**Episode 1**

**Interviewer, Respondent**

**[00:00:01]**

**Interviewer: Hello, and welcome to voices from the village, a podcast from the Wyoming Early Childhood Professional Learning Collaborative. We know it takes a village to raise a child and Wyoming early childhood educators as an essential part of that village, this podcast is for you. I am your host, Nicky Baldwin, and today I am thrilled to introduce our guest, Dr. Julie Bullard. Julie is an accomplished Professor, Author, Presenter and Leader. Her book, Creating Environments for Learning, is one of the most influential books on learning environments in our field. I have used it for years in the classes I teach at the University of Wyoming and it is our go-to resource on environments at the Professional Learning Collaborative. I love so many things about this book and I can’t wait to talk with you, Julie, about your work and about the importance of the learning environments we create for children. So, welcome Julie Bullard.**

**Respondent: Thank you, it is great to be here.**

**Interviewer: I am so excited to have you here today. We’ve had the opportunity to bring Julie in to do some webinars for us with Project Echo last year. That was a wonderful experience and listeners, if you want to hear more from Julie, which I’m sure you will after listening to this, you can contact your facilitator and they’ll help you get set up to watch those Echo sessions that Julie presented last year. So, Julie, we have so many things we can talk about together today. One of the things I really wanted to do though is can you start off just giving us a little bit of your background and tell us why early childhood, what led you here in your career?**

**Respondent: I think that I always, always loved hearing children and always was interested in how they developed and so, even in grade school, the school that I went to had what they considered librarian and these librarians who were often like sixth, seventh or eighth graders, would develop activities for younger children around books, and so I started doing that like in sixth grade, outside of planning these little lessons and activities for younger children in my school and I loved it. So, once I you know had to think about what I was going to do for a career, it was pretty, obvious to me that I wanted to do something working with young children because from a really young age I loved watching them develop and I loved planning what you could do to intervene to help with that development. I think that was where it all began.**

**Interviewer: That’s amazing that you knew so young.**

**Respondent: I know, yeah…**

**Interviewer: That this was something that you were interested in. That’s really cool. Julie, this is a podcast about professional learning, we are Professional Learning Collaborative so we are going to talk a lot about learning, and I wanted you to start off by telling us what some of your biggest influences have been as a learner. Anything that really changed your thinking or transformed your practice early on in your career or, I mean, and we’ll talk later about some things that you’re still learning but what kinds of knowledge did you gain that really changed you, lit the fire in you in early childhood?**

**Respondent: I think what, when I think specifically of environments, I think something that really changed my thinking was when I checked some architecture classes and started really thinking about influence of environment and on wellbeing and on learning and just [inaudible] joy. So that had a pretty, profound effect on me. I think with an early childhood in general, I think I’m learning about the [inaudible] was something that I love, I love learning about PRJ and I loved learning about Pagatski and I loved, you know a lot about [inaudible] Montessori, [inaudible] was very inspiring for me and so, then thinking about how all of that work combines together and how it’s relevant today and how it plays out within day to day types of activities and day to day types of learning environments has been really, really fascinating to me. And then also just observing, observing children, learning, observing teachers and how they facilitate that learning. It’s been fun for me because I’ve had a variety of roles since I’ve been able to observe myself as a teacher, I’ve been able to observe working with children, I’ve been able to observe a lot of other teachers working with children and so it’s that constant observing and seeing how different ways we relate to children in different environments we’d set up in different materials we provide, how that influences children’s learning, has been fascinating.**

**Interviewer: That makes a lot of sense to me. One of the gifts I think you offer our field in that book and just in general is a really, practice, based view of this environment. It’s practical things and simple things and just that ability to take all those theorists and then really boil that down into here’s some things you can do with kids every day. I think that’s one of the real strengths of the book for sure, and that really came through in that answer, that makes sense to me. I would just like to dig in a little bit more about the book and what led you to write it. It’s in the third edition now, right?**

**Respondent: Yeah.**

**Interviewer: What made you decide to focus on learning environments and to write the book?**

**Respondent: I think that, throughout my career, I believed that play is really, really, critical for children’s learning and I believe that environments are that backdrop for play and that that’s how we as adults and teachers influence children’s learning by providing the environments and the props and the materials that they can utilize for play.**

**Interviewer: Uhm.**

**Respondent: So, it seemed to me like we needed a book that would help teachers to do that, because one of my real worries as an educator was that we were starting to see kind of a disappearance of play.**

