**Special Episode – Wyoming’s Coherent Path to Quality - A Game Changer**

**Guest speakers:** I just love this quality pat, what is this called? It doesn't roll off the tongue. I'll tell you what coherent path to quality CPA. I love this tool. That'd be easier.

**Nikki:** 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, Nikki Baldwin. And today I'm so excited to share a special episode of Voices from the Village, celebrating the launch of Wyoming's new vision for early childhood quality. I'm lucky today to introduce four women who were involved in the eight month process of creating Wyoming's coherent path to quality, and who kindly agreed to have a conversation about this new document, why we love it so much and our hopes and dreams about how it can be used by families and early childhood educators in our state, as part of the federal preschool development grant, Wyoming received funding to define and create a shared vision of quality for all young children that can be used by anyone who works with or cares for them. We were so lucky to partner with a national nonprofit leading for children who facilitated the work and provided the evidence-based framework that we responded to our group today is Kara Castle and Liz Goddard and Shar Norris and Lauren Carlyle and myself. One thing that I think is pretty fascinating about this group of women is that they all have come to this place as a facilitator from very different routes. And because of that, their set of experiences that are so unique, they also bring a different set of interests and passion about this new document that we just created. Ladies, welcome to the podcast. First of all.

**Guest speakers:** Thank you.

**Nikki:** So glad you're here. What I thought you should do first is just introduce yourself to our audience and just tell us a little bit about your path. Some of your experiences in early childhood, and then what I'd love for you to do is talk about why those set of experiences that you bring with you have made you so passionate and interested in this particular document. Wyoming's coherent path to equality. Lauren, do you want to get us started off here?

**Lauren:** So my name is Lauren Carlyle. I live in Laramie, Wyoming, a little bit of my background. I taught early childhood for about four or five years before I transitioned to public education and was missing littles. So I ended up just deciding to stay home with my kids and started to teach preschool to my little girl and organized a preschool co-op or a group of six or seven parents got together. And we rotated children and taught preschool to a group of kids. And that was really fun. And now I am currently homeschooling my daughter. She just started kindergarten and we've been doing homeschool this year. And the thing that excites me most about this document is that in all of those roles, in different settings, as a parent, this document just lends itself to everyone. I found myself as an educator, stressed out about remembering every principle of child development or every little strategy I'd ever learned, and I would overthink it all. And I feel like this document just puts my mind at ease. It's a really simple, concise way to just know how you're doing in a classroom and yeah and your home.

**Nikki:** Thanks Lauren. Okay. Liz, why don't you tell us a little bit about you?

**Liz:** All right. Hi, my name is Liz Goddard and I'm in Wheatland Wyoming. And I came to early childhood kind of by accident. I was looking for a job when I was in college and became a para in a preschool classroom that was within the school district there and immediately fell in love with the age group and just the work, the unique work that can be done in early childhood. And I loved it and changed my major. And since then, I've worked in a variety of settings, including developmental preschools in head start settings. I've also done work on the Wind River Indian Reservation and also on the Purple Bus, the Purple Bus is a unique home visiting program that drives a classroom out to families. And then I'm also a mother of three kids. I have a, five-year-old a two-year-old and a two-month-old. I just really love this tool because it is something like Lauren said that can be used in a variety of settings. And in a variety of age groups, I also really love that this is something that we can give to parents to just help give them a sense of what they're already doing is so amazing. As I've read through this as a new mom, again, I keep thinking about all these amazing things that I get to do with my children, and it's, it's just a really neat tool to help guide us. And I think it'll be really neat for early childhood educators to be able to use this, not only with their children that they're working with within their program, but also as a tool to help connect with those families and those parents as well.

**Nikki:** Thanks, Liz. Yeah. That's really exciting that you get a new baby and you get to start off with this document in your possession right now.

**Liz:** Yeah. It, it, it gives, it gives a unique perspective in the fact that we were helping, we were working on this while I was pregnant and then also using it now with all three of my kids, it gives a cool perspective to it.

