DaSy Talks
Episode 2 Transcript

Jenna Nguyen:

Hello, and welcome to DaSy Talks, real talk for states, by states, brought to you by the DaSy Center. We're all about using data to make a big difference for young children with disabilities. We are your co-hosts, Jenna Nguyen.

Howard Morrison:

And Howard Morrison.

Jenna Nguyen:

And today, we are thrilled to be welcoming two amazing guests, Tracy Benson and Luke Kusumoto, to take a deep dive into the Habits of a Systems Thinker and data use. We are also extra lucky, because we'll hear from Hawaii about their participation in a cohort that DaSy, ECTA and the Water Center for Systems Thinking facilitated for for-state teams focused on using systems thinking and data to improve IDEA early childhood programs. We are also excited to hear about Hawaii's progress to improve their IDEA child find efforts.

Howard Morrison:

But first, let's introduce our guests. Tracy Benson is a board member and consultant with the Water Center after having served as president for nearly three decades. Luke Kusumoto is the Early Intervention section, child find coordination and family engagement specialist at Hawaii's Department of Health. Welcome, Tracy.

Tracy Benson:

It's great to be here, Howard, thank you so much for having me.

Howard Morrison:

Welcome, Luke. We're so glad you're here.

Luke Kusumoto:

Thank you so much for having me.

Jenna Nguyen:

So we wish we were all together in person, because all four of us participated on this cohort, the data systems and thinking cohort, which was an amazing experience. We wish we could be together in person, because then we could do this hand-holding exercise that was one of the systems thinking interactive activities that we did together. But maybe, Tracy, you can share that and challenge our audience to do it all together at some point during our episode today. But first, we'd love to start by asking you, what is systems thinking and why is it important for data?

Tracy Benson:

So Jenna, that's a question that we get often, and there are plenty of very formal definitions of systems thinking. And so, instead of giving a very rote definition, I'd really like all of you to think about the way

that you think, the way you perceive the systems that you work in, your family systems, your community systems, and think about the various parts and how those parts are connected. So systems thinking is really paying attention to the relationships and the way those parts are connected, and those relationships really determine and influence the way a system behaves. And so, because of those connections and relationships, it becomes a little bit more complex, so we've developed 14 Habits of a Systems Thinker that help you reflect on the way you think, and those habits were used in this work with the state-level teams.

Jenna Nguyen:

Luke, I know that you and the Hawaii team used a lot of those habits not only during the cohort, which was about 12, 14 months of meetings together across our for-state teams, but we had two in-person meetings, and then you even took the activities home and the Habits of a Systems Thinker home and did it with your team in Hawaii. What was that like for you, that experience for you? And also, when you applied it to the cohort, what was the priority area that you wanted to work on that you were then able to apply the Habits of a Systems Thinker to?

Luke Kusumoto:

Yeah, thank you. I think the experience we had as a cohort was an amazing one, because it took us on a journey as a group and it helped us to open our eyes to these habits that we need to intentionally practice whenever we come together as a cohort, and we found ourselves referring back to the different habits and trying to apply things that might've been perceived as areas that we were neglecting possibly when we were trying to collaborate together as a cohort.

Our cohort was made up of three different agencies primarily, Early Intervention section, as well as Department of Education for the three to five-year-olds, and then we also had Department of Health home visiting programs join us. So our three agencies really wanted to participate in this amazing experience so that we could better collaborate together as an interagency group, the priority being around child find, and child find being just such a critical component of Early Intervention Services, Department of Education, special education, to ensure that we are identifying as many children as we possibly can that could benefit from our services. So we really wanted to do more to take a look at what our systems are challenged with, using these habits to see where we can improve our efforts and improve our strategies and improve our plans.

Jenna Nguyen:

Yeah, the collaborative nature of your team was just so powerful. You came together and you brought your respective data from each of your three agencies, which represent its own data system. And I remember hearing from you all, before, you would be comparing apples to oranges, but through this process, through this collaboration, through this work of systems thinking and really using data, you were then moving closer to comparing apples to apples, or having those kinds of conversations with one another across agencies to ultimately improve your child find system and child find practices. And you really came together and challenged yourself to ask questions, to look at the big picture, which is one of the Habits of a Systems Thinker, and also look at data alongside of the system.

