

Faculty Feature

Interview with Dr. Tamara Lawson

Z: Good afternoon and welcome to the inaugural year of the College Lecture series. My name is Z Nicolazzo and I'm the interim associate dean of Faculty affairs here in the College of Education at the University of Arizona. Before we move into the main portion of today's conversation with Doctor Lawson, I want to start by recognizing that we're recording this session on the lands of the Tohono O'odham Nation, which are the homelands of the O'odham and Yaqui peoples. As a college, the College of Education continues to recognize and honor the native people, lands, waterways, and more than human relations with whom we live in what we now know as Tucson, Arizona. I also want to name that the University of Arizona continues to profit from land grabs of native land in Arizona and across the United States. For more information on this, I would encourage folks to Robert Lee and Tristan Ahtone's 2020 article in *High Country Times* titled [Land Grab University](#). Additionally, I'd like to recognize a name that the work that we do as faculty at the University of Arizona is situated in an institution of higher education that was built, was built through and fueled by the labor of enslaved black peoples. Not only that, but as Christina Sharp's work reminds us, we're still living in the wake of chattel slavery, from which, as Diane Brand reminds us, there is no path back to the door of No return. Black students, faculty and staff continue to face anti-Black racism in higher education, and higher education continues to profit from its ongoing investments in the furthering of anti-Black racism. And so, as a result, much of the work that we do across the College of Education focuses on addressing and counteracting the effects of these deleterious forms of structural violence and oppression. Finally, I want to take a moment to thank the people at the University of Arizona who helped make this event possible today. So first, a big thanks must go to Mike Griffith, Jason Aragon, Erica Lmuth and the entire tech team who organizes and produces all the digital content for the college. Thanks also to our dean, Regina Deil-Amen, for supporting this lecture series. And of course, thanks to all the faculty participating in this series, especially Doctor Tamara Lawson, who is being featured today. And speaking of Doctor Lawson. We're now going to move to introductions and the main portion of today's lecture series. So as I mentioned, at the top of today's session will be featuring the work of Doctor Tamara Lawson. Doctor Lawson is an assistant professor in the school psychology program housed in the Department of Disability and Psychoeducational Studies. She received a B.A. in psychology from the illustrious Clark Atlanta University, and her Masters and PhD in School psychology from the University of

Massachusetts Boston. Her scholarship examines the lived experiences of K through 12 black students and communities, aiming to highlight the cultural assets of black folks and Bridge home school based practices. Her work fosters the development and application of culturally responsive, school based practices that seek to support black students and contribute to the well-being of students as they navigate educational spaces. Doctor Lawson, thanks for participating and joining today.

Tamara: Thank you so much for having me.

Z: Yeah, it's a pleasure, I know we were just chatting about, yeah, some nice little geographic overlaps.

Tamara: Yeah.

Z: Yeah. We had with the Northeast and kind of wishing that we saw leaves at this point in time during the year.

Tamara: Yes, I, I really miss leaves the color change.

Z: Yeah, absolutely. So, to start off, I'm wondering, it's a little bit of a grand tour question. Can you talk me through kind of a broad view of your work? And specifically, I'm wondering what kinds of interventions your work makes, you know, thinking both about the field of education. But if it makes sense for you to extend the scope, broader communities to whom you're committed.

Tamara: Yeah. So, the bulk of my work, as mentioned in the introduction, is focused on culture, responsive practices and just the overall well-being of students. And this is really through their land. So a lot of my work is sharing their narratives, through their k, to 12 experiences, how they're navigating their schooling, how they're feeling, their sense of belonging, how they're experiencing their academic, achievement, and just sort of the practices that are taking place, in K to 12 settings. So, my work really looks at the ecology of a student. So what they're coming into the space with, in addition to, you know, their academics and their belonging and different school practices, but really looking at, okay, what are your communities? What are your cultural backgrounds? You know, really diving deep into that. So that includes, like the family, the culture, the history of that student, the identities that they deem salient, to them and really looking at how those relationships, how they find, you know, what they find important and how they find them important, what's