**Nikki:** Yeah. Thanks. Thanks a lot. How about you, Kara?

**Kara:** So I'm Kara. I am up in Sheridan and I came to this profession with some serious conviction. I always knew I would work in early childhood. I have two brothers’ special needs and a mother with special needs. And I didn't like the injustices that I saw growing up and my brothers are older than I am. So I got a pretty good taste of what injustice looks like. And I remember telling my mom and I was younger. I'm going to make a difference in this world. I'm going to do it. And she said, “Well, how are you going to do that, Kara?” And I said, “Through early childhood,” we can change the world. If we work with our youngest learners, “That's what I'm going to do, mom.” And that's what I've always done. I've had little jobs here and there, but my passion is in early childhood and especially infants and toddlers. I love that developmental stage. It is amazing to watch all those connections happen and everything is brand new and amazing and wonderful. I love that. I also have a passion for early childhood with special needs, watching my brothers grow up and seeing the struggles that they went through. I don't think anybody should have to struggle like that. I think we should all be successful. And actually, that's what I love about this document. It gives you the opportunity to say these are the things I'm doing well, and these are the things I want to work on to do even better. So I like this document because it's not telling you all the things that you have to change. It's telling you all the things where you need to grow and where you want to grow. That's the part that I love and that empowers me and it's so user-friendly, it doesn't matter if you're a director, a teacher, a parent, a grandparent, this document will help you see what quality should look and feel like in our profession. And that's what's necessary.

**Nikki:** Yes. Thank you, Kara. Shar. Tell us a little bit about you.

**Shar:** Hi, I'm Shar Norris. I am in Evanston, Wyoming, and I began my journey. I always knew I wanted to be a teacher. And so I was going to the elementary education field. That's what I got my degree in. I always said that I wanted to teach the kids that knew how to tie their own shoes and button up their own pants. And that was what I needed. So I, I taught third grade for two years and that was perfect. They could do those things and I really enjoyed it. But when we moved to away from there to Wyoming, that's when I didn't-- there was no opening in the school district here. So I got a ‘placeholder job’ in a preschool. And that's where I taught three year olds. And well, that's when I realized what it feels like to love what you do, and to fill a passion for going into work every day and feeling like you're making a difference. So that's where I fell in love with early childhood and realized that doing up their shoes and doing up their pants, it's worth it. It's worth that little bit for all the good things you get to do with them. So I taught a three-year-olds for two years, and then I was the education coordinator at an early head start. And then I have been a facilitator. So my life has definitely taken a different path than I planned on. I always thought I would teach elementary school aged children. I never imagined I would teach early childhood and love it and then go on to work with early childhood educators. So it's been a really interesting journey for me as the education coordinator, I was able to coach and mentor those teachers and man, that was such an incredible experience for me, that connections you can build with those adults and helping them to make a difference in young children's lives is so powerful and exciting. What I love about Wyoming's coherent path to quality is that it is a bunch of small, simple things that make a huge difference. These are things that when we do them consistently, they change our practice. They deepened the relationships that we have with others, and they enrich the learning of those young children. And I love that they are small and they're attainable and they're doable. And they're real.

**Nikki:** Thank you, Shar and listeners, if you can't tell, we love Wyoming's Coherent Path to Quality. We are so jazzed about it that we cannot wait to get it in the hands of everybody in the state. But since we have this group that was able to participate in the process of creating this document too, I really wanted to share that with all of you, sort of what led us down this road. And I think I just wanted to ask you all this question to start off, which is Wyoming has resisted early childhood education and Wyoming have been really resistant for a long time. And I was one of them to having like a statement of quality that came down from the state about what we need to do to have a quality program. Why do you guys think we have resisted that for so long historically?

**Shar:** I think it's because we don't like to be told what to do. We know what's good for us. We know what's good for our kids and we don't need someone that's in some office somewhere to tell us what's good for us because we know what's good for us. And I think that's part of what makes this tool so exceptional because it's us saying what's good for us.

**Lauren:** I totally agree with you. Shar, not only as educators and early childhood educators, do we kind of march to a beat of our own drum, but also just as Wyoming people in general, we like that. We're unique. And we want to continue to hold onto the truth of who we are as Wyoming Knights. And again, that's what makes this tool so incredible is it was developed by people across the state. It is not something that was put together by some expert in some far off land with, you know, metropolitan area. That is totally different. We really took into consideration what our programs in Wyoming are like, what life in Wyoming is like and what kids, the unique experiences that kids in Wyoming get to have when we created this document. And so not only is it by early childhood educators who know about people who are in or kids that are in that age group, but also it's made by people in Wyoming and our incredible educators across the state of Wyoming, got to share their expertise and got to be experts for our kiddos here.

