

Title: Equity and Inclusion in Education: Providing Nurturing Environments for Learners

Description: In this episode, Dr. Kenyona Walker discusses the critical impact of providing nurturing learning environments for all students. As part of the Equity, Engagement & Evaluation team at our center, Dr. Walker partners with communities and schools to dismantle systems that marginalize learners, as well as provides support, training, and tools to educators. To learn more about our work, visit cete.osu.edu/programs/curriculum-and-training or connect with our team at go.osu.edu/OhioState4Work

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Fara Allen: Welcome to CETE Works, a podcast produced by the Curriculum and Training Team at the Center on Education and Training for Employment—a translational research center on Ohio State’s campus. We work where research meets reality. I’m your host, Fara Allen, a Program Coordinator at the Center. This podcast series will focus on the various approaches and supports that our center offers to educators of all learners. How do educators engage, nurture, and support their learners? Listen in on these discussions that highlight how educators can connect with and understand their learners! At CETE, we believe that everyone deserves to experience lifelong learning! To learn more about our work, you can visit our website CETE, that’s C-E-T-E, dot O-S-U dot E-D-U. Dr. Kenyona Walker, a research specialist at our center, is our featured guest today. Dr. Walker is a trained and licensed school psychologist, so she brings that experience and knowledge to her work. She is passionate about equity and inclusion in education, and you’ll hear the importance of educators nurturing all learners throughout this episode. Along with being a life-long learner herself, Dr. Walker has a keen sense of what both learners and educators need. There’s no doubt that Dr. Walker will continue to help lead the movement of dismantling the marginalization of learners. I’m pleased to be joined by Dr. Walker today, as she shares her story and how she inspires others in our communities.

Fara Allen: Hello, Dr Walker, we're happy to have you join us today to talk about the importance of equity and inclusion in education and making sure educators include all learners. Can you take us a little deeper into this topic by explaining what this means and how it relates to our overall theme of this series, which is how educators understand their learners and their learners’ needs and using approaches designing different learning?

Kenyona Walker: Yeah well, let me first say thank you Fara for having me here today. I’m very excited to spend this time with you and just kind of share and have a conversation about this critical topic. So, we’re talking about kind of inclusion and education and those types of things, and the first thing that comes to my mind, just in terms of making sure that we have everyone included in education, is this whole notion of inclusion by providing nurturing environments, and this is for all of our learners K-12,

higher ED, adult learners, and those types of things. And so, let me give you an example, so when we think about our K-12 educators, K-12 educators have something called *parentis loco*, where essentially, they are considered the parents, the guardian at that time when they're, when our children are with them. So, essentially when our K-12 educators have our students, they are providing our students with the exact same type of environment experience, nurturing, that a parent would. They are responsible for making decisions about the child's wellbeing, their health, those types of things and ensuring that they are safe, that they're in an environment that is encouraging, and I would like to say that they're in an environment that is nurturing. So, when I take that concept and pull it back for all of us, all of us are learners, but when when we're in organized learning spaced, to think about this idea of being inclusive, we really have to take it a step further, where we have to think about how can I create a nurturing environment, because if the environment is nurturing, by default, it will be inclusive. And it will be a great learning space for all of our learners. So that's, when I hear this topic, I think, when we provide nurturing environments, we will hit equity, we will hit inclusion, we will hit all those things that we're talking about today.

Fara Allen: Okay. We wanted to talk about this topic as part of the series because at CETE, we value these principles within our own lives and work. Can you tell us a little bit about how your work at the Center directly connects to this topic and how you got involved in it?