meaningful to them, how their daily encounters, really thinking about their community aspects inside and outside of school really impact their experiences. So I really like to think of it, it's sort of like a bridge and pillars that support the bridge. I mean, from California, I'm naturally thinking of the Golden Gate Bridge. So with that, you know, we're really thinking about, like, what are the pillars that are supporting the students, right? What are the the the pillars that are being able to support the student to bridge that home in school experience, authentically and genuinely. And I think a lot of that comes from the interventions that are being implemented in schools. A lot of that comes from exploring the cultural assets that students are possessing and really finding out ways to best support them, throughout their schooling experiences, like what sustains them. Right. A lot of my work, I think, as an early scholar researcher, is really looking at and investigating ways that sustain the, pillars that support the bridge and really thinking about those narratives and storytelling that's happening through those processes. So students, they'll tell you what they want, right? They'll express it either verbally, non-verbally, through behavior, you know, whatever. Have you, and I think just being able to share more of those narratives and experiences is really key to finding out what is the best support, what best support looks like for them. In addition to the literature. So I think with youth voices, you know, in the research they're less heard oftentimes. And when we're making decisions that directly impact them, it's important that we're also hearing from them. Right. Instead of relying solely. And I'm not saying that this is always the case, but, you know, we rely on data to support our implementation of practices and what we deem effective. I mean, I think what we're finding in the literature today is that that also includes the qualitative pieces, right, in the storytelling to take place, to really add more value and, clarity about what students actually need during their processes and their development. So I'm really passionate about, how, you know, we're, we're setting up the table for them, right, to, to let them have a seat at the table, understanding that their opinions, their values, what they deem important to them and how they feel like they belong is just as important as, you know, academic achievement. So. Yeah, yeah.

Z: Yeah I appreciate that. And I appreciate the reminder too that they'll students will tell you what they need.

Tamara: Yeah.

Z: What they're thinking.

Tamara: Yeah.

Z: I think it's, um, as you're talking about a matter of not only if we're listening as educators, but how we're listening to them too.

Tamara: Yes, yes. Which is is really important when we're thinking about, you know, how are we reframing the experiences for students without giving them a voice to do so? Or, you know, what, what they consider, important to them. So, yeah, I think definitely highlighting that, like when we're thinking about adjustments to be made and effectiveness, hearing the messaging directly from the population that we're serving, I think is very critical.

Z: Yeah. I also really appreciate you thinking about bridges as metaphors.

Tamara: Yes.

Z: It also makes me think a little bit about, place in space and the importance of that through work too.

Tamara: Yes.

Z: So, You talking about all these different cultural assets, and locations that people are in, right. I like how you're kind of bringing that all together and thinking about those pillars too.

Tamara: Definitely.

Z: So that's it's really helpful to get a sense kind of of the, the big scope of work. I'm curious, you know, given the divisiveness circulating in and around K through 12 schooling, and I can appreciate that your work on culturally responsive classrooms and racial discrimination in schools is both really important and also a potential lightning rod for controversy. So can you talk a little bit about kind of the historical roots of your work and what what's the longer trajectory in which your work is grounded?

Tamara: Yeah. So I think, there's definitely and statement in there. So I think we can share the, the narratives and, the systemic barriers that students are facing. In my particular case, in research, black students are facing and the disparities. But I think we can also focus on, their cultural assets and what's bringing them joy. So a big part of my work, when I think about the historical pieces, a lot of the literature talks about, like the mental health, the lack of resources, funding issues, academic achievement gap. And we have, you know, theories such as, like multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching and pedagogy that really addresses the root of the issue, and finding out ways to best support students through these frameworks and connecting these ideologies, which I think oftentimes is, working to combat

