**Episode 5**

**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’m your host Nicky Baldwin and today I’m so excited to introduce two early childhood educators that I’ve come to know and admire as they have completed the course for early childhood education at the University of Wyoming. I have had the privilege of teaching Pepper Stevens and Britney Grainger in multiple classes and have been continually impressed by their wisdom and knowledge and by the way they carry themselves as professionals and advocates for children and families. So welcome Pepper and Britney.

**Respondent:** Thank you, and what a great compliment that we impress you!

**Interviewer:** Well, thanks for being here ladies and I can’t wait to talk about some important things tonight with you. What I’d like for you to do first though is take a minute and introduce yourself to our audience. So, tell us a little bit about you, really interested in your professional journey, what has led you to this point in your career.

**Respondent:** I’m Britney Grainger, I currently teach at Hoynam Catholic School in Sheridan, my family, my Dad went to school and {inaudible} a teacher so he was teaching and {inaudible} …growing up and then my Mom was a childcare provider for a very long time. She had her own home daycare and then she moved into DFS as a licenser after I got a little older, so, just being around young children and being a teacher is just kind of in my blood and I went to college knowing I wanted to teach but my adviser, instead of putting me in a teaching class, put me in just public speaking as that was what would get me into teaching, and I hate public speaking. So, I deterred for a while and did a bunch of science and just wasn’t really something I could get into and found myself back in elementary education and I had kind of bounced around from different jobs and centers for a while and just kind of trying to find my place and knowing that I really wanted to teach some children but not find the right fit and when I first moved up here, I worked at Holy Name with I like to call her my mentor because I wouldn’t be wearing him if it wasn’t for her {inaudible}. She called one day out of the blue and I kind of was in a rough spot and I didn’t like where I was working and I didn’t like the administration and she’s like, hey I have a teaching hot spot for you, come work with me again and I was like all right, I’m on it. And so, I have been there ever since and I just feel like because I’m with her, she was such an inspiration and wanting to work with young children, because she was just so amazing at it and it was just so fun, so being back in that place with her and being able to collaborate with her more as a teacher instead of just a {inaudible} was just a big thing for me. So, I got to do a lot of growing in there, it’s weird to think that I’ve been doing this for eleven years because I feel like I didn’t start actually, I don’t want to say not that I wasn’t a good teacher but like really dive into it and doing what I’m meant to do until just recently. I think that has to do a lot with my growth and learning and different experiences and different children and parents that come into my classroom because every year is different, but I grow each year and I finally feel like I’m at a place where I’m comfortable with what I’m doing and I owe a lot of that to Laurie and just my experiences, I don’t know how else to really put that. I feel like I’m {inaudible}….

**Interviewer:** No, I think it’s really amazing when you arrive at a space where you’re more confident and you feel like you have a real sense of who you are as a teacher in a classroom.

**Respondent:** Yeah, right.

**Interviewer:** And being in that space, I think that’s great. How about you Pepper?

**Respondent:** I’m Pepper Stevens. I work at the Child Development Center, Region 2 in Sheridan. This is my third year in the classroom. Kind of like Britney, I started my Mom ran a daycare in {inaudible} when she was in college there and then she went on to elementary and mastery and all kinds of things education. My younger sister is a school phycologist working zero to seventeen in Michigan, working with hospitals and alternative schools and all kinds of things and I was never going to be a teacher. I think in high school I worked at the daycare my Mom worked at and it was okay, it was lot of kids, a lot of parents, I wasn’t really great at it, I was great at playing with the students that were there, but I didn’t want to do that. In college I got a job as a ski instructor so I could have a free season pass and I was really good at that and I was given the opportunity to work with the students with special needs. I worked with a lot of children who had autism, I taught the blind to ski and it was just phenomenal. I really loved that, but it was more about skiing to me than teaching. So, while in college I pursued a degree in chemistry, and I did that for a really long time, and it was super boring. It was the same thing, every day, just mixing things and clear liquid and not a path that I really found exciting and then, shortly after that, my grandmother was in her late nineties, lived on a ranch in Wyoming and my husband and I moved out there to help in her final years and we had children and then after she passed I didn’t go back to work until my youngest was school aged and had been diagnosed with a disability. From there I just thought what great work these people were doing, and I knew that I had experience working with children and children with disabilities although I didn’t really view them as disabilities then because it was more about teaching the activity and I try and carry that into my classroom now, that it’s not this child need something different, it’s just how can I do better for that child. I just love it; I love getting to spend the days with these kids and watching how they grow and being a part of that. So, once my son was in pre-school, I went to work at the pre-school he was at and I loved it and have gone back to teaching this thing I was never going to do. It’s been such a great journey.

