

Episode 11: Museum Education with Brandy Whitaker

Transcript:

Easton: All right. Good morning, everyone, and welcome to another episode of This is Problematic a Conner Prairie Podcast. I'm Easton.

Hannah: And I'm Hannah.

Easton: And we're so happy to have you guys back as we take another special dive through some problematic history. And today we have a special guest.

Brandy: Greetings, listeners. My name's Brandy Whitaker. I'm the director of Education at Conrad Primary, and this podcast is rated E for everyone. I have spent my career educating children in a variety of both formal and informal settings.

Hannah: So due to the importance of education in teaching problematic history, we wanted to sit down with the incredible Brandy and get her thoughts on museum education and the education system and the the job that is being done or not being done of telling this history and how we're doing here on the prairie. So we're going to kind of chat through some topics related to that today.

Easton: When we were putting together our notes here, I was actually talking with Sara, and Sara brought up a very interesting point about how we're all educators, you know, even though we may not have the title of educator, we all do education, you know, cur- the curatorial team. You know, we're historians and you have your specialists and your exhibit creators and fabricators, and we all serve, you know, as educators. But we need actual like, you know, we need people like you to help us make sure that what we're looking at can reach all of those crazy or not crazy, all of those. You know, we're in a non-typical learning environment. And to teach people effectively in a non-typical learning environment, you know, you need a flurry of different viewpoints there.

So I just had a question for you, if I may, what are the limits of learning in a museum environment compared to a traditional classroom? Because you got expertise on both. You know, I was hoping to mine your experience for some pros and cons there potentially.

Brandy: Yeah. So, as soon as I started at the museum, which was a little over four years ago, I was really blown away by how much we attempt in our field to mirror the formal education setting. And what was shocking to me was that we don't have to do that. We have so much more freedom and so much less regulation from the state, from the government, from those in charge school boards and council members and all of these different roles that restrict or limit what

educators are able to do in their learning space. And in museums. We don't have to operate under those same restrictions, but we seem to keep doing that regardless. And I think what's most important since this is a history podcast is to back all the way up. Up until about 150 years ago, there was no organized schooling system in this country. But now that we have entered into this realm of deciding exactly what children need to learn and when we have taken on this concept of being the keepers of information, the guardians of of content and what we know about the brain and about how people learn tells us that we are already wired to learn exactly what we need to learn within our brains, naturally, if you think about an infant, for example, they begin by putting things in their mouth or experimenting with their voice, learning about their world through their senses. And there's a very natural progression for learning more academic content. If we allow the brain to be honored in that process, to be respected without so much interference. And in museums, we have the opportunity to really illuminate that. But we're often out of fear of failure or not appropriately supporting our formal education counterparts. We we operate under those same restrictions despite those freedoms.

Easton: And it is a shame because, you know, schools are taking field trips to come see us to kind of get out of the classroom. And then here we are doing classroom things.

Brandy: Right, and the environment is such an important component of learning. And in classrooms, those environments are often created by adults, not necessarily with the children in mind. It's more about achievement in mind. And so when we create an environment based on student achievement versus what we know about their development or their needs, we're really missing an opportunity to cultivate a passion for learning in people and a confidence in themselves, in their own innate ability to learn what they need to know, when they need to know it.

Hannah: I'm curious, jumping a little bit here, and we can talk more about what specifically been the changes that has specifically been made here on the prairie. And I would love to I would love to talk about the changes you've made. But how have those teachers that have come to the prairie responded when they see situations that don't look so much like that formal classroom education? What kind of reactions do you tend to get when educators witness those experiences?

Brandy: Sure. So some of my favorite memories are when we host experiences for early learners in the Big Red Barn, and we usually create a giant bin full of corn and children when they see a giant bin full of corn respond to it differently. Some children are very hesitant. Some children put their whole bodies in immediately and you can really identify the sensory needs of the different children in the space. For some teachers, that creates a great fear. I feel like there's always this fear of adults appearing to not be in control of the children that they're with, and they feel like that's a direct reflection on them.

So when a teacher walks in with her class, she wants her class to be compliant and quiet and listening and waiting for instruction. But we open the space in a very free way where children can explore exactly how they want and exactly how they need. And so that's very scary for teachers oftentimes, because then it seems like my class could be perceived as out of control or these children could be perceived as children who don't know how to follow rules. So it usually takes quite a bit of time for us to give them permission and to remind them that they are here to play, they're here to explore. This space is for them, and there's no judgment on our part for how

children interact with that space. So a lot of times I spend those initial moments helping teachers to feel safe and valued and also invited to be in the space for themselves just to enjoy. And I think we we lose sight of joy often when we talk about learning environments, but it's a really important marker for learning and also for connections and memories that will serve children through the test of time. And so we spend a lot of time making sure that teachers feel like they can do whatever they need to do here, too. Just like their students.

Hannah: I'm going to put my my soul on the line over here and say that when I first started here and I first started observing those experiences, I have worked before in camp environments as substitute teachers, like never as a formal, formal educator, but certainly in quite formal educational environments. It did give me a little bit of the fear, like there is just that gut reaction. I'm curious about how you've seen that reaction from other staff internally, too, because I feel like I have grown so much learning from you and from your team and been able to engage with children in ways I could have never imagined and had the most beautiful experiences. But oh my gosh, it took so much deconstruction and I hadn't been an educator for 40 years, which some of our, you know, some of our wonderful staff have come from that background for these long periods of time. And I'm curious about not just the reactions of those teachers externally, but also how people internally feel, because I felt a little stressed.

