



The Think Inclusive Podcast

Season 5, Episode 3

Arielle Hobbs | The Lion League

Audio Transcript

Arielle Hobbes:

This is Arielle and you are listening to The Think Inclusive Podcast.

Tim Villegas:

Recording from my office in beautiful Marietta, Georgia, you are listening to The Think Inclusive Podcast, episode 15. Today we have Arielle Hobbes, founder of The Lion League, a fantastic organization that is changing how we build inclusive schools around the United States. We talk about what inclusion looks like in her family and how The Lion League is different from other social inclusion organizations. After the podcast, please stop by our Patreon page, where you can support our goal to bring you in depth interviews with inclusive education and community advocacy thought leaders.

Tim Villegas:

In order to cover our hosting, transcription and production costs, we would like to meet our goal of \$100 per month. Please help keep this vital resource available to everyone by pledging your support of \$1, \$5, \$10 or \$20 per month. When you pledge as little as \$1 per month, you get access to our Patreon-only feed for blog posts, special edition podcasts and picture updates along the way. Without further ado, here is the interview.

Tim Villegas:

All right. Welcome to The Think Inclusive Podcast. I have Arielle Hobbes with us today. She is the founder of a nonprofit called The Lion League. She has been a thinker and writer her whole life, but found her passion when she had to rise up and fight for her son to have the same opportunities as everyone else. Through her nonprofit, Arielle has curated a curriculum that teaches students how to be more inclusive with their disabled peers. Thank you for being on The Think Inclusive Podcast, Arielle.

Arielle Hobbes:

I'm happy to be here.

Tim Villegas:

Now I'm saying that, right? Arielle or Ariel?

Arielle Hobbes:

Arielle. You are saying it right.

Tim Villegas:

Arielle. Okay.

Arielle Hobbes:

Yeah.

Tim Villegas:

Perfect. We had talked a few months ago now about The Lion League and I was just really excited about what The Lion League was and is and can be. I wanted you to come on the podcast to explain to our listeners what it is and how it relates to thinking inclusive and inclusion in general. Why don't we start off with what is The Lion League?

Arielle Hobbes:

Well, thank you for being interested. That always gets me more excited about what I do, when I meet people that are excited about what I do. I'm super happy to be here and explain what The Lion League is. The Lion League simply is a free school-based program that engages students to be more intentional about including their peers with disabilities.

Tim Villegas:

Oh, okay. How is it more intentional as opposed to-

Arielle Hobbes:

[crosstalk 00:02:59]

Tim Villegas:

Yeah. I'll go ahead and let you explain that.

Arielle Hobbes:

Yeah. For me, there is a lot of programs out there that pair children up or they have mentors or buddies, but that is a ... It might not end up that way, but it starts as a forced relationship, where you're paired with this person. It's not a natural friendship forming. It's not natural interests of one another. It can be that, of course, and I think it has been. I'm not saying a lot of those programs are not successful. I think that they are, but for me, I just wanted something that really focused on teaching typically developing students more about what is inclusion? What is disability? How can we be more understanding and accepting? The natural stuff comes after that because if you're more aware of what inclusion is, of what disability is, of the people around you, then you're going to just ... The friendships and the interest level is just going to be more of a natural occurrence rather than a forced one.

Tim Villegas:

Okay. Help me understand how this would look in maybe just a typical elementary school.

Arielle Hobbes:

Sure.

Tim Villegas:

Let me just go back and say this isn't just for elementary school. Correct? This is for K-12. Correct?

Arielle Hobbes:

Correct. We have an elementary school curriculum. We have a middle school curriculum and we have a high school curriculum. Of course, they teach the same basic concepts, but we break it down differently for the age groups.

Tim Villegas:

Okay. Is this something that's done during the school day or is it like an after school club? I guess it could be both.

Arielle Hobbes:

Yeah, it can be either. I really don't put any restrictions on the school. My focus is really just to get everyone talking about inclusion. I don't care how you do it. That's one of the things that I say right away whenever I speak to somebody or somebody has interest in The Lion League. "We're thinking about an after school club." Great. That sounds perfect. "We're thinking about something during the day." Great. That sounds fantastic. I have one school that's doing it ... They're hitting every student in the school. The counselor goes around and does a social and emotional curriculum. In that elementary school, four times a year, she teaches The Lion League curriculum. Every single student in that school is getting The Lion League curriculum. I think that is really, really cool. School's believe in it so much that they make sure that this isn't just a group of 10 students that are going to hear this. We're going to teach this to everybody.