**Nikki:** And Lauren, you and I were talking about this earlier, but if I had like a really interesting comment about how you think that sort of falls flat, if we have this particular way, we have to view quality, remember what you're telling me?

**Lauren:** Yeah. I was just mentioning how, I think a lot of us, if we're asked to describe or talk about a way that we view quality, it's like this really picturesque idea of a mom and daughter chasing each other at the park or these giggles at the table, or mom and dad, I don't know. It's just like, I feel like we have these ideas of what quality looks like, but the thing that I love about this and why I think it holds true to how Wyoming Knights believe it's just because it doesn't, it's not that canned. It gives freedom and flexibility for your relationships to look, however they need to look. So you won't find in here, us telling you that your relationships have to be happy and joyful, and it's not telling you that they have to be challenging and hard. It's just giving us some basic foundations. And then we get to embrace all types of relationships and all different forms of that.

**Nikki:** Yes. And that just makes me think, I want to call out for our listeners. When you look at the coherent path to equality, there's this epically beautiful picture of a little boy. Who's like smelling a sunflower. And that is one of the people that was a member of our network. That created this document. That's her son. And when she was telling us the story of that photo, even it looks like it could be an Instagram photo, certainly, or that it might've been posed, but her story is even so authentic. They were on a walk and she was really trying to get him to hurry and he really wouldn't hurry and he needed to slow down and have a moment where he was just closely looking at and examining that flower and smelling it. And she, in the moment it occurred to her to try to capture that. So even the photo that looks like it might not be authentic is truly authentic. It's like a real cool moment that happened with one of our Wyoming kids. And I just would say, as you look through the document for listeners, it's full of pictures of actual kids in Wyoming, just having actual daily moments with teachers and with siblings and with parents. And that's one of the things I think I'm most excited about in the document. I don't know about all of you.

**Liz:** Maybe that's why there's not going to be that pushback Nikki it's made by Wyoming. It's made by people who live here, love here and laugh here. Like realistically, that's what we do. And I love the fact that you said that sometimes relationships are hard and that's okay. As long as they're respectful, you don't have to look the same. We just have to love that's the bottom line. Right? Love what you do. Love, who you do it with. That's what I think brings us a different kind of thing to the table with this document. I don't think we'll see as much pushback because it's made by people who actually love Wyoming.

**Lauren:** Yeah. And it's made by people who actually do the work **[inaudible 00:15:33]** I have kids in their spaces every day, kids that are doing the work or people that are doing the work, got to write this and being someone born and raised in Wyoming. I think I relate to a lot of other educators in the sense that we're just pretty skeptical of these canned approaches to education and stuff that's handed to us. So, I mean, even just looking through this, you can just tell it's so ours.

**Nikki:** That's what I was going to say too. When you look at different, you know, educational book that you might get, when you look through the pictures often, I don't see a program that I would see in Wyoming versus when he looked through this, we've got pictures of kids, hiking, outdoors, and classrooms that don't have unlimited budgets that are decorating their classrooms and filling them with materials. It is real Wyoming programs. And I think our educators will be able to see themselves and their program in this. And it doesn't feel like something that's unattainable.

**Shar:** Yes. And to go along with that, Liz, I think one thing that really makes this tool powerful is that each of the simple rules has stories from the field and those stories that are from the field are from Wyoming. So like you said, as people are reading through it, these stories apply to us because they were here. And we probably have very similar situations that we're trying to work through that as well as in this tool and these different, simple rules. And I think that's really powerful.

**Kara:** I think as a quality learning network, the people who created this document, I think we really stuck to our simple rule. Number one, being authentic, being authentic to Wyoming, being authentic to who we are and what we believe as a profession for families and children across our state.