So one of the things that we did was, and Tracy and Luke, perhaps you can talk about this too, but we created an iceberg that mapped out the current reality of your system and the envisioned system that you were hoping to work towards. And within that iceberg, if you imagine an iceberg in the ocean, there's only a tip of it that is showing above the water and there's 80% or 90% of the rest of the iceberg that is below the surface. And so, one of the very illuminating, pun intended, things about this cohort

and systems thinking and data use is that you're able to surface things that were below the surface of the water, whether those were practices and policies, relational dynamics across your agencies, mindsets that people had, and those are all things that affect your child find system. So what were some of those things that maybe were brought to the surface for you, Luke?

Luke Kusumoto:

I think referring back to the iceberg activity and the analogy, with child find, we understand that the number of children that are referred to Early Intervention Services and Department of Education are just a small portion of the children we possibly should be reaching, and the way I look at it is that's the tip of the iceberg, we're seeing what we see because those are the children we're reaching. And going through that activity helped us to realize, oh, we need to test those assumptions that we're reaching all the children that we're reaching.

We need to challenge ourselves to understand what are the challenges and barriers that our systems are facing using the Habits of a Systems Thinker, the mental models for something we also explored, what are those things that are shaping the way we are exploring child find and our strategies around it? Do we need to test some of the assumptions again that we have? Are we seeing the big picture ultimately? And I think that's what the iceberg activity helped us to do is really challenge ourselves to dig deeper and explore further some of those things that might be serving as challenges to identifying all the children that could possibly access our services.

Howard Morrison:

So look, DaSy's developed a number of critical questions for states to use, from Part C and Part B's perspectives, could you share the ones that you leveraged and adapted for Hawaii and what those were?

Luke Kusumoto:

Sure, Howard. Our cohort wanted to identify these two questions. One was, are we effectively identifying all children that could be benefiting from both Part B DOE and Part C Early Intervention Services? As a cohort, the assumption is that we are reaching as many children as we possibly can, we've tried to make our services universal for all families. But we know that these are just assumptions, and we know there are groups of families out there that are potentially, for whatever reason, not being found or not accessing these services. And so, that's the other critical question we came up with is so that we could see if we can collect data around knowing if all the families that have been referred to Early Intervention Services are effectively accessing services. So it's two parts. One, are all children being referred? And of the families being referred, how many of them are truly accessing services? And do we have data to demonstrate the barriers or challenges that some families are facing receiving our services?

So what we wanted to do as a cohort is ensure that when we collect data around certain data sets, that we are collecting data similarly. For example, if one agency was looking at [inaudible 00:10:19] as a whole and that's how they were collecting data, but yet another group was breaking it down, maybe we could collaborate and work together to make sure that we're collecting data in that same fashion, so that we can then compare how families are traveling across our different agencies and what the representation looks like across our agencies, and is it providing us with any meaningful data based on that? Another area might've been socioeconomic status, that's another data set we're looking at. We discovered that for us in Early Intervention, our eligibility isn't based on income, but our home visiting programs are. And so, for them, they collect data very specifically around this, but we do not. And so,

we had much discussion around this data point, how we might align with each other to share data more intentionally around this.

So some things are ongoing discussions, some things we've more or less aligned with, and we're building out a new data system that we're building some of these changes into so that we can better communicate with each other with our data that we're collecting.

Tracy Benson:

And Luke, I would say that in some of those initial stages, if I remember correctly, as you described the awareness that you were having of one another questions connected to surfaces and test assumptions, which is one of the habits, have to do with how do my past experiences, the ways I've always done things or thought about things, influence the development of my theories and the assumptions about data? And how well does my theory or model match or different from other views? And so, that sharing really helped you all get on the same page, even though you're bringing in different ways of thinking about data and analyzing it and collecting it. So I think that was just a powerful moment for your cohort to bring all of that expertise together collectively.