Arielle Hobbes:

That just makes me feel good about what we're doing over here at The Lion League. It looks totally different for every school. I think initially, I started it with the thought that it would be after school programs and students would really get together and have maybe ... Obviously the teacher has to oversee and all that, but really student-run. We're still at the beginning stages and learning so much, but counselors and the administrative staff are really grabbing ahold of the idea and the concept and the mission of The Lion League. They're really wanting to teach it to a more broad group than just 15 students that gets together after school. I'm really happy about that.

Tim Villegas:

Fantastic. I have a couple more questions about the curriculum. The curriculum that is developed, is that something that you wrote or that you adapted?

Arielle Hobbes:

Yeah. I wrote it just from some personal experience, from some basic research. Each year, we want the curriculum to be different because we hope that we're maintaining some of the same students and eventually, our elementary students will be middle schoolers. We still want them to be in The Lion League. The concepts will be the same, but we hope to come at it from a different perspective every year. I have a spot on my website where you can actually volunteer to help me write the curriculum for that year. It's just a little committee that we put together. It's annual because we want it changing every year. It's only a one-year volunteer position. It's very low-key. I'm pretty low-key. I just really want other perspectives when writing this curriculum. Not just mine at all.

Arielle Hobbes:

This year, I worked with two really fabulous special education teachers. We just approached it from their point of view and mine. That's where the curriculum came from this year. I write the bulk of it, for sure. Just like I said, a little bit of research and personal experience. I really would love for the committee to transform into something really beautiful that everyone's excited about every year. Like, "Who's going

to write it this year?" I want that piece to become really exciting. That's a new facet for us within The Lion League.

Tim Villegas:

Okay. For instance, let's talk about this year's curriculum.

Arielle Hobbes:

Sure.

Tim Villegas:

I know that each school is going to implement the curriculum differently, but as far as ... Let's just talk about content because as far as for people who are not familiar with what an inclusion-driven curriculum ... What the content looks like. Let's say we're in our first lesson or unit. Can you give us some specific content examples of what would be in that unit?

Arielle Hobbes:

Yeah. There's four for elementary school and there's eight lessons for middle and high school. Middle and high school meet monthly. Elementary, we didn't want to put that on the elementary teachers or students. They meet four times a year.

Tim Villegas:

Okay.

Arielle Hobbes:

The first one is inclusion. Just what is inclusion? Then if you're in middle or high school, that second piece of the curriculum is going to break down, "Okay. Well now how do we actually apply what we learned last month?" In elementary school, again, it's more of just a basic overview. What is inclusion and a little bit of how can we ... There's always actions on the curriculum for every single curriculum that comes out, whether you're in elementary, middle or high school. Four or eight. At the end of your session, when these students are learning the curriculum, they have a takeaway. They have a piece of paper that's a printout and they put their own action items in there. How am I going to apply what I've learned for the next 30, 60 days?

Arielle Hobbes:

We really want them to come back to that next session and say, "I challenged myself to talk to three new students that I didn't know much about and ask them questions," or whatever their personal challenges were. Then we hope that they report those challenges. Then throughout the year, we're hoping that every single meeting gets more rich because the students are doing and understanding and just having greater awareness as we go along throughout the year.

Tim Villegas:

Oh, I like that. I like that a lot. I know that you probably don't dictate this, but what are some examples of how schools are implementing this as far as getting kids involved in recruiting, I guess, students? Is it a school-wide announcement? Have you heard of schools doing school-wide announcements or school-wide flyers? Or do teachers have their eye on certain students and they go and they ask them individually? How does that work?

Arielle Hobbes:

Very different across the board. I think some really feel like, "Oh, we'll do this as a leadership ... I already have a leadership group formed. Why don't we just add it to what they do?" That's great, too. Then like I said, that one school really took it another step further and they're teaching it to everybody. There's no option there. There's nothing going home. Every kid is hearing our curriculum, which I think is amazing. That's an elementary school here in Texas. I have another school here in Texas that has ... It's an elementary school, but they have some afternoon after school clubs. That's an optional sign up. The club list goes home and then students can decide if they want to join.

