**Ep 6. Nicole Philbin - Voices from Our Village**

**Nikki:** Hello, and welcome to voices from the village, a podcast from the Wyoming early childhood professional learning collaborative it's often said that it takes a village to raise a child. Wyoming early childhood educators are an essential part of that village. And we've created this podcast to help invigorate and inspire your work. I'm your host, Nikki Baldwin. And today I am so happy to welcome a Wyoming early childhood educator, leader and friend Nicole Philman to the podcast. Welcome Nicole.

**Nicole:** Thank you for having me, Nikki,

**Nikki:** Nicole and I first met about two years ago. And since that time we've participated in some really enjoyable collaborative work. My two favorite experiences with Nicole have been first, we participated in a book study together with a small group of professionals from around the state. And as I sat and listened, I was continually impressed by Nicole's knowledge and just how deeply she reflects on her work. I decided I needed to talk to her a lot more after that experience and we've been able to stay connected since then. I also had the chance along with Nicole and a group of about 30 other early childhood professionals to participate in a collaborative learning experience that culminated in the creation of the new coherent path to quality document for the state. We're going to talk about that more here in just a minute. Today, Nicole and I will be discussing lots of things in response to my last podcast interview with Nicole Parks and Joelle Wheatley from Leading For Children, in that podcast, we discuss the power of collaboration and how Wyoming created our new vision for quality for the state. So welcome Nicole. So glad you're here today.

**Nicole:** Thank you. I'm excited to be here.

**Nikki:** Nicole, why don't you start off just telling us a little bit about you and your experience in the field?

**Nicole:** Sure. So right now I'm the director of an early childhood center. It's a two site center. We have 10 classrooms serving children birth through pre-K. I started my education journey doing early childhood special education and also worked in elementary schools. I began in early childhood, proper being a head start teacher. I actually started out being an early head start home visitor for pregnant and parenting teenagers then transitioned into the classroom. I taught in the classroom for four years when then I transitioned into the childcare program and I did curriculum coordination for a couple years there. And then I moved up to being the director. So I think it's that kind of classic story of teacher becoming leader and all of the hi-jinks and learning that ensued in that process.

**Nikki:** Absolutely. So how long have you been doing this then?

**Nicole:** Early childhood or being a director?

**Nikki:** Early childhood in general?

**Nicole:** I officially started in 2009. I say that because I did work in elementary schools and childcare centers before that, but it was kind of dabbling and it wasn't it was not something I had really on yet. I actually had a three-year stint in between doing residential treatment at a facility. And so I have kind of a smattering of educational experience. But in 2009 I started working in early childhood and I haven't looked back.

**Nikki:** That's great. So Nicole, one thing about this podcast is that we focus on professional learning. And so I, one thing I know about you is that you finished a master's degree while you were working. Correct?

**Nicole:** Yes. While I was working and while, and while I had a newborn.

**Nikki:** [Laughs] that's amazing. So I was just thinking about, you've been a learner this whole time, always. Can you share anything that really stands out to you as a learning experience that just sort of really triggered your thing-- changed your thinking and made you sort of who you are today changed your views in a really powerful way and it doesn't have to be, you know, college, it could be anything.

**Nicole:** Yeah, that is a really good question. I think so when I think about my own learning experience, the points in time that really stand out to me are the times that were really challenging when something went wrong. If I was to be completely honest and transparent growing up, my learning experience came fairly easily and I didn't feel like I was as engaged as I am now. And then when I started facing some things that really challenged me and were not coming naturally to me, I think that's when it really were kind of my soul engaged with that learning where then I knew that I wanted to know more. I wanted to know how to do things differently, do them better. And so that's when I really jumped into just getting as much knowledge as I could. And I, it did really start, I think with my master's degree and just wanting to know my master's degree is in early childhood special education and really wanting to know how to create the highest quality inclusive programming that serves all children that we had in our classroom and how to work with all of the amazing colleagues I have with different specialties and just create a system that would be something beautiful for children and families.

**Nikki:** And tell me this. So in those moments, when you decided you needed to learn, what did you, how did you do it? How did you approach your learning? What, what tools did you use?