Brandy: Yeah, and I think that's a multidimensional concept in issue. So first of all, generally people who go into education are the type of people, me included, that are really good at school. We enjoy the structure of school. We feel successful there. We understand these are the things that are expected of me and I can deliver them and I receive praise when I do that.

And so for a lot of teachers, school was this very positive thing. Obviously, if you have a terrible school experience, it's a lot less likely that you'd want to spend more time in school as an adult. There are the few exceptions who really want to make a difference and change that experience for the future, for the future students. But for the most part, teachers are school oriented people. They like that model and they responded well to it. And so that's out play for many of our educators. They don't know what we're fighting against when this was a system that served them well. On the flip side of that, we have years and years and years and years of I guess the word is I'm trying to remember what Dr. Fletcher calls it, institutions of something. No, it's something like, oh, indoctrination.

So when we talk about systems of indoctrination, that's what's happened to us, right? We've been in this system for all of these years. And it's really ironic because we give children all of this choice when they're really, really young. You know, it's it's not common for babies to be required to sit for extended periods of time without moving or focused on one specific thing for a long time. And that's really good because their brains aren't capable of that. But all of a sudden you turn five and it's like, here's this very structured ordered system that you need to follow because we've decided that what's best for you. And that's the same for everyone your age, even though we know we don't develop the same way as the people around us. And then you graduate and you get back into this world of nothing but choice and risk assessment. And it requires critical thinking and problem solving. But for years those skills have been neglected children haven't been given the opportunity to to really master the art of those skills. And so we have this this weird section of time during these really important years in a human's development where all the choices removed and all of the critical thinking is sort of taken from them and becomes the role of the adult.

So over time, these teachers personally have been put into these boxes and educated in this very specific and structured way. And so when they come in to their profession as an adult, they're going to, of course, revert back to what they remember about their own education path. So that's really, really hard for people to break free from. And that's why I spend a lot of time helping the adults to do the unlearning, because really they have to get in touch with their own needs and desires. We recently hosted a teacher retreat, which was magical, but we put out these invitations for play for these teachers and they arrive and they sit down and they say, Well, what are we supposed to do? And we say, Whatever you want, The spaces for you. These are for your ideas. And it takes probably 10 minutes for them to even decide what they would choose because choice has been eliminated from their work and often their life. Many teachers are parents. You know, they go to school all day in this very structured space. They come home and they do dinner and bath time and bedtime, and they really lose sight of what do I need and what do I want? What what is my own instinctual reaction to this idea or this space? And we've robbed him of that opportunity. So we have to help them get in touch with that part of themselves. And we usually do that by asking them first to remember a time when they were deeply engaged in play. That's one of my favorite activities to do with a roomful of adults, because once they start sharing those things, it's like they're immediately transported to this other version of themselves in maybe the truest version of themselves. And then they're able to remember this really powerful time when they were able to choose and they were able to think for themselves and explore spaces freely. And when we give them the time, space and freedom to do that, this unlearning process begins and they start to realize that what they really need, what self-care really looks like, are all the things that their students need to.

Easton: Wow. So well said. And the way you said it was so I mean, it sounds so, it's so sad, but it makes so much sense, like how structure has kind of decayed that spontaneous, valid form of learning and feeling comfortable. Like, I've got this. And even if I don't got this, you know, it's okay. We'll figure it out.

Brandy: Right.

Easton: Yeah.

Brandy: Because that's our whole life. And we are creating this, you know, this adult force of people who have forgotten the magic of play and also the magic of discovery, and most importantly, how to follow your own intuition. And when we take that from people, we're really, really limiting our future for everybody.

Easton: I wish you would have worked at my school. I might have had I might have had a more fun time.

Brandy: Yeah, it's it's not popular to honor children and I think so much of the time, what I see is that parents want their children to have these experiences that they feel like they didn't have. The holidays are coming up. We see this a lot at Christmas. It's like, well, I'm going to buy my kid the Barbie Dreamhouse, because that's what I really wanted. And we did that. My family last year, despite my advice and our six year old played with that for probably 2 hours and then never really touched it again. But we're trying so hard to give them these experiences, you know, most often 99% of the time, maybe more parents want what's best for their kids. And I would say

the same is true for teachers, but that requires us to really listen to them, to find out what they need, what makes them tick. And we can't put our own needs or what we valued in a very different time in front of their own desire. And we do that a lot. And I think that's the concept of intention versus impact, right? We we have really great intentions. And I think a lot of teachers are that way too. But the impact that we're having is not the same that we intend.

Hannah: Oh, my gosh, amen like and it really makes me question as museum spaces like we absolutely need to do a better job of serving children, but also how can we be doing a better job of serving the inner child of these adults who are trying to heal themselves through their kids when really they need to be looking inside and trying to take care of themselves? Like you're talking about self-care? What ways do you see our spaces, museum spaces like Conner Prairie, but ideally across the country so that everybody and the world so everyone can have access. How can we be a self-care space for the grown-ups to allow them to start to care for themselves and be better?

Brandy: Yeah, it's a very long journey of healing, right? There's so much unlearning involved and returning to who we really are and what we really need, and that's not something we get to spend a lot of time in our adult lives focused on, and we spend a lot of time serving others or working so that we can pay our bills or trying to squeeze in these moments of fun that sometimes we don't even get a construct for ourselves. It's like we're just going and going and going and going. So we have to get really quiet deep into our own knowing before we can even begin to talk about what we need. And imagine if it's that hard to get in touch with what we need, how do we everything gets okay for us, Decide what someone else needs regardless of their age?

