



Centering Equity in Educator Effectiveness

Equity Spotlight Equilearn Webinar – Episode 1

Transcription

Equity Spotlight: Dr. Seena Skelton

Tiffany: Welcome to the Great Lakes Equity Center Equity Spotlight Podcast. This podcast series will highlight organizations and individuals in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio and Indiana who are working to advance equitable practices within school systems.

This is the first episode in the Centering Equity in Educator Effectiveness podcast series. Each episode in this series will focus on demonstrating equitable practices in curriculum, instruction or the learning environment.

Gayle: My name is Gayle Cosby and I am your host for the first episode of *Centering Equity in Educator Effectiveness Equity Spotlight*.

Today we will be discussing Centering Equity in Educator Effectiveness with Dr. Seena Skelton. Dr. Skelton is currently the project director for the Great Lakes Equity Center. She has gained expertise through working in a variety of roles. Dr. Skelton began her career in education as a school psychologist, in early childhood programs. As an educational consultant in Ohio Dr. Skelton worked with many schools and districts to ensure the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or (IDEA), and in facilitating the implementation of multi-tiered systems of support frameworks, including Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS).

In addition to these systemic reform initiatives, Dr. Skelton has worked for over seven years at the state and multi-state regional level for the Equity Alliance serving school systems in Arizona, Nevada and California and currently as the Director of the Great Lakes Equity Center serving the six-state region of MN, Ill, WI, MI, OH and IN to advance educational equity and the use of culturally responsive educational practices in classrooms, school and district levels.

Welcome Dr. Skelton.

Dr. Skelton: Thank you, Gayle.

Gayle: Dr. Skelton, would you please orient our listeners to the idea of centering equity in educator effectiveness. What does this mean?

Dr. Skelton: Certainly. Centering equity in educator effectiveness for me means having an understanding that equity is core to teaching and learning. Effective educators understand that educational equity is central to student success and to educators' success. And so when we talk about

equity we are talking about how educators' ways of being- and ways of doing- ensure all students have access to and participate in quality robust learning opportunities. Educators are making sure that students' perspectives, lived experiences etc. are represented in curricula content and in decision-making, and the focus of educator practices is to ensure high outcomes for all students.

Gayle: Thank you, Dr. Skelton. Can you share with us some of the research, or a working definition of educator effectiveness, and just describe for us what practices might an effective educator engage in?

Dr. Skelton: There is not one definition; what makes an educator effective is complex. However, we do know that certain traditional aspects of looking at educator effectiveness, while may be necessary, certainly are not sufficient. So, for example, only considering things like credentials or years of experience in teaching is not enough to define an effective educator.

At the most basic and broadest definition we can define educator effectiveness as an educator who through their interactions with curricular materials, students, families and colleagues within various learning environments—both classroom and non-classroom settings—create high quality, robust learning opportunities that are responsive to and reflective of the interests, needs, and assets of all students. This is done so that each student can successfully meet learning standards, as well as develop a love of self as a learner and agency towards self-determination.

Gayle: Dr. Skelton, what practices might an effective educator engage in?

Dr. Skelton: Being an effective educator centering equity in everyday practice requires more than implementing a set of strategies or a menu of strategies. In fact, centering equity in educator effectiveness leads educators really away from focusing solely on technical solutions – that is “how to do something.” Effective equity-oriented educators consider contextual factors or forces that are at play during any interaction with students and other adults, as well as considering the interactions among students and the learning environment. So by contextual factors I mean attending to the written and unwritten policies, norms, traditions and routines. These also includes messages or cues that are present that signal to students adult expectations – from the curricular materials that are used in the classroom, the artwork or décor featured on school and classroom walls, how furniture within classrooms are organized, to where particular classrooms are located in the school, how time and space are utilized, to what educators' give their attention to during interactions with students etc. All of these decisions communicate to students what's perceived to be important, valued, acknowledged etc.

When educators consistently assess the extent to which contextual factors privilege particular student groups and marginalize others, educators are utilizing a critical lens to examine the effect of school practices and policies. The practice of critical reflection is essential for effective educators.

Gayle: Thank you. Dr. Skelton, could you elaborate on what can educators do personally to ensure that their practices are rooted in equity?

