Equity Today: The Region VIII EAC Podcast
Episode 204 – “Early Childhood Education”

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Tyler: Hello! And welcome to another edition of Equity Today, the EAC Region VIII podcast! I’m Tyler, and today I’m sitting down with Dr. Marilyn Chipman, one of the three Equity Specialist Coordinators here on the EAC staff. She has been involved in equity for many years, and today we are going to discuss one of her favorite topics, Early Childhood Education. First of all, welcome, thank you for coming on the show.

Marilyn: Thank you for very much Tyler, for the invitation to take part!

T: Of course! I guess let’s start at the beginning. How did you get into Early Childhood, and what is it?

M: Well I was raised in an environment of educators, and my strongest role models growing up were my teachers, but I never pictured myself as being a teacher. I wanted to be a social worker, so my undergraduate degree from the University of Denver was in Sociology and Psychology. I moved to Los Angeles and entered the field of Social Work and did very well there, met my husband, and we had the first two of our three children. When my sons were very little, I became a stay-at-home mom, and when they entered Kindergarten, 1st grade, 2nd grade, I began volunteering at their elementary school. I was up there 2, 3, 4 days a week for all kinds of activities, from field trips to room mother to baking brownies, and as I was in and out of their classrooms Tyler, I became absolutely mesmerized by the way that young children learn, and the excitement that they bring to the learning experience. I thought, why would I ever want to go back to social work when this whole world of exciting early childhood learning is open to me? So I returned to school and earned a Master’s Degree in Early Childhood Education from California State University, and I have never looked back. Teaching became my passion. I moved to Colorado, and continued teaching here, starting in the Aurora Public School system, and in 1986, I was shocked speechless to be nominated for Colorado Teacher of the Year, just teaching my Kindergarten class. So the following year, 1987, I entered the Doctoral Program at the University of Denver, and there I earned the PhD Degree in Education, Curriculum, and Instruction. I was hired here at Metro State University, as a professor in the Department of Teacher Education, and I became the Area Coordinator for, guess what, the Early Childhood Licensure
program. So this then expanded my knowledge of the field that I'd been in for so long, but I learned so many new things because I was invited to participate in just a wide array of decision-making endeavors. So this forced me to remain on the cutting edge, and I actually had the best of both worlds, because as I was overseeing my students in their student-teaching experience, that meant that I was back out in the elementary school classroom with the little children, just the way I had loved to do for so many years. There’s a certain excitement that accrues in those, in the early years of learning. School is never boring to them. They immerse themselves in everything that’s around them, and so for me teaching the young, and then teaching others how to teach the young, has really been a joy. So you were asking, what is early childhood? What is this thing I’m talking about? Well, I have watched the field or the concept of early childhood come into its own for many, many years past, probably for generations past, early childhood was just considered to be babysitting. It was the purview of the teenage girl next door, your Aunt Jane, any other relative that you could grab a hold of as they were walking past and say “Would you watch my kids for me?” And that was the vision that the public had of early childhood. The premise, basically, was that it did not really require any training or skill, just an available breathing body to take care of the young. But in the mid 80s, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and specifically a woman by the name of Sue Brenkamp, became the catalyst, if you will, for the thrust to elevate the position of early childhood educator to where it is today. As I said, it has taken us from the mid 80s to the year 2013, but the growth has been phenomenal, beyond anything that the public was prepared for. The early childhood educators knew that they were worth something more than what they were perceived to be, but it took a long time to convince the public of that. It hasn’t been an easy road, but it’s true today that all around our nation, unequivocally, people are aware that to teach the young requires more than just a willing heart, it requires preparation, and once prepared, it requires ongoing education. Sue Brenkamp came up with the concept of Developmentally Appropriate Practice. And this has been the driving theory behind early childhood for all of these years. Early Childhood education encompasses the first 8 years of an individual’s life. So starting from birth, to age 8. In school, we say from pre-K to grade 3. Now I was around when it went from grade 2 to grade 3 here in Colorado. Many 3rd Grade teachers were outraged, because they did not want to be categorized as Early Childhood; again they were thinking, that’s babysitting, that’s marching to music songs and giving them orange juice and graham crackers and sending them home for the day, and they felt that they were more prominent than that. However, that type of thinking has changed as the profession itself has become more recognized and valued. But if you just think with me, about the years birth through age 8, picture in your mind that little infant just born into the world completely helpless and wordless if you will. Totally dependent on someone else for everything that it needs to exist. Now picture that same individual at age 8, Tyler. Can you see the difference? Can you see the difference physically? Emotionally? Cognitively? Linguistically? And of course, socially, as well. From the infant in the cradle to an 8-year old child, more changes have taken place than in any other 8-year timeframe. If you picture with me now, for instance, age 20 to 2. There’s really not that much difference going on. Age 42 to 50. That’s 8
years also. There’s not that much difference going on. But from birth to age 8, it’s a world of wonder, and this is what Early Childhood Education is all about.