I think the environment is really, really important for setting the stage for that and I think the museum educators that are in front of guests have to be able to facilitate this space of care. I talked to an artist that I adore and respect named West Bruce this week, and he was talking about creating these spaces. He's done great work around the country. The Wonder Sound in San Diego, the Adventure Forest at Denver Children's Museum and he said that people would come up to him and say, You make spaces for children. And he's totally fine with people thinking that. But he doesn't just make the spaces for children. The way he referred to it was it's like a spinach smoothie for the adults. So in the space where parents are sitting on their phones, that's where he's going to put the most impactful and intriguing poetry on the ceiling, because he is creating this environment that really encourages people to go through this kind of self-exploration of these feelings that this space can provoke. So all of a sudden it's like, I don't really know why I'm having these feelings, but I'm having them and I feel like maybe I want more and we're so out of touch with that in our very busy, hurried lives that that takes time and great intention. And that's why it's really important to have those human advocates involved in creating those spaces, people who really want a better world for others.

Easton: You've already kind of touched on this too, but I do want to just, you know, give you the time to speak on super wonderful, impactful experience that you've had and experiences that you've had in your professional experience. What have you found to be like the most impactful strategies for like education as far as like between an institution in their audience and between an educator and an individual?

Brandy: Yeah, listening. We make a lot of assumptions. And when we assume what people need or want, sometimes we really miss the mark. And I think that listening well involves a lot of trust. So we're not going to hear genuine feedback from our visitors as if we don't have their trust. And trust takes time and the building of relationships. And that's a really intentional and valuable process, but it's not necessarily viewed as a valuable way to spend our time.

So I might spend a couple hours every week at breakfast with someone who isn't considered, you know, this isn't a working breakfast if I'm not meeting with someone for work. But when I'm meeting with a mother of two young children who lives in this community, that relationship is important. And hearing from that actual person who loves me and trusts me, I can know more about what their needs are and what a space needs to be for them. How do we serve them? And we have to do that by listening well, and we have to listen coming from a place of established relationship and also a very open mind, because sometimes the assumptions we have made about what people need or what they want to see when they visit are really, really wrong. And we have to be prepared for maybe my idea isn't the right one. Maybe this isn't the direction we need to go. And that takes what Kelsey, my colleague, says, Putting your ego on ice first.

Hannah: I really think as well about listening internally as well as externally. Like I think of so many of the times that I've been invited in to listen. I was out on the floor before I was in the current position I'm in, and I often saw my my position, even though technically I was staff to be there to support mostly children in spaces that it was often the parents who actually needed me the most, but they they would they would come and talk at the most random moments and share the needs that they were having because they were vulnerable in that moment. They were having a hard day and they needed a grown up, fellow Grown up, to listen or and I feel like institutions need to value that feedback more that the staff are getting on those 1 to 1 levels and those connections like, Yeah, okay, you're just talking to some lady on the grounds, but she is opening up and being vulnerable in that moment because you're building that trust, but also sometimes because you're there, you know, as human beings, I feel like sometimes we do just need someone to listen to us. But if you take that feedback and pass it along and it doesn't feel valued, I feel like that discourages people from continuing to listen. It's so easy to shut down that I don't know where I'm going necessarily with this, but like it's so easy to shut down that listening process. And so I feel like I guess my question is how can institutions do a better job of listening? How how can that be valued and trusted?

Brandy: Yeah, it's something I'm thinking about a lot of things when you're talking. I'm a huge Brené Brown fan, and what I love most about her research is that she refers to herself as a story collector and that one on one moment of connection in real life, in real time, is this really valuable data point. But like you said, it's if it's not quantifiable, it's often dismissed or it's it's assumed that this is one person's voice on this one day. That's not the voice of the mass. But it's generally true that whatever you hear in someone's really vulnerable moment is super connected to the vulnerable moments of many, many others.

We talk a lot about evaluation when it comes to learning, you know, how do we make the learning visible? How do we ensure that students are learning these things when we teach them? There's formative assessment and summative assessment and student learning objectives and we are so desperate to prove that what we're doing is working, that we miss the magic of the doing. And I think this idea of grounded theory research and collecting these stories is so much more valuable. And I think that the way I understand that the best is when I go to a

concert, a really incredible live music experience. I can't really tell you exactly what I learned. I can't fill out a rubric for how I felt in that, in those moments throughout the experience or what concepts I mastered from being in that space. But I know that I'm different and I know that I see the world a little bit more clearly that I've been moved. Sometimes I cry. Those things told me that this experience was important. I can't quantify that. But all of us in this room know that those are really important and pivotal moments in our life, and we are learning something from being in that space. Even if we can't assess the learning. And I think that's what happens in museums. We have this opportunity for this really important connection between two human beings. But where we're much more interested in showing a donor or a board member or the community that 98% of people did this. And and that's a very true reality because there has to be a return on investment, or we can't stay open. And so that's a very real fear. But it doesn't mean that we discount all of the actual human work. There can be space for both. It doesn't have to be or it can always be and.

Easton: And so forgive me if you've already answered this, but so would you say that like tailoring education to individual needs is easier to do in museum settings?

Brandy: 100%. It's easier in almost every way. When you're in a classroom, you often have 25 students at completely different levels. When it comes to reading achievement or conceptual mathematic understanding, right? So with all of the guidelines that are put on us, we may have 25 kids show up, ten of which are living in poverty, ten of which have had open child protective Service cases living in single parent homes, all of these adverse childhood experiences that impact their ability to survive in our world or to thrive in our world. And we're told, okay, but they all have to pass the same standardized test. And so that job is pretty much impossible.