or, eradicate, eliminate, reduce these, practices that have sometimes been deemed harmful for students, especially those that have been historically marginalized. So I think it's it's important to talk about both. It's important to talk about where we, you know, issues that have aroused and barriers, but also like, yet we're still finding joy, yet we're still finding belonging, yet we're still able to develop, and students are still able to bring their whole selves into some spaces. But I also feel like a lot of those spaces have to be created. So that's like a big bulk of my work and where I sort of see it going to trajectory wise. And really looking at, you know, what these theories historically have represented is that it's not a one size fits all. Right. And I think some of the practices that we are implementing, they need to even though it's not a one size fits all, it needs to benefit all students. So whatever that structure looks like for you and your school environment, given, you know, the systems, the policies, things like that, it's not impossible. But I think we really have to start to unpack and, you know, really pull back the layers to sort of get to what's the root cause here? And are there areas that we can sort of step in and say, hey, let's do this a different way. Let's reframe this. So a lot of my work is really looking at how, these practices that we are implementing when we think about scholarship in literature and making them applicable in school sites through intervention, through programing, and really thinking about how we can be more effective in practice for historically marginalized students. So through my training, I've had the privilege of working across regions, larger districts, smaller districts, district level, K through 12 settings, and really being able to witness, some of the things that school staff, students, families, policymakers are saying that they, that they want to implement. But sometimes we know due to barriers it may be difficult. So when I think about my work is not only adding in those narratives and different perspectives, but really trying to understand, okay, how do we develop and implement interventions that are actually effective. Right. It takes a lot of I think, trial and error. It takes a lot of reframing and rethinking. But it's not impossible to create systems that are supportive of, you know, students and teachers who are being, influenced by some of the positive outcomes that are coming out of these theories and frameworks, such as like, positive school climates. When we're thinking about, like, teaching and culture responsive teaching and also just the development of curriculum and, practices and approaches that really foster the sense of belonging for everybody within the school community, including the home communities. Right? So bringing them into that space and giving them a voice and letting them have a seat at the table, I mean, I think there are there are many interventions, just do my work that I've seen that have been able to do that and, and

test that and find, you know, what's effective, what's not. But I think, you know, with every school there are different experiences and different, needs that should be provided. And I think it takes time. There's like, I said, it's not a one size fits all. So what works for your district may not work for another. I think it is critical to really think about, how we are implementing practices and how we are affecting change in the settings that we're in. Yeah.

Z: Yeah. And so some of the things I'm hearing are, first of all, it's important to be embedded in communities and schools I think that's one of the kind of big things that sometimes feels like a miss, particularly with policymakers. But I also think for us as researchers. It's a reminder to be embedded with our community. That, you know, things can always show up differently through sound bites.

Tamara: Yes.

Z: On the page.

Tamara: Yes.

Z: And oftentimes with sound bites or as we think about kind of broader landscapes and how things are framed and couched. There's not room for that nuance that both and that you're talking about. So yeah I appreciate you kind of adding that complexity to thinking about it's not just all bad news. Not that that bad news isn't there, right, there reasons for it, it's culturally embedded. We can think through historically what's going on. And also people are creating beautiful communities.

Tamara: Yeah.

Z: Amazing systems of support. So it's kind of that that negotiation between those two.

Tamara: Yeah definitely. Yeah.

Z: So I was sharing with you a little earlier that one of the joys of doing this lecture series is that I get to interact with a lot of your and our colleagues scholarship that maybe I wouldn't have otherwise kind of had a chance to, to deep dives on. And so, in one of your recent manuscripts that you co-authored with Larry Baker and Heather Hill, you talk about how black students desired far different and more effective interventions by school personnel to counteract the racial discrimination that they faced. So, specifically, you and your coauthors noted how school personnel's responses, and in many respects, they're non responses. Were

misaligned with transformative social emotional learning. So can you talk to us a little bit about this study and how it can help shift schooling practices, especially in making better environments for black students?