Luke Kusumoto:

Yeah, I think that's absolutely right, Tracy. I think above everything else, what participating in this cohort did for us was it established a sense of communication that all of us could rally around, that we used the same kind of language around the habits that we are trying to incorporate in the work that we're doing, and so it really helped us to collaborate in that sense in a much more effective manner. It wasn't always rosy, there were many times where we would wrestle with each other on issues. But the fact that we could do that openly and with trust with each other, it's because we have a common goal in mind, it's because we can rely on each other on holding each other accountable to these habits, I think that's what helped us continue pursuing the ongoing work around this important issue of child find.

Howard Morrison:

Tracy, yourself and states were all in this cohort for nearly two years, and we saw state teams grow and evolve and adapt and improve with their systems change work and their data use, and just wanted to get your sense and your perspective on how you saw states shift from when they started in this cohort to where they ended, and how maybe, from your perspective, how you saw that growth happen throughout that two years.

Tracy Benson:

Yeah, thank you for that question, Howard. It goes back to something that Luke's talked about when he referred to the importance of trust, and it makes me think about one of the Habits of a Systems Thinker is about your willingness to change your perspective, to increase your understanding. So when there are different points of view, different past experiences, different mindsets, the idea is more than empathy, like, oh yeah, I understand where you're coming from, it is, am I willing to get in your shoes and see it through your eyes?

And questions to ask yourself to help you with that is, how do different points of view influence the way I understand the system, and how should I approach to help me gain new perspectives? So people were asking more and more questions of one another over time, with the intentionality to learn and to see the system through their eyes. That shift is so powerful to impact change in positive and sustainable ways, and that is the lowest level of the iceberg, which is hardest to see and hardest to navigate, and trust is an important factor.

Jenna Nguyen:

Tracy, you were the one who taught us about this concept of neuroplasticity, and that trying new things, shifting your perspectives, can actually create new neural pathways. We can break out of old patterns that we've had for a very long time, that we've conditioned ourselves to have over long periods of time, and create new ways of behaving or new ways of thinking. So maybe right now might be a good opportunity or a good time to invite our audience to try the hand-holding exercise that we all did when we were together. Would you like to lead us in that?

Tracy Benson:

I'd be happy to. It's one of my favorite short exercises that I do often when I feel like I'm stuck in my old ways of thinking. So if you could join me in just taking your hands and folding them with your fingers bent, clasped together, and I want you to notice which index finger, right or left, is closest to your body, and just note that for yourself. And then, unfold, bring them apart, and then refold with the opposite index finger closest to your body, and note how that might feel. For most people, it's awkward, it feels uncomfortable, it's not a natural way of folding your hands. Some people think it's the same, but for most people, it's awkward.

And I want to ask yourself to think about why, why is that? And again, when we're doing this in person, people typically say, "Well, it's not the way we're used to doing it, we've developed that habit over time." And so, with that, those are physical neurons that are really strong and feel dominant over time because you do it over and over that way. The same thing happens with the way you think. And so, when you're challenged, the way you typically think about things, how you perceive things, what labels you put on certain parts of your system or behaviors you see, to challenge yourself on that can be difficult.

The other way we can do this is to fold your arms, just fold your arms in front of you, just right in front of your chest, high abdominal area, notice which arm is on top. Unfold, and then put the opposite on top. That one is sometimes even more difficult to do than the hands. And so, those simple little physical exercises remind us that if we can show up with a beginner's mind and really be willing to look at the system through different perspectives and be willing to feel a little uncomfortable... Luke said it wasn't all that rosy all the time, and that particular space is really good space for change. If everybody's feeling all rosy all the time, you're probably not going to change what's been happening over time, not going to look for those opportunities of innovation and adaptability. And so, the message is celebrate being uncomfortable.

Howard Morrison:

It's so true. Ever since we did that activity, every time I cross my arms or fold my hands like that, I always think of this. And sometimes, to your point, you have to sit in that uncomfortableness, that awkwardness, in order to make improvements and move forward and change systems. So I think that's such a simple way to make connections to the work that we're doing and the work that you're doing in your state systems and community teams. So Luke and Tracy, what words of wisdom would you pass on to others that are trying to make significant long-lasting changes to their systems? And we'll start with Luke.