T: That is so, so, so important! That’s amazing!

M: Absolutely, I’m glad I convinced you!

T: No, I, couldn’t have asked for a better explanation. What do you think occurred in the 80s that allowed this to be acknowledged and accepted that, because like, you know humans have been around for a long time, the 80s is just moments ago in the span of human history, so what happened that prepared us?

M: I think that’s a very valid question. In the span of human history, there again, we have a lot writings that have come out of history. You look in Greek literature, literature from the African continent, literature across Europe, that extolls the virtue of motherhood, OK? But it, those writings were written, usually written by men. They extoll the virtue of motherhood, because this meant carrying on the legacy of the next generation. Delivering sons and daughters to propagate the village if you will. But there was never an extolling of the care of the child.

T: You wanted the child to work to carry on your lineage, yeah.

M: Right, to carry on your lineage, but there’s never this extolling of the person who takes care of the child. So it’s good the mother delivered the child, I now have a son, but taking care of the child, well anyone could do that, a 10-year old girl could watch a 2-year old, or an elderly woman who has lived many many years and can no longer go out into the fields to work, we can leave the children in her care. So this is where so much of the, if you will, the view of Early Childhood came through all these years. But, then came along, giants of theory, like Piaget, Vigotsky, even Montessori, more recently, who discovered that children are marvels of genius, of intelligence, and so, those giants in the field today are building upon the work of Piaget, Montessori, Vigotsky, and others like that. More recently, all of our Early Childhood theorists, what it boiled down to was acknowledgement that little children should be valued for the incredible, incredible mental capacity that they have to learn anything, and the years have proven that that is true. For instance now we have, I guess I’m moving on into the most current White House initiative on STEM. Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math, which of course some people would say, well of course you’re talking high school and middle school, are you not? You’re talking college and graduate school, are you not? No, we’re talking early childhood. Starting them already in those young years, pointing them in the direction of becoming the next scientists and engineers and creators of innovation, such as this tiny microphone that’s in front of me right now.

T: It seems like there’s a bit of acknowledgment like, yeah just acknowledging childrens’ ability to learn. For some reason, for years and years we thought that just because they didn’t know things, that they couldn’t learn things, or something?
M: Or maybe because they weren't taught things. Again, kindergarten, I can recall even when my children were in kindergarten, but I can also, believe it or not, recall when I was in kindergarten! It was teaching the alphabet and the recognition of numbers, not even writing them, but just simply the recognition of them! Singing just sweet little songs, and I love how early childhood, the songs, the music, the marching, but that's basically all it was, and then nap time, and snack time, and then it's time to go home.

T: It was a mildly constructive daycare, pretty much, as opposed to education.

M: Right, and it was really for socialization, but not anymore, because we have realized that the mind of the child is so alert and so capable of learning so many things.

T: I know recently you went to the Rocky Mountain Early Childhood Conference; what kind of stuff did you pick up from there in terms of childhood brain development and all this good stuff?

M: I think that that particular conference, the Rocky Mountain Early Childhood Conference held here in Denver this very month of March 2013, but also the National Association for the Education of Young Children Conference held in Atlanta last November, I believe, yes it was November; that conference had something like 17,000 people there, the conference here in Denver had over 2,000. Doesn't that in itself show you the elevating of the profession?

T: Absolutely.

M: And the fact that there were workshops, probably over 80-90 different workshops on these various topics that relate to specific areas of early childhood, that in itself shows you that the field is valued. The luncheon keynote speaker on that Friday was Dr. Patricia Kuhl, she holds the Endowed Chair for the Early Childhood Learning at the University of Washington, but she’s also the Co-Director of the University of Washington Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences. Now, would you have, 100 years ago, put those two together? Early Childhood Education chair, but also co-director for learning and brain sciences?

T: It sounds perfect to me!

M: It sounds perfect to you today because the journey has been hard fought and hard won.

T: That’s awesome.
M: But she’s internationally recognized for her research on brain development. And this particular keynote address focused on early language development and how exposure to language actually alters the brain of a child, expanding its capacity, if you will. Her powerpoints were just phenomenal, she has many textbooks if anyone is interested, again it’s Dr. Patricia Kuhl, K-U-H-L.

T: I’ll link to some information on her in the show notes for sure.