Arielle Hobbes:

I have a school in Florida who just sends out ... In this specific elementary school, they do 2nd through 5th graders just because of understanding. I think everyone can understand it, K-5, but they decided to do second through 5th. They sent home the option. I think they made a little presentation at school and then they asked kids if they were interested. If they were, they sent home just a little bit of information for the parents to let them know their parents wanted to participate in this. Everyone's doing it so different, but that's what ... I love that. I have a middle school here in Texas where it's a leadership group and a middle school in Arkansas. They have a specific group that they get together. It's actually a reverse inclusion situation. They use some of their special education students and then some of the reverse inclusion students that come. Then they're all working on it together. That's been a really, really fun one to watch as well.

Tim Villegas:

Yeah. That actually was my next question as far as how students with disabilities or that are labeled as special education students ... How they are really included in this process. Is that also up to the school or is it something that you are on the front end telling schools that if you're going to form a Lion League, you should also be having students with disabilities in the group as far as learning these skills as well?

Arielle Hobbes:

Yeah. It's suggested and it's pushed on my end. I can't make anybody do anything on their end.

Tim Villegas:

Right.

Arielle Hobbes:

For us, we definitely, definitely want full inclusion, even in a Lion League because it's so much more rich when we do have students with all different types of differences, whether it's disability or it's race or it's background. I think that that becomes really, really cool because they can all speak from different places. It is more than suggested that they have students with disabilities in The Lion League groups.

Tim Villegas:

Yeah, that's awesome. I love it. I guess let's talk about your personal experience in the why of ... Why you started The Lion League. In our introduction, we talked about you rising up and fighting for your son. Maybe tell us specifically what happened and why did you start The Lion League?

Arielle Hobbes:

Absolutely. It was an unfortunate experience, but turned into me really finding my passion, so I'm grateful. I have three kids. My middle son is eight and he has an intellectual disability and he is nonverbal. We signed him up when he was in first grade for a kinder-first basketball thing. Kinder-first grade basketball. Very chill. It's supposed to be just super fun. We thought, "This would be perfect for

him. He loves basketball." I called the local sports league in our area and just said, "Hey, are you inclusive?" They said, "Yeah, we're totally inclusive." I said, "That's fantastic. Let me tell you a little bit about my son. I think he's going to need a person to maybe come alongside him a little bit because he doesn't understand basic directions sometimes." I just gave him a little overview of him.

Arielle Hobbes:

They said, "Yeah, this is great. We would love to have him." I paid my money. We brought him that first time and nobody even said hello to us. I thought, "Well, that's a little odd," because all the other parents just threw their kids into the gym and they sat on the bleachers. I stayed with Sullivan on the gym floor and we found that they started and nobody still spoke to us. I tried to worm my way over to the coach and introduce myself and she didn't seem very interested in speaking to me. Sully ended up playing a little bit of basketball. Then the coach was walking around, checking on all the kids. I'm the only parent on the court. It's very obvious that Sullivan needs a little more assistance than all of the other children. She looked at me and started to walk over and then decided against it. Just turned around and walked away.

Arielle Hobbes:

I thought, "Oh my goodness. What is happening right now?" I didn't want to upset my son, but I couldn't stay. I was getting really fired up. I was getting really emotional and I decided to leave. We pulled out. I called them. You know, I told them that I need my money back and how I felt about them a little bit. I was just gravely disappointed in their lack of welcoming us, not including Sullivan and just trying to accommodate I'm in a very minimal way that he needs accommodation. Sully is very, very friendly, very social. I thought that they really just dropped the ball. I found that after that, I just stayed angry. I'm a very, very happy, positive person. This was not normal for me.

Arielle Hobbes:

Instead of letting that eat me up, after a couple weeks of being angry, I decided that this was something that I had to do something about. I created initially what was called Pride Inclusive Sports. Pride Inclusive Sports was created to try and push this idea of inclusive recreation activity. There's a lot of things out there for typically developing children, there's a lot of things out there for children with disabilities, but there's nothing that's meshing the two. Why aren't our kids playing together? For me, all kids should be playing together. That doesn't seem too far-fetched.

Arielle Hobbes:

In the world of competitive sports, it's a very, very difficult thing and I don't look at it the way that a lot of people do. I completely failed with my first mission of trying to include people in recreation. Really, truly just totally bombed. The sports went really well, actually. For two and a half years, we had wonderful special needs disability programming for ... It was fantastic. We had soccer. We had swimming. We had all of these different things, but in the end, there was no parents of typically developing children that would sign up their kids for our activities.