Tamara: Yeah sure. So and shout out to my coauthors. There aren't a lot of, there aren't many studies that examine how school staff respond to peer discrimination, particularly regarding black students, let alone told from the student's point of view. So what we wanted to do with this study is really understand how black students perceive their school staff's, support, or lack thereof, depending on the situation. When experiencing racial discrimination by peers, I mean, I think one of the biggest takeaways that was evident in this study is that youth desire the adults in their lives, and in this case, school staff, to really intervene and advocate for them, even if they can do it themselves. Right. So they want to feel like their school staff are supporting them, that they're in a safe environment, that they're protected from harm when navigating schooling. And I think just going back to what we were talking about, about the, systemic barriers that students are already facing sometimes when they get to schools. I think this to to have that advocacy and support, like, like I think that can alleviate some of the, feelings of just sort of the weight of all the things, right, that are happening, to students and, impacting students directly or indirectly. So one of the things in our study that we found, that sort of misaligned with this TSL framework, which is really looking at transformative, social emotional learning framework and how that impacts students. I think through the students' lens. One of the things that came up was this ignoring, right, that school staff, would do or this lack of having awareness of how to actually intervene with discrimination, which oftentimes impacted their ability to step in and effectively intervene. Right, appropriately intervene. So with that, it's that was misaligning with the framework when we're looking at that social awareness piece. So our school staff aware that this is even occurring. Right. And really thinking about like fostering safety for students and holding the student who this who discriminated against the student accountable for their actions. Right. So that responsibility and decision making, how are you moving forward after you're aware of the issue? This misalignment we found in our work could lead to youth feeling unsupported. This lack of belongingness. Right. Where do I fit in? Do I have the support? Can I even go to my school staff and say, hey, this issue occurred or this issue has been occurring? The youth shared that they, you know, had desires or preferred for their school staff to, which I believe kind of thinks about when we're thinking about shifting practice, this desire to, be this desire of advocacy and empathy. From school staff and just the school staff to educate the offensive

student. So this may look like when we're thinking about, like, applicable practice of school staff increasing their self awareness through professional development, right? And trainings, asking the hard questions, doing some self-evaluation of themselves, where they stand, in the situation. I think on top of that, really working to build their relationships with their black students in this particular, study and really fostering those relationships genuinely and authentically, like having teacher investment to where that student feels comfortable enough to even come to you and say that they have something going on or that something has occurred, and then creating space where they feel supported as well, right. Developing strategies, including them in the process. Or you know, finding different strategies that that can help to intervene if discrimination has occurred. I think when we think about that school wide practice, like if this is something that we're noticing among many students in the schools, it's really looping in those mental health professionals, right? The school psychs, the school counselors, the school social workers to really help mediate the situation and intervene and step in through with the mental health lens of, okay, how can I support these students? How can I make, you know, what interventions are programming can we implement if we're seeing that it's more of a school wide issue? Then maybe an individual based. But I think even on top of that, maybe doing some consultative work, consultative work with the school staff member as well, to support them in navigating these different issues.

Z: Yeah. It also makes me think about the importance of hiring practices as well as preparatory training that folks are getting. And so I know that that's work that you're really invested in in classroom spaces. Right. It just makes me think about. Yeah. It's not just in the moment or after the moment but also there's this whole time before the moment.

Tamara: Yeah. Yeah. And we talk a lot I think at school psych like we talk a lot about like the like function of behavior. Right. We're not only looking at what the behavior is, what the consequences, but also what is happening before this behavior has occurred. So and thinking about it through the lens of like preparation, how are school staff, those who are working in schools, whether admin teachers, mental health professionals, like how are they being trained to intervene when situations like this come up. Right. Same thing with curriculum, right? How are they being, trained to be culturally responsive in the classroom? Like are they having, you know, hand on experience? Are they aware of, you know, the different behaviors that may occur in a classroom management in behavioral management. Right. So yeah, I think that that preparation is also key, to just to be able to, to just start with the awareness

piece, right. Know what to look for, know what you're looking at when you see it. I think that can, really impact how effective you intervene. Right. Just starting with that self-check. And if you're not intervening, questioning why, why do I not deem this a problem when the student has come to me or, you know, you you witnessed it happen? So, yeah, I definitely think it starts with that. That training piece too.