**Interviewer: Yeah.**

**Respondent: And the disappearance of play in children’s home environments and the disappearance of play in early childhood environments and so I felt like we needed a book that could help teachers understand that we can allow children to play and that they can learn all these things that we feel are so important for them to learn in the early childhood years, but that the way that we do that is by really consciously thinking about how we establish and better environments. And so, as an early childhood educator myself, I looked for that in the book and I hadn’t found the exact book that I wanted, so that led me think about writing a book.**

**Interviewer: Along those lines, just a question for you, one of our professional learning facilitators all sent questions that they were hoping that I would ask you and this one is from one of our facilitators I thought was really interesting, so I’d love to hear your thoughts about this. She wanted to know what are some small things someone could do that could make a big difference in their environment? Because we feel like your book is full of a million small things, I think that’s where that’s coming from, you know. Any thoughts about that?**

**Respondent: Well, I think it would be kind of what stage you’re in in environmental design, so if you were just beginning, I think a small thing you can do that makes a big difference is making sure that you have really well established boundaries and separating areas, for example if you have a dramatic play area and you have a black area, that you have some well established boundaries that children aren’t running through the black area and accidentally knocking them down by bringing the [inaudible] through. And so, for beginning environmental designers I find that they often don’t think clearly about that and they end up with [inaudible] issues surrounding it.**

**Interviewer: Uhmm.**

**Respondent: As people go on designing, I think one of the things that’s a small change of making sure that you have enough materials, so that children aren’t fighting over materials that are there and so there is not so much competition for materials that children are just kind of waiting around with nothing to do. I think a change people can make is making sure that that environment is something that we’d like them and the children that they’re with. So, you know sometimes you go into environments and they’re kind of like cookie cutter environments and you can walk in, like I often go to environments where there’s no children present and so you walk in and there’s nothing in that environment that really tells me who is here, you know, and so children and adults feel proud when they have their work displayed or when they have pictures of them doing things on the wall or when, you know as evidence that this environment meets their needs. And so those might not be small things, but I think they’re really important things.**

**Interviewer: Yeah, and I’d love to, …two of our facilitators asked questions about that because I think we recognize the importance of that piece and, would you have any guidance for someone whose hearing that and thinking okay, it needs to, what we want is our environments to reflect the people that live and use them, right, that absolutely. Any advice about how to start if they’re thinking: sure, I want my environment to better reflect the teachers and the children and the families and our community. Any advice about where to start.**

**Respondent: Well, I think one place I would start would be just with photos and with work and the children and adults that are in the environment and that might be something like the other hand washing charts, and it might be just putting pictures of children that are actually in that room washing their hands. That would be the generic chart. Or perhaps its in the dramatic play area and you have pictures on the wall, or maybe its just substituting one of those pictures with a picture of the children in the room that are {inaudible} that you know, a snapshot of a child that {inaudible} that or, you know it could be simple like that, it could be that children’s art is what’s decorating the walls instead of you know, {inaudible} and that art could be framed with a frame from the dollar store.**

**Interviewer: Sure, yeah.**

**Interviewer: So, it could be things like that, but I think going a little beyond that, it might be thinking about, as a teacher, thinking about what are things I’d love like for me, like one of the things I love, I love to drink tea. I’m a huge tea drinker, and if you were coming to my house and see me that above the kitchen cupboards I have, I have a clutching teapot you know, and I have quotes about tea and it would be obvious to you if you walked into my house that …Ooh, she loves tea. So, as a teacher, it’s not that I’m going to probably give children tea every day, but one of the things that I would make sure that was available in the dramatic play area would be a teapot, because that’s something I would want to share, you know, and I love plants. So, as a teacher, if you walked into my room, you would see plants because I love plants and that’s something I would want to share with the children would be my love of plants. So, I think, when you’re a teacher, you should be thinking about what are your loves too, that you want to share and that would be obvious in your room. And then I think, with the community, it’s like we live in communities where, like in our community, there’s a lot of fly fishing, there’s a lot of fishing. People come from all over to fish and blue ribbon {inaudible} springs around us. And so, at some point in my environment, I would probably want to share that with children. It’s something they’re probably familiar with as part of the culture here. We live in an area too that’s a rich ranching area. That would be something else that I’d want to make sure that I shared with children through the environment at different, you know. I won’t have maybe that there all the time, but it would be something that at some point, it would be something that I would definitely want to share, because it’s part of our community.**