Kenyona Walker: Okay, my work is explicitly related to this topic, I have the privilege, the pleasure the honor to work in an environment that creates these as the focus of everyone's experience, but also my job, my day-to-day activities, my work is essentially ensuring that I play my part, my role in providing equity inclusion regarding educational experiences across the board, so the great thing is, is that I either get to create products, create learning experiences, or interact with folks that will either educate our earliest learners, our most vulnerable learners, our learners that had the most marginalizing and minoritized experiences. And our learners who are going out into the workforce are those that are already there, and so I don't know that there are many people that can say that they work at an organization in a job that is explicitly focused on ensuring that equity and inclusion occurs for our learners so that is basically what I do is not even connected to my job, it is my job, it is, it is what I'm doing, it's my life's work, and it is exactly where I think I should be, so I love it.

Fara Allen: That's awesome. Tying all of that into our overall theme of this series, which is sharing with educators different approaches that they can use to benefit their learners, can you tell us how your work benefits educators and learners directly?

Kenyona Walker: That's a good question. So, one thing that I do when I I get an opportunity to go before educators is I get to really get to help them think about the experiences of all of their students. And in doing so I believe that that is a benefit to them, because they can really take a different perspective in engaging with their students. So, for example, psychology or therapy counseling often has folks think about perspective, taking, putting yourself in the seat in the position of other people trying to

really understand what their experiences are so that you can have the sympathy and the empathy, the passion, and the compassion for them. When I work with educators, I try to get them to sit in the seat either of a parent of a child or an adult learner and to really consider how are their experience is different than what yours would be. And that will be based on a variety of things, how are their experiences different than yours, based on their socio-economic status, because we know that that will play kind of a role in the type of experiences, they are, they will have. How are their experiences different than yours, in terms of their race, we know that that is a signaler and can also impact the experiences of our students, how was their gender, how was their sex, so really putting those things out on the table to assist educators and saying Okay, even though we think we have an average or general experience for all of our learners, there are some of our learners that may not be having that same experience and so to really walk educators through that and to get them to really sit in the seat of the learners that may be the most minoritized in their learning space is very helpful for them. But then the second piece that we overlay with that, that I try to overlay with that, is to get educators and then take that perspective and look at their practices in their classroom, consider their pedagogical practices, consider their selection of curriculum, or how they implement curriculum, consider their grading policies and those types of things and really start asking yourself are these, are these policies practices, is this environment nurturing for all of my learners. Are they having the same experiences, and then, if they are not having the same experiences, if they are not all being nurtured and included and experiencing equity, how can I create that for them? So being able to get educators to really think about the experiences, and then crafting almost an intervention or response to that is, I think the greatest benefit that I can bring to their work is is bringing that perspective and thankfully, we have seen, I have seen, educators really take kind of that concept and really begin to transform some of the work that they've been doing to benefit their learners to make it more inclusive and equitable.

Fara Allen: Dr Walker, I sense your passion for this subject matter, and I hear that it plays a big role in your work, and perspectives are so important. So, can you tell us what motivates you to do this work?

Kenya Walker: That is a million-dollar question that it can take me an hour to respond to, but I'll give you a couple couple reasons that motivates me one is, just a natural kind of person, that is a helper, and so I tend to try and spot things that need to be addressed and really consider the most appropriate ways to address those. The second thing that motivates my work is as a school psychologist, as a trained and licensed school psychologist, I have been exposed to coursework experiences that allows me to kind of see the things that are needed for some of our our most vulnerable students. When I say vulnerable students, it's the same category as I mentioned before, it's our earliest learners, it is our learners that have disabilities that might impact their availability to truly learn and in the in the general education space, but it's also our most minoritized and marginalized learners and that could be a very broad category. So, bringing a school psych perspective really allows me to sit there and kind of figure out what are those unique needs, and it motivates me to then take those inputs, have conversations with educators, and say hey, these are the experiences of some of these

students, you may not know that they're not having the experience that you think they are. And here are some ways that we can really address that. But the last thing that truly motivates me is just, one being a mother, and knowing that my children will experience this world, they will still experience it as learners, they will experience it as folks in a workforce, but also the last thing is that some folks kind of live through life just kind of going on life's term. I am a legacy building person; I know that my children will be here, and they will be my legacy. But I'm often concerned about what I will leave outside of my children my children will be fine I am hoping and prayerful that when I leave this space. That there are bits and parts and pieces of the work that I have done that continues to resonate and continues to reverberate specifically as it relates to creating experiences for our learners that are equal and that are nurturing and that are meaningful for all of them.