**Interviewer:** Thank you for sharing that Pepper and for both of you. That is one reason why you’re here tonight, is because our conversations in the podcasts the last two episodes have been about how we support children who may have experienced trauma and then also sort of a larger conversation about how we support children who learn differently or who might express behaviors that could be considered challenging in a classroom sometimes, how we respond to that and I will say that at the Professional Learning Collaborative, our facilitators are out in the State working in early childhood programs all around the State and with early childhood educators and one of the first questions that they encounter in most spaces is from teachers wanting to know how to support a child who maybe isn’t as successful in that classroom environment as others. This has been something people have been asking for for a long time and we’re not here to talk about a million behavior techniques to help a kid behave, we’re actually here to talk about how we can look at and see those children and understand their needs and try to meet those needs. You know that’s why I wanted to start with I think in our conversation today is just if you think back on your career about an experience maybe with a child who would have been considered a difficult child or a challenging child in a classroom. Have you had an experience that you could sort of share a little bit about with working with that child and what it is that that child taught you that has made you a better teacher? Does any particular experience come to mind or it could be a series of experiences, but I’m really curious?

**Respondent:** I had a student that has been back and forth in foster care and has a very challenging relationship with their biological parent. Just seeing when this child is acting defiant and throwing tantrums, realizing that it’s not so much about he doesn’t want to do this activity or doesn’t like it, it’s I’m looking for someone to tell me I’m okay, please pay attention to me, I need something from you right now and before it was, you know, you need to sit still, we’re at circle, stop, and now realizing that there is more to his behavior than just not wanting to participate. It’s really eye-opening that we need to reflect on all of the children but especially those that we know are in situations where there isn’t continuity or routine.

**Interviewer:** I love that Pepper. I love the idea that instead of placing sort of the blame on the child, you’ve shifted your thinking to thinking about what you can do, where the burden is for you to make some change and do something different, to try to support that child in understanding. How about you Britney? Any examples come to mind?

**Respondent:** I think this class that we’re taking right now has been very eye-opening to me. I haven’t had a lot of, I want to say good, solid, training in trauma, dealing with trauma response for children, so throughout this semester I have been doing a lot of that – tracking and thinking about children I have had in the past that I didn’t know what to do with at the time and I wish now I had this training or this knowledge that I could do better. I think of one child that just very aggressive and severe outbursts and it was so scary and just not knowing what to do, how to help that child in the moment while keeping everyone else safe. I remember it got to a point where we had to let the child go, like it just, it was not working and coming into the classroom the next day and the sense of calm that was in my classroom, I didn’t realize how fearful the rest of my students were because of that child until that child left. So, I was battling with no realizing how that was affecting my students, the other students and then battling with what should I have done better, I mean did I do the right thing, should I have sent this child away, I just didn’t know. So, looking back now and I keep thinking about when we had the guest speaker talk about and the question is that what’s wrong with this child, the question needs to be “what happened to you” and I just wish now looking back I would have talked to this child more or even sat down and talked to the parents more and just try to figure out what was going on, like what happened, what can I do that can help you and then just make it a better environment for not just that child but my classroom as a whole because that was a really hard point in my teaching career and my mentor pretty much said: you know you can only do so much and you have to protect yourself and you have to protect the rest of the children too. So, that’s pretty much where we drew the line, it just got to be too violent, but you know I wish I could have done more, I wish I would have had the training. So, I think about things like that and now I’m glad that I know it so if that child comes into my classroom again or a child like that, now I have better training to know what to do when that happens.