Z: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, and in some senses, it feels like really big. When you kind of zoom out like, oh my gosh, there are so many different things to be thinking of. But also there are a lot of different touch points which I think, at least for me, would make me feel like, oh, there are a lot of different points at which we can try and try again. Do and do again.

Tamara: Yeah.

Z: So, Yeah. I know that social emotional learning has been in the spotlight recently, particularly as something that some legislators, suggest should not be focused on in schools. And so given your work on cultural responsiveness and your commitment to creating better school environments for students, as a way to foster belonging and overall well-being, I'm wondering how do you explain the case for social emotional learning theory and its benefits?

Tamara: Well, I think you just named a few with the belongingness, and overall well-being. And I think that's, that's at the root of it. Right. So it is, a theory where you're able to develop self and emotional regulation. Right. Like students, we just talked about students coming into their schooling environments with their lived experiences and their background. And oftentimes we see students may come in and may have, you know, been emotionally dysregulated with an event or something that has happened or has been happening within their home life that may be impacting their schooling experience. And I think one of the things that, can, can support that is sort of that emotional awareness, and that ability to really do some self-checks of, you know, how like, am I okay. You know, I think that that can impact the academics, the behavior, the overall development when we're thinking about social, emotional, well-being and really just being able to, you know, impact development of, you know, sense of self. Right? How am I entering a space that managing your emotions, building relationships, like all of that comes into play when we're thinking about that social, emotional aspect of things? I think to the point that I made earlier, too, is like, you're really you really are considering the whole child, right? So not just academic or behavioral or behavior, but really everything, everything that that child is coming with, holistically. So many of the things that, you know, impact academic achievement. For example, is that student

engagement piece, right? How are students engaging in the classroom? How are they engaged in the content that is being taught to them? Right. Which social emotional learning can support and sort of figuring those things out? I think also helping, again, with the emotional regulation of a student in building that self-awareness of being able to check in with self, or even support school staff if you're, you know, wondering, how do I, as a mental health professional, how do I support school staff to support students who may be struggling with that? That's an area to start, and we know that that's linked to the reduction of bullying, that's linked to the reduction of stress and anxiety. Right. I think thinking about like, even the school community thinking about that social, emotional, well-being, there are different elements when we think about like pro-social behaviors that are directly linked to the social, emotional aspect of it. And how students are sort of building and being and feeling like they're in an inclusive environment. They're feeling like they belong. They're feeling like they're in a supportive environment. They are around, you know, they're in a supportive and positive school climate, which we know can impact students if we're thinking about the school as it's, you know, having a school culture in the school community. Right? We want to make sure that students are feeling welcomed in the space, and that if they if they need support, they have it. So this is one of the things that I feel like can be highlighted in that way when we're thinking about sort of the benefits, it it's as I just listed, it has many. So yeah.

Z: I think it's such a, it's such a common misconception to think that learning just happens from the head up.

Tamara: Yeah. No.

Z: And so your comment about the whole child, your comments about the environments, multiple environments that the child is traversing through their experience. Yeah. Are really yeah. Well well taken and and heard and and hopefully that can be yeah something that we all can continue to work on as we think about creating those environments for wellbeing and belonging, right.

Tamara: Definitely.

Z: So curious, couple more questions. Yes, but I'm curious what what are you currently working on. You know, are there new projects that you're excited about. You wanna share a little bit about.

Tamara: Yes, I have a few, one that I'm really excited about is looking at centering black

students' voices and their experiences with their teachers and their, teacher student relationships. I mean, I'm really excited about that work, and I can't wait to get it out there. Because I really think that it will not only add to the existing literature, focus on teacher student relationships, but really highlighting how youth, are desiring their teachers to show up for them. Right? What they're deeming important, within their relationships with their teachers. And I think, like through their lands, being able to support that is really, it's really about like when we think about how they are showing up in their classroom settings, you know, that sometimes their teacher is the first person that they see, right? That's that's where they're building their relationships with. In addition to, you know, their peers. But I think understanding the quality of that relationship is really important. So I'm excited for that work to be shared through the lens of black youth, for sure. Yeah, because they have a lot to say, you know, they will tell you.