Fara Allen: Now that we have a look into what motivates you, and I have to tell you it's motivating to me to hear, and you already shed some light on this, I believe, how do you turn this around and inspire and support others in your work, how do you turn your motivation around into inspiration for someone else?

Kenya Walker: I think the first thing in turning it around is really highlighting what's actually going on, the reality of it. The thing is, is that because we're all individuals, right, we bring our individual perspectives and our individual individual experiences. And those types of things, those really impacts, how we perceive things. And so, I think, for me, being able to bring to the forefront, hey, these are some of the other unique experiences that you may not be aware of providing educators with information that would allow them to really bring down the veil to see other folks' experiences and then, giving them tools to be able to address it, but also telling them, hey, it is possible to address this thing I think in many ways, in education, we often are able to spot issues, sometimes we're able to craft appropriate things to address those issues. But sometimes we don't share the reality and okay, when you address this issue, it's not going to be easy fix is not going to be a quick fix. But you can, you can do this, you can do this, and you can do this because I'm going to show you how it's been done so, the inspiration, the help the support that I'm able to provide for them is to say let's let's identify how we can make this space more inclusive and more equitable. And the first step in doing that is just identifying the fact that it isn't those are hard conversations to have but it's harder, not to have the conversation. The second one to do inspire is to say, here are some tools some strategies some simple things that you might be able to be able to deploy to be able to address this issue, and then just flat-out honesty. It is going to be hard work, but when we do hard work, we get awesome outcomes and the greatest benefit outside of our educators in doing this work is the benefit to our learners. That in and of itself, I believe, is inspiring.

Fara Allen: Speaking of learners and ongoing learning, and along those same lines of inspiration and support, we're learning organization at CETE, right? So, since we are learning culture, I'm going to turn the table just a bit, can you share with us what professional development you've participated in most recently and what your biggest takeaway was?

Kenyona Walker: Oh, my goodness, I think, like most other folks during COVID I think many of us have engaged in professional development, learning opportunities and those types of things, definitely in different formats than what we had ever intended. I think about all the conferences that we used to actually travel to and actually move around in the rooms and try and rush to, you know, get refreshments and things. In those events, the nice thing about, if I can say one nice thing about COVID, is that I have been able to engage in a lot of professional learning opportunities, conferences, and different things, probably more than what I would have been able to, and there have been some some great ones. And I have kind of filled my tank I think for the year, probably for years to come, with some of those. Some of my greatest takeaways, and one thing that I knew that which is why I was willing and wanting to continue engaging and kind of building my own toolkit, is a lot of my work really as you're talking about a lot of my work at CETE really falls into the bucket of diversity equity inclusion broadly. But, more specifically, it falls into that bucket as it relates to education. There is research out that suggests that DEI work, so diverse, diversity equity inclusion, work oftentimes is not sustainable. So, when we think about organizations, doing DEI work or individuals going out for those trainings and conferences that we're talking about, that many times the uptake of those I'll call them interventions, while created with intention oftentimes has great content oftentimes really gets you excited about going out and doing this work. Research has shown that many times they are insufficient, why? Because we take a single dose approach to doing diversity equity inclusion work. When really, we have to take more of a vaccination series like COVID vaccine to do this work. My biggest takeaway in all of the professional development that I have engaged in is that when we are taking care of our learners specifically when we're trying to address being equitable and being mindful of including students by creating nurturing environments is that one, we have to continue doing our own work, we have to continue developing those refined lenses so that we can continue spotting the areas that we need to address in terms of equity and inclusion. But that also we need to make sure that we are responding to the specific needs that are articulated by our learners and the only way that we can do that is by potentially getting those experiences from them. And so my greatest takeaway and a lot of my professional development is don't forget to actually go to the communities that you are trying to address, go specifically to them to figure out if you have actually identified kind of the barriers to the inclusion and equity correctly and if not, then allow them to add those inputs and if you have, and you just need a little bit more context, allow them to overlay that so that when you do actually go back out try to address those in your educational spaces, try to create those nurturing environments, that you are doing it in a way that is responsive and that is meaningful to the group that you are trying to have the greatest impact on, I know, that was a lot, but that is exactly kind of what I what I took away.