**Interviewer: Yeah, I’d love that, and I just think it’s wonderful to remind especially the adults. I think sometimes we forget that we spend hours every day in this space, we should bring ourselves to this space and that builds these really, deep relationships when we’re willing to share those things that matter to us and to recognize those things that matter to our families and the kids in the space. Yeah, I’d love that. I have another interesting question for you. I can’t wait to hear what you’ll say to this. Could you give an example of something that you’ve seen when you’ve entered a space and you feel like the environment is sort of working against teachers or that something that’s happening in the environment is really working for them but just you know, you’re looking and you see this, you know, just these couple simple things and this wouldn’t be working against you right now?**

**Respondent: I can think of, I {inaudible} with a children’s museum, I love to go to children’s museums and lots of other places and look at their play spaces, so I went into a children’s museum and they had, they had this wonderful display I guess {inaudible} but it was, they were trying to introduce children to a variety of different clothing from throughout the world, and so that they had them all folded neatly and placed on a shelf. And so, immediately of course, as soon as children entered, they’d be dragging everything off the shelves, and they weren’t folding them neatly and putting them back on the shelf. So, the staff were spending all their time folding those clothes up and putting them on the shelf. {..laughter….} So, the children weren’t able to really see the clothing, you know clearing and some were folded up and on the shelf and the adults had this idea about how to keep the area neat and so they were spending an inordinate amount of time making this happen and I sat there and I was just thinking to myself: I wonder if anybody has analyzed this and in some cases why can’t as an outsider and it’s so clear that this is not working, some things are not very clear when you’re in the midst of it. And so, I think that when you as a teacher finding that you’re spending a lot of time on something, it’s that it’s time to re-analyze and think: umm, what could I do differently here?**

**Interviewer: Aha….(laughter)…that’s a great example. I feel like there’s probably a lot of things like that in my classroom days that I was doing that to myself. Umm, and you don’t see when you’re right embedded in it, sometimes you can’t see it.**

**Respondent: Right. I think one of the things I’d recommend is that every once in a while, you have someone come in just as an observer and watch because sometimes as an observer it’s so easy to pick up those things.**

**Interviewer: Mm that’s a great idea. Listeners, if you’re interested in doing that, that is a thing that our facilitators would love to do or, even better, connect you with somebody else that’s in a classroom and you can do a little exchange and look at each other’s spaces. Here’s another question for you: what’s something that you think most teachers do well, but they don’t realize and maybe and they don’t recognize?**

**Respondent: I think that most teachers go into the field because they really enjoy children and I think that that is absolutely critical that the people that work with young children love them, that they love being around them, that they get so much enjoyment from children that you want to tell everybody about it, that you want to share anecdotes at the end of the day and I don’t think sometimes we fully appreciate how critical and essential and special that is, to have teachers that have that love. Does that make sense?**

**Interviewer: Yeah, it does to me. I was just thinking that if you find yourself, you know you run home and the first thing you want to do is tell a great story about things that happened with kids that day, you can pat yourself on the back and rest assured that you’re like enjoying kids and I agree, that’s like, that’s the foundation, right, for the rest of this work. I love that. You’ve done a lot of international work recently. Would you tell us a little bit about what you’ve been up to?**

**Respondent: I went to China and what.. I was there for about 10 days and I {inaudible} a lot of different early childhood programs in China, and I presented at the International Conference and did some other presentations, but mainly got to really see, you know, see early childhood environments in China and that was really fascinating and interesting to get that opportunity.**

**Interviewer: Uhmm. You’ve had some people since then, you’re doing some work with some folks in China, right, using around your book?**

**Respondent: Yeah, I did the …my book has been translated and so my book is used quite a bit in China, and so it was interesting for me to see the questions and things that teachers have there and for me to get to see some kind of misunderstandings and then go back and think about it and analyze it. An example might be about alone spaces and I realize that in my book I have pictures of an alone spaces, but I don’t necessarily have pictures of what goes into an alone spaces, and so it gives the idea I think, one way that an alone area or retreat spaces, that would be what we call it, is the solitary space with no materials.**

**Interviewer: Aha…**

**Respondent: And so, I think that I have been probably, the picture that I’ve chosen have led to this understanding about alone spaces.**