**Nikki:** Yeah. Thanks Kara. I'm so glad that you mentioned that because I just keep coming back to that piece in the process that we went through listeners, but we did, is we just, so we have a little bit of background. We convened a group of early childhood professionals from all parts of the field. There were 30 of us and it was about a seven or eight month process. It happened in the middle of COVID, which was a little bit weird for all of us. And it sort of changed how we were going to how we planned to do things, but it actually meant that more people could be involved. And we really reached out to early childhood educators across the state that had been in relationships with us at the professional learning collaborative we'd been in their spaces. We've seen them with kids. We reached out to families and it was a matter actually of time who could commit that much time. There was a lot of time committed to this process that if we could find people that would be able to give that time to it. And then we got together and just had so many conversations about what, what it means to have a quality experience. And the thing that came from our group most profoundly, we had some friends from a national organization called Leading For Children that helped guide us through this process. They were incredible shout out to them, to Nicole and Joelle who led us through this process. But the thing they kept coming back to for after conversations with us is that we cared most about being authentic. And so what you'll see listeners, when you open it up, there are simple rules under these three dimensions of quality. And the very first simple rule on page six of this document is about being authentic, which is what Kara just pointed out. And I feel like that's one result that I'm really proud of from this document is that we just, we didn't meet secretly ahead of time and say, we all cared about being authentic. And we were going to tell him that that just came out. It's like oozes from us. It's everything about who we are as a state. So awesome. I would love to hear you all, just talk a little bit about what the content what's in here that just really speaks to you the most. Like what, what idea in this document do you find yourself coming back to, or thinking about, or, or even what, you know, what part of the document and how it's written, do you just really love? I just love to hear you all share with our listeners a little bit about that.

**Shar:** I love the simple rule. Number three, that's part of, so the tool is divided into three strands and it, this is part of the first one relationships and interactions and reciprocal really speaks to me. Because I think because it's such an important part of brain development and that executive function that children need to develop and support that they need from others as we have that reciprocal relationship, that's two way, I feel like you have to have respect, which is another role that's really important. And that's part of why I like reciprocal. Because it's two in one I don't have to decide on just one. Respect is important too. So if, as we respect that person, either that adult or that child, whoever we are with as we, as we respect them and it's, the relationship is balanced and we're both feel seen and heard. And it's just, that is, to me, that's what love feels like and looks like. And as we have that reciprocal relationship and help them to feel seen and valued, Oh, there's just not, there's hardly anything that's better. Is there, it's just amazing.

**Nikki:** Yeah. And I think Shar, what I hear you saying too, sort of at the core of that reciprocal piece is recognizing what children bring to the relationship. So we can have conversations about relationships without it being about what they bring and what they give and what they have to offer. And I do think that's really captured in the concept of, of reciprocal is key.

**Shar**: Exactly. Yes. And seeing those children as capable and able to bring important parts of their relationship. It's not just us giving, giving, filling them up because they fill us up too.

**Nikki:** Yeah. Thanks. Anybody else

**Lauren:** Under, under the emotional and physical environment dimension, a simple rule, number two for that dimension is respectful. And I love that because respectful is not something that you would think of in environments right off the top that you think that more is a relationship piece. But the simple rule, the first thing it says in this tool is it says respectful environments convey an immediate message of belonging. And I just love that concept. I was just thinking about in two different positions that I was in as a preschool teacher, I came to the position when they had just moved either classrooms or just moved buildings. And so a week before school started, before I had kiddos in there, I literally had a massive pile of materials in the center of my room that I had a week to put together. And there's all kinds of checklists out there and diagrammed and Pinterest out the yinging of how you can decorate and set up a classroom.But I love this idea of coming at it. And from this perspective, I think I would have been a whole lot less stressed if rather than following a checklist I can had in mind, how do I set this up? So it is a respectful environment to kids where they feel like they belong. That's just such a better feeling than a checklist of how things should be. And I just, I think as a, an educator, if I would've had this tool, it would have taken a lot of stress off of, I mean, it still, would've been a little stressful a week before kids come in with a pile full of materials, but I just, I like this the way that imagery of what that looks like.

