Equity Today: The Region VIII EAC Podcast
Episode 206 – “Understanding Cultural Socialization in Early Childhood”

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Tyler: Hello, and welcome to yet another edition of Equity Today, the EAC Region VIII Podcast. I’m Tyler, and joining me yet again is our very own Marilyn Chipman, and this is going to be part 3 of our discussion on early childhood education. If you’re just picking up now, you might want to listen to the other two; they’re by no means necessary to understand what we’re talking about here, but would certainly supplement the information nicely. So, last time, we kind of, what we talked about was parent engagement, but what got brought up was just the concept of cultural relevance, where you have to both respect the culture of your students, and at the same time try to not add negative value judgments to them. Which, when I think about these things, what comes up in my mind is the idea of cultural socialization, and since we are talking to our very own early childhood expert, I’m interested what your ideas on cultural socialization for the young child looks like, and what the impact is. Let’s stand back. What does the term socialization actually mean?

Marilyn: OK, well thank you again Tyler. It’s always such a delight to be across the table from you.

T: Always a pleasure on our end too.

M: Thank you. Socialization, yes, that’s what we’ll be talking about today, and yes, I am an early childhood educator, and I’m fascinated by culture, which is where this idea of cultural socialization comes from, and the dynamics of how we interact within and between our own cultural enclave. And culture is transmitted through the process of socialization, and so, in order to define that term, let me just begin by describing an activity that I’ve used from time to time in the classes that I’ve taught here at the university, as well as when I was at the university in the state of Texas. The actual name of one of my favorite courses was Cultural Socialization of the Young Child. And, in that particular course as well as in a couple of others that I had done, I want you to use your imagination, sir, if you will, and try to envision what I had each of my students doing. I gave each participant a pink sheet of paper with a large circle drawn in the middle of it. Now, Tyler, can you see that pink sheet of paper and the circle that’s drawn in the middle?
M: OK, and hopefully all of you listening to the blog, that’s your pink sheet of paper in your mind as well. And so, I want you to close your eyes and pretend that you are in my classroom with that. What you would do then, or what I would have my students do, is to take that large circle and write their own name in that circle, OK? Then I instructed them to draw smaller circles all around that large circle. And within each of the smaller circles, I had them indicate the name of a group to which they belonged. So there were various groups that came up out of that. And examples of the other groups that they might have put inside those smaller circles were the neighborhood they lived in, sports teams they were involved in, social advocacy groups that they might have been a part of, hobbies that they maybe met with someone to do, maybe some of them were involved in politics, or their job that they went to, could have been at Taco Bell or it could have been at the bank, whatever, neighborhood community types of groups, whatever group they were part of, whatever groups they were part of, and they could add as many small circles around that larger one as they wanted to. Now, once I gave them time to do that, I said to them, “now look at all those little circles, and look at the big one with your name in it, and I want you to connect each small circle to the larger one, but you have to use this criterion. You will use an unbroken line, a straight unbroken line, to connect the little circle to the bigger one, if it’s very important to you. If that group, you feel a very strong connection to the people in that group. You will use a dash line to symbolize a broken line if you have a lesser connection to the people in that group, you know, if you only see them once a month or whatever, and then you will use a wavy line to indicate, maybe there’s actually some degree of uncertainty to why do I even hang out with these people at any rate? And so using those three, either the unbroken line, the dashed, or the wavy line, connect every one of those small circles to the big circle.” Have you done that? Yes, of course. Then, after giving them time to do that, I ask them to look at each of their small circles that had a small unbroken line to the larger one, and I said, “Answer these three questions about those circle; Number 1: How did I become a member of this group? Number 2: In what ways has this group influenced my life the most, and again you’re asking this about every small circle that had a strong line to it. How did I become a member of this group, in what ways has this group influenced my life the most? And Number 3: If I had to imagine my life without this group, how would my past have changed, and how would my present change?” And I gave them time to think and to do that, and even time to discuss if they cared to, what they had done. And as they began to comment openly, and they had a wide variety of groups, some of them even decided to erase the unbroken line and replace it with a wavy or a dash, so it helped them to solidify within their own thinking, “who are these people and why are they important to me, or why are they not when I thought they were?” So at the end of the discussion, and as we were, as they were, privately analyzing every pink sheet that then, I asked them, if anybody would be willing to throw out what group appeared first with the unbroken line. And almost all, without exception, the group that had the most unbroken lines, which occurred most frequently, which had the
most influence in their lives, which had the most power to affect change for them, and to which they had the strongest feeling of allegiance, was family. Family.