Dr. Skelton: I often talk about the three essential critical stance educators can take, uh, or think about their own practice. The first is educators should develop critical consciousness - that is an awareness that we all have biases about people that shape what we think and these biases can influence our behavior. These biases are often implicit, meaning that we are often unaware of, of them. Developing a critical consciousness is intentionally questioning oneself and surfacing our own biases. Critical consciousness also involves being aware of how power dynamics are at play in any given situation that

may systematically advantage some while simultaneously disadvantaging others. For example, a classroom practice as seemingly as innocuous as asking students to raise their hand if they know an answer to a question can set forth a power dynamic that advantage or privilege certain groups of students over others. This single behavior is anchored in the western – often Eurocentric value of individualism or individual achievement. Since the purpose of the act of raising one’s hand is for one person to be singled-out to demonstrate their personal, individual achievement of “knowing the answer,” students for whom a collective orientation to achievement is valued, or group recognition is what’s important may feel uncomfortable in the act of raising one’s hand. They may shy away from that. The act of raising one’s hand may have nothing to do with whether some students actually know the answer to a question. However, the teacher may make assumptions about how prepared students are, whether they have completed particular assignments, whether the students are engaged etc. And because the teachers has the power to act on these assumptions, assigning participation points based on, uh, uh, for example, this dynamic can systematically put some students at a disadvantage. An educator who has developed critical consciousness is able to recognize how this act may be prevent some students from fully engaging and work towards redressing an issue.

The second critical stance that I often talk about is utilizing critical pedagogy in everyday practice.

Critical pedagogy basic tenets draw from various critical theories and encompass instruction that involves reflection upon students’ cultural and lived experience. Using instructional practices that encourages students to develop their voice through a critical look at their communities, the society and the world through dialoguing with others, and a focus on social justice. This involves learning activities that engage students in transforming the society toward equality for all citizens through active participation in democratic priorities.

The third critical stance is engaging in critical reflection.

Engaging in critical reflection means to examine, disrupt or dismantle assumptions, beliefs, and practices that marginalize and disenfranchise students, families and staff.

Equity-oriented educators engage in reflective practice, demonstrate critical consciousness and promote self-reflection among colleagues, as well as themselves, and staffs and students.

Critical reflection requires:

Examining one’s own personal identities and biases

Encouraging and creating opportunities for staff to reflect on their own personal identities and examine their own biases.

It is also means educators getting to know the cultural practices of their students in authentic ways.

Recognizing and acknowledging the diversity of students and families in the school community.

This is done by demonstrating curiosity about students lived experiences and by authentically connecting with students’ families and community members and not making assumptions.

Critical reflection also includes surfacing systemic issues of power and privilege by collecting information about school culture and climate from students, staff and family members.

And, by lastly by examining programming decisions, resource allocation and assignment/course rigor etc. along with student participation data disaggregated by student groups all used to evaluate the system and determine inequities in areas for educators to then address.

Gayle: Um, thank you for that explanation. You have worked toward equity through a variety of roles – from working as a school psychologist, to working with educators at the school level, at the district level, and also state-level, and now you are currently the Equity Center’s project director for all the states in the Great Lakes region. In your experience, is there a magic professional development formula that districts can use to “grow” and sustain equity-oriented educators in their practice?

Dr. Skelton: No, there is no magic formula or silver bullet. Districts must engage in the hard work of intentionally and consistently centering equity in decision-making and practice. In terms of professional development, districts should have a comprehensive district-wide professional development plan that individual schools can link to.

This plan should be in alignment with the district’s vision and mission, connected specifically to district goals and objectives and target one or two primary focus areas.

The plan should address not only the topics for the year, but also the structures, process as well as specific content for specific stakeholder groups. Equity should be a consistent thread across all professional learning opportunities and the equity implications should be made overt in the professional development content, as well as structures. Professional development opportunities should be job-embedded and District leaders should support school level professional learning through guidance, resources and supports.

Educators should be supported to engage in frank and structured conversations about difference, culture, instruction and achievement regularly.

Gayle: Ok. Dr. Skelton, thank you very much for your expertise.

Dr. Skelton: Thank you.

Tiffany: This podcast was brought to you by the Great Lakes Equity Center, directed by Nickie Coomer. To subscribe to a podcast, click on the podcast link on the Great Lakes Equity Center website at www.greatlakesequity.org. The Great Lakes Equity Center is funded by the US Department of Education to provide technical assistance, resources, and professional learning opportunities related to equity, civil rights, and systemic school reform throughout the six state region of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin. The contents of this presentation were developed under a grant from the US Department of Education, however, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government. This podcast and its contents are provided to educators, local and state education agencies and/or non-commercial entities for training purposes only. No part of this recording may be reproduced or utilized in any form, or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including recording, or by any information storage retrieval system, without permission in writing from the Great Lakes Equity Center.

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