M: Ok, alright. But her research, on the brain of the young child, really has implications for critical periods in development for bilingual education, for reading education, even those students who have developmental disabilities, and she also talked a lot about the use of technology, the computer to enhance the research on the brain. Her work was, we sat there just mesmerized. When she finally finished, I don’t think anyone was ready for her to stop.

T: Yeah, could have taken several more hours of her presentation for sure.

M: For sure. So, her research was just phenomenal. And since she had the powerpoint, she could show how the synapses were connecting within the brain, as the child was hearing language, as opposed to children who are not. So….

T: Yeah, interesting that there’s a different neurological process for different kinds of learning that children are, or some aren’t, capable of, I imagine.

M: So, there again, those who have the concept still that learning doesn’t really start taking place until the child is older are missing out. They’re totally missing out.

T: Absolutely. In terms of kind, cause it sounds like science and the education field is on board with this, but, you know, is Washington savvy with this kind of research? And where are we in terms of more popular knowledge of it?

M: Yes, that’s a great question, and certainly one that’s important at this point. Dr. Kuhl herself has been to the White House on an invitation to present her research. Just recently of course we had the Sate of the Union Address for 2013, straight out of the White House, spoken by our President Obama, and he emphasized the early learning childhood initiatives that he is setting forth, concerning funding, again, especially focusing on STEM initiatives in the early years, um, I don’t know; did I mention earlier that even on Sesame Street, Sesame Street is no longer teaching just letters of the alphabet, but they’re having segments specifically geared to STEM learning.

T: That’s wild, I had no idea.

M: And part of that of course has to be informing the dialogue that’s taking place in the White House and around the nation. The Department of Education Secretary Arne Duncan, he also is emphasizing this in speeches that he is making,
continuously, that if indeed we intend to prepare the next generation to take over the helm of responsibility for our nation, they have to start early. We cannot wait. Actually I have a poster outside my door, which you may or may not have ever paid attention to. It’s a poster of little children, all with caps and gowns, which of course they, the gowns are hanging long on their arms and on their feet, the caps are kind of skewed on their heads, because they’re a little bit too large. But it says, preparation for college begins in the early years, begins in kindergarten, and this is what Washington is saying. The President, the Secretary of Education, as well as others are saying, we want to put more money into early learning, because our nation’s future literally depends on it.

T: Yeah, it’s, it’s...we’ve got such a good country, but if we don’t treat the children better it’s not going to be able to keep being quite as good as it is, but it sounds like the people in Washington know that, so, that’s so good.

M: Absolutely. Yeah, there’s a strong, strong initiative coming out of Washington for early learning.

T: I would feel much better putting my money towards children than towards, you know, I mean healthcare is important too, but I would feel much more confident, and I feel it’s a much safer bet, putting your money in the bank of the youth, then.

M: Right, and I guess they go hand-in-hand though, don’t they, because if they’re not healthy youth, then they’re still not going to be able to function.

T: Absolutely. Education is not as useful if you’re in the hospital.

M: Right, or if the child is coming to school sick, hungry, whatever. All of that, you know, fighting a virus, it all goes together. As a matter of fact, you know what? I think almost, that’s a direct segue way if you will, into a quote that I have. The question has been asked, “who is raising America’s children?” Well for all these years, we’ve been saying it takes a village to raise a child, which of course it does, you just want to be sure that you’re in the right village, because you want to be sure who’s raising your child. But literally, everybody is raising America’s children, because it’s a responsibility of everyone. So if we want to have children who are able to reach for the moon, and I say this meaning, dream big and set your goals high, but also out of the STEM, reach for the moon figuratively and quite literally as well, so then the task of raising them has to involve their family, their relatives, their neighbors, the private and public childcare providers, those social institutions that exist within their communities, and of course, the school. The school. Now all of those things that I just mentioned, the family, relatives, the neighbors, the childcare providers, the social institutions, the school, they’re all culturally influenced, and Tyler, I think that’s what I’d like to talk about on our next podcast.
Absolutely, if you’re down to come back, I would love to have you. This was a very, very on-point podcast for sure. Thank you.

Thank you so much again for the invitation and I’ve enjoyed your comments as well.

Well good, I try and, you know, stay caught up with your people doing the really important stuff. I’m just giving you a venue to talk about it.

Thank you so much.

Thank you. I will talk to you, I’m sure, in the next couple weeks. Awesome.

Have a great day! Thank you for listening!

Yes, thank you! If you want to look up any of the people Marilyn was talking about, there will be links in the show notes. And we also have an early childhood section coming up on our website very shortly, so either it will be up by the time this is released, or if it isn’t, I will go back and add the link to the show notes as soon as it is up. So, if it’s not up when you hear this, check back in a couple of weeks and I bet it will be here. Thank you.

Thank you Tyler.

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