T: I guess there’s not a ton of surprise there. It’s interesting though, I think family is such a... I use the term widely, but the people I consider to be my family...I think the definition of the word family implies this line, this strong connection where you don’t just use that word for people who are not part of your family. Even if it’s not a genetic thing, you know who is part of your family. So, tied in to family and all this, it seems culture must be inextricably connected to all these notions of both the individuals and the groups to which they are connected, how do those things kind of come together?

M: Yes, absolutely. What you’re saying is there is an interconnectedness and maybe to answer that question I’ll ask another one; what does a family do? Well, let’s look at it. What does a family do? In any language, in every society, in every age, on every continent, children have the same basic needs. So what are they? Physical safety, daily provision, yes, but also, love, belonging, a sense of worth, all of these things are common to human kind. And in the very early years of line, these needs, both the physical needs and the emotional and social needs, are met primarily through the members of a family. Now, culture molds families so that families can mold the next generation of children. And so this molding and shaping of the newcomers to the family or to the society is called socialization. And socializing the young is the duty of those who are older, of those who have come before. So the word socialization implies that the youngest member of the cultural group, in this case, the newborn who is now a year old, two years old, who is learning, is being taught the history, the language, the religion, the celebrations, the traditions, the values, the attitudes and perhaps most importantly of all, the behaviors or the patterns of behavior, the patterns of interaction that will make the child become acceptable to other members of the group. Let me break that down. “Johnny, you cannot go outside because your face is dirty.” Now, Johnny’s face being dirty isn’t going to disturb the elements. And frankly, it’s not going to disturb Johnny. But why can’t Johnny go out to school yet when his face is dirty? Because that’s not acceptable in our culture. Now let’s talk about another culture where water is precious, very precious, and they have to walk a mile to get a bucket of water. Are they going to waste that water on being sure that Johnny’s face is not dirty? Probably not, they’re going to use it for drinking and for cooking. And so, no parent would say those words, “you can’t go outside and play.” It’s a matter of socializing the child to be acceptable in the culture in which it is born. And it’s not an individual thing at all. The purpose of socialization is so that one person, as they grow, will be seen as part of the group and accepted by others. Now, all of us have seen children outside somewhere in a public setting, and we easily can recall at least one time in our lives when we’ve said “oh, if that was my child, I would...” What? You would what? If that was my child I would... have done something differently in the upbringing or the socialization of that child and in saying that, you are putting your own limbs on what’s right and wrong.
T: Yeah, adding value judgments.

M: Adding value judgments. And if may be something that’s very simplistic and the other parents are not concerned about it, but it bothers you because it’s not the way that you are socialized or that you are socializing your own children. And so who decides what’s right? Who decides what’s wrong? Children are reared based upon a multitude of complex phenomenon. Let me mention a few of them. Ethnic background, socioeconomic status. Would you believe that maybe the child that’s going to be born to William and Kate might somehow be raised a little different from the rest of us?

T: Yes, just a little.

