

TRANSCRIPTION

Center Announcer: Welcome to the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center Equity Spotlight Podcast. This podcast series will feature the Center's Equity Fellows, national scholars from North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio who are working to advance equitable practices within school systems. Each episode will focus on a topic relevant to ensuring equitable access and participation, and quality education for historically marginalized students, specifically in the areas of race, sex, national origin, and religion, and at the intersection of socioeconomic status.

Dr. Morton: ... two, one.

Dr. Morton: Daniella Ann Cook is an Associate Professor in the Department of Instruction and Teacher Education at the University of South Carolina. Originally from Cincinnati, Ohio, she received her master's and doctoral degrees from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Prior to joining the faculty at University of South Carolina, Columbia, Dr. Cook served as an Assistant Professor of education at the University of Tulsa and the post-doctoral research fellow with the research network on Racial and Ethnic inequality in the Social Sciences Research Institute at Duke University. Her research and scholarship address three intersecting themes: historical contemporary narratives of Black educators, public policy with a focus on community engagement and identifying factors that support students' access to rigorous curricula across diverse schooling contexts. These three areas reflect her commitment to the democratic project of sustaining racially just and equitable schooling for communities, traditionally under served by public education.

Dr. Morton: She conducted an ethnographic study of Black educators in New Orleans post-Katrina to an urban school reform narrative with an explicit focus on

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their effects on Black communities during the largest displacement of African-American educators since desegregation. Dr. Cook is also the social editor for the Urban Review. She is also actively involved in several professional organizations including, the American Educational Studies Association and the American Educational Research Association. In addition to presenting at international and national conferences, Dr. Cook has published in a wide range of journals including: Multicultural Perspectives, The High School Journal, The Journal of Cultural Mathematics, Southern Anthropologist, Voices in Urban Education, and The International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education.

Dr. Morton: Dr. Cook, thank you for taking time to talk to us today about community engagement urban education reform.

Dr. Cook: Glad to be here. Thank for the invitation.

Dr. Morton: You are very welcome. In your work, you focused on community engagement and community organizing. How do you see the relationship between those two?

Dr. Cook: When we think about community engagement, we often think about; how do we create opportunities for communities to give input, right? We ask folks, "What do you think about this? Tell me what you want," but we really don't think about then moving this input into action and that's where community organizing comes into play. So community organizing, traditionally as an organizer, you're trained to ask three questions: what do you want? What power do you have and what are you willing to do? Those questions frame action around the things that we're often asking folks to give input on. It also makes you think about when you're shifting from a discussion of community engagement to organizing, you have to really pay attention to

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power in particular ways and think about who's at decision making tables and whose voices, who we really acknowledge and listen to.

Dr. Morton: Okay. So broadly speaking, how do you see those relating to urban education reform?

Dr. Cook: Often, when we think of reform, there are a couple of things I think we need to debunk before I get to that. Reform is not necessarily positive and it's not neutral. So oftentimes, we take reform as change is good and that we're going to move us closer to a positive goal. I think that when we realize that we can have reforms that are negative, in the case of high stakes testing, reforms that have impacts that undermine our sense of equity and justice and the goals that we say we're advancing in our work and in our schools and our communities, reform is not necessarily good for us or good to us. Then when we think about urban education reform, oftentimes we're looking at what urban contexts don't do; what's wrong with Black and Brown people and Black and Brown communities? Instead of really looking at; what are the assets in these communities? What debts do we owe to these communities because of our public policies and practices that have marginalized them in particular ways and therefore, have these deleterious impacts on schools and their communities, in health outcomes, in a broad range of factors?

Dr. Cook: Then if you think about urban school, urban education reform, and you think about community engagement and then you think about community organizing and you mix that all up together, what I like to think about is if our goal is to have more equitable and racially just school reforms in urban contexts, that we need to think about how to have transformative relationships with communities and that speaks to how we engage with communities, and then how do we connect that engagement to moving the

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needle in our public policies, right? That's where the organizing comes into play because it's then asking us to think about; what are we willing to do to have the types of schools that we want to have?

Dr. Morton:

In your mind, what's your vision? When you talk about these equitable and racially just educational experiences, can you talk a little bit more about your visioning around that?