**Interviewer: That’s interesting…**

**Respondent: I know, and I don’t think its only in China, I think that’s happened here as well and so, one of the big questions that people have were you know, children want to use these alone spaces. It’s a dramatic play area and should we allow that or not? And then it’s {inaudible}….like that they were not adding any materials to the alone spaces that children could utilize and that was probably why children then were to go to the dramatic play spaces.**

**Interviewer: Sure, yeah. That’s fascinating. That relates to my next question, that anecdote, which is just: what are some things, other things you’ve learned about environments in your international work that maybe you didn’t understand in the same way before?**

**Respondent: One of the interesting things when I went to China was that they have really well-developed outdoor environments, and one way that they make those environments work really well, is by having a lot of real accessible, easy to access, storage in each of their outdoor kind of learning spaces.**

**Interviewer: Really?**

**Respondent: So, it’s something that I have been promoting for a long time but had not really seen that being implemented so much before I went to China, but it is very exciting to get to see that. So, for example, we might in environments in the United States there often maybe taking things in and out of storage chests or bringing it in and out of the indoor environment and instead of having it always available on the playground and protect them in some way right in the area where its going to be used. So, you might like have an art center outside and you might have a storage cabinet right next to outdoor, it serves to contain all your paints and materials. So, all you have to do is open up that little storage area and it’s right there and so that was, I think I got a little off focus there but I ……..**

**Interviewer: No, no, that’s amazing to think about.**

**Respondent: But that would be one of the things I saw there that I thought was really interesting.**

**Interviewer: Well and that’s just so practical again, right? It’s just really simple, that doesn’t occur to us always just a little extra thought and that’s another thing I really love about that is it’s about things like storage. When we’re thinking of our spaces, we really want to think intentionally about something that might, that might seem, others might not think about at all, but where we place storage can make a huge difference.**

**Respondent: It can make a huge difference because if we want to really {inaudible} after environment and we have limited teacher time, we do not have time to be bringing all these things in and out every day. You know, and instead of having one big storage, of having smaller storage spaces positioned throughout our play space is way, way more helpful and so I saw a lot more of that in China.**

**Interviewer: I love it.**

**Respondent: And one of the things they were using was wire shelving, like wired {inaudible} shelving but then they had these covers, these rain waterproof covers that would zip over the top so then you just unzip it you know and get to all your materials and you can zip it back up and your materials will be protected.**

**Interviewer: That’s fabulous. Maybe your next edition of the book you can toss in a picture of that.**

**Respondent: Absolutely, yes, yeah.**

**Interviewer: Okay, just a few more questions for you today Julie, this has been great. What are some of your concerns or worries about our field right now, some of the things that you see may be happening as you’ve travelled so much and seen so many places. What’s on your mind? What worries you?**

**Respondent: I really worry that we’re decreasing the amount of play that children have and that we are sometimes maybe creating environments that are not joyful, ideally we want early childhood to be a time where children are joyfully learning, right, and that they’re joyfully learning through play, and I think we’ve become sometimes so concerned that our children meet certain benchmarks that we’ve taken away play, we’ve become more teacher directed, we become more, we’ve lost the concrete learning experiences and we’ve replaced them sometimes with {inaudible} type activity and so that’s very, very, worrisome to me. I get worried about things that decrease children’s involvement in play and their ability to be engaged in deep play, and so it seems sometimes that, as we as adults we become worried, then we want to exert more control, we want to make sure our children will do exactly the same thing, maybe or that we might exert control by doing things like rotating children every 15 year {inaudible} centers to ensure that every child engages in every center, but by doing that, we are disrupting deep learning opportunities. So, for example, when children are building a block structure, the initial build, they don’t usually learn or engage in the deeper learning at the beginning of building that block structure, as they do later on in the building of that structure. I mean, let’s say they’re making a building and they’re trying to make it as high as they can but it becomes more difficult if we go on and you’re trying…..you know and so, or like a dramatic placing and then negotiating that with the other children in the center, like who’s going to play {inaudible} and as they try to keep that role going, it becomes more advanced and more difficult and there’s more learning involved with it, and from the artificial cut that off by saying: okay, I’m {inaudible} now, we negatively impacted their learning. It’s the same thing you know with play, it’s such an ideal learning method that when we take it away and we substitute instead a teacher directed activity we block the wonderful ingredient for learning.**

**Interviewer: I want everyone in the world to listen to the words you just said about that. We need to hear it. Thank you. Well then, on a positive note, what have you seen lately that’s inspired you or brings you hope?**