Arielle Hobbes:

After two years, I decided to take a step back and just say, "What am I missing? I'm obviously missing something. I'm segregating the community that I'm trying to include, so I'm failing miserably at doing what I intended to do." Through this, I took a break. I wasn't sure if I was going to continue what I was doing. In this time is when I decided, "No, I'm not going to stop what I'm doing. I'm going to change what I'm doing and I'm going to educate people on inclusion and disability because obviously they don't understand." I was in a place of passion and that's where The Lion League was created, specifically with

my son in mind, but obviously with the benefit of hopefully affecting the lives of all people and the disability community in general.

Tim Villegas:

Right. Now in seeing all of that about the segregation that happens with just sports in general, because you have sports that are so competitive, it's such a competitive world, the sports world, especially for kids. You sign your kid up for Little League and it's just a ... It's very intense.

Arielle Hobbes:

Very.

Tim Villegas:

You saw that when you created The Pride Inclusive Sports, that model, that it was attractive to families who have children with special needs or disabilities. Do you think though that there's a place for special needs or disabilities-specific events or organizations? I know that that wasn't ... It didn't line up with what you were thinking of what you wanted to do, but I guess in general. Right? For instance, Special Olympics. Or I know there are other organizations that are disability-specific.

Arielle Hobbes:

Right.

Tim Villegas:

Do you feel like there's a place for that?

Arielle Hobbes:

I'm a realist. I'm a dreamer, too, which is cool. I'm proud that I'm both of those things, but I have to live now and I have to hope for better. I think having a child with disabilities, I have found that spot. Right? I have to live in this space of, "This is what this looks like today, but I'm going to hope that this looks like X, Y and Z in the coming weeks and months and years." For me right now, there is a place for the Special Olympics because I see firsthand how much joy it brings to the disability community. Last weekend, we participated in a Special Olympics swimming event and my son had the best time and just felt like a superstar. We had a wonderful experience and we met amazing people and everyone was having a great time.

Arielle Hobbes:

There is space for that. Do I wish that sports were not as hyper competitive at this age? Do I wish that the world looked different and we could have kids playing with one another all on the same swim team? Absolutely I do, but I also feel like I have to look at right now. I dream about there not being a need for the Special Olympics, but I don't think that we're there yet.

Tim Villegas:

I think that's a really good point because you know part of my background as far as in the education world and what classrooms look like in special education. I feel very similar in that. I'm about to ask you I guess your opinion about the self-contained versus the inclusive model in special education.

Arielle Hobbes:

Okay. Yeah.

Tim Villegas:

I find myself thinking the same thing as in I have a dream and I have a vision that we can have inclusive schools. Those inclusive schools will look a certain way, where they're ... Like you said, there's no need for the Special Olympics. There's no need for self-contained classrooms, but we're not there yet. Right?

Arielle Hobbes:

Yeah. Just that.

Tim Villegas:

We're not. I used to feel really sick and bad about that because being in education for so long and seeing this disconnect that I felt like I was betraying my ideals because I'm still working in this system that does have these self-contained classrooms. I think what it comes down to for me is that I'm really in it for the kids. The kids aren't the problem. They're not what is holding us back, right?

Arielle Hobbes:

Right.

Tim Villegas:

As long as I have that in mind and just try to do what's best for kids ... Just like you. You're trying to do what's best for your son and kids like your son who need a little bit of extra help. You are trying to push people into what could be, but at the same time, you're participating in Special Olympics. You're participating in what's right now available.

Arielle Hobbes:

Absolutely. I would not deprive him of that. Yeah.

Tim Villegas:

Exactly. Yeah. I just talked a lot, so I apologize. I didn't mean to step all over your stuff.

Arielle Hobbes:

No. Oh my god. No, no, no. I love it. This is the fun part.

Tim Villegas:

Let me ask you, do you feel that same kind of tension as far as education for your son and what that looks like?

Arielle Hobbes:

Yeah. It's going to be a similar answer. Personally, I am all for full inclusion in schools, but in doing what I do, I'm so fortunate to meet amazing parents of children with disabilities, meeting individuals that have disabilities, young and old. I welcome this conversation always because I always want to hear both sides and I have heard both sides. I think when I first started this inclusion journey [inaudible 00:25:29] I thought that everyone felt like me, especially parents. I felt like, "Of course they all want their kids to be included. Of course they all want full inclusion in schools." Then I met a couple parents that were like, "No, not interested in that." I was blown away by this.

Arielle Hobbes:

I'm not now because I've been in it for a little while, but when I first really became a disability parent, I was all for that for my child. I was so shocked when I met people that weren't, but I love hearing why. I

think as long as we're respectful and always willing to learn and grow, I think it's beautiful to hear both sides. I love to hear why because some of them, it's just their fear of having their child engaged in the general education setting all day. I get that, too. If you have a very medically fragile child, I get that fear 100%. I think that personally, I totally am for full inclusion in schools, but I also want to be very respectful of some of the parents who have fears and are nervous about what that looks like for their children.