**Interviewer**: That’s a really powerful experience. Thanks for sharing that. I’m sure you carry a lot with you from that experience with the child and the other children in your classroom and I’m glad I feel a sense of hope from you as you’re reflecting back on it now. We have tools now that maybe we didn’t have before to understand that child and how to support that child to be successful and all of the other children in that space and it really is about thinking about behaviors differently and understanding them better. Let’s talk about that a little bit more, when you think about what you’ve been learning about trauma informed practices in particular, so listeners, the previous two podcasts have been talking about trauma informed practices, we did an amazing interview with Julie Kurtz who’s an expert and then we did a follow up interview in my class with other students about this. So, this is Part 3 of this series. So, Britney and Pepper, when you think back about all the things we’ve talked about, what’s your big takeaway from trauma informed practices, from the things you’ve learned about trauma informed practices?

**Respondent:** I would say understanding where a child is coming from is really important. It’s not necessarily the behavior need corrected but how to kind of pre-emptively redirect that energy, that behavior and that what we’re doing for our student who has typically developed having a behavior or a student who has disabilities, it can all be the same thing. It doesn’t have to be a different type of reaction from us and that was really powerful to me that they don’t need something different from us, they still need us to be consistent and solid and caring and kind and reliable.

**Interviewer:** I agree with what Pepper said, I think just making sure that these practices are something you just include all the time in general because you’re not ever going to know unless someone tells you if this child has been through a trauma or not. There’s a lot of good things in there that you can use for children that just have some of those behaviors. I think I was reading just tonight I was thinking about children in my home class now that they don’t have trauma but there’s a lot of things that clicked, like oh, that explains why that child was acting like that and I wouldn’t have though about that before. So, I agree, I think just making sure to use all of those all the time, it’s going to be a benefit no matter what.

**Respondent:** Yes, and I think that’s one of the principles we just want everyone to understand is that something that helps a child with unique learning needs be successful is usually great for everyone. It becomes good teaching practice, and we can adopt that, and everyone succeeds.

**Interviewer:** So, let’s talk about practice a little bit. So, if you’re going to think about ideas that just work well, things that you can do in a space that you could share with your peers that are out there in the field right now. You may have some children who have experienced trauma, they may have some children that are expressing some challenging behaviors and it’s not trauma related but just like some go-to’s for you that just seem to really help in most situations with the child who might be struggling. Do you have any that come to mind Pepper?

**Respondent:** The first thing I do if they are emoting very largely as I validate: I see that you are having big feelings, it looks like maybe you’re sad or you’re angry. I try not to label what I think they’re feeling, I let them tell me. If they can’t tell me, I try and: oh, it looks like you’re sad or it looks like you’re angry, but I let them and I say it’s okay to feel that way. First, to me that’s really important as I think a lot of children are told don’t cry, you shouldn’t be sad, calm down, and I think it’s really important that they get to feel those things. That’s the first thing: I can see that you have big feelings and how can I help you work through this. Maybe not those words exactly but try to let them know that I’m here for them to help to feel better, to feel calm, feel safe. That’s the first thing I do for those behaviors and then I try and: it looks like you’re crying, really I just try and validate those emotions and if there are behaviors that are accompanying, let’s try and think of another way, instead of throwing this toy, maybe we could come over and sit down and have a drink of water or what can we do instead, but I see those feelings, it’s okay to have those feelings.

**Interviewer:** Thank you, yeah, that’s great.

**Respondent:** One thing that really popped out to me from the reading was they talk about good and hard feelings versus good and bad feelings, because no feelings are bad, we all have feelings and it’s okay. It’s how we act on those feelings, so making sure when the children are engaging in play, like we talked about in class, that’s the biggest time for teaching that social emotional development and really working with this is how we interact with people in our space.

**Respondent:** Well, and to kind of elaborate a little too is differentiating the feelings from the behavior is really critical. You might be having this really big feeling and the thing you did was not okay but that was just a thing, that’s not you. I really think differentiating between the action and the feeling is so important, that children know that they are okay, and we love them anyway, even though they did this thing.

**Interviewer:** I would say if someone asked what I should do, to me the biggest thing is just have you built a relationship with that child. Does that child know that you care about them, does that child know that they are loved, does that child know that you’re there to listen to them, that they can go to you if they are having those big feelings and they don’t know what to do about it because if they don’t feel like they have that relationship or bond with you, it’s not going to work? So, making sure that you have that with that child is going to be the most important thing for that child, to teach them just how to self-regulate and how to interact with other people and just how to be in a classroom.

