

TRANSCRIPTION

Center Announcer: Welcome to the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center *Equity Spotlight Podcast Series*. 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, representation, participation, to realize quality outcomes for historically disenfranchised students closest to historic harm, specifically in the areas of race, sex, national origin, and religion, as well as how this impacts students with disabilities, and efforts towards socioeconomic integration.

Dr. Brown: Welcome to *embRACE*. My name is Dr. Ayanna F. Brown, and I am proud to bring this podcast series to you. *embRACE* is a series of conversations between scholars, teachers, and students that are committed to demystifying and eliminating the fear and hesitancy around discussing race in schools. Our goal is to understand how race serves as an intellectual area of knowledge that can help us deconstruct and develop ideas in hosts of content areas. *embRACE* works to help educators share instructional approaches that utilize race in constructive ways, as we also examine how learning can advance social justice efforts to eliminate racism.

Today I am honored to bring to you a dear friend who has served the education field as a scholar, as a learner, as a leader in multiple capacities. I’d like to introduce you to Kim Conner-Davis. Good evening, Kim.

Kim Conner-Davis: Good evening, Ayanna. How are you?

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Dr. Brown: I'm well. How are you?

Kim Conner-Davis: Great, thank you.

Dr. Brown: Good. Good. Well, I gave a brief introduction, but I would love it if you could share a little bit more with our audience about who you are, your professional work, your content area of expertise. Let us know everything about Kim Conner-Davis.

Kim Conner-Davis: Well, as we go through the actual interview, I wanna dive deeper and deeper into it. But on the surface, I just wanna just let you know that I am an educator. I'm committed to the field of education and have been committed for the last twenty-five years of my life. I've worked at all types of schools in various roles. I've actually worked at single-sex schools, private schools, parochial schools, primarily white schools, predominantly Black schools, or where there were student populations of, well, the majority were populations of Color. I've worked in rural schools, urban schools, suburban schools, you name it. I've worked in those schools in administrative, instructional, parent roles, board member roles, etc.

Dr. Brown: Wow, so I guess the better question is what have you not done?
(laughter)

Kim Conner-Davis: But, you know, that brings me to this point. And that is that puts me in a great position to actually do the work that we're gonna to talk about during this podcast.

Dr. Brown:

Well, let's absolutely get right into it. So, one of the reasons why I'm really excited about this conversation is because, you know, when we think about teaching and learning, and what motivates us about teaching and learning, everyone has a story. And usually, it's that story that illuminates not only the content area that you teach, but why you decided to enter the teaching profession within...like, how did you land in education in the first place? So, if you could share a little bit with us about what motivates you about teaching and learning, and possibly give us an inlet into how you entered into the profession?

Kim Conner-Davis:

So, I have a bachelor's degree in biology and chemistry. And immediately after college, I began to work in the chemical industry. And, lots of times when I was at work, I was the only female, and sometimes the only Black person working in the work environment. And so, I was just like...coming from educators—my mom, my mother and father were both educators—I was just like, “OK, how can I actually reach back to my community and bring more people into this space?” And the best way was to become a chemistry teacher. And so, that is like how I really got my instructional start in education.

Dr. Brown:

So, chemistry. You know, when people talk about content areas of choice, and of interest, the range of the story is very large, particularly when you're coming from a family of educators. So, tell us about how you were introduced to science, and did you land as a science major and then as a chemistry teacher. What was the story there?

Kim Conner-Davis: My teacher. My teacher from high school. I had that teacher that was just different. She was very very eccentric, and I was just like, “Oh wow. You know. OK, I've never thought this way about science.” She tried to introduce some things that were as we say “taboo” in science, but she only touched upon those really lightly. Because this was in the like late 90s and so, early to late 90s, and so basically, like we didn't do a deep dive in subjects like race and ethnicity to really pique the interests of students. But she piqued mine fairly enough, and so that I could actually pursue a career in the chemistry field.

Dr. Brown: Outstanding. It only takes just one, right?

Kim Conner-Davis: It only takes one, yes.

Dr. Brown: It only takes one. So, when you mentioned she was eccentric you know...and this teacher obviously had an impact on you and your approach to teaching, or at least your thoughts about teaching, if you were to describe your own teaching practices, how would you describe your teaching practices?