**Kara:** And I absolutely have to jump in because Liz stole my simple rule that she wants me to talk about that she took a different perspective, which is great because that's part of what I like about this document. It's so flexible. There's not a black and white way to use it. It's just a path that you can choose to follow. And I chose respectful and environments too, because I look at it from an infant toddler perspective. How many times do we take it away and say, Nope, you can't that, Oh,don't touch that, Oh, that's not for you. Right? We say it all the time, blocking feet. And then you're constantly trying to micromanage these little guys. But if we set up environments that allow them to explore, use their body dumb things out of baskets, because they're going to pick it up. That's part of our learning. That's what respectful means for me, a place where they can come and just be who they authentically are and dump things out into their, their little heart is content. And they move past that schema and do something like trajectory. Because you know, that's coming next and they're going to start throwing things once they dump it out. And I think that's what I like about this document. A respectful environment is not just the furniture or the pieces in there. It's also about the people who occupy that space and create an environment where people can be who they are.

**Liz:** Yeah. That's beautiful. Thank you.

**Lauren:** I feel like I could gush about every single, simple rule, like every rule I could gush about. But I think that they learned, I think the thing I love the most it's on page three, but they say one unique feature of this framework is that it was developed with adults and children in mind. When we think of a coherent path to quality, we think about its dimensions and rules from multiple viewpoints, adults with adults, adults, with children and a child with a child simply put what we want adults to do with, and for children are the same things we should be doing with and for each other. I think it's really easy to look at a document like this and think like, Oh, our program is pretty good. It probably doesn't have much to offer us, but I just love the depth of this document. So if you feel like you've got a good handle in your classroom, think about your relationship with your coworkers. Think about the relationships you have with families. Think about the relationships that kids are having with each other and are all those simple rules demonstrated in each of those aspects. And so I just, it just makes it feel limitless. The amount of work you could do with this.

**Nikki:** Yes. Maybe that's why it might be weird to be a listener and be like, why are they so excited about the process they went through to create the document. But as, as people that experienced the process, what was magical for me at least was the way we were treated as we went through this process is the way we would want to treat children. And there was those, there wasn't a line that separated those two things. And at the professional learning collaborative, that matters so much to all of us. You all can't see how much the facilitators are, nodding their heads right now in response that matters so much to us, that we, the work we do with all of you mirrors the kind of work that we would want you to do with children. And we would never want to treat you in a way that we would never want you to treat a child. And as Nicole, one of our fearless leaders from leading for children would say, you can't give someone a gift that you haven't been given. And that really rings true. We just hold tight to that. As a collaborative and the truth is that we were given that gift as we went through this process to create this document. And I really believe with all my heart that we, because it's so it was created in that way, as you engage with it, you'll be having a similar experience to what we had, which is like your thoughts and feelings matter, the work you're already doing. That's great. You'll be able to see that and recognize it. You'll be empowered to see things in children that you never saw before and all those ways that I really do believe that it, it does that learn. It, it matches what they say. We say it does. And that in that page on page three, that it really is about treating everybody in this way that we would all want to be treated. Okay. So ladies, thank you so much for sharing your wisdom and just your passion and excitement about this document. And I think before we just sort of wrap this up, I wanted to hear about what you are just dying to tell someone about this document. What's the most important thing that you want people to know our listeners to know. And then if you wanted to add to that, who have you been most excited to share it with?

**Kara:** I'm pulling from one of Nicole's gems of things that she says, but we really intentionally made this document holdable is what she would call it where it's, it's something that it's not a one and done. You read it. Yep. Read it. I'm good. You get to come back to it. And then I think it'll tell you something new each time and he'll, you'll discover something new about it each time that you look through this document.

**Nikki:** No, I just want to jump into because I think Lauren mentioned it or got at this a little bit earlier, but like you may open the document and you may see that one of the simple rules under emotional and physical environment is safe and you might just look at that and be like, yeah, I know they're safe. And then be like, this document is like, it's written at such a level that I, it's not even a challenge for me. But what I would say is that the intent to make it holdable for everybody means that if you really are trying to understand the basics of what's needed for safety, you can get a lot from this document. And if you've been doing this for 25 years, you can dig a lot deeper into this document about what safety truly means. So it scaffolds that for all of us. And I think that's how it can really be holdable. So I would just challenge people to engage with it. Don't just close it up and think you already get it because there's questions in each of these sections that really challenge you to think deeper about what, even something, for instance, like safety can really mean for all of us. So thanks for bringing that up.