Tim Villegas:

Yeah. Also, I just want to say that it does come out of fear, but there's a reason for the fear because they've seen - and I've seen, too - where there's a system that's not set up for this to happen in an authentic way. There's a lot of factors for that. There's a lot of barriers for inclusive education to thrive. The one thing that I go back to is that this is not what we're advocating for as far as inclusive education and also for what you're talking about. With what you're promoting with The Lion League, it's not like this doesn't happen. Inclusive models happen and they happen all over the country and they happen all over the world.

Arielle Hobbes:

Right.

Tim Villegas:

They're happening right now. This is not a fairytale. This is research-based.

Arielle Hobbes:

I totally agree.

Tim Villegas:

It is literally happening. We have this dream of something happening, right? It's not like it's never happened before. We can point to examples.

Arielle Hobbes:

Correct.

Tim Villegas:

People can say whatever they like about, "Well, that wouldn't work here," but at least we can point to examples and say, "This is how this particular community has decided to implement these values." Hopefully with organizations like The Lion League and other ones that we can say, "Yes, this can happen in your community. You have to make it a priority."

Arielle Hobbes:

Right.

Tim Villegas:

Yes. That's why I'm just really excited about the ideas that we're talking about and what you're promoting with The Lion League.

Arielle Hobbes:

Thank you.

Tim Villegas:
Yeah, absolutely.

Arielle Hobbes:
That means a lot. Yeah.

Tim Villegas:
How can people who are interested in The Lion League and what you're doing, how can they contact you and get curriculum for their school or after school club or whatever?

Arielle Hobbes:
Absolutely. thelionleague.org is our website. Everything is on there. A description of our curriculum. We also offer workshops for schools. Right now we're just offering them locally in Texas or if I'm drivable to you. Possibly Louisiana, Arkansas. That would be me just coming in and doing two workshops a year if your school maybe is not ready to embrace the actual full curriculum of The Lion League. We have tons of different volunteer opportunities, like I spoke about earlier. Visiting the website is definitely the best way. There's tons of contact information on the website where people can get in touch with me. I usually answer personally, so I'd love to hear from everybody and I would love to hear from any of our listeners.

Tim Villegas:
Perfect. Are you also on social media and is there a way to connect there?

Arielle Hobbes:
Yes. Again, through the website, you can certainly do that. We're on Facebook. We're on Twitter, but don't tweet very much if we're going to be honest. [inaudible 00:30:22] and you can connect with me personally on Facebook as well. Again, I'm always thrilled to connect with people personally, not just professionally.

Tim Villegas:
Awesome. One more thing before I let you go.

Arielle Hobbes:
Absolutely.

Tim Villegas:
As a little bit of a teaser, are you still in the process of writing a children's book?

Arielle Hobbes:
I am. The children's book is written.

Tim Villegas:
Okay.

Arielle Hobbes:
It's a series. The first two are written, actually, which is fantastic and exciting. I have an agent that I was picked up with in the spring and we're in the process of just pitching to publishing houses. We're really excited about the potential of that children's book series coming out in the near future.

Tim Villegas:

Awesome. You're committing to coming back on the podcast and talking about your children's book. Correct?

Arielle Hobbes:

100%.

Tim Villegas:

All right. Good stuff.

Arielle Hobbes:

Yeah.

Tim Villegas:

Well, I'd like to thank Arielle Hobbes, founder of the nonprofit The Lion League for coming onto The Think Inclusive Podcast. Thanks for your time.

Arielle Hobbes:

Thank you.

Tim Villegas:

That is our show. We would like to thank Arielle from The Lion League for joining us. Make sure you check out their website, thelionleague.org, and you can find them on Facebook and Twitter. Follow Think Inclusive on the web at thinkinclusive.us as well as Twitter, Facebook, Google+ and now Instagram. Today's show was produced by myself, talking into USB headphones, a Zoom H1 Handy Recorder, MacBook Pro, GarageBand and a Skype account. You can also subscribe to The Think Inclusive Podcast via the iTunes Music Store, Google Play, Stitcher or PodOmatic.com, the largest community of independent podcasters on the planet. From Marietta, Georgia, please join us again on The Think Inclusive Podcast. Thanks for your time and intention.

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