**Respondent:** Amen, relationships are the key, right? And it’s amazing without a solid relationship you can try a lot of things, a million great ideas and they won’t be successful {inaudible} the child and if you have a relationship, you don’t have to be perfect and there is a lot of space for you to figure things out together. I think that’s one of the keys that I learned in my career as well.

**Respondent:** Yeah, as adults if we don’t trust each other, we’re not going to learn from them, and children need that trust and safety from us even more.

**Interviewer:** Absolutely, and they don’t often have a way to ask for it, right? So that’s something that we need as the adults we need to be able to pick up on. I would love for you guys to just talk a little bit about families in your experience in supporting families who may have a child who’s struggling. Do you have any advice for early childhood educators out there that want to get it right with families, who may not be sure exactly how to approach them? Have you had some experiences that you’ve learned from or do you have some advice that you might share that has worked well for you?

**Respondent:** I think that goes back to relationships, just making sure that you can build relationships with families, make sure that they know that you aren’t their superior. I don’t, I guess if I’m saying that right, the families think that they don’t compare to you sometimes and that’s not the truth, like you’re in this together, you’re in this as a team and you want them to feel like that, that they can come to you with any questions that they may have. A big one for me is you can’t please everyone. That’s something I’ve had to learn, that’s been a hard lesson for me over the years. So, I can try to build a relationship as much as I can with the family, and some are going to be receptive and some of them aren’t. That’s just how that works.

**Interviewer:** That’s very wise Britney.

**Respondent:** I think one of the things that I don’t want to say was a “aha moment” because it should have been obvious was parents, families, they are the professional of that child. They know this child better than anyone else will. I have at most; I will have your child in my class for about 14 hours a week. I don’t know this child like you do, I need to learn from you. That’s the best way I think to build that is that you know what’s working for you, what’s not working for you, let’s try and figure this out together and if you have verbiage you use or fidgets or toys, we can copy that. So, it’s easier for you at home as the person that is with this child most. I think they have the most knowledge about their child and we need to accept that.

**Interviewer:** That makes a lot of sense.

**Respondent:** Making sure to stay positive too with parents is the big one. I had parents come in for their first ever IEP this year and it was very overwhelming for them and one of the girls from the development centers said: tell me a strength of your child, and the Mom just broke down and started crying and she was like, I don’t know, I can’t think of any, and I knew she knew some, but I think she was very overwhelmed by everything. That was a good chance for me to step in and just like: these are awesome things he does in the classroom and I’m so proud of him for doing this and I think these parents, especially parents that have children with special needs, or are dealing with trauma they hear negatives all the time, so we need to make sure to constantly give them positives because then that’s going to help build a better relationship too because they’re not going to want to come and talk to you if they’re always afraid that you’re going to tell them there’s something negative about their child.

**Interviewer:** Alright, well, a couple of other questions for both of you. I’m just curious, you’re both in different phases in your career, when you think about your profession – early childhood education, Wyoming in particular – what are some of your biggest worries right now about our field?

**Respondent:** Our budget cut. We are development {inaudible} lost a 150 000 just for Part C which is horrifying. Through all this learning that those first three years are almost more critical than anything that comes later. I mean that’s so scary that we won’t, I mean we will still have the ability but it’s going to be a lot harder to service those children at the most critical stage in their development.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, yeah.

**Respondent:** I just don’t want to see our State, you know I know we’ve been {inaudible} and you know kind of previously behind the times I think that we have so much opportunity because we aren’t a huge State to really help develop these children that I hope this loss of funding doesn’t impact that negatively.

**Interviewer:** That’s real. Thanks for sharing that Pepper. What’s been on your mind Britney?

**Respondent:** Everything! I just think that a lot of times I don’t feel like we’re treated as equals when it comes to education. We’re the babysitters and that’s it. They don’t realize how important our role is, how vital our role is and it’s frustrating going off on what Pepper said early childhood that is always the first thing to get cut. You know we struggle with communication with school districts and like how can we make this transition easy for these children, but we don’t get feedback and even teachers like there’s such big turnover in early childhood which is so hard, not just facilities but children as well. So, not having the funds to pay early childhood teachers what they should be paid and just little things like that, like I went to school like you guys did, I did the work, I’m here just as long as you guys are, and I deserve to be treated equally. That’s just so frustrating that people don’t see that.