Kim Conner-Davis: So basically, I understand that students become bored with traditional teaching. And so therefore every day, I go in with some source of entertainment. I have...I feel as though as a teacher, I have to actually be very entertaining, and also I have to make every topic that I teach relative to the students, OK. And it has to apply to them in some way within their lives.

Dr. Brown: Mmhm [affirmative]. And so, is your class that period where students have no idea what to expect? Are they walking in the door thinking, “I wonder what Ms. Conner-Davis is doin’ today?” You know...

Kim Conner-Davis: They are. They are wondering what they’re gonna do, what I’m gonna do, and also what I’m gonna wear that day (laughter) so yes.

Dr. Brown: And, and how do you feel like you were regarded by your colleagues? Do you, do you feel like that level of, I am gonna call it excitement, because I don’t wanna label it too quickly. How do you feel like that was regarded by your colleagues?

Kim Conner-Davis: I’m highly regarded by my colleagues in some ways. And it depends on...and since this whole conversation is about race—and what I do and how I incorporate race in the chemistry classroom—sometimes, a lot of my colleagues, a few of my colleagues I should say, not a lot because most of them do actually understand the “why,” but they just don’t want to actually dive into that area. And sometimes they feel as though—and I’ve had conversations with my colleagues, and they’re like, “I don’t know why you’re touching upon areas like that.”

Dr. Brown: Mmhm [affirmative]. So, let’s get into that. So, one of the, one of the pieces that’s important about this particular podcast, and what I wanted to do with this, is a lot of times...my scholarship specifically is about classroom conversations and discussions of race, and the ways in which teachers engage in these conversations, not as a sidebar conversation or a reactionary to a social event that’s occurring in the media. Not as a conversation about race because of a time of the year, but how do they think about race as a critical

component to help them...to help students make sense of a key concept. And one of the pieces for why this is so important is because if we treat race, specifically, as a necessary tool to make sense of content, then there are lots of other conversations that are related to what's happening in a country like the United States, that we are more likely to have a new generation to be more comfortable talking about. And so, when we normalize these conversations to make sense of social, political, economic, cultural—you know, everyday life decision-making, where we find that race as a factor, it's easier for us to engage in that because we learn to not run away from race itself.

Kim Conner-Davis: Absolutely.

Dr. Brown: Yeah, it's oddly, it's a process because on one hand, historically, we know that race was a deciding factor for how many decisions were made in the structure of the United States, and other countries as well. But it's also a fundamental topic that many people don't want to discuss because it also brings forth historical facts, ideas, and pains or traumas that people would like to wish away. Yet, we continue to live with the vestiges of those decisions, and create new decisions, simultaneously.

Dr. Brown: So, when I'm doing professional work, it's really frequent that my science and mathematics teachers will slowly move away, sort of fade into the background. And some have even articulated that this conversation is not relevant for them. And that their content areas are "objective," and as a result of the objectivity, that these conversations don't require their participation. Or, their content areas

have no relationship to discussions of race. So, I'd like to talk to you about this. And potentially really dig deeply into some of the ways in which you've thought about this, and potentially to talk about ways that you've been able to develop a better understanding of the intersection of race and chemistry, or science more broadly, in your content area. So, how would you respond to the idea that discussions of race are not relevant in chemistry or science, more broadly?

Kim Conner-Davis:

Well, they are definitely relative in science in general, and chemistry in particular. I can tell you as an educator over the years, I've had the chance, or the opportunity, to really analyze different curricula. And, as we know, that curricula is primarily created for, and implemented for, by mainstream white Americans, and they actually highlight white values. And as educators, we continue to let this happen. And even educators of Color, you know, we continue to let this happen over the years. But, as we continue to let that happen, we also notice student performance. Student performance, that achievement gap that everyone's been talking about for years and years and years, is continuing...is continuing to widen. It's getting ever ever bigger. And so, as a science educator who understands anatomy and physiology, biology, chemistry, environmental science and other sciences, and how that actually impacts racial and ethnic populations, it's imperative that we have to use race and ethnicity as a launching pad in our classroom, rather than a subtopic to just pique the interest of our students.