M: Just a little bit (laughs)! So, socioeconomic status. Um, the gender of the child in many cultures will make the difference in the way the child is socialized. The religion can definitely impact what is considered to be permissible and what is not. If the child has a disability, that may place them within an even larger cultural context, but then it brings them down to another interculture that would make the adults interact differently in that way. The makeup of the family - is it that the grandparents are raising the child, is it several children in the home or only two? So the makeup of the family. Um, the lifestyle, the geographic region – would you believe? That perhaps those who are being raised and socialized on a ranch might have a few more duties to perform than the child who is in inner city Los Angeles, or wherever. The educational level of the parents would change socialization. Beliefs and values, would change socialization, and all of these can effect the interpretation of the best way for a parent to raise their child. And what we need to remember is that every culture has raised children successfully for eons of time. People usually learn the rules and expectations for behavior in their own culture by the time they’re 7 or 8 years old, they have a pretty good idea of what they can get away with and what they can’t. Of course, by the time they are teenagers, they stretch it a little bit further, but even in their stretching, they know they are stretching something that might be going contrary to what they’re taught.

T: They’re aware of the boundaries.

M: They’re away of the boundaries and they want to test to see, will this boundary move, but they are very much aware that the boundary is there.

T: They wouldn’t test it if they didn’t perceive it.

M: Absolutely. And so, since everyone grows up with a culturally shaped perspective of patterns that they consider to be the norm, then sometimes it’s difficult to make an accurate interpretation or assessment of the mores of another culture. Now, this might not be so much of a dilemma, except for the fact that we’re talking teachers and children.
T: Well what occurred to me is that teachers play this role of a socializer for a big portion of a kid’s day, so obviously if a teacher can’t, doesn’t understand the importance of culture in a child’s life or tries to modify that child’s culture, it would be potentially problematic, right?

M: Absolutely. A problem exists when an educator misinterprets or judges the behavior patterns that another group permits or embraces. And again if you look back at all those different factors that I indicated, that cause differences in the way the children are reared, the teacher again may not have come from any of the same background.

T: And it sounds again like, yeah, value judgment keeps coming up again and again. And I feel like many people who react negatively to these different cultural norms think that there’s some kind of subversive obstinance to doing this, that they’re trying to do it as a statement against your own culture or something, and not understanding that it’s just their culture, it’s different and equal.

M: Right, or as a statement against the teacher’s authority. “He’s disobeying me again,” or, even such a thing as eye contact, because in our dominant society, we say to a child “look at me when I’m talking to you!” and if a child lowers their eyes, that’s considered defiance or even rebellion, because I told you to look at me when I’m talking to you. But if the child has been socialized in a culture where that is misbehavior, where that is considered arrogance to look an elder directly in the eye –

T: They’re being respectful –

M: -- yes, yes, -- and so the teacher writes it up again, writes it up again, a referral, I’ve got documentation, on May 12 he did not look me in the eye, again. And so, you can see, these are just examples of different modes of culturally based child rearing or socialization can lead to misperceptions but there is an answer.

T: Yes, of course. I was hoping you had maybe some suggestions. I mean, so many students, so many educators, what’s something, what are some things we can kind of do on a broad level to help this?

M: Yes. There’s always an answer. Let me put it this way. The school has this incredible ability to be a stable factor in the lives of children. And children are flexible enough to modify or to learn to function in two cultures, but it doesn’t happen immediately. It only happens when a teacher is sensitive enough to help them in shaping that, what would be a dichotomous emotion. So and let me just interject the fact that, parents in the parenting role also have to become aware that everything that’s right at home doesn’t fit in the school, and so they sometimes have to tell the child that, as the child is walking out the door, be sure to obey your teacher. We want to throw that in for sure, absolutely. But here’s just a handful, just a handful of suggestions for ways in which the school can become more culturally
accepting of socialization differences among children. First of all, and again, demographically, most of the teachers in America and in the early grades for the most part, are Anglo, middle class female, whereas the student population does not fit that model. More and more across the nation, we’re seeing where that model does not fit the student population. So to the teachers I would say that first of all, be aware that culture permeates everyone’s life. And so for a teacher to say, “I’m not culturally diverse,” “Yes, you are. You are diverse, everyone is diverse from someone. Everyone is diverse from some culture. So, we have what we call the dominant culture in America, which would be European based, if you will, but everyone is still a product of culture. And just as you would not want someone to disrespect your culture, then be sure that you do not disrespect anyone else’s. Number 2, recognize that socialization of the young is inherent within the structure of the family. The definition of the family is that they are going to come along and socialize the next generation. So if you stop and think, what is it that the parent is teaching the child, that I need to be aware of and to look at positively. Number 3, avoid using your own cultural style as the norm or the standard for anyone else. Number 4, believe that all cultures have valid ways of raising their children, that there is validity behind what is being done. I like this next one. Let a respect for other people just become your general approach to life. Just put down the critical lens.