Luke Kusumoto:

Words of wisdom? It's hard to put it into so many words, but I'm thinking what our cohort experienced through this entire process, there's a few things that come to mind for me, and one, as a cohort, we truly needed to have faith in the process. So having faith that we are all working towards the same goal,

we have the best interests of the children and families in mind, that we can get through challenges if we put our heads together, and truly just trust the process and rely on the habits that we've learned with systems thinking. Building trust with each other in that process, trust is very important for the work to move forward. Despite the challenges or the discomfort, the tension that Tracy mentioned that we feel with each other at times, it's there for a reason, it's to help us understand that some change may need to happen, and the only way you can get through that is by experiencing the tension.

And finally, I think the last thing that comes to mind is that, going back to the iceberg analogy, we see only the tip, there's so much beneath the surface that we don't know. For myself, what I even experience is having some fear as to what others might think, what others may challenge and push back with, the tension we might experience or the conflict. Those are all fears that you might experience as a cohort. But remember, you need to have courage to get through that to really get to a place where you can build something better and then you can see the bigger picture. If you can't challenge your fears around that, then you're just going to be stuck status quo.

Howard Morrison:

Well, I think you made a lot of good points there, and I just wanted to see, Tracy, if you had anything to add to Luke's comments, anything from your perspective on words of wisdom for states that might be working or embarking on systems change within their communities?

Tracy Benson:

Yeah. Luke's words of wisdom and the concepts that he brought up were just spot on. Thinking through that question, because it's a big question, what's in my head right now is when we're looking at the early childhood system, when we're looking at families and children and providing them access and services and support, I think that it's really important just to remember to look at the system through their eyes, through the eyes of families and children, and then what that data means. It's more than a number, it's what is happening on a day-to-day basis that produces those data sets, and so just pausing every once in a while and just pondering that I think would be important.

Another is practice. Systems thinking and the habits that we've talked about, it's not an on and off switch, like, oh, let's just use these habits to be able to look at our data system specific to Part B, Part C. It's looking at your family system, it's looking at your community system. There are opportunities to practice those habits in all the systems that you are involved with in your work and in your life. And so, that practice would be something that I have found has been really important. It makes the way you fold your hands both ways comfortable. And so, I think that's what we're striving to do is to create those neural pathways where we think in systems.

Jenna Nguyen:

And Tracy and Luke, you just reminded me, when you said that keyword, tension, it reminded me of the rubber band activity that we did when we were together during our time in the cohort. And Tracy, you were just talking about this idea of nested systems, and so there's all of these different systems or components of a system that interact with each other, that influence each other, that are interdependent with each other. And so, if somebody is moving in this direction and someone else is moving in the opposite direction, you're creating tension. You don't want the rubber band to snap, but you want enough tension where there's creative tension. And Tracy, you mentioned that earlier when you said there's a lot of opportunity for innovation, as well as adaptability. And so, Luke, I think you and the Hawaii team are really showing us that, that creative tension in what you're doing in your child find

efforts to improve access to high-quality services and support for children with disabilities and their families.

Luke Kusumoto:

Thank you, we're definitely trying. Like I said before, it's not always rosy and it's not always easy and there are things that come up that derail the process sometimes, but there's always opportunity to get back on track and to reset, so that's something that we've also learned through participating in the cohort.

Jenna Nguyen:

Thank you so much, Tracy and Luke, for joining us today. It was an absolute pleasure to have you on the DaSy Talks podcast.

Luke Kusumoto:

Thank you so much. This was terrific.

Tracy Benson:

Thank you, Jenna, Howard and Luke for this experience, it was really wonderful. I appreciate all of you.

Jenna Nguyen:

Thanks for joining us on the DaSy Talks podcast. Our guests today were Tracy Benson and Luke Kusumoto. Learn more about them and their work in today's show notes. You can find a transcript of today's show or browse our entire archive of episodes by visiting dasycenter.org/podcast. You can also connect with us on social media with the links in today's show notes. The views expressed in today's podcast belong solely to the participants, and do not represent the views of DaSy or any organizational funder or partner.