**Respondent: I see early childhood teachers who are so dedicated to children and I see teachers sharing the things that they’re doing in a variety of different media, and inspiring others, and I see that finally I think nationally there’s this this notion that early childhood are critical important years, so all of those things really give me hope.**

**Interviewer: Another question from one of our professional learning facilitators and then we’ll sort of wrap things up. As a group we’ve been thinking a lot about implicit bias and equity and those things, certainly since last summer, in particular, and she asked this: how can we set aside implicit biases to make our spaces welcoming and representative of everyone?**

**Respondent: I think it’s a really, wonderful question. I think maybe one way we do that is by really thinking about and learning about the communities that we’re in and the families that are using our environments and to really get to know the families and what’s important to them, and what they want to see with their [inaudible} groups and what they’re willing to possibly share that we might include in our environments, and so maybe including families and community members of {inaudible} environment, but it goes way beyond that. It means that we try to truly, in an understanding of what’s precious, and we include those precious things within our environment. Does that make sense?**

**Interviewer: It does, I think that’s beautifully said. They’re not just guests, they contribute, they’re partners and that idea of most precious to the families and children. That’s very healing to hear that.**

**Respondent: And that we value, we really value that.**

**Interviewer: Oh Julie, this has been amazing. I do have one final question for you, because this is a podcast about learning. What’s something that you’ve learned lately that you’re really, excited about?**

**Respondent: Mmm, there’s so much!**

**Interviewer: I’d love to hear all of it.**

**Respondent: I have been, one of the things I’ve been working on, I have a four year old grandson that I don’t get to see, and a nine year old granddaughter and so one of the things I’ve pretty gathered for them lately and have been thinking about are little challenges that I’m calling them little challenges, you might call them like a little engineering challenges, but what I’m doing is I’m developing the little {inaudible} with materials that I’m sending them along with little challenges, like kind of open ended questions that they might use with these materials and so I’ve been thinking a lot about developing these little challenges for young children.**

**Interviewer: Those are the luckiest children in the world that get to be your grandchildren, and we’re going to need you to probably publish a book with all the chapters from their grandma, that’s amazing! I’m a grandma now too, and I’m going to need to get my hands on that.**

**Respondent: Yeah, it’s been really, fun to think about it because there’s a challenge for me, like it has to be something that can be shipped easily, so that creates an additional challenge and it’s been a challenge for them and a challenge for me.**

**Interviewer: I love it! I know our listeners are going to be dying to know like one example of one challenge for your grandkids. Will you just tell us one example?**

**Respondent: Okay, I mean one challenge was I sent some little figurines that they really are engaging with right now and so then I had their mom freeze them in a block of ice. So, one of the challenges was: what could {inaudible} to get these figurines out of the ice and so, experimenting with: shall we chip the ice off; should we get a spray bottle of salt water, you know, how can we get these out, what works best? So, that was my challenge. Then once they got the figurines out, then one of the challenges was to try to build a little bridge that would hold the figurine. And so, I sent a variety of different kinds of {inaudible} materials, I {inaudible} and some straws and just different things. So that would be an example of a challenge.**

**Interviewer: What do your grandchildren call you?**

**Respondent: They call me Grandma.**

**Interviewer: Grandma.**

**Respondent: Yeah, but I have, it’s kind of funny I have a two-year-old grandchild and somehow, she started calling me Grandma G and we got no {inaudible} of the G but ….**

**Interviewer: That’s excellent. I needed to know that because I’m like envisioning this book that’s like: “Challenges from Grandma G” or something, yeah, that’s coming from you. That’s amazing. Julie, thank you so much for this time. I genuinely feel so grounded every time I listen to you and talk to you and so I just feel so grateful that you gave us this time today and listeners, if you want to get your hands on Julie’s book, it’s so important, it’s such an amazing tool and we will purchase it for you through the Professional Learning Collaborative. We want to get it in as many hands of as many people in our state as we can. So, just get a hold of your Professional Learning Facilitator and say it like to do some work with them around Julie’s book. So, thank you so much Julie for your time today. Thanks for sharing your wisdom with us and thank you listeners, for joining us on Voices from the Village. This podcast is made possible with support from the Federal Pre-School Development Grant and is produced by the University of Wyoming Early Childhood Outreach Network. We recorded our interview today on Zoom. This podcast is directed and edited by Bryce Tugwell.**

**[End of Recording : 00:36:20]**