**Interviewer:** Yeah. We spoke to really important things I think are on everybody’s minds honestly. Well, then my follow up is this: Why are you still here, what brings you hope?

**Respondent:** The world being the mess it seems like right now, like our social climate and everything going on, it’s just chaotic and what I love about my job is I can go in every day and after being bombarded with all these terrible things that are happening on the news, I’m greeted by just the kindest and sweetest little angels that doesn’t affect them and they’re just so caring and loving and they want to please and they want to be kind and just the world is new and it’s full of possibilities to them. They haven’t yet been exposed to all of these different thoughts and ideas and just this is how you should think. That’s just open and I just love their acceptance and just their curiosity for the world. So, it’s just refreshing and that’s why I love doing what I do because they haven’t been ruined yet. I love being that person that can guide them in the direction that is going to continue {inaudible}.

**Interviewer:** That’s beautifully said.

**Respondent:** Thinking back a little to your last question to what frightens me and then I can go into the hope because they’re kind of in a mix is I think we also have a lot of pressure on us now to produce academic preschoolers, instead of socially emotional ready children for preparedness of that academic venture down the road, but I think we’re really lucky in all the programs we have available in our State and Nationally and Internationally due to technology that we can still integrate those academic desires through play, through all kinds of other ways as teachers. That gives me hope. Even though there’s a lot on our shoulders to produce children at three who can read, and problem solve, you know the quadratic formula and know things, we can do it with play, and we can learn to write our names in pudding and clothe pens are fantastic toys and it just gives me hope that we are so good at what we do, that we can meet those goals, that maybe developmentally or realistically aren’t appropriate or realistic.

**Interviewer:** Yeah, I love that. That’s really empowering, right? You have so much to offer the rest of the world with your expertise about what children need and it really does work, it makes a difference. Before we wrap this up both of you, this is a podcast about professional learning and I know you’re both students, so you have a lot that’s probably my fault that’s on your mind related to classwork at the University, but I’d love for you to share with our listeners something new that you’ve learned recently that really matters to you.

**Respondent:** This was a different podcast, I overheard my husband listening to and I think it just, it’s such a great concept of the difference between trying and training. You know we can try to be better teachers, or we can train ourselves to be better teachers. We can try to be better friends, or we can train ourselves those things and I’m really trying to put, I’m training myself to put that into practice that if I want to be better at something, I can’t just try because trying, we can quit. But if we’re training, we have this goal that we are working for every day and some days aren’t going to be good training days, but other days are going to be great training days. If we looked at that bad training day as a trying day, we might just stop. So, I really like this idea of the difference between trying and training and we can always train ourselves to do something better.

**Interviewer:** That’s amazing! Thank you, because now I’m going to be thinking about that a lot Pepper. It’s wonderful. How about you Britney?

**Respondent:** I think my big one right now is I’m doing the anti-bias training and the book study and I think last year I went into a really deep dive of what white privilege is and what I can do to change that and that was very hard and very eye-opening to me and so this book study has been a good Segway into know what can I do as an educator to create these safe and accepting learning environments for any child that walks in my door and it’s just so important and I just hope that more people will look into stuff like that and just educate themselves on anti-bias training because it’s so needed right now. It’s always been needed but the social climate right now, it’s needed more than ever, so I think that’s been a really big growth and learning experience for me and I’m really enjoying it. So, I get new stuff every week from my book study group of thinks I want to try in my classroom, so I have a whole post-it note board.

**Interviewer:** Thanks for the shout-out, just for listeners too. Every spring we do a Statewide book study that connects you with early childhood educators from across the State, all different types of programs and focusing on how to be a leader in early childhood and so this year that book study has been about anti-bias education and if you are interested, if you want to be able to participate in that, if you’re interested in learning more, you can absolutely reach out to your professional learning facilitator and they can connect you with some great resources including the book that Britney has been studying. So, really glad you brought that up. Well, ladies, thank you so much. This has been so eye-opening, I appreciate you sharing your wisdom, Pepper and Britney, I’m so thankful for the amazing work you guys do with children and families that you have stayed and that you have so much hope. Just thank you for being here with me and for taking some time to talk to our listeners that are all across the State. 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 this interview today on Zoom. Voices from the Village is directed and edited by Bryce Tugwell.

**[End of Recording: 00:33:34]**