Dr. Brown:

So, help me understand this, because I, you know, I would think that someone would feel as if that they would want to run away from this

topic. How does...how do discussions of race in chemistry, environmental science, etc. - how is that used to pique interest, as opposed to create dissension or animosity? Because we don't really have a version of discussions of race that's pleasant. (chuckle) So how, how is race something to pique someone's interest?

Kim Conner-Davis:

So basically, as...at the beginning of the year, as educators, what we have to do is survey our students and see what issues are impacting our students. And students will tell you; like, if you ask students exactly what they want to learn, they can actually drive your whole...the outline of your syllabus. They can actually drive it. And let the students drive that and you as, the facilitator, you can actually just design or, or like redesign, your curriculum in a way that actually brings all of their topics...the topics that interest them in.

Kim Conner-Davis:

I know that some topics that I have used within my classroom as a launching pad are, like, race when we're talking about bonds, OK? I talk about hair, the hair, and how we actually flat iron, or use relaxers in the hair, or we do curly perms in our hair. And so, we talk about bonds. Hydrogen bonds and disulfide bonds. And so, then in a biology class where we may talk about Henrietta Lacks, and how Henrietta Lacks was actually used in cancer research. We can also talk about, in a chemistry classroom in particular, elements found in the soil, and then how that affects populations who have been relegated to live in a certain area, like Flint, MI. Lead in the soil. Lead is an element. We can analyze elements within a periodic table that way.

Kim Conner-Davis: We can also talk about how particles in the air actually effects respiratory health, such as asthma, you know, and how that effects certain populations who live in certain urban areas. pH products- Proctor and Gamble has really, really--and a lot of other hair companies have actually--really devoted a lot of money to finding out, or figuring out, what can stimulate Black hair growth. And how to actually make Black hair--or hair of people of Color--just really, really stand out and looks so vibrant. And so, also in chemistry, so that was, you know, we could talk about the pH of hair products.

Kim Conner-Davis: And so, in chemistry also, we can talk about the thermal dynamics of the cardiovascular system, OK? And we can approach all of these from race, and use race as the actual launching pad, versus the subtopic. And also, there are other topics that we can talk about. We can talk about Sickle Cell Anemia, and the protective mechanisms, and why certain populations actually are affected by Sickle Cell Anemia versus other anemias like Thalassemia, which effects more Mediterranean populations, and why is that so? And we could really really talk about mortality rates--high cancer rates, you know, within people of Color. Use race and use ethnicity, and also bring in a little bit geography, because that's all kind of really...it's all related. And so, you bring all of that in to really pique the interest of your students, and to really boost engagement within your classroom.

Dr. Brown: I find this to be really interesting because, you know, as a social scientist, one of the areas that we are very quick, and I think, you know, as society caught up, if you will, with historical representations of biology and the eugenics movement, right? When we talk about the eugenics movement, we're talking about a period of time, a very

long period of time, where science was used to justify racialization and systems of racialization that sought to do other types of work, that revolve really around demonizing non-white communities. And using pseudoscience that they would call science, at the time, in order to advance these particular ideas. So, if we want to speak back to that, the first thing that happened over time within the...in th...in the sphere of racial studies is to get to a point where today...our youth very much so understands this this languaging of race, is not real race.

Dr. Brown:

Race is not biological race; race is a social construct. And as a result of this idea that race is a social construct, you can't distinguish someone's race in biology, right? You can't go to a blood drive--this is an example that we use a lot of times--when people donate blood, they don't stand in the Black line, the Asian line, the white line, right? You go by blood type, right, as opposed to race group. So, there's a conflicting discussion when we talk about race being a social construct, where we have laws that were used hegemonically to impact different race groups, but then you're also saying you have these biological, scientific topics that very much so are leaned upon discussions of race. Can you, can you kind of help me make sense of...let's talk us through, in one way we can say race is a social construct, it was created in the context of society to make decisions and, you know, delineate power, but then on the other hand, we're saying there's validity to discussing race in science in a very real way. Can we talk through that just a little bit?