Easton: Freaking standardized tests, lord have mercy!

Brandy: Yeah, which are a horrible representation of the learning that's actually happening. But those are also tied to teacher evaluation. So it's very clear how the teacher becomes much more concerned with the success of that system of of measuring this learning in their rooms because they have to. So they have all of these 25 souls walk in and they have to treat them pretty much the same. They have to avoid their instinct again, which they've been asked to do for a really long time, and instruct and assess and instruct and assess. In the museum setting, first of all, we're generally meeting people who have basic, basic needs met because of the institution of museums and then once we know that this person is most likely here with a caring adult or, you know, isn't hungry, we're able to meet them in a very different space than maybe they're showing up each day in their classroom. And we don't have to follow all of these. We're not worried about this huge test in the spring or ensuring that their reading level is green before we move into quarter two. So we have a lot more freedom in that. And so it's a lot easier to listen to the guest, watch the guest, observe them and try to figure out what what they might need to foster a deeper learning or a deeper connection.

On the flip side, though, it is harder in a way when we're here because we don't have this established relationship in consistency. So we don't necessarily know what this person who's coming up to us already knows. We don't have any concept of their prior knowledge or what's going on in their lives or who they spend their time with. In the classroom we do have the privilege of knowing a lot more about the learner, but outside of that, it's a lot easier here.

Hannah: I, I would love to take that piece then and talk about how what we can learn here in the museum environment about children and education can feed back into the traditional education system, the changes that we can make. I'm specifically thinking, here at Conner Prairie, we have a preschool that your amazing team runs and you're talking about evaluating teachers. You evaluate teachers differently. So I would love to talk about how these almost the museum as a a testing ground or environment to to learn from and how that can feed back into our traditional education model.

Brandy: Yeah. Going back to the teacher retreat, we had 25 teachers here that day from different school districts, different grade levels and I think that what stood out to me was how their experience here impacted the experience of the students in their classrooms. And to me, that's how we can provide these moments of permission of self-care, of valuing children. We can be models for that. We can be thought leaders in that space. And these teachers came in on a Monday and we had an entire day planned for them. We had gifts for them, we had food for them, We let them zip line and we did guided reflection and yoga and all of this really beautiful and powerful time together. And there was also a lot of that deep listening on our part and when I got feedback from that, first of all, we had a focus group with ten slots and someone wrote in number 11, we hosted the focus group on the first Monday back from break, which you can imagine. The first Monday after a long break for teachers is really hard and all 11 people showed up to the focus group. So that in itself told me a lot. There was a lot of crying because it was really emotional for teachers to feel so cared for. They talked a bit about how they'll receive a peppermint in their mailbox at work that says a piece of encourage-mint. And they're seeing right through that, right? It's like, okay, that's a nice gesture. And they'll also talk about how administrators will always say, like, don't forget about self-care. And they were saying like, can you please host them so they can see what that actually looks like?

Some of the feedback we heard was, I just couldn't believe that you did all of this for us. I think that the way that we can show care reflects in the classroom. So we had teachers who came back and said, since we did this on the Monday of our break for the first time in seven years, I spent the rest of the break resting. Imagine what that looked like for her students on that first day back. Instead of spending this very busy week, stressed out, concerned about what was coming, trying to get as much done as possible, that they say. Brené Brown says that the cure to overwhelm is nothing. And it doesn't mean like bingeing Netflix, nothing. It means literally nothing to rest. And I imagine that an entire week of that probably put that teacher in a very different headspace. And that increases patience and hopefulness and all of these things that impact the students. We heard from another teacher who said, I have supportive administrators and I think I can create the classroom that I really dream of and want where I am. So there was a lot of empowerment that was inspiring to them so that when they got back to their classrooms, they were pumped up and re-energized to be there for their students to show up. And then as a final teacher who shared that she had a lesson planned, got in, the kindergartners came in for art, and she thought it was really simple and that they were just going to quickly engage and it was not working. And so she said, for the first time in my entire career, I just scrapped that and we laid down on the floor and looked at the ceiling for five whole minutes and it changed everything.

And so maybe in museums we can't say revolutionize what's happening in schools. This isn't working, but we can elevate what is working and give some permission and remind them of the research and data in their own deep knowing their own intuition that provides maybe 5 minutes of reprieve from this very structured and stressful space.

Hannah: Given, given our historical focus of our podcast and problematic history, so much of our history is unexplored untaught, so much of the feedback we've been getting about the podcast is I wish we'd had conversations like you guys are having in my classroom. I feel like there were missed opportunities to hear everybody's experiences in the classroom instead of just very cherry picked, quick overview, memorized points and then moving on.

So I'm thinking a lot about the historic field trips we have here, the groups that we have in that we are educating on historical topics and how have we made changes here on the prairie that in ideal world would be that mirrored in the history classroom. That I feel like I should just call it out and say our historic education is so broken and absent and so what changes have we made here? What changes do we need to continue to make and what changes can be made in the classroom to finally start connecting those dots. Because when you see those kids feel engaged and I mean, we've been out doing field trip experiences, it's the coolest thing in the world.

Easton: Oh, yeah.

Hannah: But some of them have obviously never been engaged in that way in their lives. And so, yeah, I would just want to hear you talk about.

Brandy: Oh, there's a lot I would say that, you know, so much of this goes back to fear, right? I don't remember what Ted talk it was and how long ago, but something along the lines of, you know, the students are afraid of the teachers. The teachers are afraid of the principals. The principals are afraid of the parents. The school boards are afraid of the parents. It's like this long line of fear. And it's a very real fear and a very valid one, because this could mean job loss or the loss of licensing or something even worse. And so I think honoring that fear, being aware of it, they say, if you can name it, you can tame it.

