids, a little boy, he was playing with the baby and when someone was on her way over and he knew it and I knew it was that she was going to take that baby. He knew it. And I knew it. So I said to her, instead of like trying to discipline or stop or whatever, or do problem solving, I, as it now, I said, “Why don't you show to Kai? How you know how to make these baby beds?” She knew immediately what I was talking about, she went and got some of the squares. She got a baby that she, that he didn't have. And she proceeded to show him how you do this. And he watched, he was really interested and she felt so powerful. Right. She could teach him. And then it, you know, it started to become a part of the children's play that they started making these beds to cover up the babies. So to me, that's the other really powerful thing is that children notice each other and learn from each other way more than they do from us. So how can I see what they're doing that I know other children will be interested in? Again, I started seeing all these ways, they know how to connect and they know how to get along. They know how to teach each other and collecting documentation, and then started to read a lot about what research is telling us in the last 10 years, that what I've been seeing is been proven in research, right? That children are born with these incredible social scientists skills. And it makes sense because to know about other people and how to get them to do what you want and to help them, help you learn about yourself is how we survive. So they are amazing observers of nonverbal communication. They're amazing at offering nonverbal communication and think about every toddler, every baby, you know, you know what they are telling you, you know, what they want. They know more about what you want, then you know what they want. And there's actually research that supports that that 10 months old can actually do statistics. They will watch the adult who cares for them do this, and then they do this and then they try this. So they'll be able to predict that's what statistical analysis is, predicting when something will happen 10 month olds, they can do that. They set up these labs situations where they do that. So to me, think about what that means. It's so powerful, how much they already know about us and about how to relate to us and get our attention. And again, it makes sense because that's how we survive, right? They learn about who they are in the world from us. They learn about the world from us. So if we start noticing what they already know and helping that be visible, it will grow. That's not just my theory. That's the research. So the research has been says, you know, we have all these ways. We try to teach children social skills. We try to teach them compassion. You know, we have all these curriculums. The research shows that when we do this kind of instruction, it actually undermines their natural ability. Even praising them when they do something nice, undermines their natural instinct to do it. And I've been trying to think about why is that? And that's because we're not acknowledging something, they already understand. We're trying to put something else on it. Most of the books about children in social skills are these moralistic ways that we try to teach them, you know, those sorts of things. So I'm on a quest now to help us shift our attention. And I think obviously some of those, some of those strategies that we've learned to help children solve problems can be useful. But I think first we have to try to call on their natural ability to see each other, to understand each other. And those are very discreet things that they offer. They're very discreet and they have to do with how you see them. You know, we've spent so long thinking, they're not competent that we immediately jump in. We immediately try to teach them about sharing and that kind of thing. Did I tell you the story the other day? Well, it doesn't matter. Other people haven't heard. Yeah. So this was back, back in my toddler days. We're I brought these bracelets in little cans that I had gotten at the dollar store. That was $1 store used to have cool stuff. Anyway, they were playing with them. Exactly. Like I thought they'd dumped them out, fill them up, try again, like spend long periods of time. And then there was Oscar who what he started doing is putting the bracelets on his arm and he wanted all the bracelets. Right. I got to put all these bracelets on my arm and the other children were getting upset and they're like sort of a little fuss about Oscar taking all the bracelets. So I have to say, this is one of those pausing moments. That's so impacted me. You know, I could have moved in to, you know, “Oscar, you need to share those bracelets. No one else has them,” You know, blah, blah, blah. All of those strategies I've learned or may wait your turn or blah, blah, whatever. Some of them aren't bad. I'm not saying they're bad. You could decide that you want Oscar to share the bracelets. I think that would be fine if you decided that. But what I did is I decided I wanted to just help them see each other's ideas. So I said to Oscar, I said to the children let's watch Oscar. He has a really interesting idea because I thought it was really interesting. He was like maybe 14, 15 months old. I said, look, he's putting all those bracelets on his arm. And at this point, like his whole arm had bracelets up to the elbow. So the kids stopped and like, Whoa. Yeah, that is a really interesting idea. They stopped fighting about it. And I realized in that moment, they're just as interested in his idea as they are and having it themselves. And in fact, I have tried, had tried to give them when somebody is fighting over something, give them another thing. Just like it. They didn't want that. They wanted the one that the child who was playing with it had. And I came to believe that that's because they wanted to be that child. They wanted to be connected to that child. They didn't want the stuff they wanted to be in this experience that Oscar was having. And it was so powerful for me because what I realized, what I'd been doing, my whole career is focusing the children on stuff that was the rules about stuff. Right. You know, he's got that stuff right now. So you can't take it. We have to share that stuff here. We'll do a timer and then you can have the stuff it's all about the stuff. And I realized that's not what I value. I don't want kids to think. It's the stuff. That's the most important thing I want to help them see each other's ideas and negotiate around the ideas. Right? So that was a brilliant moment for me.