Kim Conner-Davis:

Absolutely there's validity in when you actually analyze race, and look at it from a scientific standpoint. You actually talked about blood

typing. We all know that certain people of Color, certain people, certain areas, certain people in general, certain ethnic groups in general, or certain races have certain blood types. We know that for sure. We also know when archaeologists go on digs, and they find the remains of the skull of certain human beings, and they can actually almost pinpoint the area where that person lived, OK, and they can...they can actually almost pinpoint, well, they can pinpoint I should say, their racial--what their race was, what their race was. And so, and like I told you before, like, we have diseases that affect certain populations of people more than it does others. And so, therefore, we have to actually say that race and science are topics that go hand in hand. Of course, race could be, is a social construct that has been used to divide people, but there is biology, and or, there is science in race.

Dr. Brown:

So, can you...you know I find...this is this is fascinating. So, when you think about...I wanna go back to this one topic, because I think this is very 21st century relevant. You know, because quite frankly, our youth today can go buy any hair they want to from the store. You know?

Kim Conner-Davis:

Yes.

Dr. Brown:

They can accomplish whatever they like. And that's any racial group. So, when you talk about, for example, a chemistry lesson, and if you are going to work with this this concept called race, and help students approach it in a less intimidating way, one of those things that become really touchy, particularly for African American women, is our hair textures, and the range of our hair textures and hair types.

And if we utilize all of the variations of our hair textures and types, oftentimes in public spaces, our hair becomes a central figure; it's like it's its own person. In conversation, it's used to determine, on some level...people will talk about whether you're professional or not, based off the way your hair looks, you know. We...Black women in hair are its own podcast. So, I want to talk about some of the things you've done in chemistry. You've talked about this idea of helping students make sense of concepts in chemistry by using hair and textures in some lessons that you've done, to help students make sense of bonds and this sort of thing. Can you... if we were going to talk to the chemistry teachers who are like, "You know what? I'm not afraid of this. I want to lean in. I want to talk about this." Can you talk us through a little bit, or share some of the things you've done around this topic of hair?

Kim Conner-Davis:

Absolutely. So, before we even get to bonds, we can actually start from the follicle, the actual hair follicle, and how follicles are different in different races of people. And, or, you know, different subgroups of people. And so, we can look at the structure of the hair follicle, straight versus curly, and then we can start at that point. And then we can talk about how when hair curls, when we have some nice moisture in the hair, the water in the atmosphere, has our hair curling. Some people may call it a frizz. But basically, we have hydrogen bonding. And so, when we take that flat iron, what we're doing is we are removing the water, and that's how we're straightening our hair. And so, so many students they have, "I never knew that! So I'm removing the water out of my hair." And so, that was...that's what makes your hair more vulnerable to breakage, OK. But also, as soon as you go outside, and it's a really humid day, and

air...the water is in the air, it introduces that water right back to your hair, and your hair frizzes--curls up, whatever you want to call--it does it.

Kim Conner-Davis:

And so, just from that standpoint, like everybody's interest is piqued. And so, also, you talked about...what just happened to me just really recently was I was at a restaurant, and one of the servers asked to touch my hair. I am an Afro-wearing Black woman, and someone asked me, "Can I touch your hair?" And I was just like, "You know what? If they would've had me as a chemistry teacher, they would actually know how hair actually feels, and why my hair actually looks this way." Because you also mentioned hair extensions? I bring hair extensions into my laboratory. We actually relax them. We do curly perms on them. We dye the hair extensions. We do all of that, and we talk about hydrogen and sulfide bonding...disulfide bonding.

Dr. Brown:

So, just in case there are some people who are little mystified on what your answer would have been to the server, and just in case people don't know, do we have to do a little lesson on why you don't ask to touch women's hair, and particularly Black women's hair? Do we need to explain that? I don't know if we need to explain that, but is that something we need to say?

Kim Conner-Davis:

That's a totally different podcast, Ayanna.

Dr. Brown:

Ok, that's a different podcast. But I appreciate the educator entering into...the chemistry educator entering into the sociology of everyday life, if you will, if I...if I borrow from W.E.B. DuBois, right? And this

notion of the every...everyday life, right? What that actually means. Let's just say it's a no-no. The answer is no, right.

Kim Conner-Davis: Right.