Dr. Cook:

Yeah, so that's a great question. I think that for me, it means that when kids are coming to our schools, right? Your zip code is not going to determine the type of curricular you're exposed to. Your zip code won't determine the qualifications of your teachers. Your zip code, your race, your family's net worth will not impact your experience in school. Every kid is coming to school in a way that they're seen as full of having potential, that they're valuable, that they're valued, their families are valuable, their families are valued, and that we're operating as such, from every level at every level.

Dr. Cook:

I also think that, for me, a racially just an equitable schooling environment is preparing our kids to participate in our democratic society, right? And not just democracy here in the states, but see themselves as global participants in democracy and really critically thinking about; how can we help them shape the world in which they're living, right? What are we doing in our schools, right, to give them opportunities to have healthy conflict resolution? How are we helping them think about how our policies and practices that are human driven, right? These weren't things that this came out of the sky, but people made decisions in all these areas. How can we help our kids think about how they can positively and equitably impact the lives of other people and their own lives by seeing the relationships between different factors? For me, that's what that vision would look like.

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Dr. Morton:

All right, well thank you for that. Thinking about this equitable more racially just, a lot of districts across the country are moving towards charters as a means to provide more equitable opportunities. Can you share your perspective on the shift?

Dr. Cook:

Yeah. I think that we have to be really careful when we say, "charters," to ask folks what they're defining as charter. So the history of charters actually emerged out of the teacher's union and most folks don't know that, that teachers unions wanted to think about, "We need to have a lab for trying out those strategies that can help teachers reach all kids at high levels, right, and what are those types of learning contexts and environments that will contribute to that? Then once we figured that out in a small setting, then we can think about how do we bring that up to scale," right? The history of charters has been lost partially because of the privatized nature of contemporary charter schools, right?

Dr. Cook:

We have charter organizations that see charters as a means of economic growth. It's the new economic engine, right? What's fueling that engine are typically Black and Brown kids who are not being served. Folks are being drawn to these models because they see that their schools aren't working and they don't have a way to think about how they can help transform their neighborhood schools and their community schools, and they see charters as one way to do that. So I think that it's really important for us to kind of tease out which type of charter are we talking about. Are we talking about these corporate models that is a one size fits all, that they sugarcoat and sugar pick which kids they're going to choose? They really don't have an interest in long-term sustainability in a community because their bottom line is; are their test scores improving enough so they can continue to then get public dollars for their private venture, right?

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Dr. Cook:

Those types of charters must be distinguished between those that are community based charters, right, where schools are coming out of community desire and dream and decision, and then communities are then shaping curricula, growing their teachers and they see schools as a part of a larger ecosystem in their community, not just a school. So teasing those things out I think, are really, really important when we talk about charters. If we don't do that, we're going to then support the continual undermining of public education, which I'm a staunch advocate for. I think that public education is really crucial to our democracy. If we stopped supporting public education where all kids have access to high quality teachers, rich curricula, out of school learning experiences connected to their schools, having access to the arts, we're actually going to undermine not only our democracy, but we're actually going to undermine the dreams of enslaved Africans who the first thing that they did upon being free and fighting for their freedom was to establish schools.

Dr. Morton:

I know you talked about distinguishing between the differences of the charter schools, whether it's the corporate, whether it's community based and also at the same time, you're saying, "I'm an advocate of public education." In a recent conversation, you were talking with me about the work of Carol Lee and her school in Chicago. I think it would be great for the audience for you to talk a little bit about her work and that particular charter school.

Dr. Cook:

Yeah. I'm going to veer and I'm going to hopefully, encourage your listeners to go look up Carol Lee's charter school in Chicago and also, there're similar models in Detroit and other areas around the country. One of the contributions of Dr. Lee's work is a really rich discussion of the role of community in schooling and how we often [foreign language 00:12:08] often

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speaks around not conflating schooling with education. I think that when you look at the work of Dr. Lee and her charter school and others around the country, they're really careful about not making those things similar, right?