**Nicole:** Yeah, well, my default is to want to give up and say that I don't know how to do this, right. I just would want to be like, “Nope, I don't know how to do this.” So maybe this is not for me, but then I would take a breath and realize that we have so many amazing people around us that know more things than I do, which is also, you know, being an adult and kind of learning in that process. And so I would, the realization that I didn't, what I didn't know would become clear. And I started reaching out to whoever would take a phone call or an email for me to just ask questions. And that has been a big turning point in my leadership journey is to stop feeling like I'm the only one that knows how to do something and to realize all of the gifts that everybody brings into this situation and ask for help or advice or just knowledge, I've called people up. Just how do you do this thing? I don't, I don't know if I'm doing it as well as I could. So how do you do it? Maybe I have something to learn. And those connections have been huge for me because whether that person was able to help me in that specific circumstance or whether they were able to point me in another direction, they've, it's just been such a huge help and helped me really grow as a person. And as a director.

**Nikki:** That's pretty inspiring that you, you seek other people that's, that's where you go when you need help. As a learner, I love that. Thank you. Let's talk a little bit about the work that we did in the quality learning network with leading for children. So the podcast before this listeners go ahead and, and take a listen to that. Nicole Parks and Joel Wheatley led a team of early childhood professionals from Wyoming through a process that lasted about six months. And it culminated in the creation of this document that we're super proud of that just recently was released. Nicole was one of the members of that network. And so as I we were co-learners everybody, there was an equal status. We were just learning. Nicole, I would just love to hear what that experience was like for you and anything that stands out from that experience.

**Nicole:** Sure. It was an incredible experience. First. I was so honored to be asked to participate in a group of people from across the whole state. Many of, many of those people I had never met before. I wasn't familiar with their background and they were just-- it was an incredible group. They were at so many different experiences, so much wisdom. And it was this process of, I mean, 30 plus people coming together from kind of different walks of the field and, and sharing their thoughts and insight into how to create a path to quality. And I felt like the way that it was facilitated by leading for children and the way we worked through things just really taught me a lot about what, I mean, the-- I know this field is so important, but I feel like it really elevated that professionalism, importance of the field as well when we were all there working through it. And there were times when, you know, maybe there was a disagreement or kind of a question, a question about the way something was worded. And I just learned so much from those differing perspectives when we work with the same colleagues regularly, we kind of all fall into that same perspective, maybe use the same language, you know, say things in a very similar way. And it was really inspiring and kind of got my creative juices flowing to hear people who had those different perspectives. So it was just an amazing experience. And now that I've seen the resource, I'm just so excited about it. I've shared it out with some people just here, but just today, I was meeting with a couple of my other managers in my program about how we're really going to put this thing to use and get it out in the community. Because it's just beautiful. And I think it's going to have a huge impact on early childhood in Wyoming.

**Nikki:** I agree. And I think for listeners to just the way that we went about finding people for the network was we were looking for individuals from all across the state. So all parts of the state we wanted to have represented. And then we wanted to have representative representatives from all parts of the field. So we had home-based care and education providers, we had center-based programs, we had directors, we had classroom teachers. We had families, parents that joined us. We tried really hard to get a cross section of people in the state. In addition, we were constrained by the fact that this was an enormous time commitment that we asked of people. So part of that outreach was would you be able to make that time commitment? And it was okay that not everybody in the state could make that kind of time commitment, but the people who could do that in that window of time of that six months, we invited them to join us. So it's definitely Wyoming voices that are part of that document. Yet, Nicole, we just spent hours talking about quality together in that group. And do you have any takeaways about what quality means to you now after that experience?

**Nicole:** You know, quality is a really interesting thing in this field because there are a lot of different opinions and takes on what it looks, what quality really looks like in an early childhood classroom or even in a home-based program. And that was what was so powerful about this group is to really talk through all of those different perspectives. And eventually come out at the end was something that was consistent. And as they, like, as we always said, holdable like something that people could relate to and actually be able to implement. You know, I've had a lot of experience with working with, you know, colleagues, even within my own organization that might have differing opinions of quality. And it was a really, it was really great to have people come together and work kind of go through the push and pull of what those different perspectives are, but still come out at the end, knowing that the things that ended up in that resource do point to what high quality experiences look like for young children. And so we can all have some common language and ground to stand on, regardless of what curriculum we're using, regardless of what assessment tools we're and all of those other things that we tend to put in that quality pile, you know, regardless of all of that, we still have a vision for what we hope everybody can be doing for, you know, young children and families.