I think we have to be really honest about that fear and when you get into any historical concept, any hard truth, you're going to have this line of when does this become political? When is this the role of the school, when isn't it? And that's putting a lot of pressure on schools and also on parents. And those those two groups aren't talking to each other enough. If the parents really understood what the teacher was trying to do, this person who's showing up every day for your children, it kind of changes the game and the the school. They have to view the parent as the first teacher in. There has to be this respect for what they believe in and what's important to them. And that goes back to this concept of listening. But those things aren't necessarily happening until is the driving force for a lot of those decisions that are made. I think here our beliefs guide our actions, right? And so when we believe that children are capable and intelligent and trustworthy, that changes how we handle these learning experiences and how we how we ask questions of children and what we expect of them. And so what we've spent a lot of time here focusing on the concept of process versus product, and that's most easy to understand when you think about art.

You know, if we give a child a pre scripted craft with very clear directions and this ideal final product, they're going to learn how to please adults again. They're going to learn how to copy someone else's work because their ideas aren't so valued. This this product is the final and most important thing, and it's also something that's very easily evaluated. So that makes sense. But when we focus on the process, we take away the pressure of this final product or this objective,

and then it becomes a very intimate experience for the and they feel valued in their own choices and they feel trusted. And I think we're talking about delivering historic content, which maybe you are referring to, Hannah, the same is true.

You have learning objectives for these experiences. Of course you do. But there's still our best guess for what the child is going to walk away with, which goes back to that concert analogy. Perhaps they mastered standard 3.5 when they were here with us, but what they're really taking away from that experience is not the mastery of that standard. And no informal education institutions should feel like they're responsible for standard mastery. In a three hour field trip. They have 180 days to master that standard. That's not what we're here for. We create the spark. We encourage children to want to know more. We inspire their curiosity so that they might become more interested in something that will lead them to more research or into asking better questions. And that's really empowering for the child, and it's really rewarding for us too.

So we have a lot of our own unlearning to do here. And when we've consistently mirrored the system and don't really have another system to look toward in this country, it's just it takes a really long view of time. I listen to a podcast about that yesterday. It's called un, unbeing by Krista Paquette and she talks about this long view of time. So it's funny that you asked about this change because for me, when I got here, there was a very product based uniformed. The adult is talking. The students are lucky to be here and they're going to listen to us because we're the keepers of this knowledge. But in only four years, which in the scheme of things isn't that long, there's been a huge shift in many of our own perspectives and in how we believe children should learn and can learn. And so I've seen within my team and even outside of it a very different perception of how learning takes place and what our role is in it.

Hannah: I, I can't get the fear from ringing in my head that that concept of fear and is just so I feel like it's so big, it's so big and everything. Like not just in our education system, but fear everywhere. You're talking about how everybody is afraid of something. And I can't help but keep thinking about what the parents are afraid of. Afraid of change, of deconstructing beliefs, of having to look inside as we come back to that inner healing. They're afraid of doing that, that work. But on the complete flip side, one of the conversations we have here and have to have here is the impact we are having on communities. And there is often that fear. It comes back to fear. There is fear of upsetting people or scaring people. And yet in the three years I've been here, I have worked with kids and their parents, especially on field trips. You know, the parents that are coming in as chaperons from every color of district, from red right through to blue and the same experience has happened with all of them. I'm always so impressed by how little fear a lot of these parents actually present when we're having these conversations. And it makes me think. I think listening is an important part of it. You know, these conversations we're having, the changes you've made being processed rather than product, we're letting the kids lead and letting them ask the questions. And so the only people that they parents would have to be mad at are their own kids. And they're they're not going to like they're proud of these babies. Of course they are. And so they're they're they're learning from their kids, which is really cool, and then able to then engage in the learning process and in a unique way. But it makes me wonder. It makes me wonder if we're over focused on fear.

Brandy: Well, certainly our entire culture I think. Fear of approval, Right. I think as far as fear goes with parents, what I've seen the most is fear of their child being behind. And I think it goes back to that naming of the fear sometimes when we talk about play as this model for learning

and the children as the curriculum, that's really scary for a parent. Dr. Denita Jones, who's one of the pillars of all of my belief systems around children and what they need, especially for families of color. You know, she says, play is black radical parenting, because when you're talking about already being, quote unquote, behind in this world and Johnny down the street is going to this elite preschool and you're already combating all of this inequity and our system and this lack of a leg up just for being who you are. That's really bold for parents to say, well, I'm going to choose a preschool that honors play, because then am I helping my child close this gap? They're already coming behind just because of what they look like. How do I ensure that I'm going to help them stay caught up to get through the system so that they can have these fulfilling and successful lives? And that's what parents are the most afraid of, my child being behind.

And so my question is always behind in what? Generally we get down to literacy. It's about reading because we push that so hard, right? We've got your teach your baby to read by age three. Let me just go ahead and put this out that that's developmentally inappropriate. So if whoever is telling you that is probably marketing and not not honoring the child. And so what we do is we provide a lot of data like we know more about the brain than we've ever known.

And sometimes people say, like it will appear that they think that I am speaking on some whim or like, this is this utopian concept. Actually, that's neuroscience. And we know that this is how the brain actually works and what children actually need. They don't need to say the letters as fast as they can by age five. That's just the assessment, which is funded by this huge company that's getting this money, that's paying these districts. And, you know, it's a it's a capitalistic concept. And and once again, we go back to, yeah, there's a need for that. We get it, blah, blah, blah. But at the end of the day, when we ask a parent, what are what do you want for your child, I will usually say, Do you want them to be the valedictorian or do you want them to be happy? And when we talk about what do we really want for our kids, I'm not so concerned that they score higher than the kid next to them when they're in first grade. I hope that we can, in this episode, alleviate some of that concern.