Fara Allen: I think it's awesome, thank you for letting us have such a deep look into your own learning and the importance of including all learners and what it means. I have one last question, is there any knowledge or skills that you sought out to gain specifically during the pandemic?

Kenyona Walker: This question really goes back to my response and the last question um, I would like to think that, actually I don't, I would say, I like to think I know everything, actually I don't because I'm actually hesitant many times to use the word expert. I like talking about the experiences that I've had, I like talking about kind of the exposure that I have, and the skill sets that I can bring to many of these conversations and and those types of things, but I know that in doing this work, the needs will change and shift and particularly for our educators and really addressing inclusive and equitable spaces that are created by nurturing our learners. I needed just to make sure that my knowledge and skills were consistently refined as well, specifically as it relates to a lot of the language. I don't know if you've noticed, but of course over the last year, year and a half, we have some new language that we've added to our toolkit, some new language that we are using in either ways that we haven't used before or just we're just trying to figure out what it is.

Fara Allen: Exactly.

Kenyona Walker: For me, the what I have kind of sought out is to one, ensure that I'm aware of the changes in the language, but also understand how it relates to the practice of the work that I'm doing so that I am sensitive to all the folks that are going to be recipients of my work both educators and our learners but then also making sure that I am moving out of that learning space having gained the skills and the knowledge to actually move forward with that, but also being sensitive to the fact that it might change again. And so, I think most most folks would be nervous about that if I'm going to get it right, is this the old word when the new word I mean there's so many terms going around now we can't say this, we can say that. But the great thing about about the the shift in language is is that it is responsive to the shifts in the way that folks are experiencing things and the way that folks are beginning to perceive things, and so, if we didn't if we didn't have the knowledge that we have now, we wouldn't be able to start looking at those new terms and say okay, what does this mean for my practice, what does this mean for my learner's, how can I be more sensitive, how can I be more culturally responsive and one of the biggest kind of skills I've learned, and it ties back to that last question that you asked me, is sometimes just inquiring how do you, what is the best way to refer to you, or what is the best way to refer to someone like yourself. I'll give you an example. We have used the word minority, those types of things well over the last year and a half. The more accepted version of that word is minoritize, which actually speaks less to the person being responsible for being in that group and more into the systems and structures that have placed them in that group and so being able to continue learning about the shifts in language and the way that we use language, because many times language in and of itself can be a barrier to the wonderful education that our educators can bring to our learners specifically our adult learners so that is knowledge that I gained and literally I'm deploying those skills, all the time now.

Fara Allen: So awesome to hear, kudos to you for turning shifts in uncertain times into positive learning experiences and thank you for taking the time to share your expertise, insights, and your personal story with us. I really enjoyed our time together today and

learning about how educators can rethink their approach to include nurturing for all learners because everyone deserves the same opportunities.

Kenyona Walker: They do, and if we can create it then they'll experience it.

Fara Allen: Thank you so much.

Kenyona Walker: Thank you, this was fun, thank you for having me.

Fara Allen: On behalf of the Curriculum and Training team at The Center on Education and Training for Employment, we'd like to thank our guest today. If you would like more information on this topic, please contact us at go.osu.edu\OhioState4Work. We would be happy to hear from you and share more information about our services and our work. Follow us on Twitter at [OhioState4Work](#). See our description for details. Thank you for listening to CETE Works, we hope you enjoyed this episode. Be well and bye for now.

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