**Nikki:** Yeah. I love that too. I was thinking about your experiences and working with children with special needs and your expertise there, and then your experience working in head start. And when you think about those two settings that I know are super dear to your heart, and you think about quality, you know, if you're, if you were to reflect back on your experiences in classrooms, in the both of those settings as a teacher, how did you measure if you were doing things well? Like what were you relying on back then during those times in the classroom?

**Nicole:** Back when I was new?

**Nikki:** Yeah.

**Nicole:** You know, I really looked to how the classroom ran, what those relationships looked like, how you know, children responded to different, you know, maybe directives or different activities or different parts of the routine in the classroom. I also would reflect a lot on how the relationship was going with my co-teacher, the other colleagues that were working in my classroom. And we did use, you know, more formalized assessments that we would look at, especially when I was a head start teacher, that's very much ingrained in their performance standards. And so, you know, we would look at things like teaching strategies, gold, or we use the class assessment, but really it would come down to how much laughter and conversation you were hearing in the classroom, how engaged children were with the materials, how much they interacted and how much trust you could see that they had in the teaching staff that was in the room. And if those things were working well, you can build everything else on top of that, but you can't start with the formalized assessment and go backwards. You have to have that foundation built first. So it was kind of that loving feeling and comfortable feeling that when you walk in, you know, that those kids feel safe, they trust they're adults, they're engaged, they're laughing, they're happy. And then we would build the, the more formalized kind of performance, standard type quality assessments on top of that.

**Nikki:** Is there anything, when you think now having participated in that quality learning network experience that you wish you would have known back then when you were a new teacher that you know now about quality or about how to do this? Well, how to do good work with kids?

**Nicole:** If I had had a resource, like the one that we just created then I think it would have really helpful in communicating with other people. I think that being able to have something that really spells out what we're looking for and why it is important to children and it has that research-based tone to it. That's, this is the impact that you're having when you're doing these important practices is so important when you're communicating with families, when you're communicating with other colleagues that you're working with. Sometimes if we get a little bogged down into the regulation or the performance standards of everything, we can miss the heart of what we're doing and the things that we talked about in that in all of the quality conversations that we had in that group, really, I always felt like we were talking about the heart of early childhood education. We were kind of at the core of it, not in the-- like all of the tools that can come into our field, you know?

**Nikki:** Yeah, yeah. I, and, and just for our listeners this document you'll be able to access on the WYECPLC website. And if you reach out to your regional professional learning facilitator, they can absolutely get a hard copy into your hands as well. But just so you know, referring to this document is framed around, what's called the coherent path to quality, and it has three pieces that are key. One is relationships and interactions. The other is emotional and physical environment. And then the last is learning experiences. And so all the work that we did was diving deeply into those three pieces that we know research shows, improve outcomes for children. And then what we did is we went within each of those, for instance, relationships and interactions. We dug deeper and we created what we call simple rules. An example is a simple rule under relationships and interactions was to be authentic. And so then we would dig, we would spend a great deal of time talking about what authenticity is, what that looks like, how you could recognize it in a classroom, a second rule would be responsiveness. And so we just went down that path for each of those simple rules and we determined what those are for Wyoming from this collective group. And then we talked about what it would really look like in practice. So it's, it's a really exciting document to take a look at. We just encourage you to find it. Okay, Nicole, so let's just talk a little bit more about collaboration, sort of generally. That's another piece that I discussed a lot with Joelle and Nicole. And I was wondering if you would be willing to share a little bit about an experience that, that I know you have shared with me, you've shared it in a presentation you did at the Callaway state conference actually in case people missed it, though. I, I think there's so much to learn from one of the challenging experiences that you went through in the last couple of years and how you use collaboration as a tool to really help solve problems and help you get to the space that you're in today. So I was wondering if you could just talk to us a little bit about that experience. Sure. So