T: That’s good advice for everybody everywhere.

M: Absolutely. Put down the critical lens and just say that everyone is coming from somewhere, some perspective. And then next, research and understand the powerful influence that culture has upon people in general, and then learn specifically about the cultures in your school, your particular school. If it’s Native American population, if it’s refugee population, if it’s people who have come from Syria or South America or wherever it happens to be, learn about the culture of the children you are teaching. Participate in cultural events that the community holds outside of school and watch the interactions between the adults and the children and see if you can get a different perspective on what is being done. If you are seeing the parents interacting with love and laughter, caring and concern for their children, and yet doing things that you once considered were wrong, then maybe this will help you to open up your eyes and see. And then lastly, know and utilize the strengths of the parents and guardians and families in your school, and thereby value and validate them.

T: That’s great, and I think really ties directly to what our last episode was about, where if you practice good parent engagement, you’ll have a much better understanding of the cultures that your students are coming from. That seems like the best way to do it, you’re interacting with the people who taught these things.

M: This is true. You know Tyler, in your bringing that up it’s almost like there is that interconnectedness, because it’s almost like they will then reinforce one another. The valuing of the child rearing, of a culturally diverse family, will certainly make that family more willing to be engaged in your school. Because if they have
the perception that you are downplaying or even talking negatively about what they're doing at home, why would they come up to your school and say “oh I love this place, and I’m so happy?”

T: Right, no one wants to be judged, or to feel judged even if they aren’t being.

M: Exactly. So, one will feed into and strengthen the other. And so you know what? When all is said and done, it boils down to an understanding of family patterns of child rearing and cultural socialization, and when that understanding comes about, it will increase harmony between the home and the school, and that’s what it’s all about.

T: Well sitting down with you and hearing it all laid out like this gives me lots of optimism that it can be done, I don’t think that it’s an easy or a quick task, but these are such simple things that I think it’s all things that we know deep down, and that culture, some cultures, have kind of brushed under the rug, and we don’t have to keep doing that. That can be a part of our history.

M: It can. This is true, and what a perfect way to close it out by what you just said, that there always is this optimism, and that’s what keeps me in education. Is the school has such power to impact change and good in the lives of children. So, thank you again for having me!

T: Thank you so much! I believe this is going to be the last podcast of the season before we go into summer break, and so as always, anybody listening, if you would like to contact us, even over the summer, we’re always available. The phone number, website, and email address will all be in the show notes, and please, anybody who has not heard any of the previous two podcasts with Marilyn on Early Childhood, go check those out, good information there. Thanks Marilyn!

M: OK, and there is also a link on our website, that just simply indicates the background of all of the members of our staff, so if anybody is curious, who is this Marilyn that he keeps referring to, just simply go on the link and it will just tell you a bit more about my own dedication to the field of education.

T: Absolutely. Thank you so much.

T: If you would like to contact the Region VIII Equity Assistance Center, you may do so at our website, metростate-eac.org, phone 303-556-6065, or via email, at eac@msudenver.edu. Listeners are also invited to join the conversation by following us on twitter @EACRegion8, or by liking the Equity Assistance Center Region VIII facebook page. Special thanks to the band Northbound for the use of their song Forward in this podcast. Thank you.