And like we talked about from the very beginning, bringing it back full circle, people were learning to read long before they were sitting in these rooms. They were learning to think and they were learning how to express themselves and in words, they're going to learn those things. How many adults do we really know in our circles who are illiterate? It is a problem in this country. But it's it's very rare that a child growing up in a family in today's times isn't going to learn how to read. And so if you're a parent asking those questions of a preschool director when your kid's three, they're going to be fine. They already have you to advocate for them. So it's it's hard for people to get over their fear, to feel like play is enough because of this very competitive system that they're entering into.

But what we found now that we're in year four of our preschool, we honored play and we created this very intentional environment and all of our students are excelling far beyond our expectations in these very formal settings because they show up with a passion for learning and a confidence in themselves. And if you ask a kindergarten teacher, we very rarely ask the teachers anything. What do you want kids to know when they get to kindergarten? It's not their letters. We want them to know how to raise their hand and ask for help. We want them to know how to make a friend. We want them to know how to zip their coat. Those are the things that

they need to know. They can learn all the rest of those things when they get there. There's no need to start that any earlier than what we already do in this country.

Defending the early years, which is where Dr. Denisha Jones is the executive director. They go so far as to call pushing academics before age five child abuse. And it's really important to say things like that to people because we've got to shift this focus. We're getting I know of a local preschool that has a financial literacy course for three year olds. What are we doing and what fears are driving those actions? What beliefs do we have about children? And at the end of the day, what do we really want for them? It's One thing to decide what you want for other people's children. But when you ask someone what they want for their own child, or for their grandchild, or for their niece or nephew or a child that they love, hopefully it's less about I want them to score really high on the S.A.T. and more about I want them to feel really fulfilled and loved and I want them to experience deep joy as often as they can. A couple of things. So when we talk about inclusion, inclusion is really about honoring the needs of everyone, right? And acknowledging what someone may need that's different from someone else. That's the equity versus equality and universal design. And what that concept is, is basically if you do what's best for someone who might have a special need or what's best for a child with the sensory processing differences, what's best for someone who is blind or low vision, you're doing what's best for everyone. And that's what universal design is. And so inclusion has a really beautiful tie in to our philosophy because we are all about honoring the learner. And when you take the time and value the time with great intention and multiple brains in the room, you're able to create these environments that really honor everyone despite what they need or what their specific adaptations might look like. What accommodations do you need? No problem, because this is a space that's for you.

Hannah: I can't help but think about obviously different education systems function differently, and I have a lot of friends who are Scandinavian and who grew up in the Scandinavian school system. We were talking before about how it's child abuse to force children before the age of five into these strict environments. And a lot of these friends who are Scandinavian or some of the happiest people I know, they didn't start school till they were seven and often didn't finish school till they were 19 or 20 oh my gosh, that freaked me out at 18 when I was at university with some of these friends and like, don't you feel behind? Because it made me feel like they were behind. Behind me because I felt better, because I was younger than them achieving it and it's so messed up. It makes me think so much about what we can do here to help people continue. And I'm not saying the Scandinavian school system is perfect, but there are models that are different. This 5 to 18 block education is not the only way to do this, and the preschool is such a beautiful example. Do you get questions from teachers about what you guys are doing and where those ideas? Oh my God, I can't stop today where those ideas have come from, the models of education that you've based it off, and how we can make changes in the U.S. education system as a whole. I mean, that's a big change, a big question, but...

Brandy: A couple of countries come to mind when I think about education globally. Finland historically has scored unbelievably high and similar to what you were saying, you know, they start school later, they value play. They also value nature. I think it's the Swedish author who wrote there's no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing, have a really different perspective on what learning is and how connected it is to our leisure choice activity, especially in early childhood and it's very smart to wait to start this formal education because brains really aren't ready for it. It's like I can try to teach a two year old their colors for 100 days when they aren't

ready, or I can just wait till they're ready and then they'll learn it in one minute. That's what brains do. They're really powerful and they know what they need. China is another country that is interesting in this this entire landscape. We follow anji play, which is a movement from a specific region in China. And they believe that joy is the primary marker for learning. And I'm not sure what you know about the educational system in China, but historically, it's been known for being very regimented and very assessment based, achievement based. But now this movement is really taking over. And I can't wait to watch. And I encourage you to pay attention to how this begins to, no pun intended, play out, because now we have all of these children who may go into that system when they're six or seven years old, but they have completely revolutionized what their years look like leading up to that. And I've seen that for myself, my own children and in my students, when they have all of this opportunity to problem solve, to assess risk, to think critically, to collaborate with others, children learn so much from each other way more than they can learn from an adult teaching at the front of the room, and especially in a multi age model which we follow at preschool on the prairie. And many places follow that that model as well. So you have five year olds who are learning this great empathy for these young children who they who they can remember being. And then you have these three year olds who are looking up to these leaders around them that are, you know, about to age out of our program. And they're the OGs, you know, and it's really powerful to watch that dynamic. And I've watched child after child entering into this space and be really prepared for anything because they know who they are, they know what they need and they know how to advocate for it. And that's a game changer.