**Nicole:** Sure, so a few years ago, almost exactly two years ago, now we had a situation where we had, we were dealing with a couple of DFS violations in my center, and it was a, it was a very challenging time and it's really impacted staff. We were having some challenges with low morale and some disengagement in the staff anyways. And then this kind of compounded all of those things that were going on and it became very heavy for everybody. There were action, corrective action plans. There were a lot of things that nobody cared to be a part of really in reality. And, and it was, you know, so I, it was kind of my job to figure out how we were going to walk through this time and honestly just get through it without closing down, or having some sort of really dire consequence. And so that was really a big turning point for me, you know, like before thinking about my own learning, where I had a few moments of, I don't know how to do this. And then I just started reaching out to people. I reached out to you, Nikki. I reached out to Becca Steinhoff. I reached out to Penny Hodaveck to anybody I had come in contact with really across the state and early childhood education that I thought would have thoughts for us of how we could walk through this hard time and come back better on the other end, I started calling or emailing, and the response was really amazing. People were very willing to talk to me. I stayed completely transparent. I sent all of the dirty details to people because I figured if I'm not going to be honest in this situation, I'm not going to be able to work through it in the way that we really need to. And so I started working with a variety of different people, you know, we did-- I brought people in like Tiernan Markowen to train with my staff. Like I said, Penny Hodaveck, Yvette came in, Nikki, you and Becca came in and did a training with my staff and worked with us in a more ongoing way. And it has been an incredible turning point. Like I said, I feel like now it's kind of going to be my story in early childhood education in a way, but in the best way, because I-- we've come so far from that place. And it was all because of the collaboration and not only with experts, but also because of the staff disengagement and some of the things that were going on internally that I'm sure led to this challenge, but also were a result of the challenge as well. I really started to reflect and try to learn from others about how to engage my staff in collaborating with me to say, “Okay, we're facing this big hurdle that none of us asked for. And none of us really cares to deal with at this moment, but it's not a choice.” And so this is our reality, like what are we going to do with it? Because my plan is to be the most amazing early childhood center that we could possibly be. And I want you to be part of that plan. And so let's sit down together and figure out how we're going to make that happen. And it was it, you know, there was definitely like a, kind of a learning curve to the whole thing, a little bit of a road to be traveled. But the incredible thing is, is almost all of those same teachers that went through that with me are still here. We've seen an incredible change in the engagement of the teaching staff and the level of professionalism. We've implemented maybe too many things because I tend to get a little bit excited about the stuff that we could possibly do. So I, you know, my passion can get the best of me and sometimes I have to kind of bring it right back in a little bit, but it has ended up being, I think the best thing that could have happened to me as a director in that learning, but also in our program because we are a different program than we were before that happened in the best way.

**Nikki:** That is a really powerful story. One other piece you haven't mentioned that I thought was one of the most courageous things you did was you engaged with families.

**Nicole:** I did.

**Nikki:** And that was really what I remember is that was a pretty tricky process. And I just, could you talk a little bit about how you also collaborate with families during this?

**Nicole:** Sure. The family part was probably the hardest for me and I had to be the most vulnerable in those moments. I had to do things like a public parent meeting that the newspaper was present for writing up a newspaper article on our program and being publicly raked over the coals a little bit and that's, but that's where it started. And it's not where it ended. And even though those things were painful, in some ways, it was all part of that process. And so I tried to stay steady and confident and as transparent as possible, a word I use a lot these days is transparency. And because really we were doing the very best that we knew how to do is through all of these challenges. And parents really, really appreciated that. So while we-- you know, sometimes the, the angriest voices are the loudest and you do hear those things and that can be hard. There were also a lot of supporters that really stepped up and thanked us for our transparency, thanked us for giving those opportunities for parents to come and ask questions and understand the situation, understand the steps we had taken. And we're very happy about the way everything went. We didn't lose any families because of this situation. Everybody stayed enrolled in the program, which I think is speaks highly to the way that it was handled, even if we had very emotionally tense moments as part of that. But I really tried to stay connected to families in any way that I could, so that maybe the angriest families, I would reach out to personally and speak to them over the phone or get together and meet and, and really provide as much information as I could to help them understand the situation while also knowing that they were going to have their own process and were bringing their own perspective to the situation. And so it was, that was a really hard part, but I do think that it helped the whole program and myself personally gain a certain level of trust with families after that because of how it was handled.

**Nikki:** Yeah. I have been thinking about where you are now, you know, as a result of this. So part of your identity is really linked to having gone through this difficult time together. I think that really solidifies relationships in really important ways, what what's ahead for you all now. So you've made it through this you've United and sort of created a vision of where you want to get. What kind of work are you all doing collaboratively right now in your program?