Dr. Cook:

We understand schooling as socialization, right? We're going to help you learn certain skills so you can participate in dominant mainstream society. Whereas, education is really rooted in, not only learning those skills that help you negotiate and navigate successfully mainstream society, but education is about critiquing and pushing the mainstream of the dominant to be more in my words, "democratic, just, and equitable," right? I think that when we think about those community based charters, those charters that seek to not strip kids' identities, but to embrace their kids' identities as central aspects of their learning, those types of charters are grounded and not competing with public education, but fulfilling the ultimate goals of public education.

Dr. Morton:

So two more things to reach one of our goals, I want you to just talk a little bit about what can parents, caregivers do, larger community organizations do, to support this vision of equitable and racially just opportunities for kids. Also, I know in your work you talk about in that, that it'd be a rigorous experience as well.

Dr. Cook:

Mm-hmm (affirmative) mm-hmm (affirmative). Mm-hmm (affirmative). That's a wonderful question and I think that I really love the framing around thinking about caregivers. There is a concept that I employ in my work called, "fictive kinship," and what that refers to are; what are the larger relationships that we have that are not driven by blood kin, right? So many of us, we have our aunties and uncles who are nowhere related to us by marriage or otherwise, but those folks sow into us, they take care of us,

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they scold us, they sharpen us. So for my vision of how we think about bringing the full weight of our communities to bear on the challenges in our schools, but also then creating those opportunities to address those challenges, if we have to think; how do we bring parents, grandparents, aunties, uncles, that fictive kin into relationship with those of us who are working inside school buildings?

Dr. Cook:

That would mean; how can we build trusting relationships with those folks? That means you need to know people, and knowing them doesn't mean you judge those relationships, right? You see that having people who you're related to that may or may not be your parent, that's an asset. Most of us would love to have that many people sowing into us and loving on us and scolding us and sharpening us. How do we then think about bringing those folks in? There are lots of ways to do that. We can alter the relationship. So instead of always asking the larger community to come to us, we go to them, right? What are those community spaces where people already gravitate to, right?

Dr. Cook:

Moving beyond just churches and barbershops because I think we're at the point where now we're like over indulgent in those spaces, but you have to really kind of think about in each community there are always those homes. There are always those sites where people just gather and how do we kind of take those gathering spaces, become a part of those gathering spaces, not try to appropriate your takeover, but become a part of so that we can then kind of have more meaningful links, right, between school community, community and school, and bring the larger network of caregivers to wrap around our kids?

Dr. Morton:

So you're saying go into these community spaces, tap into this larger network. I like you're talking about getting out of just the... The church and

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the barber shops are resourceful spaces today and going beyond that. Once you're in those spaces, what are you saying to the communities, to the parents, to the caregivers to say, "Here's some things you might want to consider, some things you might want to do to help impact what's going on with the teaching and learning of your children and the children in your community."?

Dr. Cook:

Actually, the first thing I do is listen. So I actually asked them the question, "What do you care most about?" I ask folks questions around, "What are your memories about schools? Tell me about what was school like for you?" And we use that as a jump off to then start to talk about, "Well, how can they become more effective advocates for their kids?" I think that the first thing we should do is find out what folks' concerns are and really listen and then that'll open up a door of opportunity for us to then provide some insight that they may not have known.

Dr. Cook:

For example, when I was living in North Carolina, organizing around anti high stakes testing and I would go around to different communities around the state, one of the things that struck me was that parents saw holding kids back as a positive thing. They weren't trying to hurt their kids. They really thought that, "Look, you know. Daniella needs some help with her math. So she needs to take another year to kind of master this." What they didn't know that is when you hold a kid back, you increase their chances of dropping out by 50%. You do it twice, it's a 90% chance, right? You're increasing their likelihood of dropping out.

Dr. Cook:

That opened up the door for me to go, "Wait a minute, folks don't know this. So I should drop that knowledge," but then also, it made me attuned to oftentimes people are doing things that are detrimental for good reason, and then they don't have another way to think about, "How do we then

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address the gap?" So we kind of collectively thought about, "What does it look like for kids to just get additional support in the subject areas in which they need it and not hold them back for everything?" Right? "Or move them forward with additional support versus just holding them back around everything."