Easton: So looking, I guess, back to our country, which we inhabit. I did want to also kind of revisit the weird Venn diagram of like, I don't want to use the word encroachment, but like you had said, like there's a new stress on what you can and can't say in the classroom. That kind of affects, definitely affects museums. Like, you know, you'll see different states have different structures and different opportunity to say and teach certain things and concepts and all that stuff. I know this is kind of a scary question, but I think it's necessary. Like, have you seen sort of any like distinct changes in how Conner Prairie is approaching things, especially now that we're opening things like Promised Land as proving ground and starting to shift from our I guess we can say our pre-pandemic model to like a post-pandemic model.

Brandy: That's the beautiful thing about history, isn't it? That in fact. And so when we present facts to children, especially to students, they get to interpret that however they want. And with their interpretation comes their own beliefs in their family of origin, their own experiences that they've had in the world. And so when we present that history, we're like, we talked about less regulated and we should be the space where, you know, museums should be neutral, we should be presenting fact and historical truths and then allowing people to interpret that however they however they need to and if teachers can't do that in the classroom, that's even more of a reason for us to do it well. If they don't have permission to have those conversations in their rooms to present that history, and we do, we have a very important opportunity, but also responsibility to be doing that as an institution of history.

And so I think we kind of have to make that commitment to be fearless in that work because that's what humans deserve and that's what our role should be. And if we want others to operate in a space of less fear, we certainly have to be operating in a space of less for ourselves. So I think modeling that fearlessness is really important. And also it's hard to argue with fact. We know that people do you definitely know in your work, but when it's backed in data, in primary sources, in research, by experts, there's only so much combating we can do. Now, we talked

about how short a field trip is. Perhaps parents want to go to war with what's being said in these formal education settings because this teacher is trusted to be with these children for 8 hours a day, five days a week for an entire school year. But here we have them for this little short window of time. And I think we have to play those fears out a little bit. What's the worst thing that could happen?

I read a practice about that. I think that's like the doctor, the professor at Yale that does the happiness class. She talks about, like playing out at the beginning of the day. It's like some ancient practice that I guess helps kind of alleviate some anxiety, but just play out like, what is the worst case scenario? What's the worst that could happen? We're going to get this really pissed off parent who's going to write a letter to the board and it might get published in the paper and that could do these things. Okay. And like you said, Easton, when there's a problem will solve it. It will cross that bridge when we come to it. But we certainly can't operate in so much fear that we don't even give people the chance, Like we're making these assumptions that all these terrible things could happen as a result of us telling children the truth about history. But I'm not so sure that they would really play out that way. And like Hannah said, they're going to battle for their own kids. But it's pretty hard to argue with, We want your child to have this really clear understanding of what happened so that you all at home can make sure that you're processing that and interpreting that in whatever way honors your faith tradition or your culture or your belief system. And that comes from another egoless space of we're really doing this work for you and we want to hear from you about how to do that well. And we respect you if you don't think it's the right time in your child's life. Those are the conversations that are missing. And that's what leads to this great fear and our charge of doing better.

Hannah: I think so much of where we have failed children and adults in in historic education is teaching them how we do history. Like, how is this work done and why is it done in the way that it's done? And how can they be a part of the historical process, like deconstructing this idea, that the history can only happen in these ivory towers and only be assessed on them that way? That I think when we invite people in to be a part of history, to be a part of making that process, they can start to deconstruct that fear. Like, that's really one of the things I hope we're doing with this podcast is making you feel like you're a part of the historical process and you understand that behind every fact is an intense debate and it's okay for you to take a position on it, but make sure that you don't lose sight of the fact at the heart of it. And I hope that that is something where we're achieving. And I, I do feel like when we're having conversations on a daily basis, I don't know, maybe it's naive, but I do feel like we're making some progress here in making people feel safer with the way that history is made and assessed. I hope so.

Brandy: Yeah, me too. And I think we are. And I think there's having the opportunity to let children know that they do have an important role in history, that they are history, that they're making it in every single moment. And I have a quote behind me that says, Before it was history, it was a choice. And I think that it's it's less about this good, bad binary when we when we look at an event that happened in history or perspective, it's even if we just look at it from this very objective space of this was a fellow human who made this choice based on these things.

All the rest is up to you. How you feel about that. That can be perceived many different ways. You might meet that story with great empathy or with great judgment, and you're entitled to that. But we have to teach children how to deliberate that from a space of respect and care and articulate those beliefs in a way that helps to move things forward instead of sitting in anger,

sitting in fear, because those things are debilitating to our progress as a human species. And I think first have to see all of ourselves in that together. And children have to feel really valued and like a really important component of the story that we're writing because they are.

Easton: Hmm. It's funny what you. Yeah, what you just said. It reminded me a lot of my first time ever going out to help with HSE. And when they put me as

Ryan: What's HSE?

Easton: Oh, so HSC is when Hamilton South Eastern schools come in and do fun history stuff with us. And we sometimes help with the Underground railroad scavenger hunt thing. And I think it was you, Brandy, who said it, or it might have been both you and Laura because you're both geniuses and you both said pretty much the same thing. Like, you know, when where else can a, you know, a fourth grader scream at a grown man playing the role of an enslaver. And every time we go out there and do that, of course, we're you know, we're basically as the good guys because we're like a third person. 20-like...

Hannah: But also, When do they get to meet a historian like.

Easton: That's true!

Hannah: A real historian. Its true in every context.

Easton: Yeah, from a modern context. And then you have this I would love I've never seen this, but I would love to one day, like maybe sneak away and go see them. Talk to the Enslaver. We love John Martel. He's a great guy, but he plays a very convincing enslaver and the, you know, just the whole just hearing the stories of people like screaming in his face like they're never going to forget that. Like being like, what you're doing is wrong. And this is why it doesn't matter about the money. So that sack of coins you just threw on the table means nothing, you know?