**Nicole:** Well, right now we are working-- we've implemented a few different things as far as professional learning, like collaborative, professional learning. And so, as I mentioned, we have two sites and it was often a really huge challenge to have any collaboration across those two sites. And one of the silver linings of the COVID-19 situation as we've really tapped into our, our zoom abilities. And so we’re, you know, we're getting together regularly for conversations over resources and things like that. We've been continuing to explore curriculum resources. We do use creative curriculum and our program as a framework and then kind of build from there. So just working on professional development with our teaching staff, our teachers are starting to present to one another on topics that are, that they are passionate about. And so we have some teachers who have gotten really into exploring different steam concepts or teachers who are feeling really passionate about outdoor play space ideas and things like that. And so integrating that into our in-service days, we're very lucky to have a handful of in-service days throughout the year that we can give these opportunities for staff to share with one another. So we're really, my focus is working on sharing the knowledge that we have internally in the organization with one another and all of the strengths that the teaching staff bring. You know, we really used to do a lot of professional development in that kind of expert model of bringing somebody in from outside to teach a topic to everybody and people would get really excited about it for the day. And then you wouldn't hear anything else about it within a couple of months or even a couple of weeks sometimes. And this has, it's raised the bar of professionalism within the organization. And I think the staff morale has just really skyrocketed because people feel seen and they feel heard and acknowledged for everything that they bring. And that has been really fun working on the staff development side and teacher support has just been, it's like made my heart so happy. Cause you can see a really big difference, especially coming from a pretty intense, hard time, you know, like I was just talking about and we are on a broader level getting ready to go into strategic planning with our board. So who knows what's going to come next. So maybe we'll have even bigger things going on once we get more voices at the table.

**Nikki:** Well thank you for sharing that, Nicole. I do find it truly inspirational. And I think that it's good for everybody to hear that sometimes the things we think we fear the worst ends up being a real gift. And especially if it challenges us to think differently about, about our work, I love where you've ended up and that it's in a place where it's about recognizing the wisdom in your own program and in teachers in their own classrooms. I think it's beautiful. So thank you for sharing that.

**Nicole:** Well, thank you. You and Becca definitely kicked me off. So in this whole processes, a huge help. And I still go back to the video of the training that you two did for my staff a few years ago to remind myself of where we started to keep me on track. So that's, that's probably appreciate it. Yeah.

**Nikki:** I'm happy to have been any part of it. Okay. So one thing that we do to sort of wrap things up in this podcast is we talk about something new that you've learned recently that you're excited about. So you've had no chance to think about this, so you can have a minute, but as a learner, I know that you're continually learning and I know that COVID has presented all kinds of challenges. So it could be COVID related or not, but what's something and it doesn't even have to be work-related Nicole. What's something that you've learned about that you've like wanted to go tell somebody about recently?

**Nicole:** What is something that I've learned recently? I mean, thinking about COVID I have learned a lot recently, a lot of things that I didn't even think I would learn in some of it does have to do just with being a parent of three children that are virtually learning at home and how to support-- it kind of goes to how to support different learners in different environments, because we have been forced into a situation that nobody anticipated and we're on the fly. And so, I mean, that's definitely been one thing, one of the things that I've been learning about and it does tie to work in and kind of is related to all of the stuff that I've just been talking about. But I have been trying to just absorb as much information as possible and then put it into practice about working with other professionals in my world and navigating really hard, challenging moments and being able to address those things clearly and head on while being compassionate and respectful and loving at the same time. And it's something that is so hard to do sometimes. And I think that we all need to practice it a little bit more. I certainly do because sometimes I'm just right. And that is the only answer. And, and so it's hard to remember that sometimes they're also just right, you know, they're all bringing those different things. And so from a couple of different perspectives of like, you know, maybe leadership books or articles that specific to the field or learning about different perspectives, trying to really put into practice those things, because it's very easy to avoid the uncomfortable, hard moments. And I have done that in many instances and now I'm really trying to be more, more clear and more straightforward and more head-on. And in those types of interactions.

**Nikki:** You don't ever take the easy road. Do you? You're just digging in to all the hard stuff all the time Nicole, it’s quite amazing.

**Nicole:** Well the hard stuff keeps showing up. I better learn how to deal with it, or this is going to--

**Nikki:** Yeah. That's, that's amazing. That's amazing. Well, thanks Nicole, for sharing your experience with us today. Thank you for being so vulnerable and brave about talking about difficult things and for sharing your journey and listeners. Thank you for joining us on Voices From The Village. This podcast is made possible with support from the Federal Preschool Development Grant, and it's produced by The University of Wyoming Early Childhood Outreach Network. We recorded this interview today on zoom. The podcast is directed and edited by Bryce Tugwell. Thanks a lot.

**[End of Recording]**