Dr. Cook:

I think, for parents, it's really important to be okay asking questions and stating what it is that you need, knowing that someone may come and offer something that you weren't expecting, but hopefully the person that you're sharing it with is listening with the ear of, "I know you care about your kid." That's always been kind of my starting point is, "I know you care about your kid, not just your a kid, but the kids in our communities." So when I'm listening for that, then I can offer different suggestions, right? So asking questions, I think for parents, it's really important for them to read and not just read randomly, but I'm thinking rethinking schools offers lots of really accessible articles.

Dr. Cook:

Another kind of North Carolina story, we started out Friday night potlucks across three school districts of teachers, parents, there were some professors in a group and people had their kids, whoever you were dating at the time, may not have been there two months later, but they were at that one and you would show up and we would pick something to read and we would just talk about it. What would it look like in our informal gathering spaces to actually talk about some things that matter to us, but then go the extra step and invite people to read something with you? It doesn't mean you have all the answers, but it can help spark a dialogue. So I think that continuing to learn is something that parents can do.

Dr. Cook:

Then the other thing I would encourage parents to do is don't be afraid to reach out to experts. I'm thinking about the case of a group of parents in an

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affluent suburban district, two years middle-class, highly affluent, middle-class Black parents and they were struggling with their kids being disproportionately placed in special education. These folks were having an urban experience in a suburban context. What they did, they came across a book by Theresa Perry, *Young, Gifted, and Black*, I highly recommend it. It's in Barnes and Noble, and they read the book and they reached out to Dr. Perry and she reached back out to them and built a relationship with them that then supported their organizing around equitable educational opportunities for their kids.

Dr. Cook:

I think that as parents are reaching out and reading different things and coming across different articles, reach out to folks. Many of the scholars that I know, they are happy to talk with parents to connect with parents, connect with community members, is not about getting an honoraria or getting a line on a resume, but folks who are really invested in doing this work, want legs on the work. The only way the legs can be on the work is if parents and community members read it and not just go, "Oh, this is great," but feel free to push back and hold us to the carpet around, "Wait, how does this... How does this work?" So those are just a few things.

Dr. Morton:

All right, thank you. I really appreciate you sharing your expertise and insights today. Lastly, in a nutshell, can you leave our listeners with three main points to remember from this discussion today, this conversation today?

Dr. Cook:

My shero is Ella Baker. One point Ella Baker says, "Strong people don't need strong leaders." I think that one point, when we think about community organizing is for parents and communities and caregivers to realize their strength and use their strength to push for the types of education that we want for all of our kids and never apologize for wanting

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equitable learning environments for all of our kids. I think point two is realize that parents, caregivers, and the larger community, you all have a lot of power. We have a lot of power, not individually, but collectively. If we can learn to think about all kids is our kids, and then really think about; what are those levers that we need to see happen so that all kids have the types of learning that we have? That's what's going to make any reform that's positive and good for our kids sustainable because the one thing that remains are our communities. We vote, we pay taxes, people are accountable to us. So remembering that as we're thinking about; what is it that we want?

Dr. Cook:

Then I think the third thing is just be willing to be flexible and to continue to grow, that as you learn and do work and read and fight a battle and win a victory, lose some, you're going to know things differently. That's a part of the journey of good, I think, organizing and good community engagement that's transforming schools in ways that are equitable and just, that communities are not afraid to be flexible and grow. You don't lose who you are, you don't lose your traditions, you don't lose what you believe, but recognize that there may be different ways that young people are engaging that we may need to hone in on and realize that the youth are the organizers of now that will be the parents, the community, and caregivers of the future. So we're setting that model.

Dr. Morton:

If those who are listening to this wants to get in contact with you, what's the best way to connect with you?

Dr. Cook:

The best way to connect with me, you can email me at Daniella.Cook@SC.edu or you can Google Daniella Cook, University of South Carolina, Columbia. My information will populate. Feel free to send me an email. You can also reach me by mobile. That phone number is

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area code (803) 470-5518. Again, (803) 470-5518. I do respond to text messages as well. Just give me 48 to 72 hours if I don't know who you are and I really appreciate if you tell me, "Hey, I'm Crystal. I heard you on the podcast," and that way I have a gauge for who I'm talking with.

Dr. Morton: All right, well thank you again for your time and I'm sure we will connect again soon.

Dr. Cook: Great, thank you.

Dr. Morton: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dr. Cook: Bye bye.

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The Role of Community Engagement in Urban Education Reform

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