Dr. Brown: Respectfully, no, right? So, I appreciate you retaining and being very connected to the idea that engaging in discussions of race is intellectual work, right? This isn't busy work. It's not a side conversation. It's not something you do during Black History Month, as opposed to...this is work, in order to advance students' knowledge around this work. You know, some of the things that I'm often perplexed by, but I understand some people may need to hear, is this concern about if we take all the topics that our students are interested in, no matter how relevant they are, and that that relevancy may really engage them, one of the quickest, or the early things I hear people say is, "What about the standards? I'm not going to have time to cover the material to get to the standards." Can you talk to us a little bit about: what do you do when you are really trying to get to know your students, you're surveying your students, you're learning who they are, and you're really honoring their topics and their interests, and then you go, "But wait, I'm supposed to cover X content." Can you tell me what kind of things you do to take relevancy, and then engage in alignment? Tell me what that looks like for you in practice, or share a little bit about that?

Kim Conner-Davis: What I do know is that when the national standards, or the Next Generation of Science Standards were written, those standards were actually...a group of people actually sat in a room, I was part of some of their early committees, and we were actually trying to figure

out what's relevant to students at the time, OK. And so, they had different people of different...from different populations, from different ethnic groups, from different races, from different cultures, you know, everybody... they had a multiplicity of people within the room to share their opinions, OK? And so, also living in the state that I do live in, I know that those standards...I've also worked on the standards committee, too, and I have really really paid attention to what's relevant to students. And in the work that I do, how I actually structure my whole my whole year in chemistry, I know that everything I do falls within those standards, OK? And what's really really interesting is that I can sail through the standards, and get my students in a place that I want to be even quicker, because they're so interested in the work, OK?

Dr. Brown: Mmhm [affirmative].

Kim Conner-Davis: So, people who say, “Oh, it's gonna take too much time. I'm not gonna be able to cover all of the standards,” that's not true. I've been doing this work for years, and I can tell you that my students will actually fly through the standards.

Dr. Brown: So, I'm gonna touch this other hot button: so how does that translate into their testing? So, when we take on these interest areas, and our classroom is hot and popping: we're pressing hair, we're doing curly perms, we're talking about content, we're doing all of these things—and then we go, “But what about this achievement gap” that you just mentioned? What about testing? Is this really having an impact on their performance and scores? What would you say to that?

Kim Conner-Davis:

Absolutely. Absolutely. Almost every school that I've been at, you can actually look at students' performance, and the students who have been in my regular chemistry class, or my AP chemistry class, and they have broken records. They have broken records. And this is a fact. And it's because I make everything relevant, OK? Everything has to apply to their everyday lives. And so, when they're taking that test, even though the test...you see, that's the next step. That is the next step: I have to get on some test-writing committee, some national test writing committees to ensure that those questions incorporate some of that race, and ethnicity, and all of that. You know, things that are relevant to the students' lives. Like, instead of actually talking about things that mainstream white Americans would only know about. And but, I do know that the test writers are, who they are, and they write the way they write. So, even though I am teaching about, you know, hair extensions, and curly perms, and relaxers and everything, I also have to make sure that I infuse questions from previous national tests, to ensure that my students are familiar with that format.

Dr. Brown:

Mmhm [affirmative]. So, exposure to the, the structure if you will, or as we we'll say in the language world, "the discourse of testing" has a tremendous impact and influence on their performance. But at the same time, when you are doing...what I'm hearing you say is that when you're doing this sort of critical work all the time, then students are able to rise to this occasion of, of performance, and, and that's really not a factor...as much as a factor as we like to make it seem as it is.

- Kim Conner-Davis:** Yeah, they're able to make, they're able bridge concepts and, you know, make greater connections within certain concepts in science.
- Dr. Brown:** Mhm [affirmative].
- Kim Conner-Davis:** And so, really and truly critical thinking skills, and just connecting ideas, really actually ensures the success of students.
- Dr. Brown:** So, if we were talking to an early career teacher, you know, someone in the in their first, you know, one to three years, and they're really excited, they're really motivated, to want to do things differently, they want to think out the box, they want to create engaging environments, but they don't want to shake up their school environment to the extent that they're a rabble rouser. Because I can imagine some teachers listening to this, and they're like, "Oh man, this is great! But I don't want to be that teacher, and have people perceive my classroom a certain way. I wanna be able to get along. I wanna get tenure. I don't want to jeopardize my career." In some contexts, "I don't want to make my state angry. I don't want to, you know, become the poster person for going against the grain, or the expectations of the state." What are we saying? What are we...how do we talk back to this, this issue?
- Kim Conner-Davis:** Well, Ayanna, we're not actually teaching superiority, or inferiority, or anything like that. We're just actually stating the facts, and letting kids actually know who they are, and where they came from. And we want them to feel comfortable in their own skin. And that is the primary goal. We don't want anyone to feel as though, OK, we're actually pushing you to the margins, or, you know, you have