And this great thing where we all go out there to talk to the children afterwards, the students afterwards, and they like and like you usually have one that's or one or two or a handful that are always like. So just to just to reiterate you all don't feel this way, do you? And they go down the row and just ask us all like if we would help an enslaved person who came to our door and we're always proud to say, absolutely we would. And so again, I'm going to it's going to sound like I'm just so envying this, but I really it would have been really cool to have gone through something like this when I was in fourth grade.

Hannah: Like, so true. Like every piece of it. Like, I don't remember getting to beyond a 1 to 1 level with grown ups.

Easton: And challenge.

Hannah: Who are experts.

Easton: And challenge

Hannah: Yeah

Easton: And mine and either mining their, you know, picking their brains for what they do and asking them candid questions where I don't have to raise my hand or at the other end challenging something that I don't think is correct.

Hannah: And what a loss for those grown ups that didn't get to have those experiences, because I come back inside and I do a better job at my job. The days that I've had those experiences, those kids make me think way more than any grown up I.

Brandy: Well, you said a lot of really important things Easton and that power dynamic, though, is so fascinating. You know, children are just supposed to sit and, you know, we always heard when I was young, like children should be seen and not heard. I contested from the time I popped out. But yeah, like this opportunity to kind of play. That's what it is. You're pretending, you're playing, you're trying on this identity or this response to an identity. And where else do you get to do that when you're a young person? And this like the novelty of that, that's what you said.

The the uniqueness is what you remember and once again, I don't know if that means that they mastered. Students will understand that the Underground Railroad was a blah blah blah blah, but maybe what they're definitely going to remember is that was wrong. I didn't like it. And this is how we got through that together. And now I know more about the questions I need to ask and the people I need to protect and more about myself. And what do you do with rage? You have to practice that because it can get you in trouble, but it can also serve you. And so a child to feel that rage and be enraged with an adult in a safe space gives them the opportunity to figure out how to handle that, how to harness it, how to use it for good, and ultimately how to take action to prevent other people from being suppressed or abused or even worse.

And I think about what what did those experience lead to? Imagine if a child was learning like that all the time, if they got to play and play and play, be in all these beautiful spaces and around all these other incredible children, and then go into their further academic careers with experiences like the one you just talked about. I'd imagine that we'd have a lot more entrepreneurs, a lot more artists, a lot more people who are really confident in what they want and brave enough to do work that actually serves their own calling and purpose instead of just appeasing a system that's bigger than them that they they can't necessarily control.

We talk a lot about pedagogy versus andragogy, so that's how children learn versus how adults learn. It's always so fascinating to me when I look at it because they'll say, you know, adults really need by and they need to understand why this learning is relevant to them, how they can apply it to their real life. It has to be something that they're interested in that they have some prior knowledge about. But kids now they're just this empty vessel that we can fill up and they'll just sit and listen. It's like the reason why there are so many differing practices in educating versus educating adults is because we got that so wrong. And now we have the American Academy of Pediatrics and, psychologists and neuroscientists and all of these experts who know that that's not true. But we're we're so deep into this system of not honoring that truth that it's really hard to come back from it. So when you know better, you do better. But a lot of education spaces in our country can't really do that, even if they do know because now they're buried in all of these regulations and people making decisions that don't get it, and people who are profiting from this very messed up system and people are too afraid to even breathe a word of discontent.

Hannah: I feel like as we as we start to come to the end of the podcast, we don't often call it this, but one of the things we like to do is kind of call to action. Like we've had a conversation about something hard and problematic today, but like what can the listeners that in a dream world would be able to come be at our teacher retreats and be here on a prairie with us? But if this is the only engagement you have with us in the work we're doing, how can we support them moving forward? Do you have ideas? I mean, I heard so many come from our conversation today, but just kind of round up our conversation. What do you hope that people go away from this engaging conversation and and think about and engage with and do for themselves, for the children in their lives?

Brandy: Play. I want people to play. I want them to get in touch with the playing child inside of them. And the other thing I want them to do is practice the art of dawdling. We're so hurried and I think awe and wonder are these emotions that are often overlooked that lead to joy, the kind of joy that you can't measure. That doesn't mean you you've mastered any skill, but take a walk and notice. My favorite question is always, what do you notice? And you can utilize all of your senses to do that. Get outside, take a deep breath, look around you, pay attention and you'll probably know exactly what to do next because that's how your brain is wired and just relish in the freedom of that and the power in it. And think about how every child in the whole wide world has a right to that same feeling to be in awe of the birds or to wonder about why the clouds look the way they do during that time. Just to be and to remember power of that. And when you take those moments for yourself, it helps you to fight for those moments for others. And if we can all get a little more in touch with that joy in ourselves, the action will come because we'll be moved. Imagine if we were all a little bit more moved. What that could lead to. And I think if we are committed to being moved to put ourselves in moments, in spaces, where we can be moved by something bigger, by something deeper, by hopefulness, by joy, by awe, by wonder, then we have an opportunity to really create a better world.

Easton: That's deep.

Hannah: I think that sums up everything here today.

Easton: Yeah.

Brandy: Nothing problematic about that.

Easton: Yeah.

Hannah: Thank You so much, Brandy.

Easton: Dear listeners, thank you so much for joining us as we took another dive deep in problematic history.

Hannah: As always, you can find us on your normal podcast Places you can find us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, our website and anywhere else you get your podcasts. We look forward to sitting with you all again.

Hannah: Go out there and play y'all everybody.