Z: As they should, right? And I think that, you know, your work is so great because it closes the distance between these kids and what they're trying to say and the audience needs to hear them, right?

Tamara: I'm trying... Yes, yes. Yeah. Yes.

Z: I love that. You know, something I often talk to educators about is imagining what educational practice could look, sound and feel like. So you know going back to this kind of like holistic view that you're thinking about. Yes. I'm really trying to encourage people to think about what are the radical possibilities for what education could be. Beyond those confining or limiting or often damaging ways that education is, is currently shaped through both policy and practice. And when I say that, you know, we know that it's not there's no blame placed on teachers, right? I think there are broader effects for some of this, right? Budget cuts, not enough people at schools.

Tamara: Yeah. There are definitely some, some systemic barriers that are. Yeah. So.

Z: To this end, I'm wondering how would you talk about what your hopes, dreams and imagined futures are for education based on the work that you are doing?

Tamara: Yes. And I love that. I love a good sprinkle of hope question. I think it really helps, you know, drive the work that you're doing, at least for me. Just being able to dream a little bit. So I think based on my current work and experience, within education and being a young scholar, I really dream of systems that frequently check themselves, like, I think it's really

important to check your practices. Especially when we're thinking about the direct impact that it will have on students and families that they're serving. I think in addition to that is getting feedback from the people that you are working with and collaborating with and teaching. I think systemically, when we think about like policies and in, policy reform, I think it's really important to hear from the people that are experiencing it, right, day to day. I, I would love for that to happen more frequently. And I think a lot of that is, you know, also applying the literature and making it like, like doing the school to practitioner, really understanding that you want to whatever you're studying, however you're studying at the implications. Right. Like what does that look like in schools? Because I think that's often the question, but what does this look like? And we can talk about it, but I don't know what this looks like. And I think being able to sort of hear from them to inform practice and then applying, what's critical, what's important, that can really change some things around. So I think I, I dream of more, really inclusive school practices and climates that are focused on, you know, the school communities needs of feeling seen, feeling safe, feeling heard, being feeling valued in the space. And really, like I said, having a seat at the table beyond the research, and really grounding them, like embedding in and having them immersed in the process as well, and which I think we see a lot of when we think about like, YPAR research and, you know, research that's really inclusive of the youth and the families. But I would love to or, and I rather would say and I would love to see that more. So and, definitely something that I am dreaming of doing in my practices as well, my future practices. So Yeah.

Z: Voice, voice, voice, right?

Tamara: Yes, yes, yes.

Z: How can we get to those narratives? I also that comment that you made is just goanna live rent free in my mind. Now this idea of systems, schools, institutions that check themselves.

Tamara: Yeah.

Z: Like what, what a beautiful desire for future. Yeah I love that. Yeah. All right. You're off the hot seat. That was the last question I had. Thank you so much for your time today Dr. Lawson.

Tamara: Thank you for having me. Yeah.

Z: It's so exciting to get to know more about you and your work. And I'm really excited to get a little sneak peek about where your work is tracking. As well as thinking about how you share that work. Right. Which could be kind of fun. And exciting.

Tamara: I have ideas.

Z: Yeah, I didn't wanna give too much away, but I could see a little sparkle in your eye, right?

Tamara: Yes.

Z: So, so thank you again. And thank you to all who watched this video, and I hope you gained as much insight as I have. If you're interested in learning more, I encourage you to look up some of Doctor Lawson's scholarship. You can find her work highlighted on the University of Arizona College of Education webpage, including her entry in our College Featured faculty series, where she shares about her inspirations, accomplishments, and the advice that she would have for younger self. So again, thanks to you, Doctor Lawson. A real pleasure being together.

Tamara: Thank you. Thank you. Likewise.