**Nikki:** Yeah. That's so powerful that it was so powerful,

**Deb:** It just changed the way I do everything. And I have to tell you, if you work with preschool children, it's a way harder thing to do because we've already taught them the rules about stuff and they will start telling each other and us about this stuff and the rules about stuff. So it takes a little way longer to help them see, let's look at ideas. The other thing that helping children see each other ideas does is it expands their repertoire of play. Like I described within the little quilt fabric things. So all the other kids after Oscar was done, they waited, they watched. And then once I had to acknowledged Oscar's idea, he was happy to give the stuff and everybody got to try putting the bracelets on and I've had that happen so many times it maybe happens 75% of the time that children will. If they're under three, they will more easily be interested in each other's ideas. So that was a powerful moment about these social skills. And then another story I want to tell about that is I wrote a book with my colleague, Nadia having called Children's Lively Minds, Schema Theory Made Visible. Do you know that book?

**Nikki:** Yes, I do have, I have two copies on my shelf right now. I'm looking at.

**Deb:** Anyway. So Nadia and I, we went to New Zealand and then New Zealand and Australia and great Britain used schema theory as a central part of curriculum development. And what's schema is, schema theory is, is that children have repeated patterns in their play that they do over and over and over and over again. And they've documented it across countries across everywhere. There's some natural thing that children have to try out ideas in similar ways. So to me, that was just like, Oh my gosh, this is one of those really cool new things. Cause I know about their brains. They're so flexible. They take in more information than we do. They see more than we see. They hear more than we hear. So here are these brains taking in all this information and then they have this natural ability to organize the information coming in by trying these things over and over again. And they've identified about 40 schemas because that was too many for us. We chose to look at like eight of them that we saw, and we wrote the book because there really wasn't anything in the US about this. And because we were for a couple years after we were like sending each other, she's in San Francisco, I'm in Seattle, we're sending each other photographs of these amazing things. We see children doing. In fact, she still sends them to me. She sent me one yesterday, look at this because it's just like astonishing what they do. And then the other really powerful thing that came about for me and her about it is how it helps them play together. That it is, they recognize these schemas because they're all doing them. They all enjoy them. So when somebody starts, the other people join in, it's like this amazing unfolding play things that happened. Without verbal language, it happens when kids are really little, somebody will start doing something and somebody else will see it. Somebody else will see that somebody else will try something else. And then that person, so here's this amazing skill they have to play together without us, right? Like we don't have to make that happen. They do it. And you know, there's this whole big loose parts kind of craze in the world, but nobody realizes why loose parts are so useful. It's because they call on schema for children to organize and do things over and over again with these open-ended materials that allow for that. So that's another thing that anchored my deep respect for children's ability to know how to get along. So to me, I plan my environments around schemas. I help children see each other's ideas when they're playing, Oh, look, she likes to put that inside there too. So the schemas are things like transporting, like moving things. It doesn't matter if it, they don't really have necessarily a goal at the destination. It's just moving. It's also this thing called trajectory. A lot of the schemas are really annoying. Like making things fly, making yourself fly, dumping and filling. That's the enclosure schema. That's also can be annoying if you're a toddler teacher, orientation and perspective, turning upside down, wanting to do all these unusual things with their bodies and we'll put things up to their eyes. The other annoying one is transforming because they just want to change everything. Right? Smash the banana mix, all the paint. So once you understand it isn't necessarily something you still don't find annoying. It's just that you understand it better. And for me, I provided in ways that are okay for me. Right? If you want it, if you want to do that, here's a place that you can do that. And it's so powerful. And again, the most anchoring thing for me is this social ability that if we can see how powerful they are and building and expanding their play, it it's really astonishing. So that-

**Nikki:** That's a gift you're offering us. Are you, does this, is this book, have a title that's coming. And do you know when your work might culminate in this latest project?