oppressed a certain group of people for so long, now it's our time. We're not actually saying any of that. We're not. We are actually acknowledging everybody in the room, but, did you hear what I said? We are acknowledging *everyone in the room*. Because everyone, throughout the years, has not been acknowledged, OK? But now we are making an effort to acknowledge everyone in the room.

Dr. Brown:

So, so how do we find you? You know I'm, I'm excited. Thought Spectrum, and I failed to say this earlier, so you know--this is the bad part on my part, but you know so the work that we do with Thought Spectrum is to work with school districts and communities, and develop curriculum or instructional methods, or support teachers. Observing their classrooms in the work that they do to advance their learning. So, if you're interested in more work around Thought Spectrum, and how we support teachers you can go to our website, www.thought-spectrum.com

But you know, I imagine there may be teachers thinking, "I'm listening to this podcast, and I've gotta find Kim Conner-Davis." Like how, how do I find this person? Are there some brief references, or some places where they can find your work, or think about ways they connect, or is that something we need to look forward to in the future?

Kim Conner-Davis:

And if you want to get in touch with me, you can actually e-mail me at educatorkimmy@gmail.com

Dr. Brown:

Wonderful. educatorkimmy@gmail.com. I believe we're gonna be putting together a handout of some of these ideas, and supplements

that will be made available to the folks in our audience. Kim this was wonderful. Thank you so much. I really appreciate your time and your enthusiasm. You, you are amazing.

Kim Conner-Davis: Thank you. Thank you.

Dr. Brown: What do we do next? (laughter)

Kim Conner-Davis: Ayanna, what I really want to...because I know that a lot of teachers they were... they may not want to contact me, but they still may be interested in this work. And some advice that I can give those teachers to understand race and as...as a necessary, I should say, to understand race as a necessary component of chemistry is one, number one: always have a growth mindset. Always have it. Be committed to learning, and growing, and excelling, and helping others excel. And be interested in adding value to your classroom; whether it's a science classroom, or any other classroom. And also be interested always in finding the truth. Throughout the years, I know that I've learned a lot of, you know, you know, I, I've learned a lot of things that were not true—but always be committed to finding the truth.

Kim Conner-Davis: And also, uncover spaces that have not been uncovered. Don't be afraid to do it. Don't be afraid to do it. Also, seek professional development from those who have actually committed to the work, have been committed to the work. So, seek professional development from those who have been committed for a while, and have put time into this work, OK? Because you're going to find a lot of people who have been in this work for a couple of years, but you

really need to talk to someone who has done this work for ages. And really for decades, this work has been done, but it just has not been...it just has not been done on a scale as our colleagues in the humanities and social sciences, of course. And a third piece of advice I would give all of the teachers is: find others who are doing the work. Find others who are doing the work, and create your own network, OK? There's a network of us out there already, so just come on in and join the network, definitely.

Dr. Brown:

That's right. There's a room for you. There's always a seat. There's, there's space in the room. There's an open chair. All, all of those, those pieces. And I'm very excited about the future collaborations, and the opportunity to continue to push. There are additional resources that we will make available to our audiences. So again, thank you so much Kim Conner-Davis for your work, your leadership, your enthusiasm, and clearly some phenomenal ideas about how to engage in, in these conversations and discussions of race in, in science education.

For more information, again, you can look at the work that we do at Thought Spectrum, that's www.thought-spectrum.com. We look forward to seeing you next time, or at least talking to you on, on our podcast series *embRACE*. And thank you so much for your time.

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embrACE: Episode One
The Intersection of Race and Chemistry
Dr. Ayanna F. Brown – Equity Fellow – Illinois
Featured Guest: Kim Conner-Davis, Science Educator



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