**Liz:** And that's actually what I like Nikki. I like the fact that it's more like a journal than a checklist kind of book. It's this document that you can write in and reflect back on your own thinking and come back to later and say, do I still feel same? And why do I still feel the same? You know, why are my convictions still as strong as they were in the beginning? Or have they changed? That's what I like about it. I have been in this field for a long time, like 18 years. And this document still challenges me every time I think, or go into a classroom or work with adults. It challenges me to dig deeper into who I am, what I think and what I feel every single time.

**Nikki:** Absolutely. Shar and Lauren, what do you guys think?

**Lauren:** I think for me a lot of what I would tell someone about a document we've already mentioned. So one of them being, we wrote it this was ours. But I think the words that came to my mind when you asked that question or just open it, like prove us wrong, like open it up and try it out and prove, prove to us that it doesn't work. Because I think we would all guarantee that this will improve quality in any program. And that this has something to offer every person working in any type of organization of early childhood, including families. I just, I would, I think that's what I want to tell someone. I would just challenge them to open it.

**Shar:** So the, what that, I think that comes to my mind when you asked that question, Nikki is that this document is as simple or as deep as you need in this moment. And it, if we go through it, we can have real change and real joy in what we do it. If we come in with active curiosity and go through with an open mind to reflect on ourselves and our practice, then we can really see true change. I really believe that we have to start with ourselves before we can make any changes or improve anything anywhere. And one of the things that this document or tool really helps us with is to know ourselves first, to really reflect on what do we really think of these different things. And as we dive into the depths of our own opinions and realize what we think that maybe we didn't know before, we can either change it or improve upon it or whatever needs to happen so that we can improve our practices with the children. So by, by helping ourselves and understanding ourselves better, we can make it better for those children and the relationships we have with them and with coworkers and other adults, families included. My thoughts are the people that hooped that question, the people that I want to have it in their hands right now is anyone who's with a child every day.

**Nikki:** Make sure. And actually that, you know, that just made me think about the why we even did this document, which I think really matters. You know, we started off the conversation with Wyoming. We don't want to be told what to do. We've resisted, being told quality has to look a certain way for a long time. But as someone who's been in early childhood education in our state, across the state for more than 20 years, what I saw the result of that was, was that we just didn't have any conversations about what quality looked like. And it just meant we avoided talking about the giant elephant in the room, which is that what we want is that all children in Wyoming have really amazing experiences and there's ways that we can know how to do that. And so for me, I, I think this is an advocacy effort. Our children in Wyoming deserve more than just a bunch of us rebellious adults refusing to have a conversation about quality. Like they deserve more than that. And what this document is, it's not a mandate, but it's a conversation starter. This is what we can frame our discussions around. So instead of being too scared to try we just decided let's try to invent a way to do it differently that can work for us. And so that's my invitation for everybody with this document is let's view this as a conversation starter, instead of invoice avoiding one of the most important conversations we should ever have about our children. Let's have it and let's have it with this document and we can disagree about it and we can engage with it in a lot of different ways, but let's just do what Lauren said. Let's just open it and give it a try because kids in Wyoming deserve that. So thank you ladies. This was a blast. I am so appreciative of all of you and your bravery and your willingness to just chat through what we love so much about this document and for our listeners, we just have a million ways for you to get this in your hands. There's a digital version of this coherent path to quality at our website, wyecplc.org. You can also request a copy of this and I'm pretty sure we're mailing this to every single person in the state. Who's licensed early childhood educator. And if you're a parent go to our website and you can request a copy there, you can get ahold of our professional learning facilitators in your region for more copies, we would love to give you more. This is a tool that could be used for professional development in early childhood programs. If you're looking at wanting to outline a vision for professional development, if you're in a larger program, if you're a home-based childcare provider, and this is an incredible tool that you can use. That flexibly applies to you, which we all know a lot of things don't apply as well in your experience in trainings, but this document is made for you as well. Thanks for joining us on this episode of voices from the village, the podcast from the Wyoming, early childhood professional, learning collaborative, I'm your host, Nikki Baldwin. And this podcast is produced with funding from the preschool development grant. And our podcast is edited and directed by Bryce Tableau.

**[End of recording]**