**Deb:** Well, I'm still, we're still reached searching. I'm working with my colleague. Rukia Rogers in Atlanta, Georgia. She has a school called The Highlander School, which is really founded in social justice and anti-biased education. She's an African-American woman. All her staff are black. The children are very diverse. And The Highlander School is named after The Highlander School in Tennessee, which is the place where Martin Luther King and Rosa parks. And all of those people went to study and learn about nonviolent protest. People think the civil rights movement just happened because people went to the street. It's not true. They actually met together, talked about things, studied things, tried things. They had reflective practice. So her school is named after that. And she's very dedicated. So that's took me my thinking about sort of this relationship thing that if children are born with empathy and, and they're able to take you use compassion to help others. They already understand a lot about fairness. I mean, it's just phenomenal. The research that children understand about fairness, children will go without something themselves. If everybody can't have equal access. That's what the research shows. So, so she had a quote. She and I did a workshop together a year ago and she had a quote that she put up on the screen that just again, took me like [makes sound], so she said, ‘*empathy is the root of social justice. We cannot expect children to care about the vast social and political injustices. If we don't see how they deeply care about the child sitting next to them or the world before them*.’ I just think that's. So with all this stuff, I've been thinking about social skills. It just took me to that next place where what I really care about with, if we really want to help make the world a different place, we got to see which children, what humans already know when they're born.

**Nikki:** Instead of breaking things down into skills, we need to develop human potential. We need to develop all those capabilities in people. And the skills.

**Deb:** I’ve been reading this idea about a moral identity. How do we help children grow a moral identity? And that, again, that's what we're doing. We're documenting. We have lots of documentation of children's showing us. They know how to get along. And we're going to launch more of a study in her school and in other schools. So we can collect moments of children showing us how the, they already have these abilities. And then The Highlander School and other schools, my school Epiphany Early Learning has been using that to do anti-biased work in classrooms with kids. So those things are coming together and that's-

**Nikki:** That’s so exciting.

**Deb:** I'm excited about it. I think the book's going to be called The Eagerness for Relationships Supporting Children's Natural Skills and Abilities for Empathy, Compassion, Fairness, and Equitable Relationships to Change The World or something.

**Nikki:** That’s it, that sounds amazing. I can't wait to get my hands on it.

**Deb:** Well, you too could join in. If you want your people to help look for-- where do you see children already know how to get along? Where do you see children showing empathy and compassion? Where do you have moments where children recognize unfairness? Those are what we're looking for. And-

**Nikki:** Okay, do you hear that Wyoming? Early childhood educators, like Deb, just put a call out for us to send her stuff-

**Deb:** I want your stories.

**Nikki:** We'll take up the challenge. And please, if anyone's listening and is interested, I know you probably already have been agreeing with Devin thinking of all the things you've seen, take some photos and contact your professional learning facilitator in your region. And we'll connect you with Deb I'd bet would love to share some of those things from Wyoming.

**Deb:** Yes. So I just think it's, it's something we have to do. Our world is a total mess.

**Nikki:** We need to feel.

**Deb:** That we've become an ‘I world’ rather than a ‘we world’ and children are born. We, and we teach it out of them. So we want to be a we, are you a we early childhood program or an I early childhood program. So that's the difference between independence and interdependence. We have to change it otherwise we're not going to survive.

**Nikki:** That's amazing. Thank you. Well, we're almost out of time, Deb. This has been wonderful. I can't thank you enough for joining me in this conversation. I could do this for a lot more hours.

**Deb:** Yeah, me too. But everybody's probably already taken a nap or needed a snack. So I appreciate you wanting to hear me, because I love to talk about these stuff and think about these stuff.

**Nikki:** It's amazing. I think my final question for you then today is what do you, what do you think your legacy will be on the field and or what do you want your legacy to be? You've been doing this 50 years. I can't imagine you'll ever retire, but, but when you think about what you're leaving for us and for future childhood educators, what is it that you want to leave us with?

**Deb:** Good question. I have to say I've always had a mixed relationship with my celebrity. Because I'm not a writer, even though I've written a ton of books and you too could be a writer, I'd be happy to help you. So what I just want to be remembered for is I'm a regular person. I'm a regular person like you. I don't have any fancy things. I just pause and marvel, pay attention to the details and fall in love with what I'm doing. So that's what I want to be remembered for just a regular person who wants to notice the amazing things that children do. And I hope you all do too, because it will enrich your life like it has mine.

**Nikki:** Wow. Thank you, Deb. That’s amazing. Well, thanks for joining us, everybody listening in. Thank you for joining us in the new podcast from the professional learning collaborative here in Wyoming. This podcast is made possible with support from The Federal Preschool Development Grant and is produced by the university of Wyoming, early childhood outreach network. I'm Nikki Baldwin. I'm your host. We've had Deb Curtis with us today and an amazing conversation. This program is directed and edited by Bryce Tugwell. And we thank everybody for joining us today.

**[End of Recording]**